

Desarrollo de la autonomía en estudiantes de la enseñanza del inglés durante la enseñanza remota del COVID-19: Percepciones de estudiantes

Autonomy Development Among ELT Students During COVID-19 Remote Classes: Insights from Students' Perceptions

Ana Paula Hernández Colmenero^a, Martha Guadalupe Hernández Alvarado^b, Hilda Hidalgo Avilés^c

Abstract:

The purpose of this research is to investigate how English Language Teaching (ELT) students exercised their autonomy during remote classes prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative case study, conducted at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo in Mexico, examines students' perceptions and experiences before, during, and after the pandemic, involving semi-structured interviews with four ELT students. Key themes include the crucial role of teachers in providing resources and support and the impact of raising students' awareness to develop autonomy. The findings revealed a significant shift from pre-pandemic dependence on teacher guidance to increased autonomy post-pandemic. Before the pandemic, students relied heavily on teachers and engaged in limited self-directed learning. The forced transition to remote learning; however, prompted students to develop various independent learning strategies. This study underscores the importance of fostering environments that support self-directed learning and students' awareness, suggesting that autonomy-supportive teaching methods can enhance students' adaptability to future challenges.

Keywords:

Autonomy, Learning, Students' perceptions, COVID-19 pandemic

Resumen:

El propósito de esta investigación es indagar cómo los estudiantes de la Enseñanza de la Lengua Inglesa ejercieron su autonomía durante las clases remotas impulsadas por la pandemia del COVID-19. Este estudio cualitativo, realizado en la Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo en México, examina las percepciones y experiencias de los estudiantes antes, durante y después de la pandemia, mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas a cuatro estudiantes. Los temas más relevantes incluyen el papel crucial de los docentes en la provisión de recursos y apoyo y el impacto de la conciencia de los estudiantes. Los resultados revelaron un cambio significativo de la dependencia de los estudiantes a la orientación docente previo a la pandemia a una mayor autonomía después de la misma. Previo a la pandemia, los estudiantes dependían en gran medida de los profesores involucrándose en el aprendizaje autodirigido de manera limitada. Sin embargo, la transición forzada al aprendizaje remoto impulsó a los estudiantes a desarrollar varias estrategias de aprendizaje independiente. Este estudio subraya la importancia de fomentar entornos que apoyen el aprendizaje autodirigido y la conciencia de los estudiantes, lo que sugiere que los métodos de enseñanza que apoyan la autonomía pueden mejorar la adaptabilidad de los estudiantes a desafíos futuros.

Palabras Clave:

Autonomía, aprendizaje, percepciones del estudiante, pandemia COVID-19

a Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo | Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades | Área Académica de Lingüística | Pachuca-Hidalgo | México, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2680-0864> Email: 12ana.hernandez@gmail.com

b Autor de Correspondencia, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo | Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades | Área Académica de Lingüística | Pachuca-Hidalgo | México, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4939-455x>, Email: martha_hernandez5011@uaeh.edu.mx

c Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo | Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades | Área Académica de Lingüística | Pachuca-Hidalgo | México, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2540-7814> Email: hildah@uaeh.edu.mx

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Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented transformation in education, forcing an abrupt shift from face-to-face to remote learning. This sudden change left closed schools worldwide, highlighting a lack of preparedness and strategies for autonomous learning. As educational institutions gradually returned to face-to-face classes, concerns emerged regarding the implementation of remote learning and the perceived inability of students to work independently. The impact on academic achievement was particularly notable among English Language Teaching (ELT) students once they returned to classes on campus.

In response to these challenges, this research seeks to investigate how ELT students exercised their autonomy during remote classes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study, framed within a qualitative case study design, unfolds at the undergraduate program in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, offering an examination of autonomy development among ELT students.

The central question guiding this research study is, "To what extent was autonomy among ELT students developed in remote classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?" This question served as a guide, directing the research into the field of autonomy within language education. The findings can be used to inform educational practices and offer valuable considerations for fostering autonomy in language education amid unforeseen challenges.

