




FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUTONOMY FOR BEGINNER ENGLISH LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This research sought to understand the development of autonomy in beginners of the English language learning and aimed at identifying factors that encourage or discourage the development of autonomous learning. Methods included a survey to find out if and how they learn the language autonomously. A case study was carried out in English classes at the language courses at the Universidade Federal do Pará. Results showed that students have the habit of studying the language outside the classroom, they know their potentials and limitations and have motivational factors that lead them to the language study. However, the time they dedicate to study and practice is minimal and they also assign the teacher many responsibilities related to the learning process. When they practice, they tend to focus on the skills they already are good at. Even though they have the notion of autonomy in learning, in general, students are not autonomous.

Keywords: Autonomy. Learning. Foreign Languages. Beginners.

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INTRODUCTION

The language learning process involves numerous factors and specific contexts. In a teaching and learning environment, students and teachers play a fundamental role in the construction of knowledge. In this context, one of the processes that stands out as an object of study among specialists concerns the development of learners' autonomy.

Autonomy is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the ability to make one's own decision without being controlled by anyone else” (AUTONOMY, 2023). In history, this concept has a Greek origin, referring to the idea of self-government, and was used in Greek democracy to indicate forms of government in cities that were autonomous in their way of administration. This concept was extended to individuals during the Modern Age, marked by the Renaissance movement, when it began to be used to refer to the individual as a rational being who acts on his own.

In Education, the concept of autonomy finds in Paulo Freire one of its exponents. In his book *Pedagogia da Autonomia: saberes necessários à prática educativa* (1996), the educator highlights the need for students to play a leading role in their learning. He reflects on the importance of fostering criticality and autonomy for the students to develop their learning.

Within the scope of language learning, autonomy has been a field of vast study among theorists. Some focus on explaining the concept of autonomy, others on its importance and development, and others on developing models for its enhancement. In this sense, it is important to mention that learners might use autonomy as a resource for different kinds of problems and thus accomplish benefits concerning their language learning.

In teaching and learning foreign languages this process is crucial since different levels of proficiency can be observed in this context. As beginners, learners might face challenges during the learning process which can be pivotal to encourage or discourage the development of autonomy, creating the need to promote it to achieve meaningful learning.

Based on this, we cannot discuss autonomy without mentioning motivation, since both are interconnected and go hand in hand in the foreign languages learning process. In order for the students to develop autonomous behavior, it is essential that they feel motivated, as motivation is the key that will trigger the pursuit of learning, thus fostering autonomy. Thereby, factors external to learning affect motivation, such as the student's context, as well as their identity. Outside the learning environment, individuals assume numerous identities, such as student, father, mother, child, etc. Therefore, these identities can be transported to learning, which contributes to the motivation engagement.

In this sense, the teacher plays an essential role in this process. Sometimes it is not enough for students to seek autonomy by themselves, they need to have the space and tools to do so. Thus, the teacher adopts other roles, including that of facilitator and mediator in learning, providing the instruments and possibilities necessary to develop the learners' autonomous behavior.

In this learning environment, it is possible that some students have never had a deep contact with the language before. This can arouse fear and inhibition in students during the learning process. For example, fear of speaking, pronouncing words incorrectly or even communicating in their mother tongue, since they may feel uncomfortable to talk in their own language, worrying about judgments from other people.

In this context, the complex nature of learning emerges, especially concerning autonomy. Since to foster student autonomy it is also necessary to develop their motivation, and this involves social and cultural factors, sometimes external to learning, we realize the complex nature of autonomy.

Considering the pertinent difficulties in learning a new language, it is of fundamental relevance to understand the development of autonomy for beginner English learners so that it can be possible to enhance factors that encourage and manage ones that discourage it. Thus, the present study is justified as an attempt to identify such influences, which constitutes its greatest importance.

AUTONOMY

Henri Holec worked in the field of foreign languages learning since the 1960's. As a scholar, he advised the European Council during the 1970's, where he conducted research in a number of language learning-related fields, including autonomy. According to the author, autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). This means the form of ensuring and taking responsibility for all decisions made in the learning process. Also, according to the author, this ability is not always innate, but can be acquired by "natural" means or during the learning process, as it is in most cases.

