

THE ADVANTAGES OF PROMOTING LEARNERS' AUTONOMY IN EFL CONTEXT.

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Abstract

This paper explains why learner autonomy is taken into account in language learning where English is a foreign language for the learners particularly in Indonesia. The definition of learner autonomy and its advantages to language learner in EFL contexts will be described within this paper. Many scholars from psychological education and English teaching and learning had proved that language learning can be improved by certain strategy. They revealed the correlation between the autonomous learning with students' success in learning with different aspect. The definition of autonomy is similar to many different words such as self-regulated and self-determined. Finally, the writer suggests how teacher can promote the autonomous learning atmosphere in the classroom.

Keywords: strategy, promoting autonomy, EFL context, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

English language becomes favorable school subject in Indonesia. English is taught since elementary school up to tertiary education requirement. Students learn English in Indonesia as a foreign language. To learn the language, teacher in the classroom have to provide adequate material and based on national curriculum. However, it is not enough to teach English in the classroom without students' autonomy to improve their English language skill and competence.

In providing students' development in language ability, teacher may have to figure out a number of strategies that help students to acquire the language skills. Language learning according to Brown (2007) involves three basic principles that interwoven during the learning process. In language pedagogy, Brown asserts cognitive, socio-affective and linguistic into teaching principles.

Number of scholars and teachers define learning strategy as a way, a method or a process to learn and use the target language (Nunan, 1999; Brown, 2001). Oxford and Ehrman (1990) further structured the strategies into detailed dimensions. What Brown suggests to support learners' cognitive strategy is by encourage them to be autonomous in the learning process (Brown, 2007). The question then appeared whether learner autonomy embraces cognitive, socio-affective and linguistic aspects in language learning.

Language learning in classroom is not always favorable when teacher have limited time to explain or give the material needed by the students or when students are lack of opportunities and strategies to use the target language. In that case, it is reasonable to promote learner autonomy in learning language in- and outside the classroom.

This paper will explain why learner autonomy is taken into account in language learning where English is a foreign language for the learners particularly in Indonesia. The definition of learner autonomy and its advantages to language learner in EFL contexts will be described within this paper.

1. Learner autonomy as learning strategy

Study about learner autonomy often related to self-regulated, self-directed, self-determined or independent learner (Littlewood, 1999; Bruning et al, 2004; Harmer, 2007). Oxford dictionary define autonomy as "the ability to act and make decision without being controlled by anyone else, giving individual greater autonomy in their own life" (2000, p.70).

In nature, learning is a process of transferring information from the teacher to the students. Learning is differentiated to language acquisition. In the classroom, English is learned and taught explicitly. Classroom instruction is the characteristic of learning, while acquisition is a process that is naturally occurred without

intention and goal. For example, in ESL context learners who are not a native English speaker may acquire numerous vocabulary when they speak to native speaker outside the house or classroom. They acquire new words without intentional learning.

Learning may be occurred in- or outside the classroom. To maintain the learning process in both circumstances where the learning take place, autonomous learning should be promoted initially in the classroom. After given the program or strategies, the teacher keep on encouraging the strategies to be used by the learner beyond the classroom. It is the principle of learning autonomy goal, to have the students to take charge of their own learning (Brown, 2007). Furthermore, number of educators and scholars agree that to be autonomous is a life-long learning goal (Harmer, 2007). Learners are expected to maintain their motivation in learning and be able to regulate their own learning even outside the classroom (Brown, 2007; Nunan, 1999).

In the learning process, strategy plays it roles to empower students' comprehension and learning outcomes. Oxford (2003) claimed that a strategy is an action or mental process that students activate to develop learning target language. Oxford & Ehrman (1990) divided strategy into two main focuses, direct and indirect strategies. The picture (figure 1) below describes learning strategies that can be introduced to the students in the classroom.

"A good strategy allow learner to be self-directed and Involves many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive" (Oxford as cited in Nunan, 1999, p.172). According to Oxford, the strategies are divided based on language used by the learner. If the strategies are employed to use the language directly, it's called direct strategies (Oxford & Ehrman, 1990). One of autonomous learners is they hold various strategies that can be used to any different situation and problem. Learner is not always directed and instructed by their teacher. Previous statement goes along with one characteristic of a good learner that can manage their own learning using direct or indirect strategies. Dafei (2007) claims that an effective learner is an autonomous learner because learner can manage their time effectively and develop their own learning.

