



ESTUDIOS LINGÜÍSTICOS

USING LOGBOOKS WITH SECOND AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION: LEARNER AUTONOMY IN PROGRESS<sup>1</sup>

EL USO DE LOGBOOKS CON ESTUDIANTES DE SEGUNDAS LENGUAS Y LENGUAS  
EXTRANJERAS EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: LA AUTONOMÍA  
DEL ESTUDIANTE EN CURSO

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports data from a study recently carried out with university language students attending a Master's degree programme in Language Sciences. The study aimed at exploring to what extent logbook writing could allow them to progress in their learner autonomy by engaging in more reflective, conscious, and responsible second/foreign language learning. The class was asked first to write a logbook for a week with the purpose of keeping track of their personal language learning process and then to answer some reflective questions to give an account of their perception about the logbook experience. By taking an interpretive approach to the investigation and adopting qualitative data analysis, it was found that the logbook was generally perceived as useful in improving language learning and stimulating meta-cognitive reflection, self-awareness and learner's intervention. While limits were identified in the use of this tool (i.e., persistence needed to regularly keep logs, time availability and appropriate organisation skills), some students declared their intention to use the logbook in the future, after making personalised adjustments according to their learning needs and goals.

Keywords: Learner autonomy; language learning; logbook; reflection.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se presentan datos de una investigación realizada recientemente con estudiantes universitarios de idiomas que asisten a un programa de máster en ciencias del

lenguaje. El estudio tenía por objeto explorar hasta qué punto la realización de un cuaderno de bitácora podría permitirles progresar en su autonomía de aprendizaje al dedicarse a un aprendizaje más reflexivo, consciente y responsable de una segunda lengua o de una lengua extranjera. Se pidió a cada estudiante llevar en el cuaderno, durante una semana, un registro de su proceso personal de aprendizaje de idiomas, y posteriormente responder a algunas preguntas reflexivas para dar cuenta de su percepción sobre la experiencia del cuaderno de bitácora. Al adoptar un enfoque interpretativo de la investigación y un análisis cualitativo de los datos, se comprobó que, en general, los estudiantes percibían su utilidad para mejorar el aprendizaje de idiomas y estimular la reflexión metacognitiva, la conciencia de sí mismo y su intervención. Aunque se identificaron límites en el uso de esta herramienta (como por ejemplo, la constancia necesaria para llevar registros con regularidad, la disponibilidad de tiempo y las aptitudes de organización apropiadas), algunos estudiantes expresaron su intención de utilizar el cuaderno en el futuro, si bien con ajustes personalizados en función de las necesidades y de los objetivos de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: autonomía del estudiante; aprendizaje de idiomas; cuaderno de bitácora; reflexión.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning, accept their responsibility for how and what they learn, take an active role in all kinds of learning activities, and can reflect and evaluate the learning process (Holec 1981). This means that they are aware of the cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective aspects that govern the learning of the second/foreign language they are studying. However, in order to develop such a kind of awareness and ability, learners first need to be given opportunities to make choices and decisions: these allow them to reflect on the process, measure their progress, and take some responsibility of their learning. Second, learners have to be guided on how to change their approach to learning by means of useful language learning strategies, techniques and tools. The need to shift from a “pedagogy of having” to a “pedagogy of being” (Dufeu 1994: 3-4) is central here, and, for this to happen, specific consideration should be given to affective aspects equally connected to autonomy, such as willingness, motivation, persistence, and positive attitudes (Little 1991, 2007; Littlewood 1996; Benson 2001). This article focuses on these personal characteristics and considers their influence on the level of the learner’s awareness and willingness to take control over one’s language learning. According to Benson (2001: 188), if we want to examine students’ level of language learner autonomy in terms of the ability to control their learning, we can identify “behaviours associated with control and [judge] the extent to which learners display them. [...] Evidence for these behaviours may be direct or indirect”. Data needs to be then interpreted with regard to coherence among behaviours and learning goals. For the purpose of this study, “indirect” evidence of students’ ability and willingness to engage in self-determined language learning was inspected by means of reflective questions. Before describing the study in detail and presenting

its findings, this paper will briefly discuss the importance of considering learner autonomy as a continuous process of development and present the role of introspective data elicitation methods for gaining insights into students' metacognitive and psychological processes affecting second/foreign language learning. This study is to be understood within the specific context in which it was realised, given the "situated" nature of learner autonomy (Murphey 2003 as reported in Lamb 2009: 69). This notwithstanding, the results may be of interest for other learning contexts and may possibly encourage further research in the field.