Within this context, the author claims that the autonomous learners can choose the learning paths they are taking or would like to take, such as determining objectives, selecting methods and techniques, as well as evaluating and monitoring their own learning. Learners aim to achieve a level of autonomy where they can understand and communicate effectively in the language.

For a long time, autonomy was seen as something new, which should break with traditional classroom teaching methods and work in a completely new way (Allwright, 1988).

In accordance with Benson (2006), autonomy can also be observed in the involuntary actions of students in the classroom, which may escape the teacher's control.

Over the years, the interest in autonomy has grown and, as Benson (2006) affirms, the deconstruction of the idea of traditional classrooms around the world is one of its reasons. At Faculdade de Letras Estrangeiras Modernas at the Universidade Federal do Pará, Magno e Silva (2008) has also researched autonomy, bringing light to the concept and even developing a model for its enhancement. The author states that students need to leave passivity aside and be encouraged by the teachers to learn to make decisions about how to take the role of managers of their own learning. Regarding this, Menezes (2013) claims that:

Teachers are not in control of their students' acquisition processes and there will always be some space for autonomy which empowers students to overcome the boundaries posed by the context. Autonomy or control of one's own learning is manifested in decision making by the language learners and by their ability to overcome social, economic and political constraints which limit their learning experiences (Menezes, 2013, p. 411).

In this sense, the student is seen as independent, especially from the teacher, in the search for learning outside the teaching environment, mediating instruments through their skills (Estarneck, 2022). On this perspective, White (2008, p. 7) had already suggested that learners need to be "active agents who evaluate the potential affordances within their environments, and then create, select and make use of tasks, experiences and interlocutors in keeping with their needs, preferences and goals as learners".

Within this framework, Scharle and Szabó (2000) point out that autonomy goes through a process of awareness, changing attitudes and transferring roles. Once students become aware of their own role, that is, that they must seek for their own learning as autonomous learners, this can cause a change in attitude, and they begin to assume different roles in the learning process. However, it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that this does not occur in a linear way, but rather as a multifaceted process. Learners can change their attitudes and take on another role before they are even aware, thus highlighting the complexity of the process.

In that regard, Benson (2001) emphasizes that by taking control of their own learning, learners develop motivation patterns that lead them to more effective learning. In this way, it is possible to observe a connection between autonomy and motivation, since, for meaningful learning, what students learn needs to be significant and enjoyable. Based on this, we will briefly discuss motivation in the next section.

MOTIVATION

Motivation is a multidisciplinary field of study that seeks to understand why people behave the way they do and what drives them to act in certain ways. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) define motivation as what moves a person to make certain choices, to engage in action, to expend effort and persist in action.

According to the authors, when it comes to language learning, motivation does not remain constant, it flows in a complex way and suffers internal and external influences. Therefore, they state that it is very difficult for someone to be motivated to learn something all the time.

On the other hand, they believe that the learner's motivation can be encouraged and developed through motivational strategies, which are actions that teachers can use to promote motivational behaviors. In a classroom, students' engagement in learning will interact with a complex variety of other activities, which will have a significant influence on the language acquisition process.

Furthermore, there is a debate about whether motivation is a cause or effect of learning, establishing a current consensus on a relationship in cycles within learning. For Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 6), “motivation to do something usually evolves gradually, through a complex mental process that involves initial planning and goal setting, intention formation, task generation, action implementation, action control and outcome evaluation”. Consequently, it is possible to observe a link between motivation and autonomy since both processes are related to the student's engagement in the learning context.

In that respect, Ushioda (2011) brings an alternative perspective on motivation, with a descriptive analysis. With insights from autonomy theory, the author investigates the motivation engagement of particular learners and discusses how processes of constructing and negotiating identities are crucial to this process. With a ‘person-in-context relational view’ of motivation, Ushioda (2009) argues that there should be a focus on real people rather than just learners as theoretical abstractions.

Thus, it is necessary to focus on individuals as human beings with personality, identity, and history, in addition to experiences and complex social relationships of which they are part. She states that the motivation needs to be seen as a process that emerges through this complex system of interrelations. In this sense, Richards (2006) had already highlighted the importance of identity in the language motivation process. Students need to be encouraged to speak as themselves and express their identities through the language they are learning (Ushioda, 2011). In that regard, she states that this identity perspective on motivation brings a connection with autonomy.

