

*Practices and Challenges of Learner Autonomy in English Learning:
Voices From High and Low Achievers*

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The Asian Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Autonomy of English language learners in EFL contexts has long interested scholars to investigate how autonomy is practiced and ways to promote it. However, there seems less research investigating how learner autonomy is practiced among students from different academic competence levels. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to investigate students' practices and challenges of autonomy in learning English. This study involved two high school students (high and low achievers) in an EFL classroom. Both students' English proficiency was categorized based on academic achievement judgment. The data were collected through online questionnaires designed to gauge students' frequency in carrying out activities supporting learner autonomy and semi-structured interviews asked to ascertain those activities and identify challenges students face in doing the practices. The study's findings reveal contrastive practices in terms of learning quality and material access among the high and low achievers. Likewise, different considerable challenges are found. The high achiever perceives limited time of learning as the most affecting constraint whereas another participant lacks learning motivation since he feels no relevance between English and his real world. Interestingly, the willingness of both low and high achievers to practice autonomy in learning is similar; notwithstanding, they expect the teacher to always provide them with related materials to be learned inside and outside the classroom. The study's results suggest teachers fully encourage and facilitate students to engage them with activities supporting their autonomy.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Autonomy Practices, Autonomy Challenges, High Achiever, Low Achiever

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Introduction

Over the years, there have been growing interests in the promotion of learner autonomy in English language teaching and learning. Many researchers have proven that learner autonomy contributes to the success of English as Foreign Language learning (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019; Rahman & Suharmoko, 2018; Tran, 2020). The studies are in line with the theory of the learner autonomy emergence which tries to specify the roles of teachers and learners in the teaching and learning process. Cotteral (1999) defined the theory of learner autonomy in that it is the movement of teachers and students' roles which used to focus on teachers as presenter, explainer, encourager, and determiner of students' learning and how to assess its result, meanwhile, students are meant to be controlled by those roles of teachers. This issue is a serious challenge regarding the relationships between teachers and learners. Thus, learner autonomy is the result of the challenge and aims to help students to take charge of their own learning (Holec, 1981 and Little, 1991).

In the traditional view of teaching and learning, learners tend to be passive since they are not persons in charge to determine what and how to learn. Instead, all information is provided by teachers, and learners absorb the information with no evaluation and reflection. This traditional view has been gradually replaced and changed by the new shift called learner autonomy. Holec (1981) coined the term learner autonomy in the context of language learning in Europe. Holec mentioned that autonomous learners can define their own goals and strategies for understanding and evaluating their own development in language learning.

Similar issues and challenges exist in English language instruction in Indonesia. Having a look at the *Kurikulum Merdeka* as the new curriculum implemented in Indonesian education, it is strongly suggested that learning is conducted by having a learner-centered approach. (Lengkanawati, 2019). This is due to the fact that skills needed in the era of 4.0 require learners to have soft skills, good characters, and literacy-numeration skills. Regarding these crucial, student-centered learning is one way to develop those skills since it involves criteria such as depth cognitive and social skills, personal growth, and social maturity.

However, English language learning in Indonesia is dominated by teachers. This issue has become a problem since the learning process tends to be teacher-centered. Lengkanawati (2019) revealed that teachers have not well promoted learner autonomy as one of the key objectives in language teaching and learning. Furthermore, it cannot be neglected that learner autonomy still faces a challenge in Indonesian context since the standard norms set in the culture of education emphasize center to teachers. The norms include the principles of total obedience, the unquestioning mind, the concept of elders-know-all, and the beliefs that teachers are always right as well as do no wrong (Dardjowidjojo, 2001).

Promoting learner autonomy has become a challenge since Indonesia's educational setting involves a big classroom of more than 25 students. This results in teachers' difficulty in supporting students to have a learner autonomy attitude. In other words, self-directed learning does not normally happen in most schools in Indonesia. Ramadhiyah (2018) described that the culture of students just being recipients is very popular in Indonesia. Students tend to rely on teachers' explanations and decisions in learning without voicing their own and asking 'why'. Padmadewi (2016) is also in agreement in this situation in that the traditional cultures of students and teachers' role in teaching and learning process leads students to not perceive needs for studying English causing them to be unenthusiastic to take chances in learning.

The fact that learner autonomy is rarely promoted in language teaching and learning in Indonesia has encouraged researchers to investigate the promotion of learner autonomy with different strategies. However, in the Indonesian English language setting, studies on learner autonomy are limited to how teachers perceive learner autonomy, how technology is used in promoting learner autonomy, and how learner autonomy is practiced in university and public high school. However, the practices investigated are generalized among all learners, whereas in reality students vary. This issue has interested the researcher to conduct study on learner autonomy to two different students: high and low achiever. Thus, the present study aims to answer:

1. How is learner autonomy practiced by the high and low achiever?
2. What are challenges encountered by the two different learners to be autonomous in learning?

