

TEACHERS' BELIEFS REGARDING LANGUAGE LEARNER AUTONOMY AND PRACTICES OF PROJECT-BASED EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF AN INDONESIAN EFL TEACHER

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Abstract: *Language learner autonomy can be defined as learning outside the classroom in which learners direct their own learning independently of teachers. One of the approaches supports learner autonomy is the project-based education. The project that the Indonesian EFL teacher (the participant of this study) assigned to her English class was an English drama performance. In the end of the course, her students had to perform the play. This project required active engagement of students' efforts over an extended period of time. This paper reveals the beliefs of the EFL teacher about learner autonomy. In addition, this study investigates the practices that the teacher used in enhancing autonomy. The findings are based on an analysis and interpretation of the data gathered from questionnaires and interviews. The results reveal the teacher's beliefs and suggest that preparing activities that promote language learner autonomy is essential for English teachers.*

Keywords: *EFL; language learner autonomy; project-based education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Besides relying on learners' differences in terms of their age, aptitude, personalities, learning styles, language levels, and motivations (Harmer, 2001), teachers should be able to promote learner autonomy (LA) for its implications for language teaching and learning. As being claimed by Camilleri Grima (2007) and Palfreyman (2003), learner autonomy improves the language learning quality and makes individuals ready for learning during their life. It is also argued that it helps learners to use learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom in a best way.

The advantages and the possibility of raising learner autonomy in language learning, particularly English as a Foreign Language, have been recognized by researchers and led to the three major pillar as follow (Little, 1991:1) students are involved in the decision-making to design learning which should be more focused and purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term; 2) teacher-centered educational structures should be minimized because it is the learner's responsibility for their learning process; and 3) learner autonomy is upheld in order to encourage students to be autonomous for their own learning,

that indirectly leads them to be responsible in other areas in their life, and as consequence, they will be a useful and more effective member of the society.

In addition, Benson (2009) vividly defines learner autonomy as a learner's willingness and ability to take responsibility, to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning with tasks that are constructed in negotiation with and support from the teacher. However, much has been written about the concept of autonomy in language learning and many focal points of learner autonomy have been investigated as intriguing phenomena in the field of SLA, there still exists so many definitions and interpretations of learner autonomy. While the literature has revealed a great number of definitions of learner autonomy, this lack of clarity has created some misconceptions that need to be dispersed. For teachers, to raise learner autonomy, they have to gain an understanding of the concept and be able to use strategies which are effective for triggering the development of learner autonomy. In addition, teachers must have a belief that learner autonomy is worth incorporating into their pedagogy (Nga, 2014), this case study is conducted with the aims to figure out how an EFL teacher perceives the notion of Learner Autonomy and its impacts in language learning and how she identifies the desirability and feasibility of implementing Learner Autonomy in the given context.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There have been numerous definitions of learner autonomy as noted by Benson (2006). For the purpose of the study, the one framed by Sinclair (2000) which includes 13 aspects of learner autonomy and has been well recognized by language teaching profession is provided as the following, they are: 1) autonomy is a construct of capacity; 2) autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning; 3) the capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate; 4) complete autonomy is an idealistic goal; 5) there are degrees of autonomy; 6) the degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable; 7) autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent; 8) developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process – i.e. conscious reflection and decision-making; 9) promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies; 10) autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom; 11) autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension; 12) the promotion of autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension; and 13) autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures.

As a point of fact, learner autonomy in educational institutions in Indonesia has not generally been included as a teaching learning objective (Lengkanawati: 2017). It is because

there are still many teachers who are not familiar with and having clear comprehension about learner autonomy (LA). The study undergone by Lengkanawati (2017) found that the participating teachers tended to maintain that autonomy should be inculcated among learners, and that the LA concept should not be misinterpreted as learning without a teacher. Regarding the choices and decisions that learners could make during the class, it was believed that learners' making choices about how they learned and what activities they did, and involving them to decide what and how to learn could promote autonomy among learners. Moreover, most teachers were found to have desire to implement LA principles in their teaching-learning contexts, although they identified that many of the LA principles were not that feasible to apply in their situation; however, many were considered as having insufficient feasibility. In this case, commitment is majorly necessary in inculcating LA principles as well as implementing them in the classroom setting.