Since motivation is concerned with self-expression, this highlights its relevance when the objective of learning is to learn a language. In accordance with Richards (2006), Ushioda (2011) claims that when students are encouraged to express their identities in the target language, this can contribute to the socialization of these identities and motivational trajectories, especially in learning contexts that promote autonomy. This socialization is related to how learners use the language to express themselves.

Concerning autonomy development, especially for beginners, some researchers state that the environment in which the learner is involved assumes crucial importance in the learning process. This environment should be supportive, collaborative, and allow for interaction and communication among learners since they should be encouraged to engage in real-life situations to practice their language skills. Based on this, the teacher has a fundamental role in the process of developing autonomy in beginners. Therefore, we are going to discuss this role in the next section.

TEACHER'S ROLE

In a teaching and learning environment that seeks to develop learners' autonomy, awareness is fundamental. Teachers and students need to be aware of their roles in this process so that the objective is achieved. Concerning the teacher's role, according to Freire (1996), teachers must know how to balance practice and theory, giving the student possibilities to develop and build their knowledge autonomously. So, the teacher's function, more than teaching content, is to develop a pleasant space for interaction between the student and the environment.

In addition, teachers must seek an emancipatory education, providing students with possibilities for choices, thus giving students autonomy in the construction of their knowledge. In this way, it is possible to observe an interdependent character in this relationship between teachers and students.

Thereby, Little (1995) argues that successful teachers are autonomous in having a sense of responsibility for their teaching, which results in affective and cognitive control of the teaching process in addition to exploring the freedom it offers. Huang (2005) defines teacher autonomy as teachers' willingness, capacity, and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning. Thus, it is important for the teacher to understand and be aware of students' needs.

Furthermore, in the context of autonomous language learning, control and responsibility for the practices involved in the process become a debate. In this sense, Voller (1997) states the importance of negotiation. In order to seek the development of

autonomy, negotiation between teacher and student must be a constant exercise in the teaching environment. In this context, the power relations established in the learning environment call for a reconfiguration and the teacher needs to give up part of his power as an educator, thus giving space for students to express their ideas and desires, regarding their own learning, consequently highlighting the autonomous characteristic of the process.

In accordance with Voller (1997), Rodrigues (2008) points out that in a learning context that promotes autonomy, the roles assumed by the student and the teacher need to be reconfigured. Thus, responsibilities are shared and aspects that concern learning begin to be negotiated. In that regard, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) claim that negotiation of many factors such as type of activities, topics, and evaluation tend to make language learning more efficient for students as it supports the development of autonomous behaviors.

Additionally, it is interesting to point out the context in which the teacher is inserted. In formal education, the pedagogical curriculum, in most cases, limits the teacher's role in promoting students' autonomy. In this sense, Candy (1989) states that formal education can represent a threat to students' freedom to make their choices and, furthermore, that autonomy can be suppressed or distorted by institutional education. Regarding this, in many cases, it is necessary to strictly follow a pedagogical plan, contents and teaching materials previously established by spheres hierarchically above the teachers, causing them to limit themselves. These are characteristics of traditional teaching, thus inhibiting their role as autonomy-promoting teachers.

Within this context, Lorenzen (2002) argues that education is an uncertain task. According to the author, in addition to being difficult to predict what will happen in a classroom, it is also difficult to define the best direction for an individual's education. For the author, because it is connected to the rest of the universe, education is totally subject to the chaos that naturally exists in reality (Lorenzen, 2002).

LANGUAGE AS A COMPLEX SYSTEM

Complexity theory can explain language and language learning. This theory is dedicated to the study of systems that are “dynamic, complex, non-linear, chaotic, unpredictable, sensitive to initial conditions, open, self-organizing, sensitive to feedback and adaptive” (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, p. 142).

A complex and dynamic system is made up of several elements that interact with each other. These elements influence others and are influenced by them. Furthermore, the interaction between these elements causes changes and adaptations in their behavior and,

as they are open systems, their energies flow within the system due to the interaction process (Paiva, 2011).

Based on this, it is pertinent to observe a phenomenon through a complex perspective. Taking a complexity approach, Borges (2022) asserts that autonomy is a complex dynamic system interrelated with other subsystems, such as motivation, identity and emotions, which interact in different ways and in different contexts.

