



Teachers Supporting Autonomy in Online Language Learning

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Abstract

Changing world circumstances have enabled education to focus on developing different competencies and intensifying the use of technology as a mediator for learning. Student populations have become more diverse, the need for more advanced skills in English has continued to increase, and virtual programs with the potential to contribute to learning have proliferated. The authors carried out a mixed-method study to determine the efficacy of one such program. The researchers collected perceptions about the program from students and tutors through surveys, interviewed the Director and tutors, systematized information from official documents that support the process, and documented the work done on the online platform. All the information was contrasted with theoretical frameworks on autonomy [1], transactional distance [2], SOLO taxonomy [3], and Chi's framework for differentiating learning activities [4]. The study carried out from 2015-2016, provides indications of the need for the systematic implementation of scaffolds that help bridge transactional distance to promote autonomous learning using Virtual Learning Objects (VLOs). Based on those findings, the authors present recommendations for educators to take full advantage of the online components of blended and online courses to focus on the development of autonomy and students' need to make progress in their English language skills and succeed in the increasingly globalized and multicultural world we live in. These scaffolds should appear in the courses, but they should be driven and supported by teachers. The present article proposes 4 types of scaffolding to enrich teaching practices in blended/virtual programs: a) for autonomy so that rather than content delivery, the focus is on promoting self-direction that should not be confused with self-study; b) for quality interactions among students, with teachers, and with content to develop student awareness and promote the use of metacognitive strategies that ensure learning; c) on assessment that capitalizes on reflection, peer, self-, and teacher assessment and frequent, useful feedback that can engage students, ensure deep learning and the achievement of the intended goals; d) on design for learning that intentionally makes the most of available resources to promote more personalized, useful, and complex learning.

Keywords: *ELT, Scaffolding, Interactions, Autonomy, Teacher Professional Development.*

Changing world circumstances have enabled education to focus on developing different competencies and intensifying the use of technology as a mediator for learning. Student populations have become more diverse, the need for advanced levels of English has continued to increase, and virtual programs have proliferated. Dede has stated that "Emerging technologies are enabling ubiquitous learning. This can empower a structural change away from classrooms as the primary place of learning, the school day as the primary educational time, and the teacher as the primary source of information." [5] Current trends in technology, modern models of education, globalization, stakeholders' needs and expectations, other characteristics inherent to the 21st century and, of course, the consequences of the recent pandemic require educational systems to take full advantage of online and blended education. Thus, the recommendations that arise from research on one such program, may contribute to effectively harnessing the potential of alternate modes of course delivery.

This mixed-method study meant to determine the efficacy of a blended language program. In Phase 1, the perceptions of students and tutors regarding the program were explored. Surveys were applied to 56 students and four tutors from diverse linguistic backgrounds and teaching experiences. These results were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistical processes. Phase 2 included the analysis of information obtained from the surveys, interviews with the Program Director and two tutors, the study of the official documents that support the process, and observations of the work done on the online platform. In Phase 3, because the previous analyses pointed to the emphasis placed on the face-to-face sessions and their perceived success, the researchers focused on exploring the design itself and students' online participation to assess the online component of the course, levels of participation and outcomes, and correlations among the factors that emerged.



The findings indicated participants' overall satisfaction with the courses, as they met their needs, were personalized, and allowed them to work independently, at their own pace. Students manifested confidence in their competencies and strategies for independent learning. Teachers equated autonomy with self-instruction, emphasizing the importance of self-direction for learning and the need for students to develop expertise in this area. While both participants and tutors felt the need to share responsibilities in learning, tutors emphasized their predominant role in fostering autonomy and noted the learners' dependence. Students highly valued face-to-face interactions and the guidance of teachers. There was also a need to increase students' awareness of their learning processes and contribute to their autonomy. Additionally, there seemed to be a need for greater alignment between instructional design and the guiding principles of the program, as well as for strategies to use assessment information for transformation and improvement.

The information was contrasted with theoretical frameworks on autonomy, transactional distance, SOLO taxonomy, and Chi's framework for differentiating learning activities as presented in the tables below.

