



Artículo Uno |

Self-Directed Learning Activities Selected by University Students in an English Teaching Program to Improve Their Linguistic Competencies

Actividades de Aprendizaje Autónomo Seleccionadas por Estudiantes Universitarios de la Carrera de Enseñanza del Inglés para Mejorar sus Competencias Lingüísticas

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*“Learning is not only in the classroom;
learning outside the classroom gives a lot of
very significant contribution because
students spend a lot of time outside the
classroom rather than in class.”*

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the self-directed learning activities and strategies employed by 25 students enrolled in a Bachelor's degree program in English Language Teaching at an online university in Mexico. A survey was conducted to determine the activities students select for learning outside the classroom to improve their skills through the use of self-directed learning strategies, the number of hours devoted to these activities, and the skill(s) they perceive as most difficult to learn. The results revealed a lack of correlation between the out-of-class activities performed by students and the skills they find most challenging to learn; furthermore, students predominantly engaged in activities aligned with skills they considered easier to master. Another notable finding was that many out-of-class, self-directed learning strategies were receptive rather than productive, even though several students reported lower scores in speaking and writing on their language proficiency certification exam. These findings suggest that although students identify their linguistic weaknesses, they tend to select more comfortable activities, thereby constraining the development of productive skills such as speaking and writing.

Keywords: Language skills, learning strategies, self-directed learning.

Resumen:

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar las actividades y estrategias de aprendizaje autodirigido de 25 estudiantes matriculados en una licenciatura en enseñanza de inglés en una universidad en línea en México. Se realizó una encuesta para determinar las

actividades que los estudiantes seleccionan para aprender fuera del aula para mejorar sus habilidades mediante el uso de estrategias de aprendizaje autodirigido, la cantidad de horas que realizan las actividades y la(s) habilidad(es) que perciben como más difíciles de aprender. Los resultados revelaron que las actividades que los estudiantes realizaron fuera del aula no tienen una correlación entre las habilidades que les resultan más difíciles de aprender, además de que participaron en actividades que consideran más fáciles de aprender. Otro hallazgo interesante fue que muchas de las estrategias de aprendizaje autodirigido fuera de clase son más receptivas que productivas, incluso cuando algunos de ellos expresaron que habían obtenido resultados más bajos en expresión oral y escrita en su prueba de certificación. Estos hallazgos sugieren que, aunque los estudiantes identifican sus debilidades lingüísticas, tienden a elegir actividades más cómodas, lo cual limita el desarrollo de habilidades productivas como hablar y escribir.

Palabras clave: Habilidades del lenguaje, estrategias de aprendizaje, aprendizaje autodirigido.

Introduction

Language skills are divided into receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (writing and speaking). These skills can be developed besides the school, through the practice of several strategies involving independent learning. Overall, when the learners are acquiring the English language to become a second language teacher, among other theories and subjects necessary to reach the goal. It is in this scenery that independent learning becomes crucial to improve the language skills using learning strategies

and activities based on their own needs and interest.

Language Learning Skills And Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very onset of learning to the most advanced levels of target-language performance.” (Cohen, 2014, p.22)

Also, Cohen states that language learning strategies include strategies for identifying the material that needs to be learned, distinguishing it from other material, grouping it for easier learning, having repeated contact with the material (e.g., through classroom tasks or the completion of homework assignments), and formally committing to memory whatever material is not acquired naturally through exposure.

Independent Language Learning Strategies

Independent Language Learning (ILL) can be carried out in class, where the teacher encourages and monitors the activities, or out of class, where the students can use English outside the classroom (Cotterall & Reynders, 2001).

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(Ario, 2024). Moreover, White (2014) establishes that one dimension of Independent Language Learning refers to learner attributes and skills that can be acquired and used in self-directed learning, and it is based on students’ understanding of their own needs and interests, strengthened by creating opportunities and experiences encouraging student choice and self-reliance. While Benson and Gao (2008, p. 38) state that the strategies required for independent learners seem to be somewhat different from the classroom learners and vary according to the mode, for example, if they are at home.