In that regard, the author states that the trajectory of autonomy can be organized in different perspectives, which consider the social, the individual and the complex. Moreover, the process of developing autonomy is not linear, since several subsystems interact with each other, and there may be ups and downs, advances, and stability.

Furthermore, when it comes to teaching and learning languages, context appears as a primary element. Taking into account the learner's context, culture and social reality is of fundamental importance in the search for meaningful learning. Given this, it is relevant to highlight external factors that interfere with the learner's autonomy, such as social factors.

Paiva (2006) recognizes the obstacles that someone can face when trying to be autonomous and points out that students are rarely completely free from interference from external factors that act as obstacles to the desired autonomy. In this sense, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) point out that marginalized individuals or those from lower social classes may have limited access to learning resources, which can directly interfere with the search for autonomous learning.

In accordance with the authors, Paiva considers that "other factors, such as characteristics of the learner; teachers; technology; educational legislation; and cultural, economic and political aspects can also interfere in the autonomy process" (Paiva, 2006, p. 81). Considering the complexity of the concept and certain restrictions that interfere with the individual's autonomy, Paiva proposes the following definition:

Autonomy is a complex socio-cognitive system, which manifests itself in different degrees of independence and control over the learning process itself, involving capabilities, skills, activities, desires, decision-making, choices, and evaluation both as a language learner or as its user, inside or outside the classroom (Paiva, 2006, p. 88).

In this way, Paiva considers autonomy a socio-cognitive system because it involves not only individual mental processes, but also the social dimension since our view of language is that of communication and not that of just a set of linguistic structures. Thus, autonomy encompasses both external and internal factors relating to learning.

Given this context, through the work of various theorists and specialists, it is observed that the process of developing autonomy depends not only on the student and

teacher, in teaching and learning environments, but also on many other factors related to the agents involved in the process. In addition, it is important to emphasize that the difficulties of beginners in language learning can influence the development of autonomy, since these students have different perspectives and learning contexts from other more proficient students.

METHODOLOGY

This work is characterized as a field research which, according to Gonçalves (2001), is defined as one that seeks information directly from the target public. It demands the researcher to have direct contact with the public, requiring their presence in the space where the phenomenon occurs for the collection and documentation of information.

This research uses the qualitative approach and it is an exploratory case study. Bogdan and Biklen (1997) define qualitative research as the acquisition of descriptive data, which emphasize the process rather than the product and focuses on relating the perspectives of participants. Whereas Yin (2001) defines the case study as a research strategy that answers the “how” and “why” questions and focuses on real-life contexts of current cases.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to better understand autonomy in beginner learners of English. The objectives of this work are: to survey the procedures that students use to seek knowledge of the language autonomously and to identify factors that encourage or discourage the development of autonomous learning.

Based on these objectives, these are the guiding research questions: (1) How do students seek the language knowledge autonomously? (2) What factors encourage or discourage the development of autonomous learning?

With this purpose, the present research takes place at the language courses at the Universidade Federal do Pará, in Belém, Pará. The university's language courses are part of an extension project developed by the Faculdade de Letras Estrangeiras Modernas and it aims to serve the university's internal and external community, offering courses in several languages in face-to-face and online modalities.

The participants were 17 students, beginners, adults from 18 to 50 years old. The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire. According to Gil (1999, p.128), the questionnaire can be defined “as the investigation technique composed of a more or less high number of questions presented in writing to people, with the objective of knowing opinions, beliefs, feelings, interests, expectations, situations experienced, etc.”.

Furthermore, Marconi and Lakatos (1999) highlight that along with the questionnaire, a note or letter must be sent explaining the nature of the research, its importance, and the need to obtain answers, trying to arouse the participant's interest so that they fill it out and return the questionnaire within a reasonable time.

The questionnaire used in this research was developed through Google Forms platform. The participants responded anonymously. The instrument was developed in Portuguese since students were beginners in English.

The questions were divided into three groups: (1) objective questions, containing multiple choice alternatives, (2) Likert scale questions, where participants checked their level of agreement with a statement and (3) subjective and open questions, which they answered freely. The questionnaire was made available on October 28, 2023 and was sent to students through a link, using WhatsApp. The answers were received until November 8, 2023.

Through this instrument, it was possible to survey the procedures that students use to seek knowledge of the language autonomously. In addition, it was possible to identify factors that encourage or discourage the development of autonomous learning during the beginners' English language learning process.

