

AN ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING THE AUTONOMOUS LEARNERS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the factors influencing the autonomous learners in learning English. This study was conducted in second grade of one senior high school in Bandung. This study employed a qualitative case study. Case study was deemed to be relevant for this study since it deals with specific phenomenon of autonomous learner as a single case which was analyzed and described. The data were obtained from the students which were collected through observation, questionnaire, and interview. After collecting the data, it was analyzed inductively based on qualitative data analysis and interpreted to answer the research question. The study revealed a finding related to the research question. It was found that the autonomous learners were influenced by five factors which are (1) motivation, (2) social environment, (3) task, (4) teacher and (5) material. These finding suggest that the teacher must encourage and promote students to become autonomous learner because students will get more benefit from becoming autonomous learners.

Key words: Autonomous learner, influencing factors.

A. Introduction

Nowadays, autonomy in language learning has been a topic of widespread discussion among experts in learning. Learner autonomy is fast becoming one of the strategies of choice in EFL teaching in the 1990s (Broady and Kenning, 1996; Little, 1990). A great progress has been made in the exploration and implementation of the concept of autonomous learner.

Autonomous learner is a learner who has responsibility for his own learning in an independent manner (Higs, 1988). The point of autonomous learner is also emphasized by Geddes and Strurtridge (1997) that autonomous learner decides what he wants to learn of why he needs to learn, and then decides how is going to tackle the problems. It means they are an independent learner who knows what they want to learn and they decide what they want to do. Therefore, teacher who understands the effect of the autonomous learning will promote learners to become an autonomous learner.

Based on the aforementioned explanation, it can be assumed that most teachers would agree that autonomous learners are much more likely to succeed with their studies than those learners who are heavily dependent on the teacher. As a result, most of the students are then expected to be autonomous learners. However a successful autonomous learner tends to be influenced by several factors. But there have been insufficient studies investigating about these factors.

Therefore, it will be interesting to investigate autonomous learning more deeply with the focus on autonomous learner since research concerning influencing factors that influence the autonomous learners still receives little attention in Indonesia EFL context. The result of the study is expected to contribute and to support the dependent learners to enhance their English

skills. This research attempts to address the following research question: “What factors influence the autonomous learners in learning English?”

B. Review Of The Literature

1. The Definition of Autonomy

Autonomy was considered as a natural product of the practice of self-directed learning which the objectives progress and evaluation of learning are determined by learners themselves (Benson, 2001:8)

The concept of autonomy is also explained by Littlewood (1996:97) that autonomy is defined as “learners’ ability and willingness to make choices independently”. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and confidence to take responsibility for the choices required. It is purposed to create students not to be depended totally on their teachers.

It means they are supposed to decide everything by themselves; here the teacher’s role is only as a motivator and a guide. Therefore, autonomy will assist learners to play an important role in the process of learning which concern on ‘learner-centered stage’ (Geddes and Strurtridge, 1997). Hopefully, they would be active and initiate learners who plan their learning activity, find additional learning resources and evaluate their learning.

2. Autonomous Learning

To be an interdependent learner, the students will face a process called an autonomous learning process as explained by Boud (1988:1). In this process, learners will not become autonomous immediately. They will pass some stages. First, they are still dependent learners who depend totally on their teacher. They seem to do what teacher asks them to do. Then, step by step, they realize that they are expected to be independent of their teacher forever. However, they are aware that they cannot learn alone. They still need teachers or peers for collaborative learning. In this stage, learners are interdependent learners which learners need to pass in any given context to reach more mature from of relationship which places them in the world and interrelating to it rather than being apart from it (Boud, 1988: 2).

3. Some Factors Influencing the Autonomous Learners

The types of strategies used by different learners may vary due to different factors. Higgs (1988) said that there are four factors which influence the autonomous learner; the role of learners themselves, teacher, the task, the environment.

a. The Role of Learner Themselves

There are some factors may influence learners to be autonomous learners. One of them is the past experience of the learners. Higgs (1998) states that past educational experiences influences the autonomous learners. Additionally, Candy (1988) says that their past experience will lead them to be better in learning, because they can learn from the past.