“The strategies to learn can be classified into metacognitive, cognitive, social-interactive and affective. Metacognitive strategies are techniques used to help students understand the way they learn and do this more effectively” (Hornby & Greaves, 2022, p. 2), cognitive strategies are internal processes that can be utilized for various activities requiring cognitive involvement. It deals with how to learn, how to remember, and how to convey ideas reflexively and analytically (Abdel & Rabaia, 2021, pp. 30-31); the social-interactive strategies focus on basic functions to imitate the cultural behavior and social roles, and it is mostly developed in the classroom (Chandra, 2019, p.3). While affective strategies help students to deal with their emotions and develop motivation. Students will be able to solve any incoming problems while learning the language. It is an important fact that contributes to the enhancement of students’ skills (Zakaria, Hashim & Yunus, 2019).

Then, when students use the strategies without supervision outside the classroom, they are regulating their

own learning by selecting the activity they want to do, or like more; for example, reading a book, a blog, watching a video, or listening to a podcast. As Feng (2008) states, “when learners become aware of strategies that fit the L2 task at hand, the strategies may foster active and purposeful self-regulated learning” (p. 148).

“Cognitive L2 researchers contend that autonomy and appropriate cognitive and metacognitive strategies are the platforms required for effectiveness of Self Directed Learning (SDL), which is a process in which individuals take the initiative to figure out resources and strategies to make learning happen” (Williamson, 2018, p. 448). Then, autonomous learners are better input-seekers in that they know how to target the appropriate materials for learning the L2 and how to make use of these materials to achieve the best of their L2 learning efforts. Individual differences are another important element because everyone learns in different ways and has different personality characteristics. Also, metacognition would help L2 learners be more autonomous in their efforts to learn an L2, even though, a gradual and continual process of self-regulation means that teachers do not need, and should not, leave learners on their own from the beginning of L2 learning. (Giveh, et al., 2018, pp.1338-1340)

Receptive skills and productive skills activities in the second language that can be selected by are numerous, here we have

a list of some of these activities.

- a) Receptive skills: Read novels, stories or journals; listen to songs, watch series, use an app to learn new words or grammar, play games or

video games, study online.

- b) Productive skills: Write poems, short stories, letters, e-mails using an online grammar checker, chat, and practice online.

Research Methodology

Objective and type of research

The purpose of this study was to determine the activities the English bachelor´s degree students select to improve their language skills as strategies in a self-directed learning environment, and to identify the frequency with which they perform these activities. Also, the study included the correlation between the most difficult skill to learn according to the students and the activities they selected. Thus, the following questions were formulated to guide this research:

- a) Which activities do the English bachelor´s degree students select to improve their language skills?
- b) How many hours do they apply to perform the activities they choose?
- c) Which skill do the students perceive as the most difficult to learn?

Participants

A total of 25 students were recruited as the participants of this study. The students are enrolled in an English bachelor´s degree at UPACH University, located in Chiapas state in Mexico. The students are adult, there are 18 women and 7 men, there are 6 students between 20-25 years, 15 students between 25-30 years old and 4 older than 40 years old. 14 of the students are in different towns in Chiapas, 4 in Jalisco, 2 in Sinaloa, 2 in Veracruz, 1 in Nuevo León, 1 in

Guanajuato and 1 in Mexico City. The bachelor's degree is online-based and has a duration of 8 four-month periods. The students are enrolled in the 7th four-month period, which means that they are at the end of their studies.

The classes are online for most of the subjects, except for English. Once a week, they have English classes face-to-face and can share and work with their classmates. Also, most of the students have experience as English teachers.

Instrument

The instrument applied was a survey with 5 multiple-choice questions and 3 open questions. The survey was applied online. The content is presented next.

1. How many years have you been teaching English?

- a) 0 - 1 years
- b) 5-10 years
- c) 0- 15 years
- d) more than 15 years

2. When was the last time you took a certification English test?

- a) 1-3 years ago
- b) 4-6 years ago
- c) 7 or more years ago
- d) Never

Instruction: In case the previous answer was d) Never, go to question 4.

3. In which skill (s) did you have better performance according to the scores on your certification test?

- a) Reading
- b) Speaking
- c) Listening
- d) Writing

- e) Receptive skills
- f) Productive skills
- g) All of them

4. Besides your English classes and tasks, you usually...

- a) speak English with colleagues
- b) read novels, stories, journals, etc. in English
- c) listen to songs in English
- d) watch series in English
- e) communicate with people using English
- f) use an app to learn new words or other grammar
- g) play games or videogames in English
- h) write poems, short stories
- i) write letters, e-mails, chats
- j) study
- k) Other (write which one)

5. How many hours a week do you do the activities checked in question ?

- a) 3 -5 hours a week
- b) 6-8 hours a week
- c) 9-11 hours a week
- d) more than 12 hours a week
- e) None

6. According to your experience, do you think you have improved your English skills since you have been studying this bachelor's degree? If so, which one (s)?