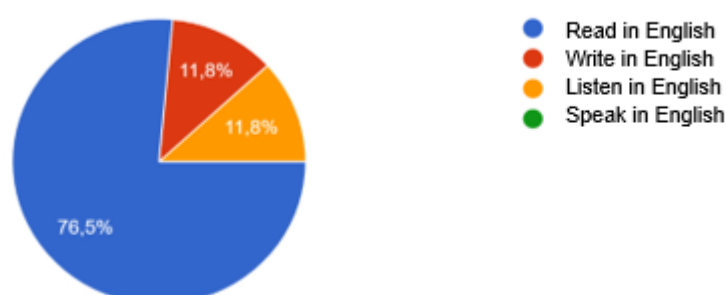
RESULTS

The data were analyzed based on four perspectives: students' potential and limitations, the distribution of the roles, learners' perception of autonomy in learning, and non-autonomous learners.

POTENTIALS AND LIMITATIONS

Concerning their skills, asked about which ones they consider easy and difficult, most students have greater ability in reading in English. In the graph below, we can see this prevalence as the strongest among students.

Figure 1 – Students' easier skills.

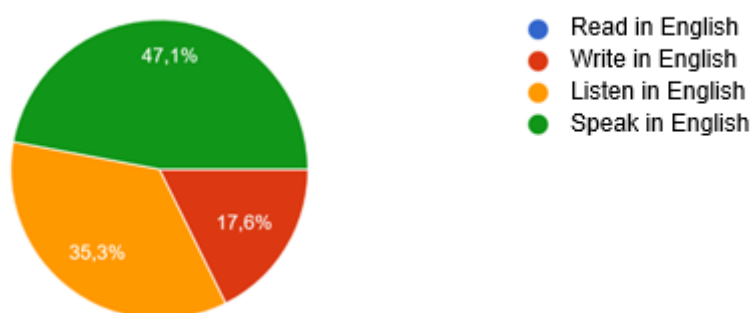


Source: Data collected. Created by Google Forms.

In addition, we can also see that writing and oral comprehension also appear as easy skills in some students' conception.

The biggest difficulty students have concerns speaking. This fits in with the fact that this skill did not even appear in the answers to the previous question (Figure 1). In the graph below, we can see the prevalence of this difficulty.

Figure 2 – Students' most difficult skills.



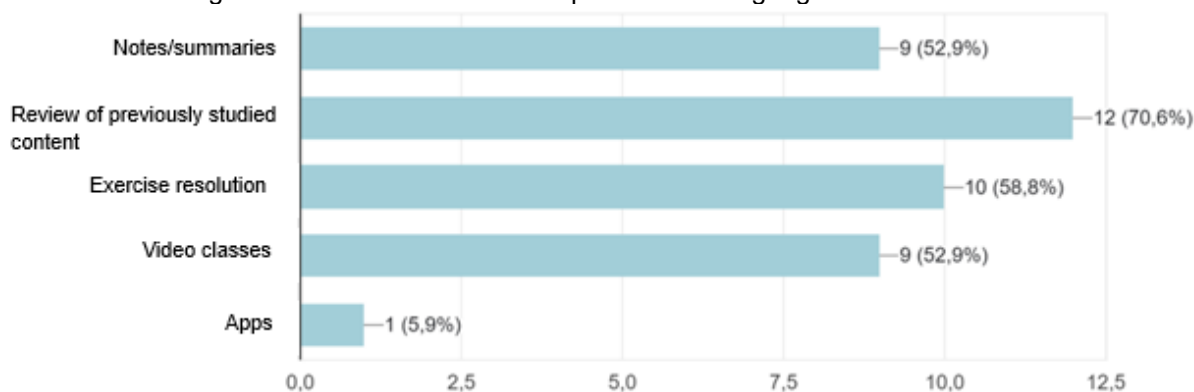
Source: Data collected. Created by Google Forms.

Oral comprehension and writing appear to be difficulties for some of them, in contrast to a minority who have ease in these skills.

Asked how they prefer to study English, most students use forms of entertainment to practice the language, such as music, series, and movies, in addition to also having a preference for reading texts in English. Apart from using entertainment, doing grammar activities is also a preference for students. Only one student practices the language through speaking, by conversations with another person present in his/her context.

