INVESTIGATING TEACHERS' STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT) PRACTICE

Anisatul Karimah[*1]
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

Abstract
More and more educational stakeholders are now concerned on learner autonomy (later will be abbreviated as LA) as a fundamental key to actualize an effective and successful instructional process. While research addressing strategies to promote LA has been conducted in ample amount, this research tries to include a more holistic coverage. This research aims at investigating strategies or activities that teachers implement in English language classroom in fostering LA, what reasons are behind the selection of those activities, and to what extent those activities enable LA to take place. Data were collected from 35 teacher respondents who have taught junior high school or higher levels. Questionnaire and semi-guided interview were employed to yield relevant data. Findings show that activities related to psychological dimension become the most favoured ones to apply in the classroom. It is followed by social, technical, and political dimensions accordingly. Those activities are applicable to certain situations and extent.

Keywords: ELT, Dimension Of Learner Autonomy, Learner Autonomy, Teachers' Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy contributes as one of the most prominent factors affecting English teaching practice. Not only does LA contribute to an effective ELT teaching, it also has a connection with English proficiency. Research conducted by Dafei (2007) and Sakai and Takagi (2009) reveal that LA has positive correlation with students' English proficiency. When students possess high autonomy or responsibility for their learning, they tend to have better competence than those who do not.

In Indonesian context, both teachers and students have not possessed a good understanding on LA and it has not been well-promoted in classroom practice (Lengkanawati, 2015). To some extent, education practice in Indonesia is similar to Hong Kong's about which Chan (2001) states in her research that teachers are perceived as the ones who transmit knowledge and students are driven by examination-oriented learning. This fact is supported by Lengkanawati (2015) who writes that students are mostly only motivated to study prior to a test and they are somewhat dependent to the teacher.

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[*]correspondence Addres
E-mail: anisatul.karimah@upi.edu

In promoting learner autonomy to be existed in classroom practice, a range of activities involving students can be implemented by teachers. Students take part in deciding what, where, and how they learn (Cotteral, 2015). Ways of accomplishing tasks –whether individually or in groups-, independent learning out of class, assessment system, and monitoring learning progress are other actions in which teachers can include students (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Elizondo and Garita (2013) sum up that it is quite potential to embrace learners in almost all phases in learning started from needs analysis up to evaluation phase.

This research attempts to investigate teachers' strategies to enable the aforementioned activities to occur which are aimed at promoting learner autonomy in ELT practice. This research is intended to figure out the answers of the following questions.

1. What strategies or activities do the teachers use to promote LA in the ELT practice?
2. What reasons become teachers' considerations in choosing the respective strategies?
3. How do those activities work in promoting LA in ELT practice?

In determining the activities that teachers might utilize in the classroom to promote learners' autonomy, the researcher based her framework on the questionnaire used by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) which has been previously adapted by Xhaferri et al. The analysis roots from the four dimensions, three dimensions namely technical, psychological, and political dimension proposed by Benson (2007) and the other one called social dimension comes up from Collateral (2008). The researcher modified the questionnaire and combined the concepts to suit her research purpose. Technical dimension activities cover asking students to read and listen to materials in English, correlating the topic with students' experience and existing knowledge, taking notes of important points, etc. Letting students know how to learn particular English areas or topics, making students aware of the learning objective, and encouraging self-evaluation are in psychological area. The social dimension occurs when students can have negotiation due to their learning which then can be translated into activities like working individually or in groups and assessing peers. The political dimension activities are such activities in which students are involved in decision–making regarding the learning content, the topic, place and time of learning, learning activities, etc.

The findings of this research are expected to be a reference for teachers in selecting the activities they might utilize in the classroom to encourage autonomous learning. This investigation will additionally find out the reasons behind teachers' choices and the extent to which those activities function in fostering LA. Thus, teachers might use the result as a leading consideration for transforming LA principles into real practice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This is a descriptive qualitative research aiming at investigating strategies or activities used by English teachers to promote LA, displaying the reasons behind their choices of strategies, and describing how well those strategies function in fostering LA.