This article is organized as follows: We first discuss the theoretical concepts and previous research relevant to the study. We then describe the methodology employed to conduct this research. After that, the results are discussed, and the theoretical implications and connections to prior research are explored, contributing to the scholarly discourse on the topic. We finally summarize key findings, discuss their implications, and suggest avenues for future research. We also discuss the study's limitations and potential biases.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to a significant number of fatalities worldwide, prompting the implementation of remote learning for students. However, this shift, combined with a lack of students' strategies for autonomous learning, led to unintended consequences. After returning to face-to-face classes, students reported decreased academic achievement and complaints about the implementation of remote learning.

In this first section, we will define and discuss the concepts of remote learning, autonomy, and the roles of the teacher and learner in the development of autonomy.

Then, we will present previous studies that have addressed how students managed their learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the materials, techniques, and methods they used and their attitudes toward their learning.

Remote Learning

During the pandemic, many schools worldwide were forced to shift from face-to-face teaching to emergency remote teaching (ERT). Hodges et al. (2020: 6) define ERT as "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances". Moser et al. (2020) exemplify some of the crises that may cause this temporary and abrupt shift to instructional delivery which include weather, war, or health. Similarly, Khlaif et al. (2021:7034) define Emergency Remote Learning (ERL) as "the unplanned and sudden shift from the traditional form of education into a remote one following the state of emergency in different countries due to the outbreak of COVID-19". In this way, remote classes are an unexpected change to distant learning without previous awareness or experience, causing ineffective classes.

Learner autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy has been discussed in second language acquisition since the late 1960s (Holec, 1981; Schwartz, 1973). One of the most cited definitions was proposed by Holec (1981:3), who conceptualized autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". For Holec, this ability involves identifying learning objectives and content, selecting learning materials, monitoring learning process, and self-assessment of learning (as cited in Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015). This aligns with Little's (2022) later definition that states that autonomy "denotes a teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning." However, autonomy is not a simple matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent. Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies either. To develop autonomy, learners need to be willing to take responsibility for their learning and be consciously aware of their learning process (Sinclair, 2000).

In this study, autonomy is interpreted as the capacity each person has to independently make reasoned and critical decisions concerning one's actions or learning, characterized by self-governance, self-control, and moral responsibility in executing and being accountable for those decisions.

The roles of the teacher in developing autonomy

The role that teachers play in the process of helping learners develop their autonomy is fundamental. Little (1991) highlights the need for educators to start with themselves to promote greater learner autonomy. This involves considering their own attitudes, behaviors, experiences, and expectations of the teaching/learning environment. Similarly, Yan (2012) claims that the learner has the responsibility to make decisions and take charge of their learning. But without teachers' counsel and supervision, the whole process will result in low efficiency or even fall into disorder.

Yan also argues that instead of acting as a boss, educators should act as directors, letting students learn in productive ways. Students then should become the center of attention under the guidance of the autonomous learning paradigm.

According to Llaven-Nucamendi (2014), learner-centered instruction is a pedagogical approach that places the learner at the center of the learning process, emphasizing the learners' active involvement, self-direction, and autonomy in their learning journey. This approach aims to shift the traditional role of the teacher as the primary source of knowledge and control to a facilitator who supports and guides learners in taking ownership of their learning. Among the different roles teachers can play in the promotion of autonomy are the ones of teachers, counselors, and advisers helping students through the process of goal-setting, planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning.

Kato and Mynard (2016) suggest that, to be autonomous, language learners need an awareness of self, an awareness of facilities, roles and resources available to them, and awareness of different approaches to learning. Therefore, one of the most important roles teachers play in promoting autonomy is to raise students' awareness of their individual characteristics as language learners and their needs, the roles they need to assume to be responsible for their learning, and the materials and resources they can use. Students also need to become familiar with the different learning strategies they can use to make their learning more effective.

Perceptions and attitudes towards autonomy

Students' perceptions of themselves play a significant role in their development of autonomy in language learning. Llaven-Nucamendi (2014) states that how students perceive themselves about their language learning abilities including their self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-reflection can influence their willingness and ability to take control of their learning process. The perception each student has of autonomous learning varies in different ways, and even if learners have a positive perception of it, that does not guarantee good

results. As detailed in the study conducted by Yosintha and Yunianti (2021), which involved 513 EFL online students from eight universities in Indonesia, it was found that learning autonomy was not a common mindset during face-to-face classes, but it was inevitable during remote classes. The majority of students (80.5%) had favorable opinions about their autonomy during English online learning. However, the majority did not achieve an A in their English classes, possibly due to complications with their learning methods or lack of active participation.