Method

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive design to describe the phenomenon in the field and provide a rich description of the experience. The qualitative descriptive design seems to be suitable for this study since it attempts to provide detailed information on practices students are likely to undertake to encourage themselves to become autonomous learners in learning English, and challenges students encounter regarding learner autonomy implementation. Moreover, the study is considered as a qualitative descriptive since it will focus on the exploration of learner autonomy at two different levels of students.

Research Participants

The study involved two students with different academic levels, a high achiever and a low one. They were selected based on the teacher's judgment on their academic competence, especially in English learning. There are some reasons underlying the selection of the two participants. To begin with, previous research on learner autonomy was found to generalize students and treat them as the same levels, thus this issue has interested me to conduct a study on learner autonomy to different levels of students. Secondly, there was research I previously conducted to these two participants aiming at revealing their motivation in learning English. The bond has been developed between us and it encourages certain openness in the participants' responses to the researcher's questions in this study. To avoid biases in inappropriate portions, I undertook this study by collaborating with my academic advisor who is an experienced researcher and expertise in the topic of learner autonomy. The participants were distributed questionnaires. In addition, selected students based on the questionnaire results will be interviewed to explore their responses.

Research Instruments

In the study, qualitative data were collected beginning with revealing the participants' tendency in undertaking activities encouraging them to be autonomous through a 5 point *Likert-scale questionnaire*. The questionnaire also aims at answering the first research question regarding practices of learner autonomy the students are likely to undertake. The questionnaire begins with asking students about their perception of their own and the teacher's role in learning and followed by autonomous activities they carry out by using the framework of Joshi (2011). Since this is a qualitative study, a more exploration of students'

responses to the questionnaire was conducted through an open-ended interview to enrich research question 1 and answers research questions 2 (challenging students encounter in carrying out autonomous activities). The interview was also conducted by following the aspects of learner autonomy proposed by Joshi (2011). The selection of this framework was based on the fact that Joshi's is really appropriate to answer both research questions being studies, despite its widely used by previous researchers in the field.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaires were distributed through a google form. After collecting data from the questionnaires, follow up interviews were conducted as well as recorded to selected students based on responses obtained from the questionnaire results. Results from students' questionnaires were analyzed by looking at the items students answer both similarly and differently. After the tendency of activities students undertake is obtained, they were explored more through interviews. Results from the interviews were focused, categorized, and transcribed. The data then were displayed based on Joshi's (2011) framework: perceptions of their own roles and teachers' roles and autonomous activities students are likely to undertake. Lastly, conclusion drawing will be done by referring to research questions 1 and 2.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses results obtained from both online questionnaires and interviews conducted to the high and low achieving students regarding their practices of autonomy and challenges they encountered in learning English.

Practices of Learner Autonomy

Categories specified by Joshi (2011) were used to describe practices of learner autonomy both high and low achievers have. The description consists of the learner's perception of their own and teacher's roles and autonomous activities they carry out. In relation to students' role in learning English, results obtained from the questionnaires show that both participants have quite similar perceptions about their roles as English learners in that students should be all responsible for finding their own ways of practicing English and should build a clear vision of reasons why they learn English. However, completely different voices, if not opposite, were revealed when they were confirmed and explored more through interview, as indicated in the following excerpts:

"I have to be serious in studying because I want to pursue my education abroad. I keep my goals, but I also have to focus on the teacher's goals because they are related. Since I have my personal goals and what is taught at school is also important, I just balance it." (Excerpt from high achiever)

"My goal in learning English is to gain knowledge related to things I initially did not know. I do not have anything more serious such as to prepare myself or work later. I also follow the teacher's way more than my own way in studying English." (Excerpt from low achiever)

The high achiever stated that having clear vision and purpose of learning English is crucial in addition to learning goals specified by teachers, so her purpose does not merely come from herself nor the teacher. She has her own learning goal, to be able to master English since she

wants to later continue her study abroad, but she is also eager to first reach the learning goals set by the teacher. Moreover, she believes that the teacher's learning goal does not contradict her own goal; instead, it helps her to become more fluent in using English. Dissimilar with the voices from the high achiever, the low one has completely different perception on vision of learning English, if not opposite. To him, learning English is simply to gain knowledge on materials he was previously not familiar with. As a result, since he also does not have long-term ambition, learning goals specified by teachers are extremely favored. How both participants perceived their roles in learning English appears to influence their practices of autonomy. While the high achiever tends to combine her own and teacher's way, the low one depends merely on the teacher.

