

Learning Autonomy: A Way to Improve English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia

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Abstract: In Indonesia English is the first foreign language and taught as a compulsory subject in secondary and tertiary education with the objective primarily to provide the students with the ability to read English textbooks on their related fields. In spite of the efforts made to improve the teaching especially in secondary school, the result is, so far, still unsatisfactory. This article argues that the implementation of learning autonomy could possibly be a way to improve ELT in Indonesia.

Key words: learning strategies, learning autonomy, ELT in Indonesia

In Indonesia English is the first foreign language and taught as a compulsory subject in secondary and tertiary education with the objective primarily to provide the students with the ability to read English textbooks on their related fields. In spite of the efforts made to improve the teaching especially in secondary school, the result is, so far, still unsatisfactory (Sadtono, 1976; Djiwandono, 1983; Danifil 1985). In S2 program the students' mastery of the English language is found out to be a hindrance for the students to finish their study in due time (Kasbolah and Sukarnyana, 1993). This condition could possibly be improved by means of learning autonomy, "a learning situation which implies a capacity to exercise control over one's own learning" (Nunan, 2000:1).

This paper deals with learning autonomy as one ways to improve the teaching of English in Indonesia. The topics of discussion are arranged as

follows: (1) student's empowerment, (2) the concept of learner strategies, (3) features of language learning strategies, (4) learner autonomy in second language teaching, (5) learning autonomy in the Indonesian ELT context, and (6) conclusion.

STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

According to Brown (1991:248) the term "empowerment" was initially popularized by Freire (1970) who said that teachers had to start a mission of liberating those who are imprisoned by the forms of education that attempt to pour knowledge into the supposedly passive, empty vessel of students' mind, to be the agents who are commissioned to empower learners--politically, economically, socially, and morally-- to be critical thinkers, equipped with problem-solving strategies, ready to challenge those forces in society that would keep them passive.

What Freire has said seems to be more concerned with education change in general. However, Brown (1991:249) states that our language classes could actually begin the process of change. To start with, Clark (1989) as quoted by Brown (1991:249) defines empowerment as "the process by which individuals gain a measure of control over their lives". This definition suggests a situation in which students are more active and independent in a classroom. In line with this active and independent role of the students, Dickinson (1992:3) asserts that there is growing evidence that success in language learning (and in other subjects) is related to the learners having an active, independent involvement with language learning. Dickinson further calls the learners' active and independent involvement in learning-learning autonomy. Autonomous learners, according to her, are not necessarily isolated or independent learners; they may well be found in conventional classrooms, but they can be distinguished from teacher-dependent learners in terms of several characteristics which are related to the ability of the learners to do the following things: (a) to identify what is being taught, that is, they are aware of the teacher's objective; (b) to state and follow-up their own purposes in addition to the teacher's, that is, they are able to formulate their own learning objective; (c) to select and implement appropriate learning strategies; (d) to monitor their own learning; and (e) to monitor and evaluate their own use of learning strategies.

In order to make such a learning process occur some important changes in teaching-learning process should be made. These changes are related especially to the classroom situation, the teacher role, and the student role.

The classroom situation which is formerly characterized to have a focus on product, authoritarian structures, pre-planned rigid curricula, measuring only performance, praising only 'correct' answers, and championing analysis, should be changed toward a class with a focus on process, egalitarian structures, flexible and open-ended curricula, gauging competence and potentials, encouraging calculated guessing, and valuing synthesis and intuition.

The second change is concerned with the teacher role. Oxford (1990:10) mentions that the role of a teacher should be changed from authoritative figure identified with the roles of a parent, instructor, director, manager, judge, leader, evaluator, and even doctor, who must "cure" the ignorance of the students to be a facilitative figure with the roles of a helper, guide, consultant, adviser, coordinator, idea person, diagnostician, and co-communicator.

