

HOW TO DEVELOP EFL LEARNERS' AUTONOMOUS LEARNING SKILL: THE ROLE OF WEB-BASED LEARNING

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Received: October 9, 2020

Revised: October 20, 2020

Accepted: November 10, 2020

ABSTRACT

The present research is intended to investigate the autonomous learners reliance on the web-based sources of material. Nowadays English class is not the only place to learn English. It is only one place amongst multitude of opportunities for using the target language. what the students learn from the teacher and what the students learn from the web-based learning of materials will be discussed in this study. A qualitative descriptive research were conducted to answer the research questions and obtain a better understanding of the complexities of the issues under investigation. This methodology best facilitates the construction of detailed, in-depth understanding of the learning journey of the autonomous learners. How they construct the knowledge they got from the teacher (in-class learning) and web-based sources of material (out-of-class learning). The study reveals that students learn four points from the teacher which are (1) recognizing the concrete rules of the language, (2) acknowledging the level of difficulties in language learning, (3) practicing the knowledge and (4) building the social skills. They learn two points from the web-based sources of material that are (1) acknowledging the potential of web-based sources of material and (2) having the effective judgment and learning about the western culture due to the authenticity of the language. The teacher and the web-based sources of material should be a partner and complement each other. The teacher integrates the web-based sources of materials in the learning process to effectively teach the language. However, it is not the web-based sources of material which can make any activities a fruitful and thoughtful language learning experience for the students but it is the teachers themselves. It really depends on how the teacher selects the materials, designs the tasks and activities, integrates the media with other aspects of curriculum and guides the students during the learning process.

Keywords: Autonomous learner, Web-based sources, In-class learning, Out-of class learning

INTRODUCTION

The notion of Autonomous Learning has been introduced as a worthy goal achieved in education circle since three decades ago. It has lead the education heading into a new era, the transformation from teacher as the main focus to students as the center of the classroom, in which students must no longer sit and listen; teachers must not stand up there teaching all the time (Page, 1992; Tamer, 2013;). One of the most cited definitions by Holec (1981) describes autonomy as “the ability of students to take responsibility of their own learning (in Reinders and White, 2016). In the 90s, Little (1991) greatly contributed to the field by adding the distinct psychological dimension and Benson (2001) more recently also added the political dimension. The former means the learning process will be more effective if the learners integrate knowledge within a personal framework

and the latter means the learners have self-government capacity, they can rule themselves. Thus, we can conclude that at the end it is expected that autonomous learning will create autonomous learners who have clear view of the learning journey such as the aim of learning process, the way of learning process, the choice of materials and the way of evaluation and reflection. Even it will create autonomous individual who are able and willing to think independently and act responsibly in their lifetime, having ability to deliberate them selves.

It is undeniable that the journey of creating autonomous learners is long and arduous since it is not easy to move from teacher-centered classroom towards student-centered classroom. The challenges are varied such as lack of exposure; willingness and readiness from both the teachers and the students; and the environmental support (Humphrays & Wyatt, 2014). First, related to the exposure, whether EFL teachers should depend on course book or their material has always been an issues to discuss (Allen, 2015), autonomous learning environment should employ the varied authentic materials. Second, teachers should be ready preparing more than two plans as the students response are unpredictable and students also need to take hold of the whole learning process. It is neither the teacher's faults nor the course book's fault nor anybody else's fault when they do not achieve anything during class. It is them who should fully being responsible of their learning process. Thus, they must show willingness to involve fully and participate actively in the learning process from the very beginning (determining learning goals) till the last process (evaluating and reflecting). Finally, environmental support means the school, the teachers and parents provide learner media or tools needed such as self-access center, a library, private study places, pronunciation seminars and a teacher-staffed center.

However, the debut of Language Learning and Technology in the mid-1990s has made autonomous learning is more achievable and more promising topic (Reinders & White, 2016;). The number of academic journal articles and books devoted to this topic increases significantly all over the world. Researchers have been investigating the topic from plethora of differentviews. A group of researchers have searched regarding the relationship between learner autonomy and their English proficiency. For example Denecamp (2017), revealed that learners autonomy and students' English proficiency level were positively in line

one another. On the contrary, Addin (2016) found that there was no significant difference between students' reading comprehension with the high autonomy level and those with the low autonomy level. She went further by explaining that there was no interaction between the reading strategy, cognitive style and autonomous learning style. Razeq (2014) explains this condition could occur in the area where the students had been experiencing the spoon-feeding instructional practice for a long time.

Other researchers discovered that portfolios, independent diary, vocabulary notebooks, vlogging, blogging, log listening and targeted comic books are the effective ways in promoting autonomous learning, whether they are offline or online (Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Bhattachary & Chauhan, 2010;) It is undeniable that digital technologies become a part of our daily life and the current generation of students are in the group of "digital native". Learners nowadays have cheap and easy access of internet connections and Wi-Fi. They send emails, shop stuffs, post in social media and download songs/ movies mostly in English, anytime and anywhere. In fact, young people spend more time in virtual world rather than in real world these days (Toffoly & Socket, 2015). Thus, nowadays global phenomena is a great potential for promoting autonomous learning since students are overwhelmed by online-English-language resources.

