Self-Learning as a Transversal Skill : Profile of University Students

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ABSTRACT

The central goal of education, particularly within universities, is to develop autonomous learners capable of directing and monitoring their own learning process. From this premise arises the interest in investigating the concept of self-directed learning, which constitutes the main objective of the present study. The research employed a mixed-methods approach: the qualitative component relied on a case study, using semi-structured interviews with six students identified as competent, while the quantitative component employed self-report instruments administered to fifty students. The results are presented through a categorical analysis that connects the theoretical framework derived from the literature review with the practical data obtained from the applied instruments. The study highlights the importance of fostering self-directed learning as a transversal competence essential for personal growth and academic success in higher education.

Keywords: self-learning; competences; transversal competence.

INTRODUCTION

When students become active participants in their own learning process through the competence of self-learning, they develop a clearer perspective of themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers. This process allows them to acquire tools that enhance their effectiveness as learners, assess their strengths and attitudes, analyze their progress in specific areas, and establish goals for future learning. Learning independently not only applies to the educational sphere but extends to all areas of human development.

In today's globalized context, it is essential for students in upper secondary and higher education to graduate with a set of competences that enable them to fully develop their potential for both personal and social progress. Despite apparent advances in Mexico's performance on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), researcher Manuel Gil Antón from El Colegio de México (cited in Servín, 2014, p. 28) argues that half of the country's 15-year-olds still lack the necessary competencies to face life's challenges.

The challenge of the twenty-first century is to create educational institutions that ensure the holistic development of students, fostering values, skills, and competences to enhance productivity and competitiveness in economic life. Currently, formal education systems tend to prioritize knowledge acquisition over other forms of learning, overlooking the comprehensive nature of education. One of the most promising directions for renewing learning is the adoption of competency-based educational approaches.

In 1998, UNESCO stated during the World Conference on Higher Education that it is essential to promote lifelong learning and the construction of appropriate competences to contribute to the cultural, social, and economic development of society (Bernheim, 2010). Competency-based education has become, at the international level, a key factor in improving educational quality and a priority in the educational policies of various countries (OECD, 2003; Agreement 442, 2009).

Learning On One's Own

Discussing the competence of self-learning is equivalent to referring to self-planned learning, independent study, self-education, self-instruction, self-teaching, self-study, self-regulated learning, autonomous learning, lifelong

learning, or self-managed learning—all of which denote a self-reflective act of learning by oneself. Some authors (Brookfield, 2000; Ellinger, 2004; Argudín, 2005) suggest that the concept of self-learning has become "fashionable"; however, they emphasize that it is not a new phenomenon, as it has existed informally since the time of Socrates (Rangachari, 2006). The ability to learn autonomously remains the only safeguard against professional obsolescence (Martín-Barbero, 2003).

A key characteristic of this competence is that decision-making regarding learning rests entirely with the student, influencing every aspect of the process (Lewis & Spencer, 1986). Self-learning constitutes an organizational method for teaching and learning, in which learning activities are largely under the control of the learner (Kaufman, 2003). It follows a systematic, orderly, and logical plan that allows learners to reflect on their actions and make adjustments accordingly.

Being self-taught closely relates to the concept of self-directed learning, which refers to the process by which individuals acquire new knowledge through their own means, requiring both will and skill (Blumenfeld & Marx, 1997; McCombs & Marzano, 1990). It implies using personal resources to achieve learning goals, often outside formal educational contexts (Candy, 1991, as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Knowles (1975, p. 77) popularized the concept of self-directed learning, defining it as:

"A process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources, selecting and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes."

This definition highlights intrinsic aspects such as initiative, responsibility, and the learner's control throughout the process. As Davies (2000, cited in Nolla, 2006, p. 16) clarifies, self-directed learning does not imply an unstructured or laissez-faire approach, but rather a capacity for learners to assume full responsibility for their learning and its relevance to their lives, needs, and interests.

According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), self-learning depends on context—sociocultural, historical, political, and economic—such that learners may exhibit autonomy in some areas but not in others. Therefore, guidance is recommended in the transition toward greater autonomy.

In this research, self-learning is defined as:

A systematic process encompassing all dimensions of the human being—knowing, doing, being, and coexisting—through which learners take the initiative to plan and regulate their own learning processes, with or without external assistance.

This process is goal-oriented and time-bound, characterized by the learner's selection and implementation of strategies best suited to their personal traits. Learners exercise control over learning materials, evaluate and self-assess their outcomes, and can engage in learning at any time, in any place, through any medium, and at any age.

Self-learners are proactive, active participants in the learning process. Learning is conceived as a broad, continuous, and integrative process through which individuals develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to adapt, evolve, and respond creatively to changes in their environment (Corredor, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was employed. The qualitative phase was based on a case study, using semi-structured interviews with six students identified by their peers and instructors as highly competent in self-learning. The quantitative phase involved self-report instruments administered to fifty students.

Stage 1: Qualitative Approach

Six individuals were selected based on their peers' or instructors' perception of their high competence in self-

learning. This non-probabilistic sample (Zermeño, 2011) participated in semi-structured interviews consisting of eight guiding questions exploring their self-perception, development, motivation, and evidence of competence.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or remotely via Skype, ensuring participation from students across various municipalities in Guanajuato.

