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LEARNER AUTONOMY IN E-PORTFOLIOS

FROM AMBITIOUS LEARNING OBJECTIVES TO DOWN-TO-EARTH OUTCOMES

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1. ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

The present learning experience is aimed to foster, among other competences, learner autonomy in the subject Oral and Written Communication in English. 32 freshman students of Audiovisual Communication elaborated an e-portfolio in 3 different stages. After setting their learning aims, the students had to provide evidences of their learning process along the course. The students received their teacher's feedback on each evidence and on the reflection on them, which they could contrast with the rubric provided to evaluate the competences at work. The results show a positive evolution in the learners' awareness of their learning process and of the need of setting realistic aims to carry them out in a limited amount of time.

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2. **KEYWORDS:** learning autonomy, learning objectives, e-portfolio
3. **FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE:** Social and Legal Sciences
4. **SUBJECT AREA:** Autonomous Student Learning
5. **DEVELOPMENT:**

a) Objectives

The objective of this paper is to present how learner autonomy along with metacognitive reflection has been worked upon and evaluated in a learning experience using an e-portfolio in the subject *Expressió Oral i Escrita en Anglès* of the Degree in Audiovisual Communication in the Faculty of Education Sciences of the University of Barcelona. This subject is taught in the first term of the first year of the degree.

This learning experience with the e-portfolio Mahara (Pujolà et al., 2011) reflects part of the work carried out by the members of the ECAL (*Espai Comú d'Aprenentatge de Llengües*) project, the objectives of which are to establish a multilingual portfolio which reflects the student's learning process in Catalan, Spanish and English (e.g. Pujolà, González & Font, 2009; Pujolà & Sayós, 2010), thanks to the common didactic methodologies, learning activities and evaluation criteria in these language subjects.

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The e-portfolio is a rather unknown instrument for freshman students, not only because of its electronic format, but also because of the didactic rationale behind it as a tool for learning. Therefore, besides presenting the didactic process followed to promote the learners' autonomy, the main objective of this paper is to describe the mishaps and challenges that students have had to face not only to define their learning objectives but also to actually carry them out.

Given the electronic format in which the portfolios for this subject were carried out, another objective of this experience is also the practice of multimodality, that is, the use of image, hypermedia (both internal and external hyperlinks and videos), special typography and general care for the portfolio layout bearing in mind that it is built in a virtual learning environment. Although this is not the central issue in this paper, it will be referred to in relation to the description and elaboration of, mainly, the formal and informal evidences, as it was observed that the highly-motivated students tended to outperform their partners in this aspect.

b) Description

The e-portfolio is, by definition, an instrument that promotes critical thinking, decision making and learning autonomy, as many previous experiences with the e-portfolio have shown (e.g., Bonsón & Benito, 2005; Enguita & Cruz, 2005; López, Rodríguez & Rubio, 2004). The e-portfolio created by these 32 freshman students for the



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Expressió Oral i Escrita en Anglès subject is designed in such a way that not only do the students develop their digital communicative competence, but they also develop some so-called transversal competences. In this portfolio, worth 35% of the subject, besides the language competence (50%), several transversal competences are also evaluated (50%). For this e-portfolio in particular, a rubric has been created in order to evaluate three competences: learner autonomy (30%), metalinguistic and metacognitive reflection (40%) and digital communicative competence (30%). This rubric was available for the students in Moodle, the virtual learning environment used for this subject and, every time a task was focused on one of the items included in the rubric, the explanations about the activity included also references to which band the students should take into account in order to carry out the task successfully and to be familiar with how it would be evaluated.

From the very beginning, it was decided to make students feel their portfolio as something of their own creation, done by them and for them; relevant for their English as a Foreign Language learning experience. Effort was put into drawing the activities in this portfolio away from being a repetition of what they would do in any other language subject and, probably, of what they had previously done in any such subject. Additionally, another aim was to make the students be aware of their strengths and weaknesses in English, no matter their starting point as far as their language proficiency level is concerned. They were required to make these strong and weak points explicit in terms of competences so as to take some course of action that could make at least one of those detected flaws become less of a flaw, if not a success. In this way, although the subject's objectives had to be accomplished, what the students were also supposed to do was to set specific language learning objectives of their own and, most important of it all,

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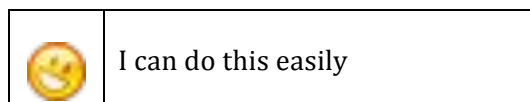
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to try to accomplish them in their own way too, without any specific format requirements regarding the learning evidence itself. This was considered an effective procedure to both encourage and challenge the students to meet their objectives (Álvarez, 2005) without being too constrained by academic formality. Guidelines were provided nevertheless for the reflection to be made on the evidences.

In order to be able to evaluate the development of the learner autonomy aspect along the course, the portfolio was divided into three main parts, which represent three main stages in the students' language learning process. These stages were presented under the form of what in the e-portfolio software chosen, Mahara, is called a "view". View 1, which was to be handed in at the beginning of October, included a composition called "linguistic snapshot", among other artefacts. Prior to writing it, several class speaking activities were devised in order to work on the contents of four checklists related to the four main language skills (reading, writing, listening – including audiovisual comprehension –, and speaking – interaction and production) and to the students' abilities in them depending on their learning history (autobiographical reflection) (Blanch et al., 2008). The checklists consist of a series of statements based on the descriptors used in the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) that the students have to answer on the basis of these three options: I can do this easily / I can do this with some difficulty / I cannot do this.