Furthermore, 70% of students use the review of previously studied content as a method of studying the language outside the classroom. This is in line with the answers to question 10, in which the act of revising is often cited as one of the actions that students take when they become aware of their difficulties. In the graph below we can see the methods they mostly use to practice the language.

Figure 3 – Students' methods to practice the language outside the classroom.



Source: Data collected. Created by Google Forms.

According to the data, solving exercises is another method that most students use to study the language, which is also in line with the answers to question 10, as the act of practicing is also commonly used by students when they become aware of their difficulties. Thus, the results show that this practice takes place mostly through exercise resolution and reviewing content (Figure 3).

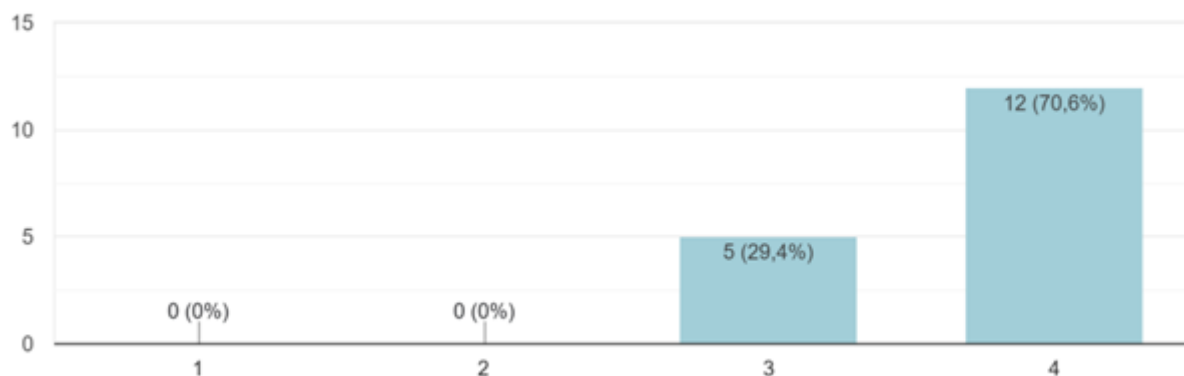
THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE ROLES

The data shows that most students attribute the development of their language skills to the teacher, even though the majority are aware of the concept of autonomy indicated in the answers to question 14. However, some students (6) believe that this role does not belong to the teacher.

Moreover, most students believe that the teacher should point out their strengths and weaknesses in relation to language skills, which demonstrates that students are tied to the teacher's role in identifying their own capabilities as students. Even though they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, as shown in the answers to questions 3 and 4, respectively, students still feel the need for the teacher to validate their language skills. Only one student says he/she does not have this necessity.

Concerning the development of language skills, all students participating in the research believe that the teacher has a fundamental role in evaluating their progress. The graph below shows this data.

Figure 4 – Students' belief in the need for the teacher to evaluate their progress.



Source: Data collected. Created by Google Forms

Thus, the data indicates that, even if some students are opposed to this result, the vast majority point to the teacher all the factors related to their own language skills, with regard to developing, pointing out, and evaluating such skills. In this sense, the data shows that students tend to place the teacher at the center of their learning, giving him/her most of the responsibility in this process.

LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS

When it comes to learners' perceptions of autonomy in language learning, asked if they were aware of the concept, most students say they already have an idea of the concept of autonomy. Among these, we highlight some definitions:

[1] Yes, I already had that idea. However, the teacher needs to be the mediator in the teaching and learning process, offering conditions and tools so that the student can access and interact with different knowledge and sources of information (Student 2).²

[2] Autonomy is seeking something beyond requests and help. Try to carry out learning alone and in a critical and reflective way (Student 5).

[3] Yes. I think the teaching-learning process should take place through methodologies that guarantee student autonomy (Student 6).

[4] Yes, being able to communicate individually in another country (Student 7).

Given these conceptions, it is possible to observe in excerpt [1] that student 2 is aware of the definition of autonomy, as well as the role of the teacher as mediator in this process.