## 2. LEARNER AUTONOMY: A MATTER OF DEGREES

In general, what seems to be shared by scholars in the field of learner autonomy in language learning (cf. for example, Holec's 1981; Little 1991; Nunan 1997; Benson 2001) is that learner autonomy in language learning is a multidimensional construct of capacity for self-management which requires learner awareness and informed decision making; it entails ability and willingness to control language learning; it presupposes interdependence in terms of communication and negotiation with others; and it may take different forms according to different cultural contexts. Far from being "an all or nothing concept", learner autonomy is to be intended as a "continuum" where self-management and self-regulation can be exercised by language learners at different stages (Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira 2007: 30), "depending on their age, how far they have progressed with their learning, what they perceive their immediate language learning needs to be, and so on" (Little 1991: 4). Hence, accepting that learner autonomy is a matter of "degrees" (Nunan 1997; Benson 2001), some specific aspects connected to the development of such "degrees" of language learner autonomy will be considered below.

### 2.1. Reflection and learner awareness

Many scholars in the field of language learner autonomy maintain that expanding learners' metacognitive knowledge is the starting point of the autonomy developmental process: raising learner awareness through reflection not only represents the first stage of the developmental models proposed by Nunan (1997: 192) and Scharle and Szabó (2000: 9), but it is also central in the models proposed by Little (1991, 2007), Littlewood (1996), Macaro (2008), and Tassinari (2016). In particular, three dimensions of awareness are considered as a necessary condition for progression in language learning autonomy: awareness of the language system (the focus is on the *content*, e.g., how the language works), awareness of the language learning process (the focus is on the cognitive and metacognitive *processes*; e.g. strategies and techniques useful in efficiently controlling one's language learning) and awareness of the learner him/herself (the focus is on the *learner*; e.g., affective variables influencing learning such as attributions, beliefs, motivation, anxiety, etc.). Such levels

of awareness “can enhance the quality of thinking and task engagement”, assisting learners to “use their experience of attempting tasks, employing strategies and solving problems to develop their understanding of how language learning works” (Cotterall 1995: 202). Little (2007) sustains that language students should be stimulated to apply critical thinking to their learning by self-assessing their achievements and actions, with the emphasis laid on identifying weak and strong points. Gaining more consciousness about these dimensions leads to “reflective intervention” (Little 2007: 24), namely, to increase learner involvement and active participation in the learning process. This brings us to the following point.

## 2.2. Motivation and willingness to take control

Learner autonomy is based on the conviction that if learners are more involved in making decisions and controlling their language learning process, they are likely to be more enthusiastic and motivated and, therefore, learning become more purposeful for them (Little 1991; Dam 1995; Smith 2008). In the same vein, learners who are actively engaged in their language learning will also be willing to control those actions and behaviours which allow them to improve in their language competence. As individuals do not construct their competence in the target language on their own, but, rather, through communication and relationships, collaboration and social interaction play a crucial role in the process of intentional control over learning and, as a consequence, of autonomy development (Holec 1981; Kohonen 1992; Little 2007, 2013). Furthermore, providing that language learning is only partly ascribable to what happens within the classroom and that “students learn best when they combine classroom learning with out-of-class learning” (Benson 2011: 7), it is expected that, in order to take control over the learning process, learners possess both understanding of the different contexts, settings and inputs experienced, and readiness to benefit from them. Whether control over learning is exercised in the classroom or out of the classroom, learners need to make use of the environment “strategically” (Breen and Mann 1997: 136). The role of learning training and learning strategies can make the difference here, as explained in the following point.

## 2.3. Learning strategies

Learning strategies were defined as “learning processes that are consciously selected by the learner” (Cohen 1998: 4), a “series of tactics” used “for setting goals, choosing materials and tasks, planning practice opportunities and monitoring and evaluating progress” which learners may display “to varying degrees” (Cotterall 1995: 195). Gaining control over learning strategies, thus, represents an important stage within the developmental process of learner autonomy. While cognitive strategies (direct operations carried out on the language to be learnt, like using a dictionary, making lists, using maps, etc.) are observable behaviours, metacognitive strategies (operations involved in the self-management of learning) and social and affective

strategies (respectively, actions taken to interact with others and actions taken to control one's attitudes towards language as an object of learning) (cf. O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990) imply the activation of certain mental processes that are much less observable. In order to bring such mental processes to surface so as to make them evident, introspective and retrospective accounts of learning through diaries, logbooks, journals, questionnaires or interviews may be encouraged.

Far from being exhaustive, this overview of the literature reflects the complexity of the learner autonomy construct, whose dimensions are characterised by strong multidirectional cause-effect relationships and whose degrees of development are said to "fluctuate" in a continuous process of improvement and adjustment (cf. the dynamic model of learner autonomy development proposed in Tassinari 2016). To activate this process, autonomy needs to be practiced. Teachers have a key role in allowing students to practice their autonomy and in creating the right pedagogical conditions for this to happen. For example, by promoting the use of reflective tools like diaries, journals and logbooks teachers will not only encourage extensive writing but also provide their students with opportunities to reflect on the learning process, therefore contributing to the developmental process discussed above. In line with this reasoning, the tool used in our empirical investigation for eliciting data about learners' degree of control over learning was a language learning logbook.