Table 1 – Analysis of participation and outcomes

Factor analyzed	Indicator of	Results
Use of VLOs	students' ability and motivation to work autonomously	High levels of student participation
Performance on the VLO	progress in language proficiency	Most students struggled to complete tasks and had low scores
Performance on other activities	transference of knowledge to different situations	Scores were slightly higher than those on VLOs, but below passing.
Final Grade for the course	achievement of objectives	Better performance and passing averages.
Interaction on platform	Enhancement of learning and evidence of progress	Limited to students posting their answers to tasks. Tutor feedback was low – less than half of students' posts receiving comments*

*NOTE: Students may have received feedback in face-to-face classes.

Table 2. Online components

Factor analyzed	Findings	Analysis
Strategies for developing autonomy	None were evident	Students must develop autonomy on their own.
Kinds of tasks and their alignment to stated objectives.	Most activities were active and passive	Interactive and constructive activities produce better learning according to Chi.
Student products	Are mostly unistructural with some multistructural.	More complex products reflect better understanding according to the SOLO taxonomy.
Final Grade for the course	achievement of objectives	Better performance and passing averages.
Interaction on platform	Enhancement of learning and evidence of progress	Limited to students posting their answers to tasks. Tutor feedback was low – less than half of students' posts receiving comments*

The final analyses found no correlation between the use of the VLOs and students' performance on the tasks they included and which should, if completed, reflect the higher grades in other activities and are not correlated with the passing grades obtained in the course despite the low performance on the platform. In summary, there were gaps between the objectives of the program, student participation



and performance on the platform, and their final grades, suggesting a need for further investigation and more support in certain areas.

Based on the findings, the authors present recommendations in 4 areas considering that the pedagogical distance that is present in distance education can be bridged with scaffolding in learning instruction [6] [7], especially if implemented systematically with collaborative work among administrators and tutors, clear policy documents for the program, and actions that ensure a generalized awareness of its purpose and context.

Focus on autonomy: Hamilton [8] suggests that, planning in technology-enhanced learning environments, should consider the conditions that favor development of autonomy. However, there is often a focus on content delivery, rather than providing scaffolds and interactions that promote the development of skills and autonomy, entail different roles for teachers and learners, and involve interaction, feedback, and support for learners [9].

Specific actions in this aspect include:

- Defining a principled approach that guides instruction in enhancing autonomy.
- Determining students' initial state of autonomy.
- Studying information on learning platforms to support teaching.
- Assessing effectiveness of scaffolding on students' progress.

Focus on interactions: Research shows that "meaningful interaction with other students and the instructor is integral to the development of thriving learning environments (Brown, 2001; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Greene, 2005; Lee et al., 2006; Swan, 2002)." [10] Unfortunately, online environments may not consistently ensure different kinds of interactions.

Specific actions in this aspect include:

- Encouraging ample opportunities for interaction
- Ensuring and monitoring high quality tutor and peer feedback
- Incorporating teacher collaboration into planning processes.
- Implementing diverse cooperative learning exercises in online environments.

Focus on assessment: "Assessment is integral to the education process." [11]. Therefore, a clear and intentional focus on assessment is key to promoting learning and may produce more effects than many other interventions. However, it is not always clear how assessment is used to reorient teaching practices, support learning, or encourage students to monitor their own progress to become successful and autonomous life-long learners.

Specific actions in this aspect include:

- Harmonizing summative evaluation with formative approaches, especially self-assessment.
- Ensuring that on-going assessment that guides teaching and learning.
- Encouraging student self-direction.
- Assessing the program continuously and rigorously.

Focus on design for learning: As in all education, online education requires effective instructional design and sound pedagogical principles. Teachers must be aware of the vital role they play in creating communities and that perspectives for design should focus more on student learning than on technology [12].

Specific actions in this aspect include:

- Recognizing the need for instructional design adjusted to alternate modes of delivery.
- Embracing the fact that online instruction, while different from face-to-face teaching, requires good teaching.
- Providing meaningful learning experiences that are primarily independent and virtual.
- Ensuring the use of novel, engaging resources that fit the learning objectives and monitoring their use.
- Monitoring student progress to ensure that design and strategies support learning adequately.
- Using feedback gathered in the implementation to improve the program and resources.

The recommendations presented here enable educators to decrease pedagogical distance and take full advantage of the components of blended and online courses to contribute to the development of autonomy, address students' need to make progress in their English language skills, and foster success in the increasingly globalized and multicultural world we live in.



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