The third important change is related to the student role. The students should be made more active rather than passive participants of teaching-learning process. This teaching learning process requires the teachers to guide their students to be able to do such things as identifying their individual learning objectives, learning needs, and learning problems, finding suitable learning materials to meet their objectives and needs, and looking for some ways to solve their learning problems. It also requires the teachers to guide their students to evaluate their learning and their learning strategies. These activities inevitably require the students to know learner strategies that best fit them individually and collectively. In conclusion, student empowerment is concerned with making the students more autonomous by teaching them learning strategies.

THE CONCEPT OF LEARNER STRATEGIES

Theoretically the discussion of how learners approach the task of learning a second language can be associated with a changing view on the nature of mind put forward by the theory and research in the field of cognitive science. Having undergone some up and down due to the methodo-

logical disputes, the study of cognitive science ultimately comes to some theoretical assumptions about human cognition (thinking in a broader sense) that serve as the basis to explain the learners' mental processes in approaching the learning task (Wenden, 1987: pp. 4-6). The most basic idea of these assumptions, according to Wenden, is that humans are processors of information. Roughly, this means that information comes in through our sense of receptors. At this time selected items of information are attended to, identified, and then moved into the short-term or working memory. In short-term memory a series of mental operations are applied to this information. Then, the changed or modified product is stored in long-term memory to be retrieved when it is needed. The changes brought about by these processes are referred to as 'organization of knowledge' or 'knowledge structures'. The techniques that are actually used to manipulate the incoming information and later to retrieve what has been stored are referred to as 'cognitive strategies'.

It should be clear, by now, that learning is basically information processing, and as such, it involves the structuring of knowledge in long-term memory, as well as manipulating the incoming information, and, later retrieving what has been stored. This means that when one is learning he/she is doing some mental activities involving some cognitive strategies.

In term of language learning, the term 'learner strategies' covers three aspects: first, learning strategies refer to language learning behaviors the learners employ to regulate their learning of a second language. Second, the term 'learner strategies' also refers to what the learners know about the strategies used (their strategies knowledge), and finally, the term 'learner strategies' also refers to what the learners know about aspects of their language learning other than the strategies they use. Such aspects are, for example, personal factors that facilitate second language learning, and general principles of how to learn a second language successfully (Wenden, 1987:6).

FEATURES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Oxford (1990:11) proposes some important features of language learning strategies. The features are problem orientation, action basis, involvement beyond just cognition, ability to support learning directly or

indirectly, degree of observability, level of consciousness, teachability, flexibility, and influences on strategies choice.

Referring to *Problem orientation*, Oxford sees that language learning strategies are tools. They are used because there are problems to solve, task to accomplish, an objective to meet, or goal to attain. Language learning strategies are also identified as *action basis* which means that they are specific actions or behaviors accomplished by students to enhance their learning. They are not restricted to cognitive functions, but also metacognitive, affective, social, and other functions as well. This feature is referred to as *involvement beyond just cognition*.

Ability to support learning directly or indirectly is another feature of language learning strategies. It refers to the idea that some learning strategies, the direct strategies, involve direct learning and use of the subject matter, in this case a new language to be learned. Others, such as meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies contribute indirectly and powerfully to learning. These strategies are called indirect strategies. Language learning strategies are also seen to have the characteristic called *Degree of observability*. This feature refers to the fact that some learning strategies such as those aspects of cooperating with others are readily seen to the human eyes, others such as the acts of making mental association, and an important memory strategy, however, cannot be seen.