### 3. A LEARNING LOGBOOK AS A RESEARCH TOOL

Although introspective data elicitation methods such as interviews, focus groups, diaries, and verbal reports have been applied in cognitive psychology for a long time, their use in the field of second/foreign language research is more recent (Dörnyei 2007: 156). Yet, they may offer useful insights into language learning processes as well as learners' own perceptions of language learning. In particular, autobiographical narrative tools such as learning diaries, logbooks or reflective journals are considered meaningful to depict the linguistic, social and psychological aspects linked to the cognitive and metacognitive processes involved (Nunan 1992; Benson and Nunan 2005). They represent "the first source of information about learners' beliefs and feelings" (Pavlenko 2007: 165) and may unveil what is normally hidden or widely inaccessible to an external observer.

Diary studies – as it is generally called that type of research accomplished through a diary, logbook or journal<sup>2</sup> (cf. Bailey 1991) – have been used to focus on different dimensions of difficulties and constraints in ESL/EFL learning (Huang 2005), to ascertain the development of grammar or writing skills in ESL programs (Tompkins 2000;

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<sup>2</sup> The terms diary, journal and logbook are often used interchangeably in literature. Nevertheless, they differ in format and scope as diaries and journals have a more speculative style and unstructured organization, while logbooks are highly structured factual accounts based on a record of data maintained over time. Like journals, logbooks are frequently intended to be read by others (i.e., the teacher, the classmates).

Vaseghi, Mukundan and Barjesteh 2014), to examine language programme design in relation to language learning objectives (Savage and Whisenand 1993; Huang 2006; Klimas 2017), to investigate on students' language learning strategies and learning preferences (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990; Nunan 1992) or on student's anxiety (Parkinson and Howell-Richardson 1990 reported in Bailey 1991: 71), to understand the nature and impact of second/foreign language learning and teaching practices (Ellis 1989; Dam 1995, 2013; Lacey 2011; Burkert 2013; Menegale 2018), and to look at the opportunities for out-of-class learning (Hyland 2004).

The concern of this study in logbook is especially connected to its formative purposes and, specifically, to its capacity to engage the learner in metacognitive processes such as reflection, self-monitoring and self-assessment.

#### 4. METHOD

##### 4.1. Context

The study was conducted in an Italian university that specialises in foreign languages and cultural studies and, more precisely, the research took place within the Master's degree programme in Language Sciences. Along with advanced training in a foreign language, the 2-year programme in Language Science aims at developing professional profiles aspiring to take responsibilities in the field of lifelong learning and research or to teach in schools, once the educational paths established by the current legislation have been completed. Some of the courses, among which the one where this study took place, are taught in English (B2 level in English – of the European Common Framework of Reference for Languages – is required to enrol). This is a semestral course and its contents include the study of developments in the field of language education, with particular attention to psychological aspects affecting second/foreign language learning and their impact at the teaching level. Carried out through a blended modality where face-to-face lectures are alternated to on-line weekly tasks, the course is designed so as to allow students to gain deep understanding of such topics through hands-on activities and reflective inputs. Although attendance of on-line sessions is not mandatory, it determines a percentage by which students may raise their final mark.

The study was carried out during the last period of the course, in April 2019. The teacher had previously discussed the main affective factors (e.g., motivation, anxiety, attitudes) and cognitive factors (e.g., learning styles and learning strategies) influencing second/foreign language learning, engaging students in both theoretical instruction and practical activities such as filling the SILL questionnaire (*Strategy Inventory for Language Learning*, Oxford 1990) and discussing on results. The concept of learner autonomy was introduced afterward. The author was invited to conduct a face-to-face lecture on this topic and was given the opportunity to run the subsequent on-line session launching a logbook writing task (Figure 1).

The objective of this task was to introduce the students to the use of a reflective tool, by means of which they could activate a process of self-reflection and awareness of how to take more control on the language learning process, with the final aim of progressing in their learner autonomy. Since the students were not familiar with the procedure of writing a language learning logbook, they were given some materials which would facilitate the understanding of the activity, that is, two readings (Dam 2013 and Yang 2007) and a logbook sample.

#### **4.2. Purpose**

The present study intended to explore to what extent logbook writing can aid learner autonomy (intended as the capacity and willingness to control language learning), by engaging students in more reflective, conscious, and responsible second/foreign language learning. The research questions the author wanted to answer were the following:

- RQ1: How did university students perceive the use of the logbook for language learning? What were the perceived advantages and limits of keeping a logbook?
- RQ2: To what extent did the logbook help promote learner autonomy in language learning in terms of control over their learning?