Other studies related to teachers' beliefs towards learner autonomy had also been undertaken. In 2015, Salimi & Ansari investigated Iranian English teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. The results of the research that involved 35 English teachers showed that teachers are familiar with the concept of learner autonomy and believe that it has essential role in effective language learning. In the previous year, Borg & Al-Busaidi (2014) described a project about the beliefs and practices regarding learner autonomy (LA) held by English language teachers in a university language centre. A distinctive feature of this project was the manner in which professional development workshops for the teachers were informed by prior research about these teachers' perspectives on LA.

In line with these, Xu (2012) framed three teachers' beliefs in the language teaching-learning process. The first part clarifies the concept of teachers' beliefs, the second part illustrates three essential teachers' beliefs about learners, learning and teachers themselves, and their role in the language teaching-learning process, the third part is the conclusion, which is consistent with the concept of teachers' beliefs. Furthermore, Joshi (2011) carried out a survey of autonomous learning activities of the Master level students, majoring in English Education, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. It explored their perceptions on the roles of their own and their teachers' roles, and how it has been looked at from the teachers' viewpoint. Adopting a mixed methodological design and analyzing the data collected through questionnaire and semi-structured interview, it was found that the learners make a good practice of autonomous activities. They view their role as an important factor in learning. The teachers have also suggested the learners to be autonomous. The teachers as well as the learners were found highly positive towards autonomous learning.

Based on the background and the literature reviews, the following objectives for the current study are set up, they are:

1. To find out how the teacher perceives the notion of Learner Autonomy and its impacts in language learning;
2. To find out how the teacher identifies the desirability and feasibility of implementing Learner Autonomy in the given context.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This case study examined teacher' beliefs about learner autonomy dealing with the project-based learning applied in English as a foreign language class in a senior high school in Malang, East Java. The goal of such research was to investigate teacher's beliefs and behaviors in promoting learner autonomy, the desirability and feasibility that the teacher saw towards learner autonomy, her knowledge and experiences in teaching English as a foreign language to particular students (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

3.1. Setting

This current research was conducted in a Senior High School located in Malang, East Java. This was one of the fully funded schools in Indonesia under PuteraSampoerna Foundation (PSF), where the other three were based in Bogor, Bali and Palembang. These boarding schools organized by the foundation were well-known as Sampoerna Academy schools with the three-year scholarship program for senior high school students from low-income family with good academic and leadership performance. Besides implementing the National Curriculum, the schools carried International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) Cambridge Curriculum and provided students with leadership activities, such as Pathways to Success Programs, Community Service Programs, and Learning to Live Programs.

Particularly in Malang, it is known as Sampoerna Academy Malang (SA Malang). SA Malang affiliated with one of public senior high school in Malang, SMA Negeri 10 Malang, so that in this school there are two types of students: the regular fee-paying students who originally registered as SMA Negeri 10 Malang, and scholarship students under Sampoerna Academy Program coming from all over East Java who were strictly selected through series of tests. Every batch of this program consisted of 150 students divided into six classes. The teachers in this school were government employees (PNS) under Department of Education and Putera Sampoerna Foundation (PSF) teachers who were assigned to teach at SA Malang.

3.2. Participants

Dealing with the present study, an English teacher who was working under PSF was the participant. All the English teachers at school were native of Indonesia. Among the other English teachers, the selected teacher was the only master graduate. Besides teaching English using National Curriculum for grade 12 and IGCSE Cambridge Curriculum for grade 11, she was given responsibilities to be the coordinator of Pathways to Success Programs, Overseas University students' counselor, and supervisor of the school's newsletter. Having experiences in teaching English as a foreign language for more than a decade, in which three years out of it were spent for teaching English at Sampoerna Academy Malang, the participant teacher was considered having trustworthy capability in teaching English; with the intention of revealing the teacher's beliefs towards learner autonomy, she was selected to be the participant in this case study.

In her English class, she has applied several strategies in order to trigger students' English skills. She applied Word Share—a seven-minute presentation that assigned each student in every meeting to share a story by including one or two uncommon English word(s) in the story. The purpose was to improve students' vocabulary and as the preparation for the students to take internet-based TOEFL (iBT) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Another activity she premeditated was students' drama performance as the class annual project which was designed as a project-based learning. The implementations of this project are further examined and elaborated in the following section by being related to the teacher's beliefs regarding language learner autonomy and practices.

3.3. The Instruments

Questionnaire

To collect the data intended, a questionnaire adopted from Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012) was used. Four out of five sections of the taken questionnaire were implemented in this study. The four parts are elaborated as follow:

1. Part one was about teacher's opinion about learner autonomy during her English teaching generally. It consisted of 37 questions with Likert scale responses.
2. Part two was about teacher's opinion towards the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy—the decisions learners might be involved in and the abilities that learners might have. It consisted of 14 statements that teacher needed to responded using Likert scale too.