These results differ from the ones obtained in the study by Octaberlina and Muslimin (2021) which aimed to investigate students' autonomy and attitudes towards taking an online TOEFL course during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results showed that students were self-motivated, emotionally-managed, and independent learners. They also assessed their learning skills and weaknesses. By taking their feelings into account, comprehending the benefits, and planning for the future, students demonstrated favorable reactions and views regarding the implementation of online TOEFL courses and autonomous learning.

Materials, tools, and strategies for autonomy

Besides students' attitudes and perceptions of self-learning, materials, tools, and strategies play a significant role in the development of autonomy in language learning. These resources can empower students to take control of their learning process, make informed decisions, and engage in self-directed learning.

The use of different materials for autonomous learning is a topic that has been researched since the pandemic started. For instance, Chen's (2021) study examined the use of embedded scaffolding materials by 60 international Chinese students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The materials included notes, scripts, multimedia resources, references, and video captions to help students solve learning problems. After two weeks of autonomous learning, participants were interviewed online. The results showed that scaffolding materials promoted autonomy and independence in language skill acquisition for foreign students, but less independence was observed in acquiring cultural elements. The development of learner agency through scaffolding materials was a dynamic process and it took time for participants to fully utilize it. However, students who frequently attempted, monitored, and reviewed their learning in the new online setting exhibited greater autonomy.

Similar to the previous study, Xie's (2020) research aimed to examine the impact of autonomous learning materials on students' learning outcomes and their effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study involved second and fifth-grade students from two primary schools in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, and a control group from a

different elementary school. Results showed that while most subjects reached the qualified level, total scores were lower during the pandemic. The study suggests that autonomous learning resources can be beneficial for students' learning and information exploration.

On the other hand, the way teachers manage tools and strategies to promote autonomous learning not only affects students' learning process but also their perceptions, as shown in Tuan's (2022) research. The study aimed to explore the strategies English teachers at Thuong Mai University used to enhance students' autonomy in online courses. Students involved in this research were asked to give their opinions about the tools used to promote learner autonomy. The results showed that teachers used Zoom and other tools like Padlet, Quizizz, Google Docs, Mentimeter, and Canva for tasks. Students generally appreciated the tools, but some felt stressed and nervous due to strict self-study requirements. The use of IT tools improved students' self-assurance, tenacity, and learning abilities as they became more independent.

Autonomy development during the COVID-19 pandemic

According to Llaven-Nucamendi (2014), autonomy in language learning is developed through a combination of factors, including individual characteristics, learning experiences, teaching practices, and the learning environment. Students' autonomy development was different among students before and after the pandemic as it was shown in Luhdyanti and Hardi's (2020) research conducted at the University of Pahlawan Tuanku Tambusai to examine students' autonomous learning in online classes. The research involved 82 second-, fourth-, and sixth-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program. The study found that most students had positive experiences with independent learning and with teachers delegating learning responsibilities. Autonomous learning in online classes requires active participation, with students choosing subjects and materials, assessing their understanding, and producing course materials themselves. Students who chose subjects and materials were more motivated to complete assignments, while the ones who continued to rely on their teachers lacked control over their education. Students believed they could pursue autonomous learning when they had more control over their own learning but choosing the topic to explore in an online class was challenging.

Ariebobo's (2020) study, conducted with Air Transport Management (ATM) major students to explore their objectives and preferences for learning English during the pandemic, yielded similar results. The research involved analyzing documents, conducting a semi-structured

interview with 20 students, and administering a questionnaire to 166 students. The results revealed that students were aware of their English learning since they "could choose their learning objectives, learning preference, and the topic they preferred to study" (Ariebobo, 2020: 71). A similar study was conducted by Hardi, Rizal, and Noviardila (2022) to explore the students' autonomy capacity. A questionnaire was administered to 269 students. Results showed that students were able to formulate their own learning objectives and a study plan tailored to their needs. These studies show that students managed their learning during the pandemic in a positive way by identifying their learning objectives and the topics they wanted to learn.