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	I can do this with some difficulty
	I cannot do this

Figure 1. Checklist answer options.







Listening			
1. I can understand standard spoken language on familiar topics.			
2. I can understand standard spoken language on unfamiliar topics.			
3. I can follow spoken language with extreme background noise .			

Figure 2. Sample statements from the listener checklist.

Spoken interaction			
1. I can start, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation topics that are familiar or of personal interest.			



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2. I can maintain a conversation or discussion but may sometimes be difficult to follow when trying to say exactly what I would like to.			
3. I can deal with most situations likely to arise when making travel arrangements through an agent or when actually traveling.			
Spoken production			
15. I can narrate a story.			
16. I can give detailed accounts of experiences, describing feelings and reactions.			
17. I can describe dreams, hopes and ambitions.			

Figure 3. Sample statements from the speaking checklist.




Writing			
1. I can write simple connected texts on a range of topics within my field of interest and can express personal views and opinions.			
2. I can write simple texts about experiences or events, for example about a trip, for a school newspaper or a club newsletter.			
3. I can write personal letters to friends or acquaintances asking for or giving them news and narrating events.			

Figure 4. Sample statements from the writing checklist.



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Reading			
1. I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems.			
2. I can grasp the writer's attitude or viewpoint towards a topic.			
3. I can understand contemporary literary prose.			

Figure 5. Sample statements from the reading checklist.

Thus, in the linguistic snapshot, the students had to set their learning objectives for the course based on their strongest and weakest points in these skills taking also into account the learning objectives of the subject, which appear in the official teaching plan. In this composition they also had to state the way they were going to carry out their objectives mainly outside the classroom. Their dedication to the subject was, in principle, expected to match the number of credits of the course (only 6 credits). The students would only have to attend 50 hours of class, which means that the rest of credits should count for the students' autonomous learning activity. The students were provided with a list of possible ways to accomplish their objectives, which was also reviewed in class:

- Keeping a vocabulary notebook and regularly reviewing it.
- Keeping a regular record of what you've learned during the week.
- Chatting or posting on Facebook or sending e-mails in English.
- Writing new words on flashcards.
- Regularly asking yourself "How would I say that in English?".
- Reviewing your notes before the next class.

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- Watching films and/or TV programs in English.
- Listening to the radio or music in English and trying to understand what is said.
- Reading English graded readers.
- Reading websites / magazines / newspapers in English.
- Subscribing to the "Word of the day" and keeping a record of the most meaningful ones.
- Writing something in English every day.
- Keeping a journal in English.
- Doing grammar/vocabulary exercises of a self-learning book.

Naturally, the students could add objectives other than those on the list above. It was insisted that the students set specific and feasible objectives, as they would have to provide evidence of their accomplishment later on in the course, in the second view of their e-portfolio.

In the second stage, besides one more compulsory artefact¹, the students had to prove they had been accomplishing their learning objectives by providing two informal learning evidences (carried out outside the classroom, in the time they are supposed to devote for autonomous learning) and two formal evidences, based on the subject contents. For both the informal and the formal evidences, the teacher pointed out which competence objectives - as established in the evaluation rubric (see below) - were related

¹ Besides the evidences described in this article, the three e-portfolio views contained other compulsory evidences. The compulsory evidences had to be complemented with reflections adapted to the different nature of the activities. Consequently, further aspects of the same competences described here were worked upon.



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to these evidences. In addition, the students were provided with a set of questions as guidelines for the reflection on the evidence itself.

The general scheme of the reflection on the formal evidences was as follows:

Include a formal learning evidence plus a reflection on it. In order to write or record (audio or video) your reflection, you should answer these questions (if you present it as a text, do it **with paragraphs**, not answering the questions one by one):

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1. What have I learned when doing this activity in relation to...?

- English language
- English language use
- Sources of information used
- Task - work procedures

2. Will this task be useful for me in the future?

3. Was the difficulty level adequate?

4. If I had to do this task again, would I do it in a different way? If so, how?

5. Has this activity been useful to meet any of my objectives for this subject?

6. Am I pleased with the results?

These reflections should be **in English**. Remember that the contents are also very important, as what will be assessed in them is your autonomous learning competence and your metalinguistic and metacognitive competences.

The reflection on the informal evidences was different from that of the formal ones. Its general scheme was as follows:

In this part, you should include **one** extra evidence **in English** of what you are doing to practice or keep your English up-to-date (bearing in mind the objectives you set at the

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beginning of the course) plus a reflection on them in text format (written, audio or video). If for some reason your objectives from the beginning of the course have changed, please, state so. Remember your tasks should be real, not a major project or anything too ambitious. If you are not doing anything to improve your English, just say why you have not taken any course of action and what you conclude out of this decision. For this informal part of your view, you have to think of how you are going to display it on Mahara. Try to make it as visual as possible.