Furthermore, as we observe in excerpts [2] and [3], students 5 and 6 have a notion of autonomy directly linked to the teaching and learning process, highlighting criticality and

² The answers to the questionnaire were originally written in Portuguese. This and all the translations of the students' words are our responsibility.

reflection, in addition to language teaching methodologies. While in excerpt [4] student 7 understands the autonomy associated with communication in real contexts of language use

Among the participants, only four said they had no idea of the concept of autonomy. However, this conflicts with the answers to question 14, in which all participants can point to a definition of what it means to be an autonomous learner.

When asked about the influence of autonomy on the language learning process, we highlight the following perspectives:

[5] Being aware of my own difficulties, I can focus on activities that help me overcome the areas of English that I need to focus on (Student 5).

[6] It helps because you decide how you want to learn, how you will organize yourself and use motivation as the main factor (Student 6).

[7] Encouragement and freedom (Student 16).

Given the answers, it is possible to observe in excerpt [5] that student 5 understands the influence of autonomy in becoming aware of his/her difficulties. From this awareness, he/she develops autonomous behaviors to focus on overcoming his/her difficulties.

On the other hand, in excerpt [6] student 6 understands autonomy in the learning process as decisive for the way he/she wants to learn, which influences his/her motivation in the process.

Finally, in excerpt [7] through students 16's response, we can see autonomy itself as the factor that encourages the student learning

When asked what it means to be an autonomous learner, the act of looking for tools, means and ways of learning were some of the frequent answers among participants. To this question, we highlight the following answers:

[8] It means having the power to decide on the learning process according to your own limitations (Student 10).

[9] One who does not assimilate knowledge passively (Student 13).

[10] Walking in your own shoes. Independence (Student 15).

With these answers, it is possible to identify that in excerpt [8] student 10 points out that being an autonomous learner implies having the power to decide on his/her own learning, in addition to having the possibility of recognizing his/her own limitations. While in excerpt [9] student 13 highlights the non-passive character of autonomy.

Finally, in excerpt [10] student 15 uses a metaphor to highlight the independent nature of an autonomous learner, who, according to him/her, is capable of “walking in your own shoes”.

Asked if they consider themselves to be autonomous learners, the majority of students say yes, which is in line with the answers to question 10, in which, upon becoming aware of their difficulties, students try to do something to reduce them, such as practice, review and dedicate more time to studying the language.

Only three students say they do not consider themselves autonomous. However, according to the answers to question 10, these students state that they try to practice and study the language more when they become aware of their difficulties, which indicates an autonomous character even without their own awareness. To the question about consider themselves autonomous, we highlight the following answers:

[11] No! Despite studying outside of class hours, I feel that my learning is still robotic, largely because I don't have contact with other people who speak the language. So, I feel dependent on the classes, the teacher and the books. I don't question the reason for the grammar rules and I still don't feel that learning English is something natural and pleasurable (Student 1).

[12] Yes, because I want to learn the language in old age (Student 11).

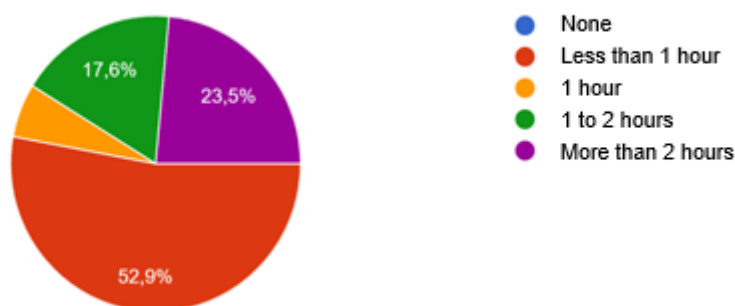
Given this, it is possible to observe in excerpt [11] that student 1 does not consider him/herself an autonomous learner due to the lack of communication in the language. Furthermore, the student demonstrates a dependence on the teacher and materials and emphasizes that he/she does not enjoy language learning, which highlights the absence of major motivational factors in his/her learning process. While in excerpt [12] student 11 shows, in his/her response, a great motivation pertinent to this process.

Based on this, the data indicates that students are aware of the concept of autonomy in learning, in addition to knowing what leads them to have autonomous behaviors and the important factors in this process, such as motivation and the teacher's role.

NON-AUTONOMOUS LEARNERS

The analyzed data shows that most students have the habit of practicing and studying the language outside the classroom environment. Only two students said they did not have this custom. However, we can see in the graph below that most students have the habit of practicing and studying the language outside the classroom for only less than 1 hour.