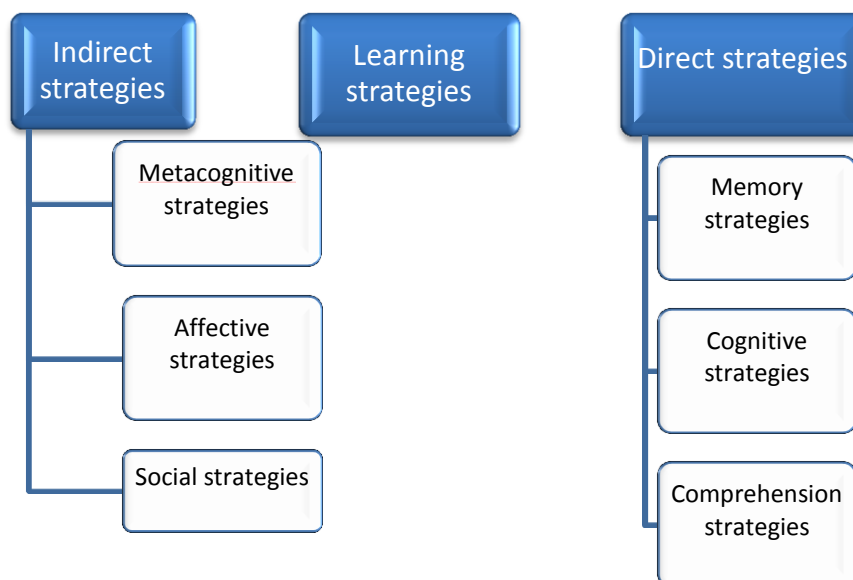


Figure 1: Oxford taxonomy about learning strategy.

Strategies are basically drawn from learning principles. Brown (2007) put forward two principles that underlying learner autonomy. Cognitive principle is mental state or intellectual of the learner to deal with a problem in learning. Similar to Brown, Oxford (1990) also takes cognitive aspect into account in language learning. However, Oxford specifically regards cognitive strategy as a direct strategy in learning. It is because when learners use a language, they activate their mental process such as analyzing, repeating words, and taking notes (Oxford & Ehrman, 1990).

Learner autonomy is also a combination between cognitive and socio-affective of learning principles (Brown, 2007). In socio-affective principles, autonomy plays its roles when it comes to social or culture and language. Beyond the classroom, students are expected to maintain their motivation in learning and develop their strategies to use the target language. In EFL context, outside classroom opportunities are certainly limited. In that case, learning needs positive attitudes to English as a target language (Gardner, 2006). Gardner claims that “integrativeness refers to the individual's cultural openness and interest in other communities and languages and favourable attitudes toward the target language group as well as integrative orientation.” (Gardner, 2006, p.354).

It is noteworthy that in learning language particularly other language, learners have to hold integrativeness so that their socio-affective aspect develops and it certainly does enhance their autonomous learning. Positive attitude to the target language such as integrativeness is important.

Nevertheless, learner autonomy should be implemented in- and outside the classroom. Harmer (2007) argued that autonomy plays significant role as compensation for students have limited opportunities to learn the English language in the classroom.

Littlewood (1999) further allocated different types of autonomy. In the view of psychological and social relatedness, autonomy should have advantage the environment of the learner. Littlewood attempts to define autonomy in a related-culture definition. He comes up with an idea that culture, such as in East Asian, have a strong relation to one's autonomous in learning. As individual differences effect one's learning style, if the culture effects one's personality, it means the culture also influence one's learning style. For example, Asian people are mostly collectivism and interdependent self, the way they learn autonomously may be different who learner who is individualist that is mostly hold by western people.

Autonomy in the level of when it initiated is divided into two types: *Proactive* and *Reactive* autonomy (Littlewood, 1999). These two terms have similar definition with Flannery's learning strategies definition (Flannery, 1994 as cited in Littlewood, 1999). *Proactive* autonomy is similar to collaborative learning strategies, while *Reactive* autonomy mirrored cooperative learning. *Reactive* autonomy where a strategy is initiated by the teachers mostly represents East Asian Culture, while *Proactive* autonomy mostly represents Western Culture in learning strategy. These two terms become one dimension to be considered when teacher would like to employ learning strategy in a particular context.