#### **4.3. Participants**

The study was conducted within the Master's programme course "Psychological Aspects of Language Education". The characteristics of the students in the class were varied in terms of language background and competences. For most of them the specialising language was English, but there were also learners of French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Italian as a second language. All the participants had at least a B2 level in English. It may be argued that students attending such a course as, in general, a Master's programme in Language Sciences or similar, represent a privileged target for research related to language learning issues, such as learner awareness, learning strategies, motivation to language learning and so on. To a certain extent, this is correct, but distinctions need to be made. On the one hand, in fact, these students are expected to be higher motivated and have a more positive disposition to language learning, and therefore to be more attentive and receptive to the aspects affecting the learning process of second/foreign language(s). On the other hand, however, the level of their involvement in language learning, of their learner awareness and readiness to control their learning process is not presumable. For these reasons, we believe that this study may contribute to the research in this field through insights on the complex construct of how even more "expert" learners control their language learning process.

#### 4.4. Instruments and Administration

For the purpose of this study, the instruments used to collect data were three reflective questions. The class was first asked to write a logbook to keep track of their personal language learning process by noting down whatever they thought to be significant and, at the end, to share it by uploading it on the course platform (Moodle). Along with this, the students were asked to express their view about the logbook writing task as to likeableness and usefulness, by posting their answers to three questions (two closed questions, one open question); the questions were formulated so as to activate students' meta-reflection. Students were given one week-time to accomplish the task. Task assignment is fully reported in Figure 1.

You explored the concept of autonomy in language learning last week in our face-to-face lesson. Just to dust off your memory, an autonomous learning environment is one where students are actively and consciously involved in their own learning, and where learning outcomes, resulting from individual, pair, and collaborative activities, are shared and made available for further discussion and reflection.

This is the reason why we'd like you to complete a *learning logbook* this week, by recording events taking place during the next 7 days and thus keeping track of your personal language learning process. In your logbook, you should describe what learning activities you engage in every day (i.e. listening to a particular song, talking to tourists etc.), the difficulties you encounter, the strengths, and any other relevant information you might want to add. You can also include pictures, online links, audio tracks etc. As an example, you can follow the logbook that you will find in the Study Materials folder, together with a couple of articles you might find useful.

Please remember to upload your logbook in your post and to answer the following questions:

- a) Did you enjoy writing your logbook?
- b) Do you think it was useful? If so, how?

Let's see what you come up with!

Figure 1. Logbook writing task and reflective questions

The task was the fourth out of five online activities included in the course syllabus and, as in other activities, what was assessed was students' participation and engagement in meta-reflection rather than the product of the task itself (i.e., language logs and written production). As the course working language was English, logbooks and posts with answers were expected to be written in English, regardless of participants' language(s) of specialisation.

#### 4.5. Analysis

The study adopted a qualitative data analysis. By taking an interpretive approach to the investigation, the analysis started by examining participants' answers to the reflective questions so as to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions about the logbook writing task. In order to answer the first research question (RQ1), a Grounded Theory, bottom-up approach was adopted with the purpose of discovering the most dominant themes and then proceed with content analysis. So, by means of data analytical software NVivo, raw data were first coded into separate themes or "nodes" (*initial coding phase*) and then, starting from the most salient nodes, larger amounts of data were organised, integrated and synthesised (*focussed coding phase*) (cf. Charmaz 2006: 46), as shown in Figure 2. To provide evidence for the selected nodes, the most significant parts of the students' answers entries were identified (see paragraph 6). Finally, in order to answer the second research question (RQ2), data were interpreted and discussed in light of the background theories exposed in paragraph 2.

#### 5. LIMITATIONS

The study presents some limitations. The first is a general concern widely acknowledged among researchers in field of learner autonomy in second/foreign language learning, that is, the difficulty to 'measure' the degrees of learner autonomy, or, in the present case, to assess to what extent students are "intentional learners, gradually developing awareness of the what and the how of language learning" (Little 2013: 170), considering the many variables involved and discussed in paragraph 2, above. The second limitation regards the instruments adopted for this research: the weakness in the usage of reflective questions (here, to investigate students' perceptions about the use of the logbook) is in the fact that students may be led to answer what their teacher-researcher expects them to without actually thinking it in reality; the weakness in the use of a logbook (here, to elicitate metacognitive processes) is due to the vulnerability "to honest forgetfulness, where participants fail to [...] have the diaries at hand" or to remember to write down some information which had occurred, or they are "too tired or simply not in the mood" to note down their logs (Dörnyei 2007: 158). This may limit the benefits provided by reflective writing tools.