Other features of language learning strategies cannot be neglected are *level of consciousness*, *teachability*, *flexibility*, and *influences on strategy choice*. *Level of consciousness* refers the characteristic that learning strategies may be used intentionally and thus reflects conscious effort. After a certain amount of practice, however, the use of strategies, like other skills or behaviors, can become automatic, and so reflects unconscious effort by the learners. *Teachability*, denotes the idea that unlike learning style and personality traits which are very difficult to change, learning strategies are easier to teach and modify. This can be done through strategy training, an essential part of language education. Language learning strategies are flexible; that is, they are not always found in predictable sequence or in precise patterns. The pattern is subjected to individuality. This fact denotes the feature of *flexibility*. And finally, the feature of *influences on strategy choice* indicates that the choice of a strategy being used by the learner is influenced by many different factors such

as sex, age, degree of awareness, ethnicity, task requirement, stage of learning, general learning style, personality traits, motivation level, teacher expectation, and purpose for learning the language.

LEARNER AUTONOMY IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

One of the important goals of research on learner strategies is to develop a sound characteristic of an autonomous language learner. The idea derived from such research is meant to be a guide in the development of learner training activities so that learners become not only more efficient at learning and using their second language but also more capable of self-directing these endeavors. Although the idea of learner-centered language teaching and learning has been highlighted since early seventies, an explicit commitment to autonomous learning or self-directed learning in the field of second language teaching and learning is relatively new (Wenden, 1987:8).

The claim on the importance of autonomous learning can be supported both from the research work in education, including language learning, and through reasoned argument. Dickinson (1992:3) states that Wang and Perverly (1986) reviewed findings of strategies research (in subjects other than language learning) and concluded that

“... one feature is salient across the research from the various perspectives. Effective learners are characterized in the research literature as being cognitively and affectively active in the learning process. They are seen as being capable of learning independently and deliberately through identification, formulation and restructuring of goals, use of strategy planning, development and execution of plans, and engagement of self-monitoring.” (p.383)

Similar findings have been suggested for language learning. Experts such as Rubin (1975), Stern (1975), and Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, and Todesco (1978) found out that good learners have an active involvement with language learning, that they have clear ideas about the best ways for them to go about language learning, and that they set up their own learning objectives in addition to the teacher's objectives. Other studies such as the ones by Ellis and Sinclair (1989) and Dickinson (1987) show that language learning is best facilitated by the development of greater independ-

ence on the part of the learner involving the learner in accepting a greater share of responsibility for his/her own learning. In line with these studies, Oxford (1986:30-31) states that differences in achievement in second language learning are often related to differences in strategies used. Sadtono (1997a:55) claims that there is the need to prepare the students to become autonomous learners, because, according to him, to a large extent success in language learning depends on the learners.

Another argument in support of learning autonomy is an a priori reasoning. Bruner (1966) as quoted by Dickinson (1992:4) argues “Instruction is a temporary state that has as its objective to make the learner or problem solver self-sufficient... otherwise the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is contingent upon the perpetual presence of the teacher.” In other words, Bruner says that the outcome of instruction must logically be to make the learner self-sufficient, which means that the learner is able to learn by himself/herself, if not, the product would be a learner who can only learn with the help of a teacher.

There are occasions in which learners work with the teacher's companion. Within twenty four hours a day, however, most of the time the students practically work alone or with their friends. This does not necessarily hinder their learning if they are provided with learner strategies to cope with their learning problems effectively and efficiently. Such a condition clearly indicates that the teaching of learner strategies is inevitable if the students are to be successful in their learning, and thus become autonomous learners.

Furthermore, in the era of globalization, we notice the world changes so rapidly due to the rapid development of technology. In such a fast changing world, survival can only be made possible if one is able to adapt himself/herself to the change. Consequently, an educated individual needs to have the ability to continue learning in order to cope with the changing circumstances. Realizing this condition, Lange (1989) as quoted by Dickinson (1992:4) says that among the characteristics of the future technological society two things are important related to teaching and learning process: (1) Lifelong learning must be a construct in every teacher development program, and (2) Experimentation, risk taking, autonomy, and flexibility must be key elements in the development of model of schooling that places responsibility for learning on the students, giving them free-

dom to try, test, innovate and create.