7. Which skill (s) do you find more difficult when learning English, and why?

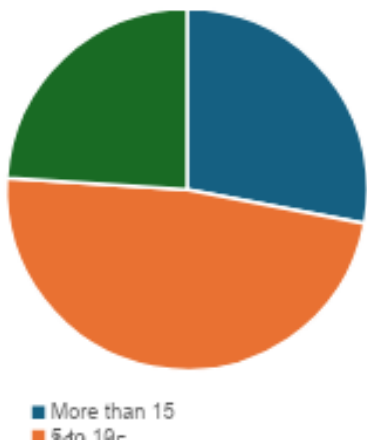
8. How many years have you been an English teacher? Which grade do you teach (primary, secondary, etc.)? and which level of English do you teach (A1, A2, B1, etc.)?

Research results

The students were given the survey. Before the administration of the surveys the students were informed of the

purpose of the study and were requested to answer the questions as honestly as possible so the results would provide answers to the activities they select as strategies to improve their skills in a self-directed learning environment.

Figure 1
Students' years of English studies



As shown in Figure 1, almost half of the results (48%) correspond to 5 to 10 years, while 28% to more than 15 years and 25% between 10 to 15 years.

Figure 2
Students' number of years of taking a



certification test

As shown in Graphic 2, 24% of participants have never taken a

certification test, 24% took a certification test seven or more years ago, 16% between four to six years ago, and 36% between one to three years ago.

Figure 3
Students' performance according to

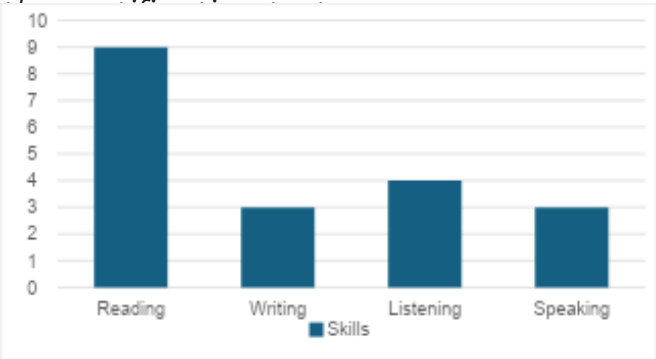


Figure 3 shows the performance of participants that have taken a certification test, according to the data presented in Figure 2. Of the four skills, reading was the one which achieved their highest score in reading 47 %, then listening with 21 %, and finally writing and speaking with 16 % each.

Figure 4
Students' engagement in self-directed activities outside the classroom

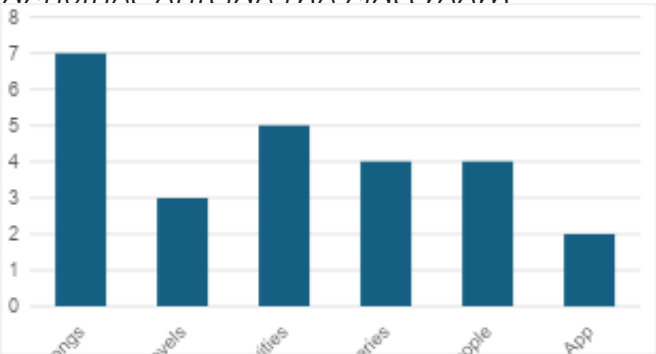


Figure 4 shows that 28 % of participants listen to songs, 20 % Do online activities (grammar tasks), 16% watch series or communicate with people, 12 % read novels, and 8 % use an app, to improve their English skills outside the classroom.

Figure 5
Hours a week students engage in



Figure 5 shows the number of hours the participants engage in the self-directed learning activities included in Figure 4. 64% answered they engage 3 to 5 hours a week, 12% 3 to 5 hours, 9 to 11 hours, and no hours at all, respectively.

