

# COMBINING STUDENT-BASED LEARNING ACTIVITIES WITH TEACHER'S ENCOURAGEMENTS TO FOSTER LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ELT

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## ABSTRACT

*Teacher's domination and authority used to prevail the traditional language teaching is now left and replaced by more acceptable concept of teaching. This concept emphasizes on developing the sense of learners' responsibility, independence, or autonomy, for better learning outcome. Autonomous language learners are those assumed to have greater responsibility on their own learning for their own needs. A series of guided practice through a step-by-step manner is needed in order that students can be possibly trained to be autonomous, independent learners. This paper discusses learning activities created and designed by the students combined with teacher's encouragements to foster learner autonomy. Some theories and previous studies on learner autonomy are analyzed to support the discussion. It is believed that the combination between the two important aspects in autonomous language learning will strengthen the efforts of promoting learner autonomy in ELT.*

**Keywords:** *English language teaching, learner autonomy, autonomous learning, learning activities, teacher's encouragement*

## Introduction

Globalization has affected many changes of almost the whole aspects in the world. English as the main means of communication in many sectors is taking a part in it especially in teaching and learning process. The recent issues in English language teaching shift from teacher-centered approach to student-centered one as a response to the students' need of mastering English through individual learning efforts. This notion is not only realized by the efforts of changing teacher's ways of teaching but also providing self-access facilities or centers in which both paper-based materials and computer based materials are made available for students to use in order to study English by themselves (Jarvis, 2012). Students who are able to self-access those materials suit to their own needs and play the kind of active role in their own learning could be said to be autonomous (Nunan, 2003). This condition creates ideas among the teachers how to develop

their students to be learner autonomy.

Autonomy in language learning has become an interesting issue to discuss. Benson (2006) notifies that there has been a remarkable growth of interest in the theory and practice of autonomy in language teaching and learning in recent years. Conferences have been held in many countries, such as at the AILA 2005 World Congress, no less than 36 contributions from 18 countries were listed under the heading of autonomy. Indeed, it indicates that the tendency in language instructional practices have been changing towards developing students' potency in independent or autonomous learning.

Becoming autonomous learners is not so easy since students used to learn mostly under the teacher control. The teacher lectures and speaks during most of the class time whilst students are required to listen to them and busy taking notes. Yahong (2009) found the similar condition that her students were accustomed to listening to the teacher in the classroom and waited to be told what to do with their learning. She felt that it was necessary to arouse their

awareness of learning being one's own responsibility through an action research. In her research, she put herself as facilitator to develop the students' awareness through encouragement, persuasion and independent learning observations. She discovered something new and different from the traditional perspective, i.e. students could be more creative in learning if they have had a chance to show and manage themselves.

Other diverse ways can be administered to develop students' skill in managing their own learning, i.e. arousing their motivation and self-confidence to design their own learning activities. In addition, letting the students to plan and manage their own learning can help the teacher getting rid of monotonous condition and reducing his domination in the classroom. Having this mind, this paper discusses other alternatives of promoting or fostering students to be more independent or autonomous in ELT. It is believed that student-based learning activities combined by teacher's encouragements could be as effective ways to foster learner autonomy.

### **Autonomy in Language Learning**

The term 'learner autonomy' has been a trending word in foreign language education in the past decades, especially in relation to lifelong learning skills. It transforms old practices in the language classroom. Some experts may have different interpretation in understanding the concept of autonomy. Dickinson (1987) defines that autonomy is a situation in which learners are totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with their learning and the implementation of those decisions. Similarly, in the context of adult learners, Holec (1988) defines autonomy as taking charge of one's own learning, that is then elaborated as to have responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning, namely determining the objectives, defining the contents and progresses, selecting methods and techniques to use, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking and, evaluating the achievement that has been acquired. Thus, autonomy in language learning is understood as learners taking more control over the purposes for which they learn languages and the ways how they learn them.

Learner autonomy is regarded as interesting phenomena in ELT and there has been a remarkable growth of interest in

conducting studies on this area. Some topics of the studies viewed from different perspectives can be high-lighted such as, among others, autonomous learning connected with motivation (Tatarko, 2012; Ayan, 2015; Wachob, 2014; Fukuda et al., 2011); autonomous learning connected with EFL teaching and learning (Lu, 2012; Chiu, 2012); and autonomous language learning connected with the use of technologies (Warschauer & Liaw, 2011; Darasawang, 2010; Vakhnenko, 2014). Besides, there are still a number of hundreds or even thousands of similar studies connected with different language teaching and learning aspects are still very relevant for English teachers to read.

### **What makes learners autonomous?**

The decision to be an autonomous learner must be based on certain reasons or conditions. It is believed that autonomous learning is more practical and allows more freedom (Benson, 2001). Autonomous learners have the benefit of exposing themselves to different types of material and the amount of input they receive. They are free to decide what material to use and how to use that for their benefit. Since there is less teacher's control, in speaking class for example, the students may expose themselves to different types of accents, pronunciations, and cultures until they find one they feel comfortable with. Furthermore, with today's technology development it will be quite easy for them to learn a foreign or second language without other assistance.

There are more principal factors that enable learners to be autonomous. Benson (2011) claims that there are three factors that enable learners to be autonomous: (a) language learners naturally tend to take control of their learning, (b) learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it, and (c) autonomous language learning is more effective than non autonomous language learning. These factors are visible and valuable to be used as a basis of fostering learner autonomy.

Little (1994) states that autonomy does not arise spontaneously from within the learner, it needs to develop it through some ways. One of practical ways that enable ELT teachers to foster learner autonomy is by combining teacher's encouragements and

learning activities designed and administered by the students themselves. It based on the idea that students can be more successful if they are given a chance to design and control their own learning (Benson, 2011), but they still need to be encouraged in order that they can be motivated to be more creative in performing their own learning (Kavaliauskiene, 2002).

