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Secundino Isabeles Flores, University of Colima, Mexico
María Magdalena Cass Zubiría, University of Colima, Mexico
Raphael Hubert Elie Sebire, University of Colima, Mexico

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Corresponding email address: secundino@ucol.mx

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Processes Employed to Introduce Autonomous Learning

Secundino Isabeles Flores, University of Colima, Mexico
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5293-3783>

María Magdalena Cass Zubiría, University of Colima, Mexico
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4671-2981>

Raphael Hubert Elie Sebire, University of Colima, Mexico
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2803-7203>

Abstract

This article presents the results of an analysis made to some process models that have been used to introduce autonomous learning in EFL contexts. The purpose of this analysis was to explore the processes these models followed to reach such a goal. This was done because the authors of this paper considered that knowing the steps that were taken to foster autonomous learning may help to create or adapt a process model to implement this approach to learning in other contexts.

Keywords: process models, autonomous learning, levels of implementation

Process Models

Process models are constantly used in different areas of knowledge because of the benefits they provide. Rolland (1998) contends that a process model is a system which defines the process to be followed and explains how this should be conducted. Davis (2009) adds that this type of model depicts the sequence of steps to be taken to reach its goal. These types of models have several key elements. First, they have a clear objective (Davis, 2009). This defines everything in the model. For instance, if the objective is to introduce a new teaching approach, its components, processes, activities, and tasks will be aimed at accomplishing this goal. Second, the process is an essential component of this type of model (Rolland, 1998). Sommerville (1996) defines a process as the steps that have to be taken in a specific order. Guidelines are a significant element in process models (Rolland, 1998). They provide instructions, suggestions, and other relevant information regarding how to implement the model. Process models provide information regarding the resources required and the desired conditions of the environment to successfully implement them (Davis, 2009). If specific conditions or special materials are necessary, these are described in the model as well.

Process models have been used extensively because they provide a roadmap which gives users stability, control, organization, and guidance (Tsui & Karam, 2006). Existing literature on autonomous learning indicates that in the past decades different researchers have used process models to foster autonomous learning (Bertoldi et al., 1988; Iimuro & Berger, 2010; Murray, 2006; Nordlund, 2001; Nunan, 1997; Reinders, 2010; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; St. Louis, 2006). These were implemented in different contexts to introduce this educational approach to students who were learning English as a foreign or second language. The results of these studies indicate that process models are appropriate to promote autonomous learning. These findings motivated the authors, language teachers working at a Mexican university, to analyze the models employed in these studies to try to discover any elements they had in common that could generate information regarding how autonomous learning can be introduced and what needs to be done to accomplish this goal.

Models Analyzed

Several models were examined to know the steps taken to introduce autonomous learning, how these were sequenced, and the resources employed to reach the goal. They draw on studies conducted by different researchers around the world (Bertoldi et al., 1988; Iimuro & Berger, 2010; Murray, 2006; Nordlund, 2001; St. Louis, 2006). Their findings indicate that these models helped students to become aware of the benefits of autonomous learning, their learning processes improved, they became more responsible for their learning, and were more motivated to study by themselves. In other words, the models analyzed successfully introduced autonomous learning in the settings where they were conducted. Other models were also examined (Nunan, 1997; Reinders, 2010; Scharle & Szabo, 2000), even though they had not been part of any studies, because they had been considered theoretical frameworks by researchers who have studied the introduction of autonomous learning. In some cases, they have been adapted by other researchers (Zorro et al., 2005) to be part of studies that fostered this type of learning.

Bertonldi, Kollar & Ricard's Model

This model helped students become autonomous learners by using a three-step process: raising awareness, establishing personal priorities, and taking action on the priorities set. This model considers raising learners' awareness as the first step of the autonomization process. The second phase: setting up priorities, is relevant because by doing so, students make decisions

about their learning, they decide what areas they are going to work on and the order in which they will do so. It is a strength of this model the fact that it gives learners the freedom they need to work on their goals, according to their learning styles and preferred strategies. In other words, there is a high amount of student involvement in their learning process, which contributes to developing autonomous learning. The involvement of the students in the decisions that are made regarding their learning is supported by tutors who work one-on-one with students. Getting support to create a plan of action to work on their priorities was crucial. By using their plans of action, students focused on their priorities. These efforts were monitored in the tutorials students had throughout the learning process. Such scaffolding was vital to complete what was included in the learning plan and to do the projects students decided to work on.

