

THE IMPORTANCE AND THE MEANINGS OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract. *This article presents the findings of a qualitative study conducted in English Department of Pekalongan University in 2018. The study aimed at revealing students' and teachers' perceptions about the importance and the meanings of independent learning particularly in their language learning. However this article only reports the interview results with fourteen students. The findings signal the students' positive perceptions about independent learning. All students considered independent learning as important to improve their mastery of English. They also presented various reasons on the importance of doing independent learning. Interestingly, while all students reported the importance of doing independent learning, they described independent learning with a range of meanings. This suggests that independent learning means different thing for different students. Among the meanings they give to independent learning covers: 1) individual effort to improve the language competence, 2) individuals' learning habits, 3) independent learning activities, 4) self-evaluation activity, and 5) self-reflection activity.*

Key words: qualitative study, independent learning, perceptions

INTRODUCTION

The students of English Education Department of Pekalongan University are required to master English well as they are preparing themselves to be English teachers. Therefore it is necessary for them to do independent learning outside the classrooms apart from joining the lectures in the class. They are expected to do more practices or read more references independently so that they can improve their English mastery. However, how the students perceive independent learning, as an important thing to do to increase their English skills is still unknown. Thus a study is conducted to reveal how students perceive the importance of independent learning to support their language learning.

Besides, studying the meanings given to independent learning by students is also important as this relates to why they consider it as important or unimportant. The literature has shown that there are various meanings

given to the concept of independent learning. It may also be possible that the students also give various meanings to the concept of independent learning.

Independent learning or sometimes called autonomous learning is a learning concept introduced in the Western countries. This learning concept basically gives the students more responsibility so that they can participate actively in the teaching and learning activities both inside and outside the class. Students are also expected to share ideas about the learning materials, types of assignments, places for doing the learning, and the types of learning activities. In this case, the teaching and learning activities in the class will be centered on the students and not on the teacher.

Any learning activities which place independent learning as an important element in them will promote the development of the students into life-long learners (Egel, 2009). This is actually the educational goals in this

modern era, especially as we are facing the globalization era where every single individual will be required to continue their learning throughout their lives, particularly to enable them to be accepted by the global society (Jarvis, 2007; Weinstein et. al, 2011).

The concept of independent learning has been increasingly attracting the interests of those involved in the educational field. This is so, as first, every individual has the right to fulfil their learning needs so that they can learn what they like or what they want (Crabbe, 1993). The students can get their rights when they are given the chances to determine the learning materials or the types of activities and tasks which they can do inside and outside the classrooms. Second, the independent learning done by students is more effective and efficient

Based on the psychological aspects, when students learn autonomously or independently they will take more responsibility and their learning can be better and more meaningful (Crabbe, 1993). In addition, according to Little (2009), independent learners can learn by using the knowledge they have got from the class. Thus they can expand their knowledge.

The concept of autonomous or independent learning itself however has not been fully understood by those who are involved in the world of education. There is an interpretation that autonomous learning is learning without the teacher (Little, 1991). This is not true because the teacher has the responsibility to act as a facilitator in a class which is applying autonomous learning. Teachers also have to play the other roles like serving as an assistant, a tutor and an advisor (Gremmo and Riley, 1995).

At present, the concept of autonomous learning has been introduced and applied in Indonesian education. The 2013 curriculum has stated that the teaching and learning activities must support the development of students' autonomous learning. The teaching and learning activity is no longer teacher-

centered but must be centered on the students. Teachers are expected to serve as facilitators who facilitate students' learning. Thus, students are more active and independent in their learning both inside and outside the classroom.

The application of autonomous learning in Indonesia has been discovered by Martin Lamb (2004; 2011) who examined autonomous learning activities in a Junior High School in one of the cities in Sumatra. He found that young students there already had learned independently and done many autonomous learning activities such as watching English TV programs, listening to English songs, taking private lessons and practicing their speaking skill in English. From those results, we can conclude that Junior High school students can already do autonomous learning activities to improve their English skills. This suggests that students at higher education levels such as those in senior high school or college may also be able to do autonomous learning activities outside the classroom.

To improve students' English skills, autonomous learning is needed to complete classroom learning. Dardjowidjojo (2000) has analyzed the ability of students in English and he found that high school graduates in Indonesia still have low English proficiency because the concept of autonomous learning and classroom interaction have not been implemented. Considering that English is a foreign language in Indonesia, there is only limited opportunity to use English outside the classroom and thus students need to learn independently in practicing the language so that they can improve their mastery of the language.