Another factor is the psychological variable. As stated by Benson that the autonomous learners learn languages and the outcome of their learning are influenced by a variety of individual psychological variable. He also says that learners tend to exercise control over psychological factors that influence their learning, especially those which concern on motivation, affective state and beliefs or preferences.

Additionally, Yoen Pan (1997) in her research defines that there are three psychological factors influence learners to be autonomous, those are (1) desire, it is an innate tendency, and left to themselves, people pursue learning; (2) ability, to be an autonomous, they need to develop an inquiry and that will prompt them to question and search which enable them to adapt and apply the knowledge they require; (3) needs.

b. The Role of Teachers

In developing learner autonomy, the teacher-student relationship is crucial. The trust and cooperation between the teacher and the students makes the students feel comfortable and secure in the classroom. The distance between the teacher and the students is shortened through face-to-face talks. During the intervals, the teacher and the students chat freely just as good friends do.

Teachers play an important role in helping students to learn about the process involved in learning. This process creates supportive and simulating learning achievements which helps students to be a discipline. The most important thing in language teaching is to help students become more autonomous in learning (Benson, 2001:1).

Therefore, teachers should raise the students' awareness of ways of identifying goals, specifying objectives and identifying resources which will help them to realize these goals (Harmer, 395). Next, the course task should be explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process.

When students are encouraged to be autonomous, teachers need to try to ensure that both, students and teachers are hearing the same thing. Furthermore, teachers will need to offer them a choice of learning strategies, for example; memory strategies by using flash cards to remember words, cognitive strategies by reading for pleasure, affective strategies by giving themselves a prize if they did well, and so on.

c. Type of Tasks

In this case, students will get a lot of tasks to be done. Most of them are from their teacher. The attractive and challenging task will greatly influence to the autonomous learner. Therefore, students are encouraged to be interdependent and to work collaboratively. Collaborative learning is an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of students working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. Together with those activities, students are encouraged or even sometimes forced to take responsibility for what they are doing.

d. The Role of Environment

Environment can influence the students to learn independently and effectively therefore teacher is also responsible for creating and managing the learning environment (Higgs, 1988). The environment is the place where learner contributes himself as an individual to the interactive process. It is also supported by Yuen Pan (1997) a conducive learning environment is needed to facilitate learning. It means that environment is important aspects in learning activities.

Additionally, environmental factors which influence learning strategies are situational aspect and social aspect (Benson, 2001:49).

1) Social Aspects (Social Environmental Aspects)

Parents, brother, sisters, relatives, friends, and teachers are some examples of social aspects. They are greatly influenced the autonomous learners, as Little (1991) mentions that autonomous

learner is interdependence because they require interaction. They will interact with social supports which can care and motivate learners (Aoki, 1999). This interaction shows also that the autonomous learners do not learn alone. (Boud, 1988). Then, the autonomous learners are being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context; being able to cooperate with others (Kohonen cited in Benson 2001:14).

In line with, Little (1991:5) has argued that "The developmental learning that unimpaired small children undergo takes place in interaction with parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, family friends, neighbors and so on".

Vygotsky's approach, then, emphasizes that social interaction and collaboration are essential to the learning process. This involves the extensive use of alternative learning environments. When this is facilitated, students are able to collaborate and interact in pairs or larger groups as well as experience new environments that have not been shaped by teacher-centered, non-collaborative classrooms.

There is a direct relationship between an individual's cognitive system and his or her interaction in social groups. In other words, an individual is not separable from social life (Vygotsky 1987).

2) Situational Aspects

These aspects can support or help learners to plan and carry out their learning and to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to plan and implement their learning (Aoki, 1999). The kinds of situational aspects are resources or materials for learning. It can be in the form of printed materials such as newspaper, novels, magazines, English textbooks, etc. Visual materials such as film, video can be categorized as situational aspects.

C. Research Methodology

a. Research Design

The aim of the study is to figure out the factors influencing the autonomous learners in learning English. Hence, this kind of topic for investigation requires specific research which should be a qualitative research design rather than quantitative design because the aims of the study relates to a specific phenomenon which tries to describe and analyze. Therefore, qualitative research design was employed as the research design which is appropriate in understanding process by which events and action take place (Maxwell, 1996:19).

b. Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at one Senior High School in Bandung. The school was chosen as the setting of the study because this particular school is one of the best schools in east Bandung. The students in this school were active whether inside school activities or outside school activities voluntarily.