METHOD

In order to answer the research problems and obtain a better understanding of the complexities of the issues under investigation, a qualitative descriptive research will be conducted. This methodology best builds the construction of detailed, in-depth understanding of what is to be learned, and because this kind of study research can deal with the complexity of real-life conditions.

This research was conducted in Malang. Five senior high school students who ranged in age from 16-18 years old participated in this study. They all had between 10-12 years of learning English experience in various settings (formal and informal) and recently had learn English through websites either it was based on their teacher recommendation or it was coming from their own preference. Their proficiency level was fairly homogeneous. Four students are currently

studying in two different state schools in Malang and one of them is studying in an international private school in Malang. The subjects were chosen purposively based on the recommendation of their English teacher.

FINDINGS

Although the talks over learner autonomy has risen significantly in the past few decades, it seems there still some disagreement on the definition of the concept. It is showed in different ways by different people (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Ikonen (2013) explains further that the reason of disagreement found on the details of learner autonomy is due to the remarkably complex nature of the concept. The concept do not discuss about measurable behaviors but it talks about the learner potential or ability which is not observable. Nevertheless, the concept can, and will be defined in more details.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) defined classroom instruction as the interactive and effective process whereby learning opportunities are provided. It suits nowadays current issue in educational circle, learner-centered methods and approach. Students and teachers collaboratively work to create learning opportunities. In this collaborative nature, students and teachers are actively involved. We will never see teachers stand up all day long explaining; students all day long sit and expect to be taught. The successful classroom considers both teachers and learners to be the most influential player in managing the class.

DISCUSSION

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EFL Classroom is the place where students learn English while they are not speaking English as their first or second language. They barely use English in

daily activities. They only can get information about English and the culture via TV, newspaper, magazine or radio. Teachers perhaps the only language exposure they have. Thus, in this present study, the researcher will focus on the strategy that can be applied in order to improve students' language skills proficiency.

Since technologies become part of our daily life, it is natural that the learning subjects employ it in the language instruction. Toffoly and Soket (2015) states that students nowadays easily immerse themselves into English. Even, they spend their time online more than offline. They conduct all online activities mostly in English; downloading songs or movies; shopping stuffs; writing emails; watching tv series online; and posting pictures, stories or videos related to their life; and playing games (Trinder, 2017). Hence, it is such a great potential for English teacher to promote autonomous learning using web-based learning media. It will help students to perceive technology not only as the entertaining/communication devices but also as valuable learning tools (Dogority & Pange, 2014).

However, in ELT, especially in promoting autonomous learning, playing with gadget alone does not guarantee the students are promoting their learning autonomy (Hamilton, 2013). Learner needs to, again, consider the steps; planning, monitoring, problem solving and evaluating. This is where the teachers play the main role as a facilitator; selecting a range of media that can be chosen by students; providing the reasons or consideration; following the students' progress; and directing them to what they should focus on.

The benefits of employing technologies in English Language Teaching environment are enormous. Firstly, it is accessible. Both teachers and students can access it via communication devices such as smart phones and tablets, or computer, with no time and location constraint (Polomo-Duarte, Berns, 2015). Students can study both inside and outside the classroom. Thus, web-based learning is getting popular these days since it solves several problems in academic circle, such as lack of time allotment, the difficulties in managing the large class, and the distanced-class.

Secondly, it develops a sense of community. Brown & Lee (2015) explains that language learners can be viewed to various form of the learning process using technology. In this case, students have the opportunities to communicate not in the

real world only but also in the virtual world by using technology tools such as Instagram, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter and so on. Previously, the students only use the social media as a place to express themselves. Now, by integrating it in ELT classroom activities, they can learn, engaging one another in the media that they are familiar with. It can be a place where the collaborative learning will take place to be promoted. Students will consider this activity as a familiar, fun and relatively new and interesting. Thus, one of essential benefit using web-based learning tools is to facilitate the students with more opportunities of the target language in the class and beyond it.

Thirdly, it provides an access to authentic materials. Allen (2015) states that the position of the course book package is being debatable since the emergence of the interactive and free available electronic learning resources. Truly, in the internet the teachers can find thousands different materials to be taught in English class, in form of stories, podcasts or audiovisual videos and they are available from the beginner level, intermediate level and advance level. So, instead of using what is available in the course book only, the teachers can creatively create or modify their own lesson plan with the most suitable method and materials for the students.

Lastly, it increases students' language skills. Dogoriti and Pange (2014) found that the utilization of web-based tools changed the students' perspective on the role of internet technology in the development of their English language learning. Most students perceive that it enhanced the learning process and helped them to have better performance in English. Other researchers also said the similar things, one of them is Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) who stated that the students did not feel that they were doing something "extra" that was outside the regular curriculum. It is mainly due to the entertaining side of internet. Students may do anything; downloading songs or movies, chatting with other friends, writing through bloggs, playing with the online platform and so on. They are learning but also playing. These are the effective and interactive way of learning.