One strength of this model was the fact that students were encouraged by the course teacher to analyze their language production - written and spoken - through individual feedback sessions led by the course teacher, classroom discussions or small-group talk. This contributed to having students learn to assess their own language performance, identify their own mistakes, and acknowledge their accomplishments (Bertoldi et al., 1988), which moved them a step closer to becoming autonomous. Another principle found in this model was the support and guidance students received throughout the learning process. The previous were given especially during the tutorials, although it was also present in the course, during the discussion sessions and, to some extent, when participants worked in the resource center. This support was of paramount importance to help students set their priorities, create and monitor their language training plan, choose the best learning strategies as well as to introduce and encourage learners to use new ones, and assist them to reflect on their learning process and self-assessment. Imuro and Berger (2010) and McClure (2001) state that learners, especially at the beginning of the introduction process, need support to set their own goals, find the most effective learning methods and select appropriate study materials and resources. Nunan (2003) affirms that learners need guidance from teachers to acquire the knowledge and develop the abilities needed to become autonomous learners.

Nordlund's Model

The four-level model (learner awareness, plans and contracts, counseling, and record keeping and evaluation) used by Nordlund (2001) to introduce autonomous language learning at Helsinki University Language Centre seemed to have taken some elements from previous

models, as well as adapted and improved others to reach such goal. In this model, awareness raising focused on having subjects become conscious of what autonomous learning and learning strategies were and analyzing the strategies they were employing. Learners' active participation in their learning process was triggered by the creation of plans designed to improve their EFL skills. As in other models, students decided what their learning objectives were going to be and the activities they were going to do to reach such goals. What makes it different from other models is the fact that the previous information was used to put together a plan and a contract in which their goals and responsibilities were scripted on paper to make them feel more committed and responsible of their learning. Students were able to work at the language center and with support groups to create their plans and complete the projects they were going to do individually; these were crucial in this model. The access they had to the wide assortment of learning materials at the language center provided scaffolding for students to be able to do all the activities they included in their plans. The skill support groups, on the other hand, helped students improve specific abilities they needed to develop. Nordlund (2001) believed that having one-on-one meetings with students resulted in positive effects for the implementation process. This researcher included counseling sessions in the model. The guidance, motivation; practical and emotional support; as well as the methodological and conceptual information students were given during the counseling sessions was crucial to assist learners to check on their progress, to make sure they were not procrastinating or interpreting autonomy as having the freedom and power to do whatever they wanted, which might have led to little or no learning.

The last stage in Nordlund's model involves two actions which were important for the development of autonomous learners: to keep records and evaluate their learning. For the latter, the researcher asked participants to assess their learning process. This meant not only stating if they learnt anything or not or what they liked and did not like; it involved a deeper reflection about whether the objectives established at the beginning of the process were reached and if the activities and learning strategies employed had been effective to help them develop the language skills they were selected for. This was one of the methods which included a stage to specifically make them reflect on what they had done to reach their learning objectives, what worked, what did not, what could be changed or adapted, and anything else that could be done to have subjects reach their new goals. Having students reflect on their learning can contribute towards making them aware of what is efficient in their learning and what not, how learning can more easily be

achieved while working autonomously, which can inform their decisions making process in the future to help them become better learners.

Murray's Model

Murray (2006) created an autonomous language learning program which was based on the taxonomy of autonomous learning principles by Fenner and Newby (2000). It included different elements related to autonomous learning, for instance: reflection, objectives, levels, evaluation, learning styles, strategies, materials, classroom activities and external resources. Murray (2006) explains that the previous were taken and adapted and were the basis for the framework used by this researcher, which relies on awareness raising and an understanding of what autonomous language learning is.

The autonomous language learning program created by Murray (2006) was introduced in several Japanese universities during the 2006-2007 academic year in different courses from these universities. This model included five phases: course description and objectives, reflection, goal setting, planning, and evaluating learning, learning styles and strategies, materials and classroom activities and external resources. The program described to students what the course was about and were explained the objectives of the program. The next step was to help students become aware of the framework of autonomous learning behaviors and their use. The latter was done by having students answer a questionnaire regarding how often they performed these types of behaviors prior to their participation in the program. Students were also asked to reflect on their learning styles and the learning strategies they usually used. The third phase involved helping students select their goals and the levels to which they were going to achieve them. To help them with selecting goals and levels, students had to answer short quizzes or carry out communicative exercises which focused on three language elements and four macro skills. During this phase, students were guided to raise their awareness regarding autonomous language learning endeavors and to help learners choose their own goals. An effort was made during this stage to motivate participants to use different autonomous learning behaviors. Participants were free to decide whether they wanted to work towards improving the weaknesses found in the preliminary tests they took, something they were particularly interested in, or longer projects based on experiential learning.