3. Part three contained two open-ended questions that required the teacher to comment more specifically on her work at the school, especially in implementing students' drama performance project with project-based learning approach.
4. Part four which consisted of six questions were aimed at knowing more about the teacher's background.

Interview

For the succeeding stage, follow-up interview with the teacher was conducted. It was done to explore in more detail the teacher's responses to the questionnaire. The interview was, with teacher's permission, audio recorded and field noted.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The questionnaire results showed that the teacher was in line with the notion of promoting learner autonomy in language classroom. The responses she made towards the statements in the questionnaire expressed agreement that autonomy could be fostered to language learners of all ages and of all cultural backgrounds. Consistent with the definitions of learner autonomy that this present research is based upon, the teacher had a strong belief that autonomous learning did not mean learning without teacher. Learner-centered classrooms, giving choices in the kinds of activities and materials, designing activities which give learners opportunities to learn from each other, and independent work in a self-access center could be supportive efforts to promote learner autonomy. In her EFL class at Sampoerna Academy Malang, the project of students' drama performances conducted by 11 graders were the evidences that she upheld learner autonomy. The class which consisted of 25 students was assigned to work together, set all the stages from planning, script writing, casting the actors and actresses, to designing the stage act and performances by themselves. Dealing with this, in terms of setting up the objectives, designing the kinds of tasks and activities to be conducted and choosing how learning was assessed, the teacher said that learners were actively involved.

Moreover, the teacher was confident that learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy. In this case, it is the teacher's duty to improve the students' motivation to learn as language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated. In the interview, the participant teacher explained how she designed the classroom activities to be meaningful—related to the lessons to students' life context, using authentic materials, involving students' experiences and accommodate learners' needs, in order to engage them in the teaching and learning process, develop their motivation, and

instill the idea of enjoying the class. Hence, when the students enjoy learning, it would be easier to transfer knowledge, and lead them to learner-centered teaching where autonomy in learning functioned to assist them to be more proficient in learning the language. Drama performances were chosen as the project to be executed in the end of the academic year based on the class agreement that involved the teacher and the students. Moreover, through drama performances where language arts were significantly grounded, not only students' English skills were improved, but also their creativity was encouraged (Athanases, Bennett, & Wahleithner, 2015). Consequently, enthusiasm and joyfulness in performing the drama had proven to be able to increase students' motivation in learning the language and indirectly, triggered them to be autonomous.

Along the lines of the above explanations, the teacher was aware of the existences of multi sources knowledge which were beneficial to support students' learning. She believed that the teacher students met in the class everyday were not the only sources through whom they could enhance their knowledge and experiences. To accomplish the project, the students were given opportunities to create their own story, write the scripts by themselves, and prepare all the supporting stuff for their performances. To do these, it required them to not only do the library and internet research, but sometimes it was prerequisite for them to meet people as the sources, for example dealing with references of the story, the stunning stage acts and appropriate costumes for the characters to wear. Regarding this, as the students of Sampoerna Academy Malang were highly selected—the students studied at the school were academically excellent and having good leadership characteristics, the teacher convinced that her students were categorically able to identify their own needs, strengths, and weaknesses. As they also had been proficient in English, they can learn both independently and cooperatively within their group. Besides having the teacher's supervision, the students were considered capable to monitor their progress and evaluate their own learning as being proved by their achievement in their drama performances. In the interview, the teacher confidently stated that the students took the project very seriously and gave the results more than being expected.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

According to the results of data analysis, this present study showed that learner autonomy for the Indonesian teacher means that both teacher and learners have important roles in the teaching and learning process. From the data analysis, it can be concluded that learner autonomy is indirectly promoted through giving learners the opportunities to work alone or

cooperatively to accomplish a project both inside and outside the classroom, providing the choice of learning method, materials and assessment procedure to the learners. The project-based learning approach that the teacher used for students' drama performances has proved that teachers are the ones who should help and support their learners to promote autonomy and become autonomous learners. Finally, the results of the study are in line with the findings of previous studies such as Lengkanawati (2017), Nga (2014,) and Borg & Al-Busaidi (2012) which revealed that it is necessary that teachers have awareness of the concept of learner autonomy and potentially promote it to achieve teaching and learning activities and objectives more effectively.

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