The participants in this study were second grade students which consist of 63 students. Here, the participants were categorized into high and low autonomous learners. The primary data of the study was only students from two classes which were categorized since this study focused on the investigation of autonomous learners.

Hence, the choice of autonomous learner would be more effective in the investigation than the non-autonomous learners (L. Dam and Lagenhausen, 1996). In other words, the study used

purposeful sampling to gain the important information from research participants (Alwasilah, 2009:146).

c. Data Collection

Generally, the data was taken from the class. The data collected were in the form of learners' action and activities related to learning process. Then, due to the use qualitative case study, the data collections were in the form of words.

In collecting the data, some instruments were applied. The instruments used by the researcher were data triangulation which was a powerful technique that facilitates validation of data through cross verification from more than two resources. Alwasilah (2010) argues that dealing with the validity of the data, it is important to use several methods of data collection, such as observation, interview, questionnaire and document analysis. Thus, the techniques of data collection used were: questionnaire, observation, and interview.

D. Findings

1. Affecting Factors in Becoming Autonomous Learner

The question of this study was about the factors influencing the students becomes an autonomous learners. Therefore the interview asks about the students' companions with whom they practice or learn English and about the motivation behind their learning activities. The results of the interviewed showed that there were two affecting factors in becoming autonomous learner, there were psychological and environmental factors.

Having analyzed the data, it is identified that there are five factors influenced all of the autonomous learners in learning English; learner themselves, environment, task, teacher, and material. Here are the explanations:

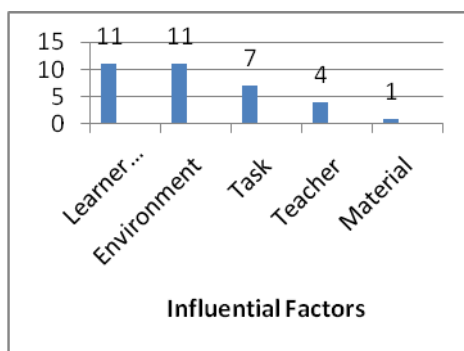


Chart 1
Influential Factors

a. Learners Themselves (Psychological Factors)

Related to this study, all of the autonomous learners were influenced by psychological factors to be an autonomous learner. The psychological factors that influenced the participants were desire, interest, and need. All of the autonomous learners are influenced by their desire, ability, and need to be autonomous. One of motivational orientation was related to career field (Benson, 2001). They think nowadays in every career field need English proficiency. For example:

“Sangat besar gunanya soalnya dipakai dalam lapangan pekerjaan nantinya. AL 3

“It is great value because it will be applied in the future jobs” (AL 3)

“Pengen jadi guru Bahasa Inggris” (AL 9)

“want to be an English teacher” (AL 9)

“Bahasa Inggris perlu buat kerja jugakan, pastikan kalo pengen jadi-dokter harus bisa Bahasa Inggris, solanya aku pengen jadi dokter. Terus Bahasa Inggriskan Bahasa internasional.” (AL 10)

“English is needed for work, if we want to be a doctor then we need to be able in English, because I want to be a doctor. Then English is an international language.” (AL 10)

The examples show motivation has significant role in helping students to learn better. The learners have a high motivation to learning English. They gave different opinion to express their motivation in learning English. Motivation is one of the most important factors in promoting students' success in learning. It is because motivation can increase the possibility for the students to commit their time and efforts to achieve their learning objectives (Bong & Clark, 1999).

The findings imply, when learners entered the class with highly motivation, they had more positive experience in the class, higher interest and enjoyment. So, the effects could be directly attributed to the autonomy. Furthered, the data confirmed motivation would influence the performance of the autonomous learner. Those students who became more autonomous received better grades in the English subject. Autonomy has been shown to lead to greater autonomous motivation in students (Gronick& Ryan, 1989, Williams &Deci, 1996).

b. Environment

The result showed that all of the autonomous learners were also influenced by environmental factors; social factors. The social factors are some people who can motivate and influence them to learn and to be autonomous. Parents, brother, sisters, relatives, friends, and teachers are some examples of social aspects. They are greatly influenced the autonomous learners, as Little (1991) mentions that autonomous learner is interdependence because they require interaction. They will interact with social supports which can care and motivate learners (Aoki, 1999). This interaction shows also that the autonomous learners do not learn alone. (Boud, 1988). They need to cooperate with others. Here is the evidence.