It is very important that you add a text, audio or video file reflecting on **why** you chose to show this, **what it means** to you, **what you've learned** out of it and **whether you think it is the most effective strategy** to follow to achieve your objectives. Bear in mind the rubric of the portfolio. You can also get inspiration from the questions suggested for the formal learning evidences. The reflection must be in English yet pay special attention to contents, as your autonomous learning competence and your metalinguistic and metacognitive competences will be assessed, not the evidences themselves.

Taking advantage of the answers to these questions, the teacher could certainly benefit from both the positive and the negative feedback from the students, which also contributed to the teacher's formative evaluation (e.g., Bhola, 1990).

The deadline for the first formal and informal evidences was at the beginning of November, while the second formal and informal evidences were to be handed in at the beginning of December, after having received the teacher's feedback on the first evidences. Thus, the quality of the second formal and informal evidences, it was thought, would improve if the teacher's feedback was taken into account.



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The evidences were required to be in English. However, it is important to mention that, since the English proficiency level of a large part of the students was rather low, as they had not studied English for years, they asked whether they could write their reflections in their L1 (either Catalan or Spanish). This petition was conceded, as it was considered that what was most important in this e-portfolio was the development of the learning competences regardless of the students' linguistic competence, which was already being evaluated in other tasks of the course, as well as in other e-portfolio artefacts. In fact, only 4 students decided to write their reflections in English.

Finally, in the third step of this portfolio, to be handed in the week before Christmas break, in addition to one more compulsory activity, the students had to provide a third formal evidence showing they were still accomplishing their learning objectives. They also had to write an essay as a conclusion reflecting upon their learning process during the course and stating whether they thought they had met the objectives they had set for themselves at the beginning of the course. This conclusion had to be in either written or oral format². For this assignment, the students were provided with a battery of questions as guidelines, which were the following:

² Besides handing in the written version, only three students uploaded a recorded version of the composition voluntarily.



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Write a text **with paragraphs** in which you answer the following questions. Since this text will be posted to your portfolio as a text block or as a blog entry, start thinking of it in multimodal terms (hyperlinks, images, different font types, colors, layout, etc.).

- Report on your overall learning process and outcomes during this course.
- Comment on any language and content problems you encountered on writing any of the products of your Portfolio.
- Do you think that you have improved in any of the language skills and systems in English? Indicate which ones and how.
- Which method did you follow to organize this Portfolio?
- List the artifacts included in your Portfolio that you enjoyed doing. Give reasons.
- In your opinion, choose the best product in your Portfolio and explain why.
- In your opinion, choose the worst product in your Portfolio and explain why.
- What is the most personal contribution to this portfolio? And to the subject?
- Have you included any extra evidence you've done voluntarily in this Portfolio?
- What difficulties did you face when doing this portfolio?
- Have your reflections helped you to take some action to improve your assignments as time went by? And your teacher's feedback on both the assignments and the reflections?
- Have you used the rubrics provided during the course to do your assignments? Why (not)? If you have, in which assignments?
- How would you describe your experience with Mahara as an electronic portfolio?
- How would you grade yourself in relation to your initial objectives? Remember to be objective and critical with yourself and your work.
- Mention the activities that you liked and did not like doing during the course and give reasons. Alternatively, state any course task that you would have liked to do.

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- Give a piece of advice to the partners that will be doing this course next year.

Each activity was evaluated taking into consideration only some competence aspects in the rubric. The table below shows the correspondence between the activities and the competences involved in them.

Stage	Evidence	Competence	Description
1	Linguistic mapshot	learner autonomy	learning objectives
		metalinguistic and metacognitive reflection	awareness of one's needs and action plan
2	Two formal learning evidences	learner autonomy	use of the resources available
	Two informal learning evidences	learner autonomy	evidence selection according to learning objectives
3	Third formal learning evidence	learner autonomy	use of the resources available
	Conclusion	metalinguistic and metacognitive reflection	linking of views in relation to one's learning process awareness of one's needs and further action plan

Table 1. List of evidences per view and corresponding competences.

Each competence was broken down in four levels. However, when grading the students, the teacher adapted it to the course evaluation needs and so 7 degrees instead of four were used in each band: excellent, very good, good, fair enough, not enough, too little and none.

c) Results and/or conclusions



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As can be seen in the pie charts that follow, the students were able to set their own learning objectives successfully (72% obtained top marks – 38% excellent and 34% very good) according to their learning needs analysis taking into account the checklists they had answered previously in class.