#### 6. RESULTS

Out of a total of 110 students enrolled in the course, 88 subjects completed the task. The following findings are based on the analysis of participants' answers to reflective questions in relation to their perception of the logbook writing experience.

### 6.1. Likeableness of the logbook

The first reflective question inquired about the students' *likeableness* of the experience of keeping a reflecting tool. The majority of participants (86%) stated that they had liked writing their logbook. Their answers were substantiated by the use of a range of qualifying adjectives, going from 'enjoyable' or 'funny' (83 frequencies), to 'interesting' (38 freq.), 'nice' (24 freq.), 'stimulating' (11 freq.), 'challenging' (7 freq.), 'positive' (6 freq.), 'lovable' (6 freq.), 'easy' (5 freq.), and, finally, 'unusual' (4 freq.). Some students admitted being "sceptical" (11 freq.) at the beginning of the activity, because they had never kept a logbook before and did not know what to expect. As they started to record their logs, they realised that that method had generated a process of reflection which was extremely personal and helpful in gaining insights about their beliefs as language learners and orientations to language learning. A recurring aspect connected to the experience of writing a logbook was the fact that it was felt as a 'personal' tool (28 freq.), which could take any form, according to individual preferences ("*What I found interesting is the opportunity to personalize it adding images and links*"; "*I believe that the possibility of adding images, videos, links and therefore of creating a personal and unique work is the strength of this activity*") and which was more related to their private life rather than academic life ("*It's a personal journal that builds itself on the student's personal hobbies and experiences not related to school demands*"; "*It was very useful because I can practice different skills in a non-academic way, which makes this activity a pleasure to do!*"). It was also remarked (4 freq.) that this experience allowed them to reminisce pleasant memories of when they used to write diary ("*I had a lot of fun writing my logbook because it was almost like writing a journal or a mini diary and I have always had fun doing that*"; "*When I was younger, I used to keep track of my daily activities. Getting back to this habit for a while has been really involving! So yes, I definitely enjoyed it*").

In contrast, a minority of students (3%) expressed their dislike for the logbook writing task due to two main reasons: some did not know what to write because either they had not had the opportunity to use the target language during the task week period or, conversely, they had been totally immersed in the target language during that week and they could not record so much input, while others complained the fact that writing a logbook was time-consuming or just did not make sense for them, or, finally, they did not like the idea of sharing it with the class and the teacher (see also paragraph 6.2.5). The remaining subjects (10%) did not overtly state whether they liked or not the activity.

### 6.2. Usefulness of the logbook

The second and third reflective questions inquired students' perceptions about the *usefulness* of their logbook writing experience. The results of content analysis highlighted 6 main nodes (see Figure 2). Nodes 1-4 include four aspects connected with

language learning, while Nodes 5 and 6 identify issues which are more related to the logbook as a tool, in terms of its usability (see paragraph 6.3).

Nodes	Themes	Frequencies
Node 1	Promoting reflection and process monitoring	75
	>>opportunity, chance	45
	>>strengths and difficulties	25
Node 2	Increasing awareness	63
	>>of language inputs	34
Node 3	Fostering motivation and self-efficacy	12
Node 4	Improvements in language learning	10
	>>useful techniques/strategies	6
Node 5	Limits	11
Node 6	Intention to use:	14
	>>to use it in the future	6
	>>not to use it in the future	5
	>>to use ti in the future with own students	3

Figure 2. Content analysis of students' answers about usefulness of logbooks: Nodes and frequencies

### 6.2.1. Reflection

Students reported that this writing process has assisted them to *reflect* on the language as a system and on language learning (Node 1), in particular on the strengths and weaknesses characterising their way of controlling their learning. This task was broadly perceived as an 'opportunity' or 'chance' (45 freq.) to initiate a mental process that involved rational thought, feelings, judgement and change. Apart from one subject, who had had previous experience with a language learning logbook at upper-secondary school, for all the other participating students this was the first time they had recorded language logs and reflections in a systematic way (*"It's an exercise of self-analyse, which I was never asked or suggested to do"*; *"Before this activity I had never reflected on my daily use of foreign language"*; *"I am honestly quite sad that none of the language teachers I had in the past proposed such an activity to me and my classmates"*). Logbook writing helped participants step back and think about their cognitive activities (*"I noticed that I really like watching movies, TV series, talk shows, but I also like chatting with friend and trying to help someone with his/her homework"*), capabilities (*"I have realized that I absorb the language by doing the things I enjoy, for example, watching YouTube programs help me learn*