There are number of advantages that learner even teacher may attain when autonomous learning has been implemented. Study has shown that autonomous learner has similar quality to students who have high ability in target language competence. Legenhausen's (2007) study about linguistic development between autonomous students and student whose linguistic ability higher that later group of students showed noteworthy result. Average students who learn autonomously show similar grade to students who has higher language competence and skill.

The study seems to imply that learner can enhance their language skill by giving them chance to control their learning. Initially, learners are not automatically independent in their learning. Legenhausen (2007) illustrate the learners' role as an English language learner.

In EFL context such as Indonesia, English is rarely used outside the classroom. Thus, English language not a tool of communication. In that case, Legenhausen called the learner as a explorer or intentional learner. What the learner need is language awareness to reach language proficiency (Legenhausen, 2007).

Given that learner need language awareness, autonomous learning should be promoted. Language awareness is related to learning awareness. Carter (2003) defines language awareness as “the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and the functions of language.” Learners are aware when they use the language and how well their language development in compare to other learners’ language ability.

Autonomous learners are aware of their own learning progress. Despite of autonomy strongly related to cognitive strategies, however, self-regulated learning required metacognitive awareness. It follows that autonomous learners comprise not only cognitive awareness but also metacognitive awareness.

One indicator that learner autonomy has been seized is when learner maintains their learning development even without teachers’ monitor. In other words, learners continue their study outside the classroom (Brown, 2007). The process is such transition learning. The learner is not abruptly independent in learning. The learners need to be controlled and monitored by the teacher before acceding to learn independently.

Independent learning is not immediate behaviour, it takes time and intention to become autonomous. Learning, in fact, require objectives and goal to get somewhere. Therefore, Nunan (1999) suggest ‘Goal setting’ to begin the journey to become independent learner. It goes without saying that learner autonomy is an aimless process.

It is a fact that learner has multiple goal in their learning (Borkowski, 1988). For example, when they learn English language they not only desire to achieve language proficiency but also to acquire a good job after school. Borkowski (1988, p.109) stated that “hence, multiple-goal interventions (which involve, for example, a variety of social goals) may lead to stronger and longer lasting impacts on students’ motivation and performance in classroom settings.” The word “motivation” is the key word for learner in sustainable learning even outside the classroom setting. Autonomous learner possesses this motivation and awareness to continue the journey of learning English language.

Continual learning would be difficult without learners’ persistence. In addition, the problem also would be the context of the language is used or spoken. In EFL context, learners persistence is incredibly needed to keep the learner use the language despite of limited situational support. Learner, whose language awareness fairly excellent, will find it difficult to practice their English without English speaking environment. They easily despair and feel useless to learn the target language. However, if they recognize that learning is not necessary to speak or listen, they will automatically switch the strategy to find another way to learn English favourably. They continue to learn.

Promoting Learner Autonomy

The nature of learning and learner differences in employing learning strategy does not hinder autonomy learner to be promoted. Learner autonomy impacts learner English proficiency, language awareness and sustainable in learning. These advantages should take into account in the learning process.

Learner autonomy initially promoted in the classroom setting. Learner autonomy should be encouraged and reinforced through autonomous classroom (Dam, 2007). Autonomy reinforcement starts from classroom which set to enable students to learn independently. This situation is initiated by the teachers to their students with clear direction, responsibility and instruction (Dam,2007).

The picture below (figure 3) illustrated how autonomous classroom to be occurred. Both teacher and learner have the same role as a director of the learning progress. To begin with, teacher or trainer should recognize the characteristic of autonomous classroom before developing learning autonomy. Dam (2007) gives illustration how an autonomous learning circumstance to be occurred. He suggest that autonomous in learning require teachers and students roles. The four processes develop learner autonomy are attained through dialog and negotiation.

