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Guiding Students onto Autonomous Learning in Learning English as a Foreign Laguage

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Abstract

English as a foreign language is too complex to be learned merely in a classroom by Indonesian students. There are a lot of language elements and expressions to be mastered and practiced but there is not enough time for the students to learn and practice English in the classroom. This also happens to English teachers. They face the same things. Although they are the key figures setting the tone of English class atmosphere, they do not have enough time to facilitate their students' learning in a classroom and they are barely a kind of English learning resource for their students. An alternative to face and solve the fact concerning the limited time and the complexity of the target language is that the English teachers guide the students onto autonomous learning in learning English as a foreign language in Indonesia. This paper discusses ways to guide the students onto autonomous learning. The steps are as follows: 1) making and discussing basic course outline or syllabus and lesson plan, 2) assigning students meaningful and challenging tasks, 3) catering the students with materials in Self-Accessed Learning Centre (SALC), 4) having the students make use of the Internet as a learning resource, 5) helping students make learning plan and learning logs, and 6) having the students reflect what they have learned. If the English teachers are able to do so, they will really have meaningful roles as organizer, prompter, resource, observer, tutor, controller, and assessor in students' learning English as foreign language in Indonesia to meet the pre-determined objectives.

Key words: English, students, English teachers, syllabus, tasks, salc, the Internet, reflection, and autonomous learning

A. Introduction

English as a foreign language is too complex to be learned merely in a classroom by Indonesian students as it has complicated language elements and grammatical rules to be mastered. Besides, it also has abundance of language expressions useful to communicate with one another. The students, however, do not have enough time to really master English by learning and practicing English merely in English learning hours in classrooms. In Indonesian setting, officially junior high school students get four English learning hours (4 x 40 minutes) in a week but mostly in practice they are allotted six English learning hours (6 x 40 minutes) in a week. Senior high school students and vocational high school students officially get four to five English learning hours (4 or 5 x 45 minutes) in a week. This fact shows that the students have limited time to learn and practice English in classrooms guided by English teachers. Moreover, they still have duties to learn other subject matters.

In relation to the fact above, Harmer (2001: 335) states that however good a teacher may be, students will never learn a language – or anything else – unless they aim to learn outside as well as during class time. It is, therefore, clear that English teachers can only facilitate students' learning in classrooms and it means nothing if the students do not learn and practice English outside. The English teachers also cannot control and observe when they practice outside. They need to be self-directed learners, autonomous language learners. However, children are children; students are students. Mostly they need guidance from their teachers and the English teachers should promote autonomous learning and guide them how to be autonomous. Step by step, the English teachers should move from an often totally teacher-directed teaching environment to a possible learner-directed learning environment (Dam, 2011: 40-51) because of the importance of incorporatingprinciples of learner autonomy - 'the ability to take charge of one'sown learning' - into their practice (Holec in Cotterall, 200: 109-117) or more specific, an individual effort and action through which learners initiate language, problem solving, strategic action, and the generation of linguistic input (Brown, 2007: 377).

General conclusions from an extensive number of recent studies in many countries such as China, Korea, Japan, Egypt, Kuwait, Italy, and Singapore promise more than a glimmer of hope that SBI and autonomous learning are viable avenues to success (Brown, 2007: 137). From this conclusion, it is no doubt that English teachers in Indonesia should motivate and guide their students to be autonomous in learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, there would be the emergence of psychological autonomy where, according to Oxford in Dion (2011: 63-74), an independent learner of L2 –English, shows performance of high motivation, self-efficacy, and displays a faith in his or her abilities to organize and execute the necessary actions to achieve a goal, i.e., being able to communicate using English.

However, it is really hard to change from teacher-directed learning to learner-directed learning. Even, it is probably also hard to change teachers' behavior from teaching to organizing, prompting, resourcing, observing, tutoring, controlling, and assessing students' English learning. A number of teachers do not feel teaching if they function as organizer, prompter, resource, observer, tutor, controller, and assessor during classroom activities. Moreover, most Indonesian students are still dependent on their teachers. They learn only what their teachers explain and do what their teachers ask them to do. Even they only rely on and read an English coursebook used during the English teaching-learning in the classroom.

Taking the allotted time, the limited practices, the limited resources in the classrooms, and students' individual differences into account, the English teachers should, step by step, guide their students onto autonomous learning. It is widely believed that autonomous learners will more easily meet the pre-determined goals and objectives in learning English as a foreign language in Indonesia. The suggested steps for the English teachers are as follows: 1) making and discussing basic course outline or syllabus and lesson plan, 2) assigning students meaningful and challenging tasks, 3) catering the students with materials in Self-Accessed Learning Centre (SALC), 4) having the students make use of the Internet as a learning resource, 5) helping students make learning plan and learning logs, and 6) having the students reflect what they have learned.

