

Promoting Autonomous Language Learning to Higher Education Students

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Abstract

Autonomy can be considered as a new concept in Indonesia, and many students are unaware of this concept. This paper aims to reveal the problem related to autonomous language learning in higher education context, especially in the English Education Department of Yogyakarta State University. The literature review gives the definitions of autonomy, looks at some researches related to autonomy in educational contexts, and highlights some information about adult language learners. In the last part of the paper, the writer tries to offer some suggestions in promoting autonomy to language learners within the classroom, which includes SALC, the internet, self-reports, and evaluation sheets.

Keywords: *autonomy, higher education*

1. Introduction

The concept of autonomous learning entered the field of language teaching in 1970s (Benson, 2001: 8). It can be considered a new concept in the English language teaching, moreover in Indonesia. Not many educators and students in Indonesia are aware of this concept. There seems to be a common view among them that learning autonomy merely means that students learn by themselves, in the absence of a teacher.

The traditional educational culture in Indonesia has been obedience to teachers, i.e. students were expected to obey and not to challenge their teachers. Additionally, teachers in Indonesia are still occupying teacher-centered approach, thus students become dependent towards their teachers (Karim Mattarima, 2011). Many students who enter higher educational institutions still bring this trait with them, therefore they lack autonomy in their learning. Crome et al (2009) state that students coming to university are less capable of autonomous learning than before,

and that secondary education has not sufficiently prepared students for the challenge of autonomous learning at university.

Based on the writer's informal observations in some classes in the English Education Department of Yogyakarta State University, the first year students showed the lack of autonomy in their English language learning. For example, the students kept silent when the teacher asked them questions, and they did not actively get involved in the class activities. They also kept silent when there were things that they did not understand during the class, and did not raise questions to the teacher. Other examples are: some students did not do the assignments given by the teacher; students were unprepared when the teacher gave them a quiz or a test without any notification beforehand; and when the teacher could not come to class and teach, the students used the time for things other than studying.

It seems that there is no significant step undertaken to promote autonomous language learning within the classroom. Learning is mainly directed and evaluated by the teacher, and the students are seen as passive receivers of information. They are unlikely to develop the skills necessary to control and to assess their own learning progress.

The situation above is unfavorable for the teaching learning process and needs to be minimized. English language teachers need to raise students' awareness about autonomous learning and to promote it to students. According to Karim Mattarima (2011), teachers should promote learner autonomy by acknowledging different ways to goal attainment and learning styles, minimizing external pressure, fostering an intrinsic motivation, and sharing responsibility with the students in the learning process. This can be done by using various techniques and activities which later will be elaborated in this paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definitions of autonomy

There are many definitions of autonomy proposed by some experts. Benson (2001: 47) defines autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own learning. Dickinson (1987) as cited by Benson (2001: 13) defines autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his

learning and the implementation of those decisions”. Meanwhile, Kohonen (1992) in Benson (2001: 14) argues that autonomy includes the notion of interdependence, i.e. learners are able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts constructively.

Holec (1981) as cited by Benson (2001: 48) describes autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.” Holec elaborates this definition as the ability to have and to hold the responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of learning, such as: “determining the objectives, defining the content and progression, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired.” In short, they refer to the capacity of making decisions at successive stages of the learning process.

Crome et al (2009) view autonomy as “the ability to think and act critically and independently, to self-manage study and learning, and realistically to appraise one's strengths and weaknesses as a learner”. They further explain that the capacity for autonomous learning is recognized by its expression in various forms, such as the ability to search for, read, and understand relevant primary and secondary materials; to explain an issue in oral and written form to others; and to demonstrate an awareness of the consequences of what has been learned.

According to Little (2011), autonomous learners “understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness.” This means that the practice of learner autonomy requires a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others.

Thanasoulas (2000) notes that the term autonomy has been used in five ways:

- 1) for situations in which learners study entirely on their own,
- 2) for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning,
- 3) for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education,
- 4) for the exercise of learners’ responsibility for their own learning, and
- 5) for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

From the definitions above, we can see that autonomy can not be easily defined. Autonomy can be seen as learner's behavior or capacity, and it can be expressed through a range of activities and skills. However, Holec gives a comprehensive definition of autonomy which the writer would like to adopt in this paper, i.e. the ability to take charge of one's own learning which covers decisions concerning all aspects of learning.

2.2 Characteristics of autonomous learners

Leni Dam (1990) in Thanasoulas (2000) states that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he “independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation.”