In the opposite direction were the results found in the research done by Irgatoglu et al. (2022), which examined the autonomy level and language learning strategies in a preparatory school in Indonesia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that motivation was stronger before the pandemic but lower during the outbreak, possibly due to different educational settings. Learner autonomy levels were high before the pandemic but moderate after, suggesting higher autonomy before the spread of COVID-19. The study found that students' levels of learner autonomy ranged from low to moderate during the pandemic. These findings suggest that students' motivation, autonomy, self-confidence, and willingness were weaker during the pandemic.

As stated above, this research aims to investigate how ELT students at a public university in Central Mexico exercised their autonomy during remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the development of autonomy among students is important for understanding their progress during this period. The guiding question for this research is: "To what extent was autonomy among ELT students developed in remote classes during the COVID-19 pandemic?"

Methodology

The COVID-19 pandemic generated a different way to teach and learn English. Thus, the purpose of this case study is to identify to what extent autonomy was triggered during the pandemic among university students.

A description of the setting where the study took place, the participants, and the instrument used to collect the data as well as an explanation of the data collection and the data analysis to undertake this study are described below.

Worldview, approach, and design

Based on the philosophical theory of constructivism, scientific knowledge is either developed by the scientific community or by the individual learner, depending on one's experiences and views of the natural world.

Creswell (2007) stated that constructivism's main goal is to rely as much as possible on the perspectives and views of the participants of the situation. According to Thompson (2019), constructivist researchers seek to understand the experience of research participants to discover the participants' subjective truth or perceptions. As one of the interests in doing this research is uncovering participants' views on the development of their autonomy during the pandemic, this paradigm suits this aim.

A qualitative case study is a research method that involves an in-depth examination and analysis of a specific phenomenon or case, such as an individual, organization, community, event, or situation (Hassan, 2024). In this case, the COVID-19 pandemic was an unexpected and rare phenomenon that brought many changes that are worth studying.

Setting

This research was carried out in 2023 at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, which is a public university in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico, at the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades with students of the English Language Teaching undergraduate program. The university was working with face-to-face classes before the quarantine began and shifted to remote learning during the pandemic.

The setting was selected because the radical change from face-to-face classes to remote learning forced not only the school and teachers to adapt to a new way of teaching, but also students to take more responsibility for their learning process.

Participants

The participants that took part in this research were four university students around 20–23 years old. They were in 7th semester at the moment of the study. The participants were chosen using purposive sampling. Participants had to meet these criteria: they had to be studying before the pandemic and continue their studies during the quarantine. In this way, it would be possible to compare their autonomy behaviors before and during the pandemic.

Before the interviews were conducted, the participants were informed about the study's aim and asked to sign a consent form granting the use of the information provided solely for academic purposes.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data for this research. OpenAI 2023 was used to generate the questions, which were then adapted (Appendix 1). This decision was made to ensure linguistic clarity and accessibility, as well as improve efficiency. According to George (2022:1), "a semi-structured interview is a data

collection method that relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework. However, the questions are not set in order or in phrasing".

The interview was piloted with an ELT student using the first draft, and as it was too long, some questions were omitted to have a shorter version which was used with the participants.

The final version of the in-depth interview consisted of 30 open-ended questions, which were divided into 8 different sections that covered different topics such as initial adjustment, autonomy, time management and planning, skill development, flexibility and adaptability, collaboration with teachers, support systems and resources, and long-term impact.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interviews, we drew on Thorne (2000) who mentioned that the data analysis of qualitative research involves multiple steps, including transcription, translation, categorization, labeling, presentation using visual aids, coding, and conclusion-making. Both an inductive and deductive approach were used to analyze the data. As the first step, interviews were transcribed and read several times to get familiar with them. Afterwards, the transcripts were coded by highlighting salient phrases and words in the light of the literature review, and some others emerged throughout the analysis. Then, in a separate document, the codes were written to look for commonalities, differences, and patterns among them. After going through all the transcripts, a final list of categories emerged.