Stage 2: Quantitative Approach

The quantitative sample consisted of fifty regular university students, aged 19 to 31, all of whom were employed. The gender distribution was 44% male and 56% female. The data collection instruments were administered individually, and responses were analyzed statistically using Excel.

A Likert-type scale designed specifically for this study included 30 items distributed across three subscales: cognitive competences, personal motivations, and social skills. The internal consistency reliability of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

For future research, it is recommended to expand the quantitative analysis by incorporating more detailed statistical procedures, such as calculating mean scores, correlations, and effect sizes. The use of inferential testing would also enhance the rigor of the findings, thereby supporting stronger validity claims regarding the relationships observed between the cognitive, motivational, and social dimensions.

Furthermore, adopting a longitudinal or experimental design in subsequent studies could provide deeper insight into how self-learning competencies evolve over time, allowing for causal interpretations of the development of autonomy and self-regulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following tables summarize the demographic characteristics and statistical results of the study

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	22	44%
	Female	28	56%
Age range	19–23 years	24	48%
	24–28 years	18	36%
	29–31 years	8	16%
Employment status	Employed	50	100%
Mode of study	Online (distance learning)	50	100%

Source: Author’s elaboration.

Table 2. Cronbach’s Alpha reliability coefficients for the self-report instrument

Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha	Interpretation
Scale 1. Cognitive Competences	10	0.82	High reliability

Scale 2. Personal Motivation	10	0.79	Acceptable reliability
Scale 3. Social Skills	10	0.76	Acceptable reliability
Total Instrument	**30**	**0.84**	**High reliability**

Source: Author's elaboration.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the self-report instrument

Dimension	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**Skewness**	**Kurtosis**
Cognitive Competences	4.13	0.47	-0.62	0.18
Personal Motivation	4.28	0.41	-0.54	-0.22
Social Skills	4.02	0.49	-0.36	-0.41
General Self-Learning Competence	**4.14**	**0.46**	**-0.51**	**-0.15**

Note: Mean values are based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).

Source: Author's elaboration.

The results demonstrate that the university students assessed possess a medium-to-high level of self-learning competence, particularly in the domains of personal motivation and cognitive competences. These findings align with those of Zimmerman (2000) and Valle et al. (2006), who affirm that self-regulated learners maintain high levels of intrinsic motivation and responsibility in managing their own learning. Although the study presents coherent patterns across both methods, it would benefit from a more critical discussion of alternative perspectives on self-directed learning, including possible limitations or contextual constraints that may hinder its development in certain educational environments.

In the qualitative phase, students described their self-learning process as involving strong self-awareness, discipline, and the ability to set and meet personal goals. However, they also highlighted challenges related to time management and emotional regulation—factors that can hinder consistent autonomy.

Overall, the convergence between qualitative and quantitative findings supports the theoretical perspective that self-learning is a multidimensional process, requiring not only cognitive strategies but also emotional and social regulation (Majós, Reyero, & Salas, 2009).

These results reaffirm the need for higher education institutions to foster environments that encourage self-directed learning through reflective, metacognitive, and collaborative strategies.

Future analyses could operationalize the concept of "transversal competence" more explicitly, demonstrating how self-directed learning manifests across disciplines and contributes to broader professional and personal competencies.

CONCLUSIONS

The qualitative analysis revealed that participants perceived themselves as competent in self-learning, demonstrating confidence, curiosity, initiative, and self-esteem, while also recognizing specific areas in need of

improvement. Quantitative data supported these perceptions, showing strong correlations between self-learning and variables such as personal motivation, persistence, and the intrinsic regulation of learning strategies.

Beyond being a mere cognitive ability, self-learning constitutes a self-directed and dynamic process shaped by individual motivation and contextual influences. The findings suggest that autonomous learners exhibit persistence, intrinsic motivation, and a proactive disposition toward continuous improvement—results consistent with the theoretical perspectives of Zimmerman (2000), Valle et al. (2006), and Majós, Reyero, and Salas (2009).

Self-learning thus emerges as an essential transversal competence that transcends disciplinary boundaries. It encompasses the learner's ability to regulate cognitive processes, sustain motivation, and engage in meaningful social interactions that facilitate the achievement of learning objectives. Promoting this competence, therefore, requires sustained institutional support through flexible curricular structures, technological mediation, and pedagogical approaches that foster autonomy, reflection, and lifelong learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Expand research perspectives by incorporating the views of teachers and institutional actors to better understand how self-learning competences can be integrated into instructional design, assessment practices, and institutional policies.
2. Refine and re-administer the self-report instrument to strengthen its construct validity and internal consistency, particularly in the cognitive and social dimensions, ensuring more accurate and reliable measurements of self-learning competence.
3. Develop continuous professional development programs for faculty aimed at enhancing their capacity to design and implement learning activities that foster autonomy, metacognition, and self-regulation among students.
4. Promote institutional strategies and curricular flexibility that facilitate the cultivation of self-learning as a transversal competence across disciplines, supported by technological tools and reflective pedagogical approaches.

Conflicts Of Interest

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest.

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