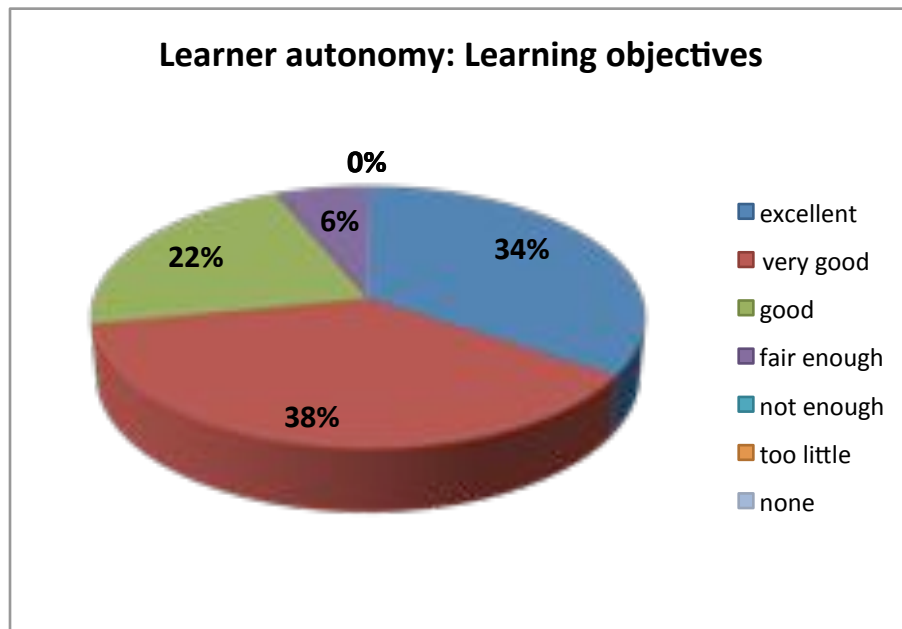
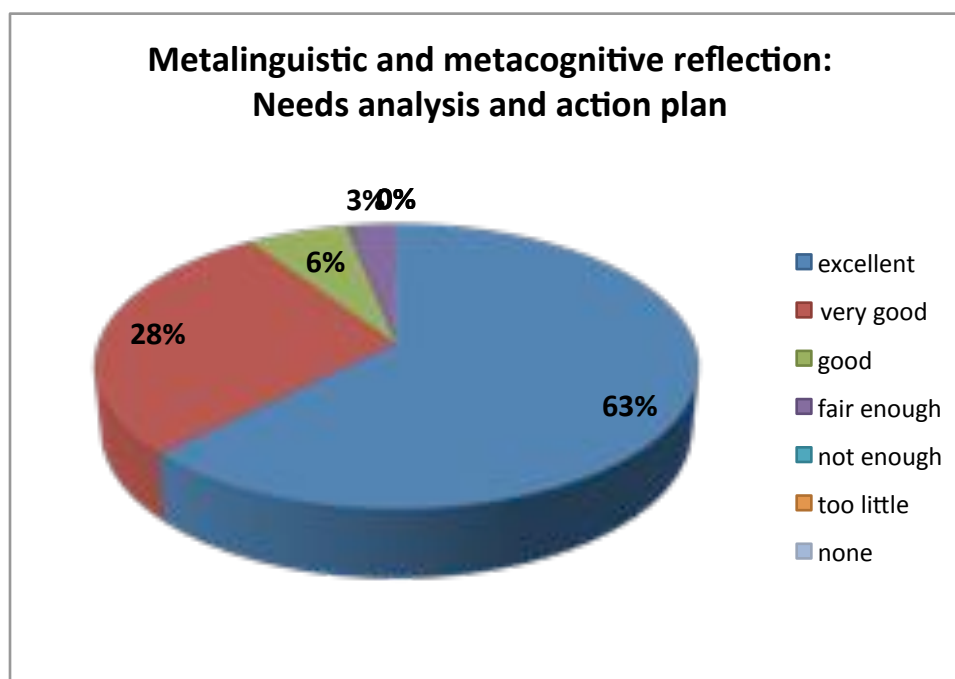


Figure 6. Linguistic snapshot (View 1). Learner autonomy: learning objectives.



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Moreover, after the detection of their strengths and weaknesses, the students managed to decide on logical ways to overcome their difficulties or to enhance their strengths, as shown in Figure 7. The evaluation of this aspect took into account if the students were aware of their needs as well as if they were able to plan to take some action which, in principle, should be effective. At this point, the feasibility of these learning actions was not considered in the teacher's evaluation, as it was totally up to the students to set their own objectives and to suggest what for them was the most appropriate way to accomplish them.



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Figure 7. Linguistic snapshot (View 1). Metalinguistic and metacognitive reflection: awareness of one's needs and action plan.

Although the potential unfeasibility of some action was not taken into account in the evaluation of this task, some students were warned that some of the objectives they had planned to meet at the end of the course were a little vague and/or, sometimes, too ambitious. For example, some students said they intended to see movies and read books in English. In her feedback, the teacher pointed out that they were using the plural form (books and movies) and, therefore, were being a little too daring taking into account the amount of time available (three months), and that they had not provided the title of any particular book or movie and, therefore, they were vague in their proposal. She also pointed out that they may not have the time to not only watch a movie but also elaborate a learning evidence from it in such a little time before the handing over of the learning evidences for the second view of their e-portfolio. In spite of these remarks, none of these students changed or narrowed their objectives in the second version of their linguistic snapshot, which was done after having received this feedback.

As shown in Figure 8, when presenting the first formal and informal evidences, the students had difficulty in showing what they were doing in order to accomplish the objectives established (or perhaps in actually taking real action), in spite of having been able to detect their own language learning needs and having established an action plan to reach their objectives in their linguistic snapshot.