Candy (1991) as cited by Benson (2001: 85) lists some characteristics of autonomous learners as follows:

- 1) methodological and disciplined,
- 2) logical and analytical,
- 3) reflective and self-aware,
- 4) demonstrate curiosity, openness and motivation,
- 5) flexible,
- 6) interdependent and interpersonally competent,
- 7) persistent and responsible,
- 8) venturesome and creative,
- 9) show confidence and have a positive self-concept,
- 10) independent and self-sufficient,
- 11) have developed information seeking and retrieval skills,
- 12) have knowledge about, and skill at, learning processes,
- 13) develop and use criteria for evaluating.

Meanwhile, according to Thanasoulas (2000), there are seven main attributes characterising autonomous language learners:

- 1) have insights into their learning styles and strategies,
- 2) take an active approach to the learning task at hand,

- 3) are willing to take risks,
- 4) are good guessers,
- 5) attend to form as well as to content,
- 6) develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply, and
- 7) have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

These characteristics show us what learners should be able to do in order to manage their learning effectively. To achieve success in developing these characteristics, students need to be presented with autonomous learning opportunities, and support in the development of the necessary strategies to be successful.

2.3 Why learning autonomy is important?

According to Little (2001), there are two reasons of trying to make learners autonomous. First, if learners are reflectively engaged with their learning, it will be more efficient and effective, because it is more personal and focused. The efficiency and effectiveness of autonomous learners means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom. Second, if learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is solved. Autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning, and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation. In the case of foreign languages there is a third reason. If language learning depends on language use, learners who have a high degree of social autonomy in their learning environment should find it easier to master the full range of discourse roles on which effective communication depends.

Karim Mattarima (2011) states that autonomy in learning is necessary, and it is one of criteria of successful learners. Autonomous learners have strong efforts to inquire what is learnt, how it is learnt, and why it is learnt. They will need few helps from their teachers. They have great potency in appropriately selecting their learning strategies, and mostly learn in their own strategies and styles.

Dickinson (1995) as cited by Benson (2001: 105) states that “taking an active, independent attitude to learning and independently undertaking a learning task, is beneficial to learning; that somehow, personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning.” According to Benson (2001: 112), autonomous language learners are better language learners. Benson (2001: 189) further explains that autonomy may lead to greater proficiency in language use. Teachers and educational institutions should attempt to foster autonomy through practices that will allow learners to engage in modes of learning in which this capacity can be developed.

2.4 Autonomy in language learning

Kenny (1993) as cited by Benson (2001: 101) states that autonomy implies that learners use language rather than study it. Meanwhile, Little (1996) as cited by Benson (2001: 101) states that autonomy “facilitates target language use in the larger world that lies beyond the immediate learning environment” and “allows the learner to take maximum advantage of the language-learning opportunities that continually arise in language use.”

According to Little (2001), in educational contexts, learner autonomy entails reflective involvement in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating learning. He further notes that language learning depends on language use, so in language learning, the scope of learner autonomy is constrained by what learners can do in the target language. Little (2001) also explains that the development of autonomy in language learning is governed by three basic pedagogical principles:

- 1) learner involvement, i.e. engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process,
- 2) learner reflection, i.e. helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning, and
- 3) appropriate target language use, i.e. using the target language as the principal medium of language learning.

According to Little (2001), the principles above imply that the teacher should:

- 1) use the target language as the medium of classroom communication and require the same of the learners,

- 2) involve learners in a non-stop quest for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analyzed and evaluated with the whole class,
- 3) help learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities, subjecting them to discussion, analysis and evaluation,
- 4) require learners to identify individual goals but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups,
- 5) require learners to keep a written record of their learning, such as plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, and texts they themselves produce,
- 6) engage learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class.

Benson (2001: 76-103) relates autonomy in language learning to three levels of control. The first is control over learning management, which can be described in the behaviors that learners employ to manage the planning, organization, and evaluation of their learning. The second is control over cognitive processes which is related to the psychology of learning, such as attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge. The third is control over learning content which concerns with what learners want to and have to learn. These three levels of control are interdependent. Effective learning management depends on control of cognitive processes, while control of cognitive processes has consequences for learning management. Autonomy also implies that learning management and control over cognitive processes should involve decisions concerning the learning content.

