



Supporting students' learning outside the classroom: promoting independence and autonomy in LLAS disciplines

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Autonomous Learning Portfolio in Spanish: Personalised learning and motivation in a regulated learning environment.

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I. A brief overview of Spanish Language Autonomous Learning in our department today:

- Autonomous Learning is a component, compulsory, of the Spanish language modules in Years 1 and 2 (post-A level).
- It involves the submission of a portfolio:
 - A collection of worksheets for the whole year, preceded by a linguistic competence self-questionnaire that it filled in at the beginning and at the end of the course.
 - Each worksheet contains at least
 - questions on the cultural content of the activity, which may require some research and critical thinking;
 - language learning activities /exercises;
 - Each worksheet has a word limit.
 - The completion of each worksheet gives a number of points to the student, for instance attending to a talk and writing the worksheet is worth 25 points.
 - Students must complete around 200 points in a year.
 - The submission of these worksheets is staggered, and every time students submit one part of their portfolio they fill in a form in which they give details and reflect on the skills practised or acquired. In Year 1 the portfolio is divided in four parts.
- In Year 1, the portfolio currently represents 25% of the mark of the module, but the oral exam, 15% of the total mark, is an interview based on the portfolio. The rest of the assessment in Years 1 and 2 Spanish Language is made up essays, language tests and a written exam.
- There are five one-hour workshops to introduce students to autonomous learning in Year one.
- Extensive formative and summative feedback is given after each submission.
- A mark for each submission is given to linguistic competence, cultural/critical content and quality of learning reflection.

II. History of our Autonomous Learning programme

Background (Before 2002):

- We had news sheets that had to be filled in regularly, but they were perceived as monotonous.
- It was felt that a stronger structure, purpose and support for the so-called “private study time” were needed.
- Conferences, cultural events and other extra-curricular activities had low levels of attendance. Excellent learning opportunities were being wasted.
- Discussion with older colleagues about student’s reading habits and students’ attitudes towards certain types of cultural production. The myth of a golden age of language learning in HE during the 1960’s 1970’s, when motivated students had read full novels in Spanish at the age of 18 and recited poetry in house parties, was the benchmark against which the learning habits of the apparently apathetic audiovisual generation of learners were being assessed.
- Staff changes in our Department opened the door for the introduction of autonomous learning as a compulsory element.
- In 2001/2002 the first set of autonomous learning sheets is created by Antonio Martínez-Arboleda and Ramiro Cebreiros. The current autonomous learning programme is officially incorporated in Y1 Spanish language (post-A-level).

Evolution of the Portfolio till 2010:

- Rules on variety of activities for the successful completion of the portfolio were developed in order to ensure some kind of balance in terms of skills.
- Oral skills were soon introduced with the debates.
- Specific worksheets on films and books were developed alongside the first generation “generic worksheets”.
- Allow students to propose their own activities? Yes, within limits.
- Changes in the way of supervising: from dedicated autonomous learning tutors, to language tutors themselves supervising and advising students.
- From ongoing tutorial supervision through meetings and final summative assessment to staged submission followed by formative and summative feedback.
- Marking: From detail marking of each worksheet, to overall mark of each submission (staggered).

- Ownership of the learning activities portfolio is open to the whole teaching team. All the tutors started to collaborate creating their own autonomous learning sheets, which would be incorporated to the autonomous learning programme and offered to all the students.
- A lot of comments from students about workload, but we calculated it, looking at the number of hours that they should dedicate to each activity and it turned out that our initial calculations were fair. A slight readjustment of points was carried out in 2008, though.
- Changes in 2008, after a first round of ad-hoc staff meetings, partly inspired in the suggestions of Marién Pereira, who wrote her MA thesis on autonomous learning whilst working as a language tutor in our Department:
 - Electronic submission through VLE.
 - Learning reflection becomes a more important part of the learning process and is also assessed.

III. Present and future of Spanish Language Autonomous Learning in our department:

- Support and constructive involvement of language tutors has been crucial for the success of the programme. María García, Bettina Hermoso and Juan Muñoz have made key contributions to the shaping and content of the programme of autonomous learning in the last 5 years. Instituto Cervantes tutors and co-ordinators have supported the programme since its inception. Heads of Department (Alex Longhurst, Paul Garner and David Frier) were fully supportive.
- A departmental culture of autonomous learning has appeared. Almost anything can be transformed into an autonomous learning activity. For instance, theatre was introduced successfully by Stuart Green. Learners' needs and preferences have been playing a role in cultural programming. The Instituto Cervantes has been very receptive to this and the talks they sponsored have been extremely successful.
- Learning is now far more personalised: more types of activities, more variety of worksheets and more topics to choose from.
- A great variety of skills are now covered throughout the portfolio, but more oral skills are needed. One future development will be the submission of audio reports or even video worksheets for the activities.
- Feedback was enhanced with the introduction of staggered submission and new assessment worksheets.
- The centralisation of schools structures and reshaping of departments may have an impact in the prospects of this type of initiatives.