*in a more relaxed setting. The logbook has also helped me track my progress*) or limits (*“This activity had highlighted how much I don’t act on my language learning and I should do more”; “I have also realized that I have to practice more with the languages I study, because I have become less motivated”; “It allows to highlight our weaknesses, strengths and vocabulary needs”*). In certain case, this deconstruction of attributions and beliefs had generated active engagement for self-improvement and control over learning (*“I never plan my study activity but to do this online lesson and write my logbook I tried to do it”; “I realized I am very impatient when it comes to learning and I easily get frustrated. I should also try to be more persistent”; “It may be a useful device to organize your activities during the week, so that you can easily spend at least some minutes a day practicing language, or any other area you want to develop”*). Finally, logbooks were perceived as fostering reflection on strategy knowledge (*“These kind of self-analysis activities are really stimulating and they help us understand all the different learning strategies we use”; “I have always written in the evening as a relaxing way to end the day, and I revised the whole logbook today”*). Furthermore, it was found that that conscious metacognitive process initiated by means of logbook keeping had led to increased involvement in personal learning (*“Knowing that I had a logbook to write focusing on my linguistic inputs, I think I was more receptive to them than I usually am. I want to keep on in this direction and take advantage of every situation to improve my competences in the languages I know”*) as well in social learning (*“I think that if it is written throughout a whole academic year and in the target language it might end up being a great tool for both students and teachers”*).

### 6.2.2. Language learning awareness

Analysis of students’ answers also highlighted that logbook writing has led to *increase participants’ awareness* (Node 2) about how/how much they used the target language, especially in informal context: *“I consider it to have been an awakening activity”; “It made me notice how much we use a language during our everyday lives”; “I realised how much time I actually spend doing learning activities and how these activities are actually very rich and important in order to build up my language competence”*). Many participants stressed that their logs had revealed high frequency of reading and listening activities and limited writing and speaking (*“I know that I need to work on my oral skills more than my listening and comprehension skills. This has also made me more self-aware; I need to engage in more activities that will help me speak better and I will begin to make attempts to engage in more conversations”*). Furthermore, although generally the logs noted down by the participants regarded the foreign language of specialisation of their curriculum studies, it was remarked that the experience of logbook writing went above and beyond this, serving the learning of all the languages studied (*“I also reflected on my Spanish input and output”*).

### 6.2.3. Motivation and self-efficacy

Another consequence of logbook writing was a perceived *boost in students' motivation and sense of self-efficacy* (Node 3). Keeping language learning logs has helped participants reevaluate the learning situations they were experiencing and recognise the value of their efforts (*"I realized how much effort I put in being a good language learner in terms of responsibility, self-concept and motivation. I should create more opportunities for language use and schedule my self-study better in order to improve my performances in the target language"*; *"It made me realise how big I make small mistakes look, or how counterproductive I can be with my own bad ideas. I'm a bit too negative. It was a good chance to reflect and make an effort to see the positive side of my experience as a learner"*). Some students also remarked that logbook writing had had a positive influence on their motivation to language learning (*"I think that a logbook is more useful for those who are learning a new language (as I am doing) because as beginners it's crucial to keep track of our progresses and difficulties in order to stay motivated"*; *"It gave me an incitement to find always new opportunities to practice the languages and to improve them"*; *"By keeping the logbook, you will be also able to see every event in your daily life as a good opportunity for training your language skills. Even buying something in a shop will become a great opportunity to try my Italian [here, as a SL] with local people"*). Furthermore, keeping a logbook allowed participants to analyse their feelings and attitudes about language learning, like their sense of self-confidence and anxiety (*"The most significant finding on myself through logging is that I was more fluent when I had confidence in the topic of conversation. Instead, I felt uncomfortable in situations in which I had to communicate with new people to the point that I gave up trying to use Italian [here, as SL]. This shows that my Italian skills are not so bad, but anxiety affects badly my language production. This thought on myself will help me to understand my language ability deeply and to adjust my plan for learning Italian"*).

### 6.2.4. Improvement in language learning

A fourth aspect resulting from participants' perceptions of the logbook writing experience was directly connected to *improvements in language learning* (Node 4). What the students generally emphasised was the fact that writing language logs allowed them to exercise writing skills (*"Doing this type of activity can help you improve your writing abilities of the language you are learning"*), to widen vocabulary knowledge (*"I looked for more details in order to write a complete logbook (i.e., the biography of the authors I mentioned, the history of the Marrakesh festival, further interesting sayings in English, etc.)"*). Moreover, since I tried to describe my linguistic inputs as best as I could, I had the possibility of improving my English vocabulary" and to improve listening (*"I've noticed that I've improved my listening skills"*).