The mastery of English will be a requirement for those who are majoring in English or English Education in higher education. Generally, these teacher candidates can interact and communicate in English in the classroom but their use of English outside the

class is still limited as English is not their daily language. Therefore, autonomous learning outside the classroom is the opportunity for the students to improve their English mastery. For example, the students can make groups to practice their speaking skills before having the presentation in the class. Students can also correct their friends' writing or they can read English texts and discuss the content with their friends. Students can also interact online with foreigners through social media. Similarly, they can improve their vocabulary by reading English texts in the internet. Asking friends who are considered smarter or asking lecturers outside the class is also a form of students' efforts to fulfill their curiosity about a particular learning material and this shows the existence of students' independent strategies in learning. Students who have the initiative to learn independently show that they have a sense of responsibility for their learning.

In short, autonomous or independent learning emphasizes the responsibility of students over the learning activities they do as well as the learning outcomes they achieve. As a result they will not feel compelled to learn because they take part in determining or making choices related to materials, activities, tasks, and places to study. Autonomous or independent learning has been introduced and implemented in Pekalongan University. However, it is unclear how important the concept of independent learning is perceived and implemented by those majoring in English Education Department. For this reason, there is a need to conduct a study to reveal how the concept of autonomous learning is perceived by students and lecturers in English Education Department of Universitas Pekalongan. This is because the students in English Education Department will be future teachers who will have the tasks to develop their students' autonomy and independence in learning. Without having a positive perception about independent learning, these future teachers may keep focusing on the use of teacher-

centered approach. In this way, then the government policy which requires us to shift from the teacher-centered approach into student-centered approach will be hard to implement. This research is then serving as an initial step to reveal students' and teachers' perceptions about independent learning which further can be used to see how the government policies are applied by the institution which prepares the teacher candidates. The objectives of the study are as follows: (a) to reveal students' perceptions about the importance of independent learning, (b) to reveal students' perceptions about the meanings of independent learning.

METHOD

This qualitative study has been conducted from March 2018 to October 2018. The study involved the students in English Department of Pekalongan University Central Java Indonesia as the respondents. The students were selected through the use of convenience sampling. To collect the data the students were invited to join the semi structured interview. Narrative inquiry was used in the study and thus the interviews were done by asking the respondents to tell their experiences in doing the independent learning activities. The interviews lasted for about twenty to thirty minutes. The students had the freedom to select the language used in the interview. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed and analyzed. The writers used the thematic content analysis in analyzing the data to see how the data built the patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the interview with fourteen students. There are two main findings reported here, namely, (1) the students' perceptions about the importance of independent learning and (2) the students' perceptions about the meanings of independent learning.

Students' perception about the importance of independent learning

All of the respondents participating in this study acknowledged that independent learning is important. Most of the respondents stated that it is *very important*. Several respondents said that it is *important* and only one respondent mentioned that it is *quite important*. Although all of the respondents had positive perceptions about independent learning, they presented different points of views when they explained their reasons on the importance of independent language learning. For those who reported that independent learning is *very important*, their reasons were presented below.

Students cannot rely on the group work

Some students reported that they could not depend fully on their friends when they worked together particularly as some were unwilling to do similar amount of work. One of the students mentioned: "*Independent learning is very important. It is really necessary to be done. This is so because when we are working in the group, some members will choose to do a small part of the work and they will depend much on the work of the other members of the group. It often happens that there is miscommunication and then the result of the work is far from meeting the expectations.*"

From this answer, the student felt that working in team did not always achieve a good result. Sometimes problems occur as the students did not contribute equally to the work. This particular student seems to be aware that sometimes working independently is required as the group members may not be able to cooperate well. Without having good team work, there seems to be no value of working together. As a result working independently is more preferable.

Independent learning promotes self-evaluation

Several students perceived that independent learning is important to do

because they felt the need to evaluate their learning progress. "*In my opinion, it is very important because if we do not make personal effort to do the language learning, then we may not know what we haven't mastered yet.*" This shows that the students perceived the need to be aware of their weaknesses. They need to know what they have been good at and what they have not.