St. Louis' Model

Another model that has been used to introduce autonomy to learners is the one employed by St. Louis (2006). It was introduced in an English for science and Technology course at Simón Bolívar University in Caracas, Venezuela. This English as a foreign language (EFL) class was part of a compulsory reading program for first-year undergraduate, engineering students. The purpose was to help students improve their reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Nevertheless, St. Louis (2006) believes that it can be adapted to any four-skill course. This model included four stages. The first one helped subjects to become aware of their different learning styles and the strategies they use daily and have them reflect on the way they learn. This included making students aware of their strengths and weaknesses. The second step involved having learners decide the areas they need to work on, the percentage of their grade to be assigned to each area, and the time for evaluation. During the third stage, each student decided the type of material and the activities to be completed. They were also given handouts to help them with their work. Finally, a progress report sheet was created including the activities done, what had been learnt, and the areas that still needed improvement were tracked.

During the first day, different activities were carried out to help students become aware of their learning styles, the strategies they used on a daily basis, and to have them reflect on the way they learn. Several activities were conducted on the second day to help students become conscious of their strengths and weaknesses. Students were first given a survey to find out what they thought their academic performance was like, what their needs were, what they suggested doing to improve their performance during the semester, as well as the reading strategies they were using. During the third day, based on information collected from the surveys and the results of tests taken, learners met with the teacher to plan the areas they were going to work on, and establish when the work on these areas was going to be assessed. Students were allowed to select the materials they were going to use and the activities they were going to carry out to fulfill their needs. As they began to work, students kept a record of the activities they did, what they had learnt, and what they still needed to work on in a progress report sheet. In addition to these materials, learners were allowed to use search engines to find the information they needed to complete the activities planned.

Iimuro and Berger’s Model

In 2010, Iimuro and Berger published a paper where they reported the findings of a study they carried out in a Japanese university; its purpose was to help learners develop autonomous learning as well as improve their English language skills. To achieve such an aim, the researchers created a syllabus for a course that included different strategies and a model that included the following stages: explanation of autonomous learning and its importance, evaluation of own needs and setting of study goals, development of own study plans and finding study materials, setting of study plans for every week, completion of English activities and submission of a weekly progress report with completed work. These researchers believed that in order for students to develop their English language competence, it was not enough to do only the assignments given by the teacher in class; they affirmed that learners also needed to work independently on their weaknesses. To achieve these aims, researchers included in the course an assignment they called “self-study”, which was designed to have them learn autonomously.

The importance and reasons for introducing autonomous learning in the course were explained during the first week of classes. Then, students worked on the next stage, evaluating their own needs and setting their study goals by using a worksheet. The first thing they did was to assess their English language needs and to become aware of why they were learning English. Short and long-term goals were set by learners, as well as brainstorming how they might use the target language in the near and long-term future. After that, students created achievable goals by considering the language skills they needed to develop in order to cope with the English language requirements they might have in the future. Once students had their goals set, they looked for suitable study materials to reach such goals. During this stage, teachers provided suggestions regarding the materials they could use and had access to. It was during the second week that students began to work on reaching the goal they set during the first week. Students recorded what they planned to do for the week on their Study Log handout; when the week was over, they wrote down what they had studied. The feedback learners received varied and depended on what each of them was learning and the skills they were focusing on developing.