Figure 5 – Distribution of language study hours by students outside the classroom.



Source: Data collected. Created by Google Forms.

This indicates that, even though the majority have the habit of studying outside the classroom, the time they dedicate to this practice is minimal.

Furthermore, these data point to a contrast with the students' answers to question 10. When they become aware of their difficulties, one of the attitudes to try to reduce them concerns time. The students' responses indicate that they try to dedicate more time to studying and practicing the language, though the data indicates that this time is minimal.

DISCUSSION

Based on the data, students tend to focus language practice on the skills in which they are good at, not practicing that skill they consider more difficult. In this sense, the methods they use to practice the language are almost always focused on those skills they are good at, so we can infer they are motivated by their affinities.

It was possible to observe, according to Borges (2022), the influence of the motivational subsystem present in the complex system of autonomy. Learners tend to be autonomous with things they feel motivated to do.

In addition, this result is at the same time, in line and contrary to what White (2008) points out, that learners need to create, select and use tasks according to their needs and preferences. In this sense, data shows that students focus only on their preferences, what they like and find easy to study, leaving aside their necessities, what they need and have difficulty with.

Furthermore, it is evident that most students are tied to the teacher's role in identifying their strengths and weaknesses. Although they acknowledge their limitations, they rely heavily on the teacher to validate their capabilities. This highlights a gap in their progression toward full autonomy, as emphasized by Scharle and Szabó (2000).

Regarding learners' perceptions, while many students understand and articulate definitions of autonomy that align with established theories (Freire, 1996; Holec, 1981;

Paiva, 2006), the data reveals inconsistencies in their self-assessment and reported behaviors. Students often demonstrate autonomous behaviors without fully recognizing them, suggesting a need for better awareness and reflection on their learning strategies.

Finally, although motivation is a key factor driving autonomy, as per Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), its application remains limited by minimal engagement in extended practice. This minimal dedication to autonomous learning activities, coupled with their reliance on the teacher, highlights the complexity of autonomy as a socio-cognitive system (Paiva, 2006), involving internal and external factors that shape learners' behaviors and attitudes toward language learning.

CONCLUSION

This research was developed in English first-level classes at the language courses at the Universidade Federal do Pará. The instrument used was a questionnaire with questions about students' learning, which aimed to survey the procedures that students use to seek knowledge of the language autonomously and to identify factors that encourage or discourage the development of autonomous learning.

Thereby, in response to our first research question, about how students seek language knowledge autonomously, the data shows that they do it by studying outside the classroom through entertainment, such as music, series and movies. In addition, they also have a preference for reading texts in English, doing grammar activities and most of them using the review of previously studied content as a method of studying the language outside the classroom. However, the time they dedicate to this study is minimal, which thus compromises the development of autonomous learning.

Moreover, the data shows that most students tend to study the language based on the skills they have affinity and ease with. This answers our second research question, about factors that encourage or discourage the development of autonomous learning. Such easier skills are the factors that encourage them, as they seek to practice and focus their studies on what they like. Consequently, the skills in which they have difficulty are the factors that discourage them from studying the language, as they do not prioritize studying what they have to struggle with.

Additionally, the data indicates that students need the teacher to point out, evaluate and develop their language skills, thus placing the teacher at the center of their learning, giving him/her most of the responsibility in this process. This is also a factor that discourages them from developing autonomous behaviors.

The limitations of this study lie in the lack of interviews with some representative students. Based on the answers, it would be interesting to talk to the students, through an interview, to learn more about their autonomous learning. However, due to the research execution time, it was not possible.

Furthermore, an intervention in the class could also be relevant for the research, in the sense of encouraging autonomous behaviors through this intervention. To comply with this, in the last classes feedback was given on the results so that students can learn to walk in their own shoes, study things they do not know or have difficulty with for longer and, thus, develop their autonomy in learning.

Therefore, the present research opens a window of opportunities for future scientific investigations in the field of autonomous learning of beginners in a foreign language. Learning a language, especially when you are a beginner, requires numerous factors, such as time, motivation, encouragement, and autonomy. Through theory, we know that the development of these factors is not an easy task, neither for students nor for teachers. For that reason, continuous scientific research in this field of study is necessary in the search for meaningful learning.



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