The data were collected from 35 teachers who have taught in junior high or higher levels with minimum one year of teaching experience. Questionnaire and semi-guided interview were used as collecting data instruments. The questionnaire adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) was distributed online on 1st of December 2017. In the questionnaire, teachers make a list of activities they have ever used in their EFL class. Those listed activities covered all the four dimensions as the focuses. To meet the effectiveness and efficiency of the research, only two mostly implemented activities were discussed for each dimension.

After the responses from the questionnaire were collected, some respondents were chosen to be interviewed to gain deeper information. On the questionnaire, the researcher already asked whether or not the respondents would be willing and available for an interview. Thus, the selected interviewees were firstly based on their approval and availability. Second, the consideration for interviewees is the ones with better understanding of LA comparing to others which was as well obtained from the questionnaire. As the researcher's investigation is dealing with LA, the researcher would like to ensure that teachers are aware and possess quite good understanding on LA. Third, the researcher chose interviewees based on the duration of teaching. The researcher assumes that the longer teachers teach, the better understanding they have in terms of recognizing their students and teaching practice. There were around 10 percent of respondents, or approximately 4 participants, were interviewed. Names of respondents written in this research are all replaced by "R.1" until "R.4" in which R stands for "Respondent". Interview was accomplished using Bahasa Indonesia to attain interviewees' convenience. The data of the questionnaire and interview were then broken down to four categories namely technical, psychological, social, and political perspectives on learner autonomy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data were obtained from 35 respondents who are all English teachers either in junior high, senior high, or university level. 54.3% of respondents had more than five years of teaching experience, 25.7% of them has been teaching in a range between 2 up to 5 years, and 20% of teachers possessed teaching experience with a range 1 up to 2 years. More than 50% of respondents claimed that their students were in beginner and intermediate level. In

terms of their understanding on the concept of LA, from scale 0 up to 4 where 0 demonstrated having no idea of LA and 4 demonstrated a good understanding of LA, the summary was 42.9% in scale 3, 31.4% in scale 2, 20% in scale 4, and 5.7% in scale 1. It can be concluded that the majority of respondents had a quite good understanding on LA. In terms of respondents' perspectives which also came in scale 0 up to 4 in which 0 meant that they had no idea on the significance of LA instructional process and 4 meant that LA was very essential in an instructional practice, the findings showed the same amount of 40% in scale 3 and 4, 17.1% in scale 2, and 2.9% in scale 1. Concisely, most respondents perceived LA to be relatively playing a significant role in teaching and learning process.

The following were the findings obtained from the questionnaire addressing the top two activities for each LA dimension that the teacher respondents employed to foster LA in their classrooms. Further and more detailed discussions are presented in the next part.

Table 1. Distribution of the Questionnaire Items Based on the Four Dimensions

Dimension	Activities
Psychological dimension	Teacher makes students aware of the learning objectives.
	Teacher asks students to conduct self-evaluation.
Technical dimension	Teacher asks students to read and listen to things in English outside the class.
	Teacher asks students to take notes of important points.
Social dimension	Teacher asks students to do collaborative work.
	Teacher asks students to accomplish tasks individually.
Political dimension	Teacher lets students decide what, when, and how to learn.
	Teacher lets students decide what activities to do.

Teachers' Strategies to Promote LA in Psychological Dimension

Making Students Aware of the Learning Objective

Based on the result of the questionnaire, activities related to psychological and social dimension spotted the most frequently used activities by teachers to foster LA in everyday class. Particularly in psychological version, the most preferable activity to use was making students aware of the learning objectives which took 77.1% of respondents. They argued if students had known the specific aim of the learning, they would have a clear focus and will not go anywhere out of the topic. Students would likely have assumption on what they were going to do and which strategies were best used during the lesson. Not only ideas on activities and tasks did students have the assumption on, but they would also recognize what kind of output and competence they were expected to accomplish at the end of the meeting. Another respondent added a good point that by making students aware of the learning objective, this respondent wanted to motivate students by saying,

"In raising students' awareness of the learning objective, I feel there is an urgency that the students have to feel like getting something new and useful for their self-learning". (Interview, R.1)

When students had the feeling that they are going to learn something new and useful, it tended to give them reason and motivation to be involved in the teaching learning process.