Similar perception was also presented by another student: "*In my opinion, independent language learning is very important because we can measure our own ability. By doing independent learning, we will know what we are weak at and we will know what to do next.*" Apart from knowing the students' weaknesses, doing independent learning will help the students to measure their current ability and thus they know what they are supposed to do next to help them improve the skills they are lacking of.

Independent learning improves the mastery of English

For the other respondents, independent learning was seen as a means to further understand the learning materials which supports the mastery of English: "*In my opinion, independent learning is very important. After we finish learning in the campus, then to understand the materials deeper we need to do independent learning, we need to memorize, or we can repeat what the lecturers have explained in the class.*"

Apart from that, independent learning is considered as a tool for reviewing the classroom learning: "*Independent learning is very important because at home we can do the review about what we have learnt in the class. In this way, we can remember what we learn both inside and outside the class. So for me, it is very important to remember the lesson.*" For some other students, independent learning is considered *important* for a number of reasons:

Independent learning helps the students in the material mastery

For some students, independent learning is the way to improve the language learning outside the classroom. This is shown in the students' answer when they were interviewed: *"Actually it is important because when we are learning independently we must master the material independently. If we work in group, sometimes we do not really understand the materials fully"*. This shows that there is a greater demand for the students to master the materials when they learn it alone. This is regarded as a positive side of doing independent learning as the students see independent learning as helping them to master the language.

Independent learning provides the chance for students to expand the knowledge

Students also shared their perceptions that independent learning enables them to learn stuff they did not learn in their class. *"Independent learning is important because we are going to be a teacher and it really helps the achievement of our goal. It must be done. So we need to learn more than what the teachers have given, we must get the information and knowledge about the four language skills that we have to master"*. This suggests that they students are aware of the needs to expand their knowledge and this has signalled a good sign of their readiness to be independent life-long learners.

Independent learning helps students to gain better learning concentration

For the other respondents, independent learning is important to help the learners to concentrate better in their language learning: *"It is important due to the higher level of concentration that we get when we do it."* This seems to be a good reason for the students for doing the independent language learning. Without friends, there is limited chance for them to speak and chat and thus they can have more opportunities to concentrate well in the learning.

Independent learning trains students to be independent learners

The other respondents express their ideas on the importance of independent learning due to their awareness as they cannot rely on other people. *"Independent learning is important as without it we will face difficulties. It is not possible to ask for other people's help all the time. We must understand the material by ourselves."*

For another respondent, independent learning is *quite important* due to the following reason: *"In my personal view, independent learning makes up 60% of all our language learning. By doing the independent learning we can challenge ourselves to work harder and we can achieve what we want to gain. Why 60%? Because the other 40% can be obtained from others' help or from learning with the group."*

From the student's answers above, it can be concluded that more portion is given to independent learning. This shows that this particular respondent has the willingness to work on his/ her own because he/ she has a particular goal to achieve. Personal challenge is one of the triggers for the student to do the independent learning.

Overall, from the answers of the students related to their perceptions about the importance of independent learning, it can be concluded that the students in English Education Department of Pekalongan University had revealed their positive perceptions about independent learning. All of the respondents in this study perceived it as having the importance in supporting their language learning. The various reasons and arguments showed that the respondents perceived the importance in doing independent work from different points of view. The following section will present the findings and discussion on how students perceived the meanings of independent learning.

Students' perceptions of the meanings of independent learning

Basically the students considered learning independently as an important aspect of their learning activities which can foster the language mastery. However, they had various perceptions about the concept of independent learning. For the English Department students, independent learning is regarded as 1) individual effort to improve the language competence, 2) individuals' learning habits, 3) independent learning activities, 4) self-evaluation activity, and 5) self-reflection activity. Each of the meaning will be discussed in the following section.

Independent learning as personal efforts to improve students' language competence

Several students stated that independent learning activity is the efforts that they make as a way to foster the mastery of English. However, the forms of efforts they do also vary. One of the students said: *"[Independent learning] is more for the practices. Try every day. Try every day to exercise the skills. Independent learning means observing, understanding and practicing. For example, when we see the video or listen to a song and find the new vocabulary, we can write them and find the meanings. After that we can use the new words in the daily conversation."*

From the statement above the student emphasised the activities like observing, understanding, and practicing the language that they meet in the daily life, especially to deepen what they are learning. Almost similar to what this respondent stated, another respondent thought that independent learning is more for speaking practices: *"To me, independent learning is learning how to say something, the pronunciation, intonation, words stressing, and the grammar."*