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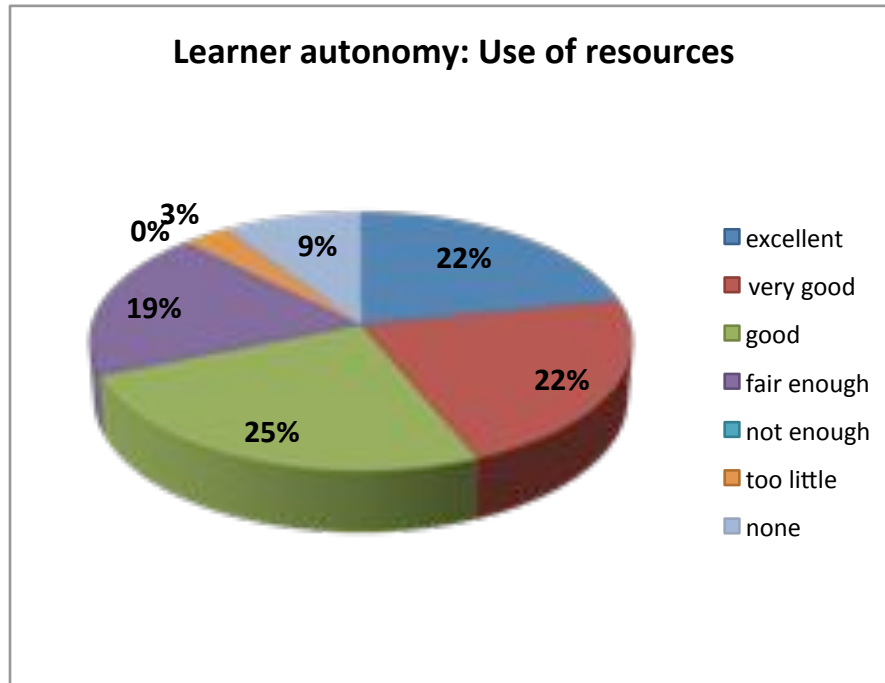


Figure 8. Formal learning evidence 1 (View 2). Learner autonomy: Use of the resources available.

“Use of resources”, which was the aspect evaluated in the first formal evidence, is understood as the students’ capability to take advantage of the resources at hand and create new learning products of their own from the input they had been exposed to either in class or in the Moodle course of the subject.

In the first informal evidence (Figure 9), the students’ learner autonomy was measured taking into account whether the evidence provided was related to the learning



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objectives exposed in the linguistic snapshot in View 1 and whether a relation with the students' overall learning could be established.

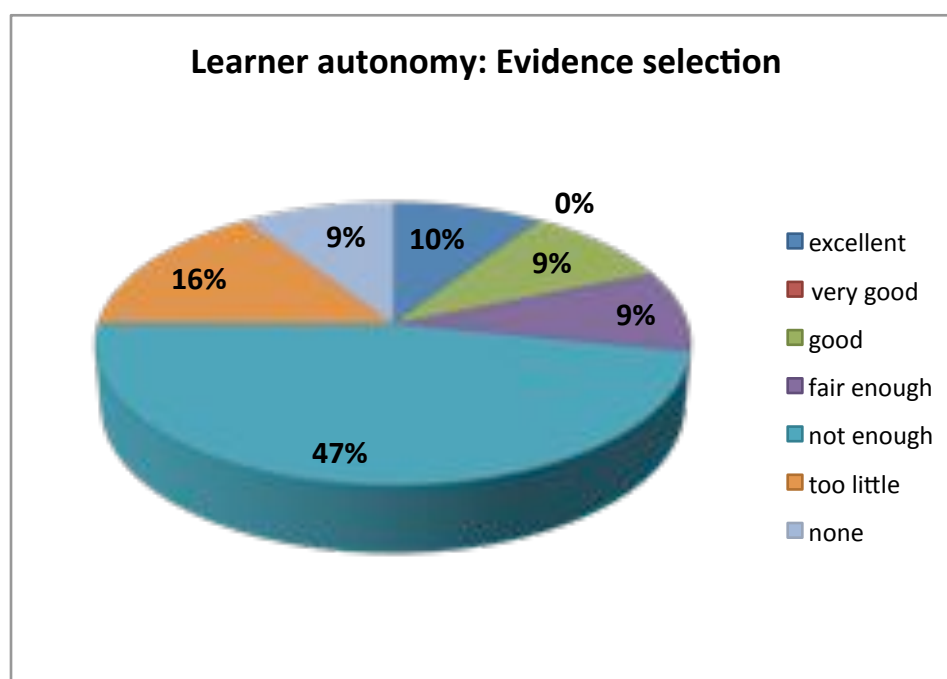


Figure 9. Informal learning evidence 1 (View 2). Learner autonomy: Evidence selection according to learning objectives.

It is clear from Figure 9 that more than 75% of the students had difficulty in selecting a learning evidence that reflected the learning objectives that they had set in their linguistic snapshot. In fact, some students sent some e-mails asking what it was actually meant by “informal evidence” or asked the teacher about this issue individually after class. Consequently, after handing in the first part of View 2, the teacher asked



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those students who were successful in the first evidences to explain what they had done in them to their classmates. In addition, the teacher herself brought to class several evidences of her own language longlife learning experience so that the students had another model from which to get inspiration.