Nunan’s Model

One of the earliest models used to introduce autonomy among learners was created by Nunan (1997). According to Dang (2012), Nunan was the first person who divided the implementation of autonomy into different phases. His model is divided into five phases:

awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence. Onozawa (2010) calls these levels of implementation. In the awareness level, students become conscious of the content the materials they are using include. Here learners also identify their learning styles and strategies. Involvement requires learners to choose the goals they want to reach from the different options they have. During the intervention, students make changes or adaptations according to their needs to the objective and content of the learning program. Creation requires learners to establish their own learning objectives. In the final level, transcendence, learners connect what they learnt in the classroom to the real world. Nunan (2003) believes that the first step is to raise awareness among students, and this can be done by informing them about the system that is going to be introduced, the pedagogical goals to be reached, the role learners are going to play, the content of the materials they are going to use, among other things. He suggests that learners should become aware of the fact that a change in the way of learning is going to be introduced. Levels two (involvement), three (intervention) and four (creation) are important for two main reasons: they make students get involved in their learning process and provide an opportunity for learners to take part in classroom meetings where they use their English language skills meaningfully because they talk about, discuss and negotiate with the teacher the goals they are going to try to reach. Although transcendence is not a level of implementation, it is vital in this model because it encourages students to apply what they have learnt in a meaningful way in real or semi-real situations.

Nunan emphasizes raising awareness in his model. It is the first level learners need to go through, and even though the order in which the rest of the levels are introduced may vary, and students may work on upper levels before they work on the lower ones (Dang, 2012), helping students become aware of their learning styles and strategies is a step that cannot be skipped. Another pillar of this model is allowing and encouraging learners to make decisions. During the involvement phase, learners select their own goals from the choices they are given. In the next phase, intervention, students modify and adapt the goals and content of the learning program. Adaptations are made according to the needs and goals they previously established. Learners also decide how they are going to reach their goals, when, and how fast.

Scharle and Szabo's Model

These researchers proposed a model which included three stages: raising awareness, changing attitudes, and transferring roles. The objective of the first stage is to help students

become conscious of the learning objectives, to define the content to be learnt, and to establish how the learning process is going to be directed. The second stage: changing attitudes, refers to the transition process students go through from teacher-centered to student-centered learning; in other words, the changes they have to make in order to adapt to an autonomous learning model. Here, students practice being responsible learners by giving them the power to make their own decisions regarding which strategies, techniques, approaches, methods and materials they are going to use to learn. The third stage requires learners to take control of their learning. During this stage, students go from being passive recipients to active constructors of knowledge; this is done autonomously with little or no support from the teacher. Learners not only make decisions regarding how and when they are going to learn, but also they carry out monitor and assess their learning activities, as well as the content learnt or skills developed so far. According to Scharle and Szabo (2000), throughout the three stages, students are required to develop important elements of autonomy, such as motivation, learning skills, empathy, and cooperation. These authors argue that the novelty of this approach lies in the systematic combination of the previous elements and the fact that such development is done gradually.

Reinders' Model

In a paper Reinders published in 2010, he described the model he created and implemented in a language classroom, as well as the results obtained from the study he conducted. The model created by Reinders had seven stages. The first one is asking students to identify their needs, which this researcher believes is not a simple task. He contends that learners barely know their strengths and weaknesses, or they may be able to identify some that are easy to spot but miss others that may be as or more important. The second one is setting goals. This author highlights the importance of establishing clear goals because he believes that doing so can contribute towards focusing on the aspects that are most relevant to students. Planning learning is the next stage. This researcher explains that this is as difficult as setting goals because it involves deciding which road is going to be taken to reach the goals established previously. It requires deciding specifically which actions are going to be taken and when they are going to be carried out. The fourth stage is selecting resources and learning strategies. This also involves the active participation of learners. According to the goals they established, students choose the resources and strategies that will assist them in reaching these. Most learners let the teacher decide which strategies are going to be used to complete the tasks they are given; however, learners need to

learn how to use different types of strategies, and how to choose the appropriate strategies for the different tasks they have to complete (Reinders, 2010). The fifth step is practice. According to Reinders, practice should make students apply the acquired knowledge in meaningful, everyday situations. Monitoring learning comes after. This involves students checking the learning of content as well as an assessment of their motivation levels and other social-affective aspects of learning. The last level is assessment and revision. Reinders (2010) affirms that it may not be advisable to completely stop assessing learners with tests; however, other assessment instruments should be employed as well. Alternative assessment instruments can produce in them an inner satisfaction from their own learning so that they no longer need the support of an external evaluation.

The process models reviewed here were different in many ways; however, they share one key thing in common; they all assisted in the introduction of autonomous learning. Because of this, it is necessary to analyze them to find out which elements they share, which contribute towards introducing this teaching approach, and how they have been sequenced in the implementation process. This information can help educators realize if there are any steps or processes that should be considered when autonomous learning is planning to be implemented.

Analysis

The analysis of the models included here was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the levels of implementation found in these models?
2. How are these sequenced?