“...kakak kelas SMA, kan aku tinggal di asrama, jadi kalau lagi nonton film Bahasa Inggris the dia tau. Jadi terinspirasi, jadi pengen bisa gitu. Kayanya gampang gitu. Suka bantuin ngerjain pr juga, ngeartiin cerita-cerita Inggris.” (AL 2)

“...high school senior, I live in a dormitory, so if I am watching English, he always knows. It inspires me to be like that. It seems easy. He also helps to do homework, translate English stories.”

AL 2 was taught English by her friend. Her friend also motivated her to learn English. It means friend played an important role in her learning process and was able to create supportive environment. Her friend is also as a resource person. So, the autonomous learners are interdependence learners (Boud, 1988). Then, the autonomous learners are being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context; being able to cooperate with others (Benson 2001:14).

To sum up, students will be motivated when they feel related. Establishing learning groups is able to make learners feel related about sharing their ideas and teaching and learning each other. They have favorite place to learn English with different reasons. They learn English at home, at school, at dormitory and other places which is comfortable place to learn.

c. Task

In this case, students will get a lot of tasks to be done. Most of them are from their teacher. The attractive and challenging task will greatly influence to the autonomous learner. Therefore, students are encouraged to be interdependent and to work collaboratively. Together with those activities, students are encouraged or even sometimes forced to take responsibility for what they are doing.

“Kalau ada PR, tugas-tugas jadi termotivasi belajar” (AL 3)

“If there is homework, tasks, then I will be motivated to learn. (AL 3)

“Kalau besok ada pelajarannya, kalau ada tugas, terus kalau ada-ulangan.” (AL 4)

“If tomorrow is the schedule for the study, if there is task, then if there is a test”

“Kalau ada PR udah pasti belajar.”(AL 5)

“If there is homework, I will learn certainly”

From the example above it is clear that task greatly influenced the autonomous learner to learn. The nature of the task helped determine the motivation naturally required in learning process (Boud, 1988). The more task that the teacher provide, the more they will learn.

Additionally, Dickinson (1987) states that the autonomous learners will allocate time to task. Some of the autonomous learners allocated their time to learn because there are task which is given by the teacher. They spent time to learn as much as the task that they get. It is undeniable that the attractive and challenging task will greatly influence to the autonomous learner. The autonomous learners are encouraged or even sometimes forced to take responsibility for their tasks.

d. Teacher

The success of attempts to empower learners to become actively involved in their learning depends to a large extent on the teacher's ability to redefine roles (Hill 1994: 214). Additionally, Wright (1987: 45) summarizes teacher-student roles as a complex set of interacting factors, both interpersonal (social role, status and power, attitudes, beliefs, personality, motivation) and task-related. This redefined role requires professional knowledge and skills in every aspect of learning.

However, teachers struggle with the ways to promote learner autonomy or at least to encourage the idea of autonomy in language classrooms (Dickinson, 1992; Nunan, 1997). In this case teacher needs to provide teaching-learning situation which is comfortable for the learners. Thus it will arouse learners' motivation. For example:

“Tergantung gurunya bu. Kalau gurunya seru jadi enak belajarnya gitu bu.” (AL 7)

“It depends on the teacher, Mrs. If the teacher is pleased thus the learning activity will be comfortable”

“Tergantung gurunya. SD ga terlalu suka, tapi sekarang suka soalnya enjoy gurunya. Jadi termotivasi buat belajar.”(AL 10)

“It depends on the teacher, when I was in the elementary school I do not like English, but now I like it because the teacher is enjoyable. Thus it is motivated to learn.” (AL 10)

Dickinson (1987: 90) notes that the teacher as manager function include determining learning goals, making decisions about materials, deciding how the materials will be used, keeping records, evaluating progress, allocating time to tasks, deciding on what tasks will be done, and who should do them, what groupings the learners will work in is “daunting” and suggests that the responsibility for at least some of these might be shared with the learners.