After having received the teacher's feedback and having been presented some models of language learning evidences in class, it seems that the students were capable of proving with more specific kinds of evidences their autonomous learning actions in the second formal and informal evidences to be included in View 2, as shown in the pie-chart of Figures 10 and 11 below. This is so because, actually, some students reformulated their learning objectives, perhaps after realizing they were too ambitious.

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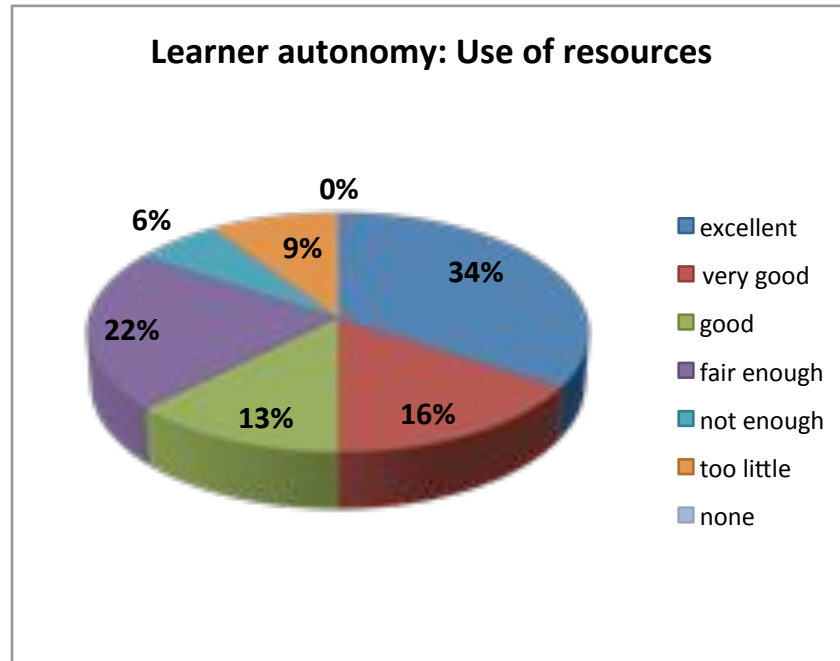


Figure 10. Formal learning evidence 2 (View 2). Learner autonomy: Use of resources available.

Comparing the pie-chart in Figure 10 with that in Figure 8, it can be seen that students found it easier to find the appropriate resources that would help them show their language learning process. Furthermore, some students went beyond and created new products reformulating, transforming or complementing the input provided in the subject's learning materials.



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It is remarkable that those students who were highly motivated provided specific evidences from the very beginning. Particularly regarding the informal evidences, these highly motivated students' evidences stood out of the rest of evidences for their originality and use of more sophisticated resources. Some examples are the elaboration of a Photoshop tutorial in video format in order to learn specialized vocabulary while practicing speaking, a video inspired in another video used in class to practice phonetic aspects, a personalized dictionary of phrasal verbs and idioms using online software and a playback version of a song in order to practice phonetics in a joyful way, among others. Therefore, besides transforming, personalizing and integrating the input provided, these students were taking advantage of the multimodal possibilities that the e-portfolio offers. Figure 11 shows the results obtained regarding the evidence selection of the informal learning actions taken by the students in this second phase of View 2³.

³ In this case, though, one student did not hand in the evidence in time, hence the 3% in the "none" level.



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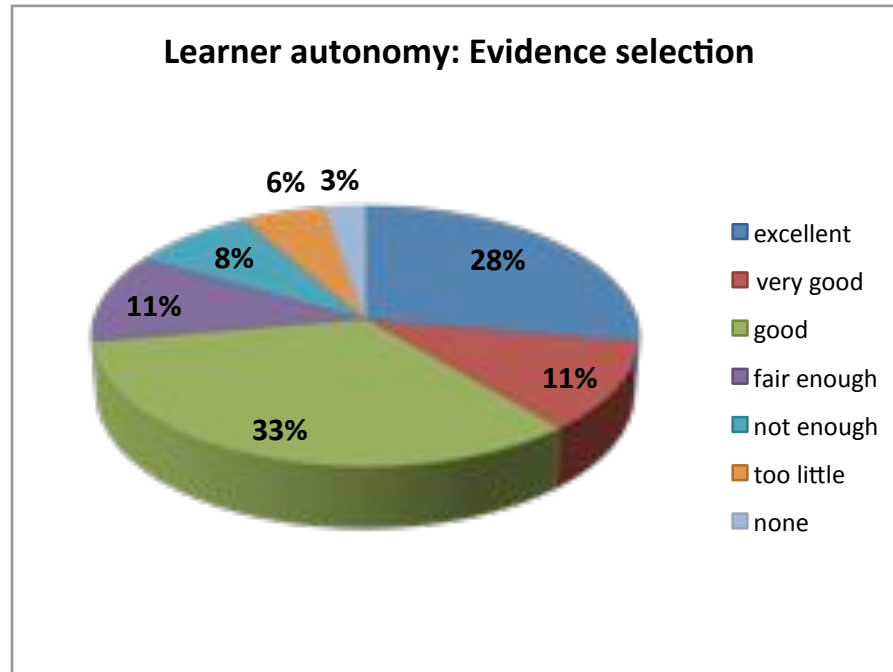


Figure 11. Informal learning evidence 2 (View 2). Learner autonomy: Evidence selection according to learning objectives.