Results and Discussion

The results show that the forced transition to remote classes during the pandemic helped students raise awareness of their own learning process. Despite the many challenges students faced, they managed to develop strategies to learn effectively. Participants highlighted that to develop these strategies and become more autonomous, they had to better understand themselves, which helped them discover new skills and abilities.

It is important to note that some participants' responses contained language mistakes, which will be indicated in the excerpts with the abbreviation [sic].

Autonomy BEFORE the pandemic

Participants agreed that before the pandemic, they were not in charge of their learning process because they were totally guided by the teacher, as suggested by Sam and Mary respectively:

Before the pandemic no, I just keep [sic] what I learned in school. I never studied in my house and... well before. (Sam)

Before the pandemic, I don't think so. before the pandemic, no, it was something that I needed to improve during the pandemic. As I mentioned, I was not autonomous. (Mary)

The perspectives provided by the participants showed a notable lack of autonomy before the pandemic. Interviewees expressed a reliance on teachers for guidance and materials, suggesting a more teacher-centered learning environment. This means that these students relied on their teachers mainly since they did not do many activities outside the classroom on their own. The recognition that their level of autonomy needed to be improved during the pandemic points out how the pandemic situation drastically transformed how they approached learning.

However, not all students experienced a complete lack of autonomy. Katy's nuanced perspective sheds light on this variability:

Well, I was autonomous but not that much. (Katy)

Katy's comment reveals that while some students did exhibit some degree of autonomy before the pandemic, it was limited. This suggests that there was a spectrum of autonomy among students, with some engaging in self-directed learning to a certain extent but still not fully embodying the autonomous learner described by Holec (1981). This viewpoint adds depth to the analysis by acknowledging that the pandemic did not introduce autonomy from scratch but rather intensified and expanded pre-existing, albeit limited, autonomous behaviors.

Awareness

Participants commented on very interesting facts regarding how they discovered different ways to manage their learning. Interviewees' perceptions underscore the crucial role of awareness in the development of autonomy. Katy and Paty highlighted, correspondingly, the importance of knowing themselves deeply.

Well, I had to know myself better to notice eh which ways help me the most [...] It helped me to find other ways in which I learn better. It impacted me a lot because now every time that I have to study a new topic on my own, Ehm, I know myself better and I can implement eh the strategies that help me the most... Now, I know myself better and I know better how I learn. (Katy)

Katy emphasized the significant impact of awareness on her autonomy development. She mentioned that by knowing herself better, she was able to identify her individual preferences and the strategies and techniques that were more suitable for her learning. The newfound knowledge of herself allowed Katy to explore and perform well in her independent study, emphasizing the enduring influence of this awareness on her overall learning

experience. Paty mentioned something similar:

I think I discovered some abilities I had, and I didn't notice until I did it in pandemic [sic]...Because practicing all these new activities, I discovered new abilities in myself. So, it helped me to develop my growth in school and as a student. (Paty)

Paty highlighted that the awareness of herself during the pandemic led her to find some abilities that she was not conscious of having before. The recognition of these new skills not only had a positive effect on her personal growth but also in her academic journey.

The participants' experiences align with the idea that autonomy involves not just external factors, such as teaching strategies, but also internal factors related to self-awareness and metacognition, which help them be aware of their learning process and develop their autonomy. This aligns with Kato and Mynard (2016), who identify learners' awareness of themselves, of facilities, roles, and resources available to them, and of different approaches to learning as essential elements to become autonomous.

The teacher's role in developing students' autonomy

Examining the crucial role of teachers in fostering autonomy requires delving into specific strategies and experiences. Little (1991) emphasized the need for educators to start with themselves to promote greater learner autonomy. Building on this idea, Paty recounted her experiences during face-to-face classes, highlighting how the example set by certain autonomous teachers inspired her to emulate their autonomy.