The future: A more social Autonomous Language Learning. See Language Box activity on the book *Manolito Gafotas*: <http://languagebox.eprints.org/833/>

IV. Effectiveness of the portfolio: Students views (questionnaires and videos)

We have had abundant feedback from students throughout the last 8 years and we have been taking that feedback into account. The feedback was received both informally and more formally through the module review questionnaires and staff-students liaison committees.

However, a more in-depth review is needed and I have taken advantage of this LLAS event to carry out a comprehensive survey, whose results I am going to summarise briefly. The questionnaire and related documentation can be found in one of the attachments. **This questionnaire was passed to 20 volunteers of Y1 and the results will be properly gathered and publicised during the next weeks.**

The questionnaires reveal that in most cases, **students have enjoyed thoroughly the activities**, have found the **worksheets for each activity very useful**, feel that they had a **sound learning experience in terms of cultural content** and in terms of **language skills** and have received **quality feedback and support**. If anything, most respondents claim that they do not need workshops on autonomous learning.

However, most of the respondents confess that in certain activities, namely conferences, poetry readings, novels, newspapers and debates, **if there had not been a compulsory autonomous learning component they would not have written up the worksheet and, in many cases, they would not even have attended the activity at all.**

There are certain activities such films in Spanish that a great deal of students is very inclined to do even if they did not count as part of their portfolio.

There are some other activities, such as theatre and poetry translation which attract relatively few participants. However, the participation in these activities is not related to the fact that autonomous learning is compulsory.

In any case, increased motivation seems to be the norm.

Apart from the questionnaires, there are three videos containing three interviews with students. The purpose of these video-interviews is to illustrate the different points of view amongst students about autonomous learning and to show the complex dilemmas that practitioners face when we need to offer solutions that keep everyone happy.

One participant, Lexi, is a Year 2 student who is very pleased with her autonomous learning. Paul and Rebecca are Year 4 students talking about their portfolio in Years 1 and 2 and express different degrees of scepticism about it based on their own experiences and on their own beliefs about education.

Many thanks to the three of them and to the twenty participants in the survey.

Some provisional conclusions:

1. In my view, and based on the evidence available, **we must have compulsory autonomous language learning** for all the students in intermediate to advanced levels in HE language modules, even if some of the students prefer exclusively language-class based work and would rather opt-out. Students cannot make an informed decision about voluntary autonomous learning until they have had a fair crack to the whip. In order to be able to gauge how useful or fruitful autonomous learning is, they need first to acquire the habits that autonomous learning involves. In many cases, that habit has to be instilled.
2. If students are able to work **in topics of their interest**, the portfolio will have more chances to succeed.
3. Our portfolio may increase the chances of greater differentials between the students in terms of the learning experience and the learning outputs, although that still needs to be demonstrated. The portfolio offers a more open-ended outcome and there may be a reason for concern. However, **the portfolio is only one component of the language course**. Students who prefer a more even and predictable learning experience with more “instructional objectives” do have the opportunity to make the most out of highly “instructional” classroom-based and text-book based language work, which we also offer. We can challenge social conventions about the nature of university education by offering additional learning components such as our autonomous learning programme, but not by wiping out completely the existing more instructional learning components.
4. Our education system, in general, is based on detailed programming, very well defined routes into a highly predictable learning experiences, standardised measuring of outputs and very tangible rewards. This type of regulatory approach does not encourage, in principle, autonomy or personalised learning. However, there is what I call **a regulatory paradox**: we can actually promote a personalised, free-spirit, intrinsically motivated and truly humanistic learning by making autonomous learning a fully fledged member of our highly regulated instructional learning environments. In the case of our portfolio, we give tangible rewards, points and marks, to autonomous learning, we provide a very solid structure for the autonomous learning experience, we give the portfolio the same treatment in terms of assessment that essays or exams receive and the portfolio becomes the subject of an oral exam. We could be critical about this and say, following the terminology of Eisner (1), that we **have managed to infiltrate in our curriculum a learning experience that is actually aimed at “expressive objectives” by presenting it under an “instructional” wrapping**. But that would be inaccurate. It'd be more appropriate to conclude by saying that the apparent dichotomy between expressive objectives and instructional objectives is resolved in our case by simply delaying the definition of some key instructional objectives. **It is the student who defines or “instructionalises” those objectives by choosing the activities and completing the forms and worksheets. It is a case of deferred, decentralised and personalised “instructionalisation” of learning objectives.**

(1) Keith Crome, Ruth Farrar and Patrick O'Connor. “What is Autonomous Learning?” *Discourse*. Vol. 9,N. 1. 2009. Available from <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/PrsDiscourseArticles/113> [Accessed 25May 2010]