If for the respondents above independent learning focuses on the practices, another student perceived that independent learning is for deepening the mastery of the materials taught in the classrooms: *"Independent*

learning means learning how to understand the materials given by the teachers and thus we can understand them more." Another student also had similar perception: *"Independent learning means we are learning individually so that we can understand the materials."*

These two statements suggest that independent learning is considered as an activity to master the materials taught in the class. In addition, independent learning is also seen a preparation for classroom learning:

"By doing the independent learning, we are preparing the materials to be learnt in the class and therefore we can master them." In addition to serving as a preparation to join classroom learning, independent learning activities are also considered beneficial for increasing students' knowledge: *"Independent learning is like a process or an activity to increase the knowledge."*

From the students' answers above, it can be concluded that some perceived independent learning as an activity for practicing the language outside the class, as a follow up of a classroom learning, as a preparatory activity before joining the classroom activities, and as an activity to expand students' knowledge. Therefore, independent learning is considered as the students' efforts to increase their ability in English even though the efforts done vary from students to students.

Independent learning as individuals' learning habits

Besides being considered as an effort to increase students' English mastery, independent learning is also perceived as the individuals' learning habits. Habits here means the activities done as a routine which also develop as a life style. One of the respondents said: *"Independent learning is what we have to do every day. Not always very effective. The most important thing is we learn."* Another student mentioned: *"I consider independent learning as a life style. In this way, learning style means that we start with*

the planning, we plan what we must do and we put them in our to do list.” From those statements above, it can be concluded that for some of the respondents, independent learning is a habit that they do based on their schedule.

Independent learning as independent (personal) learning activities

Several respondents also considered independent learning as personal learning activities. One of the respondents explained: *“The concept of independent learning in my opinion is a learning process done by individuals in various different ways.”*

The answers above show that independent learning can be done in various ways. There is no fixed rule on how to do it. This also shows that students who have different learning styles are supported by independent language learning as independent learning gives them the freedom to do the learning based on their own characteristics and style which are most suitable for them.

Another respondent stated: *“For me, independent learning means doing everything related to the English language learning and it is done independently and if possible it is done in a routine.”* This statement highlights that the independent learning is done without the presence of a teacher. Similarly, another student mentioned: *“In my personal view, independent learning is our own way to learn something individually.”*

Another respondent added: *“Independent learning means learning individually, trying individually, and maintaining individual willingness to learn.”* From all of the answers above, it can be concluded that independent learning is seen as an individual activity done in different ways based on students’ willingness to learn and this is done without the presence of the teachers.

Independent learning as a self-evaluation activity

Independent learning is also considered as an activity for self-evaluation. Evaluation in this case highlights the measurement of

personal ability in mastering English. The respondents perceived that: *“Independent learning is the learning done by individuals to understand one’s own ability, how far one masters the language.”* Independent learning is also seen as an activity to analyze one’s learning needs: *“In my opinion, independent learning is our own way to learn something. By doing that we can know our own learning needs.”* The answers above describe the students’ perceptions that independent learning serves as a tool to measure one’s ability and a tool to analyze the learning needs of the students.

Independent learning as a self-reflection activity

Independent learning is also considered as a reflection activity by the respondents. This activity is described in the following statement: *“I think independent learning is a learning activity done in which the learners have to know the direction or objective of the learning and they have to be aware of the reasons why they are learning.”* The answer above suggests that in independent learning students have the awareness of why they learn. In addition, a student described his opinion: *“For me independent learning is our way to learn independently and by doing it we can know what we need.”* This answer shows that students can reflect what they need in learning English.

From the findings and discussion above, it is clear that the concept of independent learning is perceived and practiced differently. This is similar to what Benson and Voller (1997) have described when discussing the various uses of the term “autonomy”. This is interesting as all students perceived independent learning as important but then in practice, independent learning is reflected in several different forms of learning activities.

CONCLUSION

Referring to the findings above, the students basically had positive perceptions

about the importance of independent learning. Even though the students perceived the meaning of independent learning differently, all respondents reported that they perceived the benefits of doing the independent learning to support their English mastery. In this way, it can be concluded that students felt the advantages of learning the language independently without the presence of the teacher. Based on the findings of the study, the writers would like to suggest that independent learning activities should be assigned to English Education Department students especially to help the students in mastering English.

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