Well, one strategy I can think of, it was my first teachers that in first semester before the pandemic, they were super, um, and powerful, no, inspiring, and all the techniques they were giving me in a book, I could see it in their selves [sic], you know, in their actual learning, teaching, sorry, and they asked us to do the same. So, I think that was one of the strategies, you know, to follow their lead. (Paty)

However, Sam pointed out that, before remote classes, teachers primarily provided strategies and theories of autonomy that were not effectively applied by students until they were left alone to navigate the challenges.

Some of them gave us some strategies and some techniques to become autonomous. But I think that it was not, it was just information. We didn't apply it until we faced the pandemic. (Sam)

Paty echoed this perspective, recalling a specific subject on learning autonomy that focused on theory rather than practical application. Paty further stressed this point, reflecting on a class during the pandemic that, despite presenting valuable content, remained more theoretical than practical.

I remember we had a class about autonomy and I think I took it in pandemic. I mean it was the content that the books and the subject had. They went straight to the point; you know to give us facts to improve our autonomy. But I didn't practice it with that subject, with that teacher like in real life. You know they were just; it was just information rather than you know, practice. (Paty)

These accounts underline that students were more inclined to develop autonomy by either emulating autonomous teachers or actively implementing strategies, rather than passively absorbing information. This is consistent with Sinclair (2000) who states that promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies. Learner training aims to help learners consider the factors which affect their learning and discover the learning strategies which suit them.

In this way, the sudden shift to remote classes further compelled students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios, showcasing the dynamic relationship between teaching approaches and student autonomy development. Sinclair emphasized this by pointing out that autonomy is not a simple matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent. She suggests teacher support is crucial for encouraging responsibility and metacognitive awareness development.

Strategies used by teachers during the pandemic

During the pandemic and the sudden transition to remote learning, teachers adopted diverse strategies and tools to continue with the classes and facilitate remote learning. These tools were carefully selected based on their effectiveness for specific tasks, showcasing the adaptability of educators in the face of sudden changes. Participants shared their experiences and thoughts regarding the strategies employed by their teachers.

We used different programs as Meet [sic] in Google and Zoom. And sometimes we had to use WhatsApp because of the programs. (Sam)

Well, during the pandemic... we used to take online sessions; for example, on Meet or Zoom, so the teacher used to give us kind of presentations or to explain the topics. (Katy)

The utilization of multiple platforms reflects teachers' efforts to create engaging and interactive virtual classrooms. The incorporation of WhatsApp suggests a pragmatic approach to addressing potential technological challenges. However, it's essential to explore the impact of these tools on students' autonomy and engagement and how they were used.

In addition to digital tools, interviewees highlighted that a common approach among their teachers was to provide them with books and reading materials, encouraging

independent study. They pointed out that teachers played a supportive role; they were helpful in answering questions and offering opportunities for additional research.

They gave us information, they gave us books; they gave us places where we can [sic] answer our questions and also when they... we didn't have classes, we could send messages to them. (Sam)

Teachers used to give us kind of the materials and we had to check them and to read everything by our own [sic] and in our own rhythm or in our time. I think most of the teachers were supporters for us and they clarified our doubts all the time. (Katy)

The provision of resources and the availability of teachers for clarification indicated a student-centered approach. According to Llaven-Nucamendi (2014), this approach aims to shift the traditional role of the teacher as the primary source of knowledge and control to a facilitator who supports and guides learners in taking ownership of their learning. The pedagogical approach used by the teachers during the pandemic period, aligned with autonomy-supportive teaching practices, encouraged students to take responsibility for their learning.

However, it's crucial to address Mary's perspective, who felt that despite receiving additional materials, clear guidelines were lacking.

Some teachers helped me and provided some extra books in which I can study [sic] but I consider that it was just the only thing that the teacher facilitated, I don't consider that I received clear guidelines. (Mary)

While the strategies employed by teachers during the pandemic were relatively uniform, students' perceptions varied in terms of helpfulness. The impact of these strategies on student autonomy, feelings, and overall learning process varied based on each student's experiences. These findings align with Tuan's (2022) previous research indicating that how teachers manage tools and strategies to promote autonomous learning affects students' learning process and their perceptions of it.