Some strategies in employing web-based sources in EFL classroom is often applied by the teacher. Inside the class, they may use podcasts, short stories, videos and songs. It has been researched by the scholars focusing on the effectiveness of these media in promoting learner autonomy and increasing

learners' language proficiency. It depends on the skills that the researchers would like to focus on. If it relates to listening, then podcast is the best way (Hagelheimer & O'Brian, 2009). It is a series of digital audio file that is available on the internet. The user can download and listen to it anywhere and anytime. The role of the teacher here is to make sure this activity has the follow-up activities. Thus, the students will not be busy by themselves.

One of the most popular web-based medium among educators nowadays is blogs. It is also known as online diaries in which people can write down all the thoughts, reflections, or anything they want and the reader can leave comments on what they have read. It helps both the teachers and the students. For teachers, it assists them following students' progress without anytime and place constraints, providing sources of valuable information, and evaluating student's understanding (Al-Qallaf & Al-Mutairi, 2016). For students, it helps them to provide a media which is fun, accessible, entertaining and up-to-date. Thus, it will keep them motivated to perceive writing not as a burden but as a "me-time" when they can show who they really are. In terms of interaction, it can be useful for students and also teachers give one another comment as feedback, motivation and suggestions and it becomes authentic interaction within learning communities (Ding, 2008).

Facebook also come up as the influential recommended tools in learning a language. Facebook demonstrated a very strong acknowledgement and endorsement of the use of social media as an effective learning tool by female Saudi undergraduates in a sex-segregated educational system. It helps them to promote interactivity, activate collaborative learning and engagement (Alseid, 2017). According to this, Thawabieh & Rfou (2015) also states that faculties in Tafila Technical. University should encourage students to invest their use of Facebook in areas that support their academic performance. Thus the students do not only perceive it as entertaining media but also as beneficial tool in improving their language proficiency. Instead of these two, there are various web-based learning tools employed by the teachers, researchers or teacher-researchers such as vlog, speakapps, log listening, google docs, language learning apps (duolingo, iKnowl and busuu).

Although the benefits of web-based learning, teachers and students also face difficulties to some extent. Hamilton (2013) writes about the Autonomy in *Volume 9 (2) November 2020, page 417-427*
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language learning (EFL/ESL) online states that technology appears to offer great potential for autonomous learning and learner autonomy. Of course, in reality things are never as straightforward as we would hope. There are some obstacles in applying the learning process using websites.

First, it is not easy to operationalize. Teachers face difficulties in implementing web-based learning in their class due to the complexity of it. There are so many available free resources in the internet, however the way to choose it needs much effort. Iver (2003) also argues if the teacher never get the appropriate training for using or following the trend in language teaching with technology era, they will end up as the previous teacher, using technology only for replacing the whiteboard with the screen. No more. Thus, the solution in getting rid of this kind of problem is the teacher needs to observe their students' characteristic first, their learning preference and their students' needs. After knowing them, the teacher can determine the best material for the students because the beginner level in internet sometimes does not match our students' beginner level. Again, it could be too easy or too complicated.

Second, it is hard to evaluate. We agree that autonomous learning is the ability and innate capacity that resides in each person. That is why it is not measurable or observable. Little do we know that learning using web-based learning to some extent also is not observable. Blogging is fine since it is the writing activity, the teacher may evaluate the final product which are in the students' blog. However, another activity such as learning apps that consists of drilling process and quizzes cannot be observed by the teacher. Hamilton again argue that drills and quizzes do not be autonomous learning simply because you do them on your mobile phone. It does not encourage students' learning awareness. Thus, to minimize this, the teacher can choose the application that is observable such as blogs, vlogs and using observable tools too such as edmodo. However, if the students really immerse in such application, the teacher can construct particular evaluation rubric for that.

The last obstacles faced by the teacher is the matter of connection. Even though some researchers believed that nowadays wifi and internet connection is ubiquitous and affordable, we cannot deny this sometimes happen in particular places. There is no internet connections. Not only is it faced by those who live in

remote area, but also for them who live in the city, technical problems sometimes occur everywhere. The solution lies in the creativity of the teachers. They can download the apps which is available both online and offline or they may use other strategies in teaching. The main actor in learning process is the teacher not the internet connection. Technologies only assists the teachers to make huge benefit from the web-based sources of learning material for students to learn effectively and interactively (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

CONCLUSION

These days, people are overwhelmed by the technologies because it is getting easier, more affordable for both teachers and students to have internet and wi-fi connections. Students have become digital native and they also need to engage with digital literacy. It is not a threat, but a great potential to promote students learning autonomy. New technologies provide more tools, more media, more applications that can make learning process become more interactive and effective. However, autonomous learning will not be able to succeed without students' learning awareness and teachers' effectiveness on learning process. Thus, the teachers and students should be in hand-in-hand relation to promote autonomous learning using web-based learning tools.

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How to Cite (APA style):

Hafid, Hilda. (2020, November). How to Develop EFL Learners' Autonomous Learning Skill: The Role of Web-Based Learning. *Exposure: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris*, 9(2), 417-427. Retrieved from <https://journal.unismuh.ac.id/index.php/exposure/article/view/4372>