The models were broken down to find out the levels of implementation included in each model. A list of them was made for each model. These lists were then compared and contrasted to find any similarities and differences among them. The findings that emerged from this analysis are presented next.

Findings

A significant finding was that there is no agreement regarding what the process for introducing autonomous learning should look like; nevertheless, some similarities among the models analyzed were discovered as well. The number of levels of implementation included in the models studied varied, some had more than others. In addition, the levels the models had were not the same. The following table shows the levels of implementation found in each model.

Table 1

Levels of Implementation Found in the Models Analyzed

Models	Raise awareness	Establish goals	Plan learning	Select materials and resources	Monitor progress	Evaluate learning	Reflect on the learning process
Bertoldi et al.	✓	✓	✓				
Iimuro & Berger	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Murray	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Nordlund	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Nunan	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Reinders	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scharle & Szabo	✓	✓			✓		
St. Louis	✓	✓		✓	✓		

Three levels of implementation were found in some models (Bertoldi et al., 1988; Scharle & Szabo, 2000;), there were four in others (Nunan, 1997; Nordlund, 2001; St. Louis, 2006), five (Iimuro & Berger, 2010; Murray, 2006), or seven (Reinders, 2010). In addition, the levels of implementation included in the processes varied from one model to another; even in those which had the same number of levels. The only one found in all of them was awareness raising. This was also the first level of implementation across models; although there was disagreement regarding what students needed to become aware of. In some models the purpose was to raise awareness about what autonomous learning was and what it implied for learners (Iimuro & Berger, 2010; Nordlund, 2001), whereas in others the goal was to help students become conscious of their learning styles and strengths and weaknesses (St. Louis, 2006; Murray, 2006;

Bertoldi et al., 1988), their language learning and learning strategies (Nordlund, 2001), or the pedagogical goals and content to be learnt (Nunan, 1997; Scharle & Szabo, 2000). Similar differences were found in the conditions needed to implement the models. The resources used, the materials students had access to, the support given to them, and the guidelines followed in each model were different. This led to conclude that there is no agreement regarding what the process of implementing autonomous learning should look like and the components the model should include.

Regarding the sequencing of levels of implementation, it was discovered that they were ordered progressively within each model analyzed, regardless of how many and which were included. Nunan (2003) was one of the first researchers to do this and explained that the levels of the process included in the model he created in 1997 were purposefully ordered in that way. Dang (2012) believes that Nunan's model is a clear example of a sequence that gradually develops autonomous learning. Therefore, arranging the levels of implementation properly is of vital importance because this helps to establish progression and a gradual introduction. The levels of implementation found in all the models were the following: raise awareness, establish goals, plan learning, select materials and resources, monitor progress, evaluate learning, and reflect on the learning process. Learning about this was useful because it informed the authors about the levels that can be used whenever autonomous learning is introduced.

It was found that assistance played a relevant role in the introduction of autonomous learning. Support was provided by people, materials, and resources. Learners received help from teachers, tutors, or peers to raise their awareness regarding autonomous learning (Nunan, 1997), to choose their learning goals (Iimuro & Berger, 2010; Murray, 2006), to become conscious of their learning styles, the learning strategies they used, as well as their strengths and weaknesses (Nunan, 1997; St. Louis, 2006). In addition, one-on-one assistance from tutors and support groups was given to help learners create their plans of action (Bertoldi et al., 1988; Nordlund, 2001; St. Louis, 2006). Moreover, feedback was provided by the researchers in individual sessions (Iimuro & Berger, 2010) and by peers during small-group talks. Finally, individual tutorials (Bertoldi et al., 1988; Nordlund, 2001) and counseling sessions were conducted to provide emotional support, motivation, guidance, and methodological and conceptual information (Nordlund, 2001).