### 6.3. Logbook usability: limits and future use

The analysis of participants' answers about the logbook writing experience gave account of other two observations. The first has to do with the *limits* perceived in keeping a reflective tool (Node 5): most of all, the participants stressed that writing language learning logs required time, constancy and organisation (*"I realized how hard it is for me to organize my study and to plan, in this case, a week of activity"*; *"It was a challenge and I knew I would have probably failed. I think I put too many expectations on my ability in organizing the time necessary to do my activities"*; *"The only problem I have had so far is being consistent. It was difficult to write every day because I often have very busy days"*); one participant also remarked that she found it difficult to keep a logbook because of a lack of logs to record (*"I had to make an effort to find a particular event for each day"*). Finally, the last point arisen by content analysis of students' answers regards the *intention to use/not to use the logbook again* (Node 6). Although it was not explicitly asked, some students expressed their preference in this sense: while 5 subjects stated they would not continue using the logbook once the logbook task was over, 6 subjects revealed that they would likely go on keeping records of their learning and controlling the whole process, though introducing some personalisation to the tool (*"I am not sure whether I will be able to keep a logbook in the long run, but I will definitely write down the activities and strategies I find helpful in the future"*; *"Once a week would probably be a realistic target"*; *"I should use it regularly to track my learning experience, but also to take notes on ideas for the future"*). Some suggestions were also given so as to make the experience of logbook writing as meaningful as possible (*"It is important to specify your aim or goal for language learning before starting to write your logs so that you can see whether you are on the right track or not for that goal"*; *"It would be interesting to write the logbook in different languages, according to the one we use in the activity, to compare them and see, at the end, if we improved in the less used as much as in the most used"*) and 3 participants mentioned the fact that, being a personal reflective tool, a logbook should not be read from other people (*"I think that a logbook should be strictly personal, that is, not intended to be shared with other people. In this way, I think I could feel more free to write all my thoughts and my impressions"*). Finally, 6 subjects expressed the intention to use the logbook with their future students (*"I will suggest it to my students in the future, for self-reflection"*; *"The logbook could be used even with students with a low language competence: instead of writing a daily language diary, it could be recorded (with vocal memo or with little videos)"*).

## 7. DISCUSSION

Results of data analysis will be here interpreted and discussed in light of the background theories about the construct of learner autonomy presented in the first part of this paper. The purpose of our reasoning is to understand whether and how the

logbook writing experience has served the promotion of learner autonomy in terms of increased control over language learning.

### 7.1. An awakening activity

Positive beliefs about logbook writing were reported by a great majority of participants. Among many others, one of the statements collected, “*I consider it to have been an awakening activity*”, provides evidence that the logbook task had activated a mental process which had led to increased language learning awareness. This is in line with other research findings, which reported that reflective writing led to greater sensitivity to the learning process over time (Nunan 1994, reported in Nunan 1996; Lacey 2011) and to positive change in learner beliefs and attitudes (Takaesu 2012; Klimas 2017). This sense of ‘awaking’ expressed by the participating students was intended as a coming into *awareness through conscious reflection* about questions such as how they learn target language, to what extent what they learn corresponds to their personal goals, what language learning inputs surround them and in what way they have an impact on their learning. Findings revealed that the first aspect the students gained awareness of was the multitude and variety of language learning opportunities they daily experienced *beyond the classroom*: as showed in other studies (cf. Reinders and Benson 2017 for a recent review), one of which accomplished by the author herself (Menegale 2013), out-of-class learning processes are not only often invisible to teachers, but also to learners themselves. As stressed by research on linguistic landscape and soundscape (see for example, Ben-Rafael, Shohami and Barni 2010; Murray and Lamb 2018), making learners aware of the language inputs beyond the classroom not only helps them notice affordances and seize learning opportunities, but also fosters engagement in new and self-directed language learning. Especially for adult language learners – and particularly for the students in our study who were attending a university course specialising in foreign language learning and teaching – it could be hypothesised that the quality and quantity of opportunities of using the target language in informal settings are proportional, to a certain extent, to their level of autonomy: the higher learner involvement and self-directional skills, the more the activation of learner self-directed initiatives. With reference to our findings, if we consider that the majority of participants admitted not being aware of many of the language opportunities offered by the environment before the logbook writing task, it could be concluded that their level of control over out-of-classroom, informal learning was very low. Yet, they stated that the fact of recording their language logs made them more “receptive” to the different language inputs and learning situations and willing to take advantage from them to improve their language competence. This could be interpreted as an increase in their capacity of learner autonomy, of control over their learning process, due to the use of the language learning logbook. Data coming from autobiographical and reflective tools, in fact, may provide interesting insights in this sense (cf., for example, Sundqvist (2011)’s diary study

on relation between language proficiency and out-of-class language learning) and, thus, would deserve further attention in research.