In relation to students' perception of teacher roles, and in line with students' responses above, the questionnaire results show that the high achiever agrees that a lot of learning can be done without the teacher while the low one strongly disagrees with the statement. Notwithstanding, their voices seem to be quite similar after more explored in the interview, as exemplified below:

"In learning, I follow the teacher's way, but I also look for material from other sources, usually via Youtube by listening to songs and then I can find out the meaning of the song. Whenever I face difficulty, I will ask the teacher to explain. The way the teacher teaches really influences me. I agree that if the teacher's way of teaching does not suit me, I will not understand. However, I can study on my own without a teacher if learning resources are provided." (Excerpt from high achiever)

"I can't study without the teacher. I find it more difficult to understand the material because I am not guided, and I become lazy. I hope that the teacher always provides materials and notes for us. If no examples are given, I prefer to copy because I don't understand and I'm afraid of being wrong. If there are things I don't understand, I also need to ask the teacher." (Excerpt from low achiever)

Surprisingly, the high achiever is also dependent on the teacher's way of teaching, if not a hundred percent, despite her previous answer that students should have their own clear vision in learning. Her desire to learn English from resources other than just those provided by the teacher show that she is actually able to learn without the teacher as long as the guidance exists to help her deal with difficulty in learning. The practices actually confirm how scholars have conceptualized learner autonomy, in which it is a quite well-established concept. Holec (1981), as the originator of the concept, stated that learner autonomy is not learning without a teacher. Some previous studies also voice that learner autonomy is strongly connected to teacher's guidance and facilitation, and teachers should employ various supporting strategies (Bozack, A. R, et al, 2008; Yuzulia, 2020; Wiraningsih and Dewi, 2020).

More strong dependence is perceived by the low achiever who relies everything in learning on the teacher's decision. Unlike the high achiever who is able to learn independently in the absence of the teacher, the low one has to struggle with bad habits such as being lazy and cheating. The low achiever is not able to decide whether he should use much self-study materials to learn English, while the high achiever agrees she should do so. The responses from the two participants do suggest the teacher positions herself as a party with multiple roles and has significant influences on students' learning. As stated by Alonazi (2017) that language teachers should be facilitators, counselors, and resources. Being a facilitator means that teachers help learning to make it easier to happen, being a counselor means that teachers

help in identifying and solving students' difficulties in learning, and being a resource means that teachers help learners with knowledge and skills they need. Similarly, Tran and Duong (2018) found that the benefits of learner autonomy can only be felt by students if teachers provide them supportive factors, such as the teacher's autonomy-oriented role. Thus, it is not surprising that both participants agree if the failure of students is directly related to teachers' classroom employment.

Corresponding to autonomous activities students carry out, the participants' practices are totally different in terms of their learning awareness, self-efforts, self-esteem, and motivation. The high achiever's voices reflect that she involves in many autonomous activities, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

"My English ability is still lacking. I find a lot of difficult words in reading. To overcome this I use Google Translate to search for new words. In my free time, I also like to watch movies to enrich my vocabulary and see how people talk. I also take the initiative to speak in class, take notes, read English content on social media, and give myself rewards like going to a salon." (Excerpt from high achievers)

Regarding their learning awareness, the high achiever is aware of her English ability and eager to cope with her English limitations. This awareness results in her high degree of self-effort such as using every opportunity to participate in activities where she can speak English, making notes and summary of lessons learned, using audio-visual materials to develop her speech, and taking risks in learning English. Her self-esteem also increases since she involves herself in various activities to improve her English, so she is able to note her strengths and weaknesses in learning. It is also found that she builds her own motivation such as buying new things due to her success or celebrating it in her own way. When interviewed, her response shows that she terribly involved herself in numerous autonomous activities. Contrary to the optimistic sound by the high achiever, the low one seems to be down beat, as indicated in the following excerpts:

"I can't speak English because it's difficult. I also rarely study and look for other sources. I find a lot of English content on social media, but I only read it. I don't delve into it because I feel lazy. Maybe it's my character. When it comes to assignments, I always do them because I feel sorry for my parents who are often called to school. I often cheat, especially in exams, since I find no relevance between English and my real and future life." (Excerpt from high achiever)

It is very noticeable from the low achiever's statements that he has low motivation in English, and it influences his self-effort and self-esteem which lead to his laziness in doing autonomous activities. He is also trapped in the culture of cheating which really blocks the ability to be autonomous. Cheating culture has been a serious concern in Indonesian students' learning and exams, and it is connected with students' self-control (Ednadita et al, 2020). This issue suggests two important things: (a) self-control development should be focused more by teachers through supporting activities, and (b) attention to low achieving students and their academic dishonesty should be paid more. The neglect of the two aspects can result in students' inability in being autonomous in learning and in their real life after finishing their studies.