From these results, it can be drawn that there was an improvement in the way the students understood what providing an informal evidence meant. It may be the case that they had also taken the feedback they received on their first informal evidence and so this helped them in the process of becoming more self-regulated learners (Carless, 2006).

In the formal learning evidence 3, belonging to the e-portfolio View 3, the students were even more specific and provided higher-quality evidences of their learning



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actions, as shown in Figure 12 below. However, two students failed to provide evidences because, as they reported, they run out of time because of the accumulation of assignments from other subjects.

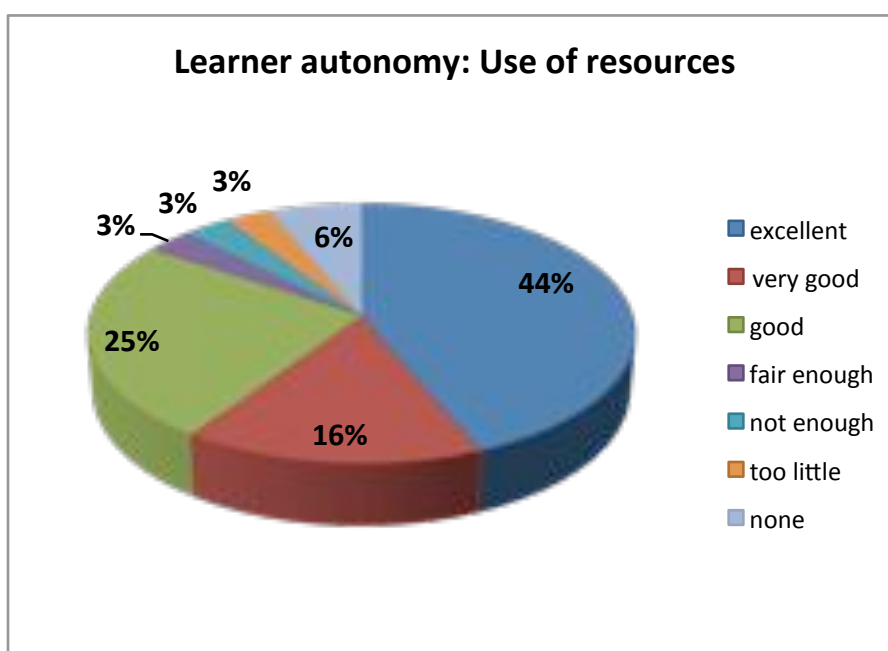


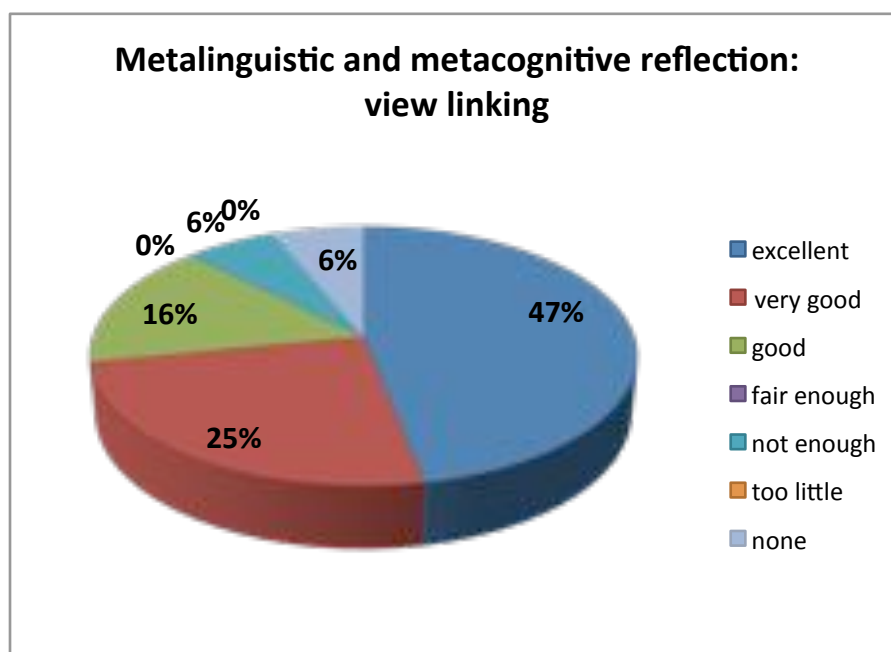
Figure 12. Formal learning evidence 3 (View 3). Learner autonomy: Use of resources available.

Finally, in the conclusion of the e-portfolio in View 3, the students had to resort to their linguistic snapshot in order to review their expectations for the subject and their learning objectives and see both if they had accomplished them or not and what their course of action after the course would be in order to keep on learning English. Actually,



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these students will not have any other subject in the degree only in English but are aware that they will have to present some projects in English further on in other subjects of the degree. Regarding view linking, the results were very satisfactory, as the students were able to reflect on their objectives and see how they had been able to convey them through different evidences that were of higher quality as time went by, thanks as well to the teacher's feedback. More than half the class reached top marks in this assignment regarding this competence. Nevertheless, probably due to time constraints, two students failed to retrace their steps and reflect on the learning process they had undergone during the term.