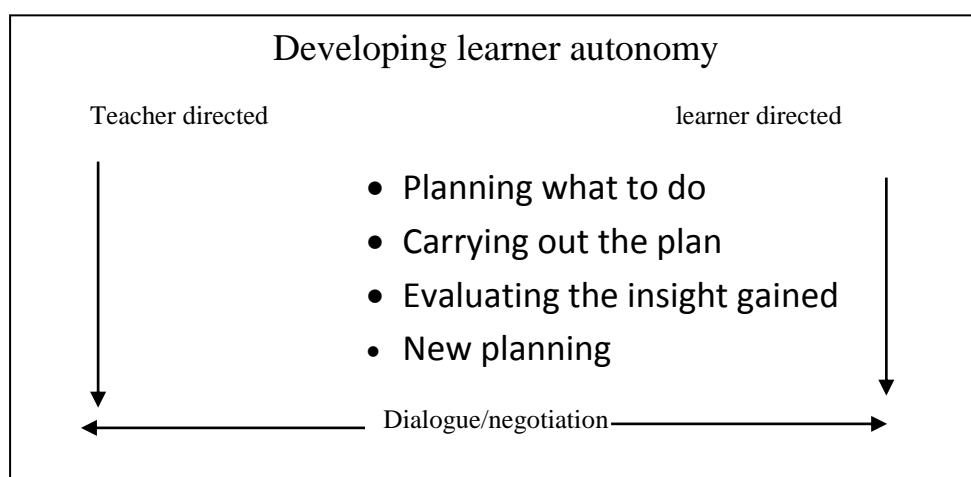


Figure 2: developing learner autonomy- a simplified model (Dam, 2007, p.14)

The strategy above similar to what Hedge (2008) called Metacognitive strategy. The component of metacognitive strategy planning and evaluating the task that learner are going to accomplish. This strategy is repeated until it patterned when learner start doing the same task or even different task that has the same pattern.

The picture above also likely goes along with Oxford's taxonomy on learning strategy. Metacognitive strategy consists of both planning and evaluating. However, Oxford put centering students' learning such as paying attention to the

subject before beginning to work. Planning and evaluating the task are intended to organize the learning. This strategy may be used for any type of task that learner carry out in- or outside the classroom.

In the classroom context, teacher set the classroom to support learner autonomy. In the first place teacher should create an autonomous atmosphere. Classroom culture such as valuing learner independence to have an idea and do the task with their preferred learning style may be stimulated. Little (2006) suggest teacher's roles as follow:

- use the target language as the preferred medium of classroom communication and require
- the same of her learners;
- involve her learners in a non-stop quest for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analysed and evaluated with the whole class – in the target language, to begin with in very simple terms;
- help her learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities, subjecting them to discussion, analysis and evaluation – again, in the target language;
- require her learners to identify individual goals but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups;
- require her learners to keep a written record of their learning – plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, whatever texts they themselves produce;
- engage her learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class – in the target language. (Little, 2006, p.3)

In formal language learning, autonomous classroom is characterized with *learner involvement*, *learner reflection* and *appropriate language use* (Little, 2006, p.2). These three principles implemented by the teacher in the classroom.

Despite of action in learning, learner autonomy should be initiated by the basic idea about learning itself. Teacher assists the students to understand their own learning style and preferred. Nunan (1999) suggest some initial teaching to learner about *learning-how-to-learn* as follow:

- *The learning process in general*
- *Becoming more sensitive to the context and environment within which learning take place;*
- *Dealing with the macroskill (that is listening, reading, speaking and writing)*
- *Dealing with the linguistic systems of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and discourse.* (Nunan, 1999, p.172)

One of these initial activities will lead to any classroom activity that is related to the lesson. Learner should understand what they are learning about in order to learn effectively. They are directed to have learning goal and become independent

in their own learning. They are responsible of their own learning development finally.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Teaching English in EFL context which is related to students' learning style and motivation may be challenging. At the present some scholars take autonomy into account as their study as a contribution on learning development. Learning a language involves many aspects. Brown (2007) proposes three main principles in teaching language, they are cognitive, socio-affective and linguistic aspect.

A number of studies about learner autonomy have been written and published by educators and psychologists. Littlewood (1999) has further examined whether learner autonomy has been influenced by particular culture. Learning to be autonomous is one of language teaching and learning goals. It plays an important role in a learning process for certain reasons, firstly, it has a strong correlation with learners' achievement. Secondly, it is a life-long learning goal. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to promote learner autonomy through their classroom instruction and activities.

Promoting students' autonomy is important as it helps students to be well-performed in English language proficiency and leads students to be independent learners in- and outside the classroom. Therefore, the teachers may promote learner autonomy by providing a program or training that may be stimulated by giving an explicit instruction and by having a group dynamic strategy to encourage learners to be autonomous.

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