Using this activity to raise students' awareness was seen as an effort to realize psychological dimension of giving attention and directing themselves to the learning content. In further explanation, respondents said that by being aware of the objective, it gave guidance for students to search for additional materials related to the topic. Students' awareness of learning something new would motivate them to learn and later when they found something missing and needed to improve, it would lead them to find out more inputs. Other teachers claimed that this kind of activity could recall their existing knowledge and previous experience regarding the materials including in terms of linguistic aspect.

"Let's say for example the learning objective is being able to do presentation. When students are aware of the objective, students then can share background knowledge, existing knowledge and also experience of presenting something".
(Interview, R.2)

".... If they do, they can use the existing knowledge and experience. They will remember the linguistic features they might have known".
(Interview, R.3)

In short, awareness of learning objective fosters LA in a sense that students were encouraged to recollect information, experience, and linguistic aspect they had previously known and learned.

Conducting self-evaluation

Another 68.6% respondents chose self-assessment as a means to foster LA to students. Most respondents had a sound understanding on LA that they thought one of vital characteristics of LA was students' ability to evaluate themselves. Self-assessment also forced students to review what they have been learning so that to some extent, this was very beneficial to them. Another teacher argued that evaluating oneself became a way to figure out whether his learning was successful or not.

The extent to which self-assessment plays a role in promoting LA was the recognition of learners' progress, strength, and weaknesses in their learning. The process of evaluating themselves was a form of LA itself.

"What I understand about LA is that students know what they are learning, they know why they learn that, and they evaluate their learning".
(Interview, R.2)

Once learners recognized their strength, they would maintain it and kept themselves on the track. When they identified what their weaknesses were or in which parts they needed to improve, they searched for strategies they could apply to cope with these drawbacks. When learners figured out they were successful, they tended to be encouraged to make more progress. On the other hand, if they found out that they were not so successful, if they were motivated enough, they would discover ways to be better.

"One of characteristic of LA is able to assess themselves. It means they know their strength and weaknesses. They will know what they need to develop, what material they need to search, which part to improve. In the future, they will find a way to learn by themselves to improve themselves. Knowing what you are and your weaknesses will contribute more to how you will learn by yourself".
(Interview, R.4)

"When they can measure themselves, it helps them to improve on certain parts".
(Interview, R.3)

To sum up, in teaching and learning practice self-assessment encourages students to maintain their achievement, make more progress, search for strategies to improve the weak parts, and find additional materials to support their learning. Those actions are surely fostering the implementation of LA in the classroom.

Teachers' Strategies to Promote LA in Social Dimension

Encouraging Students to Do Collaborative Work

50% of interviewees viewed that group work promoted LA better than the individual one. However, one of those three teacher respondents pointed out that it worked especially with a big size class in which handling each student was a quite complicated thing to do. Working in groups meant that the teacher shared her responsibility with students as those students with better capability could provide assistance to those who were weaker than them. One crucial idea to consider was that in implementing group work in the classroom, the teacher needed to make sure that every student had contribution to the group, which meant the teacher was required to monitor the process. By doing so, some teachers' anxiety related to the group members who only relied on them who were considered to have more advanced capacity can be reduced.

Collaborative activities and tasks enabled the teacher to promote LA in a way that students had social responsibility in which they felt obliged to give contribution to the group. When everybody provided input, students felt the urge that they needed to do at least the same.

"There is a social responsibility in group work so that it raises learners' awareness to study more".
(Interview, R.5)

Another contribution of collaborative work in fostering LA in the classroom was that it enabled students to give comments, recognize what others' strength and weaknesses, and provide correction to others based on what they had learned or the experience they had. Students might be motivated to make improvement as they saw their peers who were better or as they noticed their peers who were weaker than them so that they felt the need to maintain their competence. Group work also provided a big chance for students to exercise their decision-making skill; what part each student should do, what aspect should be discussed more, what points should be presented to the class, what language function should be used, what are the accurate grammar, correct pronunciation, and appropriate expressions, etc. If learners get used to this, it seems that the development of LA will take place.