Strategies used by students during the pandemic

Autonomy involves the use of techniques and strategies to manage one's learning process. According to Yan (2012), the learner has the responsibility to make decisions and take charge of their learning. Moreover, the results obtained in the study conducted by Xie's (2020) show statistics where the use of autonomous learning resources has a certain degree of beneficial guidance.

The strategies and materials each student used during the pandemic in their learning process varied depending on their learning goals as well as their learning style. Katy,

Paty, and Sam, correspondingly, explained the strategies they came up with during remote learning,

When I didn't understand a topic completely or when I was struggling, I used to look for blogs or videos for me to understand that better. (Katy)

One of the strategies was to record myself because two of my teachers asked us to record ourselves and I love recording myself in a video, so it was a strategy for me because I started doing it for myself out of this school so yeah, I like it. And I found that strategy useful. (Paty)

During the pandemic I tried to work firstly to order my schedules. Now as I mentioned, I try to look for more information, more books. (Sam)

These narratives highlight the diverse and personalized approaches students took to manage their learning during the pandemic. Referencing Xie's (2020) study on autonomous learning resources, the students' strategies align with the idea that the use of varied resources contributes positively to autonomous learning.

The participants' self-directed choices highlight the importance of students actively engaging with diverse materials beyond traditional classroom resources. The diverse strategies employed by students during the pandemic underscore the personalized nature of autonomy. The participants' approaches, which are based on their needs and preferences, emphasize how crucial it is to create a learning environment that considers each student's unique learning preferences. Integrating these insights into teaching practices can contribute to the development of autonomy in learners.

Autonomy AFTER the pandemic

Participants expressed confidence in the notion that the abrupt shift to remote learning contributed to the development of their autonomy. They highlighted that the absence of constant guidance from teachers during this period compelled them to explore additional tools and strategies for independent learning. This perception was echoed by both Sam and Katy,

After...the pandemic, well it changed my mind a lot. NOW, I look for more materials. more sources and now I know that I need to learn by myself. Well, I think that I become [sic] more autonomous... (Sam)

After the pandemic, I became kind of more autonomous. Because I had to for example when I didn't understand a topic at all, I had to do more research or to do more exercises by my own [sic] or to try to find strategies for me to learn better. Definitely I am more autonomous than before the pandemic. (Katy)

Paty also highlighted that during this period, she discovered that, based on the level of motivation and interest she had in the task, she was able to develop either more or less autonomy. This is consistent with Dickinson

(1995) who states that autonomy and intrinsic motivation are closely related. Intrinsic motivation stems from internal factors like enjoyment and interest. Students are more likely to look for opportunities for autonomy, take charge of their education and make improvements if they feel that their actions and decisions have a direct influence on the results.

Which, at the same time, matches the characteristic of autonomy suggested by Sinclair (2000), developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process. This emphasizes the importance of learners to acquire metacognitive awareness which includes: reflection on learning through goal-setting and planning, self-evaluation and progress tracking, assessing learning activities, and making use of learning resources.

I consider myself to be a little bit more autonomous, but not that much. It was so much helpful [sic] because I discovered that I can be uhm, I can be autonomous through the learning [sic] if it's meaningful to me. (Paty)

The participants' reflections on autonomy after the pandemic revealed a transformative impact on their approach to learning. The transition to increased independence and proactive participation in the learning process represented a favorable result of the difficulties brought about by the sudden switch to remote instruction. The strategies and approaches interviewees developed during the pandemic, based on an understanding of their individual learning preferences, and needs, continue to influence their autonomy after the pandemic. Participants' increased autonomy underscores the importance of providing students with opportunities for self-directed learning.

Conclusion

This case study delved into the development of autonomy among ELT students during the COVID-19 pandemic at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo. The shift to remote learning prompted a reevaluation of students' roles in their own learning, offering an opportunity to explore the aspects of autonomy development in a challenging and unexpected setting.

The findings showed a significant shift in students' perception and exercise of autonomy. Prior to the pandemic, participants acknowledged a limited role in their learning process, heavily guided by traditional classroom structures. However, the sudden transition to remote learning became a mechanism for change. The forced transition to remote education led students to discover, adapt, and implement a variety of strategies. This, in turn, helped them develop a sense of autonomy.