2.5 Teachers' roles in learning autonomy

Kohonen (2001) in Sert (2006) argues that the language teacher had a significant role as a resource person for autonomous language learning. This is in line with Egel's statement (2009) as cited by Karim Mattarima (2011) that teachers should become agents on developing students' autonomy in the classroom context. In the teaching learning process, teachers are one of determiners to create autonomous learners in the classroom. Teachers also have other potential roles, such as a facilitator, a teammate, and a controller, to involve students independently.

Thanasoulas (2000) explains that learner autonomy is best achieved when the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning, a counselor, and a resource. Meanwhile, according to Little (2011), the teacher's role is to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners can be autonomous in order to become more autonomous.

From the roles mentioned above, we can conclude that teachers should create many opportunities for developing students' autonomy in the classroom. The materials, teaching techniques, tasks, and the evaluation should be directed to promote autonomous language learning. It is not an easy job as teachers should understand their students' background, needs, motivation, and other individual characteristics.

2.6 Adult language learners

Students in higher education can be categorized into adult learners. Lamb (2004) states that higher education students are assumed to have the personal maturity necessary to take responsibility for their learning and the content or method of learning.

According to Brown (2000: 123), some experts observed that certain adult learners appeared to possess abilities to succeed while others lacked those abilities. This observation led Rubin and Stern to describe good language learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles, and strategies. Rubin and Thompson (1982) in Brown (2000: 123) summarize fourteen characteristics of good language learners as follows:

- 1) find their own way, taking charge of their learning.
- 2) organize information about language.
- 3) are creative, developing a "feel" for the language by experimenting with its grammar and words.
- 4) make their own opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom.
- 5) learn to live with uncertainty by not getting flustered and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.
- 6) use mnemonics and other memory strategies to recall what has been learned.
- 7) make errors work for them and not against them.

- 8) use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of their first language, in learning a second language.
- 9) use contextual cues to help them in comprehension.
- 10) learn to make intelligent guesses.
- 11) learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform “beyond their competence.”
- 12) learn certain tricks that help to keep conversations going.
- 13) learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence.
- 14) learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language according to the formality of situation.

Brown (2001: 209-210) notes that this list is not an exhaustive one, and not all successful learners exhibit all of these characteristics. He explains the more the classroom activity can model the behaviour exhibited by successful language learners, the better and more efficient the learners will be, especially in developing their own autonomy as learners.

Meanwhile, Rubin and Thompson (1993) as cited by Karim Mattarima (2011) offer other characteristics of good language learners in the following list.

- 1) Using the language at every available opportunity.
- 2) Practicing what they have just learnt as soon as possible.
- 3) Willing to try out different ways in order to get their message across.
- 4) Being able to overcoming their uncertainty and uneasiness.
- 5) Monitoring own speech as well as the speech of others.
- 6) Analyzing, categorizing and synthesizing new language.
- 7) Systematic organizing program and goals.
- 8) Applying different learning methods.
- 9) Understanding errors in working or learning.
- 10) Starting conversation or be initiator of conversation.

Griffiths (2009) in Karim Mattarima (2011) states that characteristics of good language learners can give the greatest potential for change in relation to students’

use of language learning strategies. Therefore, teaching will help students to become better language learners.

2.7 Promoting learning autonomy

Hughes (2003) states that not all learners entering higher education already possess the knowledge, skills and qualities to be able to deal with learning autonomy. McNair (1997) in Hughes (2003) explains that students enter higher education with diverse levels of autonomy, and many of the educational processes which they have experienced in the past have not encouraged it. If students' ways of learning adopted in earlier stages are carried forward into higher education, there is a danger that students will become less autonomous.

Hughes (2003) proposes some tools which teachers might utilize to provide autonomous learning opportunities to students as follows:

- 1) clear induction and guidance regarding institutional structures,
- 2) skills training and support,
- 3) provision of opportunities for negotiated learning,
- 4) project-based learning,
- 5) problem-based learning,
- 6) stand-alone independent study modules,
- 7) provision of opportunities for self-assessment or self-evaluation,
- 8) provision of opportunities for group work and peer evaluation,
- 9) learning and assessment through learning journals or diaries to stimulate reflection, and
- 10) provision of learning and assessment opportunities designed to stimulate and assess critical thinking.