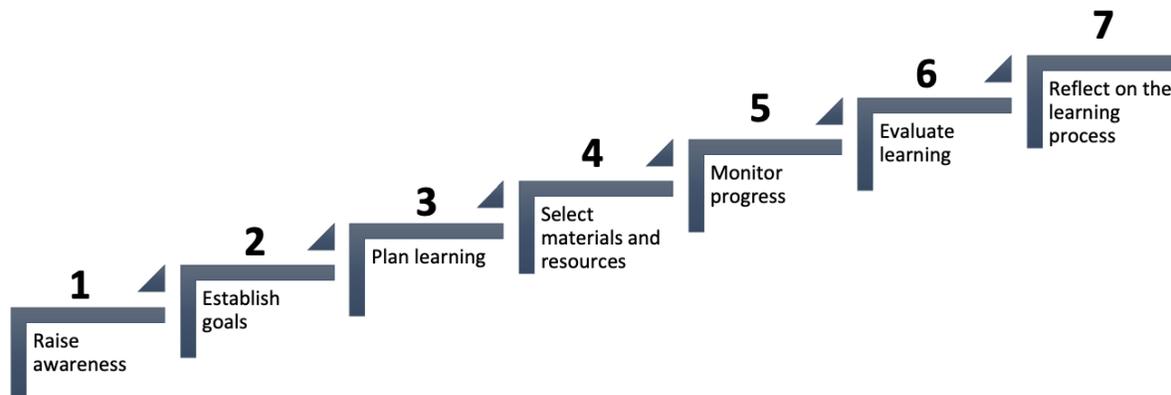
Furthermore, different materials and resources were employed to assist learners throughout the introduction process. Learning this information was essential to be aware of what was needed to carry out the actions, activities and tasks the models included. Each one employed different materials and resources. Iimuro and Berger (2010) used handouts, logs, notebooks, charts, and the resources available at the self-access language center from the Japanese university where their model was implemented. St. Louis (2006) required access to the university's computer lab and basic computer skills from participants. Nordlund (2001) needed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning by Rebecca Oxford (1990) to learn about participants' strategy use, contracts, support groups for the four language skills, logs, counselling sessions, as well the resources found in the self-access language center. Murray (2006) employed questionnaires, portfolios, reflective journals, tests, and short quizzes. Reinders (2010) suggested the use of learning diaries, portfolios, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning by Rebecca Oxford (1990), online tools, web applications, websites, and worksheets. Bertoldi et al. (1988) had tutors to help students in tutorial meetings, surveys, tests, learning projects, and the resource center of the Canadian university where their model was put into practice. This discovery made the researchers realize the role materials and resources play in the implementation of a model and how the lack of them can significantly affect reaching the objective of the model. In addition, it informed and gave the researcher a wide range of options to choose from when it was time to select resources if a new model was created.

Conclusions

The analysis conducted led to the following conclusions. First, there is no one-size-fits-all process for the introductions of autonomous learning. There was disagreement on the number of levels of implementation that should be included and which ones. This was likely because the models were implemented in different contexts in which learners had different characteristics, the resources available varied from setting to setting, the learning conditions were also different, and so it was the cultural and educational background of participants. Second, when all the levels of implementation from the models analyzed were found, they seemed to follow the sequence included in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Sequence of the Levels of Implementation



Note. This figure represents the apparent sequence of the levels of implementation as they emerged from the analysis of the different process models reviewed.

Even though the models did not include all of these levels, whichever ones were present were arranged according to that order. Third, the models analyzed shared three elements which suggest they significantly contribute towards introducing autonomous learning. One of them is awareness raising. This was present in all the levels, although they did not help participants to become conscious of the same aspects. The second one was having students make their own decisions. In all, but one of the models, participants were asked to make decisions about their learning. This was usually done by having them select the learning goals, materials, activities, or how they were going to go about their learning. The third element found in most of the models was monitoring and self-evaluation. Researchers seemed to agree that it is vital to have students check their progress and self-assess their learning, as well as the strategies employed, the resources they used, and anything else related to their learning process. It is possible that these findings can assist educators, who are interested in introducing autonomous learning, to make decisions regarding the process to follow to reach this goal.

Notes on the Contributors

Secundino Isabel Flores holds a PhD in Modern Languages from the University of Southampton, and an M.Ed. in ELT from the University of Exeter, UK. He has taught English

for 20 years to different level and age groups. Currently, he teaches at the University of Colima, Mexico.

María Magdalena Cass Zubiría holds a PhD in Modern Languages from the University of Southampton, and an M.Ed in Teacher Training from the University of Exeter, UK. She has been an English teacher and teacher trainer for over 30 years. She currently works at the University of Colima, Mexico.

Raphael Hubert Elie Sebire holds a Master's in literature and Spanish Civilizations from Caen University, and in FLES from Clermont Ferrand, France. He also has a Master in Virtual Education from the UV. He is full time professor at the School of Languages in Colima. He is professor of French and related subjects.

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