As the pandemic subsided, participants reported feeling more independent, citing improvements in their ability to find information and organize their time. For instance, one

student highlighted their newfound ability to discern reliable sources from the vast amount of online information. Another participant shared a specific experience of planning a detailed schedule that enabled them to set aside time for studying, taking online courses, and doing other things.

These individual experiences collectively underscore the pandemic's transformative impact on students' autonomy. Overcoming the difficulties of distance learning proved to be a life-changing experience that shaped both academic and personal growth. However, to enhance students' development of autonomy in times of crises, it is important that teachers provide the necessary guidance by fostering students' awareness of themselves, the resources available, and their learning process (Kato & Mynard, 2016) in a learner-centered environment (Llaven-Nucamendi, 2014). Moreover, although varied materials and resources used by instructors can play a significant role in the development of autonomy (Xie, 2020), it is the teachers' use of them that impacts the students' learning experience and their perceptions of it (Tuan, 2022). The role of teachers setting an example in the promotion of autonomy (Little, 1991) also contributes to development of autonomy in students by providing opportunities for students to identify their learning objectives, select materials, monitor their progress, and self-assess their learning.

While this study shed light on the positive aspects of autonomy development during the pandemic, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations. The research focused on a specific university setting and on a small number of participants, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, as the study only considered students' perceptions, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias. In order to obtain a thorough understanding of the development of autonomy during similar situations, future research could examine a wider range of educational contexts, utilize a larger sample size, and involve different sorts of data.

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Appendix 1- Interview

ChatGPT. (2023, July 26). Chat GPT

[Modelo de lenguaje GPT-3].

<https://chat.openai.com/?model=text-davinci-002-render-sha>

Initial Adjustment:

1. How did you take classes during the pandemic? Do you consider that to be a useful way to learn?
2. How did you adapt to the sudden transition to online learning during the pandemic?
3. What were your initial feelings and challenges when faced with remote learning?
4. What were your initial challenges when faced with remote learning?
5. What did you find more difficult when learning online/ that way?
6. Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic affected your learning of English? How?

Autonomy

7. Did you consider yourself an autonomous learner before the pandemic? Why or why not? What about now?
8. Did the shift to online learning require you to take a more self-directed approach to your studies? How did you handle this change?
9. What strategies did you use BEFORE the pandemic to manage your learning? Were they useful?
10. What strategies did you use DURING the pandemic? Were they the same? Were they useful?
11. Were there any strategies you used to maintain focus and drive while studying remotely?

Time Management and Planning:

12. Did your time management strategies change when you had to learn from home? If so, how?

13. Did you develop new strategies for planning and organizing your coursework and study schedule? Which ones?

Skill Development:

14. (In what way) Did the pandemic period lead you to develop new skills or enhance existing ones? How did this impact your approach to learning?
15. Were there any unexpected positive outcomes in terms of skill acquisition or personal growth?

Flexibility and Adaptability:

16. Can you describe instances where you had to adapt your learning approach due to changes in the pandemic situation?
17. Did you find that you were more flexible in your learning strategies compared to pre-pandemic times?

Collaboration with Teachers

18. How did the role of your teachers or professors change in facilitating your autonomous learning during the pandemic compared to before?
19. Did you receive clear guidelines and support from instructors to help you navigate the transition to online learning?
20. How did their involvement influence your level of autonomy and interest in learning?
21. Did teachers play a role in motivating and engaging you in your studies during the pandemic? How did this impact your autonomy and understanding of course?
22. Did teachers encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and independent research skills during the pandemic? How did this impact your approach to learning?
23. Were there specific assignments or activities that promote autonomous learning?

Support Systems and resources:

24. How did the university support your learning during the pandemic?
25. Did you seek additional support outside of formal channels? Where?
26. How did you access learning materials during the pandemic?
27. Did you explore different resources beyond what was provided by the university?
28. Did you find any online tools or platforms particularly helpful for self-guided learning?

Long-Term Impact:

29. Looking beyond the pandemic, do you think you'll continue using the autonomous learning strategies you developed? Why or why not?
30. What lessons from this experience do you think can contribute to your future academic and professional endeavors?