B. Guiding Students onto Autonomous Learning

There are probably a number of terms related to learners' learning autonomy and ways to make students become autonomous. To guide students onto autonomous learning in learning English as a foreign language, this paper suggests six steps to consider and to follow.

1. Making and discussing basic course outline or syllabus and lesson plan

Indonesian schools where Indonesian students learn are formal educations which are set out by laws, acts, and rules. Therefore, what teachers do, what students learn, and what learning goals and objectives the students should meet are also set out on particular legal bases. In an institutional context learners are not free to choose whatever they want to do. The curricular guidelines have to be followed. The important thing when developing learner autonomy is to make these guidelines known to the learners (Dam, 2011: 40-51). In Indonesian setting, curricular guidelines are in the forms of standard of content –standard of competence and basic competence, syllabus, and lesson plan.

To meet the pre-determined goals and objectives of English teaching-learning, the English teachers should be able to spell out standard of content of English as stated in the ministerial rule of National Education No. 22 Year 2006 about Standard of Content, standard of competence and basic competence, into syllabus, lesson plan, material, and English teaching-learning media. From the syllabus the English teachers make, it is clearly understood what materials to teach (for teachers), what materials to learn (for students), and what end to meet. From a lesson plan the English teachers make, it is more operationally known what to teach/learn, how to teach/learn (how English teaching-learning is conducted in detail step by step, what to assess, and what to meet. It is in accordance with Bailey in Farrell (2002: 30-39) stating that a lesson plan is like a road map which describes where the teacher hopes to go in a lesson. Furthermore, Jensen (2001: 403-413) states that once the syllabus has been decided, planning for the year or term takes place. A lesson plan serves as a map or checklist that guides teachers in knowing what they want to do next and the goals and objectives of the lesson for the students. Ideally, syllabuses and lesson plans also tell the

students the main sources of materials and other relevant resources in order that the students are able to search for and prepare themselves.

The ideasand functions of syllabus or basic course outline and lesson plan are well understood by most English teachers. However, sometimes they forget that they should share and discuss the syllabus and lesson plan with their students*at the first meeting*. This is a kind of negotiating syllabus with the students. It is important because the students are the *actors* to achieve the pre-determined learning goals and objectives by following what are stated in the syllabus and lesson plan.

The discussion on syllabus and lesson plan will let the students know and be aware what to do and what to achieve so that they, guided by their teachers, decide what ways to achieve and how to achieve the objectives. As a result, the students will be able to prepare themselves by searching for materials relevant to the topics to discuss, and even deepen their understanding on particular materials, becoming autonomous learners. It is in line with Parrish (2006: 166) stating that in order to ensure instruction meets the needs of learners, a teacher needs to collaborate with learners to identify the goals. Furthermore, Borg in Crawford (2002: 80-91) asserts that one of the advantages of talking about language as proposed is that such discussion contributes to the development of skills for continued autonomous learning. The ideal course reflects learners' goals in its language, tasks, and strategies any course designed to promote learner autonomy must set out to achieve the goals which the learners deem important (Cotterall, 200: 109-117). At the end of the discussion on syllabus and lesson plan, the English teachers should emphasize and make the students aware that they do not have enough time to merely learn English in classrooms, they need to search for relevant materials, learn, and practice their English outside the classrooms. The English teachers should also highlight the importance of learning English for better lives in the future.

2. Assigning students meaningful and challenging tasks

One of the ways in the steps to guide the students to guide students onto autonomous learning is assigning them meaningful and challenging tasks based on the syllabus and lesson plane discussed and agreed before, at the first meeting. Meaningful tasks related to English teaching-learning refer to the usefulness of tasks for communicative purposes based on students' socioeconomic linguistic backgrounds. Challenging tasks refer to interesting tasks but they are above students' understanding level so that the students get challenged to accomplish and they feel that they get a success, and want to know more. Communicative pedagogic tasks, therefore, aim to actively involve learners in meaningful communication, are relevant, are challenging but feasible (with task manipulation where possible), and have identifiable outcomes (Council of Europe, 2002: 158).