## 7.2. Deconstruction and reconstruction

Logbook writing seems to have engaged the students “in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of assumptions and beliefs” (Benson 2001: 92) which had led, in turn, to increased self-improvement and control over learning. To activate such process, however, students need to understand the impact and value that a certain goal, task or material bring to their learning. At the same time, it is also important that they feel capable to monitor and intervene in the learning process. The fact that participating students perceived gains in their sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy towards language learning indicates the presence of fertile ground for advancement in capacity of taking control. As Benson (2001: 189) writes, the development of learner autonomy “implies a qualitative change in the learners’ orientation towards learning in the direction of personal relevance”. Considering our findings, what was said to be *likable* about the logbook writing task was highly compatible to what was said to be *useful*, and vice versa: besides being “stimulating” and “challenging” from a cognitive point of view, the language learning logbook was also appreciated by the participating students for its great “flexibility”, in that it could be personalised as to goals, format and contents, therefore matching one’s preferred learning style. While other studies reported that the process of reflection through writing may be felt as difficult if not properly guided (Lor 1998, as reported in Benson 2001: 204) or meaningless if objectives are not explicitly negotiated in advance (Huang 2006), in our study the logbook was perceived by most of the participants as effective in relation to its initial goals (cf. Figure 1). Furthermore, as showed in a similar study investigating EFL students’ perceptions on the effects of diary writing (Sadeq et al. 2015), when students recognise that a perceived need can be fulfilled by undertaking determinate actions or behaviours, their motivation and willingness to make goal-directed decisions will consequently be reinforced. This was the case of some of the participants in our research, who stated that logbook writing allowed them not only to analyse particular feelings implied in their language learning process, like their sense of self-confidence in certain situations and anxiety in others, but also to discern points of strengths and weaknesses and room for change. In other words, the process of deconstruction had led to a phase of reconstruction, of learner improvement, which is conceivably the expression of students’ increased control over their learning.

## 7.3. Effective language learners

So far, we discussed how participating students felt that their sense of self-awareness and understanding of what they learn outside the classroom had matured

through the logbook experience (paragraph 7.1) and how such increased awareness had generated a process of deeper analysis and gradual intervention on what and how is learnt, making them become more “intentional learners” (Little 2013: 170) (paragraph 7.2). Now, all these characteristics, that is, the capacity to reflect on and articulate the processes underlying one’s own learning and readiness to undertake actions and behaviours directed to advancement in one’s language competence, are displayed by effective language learners (Benson 2001; Benson and Nunan 2005). Effective language learners understand that effective learning depends on language use and that language use, in turn, rests on their capacity to renew and expand their communicative repertoire by further learning (Little 1996: 94). Our findings revealed that the students perceived the importance of being actively involved in their own learning and in controlling it more and better (“*I should create more opportunities for language use and schedule my self-study better in order to improve my performances in the target language*”). This may suggest a development of a sense of “ownership of learning”, which occurs when “students internalize the responsibility to make their own choices, direct their own behaviours, and attribute the consequences of their actions to their behaviour” (Paris and Turner 1994: 228). Some of the students participating in our study not only stated that logbook writing had positively affected their language competence (with enhanced writing skills and widened vocabulary knowledge), but also declared their intention to continue using it, though adapting the tool according to their perceived future needs and self-determined goals (i.e., keeping a learning logbook just to record the strategies used, or using a unique logbook to record logs of all the languages studied) or according to self-determined time and methods (i.e., recording logs once a week, keeping video/audio recorded logs instead of written logs). This matches Little’s (2007: 26) idea that “autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language use are two sides of the same coin” and we believe it is evidence of a developed sense of control over learning.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The present study intended to explore to what extent logbook writing could engage university language students in more reflective, conscious, and responsible second/foreign language learning, therefore allowing them to progress in their learner autonomy. Data was collected through reflective questions which guided students’ meta-reflection about the logbook experience. It was expected that students attending a university curriculum specialising in language sciences, as were the participants of this research, would have a higher understanding of language learning matters and the capacity to reflect about undergoing mental processes. However, it was found that their awareness of both their cognitive and behavioural processes was very low.

With regard to the first research question concerning how university students perceived the use of the logbook for language learning and related advantages and limits, findings showed that the logbook experience was felt by the participants as

positive on the whole. Although some limits in the use of the tool were identified, mainly due to persistence, time and organisational skills required to regularly keep logs, the task was widely perceived as having improved the level of students' language competence, especially as to writing skills and vocabulary knowledge. At the same time, it was deemed as a starting point to engage in a more controlled, self-directed language learning. This data provides a relevant answer to our second research question too, about whether/how the logbook supports learner autonomy in language learning in terms of control over one's learning. The participants stated that the logbook writing experience had helped them reflect on the way they were learning and the vastness and usefulness of the language inputs they were immersed in. This had activated an "awakening" process, which made them understand the value of personal active involvement in the language learning process, so as to make it as much significant and effective as possible.

In spite of the limitations of this study and of the fact that the findings pertain to a specific context, we believe having here raised implications for other learning contexts and further research in the field.

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