> "I think it is group, in general, tasks which can promote LA better. In group, when it comes to problem solving, they can do correction to their peers when solving the problem, division of work, evaluating each other".
> (Interview, R.2)

> "Students have more freedom to determine what they ought to do in a discussion".
> (Interview, R.6)

Accomplishing Tasks Individually

Because some teachers found it challenging enough to maintain each student's contribution in a group work, they preferred individual tasks in fostering LA. They argued that the responsibility the students held in individual work was greater than in collaborative work. Whether students wanted it or not, they had to complete tasks by themselves. They could not irresponsibly be dependent to other students with more superior capability. Despite longer time that learners might need in completing personal tasks, it would exercise them to shape their own responsibility for then being ready for a group work as each of them was aware of their responsibility in the group.

> "In individual work, the responsibility is on each student. They will feel they have to accomplish the task as they might need the score, or need to understand the lesson. Responsibility in individual work is greater".
> (Interview, R.4)

The extent to which working alone could foster LA, it could be seen from students' effort to accomplish the tasks. As they could not rely on anybody else, they tended to do their best; recalling their memory, opening their note, checking the dictionary, confirming the sources, etc. The teacher was expected to assist students to discover how they could accomplish the task in an effective and correct manner.

Teachers Strategies to Promote LA in Technical Dimension

Encouraging Students to Do Extensive Listening and Reading Out of the Class

Technical dimension of LA is very much linked with practical strategies done by students in learning independently. One endeavour teachers frequently do was asking their students to be considerably exposed to inputs of English outside the class. Respondents claimed this was one effective way to make progress and increase their willingness to learn. Learners had a wide choice of resources and suited those resources to fit their interest. They might pick songs, videos, movies, TV programs, newspapers, novels, short stories, and many others. However, teachers might need to set a pre-determined procedure to reassure students to do this for example by conducting a sharing session. The teacher held a sharing session each day for students to communicate what they had got outside the class.

Students were mostly doing extensive listening and reading in a relaxed, stress-free and more casual situation compared to classroom environment. Instead of learning the language, they were acquiring the language unconsciously which has a tendency to leave more impression to students' memories. Once students found it very advantageous and enjoyable at the same time, LA was significantly growing here.

> "Students are usually reluctant to learn by themselves. But once they find something interesting to them in English, they will keep doing that. The teacher just directs them to find the appropriate input for them".
> (Interview, R.6)

In this type of activity, the teacher played her role as an initiator, counsellor, and resource. Students were not really exposed to English out there possibly because they had not found sources which fitted their interest. The teacher might have to offer students plenty of various sources for then students could find which one they were really into. If students did this in a consistent way, it would greatly foster LA to happen.

Taking Notes of Important Points

40% of respondents felt that taking note of crucial points in learning was beneficial. Some students had a habit of taking notes while some other did not. They just listened and recorded everything in their memory. Students took notes when they felt that those points were crucial to them. One of respondents said that she rarely asked students to take notes. However, once she asked students to note important details, she argued that students would automatically sort which ones were important and which ones were not or what points they have understood and which parts students needed to further study about.

> "When students think there are things new, important, and needed to know, they feel like need to note that. Other points that they have understood, they might not note that. Students' note will vary and they will learn to recognize from the note

which parts I still need to improve to check their weakness and strength. That will also notify them new things in which they need to find out more".
(Interview, R.3)

In other words, taking notes built students' perspectives on the materials they were learning; perspectives on what were important and what were not, which parts they were good at and which sections required further learning.

Correlating the note-taking activity with encouragement of LA in the classroom might be viewed from students' responses when they saw their notes. At a point of time, when they had an access which then enabled them to realize that some points were not so clear to them, they would find additional sources. Another respondent came up with a good idea that the notes would be very supportive for students in out-of-the-class learning. Students had a guidance and a resource for their independent learning. The notes might be useful in the future as well. When students reviewed their learning progress and materials, the notes could help them to understand certain topics and function as a learning source to them.