In this view, the teacher becomes a skilled manager of human beings with access to a body of language and learning knowledge (Hunt, Gow& Barnes 1989: 211). It could be assumed that the ideal helper is warm and loving. Teacher accepts and cares about the learner and about his problems, and takes them seriously who is willing to spend time helping.

The statement shows that as a good teacher should have good characteristic and varied activities over period of time. An interesting and good activity will be motivating the learner to learn more. As stated by Dickinson (1987: 122) that teacher is approving, supportive, encouraging and friendly; and he regards the learner as an equal.

e. Material

Promotion of autonomy in the language classroom requires appropriate learning materials, plus a rigorous examination of available materials. Interest in learning depends to a large extent on whether learners find the materials they use interesting and useful (Frankel 1982; Hughes 1982). As stated by the autonomous learner 3:

“Tergantung materi yang diajarin. Kalau materinya suka, jadi ber-semangat.”

(AL3)

“Depend on the learning material. If I like the material, it will be enthusiastic.”

(AL 3)

From the above statement it can be seen that the materials influence learners' enthusiasm. As stated by Harmer (2007: 29) that students will learn more successfully if they enjoy the activities they are involved in and are interested or stimulated by the topics. Therefore, teacher should think carefully about matching activities and material because material is one of important aspect to increase learners' autonomy.

E. Discussion

Based on the findings mentioned above, there are two aspect emerged in accordance with the autonomous learner.

1. Positive Influences of Autonomous Learners

Considering the third finding, one important conclusion that could be described from this study is that the concepts of learner autonomy along with various factors which influence them. In this study, all of the autonomous learners get positive influence from their motivation, environment, task, teacher and material. It is undeniable that those factors play an important role in learners' autonomy.

The first factor is psychological factor. Yuen Pan (1997) defines that desire; need and ability are psychological factors that influence learners to be autonomous. From this point of view, several factors considered relevant to develop learners' autonomy. They had desire to have better future career. Thus, guidance will be needed by the learners to set higher goals or dreams in term of leaning English.

The second factor is environmental factors. Related to the environmental factors, all of the autonomous learners were influenced by the social factors. In this case, the autonomous learners got positive influence from their parents, brother, sibling, and friends. As a resource person, they motivate the autonomous learners to learn English. This support is needed to develop their autonomy. It means that social factors were significantly influenced to the learners' autonomy.

The third factor is task. Dickinson (1987) states that the autonomous learners will allocate time to task. Some of the autonomous learners allocated their time to learn because there are task which is given by the teacher. They spent time to learn as much as the task that they get. It is undeniable that the attractive and challenging task will greatly influence to the autonomous learner. The autonomous learners are encouraged or even sometimes forced to take responsibility for their tasks.

The fourth factor is teacher. Teacher is one of factors who can motivate and influence the autonomous learner to learn. Some of the autonomous learners learn English enthusiastically because of their teacher. They thought teacher played important role in their learning process for help and create a supportive environment.

And the last factor is material. This factor influences the learner to learn English. Richard-Amato (2003:83) said that the autonomous learners will use language materials effectively to improve them. A rich collection of second language materials would offer learners the best opportunity for their learning (Benson, 2001). A good material may help the learners to arouse their motivation to learn. As a result it could improve their English. To summarize, the positive influences was beneficial in raising learners' autonomy.

F. Conclusions

The results of the analysis showed that autonomous learners were influenced by positive exposures in becoming autonomous learner; there were five factors: motivation, environment, task, teacher, and material. These exposures can be influenced by their motivation such as future career, social aspect such as their parents, brother, siblings and friends which improve their knowledge, vocabulary and ability in English, challenging task which encouraged or even sometimes forced the autonomous learner to take responsibility for their tasks, good teacher who can create comfortable environment, and vary material which can arouse learners enthusiasm.

The finding implies that knowing the factors influencing the autonomous learner in learning English helps to foster the students' learner autonomy in the classroom that might help improve the students' English proficiency. It also infers that the more autonomous a learner becomes, the more likely he achieves high language proficiency.

G. References

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