According to Benson (2001: 109), any practice that encourages and enables learners to take greater control of any aspect of their learning can be considered a means of promoting autonomy. Benson (2001: 111) sees the some teaching practices as supportive of autonomy. They are:

- 1) resource-based approaches which emphasize learner's independent interaction with learning materials,

- 2) technology-based approaches which emphasize learner's independent interaction with educational technologies,
- 3) learner-based approaches which emphasize the direct production of behavioural and psychological changes that enable learners to take control over their learning,
- 4) classroom-based approaches which emphasize learner control over the planning and assessment of classroom learning,
- 5) curriculum-based approaches which extend the idea of learner control to the curriculum,
- 6) teacher-based approaches which emphasize the role of the teacher and teacher education in the practice of fostering autonomy among learners.

The distinction made in the classification above lies in the focus of the approaches. However, these approaches are interdependent, and sometimes are combined in eclectic ways. It is likely that learning autonomy will be fostered effectively through a combination of approaches.

3. Discussion

As stated by some experts, autonomous language learning is important and can lead towards language proficiency. Autonomous learners will be better language learners and motivated learners. Their learning will become more efficient and effective. However, students entering high education such as those in the English Education Department of Yogyakarta State University still lack autonomy. They are still dependent towards their teachers and thus might be unable to develop their language potency to the fullest. Hence, the teachers should attempt to promote autonomy to the students. They should be able to create opportunities and maintain learning environment which support autonomy. There are many ways of promoting language learning autonomy in the class. However, the writer would like to suggest some of those which are applicable for the students of the English Education Department of Yogyakarta State University.

3.1 Self-access learning centre (SALC)

SALC can be defined as any purpose-designed facility in which learning resources are directly available to students (Benson, 2001: 114). These resources usually include audiotapes, computers, and printed materials. SALC functions as a quasi-independent unit for engaging learners in study outside the classroom.

There is one SALC in the Languages and Arts Faculty of Yogyakarta State University which can be utilized by students and teachers. It provides some reference books, learning materials, teaching media, computers, and multimedia. Teachers should familiarize students with SALC since the first semester. They can assign some tasks which students can complete through the use of SALC, such as reading a certain type of texts and recognize its generic structure, listening to a recording and find out some of its specific information, or discussing a certain topic of interest within a group of students.

3.2 Internet-based activities

The benefit of the internet is that students can study whenever they want using an unlimited range of authentic materials (Benson, 2001: 139). The significant internet-based activities include writing e-mails and joining on-line discussion which provide opportunities for collaborative learning. Hence, students can interact with other students, teachers, and target language users. There are also many websites providing English learning sources and activities which can be utilized by the students to improve their skills.

There is an e-learning program developed by the computer centre of Yogyakarta State University which is called Be Smart. It has some features which support the teaching learning process such as courses, quizzes, discussion forum, email, and chatting. Teachers can upload the learning materials, tasks, tests, and links to other online resources. Students can download materials, upload their homework, and have discussions with the teacher and other students through discussion forum or chatting facility. Thus, when a teacher cannot come to the class to teach, s/he can use Be Smart to guide the students in learning English.

3.3 Self-reports

Wenden (1998) as cited by Thanasoulas (2000) state that self-reports are useful in raising students' awareness of their own learning strategies. There are two kinds of self-reports: introspective report in which students are asked report what they are thinking while they are performing a task; and retrospective report where students are asked to think back or retrospect on their learning.

In self-reports, students answer questions related to their feelings towards particular skills (such as reading, listening, and others), problems encountered, techniques to tackle these problems, and their views on optimal strategies in acquiring specific skills and ways of dealing with learning tasks. Teachers in the English Education Department can ask their students to write a self-report after they do a certain activity or task in the class to make the students conscious of what they have done in their learning.

3.4 Diaries and evaluation sheets

Diaries and evaluation sheets offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning (Wenden in Thanasoulas, 2000). Students can identify any problems they run into and suggest solutions. Alongside diaries, students can benefit from writing their expectations of a course at the beginning of term, and then filling in evaluation sheets at the end of term. These activities will help the students put things into perspective and manage their learning more effectively.

The English teacher can ask each student to keep and write a diary in which they tell anything related to their language learning. S/he can also ask the students to fill in some evaluation sheets during or at the end of the semester. This way, students can see the progress they have made in learning English, and then they can plan their next steps in the learning process.

4. Conclusion

Students entering higher education might lack autonomy in language learning because their learning experience in the secondary level is usually teacher-centred. Thus, teachers in higher education institutions should make their students aware of learning autonomy to improve the learning process. There are many ways of

promoting autonomy, and students are free to choose the ones which are suitable for themselves. However, teachers should also guide the students in developing learning autonomy. When autonomy has been fostered in language learning, teachers and students can expect for a better language performance and students' personal development.

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