Twenty years before Lange, Rogers (1969), according to Dickinson (1992:4), argues that learning to be independent is learning how to learn. This is essential in the era of globalization in which the world is changing so fast. The statement is quoted as follows:

“The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security” (Rogers, 1969 quoted by Dickinson, 1992: 4).

So far, it has been argued that learning autonomy as an outcome of learner empowerment is essential in education program in general, including language education. Further, it has also been clearly discussed that learner strategies are one of the essential steps toward learner empowerment. Thus learning autonomy can only be made possible if a language learner has already been equipped with learner strategies. It is then obvious that teaching the students learning strategies should be part of the teaching and learning process in any classroom activities, including a language class. The following section will discuss learning autonomy in the Indonesian ELT context examining whether it is possible or not.

LEARNING AUTONOMY IN THE INDONESIAN ELT CONTEXT

Many articles have been written related to ELT in Indonesia. Sadtono (1997), despite his shortage of data as he admits, manages to give a clear account on the development of ELT in Indonesia. According to him ELT is an old profession; but in Indonesia it is still relatively young. Now, he further says, ELT has become a big business all over the world. Unlike other businesses, ELT cannot be monopolized or cartelized. Thus the development of ELT in one place cannot be isolated from the others. To state clearly; the development of ELT in Indonesia cannot be separated from the development of ELT in other countries, especially the western countries such as the US and England. In terms of curriculum, Komaria (1998) gives a vivid sketch of its development not only in Junior and Senior High Schools but also in English Teaching Colleges. The development clearly reflects that the change of curriculum is always in accor-

dance with the world current approach of language teaching such as audio lingual approach in 1960s to 70, and communicative approach in 1980s to the present time.

Unlike Sadtono and Komaria, Huda (1999) discusses the teaching of English in Indonesia in relation to the era of globalization. In this era of globalization, he says, the need of English as a means of communication is undeniable. This is also true for us, Indonesian people, if we do not want to be left behind in both scientific and technological advancement. Unfortunately, the result of English teaching in Indonesia up to now is still unsatisfactory (Huda, 1999:8). This condition, according to Huda, is attributed to different factors such as teacher's competence, class size, time allotment, facilities, linguistic environment, and the national management.

To solve the problems, Huda (1997, 1999) has suggested to give priority to the teaching of English at university level. This is meant to build a critical mass which contains individuals who are potential to fight in the global competition. While this is done, he continues, the teaching of English in both elementary and high schools is maintained in its good condition.

Another solution could be the implementation of learning autonomy. Studies by Sadtono (1997b) and Diptoadi et al. (2002) indicate that successful Indonesian English foreign language (EFL) learners are to some degrees related to their being autonomous learners. They take control of their learning and use their own learning strategies to solve their learning problem in order to meet their own learning objectives.

The implementation of learning autonomy could be done by first, focusing our ELT researches on teaching learning strategies in order to describe learning-strategy models suitable to the Indonesian EFL learners, and then considering the model(s) to be the content of the English language teacher training curriculum in order to equip our potential teacher candidates with such knowledge to be further passed to the learners. The idea seems very simple. However it may turn out to be very difficult due to some reasons such as those related to financial and cultural problems. While financial problem may be easily solved, the cultural problems may not be so. Some particular problems related to culture are the fact that Indonesian are normally passive, introvert, and resist changes.

CONCLUSION

Student empowerment toward learning autonomy which has become one of the central issues in ELT since early seventies can be obtained by providing the students with knowledge of learner strategies. Some studies have indicated that successful language learners use strategic patterns different from those used by the unsuccessful ones. Yet, it is also found out that strategies are individual differences. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research in order to describe typical learning-strategy models which would be part of our English teacher training curriculum in order to provide the teacher candidates with knowledge of learner strategies to be further passed to the students to make them autonomous. In order to improve the teaching of English in Indonesia, in line with the need for English in the global era, developing learning autonomy is worth considering in spite of the problems that may be faced.

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