The challenging tasks guide the students move forward to autonomous learning at a crawl. They will get enjoyed and busy on what to do if the tasks are really what they need, want, and love.The development of students' autonomy is a gradual and unpredictable process, therefore, techniques and tasks tend to work only when they build on each other and are responsive to the immediate needs of the learning situation (Benson, 2003: 289-308). The tasks should be closely related to the discussed topics or topics to be discussed. Once materials or skills are automatized, learners begin to improve on their own through further meaningful practice activities. Learners begin to speed up performance, to perceive or create new combinations, and to 'do their own thing'. At this stage learners are autonomous (Aliponga, 2011: 90-98). Therefore, in an effort to fill class hours with fascinating materials, and of course in assigning the students, English teachers should overlook their missions of enabling learners to eventually become independent of classroom, that is, to become autonomous learners (Brown, 2001: 208).

Oxford in Dion (2011: 63-74) states that the process of becoming autonomous is complex. Agency is not a gift that can be delivered to the learner. Changing the learning situation cannot directly change and create agency. Agency involves exercising, practicing oneself to make conscious choices of action, training to bring freedom into play while confronting writing processes and products. This statement clearly supports that to make students become autonomous in learning English as a foreign language, the students should be rendered challenging tasks to exercise, practice, and rehearse their English and make them busy with activities to accomplish.

However, Learners can only beautonomous if they are aware of a range of learning options, and understand the consequences of choices they make. The role of English teachers, then, is to make the students aware and sure if they accomplish the tasks they will get meaningful and useful thing for their lives. Armed with a model of language learning and provided with abundant materials, learners will be able to determine the role of input texts and tasks, to trial alternative strategies, and to seek feedback on their performance (Cotterall, 2000: 109-117). In short, to guide the students to be autonomous, the English teachers should assign the students with meaningful, useful, interesting, and challenging tasks based on their interest and backgrounds so that the tasks will really activate students' learning outside the classrooms. The tasks should also be in accordance with the teaching-learning goals and objectives. The tasks must also be appropriate for the students' capability. The teacher and the students should discuss the tasks to get right numbers and levels to cope with. This should be done to create a great commitment among students and also teachers to get much greater chance of compliance (Harmer, 2002: 338).

3. Catering the students with materials in Self-Accessed Learning Centre (SALC)

Self-accessed learning centre (SALC) is one of the places for the students to find out materials. In this place the students are able to learn and to directly practice a particular material. Therefore, the English teachers should cater the students with various materials put in the self-accessed learning centre. Besides, SALC should be equipped with complete books, tape recorder, video players, CDs, and the Internet connections. Ideally, the teachers of English also provide the students with interactive learning materials and exercises. The English teachers can also recommend the SALC management to buy a certain language learning program with complete exercises. The exercises should be short, taking 15 to 20 minutes to accomplish. In the exercises, clear instruction and answer keys are crucial in order that the work can be done autonomously (Parrish, 2006: 202).

Good self-access learning centre(SALC) will foster learner autonomy by providing a range of appropriate learning opportunities within the centre and by making the right connections to learning opportunities outside the centre (Gardner, 2011: 186-198), the Internet connections. This idea is closely related to step 4. SALC should also subscribe electronic journals to provide students with current issues and research on language and language learning. Having the Internet connections and electronic journal subscriptions, the tasks of English teachers to provide English materials get lesser. Therefore, self-access learners are able to access: learner training materials and workshops; diagnostic tools suitable for their language levels and goals; self-assessment tools; pathways through existing materials; resources suitable for individual and group modes of learning; packages targeting specific courses with integrated self-access components; language advising; support mechanisms; the necessary technology; and a safe study environment (Gardner, 2011: 186-198).

Despite the lack of theory, the over-riding goal of a SALC, and one which is inherent in most SALC rationales and is agreed by Morrison (2006), is to support independent learning. SALC also implies an attempt to foster autonomous learning (Gardner, 2011: 186-198). Therefore, the English teachers should cater the students with meaningful and useful materials in the SALC by adopting, adapting, selecting, developing, or even creating materials. The English teachers can propose budgets to the principal via the SALC management to equipped SALC with complete materials. They can also employ expert to create SALC English materials. Finally, the English teachers should ask the students to make use of SALC, guiding the students to be autonomous.

4. Having the students make use of the Internet as a learning resource

The Internet is very rich in learning resources. Everything is on the internet, including English materials. Therefore, English teachers should ask the students make use of the Internet to search for and enrich English materials relevant to their tasks to accomplish. This is in line with Walters &Fehring in Buang (2011: 233-239) stating that information and communication technologies (ICT) today impinge on all aspects of daily life – including school life. ICT is generally believed to empower teachers and learners; transform teaching and learning from being highly teacher-dominated to learner-centred; and foster the development of 21st century skills (Trucano in Buang, 2011: 233-239).ICT-assisted learning has facilitated independent and

personalised learning among learners who have complete control of the media (Buang, 2011: 233-239). It is clear that the use of the Internet can promote students' autonomous learning.