> "In the future when students review the lesson, the note will be useful for them. Let say they learn about grammar, there are the formula and function that they write before, they can search for additional materials on the topics they haven't got a good understanding on the grammar. It supports them when they learn outside the class".
> (Interview, R.4)

Teachers Strategies to Promote LA in Political Dimension

Deciding What, When, and How to Learn

Political dimension of TA takes place when students possess the authority to decide any aspects of learning by themselves. They may decide the topics, inputs, activities, tasks, time, and duration of the learning process. However, out of 35, there was only one respondent who applied this strategy of political dimension in the classroom. The majority stated some reasons regarding this finding. First, it was somewhat impossible for them to do so because they were limited by educational system; the curriculum, syllabus, schedule, time allocation, and institution regulation. Especially for the scope of materials, it was already abundant to accomplish in one semester that the teacher did not have any space for students to make decision on the learning process. One of respondents said,

> "Teachers are restricted by curriculum and objectives which should be achieved at the end of program that they are worried if decisions are on students' hands then the objectives is left unfinished"
> (Interview, R.6)

Second, with typically big size classes in Indonesia, it was hard for the teacher to accommodate numerous views coming from students. If the teacher picked up a certain decision from a student, other students might assume that they were less important or less intelligent that that one student. One teacher presented her argument due to this reality. "The class is big, meaning each student have various opinions on their decision. Teacher will feel impossible to give them the chance as students might consider the subject to be not so important, or the topic will be too broad if students choose by themselves". (Interview, R.4)

Third, since most students of the respondents were beginner, those respondents did not put much belief on students' decisions. Let's say students were to make decision on activities in the classroom, those tasks students chose might not be connected to the topic or skill they were learning. One respondent pointed this out in the interview.

> "Mostly, my students are beginner, then I don't really believe them to choose the content and activity. The activities and objective might not be relevant to each other". (Interview, R.2)

This finding is in contrast with some researches results of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), Madrunio et. al (2016), and Lengkanawati (2016) which state that giving students freedom to decide what and how to learn is highly feasible to apply. In reality, teachers rarely do this due to the aforementioned reasons.

Despite those arguments that teachers have stated, another teacher still put a faith on students to make decision. One characteristic of LA was that when students had freedom to some extent to select materials, activities, or time for study. Logically, as students picked up their preferred aspects, they gained the responsibility to accomplish what they had previously set. This one respondent presented an argument that when students acquired a sense of responsibility for their choice, they would feel the urge to complete the tasks or understand the materials. She said,

> "Letting students decide some aspects in their study is a good exercise to promote LA. The most crucial point is that it raises their responsibility and awareness; I choose this activity, I have to finish this".
> (Interview, R.6)

Providing students with the power to make decision is in nature a very effective way to promote LA. Students set their own rules and purpose which means it indirectly commits them with responsibility. What needs to be done by the teacher is that she needs to make sure that the activities are relevant to the topic, the tasks are doable, and no student feels being underestimated.

CONCLUSION

In general, teachers who took part in this present research had a respectable understanding and perspectives towards LA. They confirmed that LA became a vital aspect to promote in ELT practice. From the questionnaire, it was shown that 40% of respondents put their belief on the importance of LA in the classroom in scale 4 and the same amount of 40% in scale 3. As a consequence, teachers felt the urge to transform their effort in fostering LA into the activities in everyday teaching and learning process. Those activities were based on the four dimensions proposed by Benson (2007) namely psychological, social, technical, and political dimensions.

Findings showed teacher respondents established activities in terms of psychological perspective as the ones which were repeatedly used. This finding concurs with a research conducted in Thailand by Tapinta (2016). The two top activities were making students aware of the learning objective and conducting self-evaluation. Encouraging learners to do collaborative work and accomplishing tasks individually were the two activities respondents preferred to implement in their classroom to promote LA in terms of social dimension. Technical dimensions covered two activities which were encouraging students to do extensive listening and reading and taking notes of important point. The last dimension is political in which it presents authority for students to make decision. Letting students decide any aspects in learning turned out to be the least chosen due to some reasons. Teacher respondent who applied this claimed that this action raised awareness on their responsibility.

The activities above are the examples of activities based on the four dimensions that teachers apply in their classroom to promote LA. Those activities are applicable to certain situations and effective to promote LA in particular extent. In adapting the strategies that teacher respondents use in this research, other teachers might want to consider the reasons behind it and the extent to which these activities work in promoting LA in ELT practice. Teachers can make the findings as a reference with their own consideration.

Data collected in this research were from questionnaire and interview. Further research is suggested to include observation to confirm the interview data. Moreover, the research limits its scope in only two activities for each dimension of learner autonomy. Further studies can extend the scope by including more activities that teachers employ in fostering learner autonomy.

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