Another finding is that the low achiever's judgment on his own English ability, which is very low, causes him to have no intention to cover the weakness. Instead, English serves as an

enemy he avoids. As a result, he puts no effort in learning English and is not interested in learning English. From the two participants' contradictory practices, it can be seen that learners vary in terms of many aspects including motivation which will be discussed below as the challenge students encounter to be autonomous in learning.

Challenges Students Encountered

In relation to challenges students encounter in carrying out activities which support learner autonomy, the findings show different constraints faced by the two participants. As discussed previously, the low achiever expresses pessimism in learning English due to lack of motivation. Continuous bad habits including laziness and cheating have been practiced a lot during learning. Traced back, which he feels no urge to learn English, it leads to his ignorance in studying. The low achiever's excerpts above also show that he believes in the constant character he owns, indolent, causing him to not be eager in making improvement. Ekiz and Kulmetov (2016) argued that socio-functional validity is an important factor in motivation. Learning English as a foreign language may or may not be worthwhile from the student's point of view, depending on its social reality. When students perceive that they need English outside the classroom, they may be eager to learn it. However, students may find it not worth learning when they have no urge to use English outside the classroom or in their daily lives. In other words, if there is no out-of-class validity, language learning misses its functional consequences, and lack of motivation happens among students (Jafari 2013).

This issue implies that students' motivation needs to be paid great attention in addition to language knowledge. Dornyei (1997) stated that helping students to be motivated in the EFL classroom is not an easy task; it is often a difficult and complex task involving a multiplicity of psycho-sociological and linguistic factors. Despite its complexity, teachers, as one of the cores in education, cannot leave this issue from attention due to the fact that motivation contributes much to successful learning, and demotivation happens not merely due to students' internal factor, but also the learning environment (Harmer, 2007; Haynes, 1996).

One of the aspects was explained by Harmer (2007) in that poorly lit and overcrowded classrooms can be excessively demotivating because students may not study as well in uncomfortable situations as they do in more comfortable ones. Haynes (1996) added that positive school climate perceptions are important predictors that can provide students with a favorable learning environment. Students are more likely to participate in the learning process when they are in a compassionate, relaxed, and helpful learning environment. On the other hand, if the learning environment is not designed to ease students in learning such as poor lighting, unsuitable atmosphere, unpreferred order of desks, and disturbing visuals, students are easily unmotivated since those factors demotivate them.

Unlike the low achiever, motivation is not the affecting factor for the high achiever; instead, lack of learning time is the most constraints, as indicated in the following excerpts:

“When there are many tasks, I don't have the opportunity to learn more because it makes me very tired.” (Excerpt from high achiever)

This challenge has something to do with time-management and quantity of tasks and homework given to the students. There is no exact number of task quantities specified by curriculum, but teacher's adjustment with the students' needs is needed and the quality, other than quantity, of the assignments should be more emphasized.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, findings of this study reflect that some different practices of learner autonomy exist among high and low achieving students. The challenges they encounter in carrying out autonomous activities are also not similar; however, both of their results point out that they expect teacher existence and existence in learning. The results disconfirm the misconceptions of learner autonomy which emphasize learning without teachers. Instead, teachers' roles are centered in developing and assisting learner autonomy. Learners should be involved in making decisions for their own learning. All activities done both in the classroom and beyond the classroom including planning and doing actions that the learners do by themselves plays a role in promoting their autonomy. It is the student who is the agent to develop, taking responsibility, and having control over their own learning.

Notwithstanding, it is important to note down that being autonomous in the classroom does not mean that teachers' role in the classroom is banned. Instead, teachers should be able to initiate and stimulate students to be autonomous, especially if the students lack autonomy. Regarding this, some activities and practices should be implemented by teachers so that teachers' roles to encourage students to be autonomous can be enhanced. Stefanou et al (2004) mentioned that there are three practices teachers can do to develop students' autonomy: organizational autonomy support, procedural autonomy support, and cognitive autonomy support. Organizational autonomy support allows students to choose the organization of the classroom. Procedural autonomy support relates to students' right to select among available resources including media and materials of learning. Cognitive support is giving students a chance to evaluate their learning including both during and after the learning process.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) Scholarship for granting my master study and supporting this publication, and my extended appreciation to English Language Education of Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia for assisting the completion of this article.

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