The reason why English teachers and students use the Internet as a kind of English teaching-learning resource is that the English materials in the Internet take place in authentic and meaningful contexts and they are alive: authenticity, literacy, interaction, vitality, and empowerment (warschauer, shetzer, and Meloni, 2002: 7). The opportunities to study English via the Internet are not limited. The students can access English materials in 24 hours nonstop, wherever and whenever they need if the Internet connection is available. However, the English teachers should guide their students in accessing useful and meaningful English materials through certain web addresses. The English teachers should also train their students to access English materials from the language laboratory, laptop in classrooms, or SALC to avoid misusing the Internet by the students.

5. Helping students make learning plans and learning logs

At the first meeting, the English teachers set and discuss the syllabus or basic course outline and lesson plan to help their students set their actions to autonomously achieve the learning goals and objectives. However, this is not the end of teachers' guidance. In the whole course, the English teachers should always help their students plan their learning and make learning logs. In each topic or in each meeting, the English teachers should guide their students to plan their learning both inside and outside the English class in the form of daily plan, weekly plan, monthly plan, and or semester plan or a course plan. The English teachers should tell or guide what their students to do to meet the end. Besides, the English teachers should also guide their students to record and control what they have done using learning logs.

The task for the English teachers in this connection is two-sided. They have to make their students be *willing* to take over the responsibility for planning their own learning, for carrying out the plans and for evaluating the outcome. At the same time, they also have to support them in becoming *capable* of doing so, autonomous (Dam, 2011: 40-51). To have the ability to set goals (planning), implement strategies to attain goals, identify relevant resources, and access personal progress is advantageous for learning English and facilitates successful functioning in society (Aliponga, 2011: 90-98). In this case, helping students to plan their learning implies that the teachers also help them prepare their future lives in real society. Then what they plan and what they do are recorded in the learning logs that can be used for reflection, related to step six.

6. Having the students reflect what they have learned.

What students plan, what students do, and what students write on their learning logs should be checked by the students themselves, their classmates, and their teacher. Students' learning logs consist of the learning experiences during the day, or week, or month. What they write on their learning logs can tell their success of   failure, their eases or their difficulties. After that, they should reflect what they experience when they learn English to come to a greater understanding. Guided by their teachers, then, they should identify, explore, and elaborate their success and failure to have better understanding on the future learning activities.

From the learning logs, the students can also check whether they can accomplish what they plan or not, whether they can achieve good results or not, what problem they have, etc. The role of the teachers is then to try to help the students solve their problem they have. This can be done individually or classically. Because the students make learning logs and reflect their learning experience, the advancement of the student can be found by comparing the plans in the following weeks and then is considered as one of the aspects for the assessment outcome at the end of the semester (Wang, 2010: 221-228).

In a recent report, Dam and Legenhausen (1999: 90) claim that learners' ability to reflect critically on their learning is a measure of the effectiveness of the learning environment. Cotterall (2000: 109-117) states that courses integrate activities which require learners to reflect on their learning, such as discussion of the goal-setting process, analysis of task types, and experimentation with strategies to monitor progress and evaluate personal learning. The role of the teacher is to help the students what they have done and experienced.

To really help the students reflect what they experience and solve their learning problems, the teachers should be close to them and be friendlywith them in order that they succeed in talking withstudents. Moreover, it is through friendly interaction with students that teachers can encourage social and personal development in students and respect their whole person, especially in learning English as a foreign language (Mahdavinia, 2011: 76-89).

C. Concluding Remark

Regarding to the above discussions, some conclusions can be made. Guiding students onto autonomous learning in learning English as a foreign language seems to be simple and easy. On the contrary, it is a daunting job. The English teachers should really be organizer, prompter, resource, observer, tutor, controller, guide, counselor, and assessor in students' learning English as foreign language in Indonesia to meet the pre-determined learning goals and objectives. This is the compensation of having limited time in conducting English teaching-learning process in classrooms.

However, if the English teachers are able to do so, guiding the students to be autonomous, both the English teachers and the students will achieve the pre-determined learning goals and objectives with greater success, better results, and higher confidence. It is only a small thing that English teachers can do inside classrooms, except promoting and guiding students onto autonomous learning from classroom activities.

Make the students secure, comfortable, and enjoyable in learning English and guide them to be autonomous. Make the students learn outside as well as they learn inside the classrooms. Don't expect to meet an end if we never start.

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