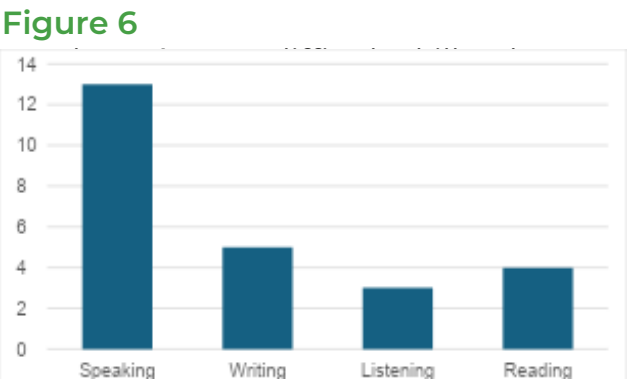
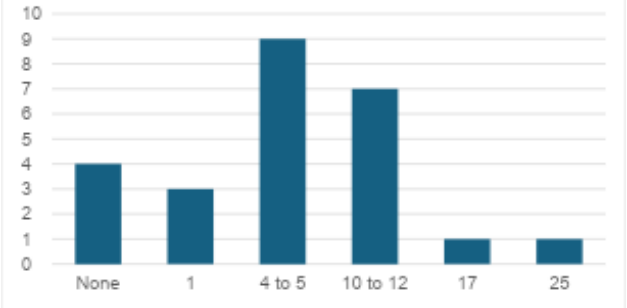


Figure 6 shows that 52% of students find speaking the most difficult skill to learn, while 20 % find writing difficult, 16% reading and listening, and 12% listening.

Figure 7
Students´ years of teaching English



As shown in Figure 7, 36% of students have been teaching English for 4 to 5 years now. While 28%, 10 to 12 years; 16% have no experience, 12% started teaching English last year, and 4% has been teaching for 17 years and 25 years, respectively

About the levels of English they teach, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), 38% of students teach in A1-A2 level, 29% A2, 23% in A1, and 10% in B1. Other data show that 56% of students teach in primary schools, 24% in secondary schools, and 10% in high schools.

Spearman Correlation Coefficient Analysis

In order to determine if there is any relationship between the activities they selected (Figure 4) and the skills they consider more difficult to learn (Figure 6), a Spearman correlation coefficient analysis is performed, it was selected because we are exploring whether there is a general association, since the data obtained are not linear, but ordinal, that is, they can be classified or ordered according to a criterion, but we do not know the distance between each level of the classification. Given a sample of individuals in which two ordinal attributes X and Y have been measured. Values to measure the correlation were randomly assigned

Values Figure 4 and 6:

The activities were considered according to the nature of the task: Listen to song and watching series-Listening; Read novels and use an app-Reading (even though there are different activities to do in an app, they have to read and select vocabulary and other elements). Do online activities

(grammar tasks)- Writing and communicate with people- Speaking. °Speaking- 1, Listening- 2, Writing- 3, Reading- 4

Now, since we want to calculate Spearman's correlation, we need to calculate the ranks associated with each value of the variables, which are shown in the following table, where X are the activities, they selected and Y the skills they considered the most difficult to learn.

Classification (X)	Classification (Y)	Rank(X)*RANK(Y)	Rank(X)2	Rank(Y)2
10	7.5	75	100	56.25
23	23.5	540.5	529	552.25
18	19.5	351	324	380.25
18	16	288	324	256
18	7.5	135	324	56.25
10	7.5	75	100	56.25
10	16	160	100	256
10	7.5	75	100	56.25
10	23.5	235	100	552.25
10	7.5	75	100	56.25
23	7.5	172.5	529	56.25
10	7.5	75	100	56.25
18	7.5	135	324	56.25
23	7.5	172.5	529	56.25
23	7.5	172.5	529	56.25
23	7.5	172.5	529	56.25
2.5	7.5	18.75	6.25	56.25
2.5	19.5	48.75	6.25	380.25
10	7.5	75	100	56.25
10	19.5	195	100	380.25
2.5	19.5	48.75	6.25	380.25
10	23.5	235	100	552.25
18	7.5	135	324	56.25
10	16	160	100	256
2.5	23.5	58.75	6.25	552.25
325	325	3884.5	5390	5285.5

In this case, according to the information provided above, it is found that Spearman's correlation coefficient is $r_s = -0.306$. The interpretation of Spearman's rho coefficient agrees with values close to 1; they indicate a strong and positive correlation. Values close to -1 indicate a strong and negative

correlation. Then there is no correlation between the activities selected and the skill they find most difficult to learn.