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Figure 13. Conclusion (View 3). Metalinguistic and metacognitive reflection:
Linking of views in relation to one's learning process.

As for setting new learning objectives and reflecting upon what and how the students had learned English during the term, the students proved they were capable of resetting more realistic new learning objectives taking into account variables such as the lack of time to undertake too inconcrete or even industrious learning action plans as well as the time needed to realize one's progress when learning a foreign language. Actually, 63% of the students recommend future students who will take this subject in their degree to be constant in the foreign language learning endeavor and not to leave their assignments for the last minute. On a side note, it may be the case that reflection upon evidences done hastily becomes shallower and, therefore, not as useful as it would be in other more favorable circumstances. Figure 14 shows how students were capable of reflecting on the contents of their linguistic snapshot and be honest as to whether they had succeeded in accomplishing their objectives. The competence evaluation of this evidence took into account the feasibility of the new objectives set, unlike the evaluation criterion of this same competence in the linguistic snapshot.



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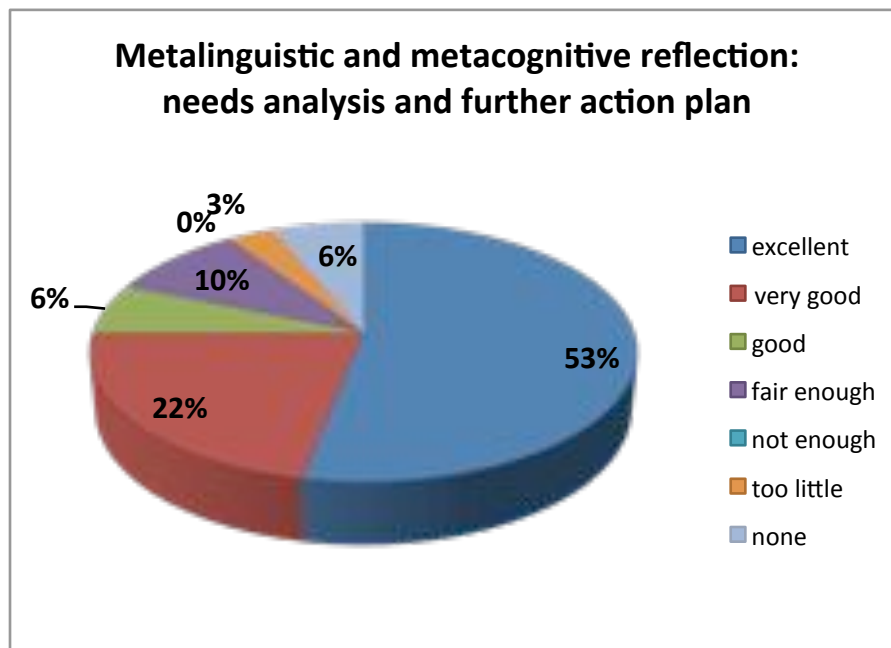


Figure 14. Conclusion (View 3). Metalinguistic and metacognitive reflection: Awareness of one's learning needs and further action plan.

As a conclusion, it could be said that after this experience with this 3-view e-portfolio, the students were able to come to grips with what learning a foreign language implies in terms of time and results and to establish new down-to-earth objectives depending on the results obtained. Reelaborating their evidences and rephrasing their learning objectives in their e-portfolio was a way to integrate their learning autonomy process and their (self-)evaluation (Giné et al., 2007). It should also be pointed out that this learning experience could be of use in the future not only for their lifelong learning



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experience but also in their professional practice (Boud, 1989). Actually, elaborating their reflections in their L1 will contribute to this as well. It is a fact that at least in this subject, most students succeeded in this aspect, regardless of their English proficiency level. Nevertheless, individual differences could be perceived in the depth of the reflections on the evidences as, although most students were motivated in doing the portfolio, two students disapproved of this new learning procedure. In spite of this, the e-portfolio was a useful tool to cater for learner diversity, which could be hinted from the wide variety of resources used by the students, especially from the second phase of View 2 on.

This teaching experience is not without limitations, though. Some aspects of the rubric's band description need being finetuned and so need the guidelines of some of the activities. This would also contribute to the validity of the rubric. It would also be advisable to check the inter- and intrarater reliability of the rubric (Moskal & Leydens, 2000). Also, analyzing the students' reactions to this experience will surely help in this regard⁴.

Because of time constraints, it was not possible to collect a third informal evidence. Perhaps a new calendar distribution would help adjust the inclusion of this activity and see if the quality of this type of evidences improves as much as the formal ones.

6. REFERENCES

⁴ A questionnaire regarding these issues was administered.



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7. NOTES

This project is part of the *ECAL6 - Espai comú d'aprenentatge de llengües* (2011PID-UB/96), a teaching innovation project, coordinated by Dr Joan-Tomàs Pujolà Font and lies on the theoretical grounds of the project “*Sistemes d'avaluació formativa i participativa en el marc de l'EEES: anàlisi de la seva implantació i qualitat en la formació del professorat*” of the *Programa de Millora de la Qualitat Docent* (2010MQD00051), directed by Dr Francesc Buscà Donet.

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