### Teacher's encouragements

Learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it (Benson, 2011). It means that the learners have a potency to be autonomous by developing the skill 'how to learn' even though it needs a slow process and can only be perfected in a step-by-step manner (Kavaliauskiene, 2002). This condition stimulates teachers to find practical ways to develop their potential as autonomous language learners so that they can learn and appreciate the language, and at the same time, sustain their interest in the language learning process (Ismail and Masdinah, 2012).

Basically, autonomy is not self-instruction/ learning without a teacher or it does not mean that intervention or initiative on the part of a teacher is banned (Esch, 1996). The teacher presence is still required. Thus, developing learners' autonomous skill does not mean leaving the teacher's role in the classroom, but the teachers still need to encourage the students to have attitudes and desire to create activities that interest them.

Encouragement is very important to arouse students' psychological factor. Mullener et.al. (2011) define encouragement as a process whereby one focuses on an individual's resources in order to build that person's self-esteem, self-confidence and feelings of worth. It involves focusing on any resource that can be turned into an asset or strength. In their research investigated about encouragement behaviors among student teachers, Mullener et al. (2011) reported that student teachers in all grade level often engaged in encouraging behaviors and having encouraging attitudes with their students, i.e. they had more motivation, demonstrated empathy, expressed concerns, recognized the differences between students and conveyed confidence in students. It shows that encouragement behaviors as a part of important psychological aspects should be

owned by teachers, even if they are being in a training time to be a teacher.

Encouraging students to be self-confidence in learning cannot be done in once time. Din kemyer and Dreikurs (2000) say that humans need encouragement like a plant needs water that is supplied sufficiently and continuously. Similarly, students will feel confident to perform their own learning if they are encouraged by using motivating words or wise instructions in a right way. Regarding encouragements can help students to have skill of 'how to learn' (Yahong, 2009), Kavaliauskiene (2002) recommends teachers to encourage the learners in three ways:

- a) Learners need to become aware of the ways they learn best, which involves their learning styles and strategies. It commonly takes time for learners to find out what are the most effective techniques and activities for each person;
- b) Learners have to change their passive attitude to learning to a more active attitude. For example, learners have to become less dependent on the teacher and take charge of their own learning. Teacher's role is to involve students in search for interesting materials, e.g. surfing the Internet, or finding pen friends on the Internet, taking part in competitions, chat-clubs, encouraging to read English books, newspapers, magazines, etc. ; and
- c) Learners have to be given a chance to gain experience in 'swapping places' with a teacher. It means that the teacher should change the traditional role of teaching, develop the art of negotiation, emphasize the importance of self-assessment, etc. This involves tasks and activities designed and administered by the learners themselves.

The last recommendation seems effective to promote learner autonomy by motivating students to involve learning activities with various materials they think suit for themselves. Thang (as cited in Ismail and Masdinah, 2012) states that the most important concern in the training for such autonomous skills is that the learners display desires and initiatives to think for themselves.

### Student-based learning activities

In autonomous learning, there is a shift in focus from the teacher to the learner, from exclusive focus on how to improve teaching to an inclusive concern for how individual learners go through their learning (Little, 2002). To respond to that existing situation, Brajcich (2000) suggests teachers should be smart to find some practical ways to help learners become autonomous. One way of helping learners become autonomous is by giving a chance to the learners to gain experience in 'swapping places' with a teacher, which means changing the traditional role of a teacher (Kavaliauskiene, 2002). This statement implies that the common instructional tasks or learning activities commonly instructed or given by the teachers are now reversed, the activities should be initiated by the students. The diversity of tasks and activities designed and administered by the students themselves may cover grammar games, written work, audio-and video-recordings, news items, translation, or any other learning activities that interest learners. The learning activities can be performed in the classroom or beyond the classroom.

Performing learning activities self-designed and chosen by the learners can arouse their learning motivation. However, when learning happens in the classroom, the students should follow stages suggested by the teachers to help learners to manage their own learning. Reinders (2010) proposes the following stages as a teacher guideline helping students in managing their own learning:

1. Identifying needs: carry out a needs analysis with students and link these needs with classroom activities.
2. Setting goals: discuss and help learners identify and set realistic learning goals. Planning learning: include learners in decisions on what to learn and pacing of lesson
3. Selecting resources: provide the opportunity for learners to bring in authentic resources to share and learn with the rest of the class. Selecting learning strategies: incorporate strategy instruction with classroom activities and allow time for learners to discuss and reflect on their strategy use.
4. Practice: offer choice, for example, in the types of homework tasks to complete so

that they are using language in ways that are relevant to them.

5. Monitoring progress: students can record, and reflect on, their learning experiences in a learning diary which can be shared with other members of the class or used as private dialogue between teacher and student.
6. Assessment and revision: provide alternate forms of assessment and reflection activities such as language checklists and self and peer assessment worksheets/ activities.

The guideline above is important as it encourages good practices for learning activities performed by the students. It also reflects a combination between two important aspects of language learning that is seen as essential to the development of learner autonomy in ELT.

### Conclusion

Autonomy is a process that enables learners to be responsible for their own learning through strategies and techniques applied in the learning process in time. Fostering students to be autonomous in learning becomes a part of ELT teachers' task. Therefore, teachers should be patient and creative to help our learners become autonomous learners as it does not happen overnight. As students tend to be pleasure performers their own learning using activities planned and managed by themselves, teachers just need to encourage the students to maintain their motivation and be more creative in finding the way of learning with learning materials that interest them.

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