Discussion and Conclusions

Learning can be carried out in class, where the teacher encourages and monitors the activities, or outside of class. Learning outside the classroom gives a lot of very significant contributions because students spend more time outside the classroom than in class. Overall, when the classes are online and once a week. Then, when students use the strategies without supervision outside the classroom, they are regulating their own learning by selecting the activity they want to do, or like more. In this sense, this study was conducted to learn about the type of activities students selected to improve their English skills. The participants of this study showed they have been studying English for several years, almost 50% have studied between 5 to 10 years, and a third more than 10 years.

On the other hand, 36 % of students have been teaching English for 4 to 5 years and 28%, 10 to 12 years.

This data is important because the students are not pursuing a regular bachelor's degree but, on the contrary, they are also teachers, and the experience could lead them to have another perspective when

they are selecting activities to learn in and out of the classroom.

Another data showed that 24% of participants have never taken a certification test, or took a certification test seven or more years ago, 16% between four to six years ago, and 36% between one to three years ago. The participants that took a certification test obtained the best score in reading, then listening, and finally writing and speaking with the same score each.

Regarding their English learning tasks, they engage in many autonomous activities beyond the classroom. However, many of the preferred out-of-class activities are more receptive rather than productive language use, and that is directly correlated with the scores they got in the certification test they took, where they got better scores on the receptive skills. On the other hand, they also manifested that the most difficult skills to learn are speaking and writing, to corroborate if there is a correlation between the activities they chose and the skills they find difficult and need to improve, as it is shown in their certification test scores, a Spearman correlation calculation was considered pertinent in this study.

According to the data obtained in the Spearman correlation calculation, there is no correlation between the activities the participants engage in self-directed learning and the skills they find more difficult to learn, since they engage in activities that are easier to learn for them. The number of hours can be another important factor as it is the time they dedicated to out-of-class practice. The participants engaged in

the self-directed learning activities for around 3 to 5 hours a week, then on a smaller scale, around 9 to 11.

The study results are halfway consistent with one of the dimensions of Independent Language Learning (ILL) that White (2008) refers to, "which is that learner attributes and skills can be acquired and use it self-directed learning and it is based on students' understanding of their own needs and interests strengthen by creating opportunities and experiences encouraging student choice and self-reliance" (p. 23). That is, the students that took part in this survey are adults, and some of them work as teachers. Moreover, they are aware of their difficulties in learning some skills, but they choose activities they like, receptive skills, before the activities they need to improve, which are the productive skills. As a result, it can be stated that in the case of this study, understanding of their own needs is not necessary to create opportunities and experiences encouraging student choice. Of course, as Feng (2023) stated, not everything is wrong with the selection of activities as long as when learners become aware of strategies that fit the L2 task at hand, the strategies may foster active and purposeful self-regulated learning (p. 148).

According to Villoria and Barroso (2023), autonomous learning requires the learner to be fully responsible for the decisions related to their learning and for the implementation of all their decisions, be in full control of the content, both of the language and of the learning process itself; which implies that the learners must take control of their own learning process and fully understand it; be able to define objectives, select materials, plan

and carry out evaluations. Thus, it is important to consider that

“autonomous learning is not simply the ability to learn without supervision, but the ability to make decisions about the learning process,”

from the selection of topics to the evaluation of progress. It is an active process where the student becomes the protagonist, assuming responsibility for his or her own growth. The teacher must become a facilitator by proposing different learning strategies that lead the students to find the methods intended to teach them to learn.

Some elements that can be taught to students to improve the effectiveness of autonomous learning include that the students establish a learning objective, choose the topics, learning strategies and sources of information that best suit their needs and objectives. Also, the learners need to evaluate their progress and adapt their learning approach as they progress, seeking feedback from the teacher and adjusting their strategies. Finally, reflecting on their own learning, identifying strengths and areas for improvement are also important. In conclusion, true autonomy in self-directed learning is not only about learning on one's own, but learning consciously, reflectively and strategically, making informed decisions and taking responsibility for one's own growth.

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