

FOSTERING EFL LEARNER AUTONOMY IN INDONESIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Every teaching practitioner seemingly has come to a common term that language advising is essential in language learning especially in fostering language learner autonomy. However, the issues as to whether teachers also serve as advisors or advisors are also teachers, or whether both play separate roles, or they are actually the same individuals who play different roles are still in controversy. This writing is not trying to claim which one is right and which one is not. This essay is just a little lantern on how actually the roles of advisors are exercised by teachers within the context of Indonesian EFL classrooms. Presumably, the advising teachers in Indonesian setting do not only feel responsible for transmitting knowledge and skills, but also for transforming ideas, advice, morality, values, etc. into their learners within and beyond classroom practices. Thus, the inkling of this essay is briefly addressing both theoretical and practical account of language advising within the spectrum of learner autonomy.

Key Words: *EFL, learner autonomy, Indonesian context*

Introduction

The old paradigm suggesting that teacher's job is merely to teach is now nearly vanished. Teachers no longer transmit the soft-wire, the knowledge and skills, into the blank slates of learners; they no longer spoon-feed the empty pots of students' minds. Nowadays, teachers have changed to be, expectedly, transformative. In transmissive approach, as suggested by Miller (1996), teaching is the act of transmitting knowledge from Point A (teacher's head) to Point B (students' heads). This is a teacher-centered approach in which the teacher is the bearer of knowledge, the judge of truth, and the final evaluator of learning. A teacher's job from this perspective is to supply students with a chosen body of knowledge in a

predetermined order. Conversely, in transformative perspective (Miller 1996), teaching is creating conditions that have the potential to transform the learner on many different levels such as cognitive, emotional, creative, etc. The ultimate transformational goal is to help develop more nurturing human beings who are better able to perceive the interconnectedness of all human, plant, and animal life (Narve 2001).

Learning takes place when experiences elicit a transformation of consciousness that leads to a greater understanding of and care for the self. Academic achievement from this transformational perspective is similar to self-actualization, perceived as discovering and developing each individual's unique talents and capabilities to the fullest extent possible. Self-actualization is synonymous

with autonomous learner, ‘the situations in which a learner, with others, or alone, is working without the direct control of a teacher’ (Dickinson 1987: 5). This learning condition is aimed to attain a capability to perform learning independently, the end goal of a teacher as language advisor (LA). The primary role of teachers here is to enable students to discover and embrace their inner core and develop their interests and unique talents to the fullest extent to which students are engaged in meaningful learning experiences.

Theoretical Assumption

Current teachers have made a major shift from the position of teacher-centred to that of learner-centred. In other words, they have migrated from the old comfort zone of transmissive practitioners towards the more flexible territory of transformative actors. Therefore, we can make theoretical assumptions that 21st century teachers are not just teachers who teach, but teachers who teach as well as advise, termed as “Teacher Plus.” The teachers who are actively engaged in the role of an advisor can better transform learners into more independent learners. Hence, advising teachers create autonomous learners, the ones who have ‘the ability to take charge of their own learning effectively’ (Holec 1981: 3). Advising is not about telling and showing the how-to tips. It is more on shedding for the light for the learners in order for them to learn their distinctive potentials that they can develop in their own cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects, which can lead to an effective and meaningful learning.

Exploratory Question

This essay is projected to answer this exploratory question: How do the Indonesian EFL teachers perceive and practice the roles of language advising in their classroom teaching and beyond for deriving autonomous learners?

Theoretical Framework

Conceptualization of learner autonomy

The idea of autonomous learning is defined as an act of learning whereby motivated learners consciously make informed decision about that learning (Mynard 2011). It is simply about self-learning based on one’s own appraisal of what, how and where to learn. It can be both formal and informal modes. In formal environment, learner autonomy can be incorporated in a variety of ways. This might be a simple focus on the development of good learning strategies or skills, a change in the way that learning activities or resources are organized, or in the way that the class operates (CIEL Project 2000). Hence, the development of learner autonomy (Little 1995) will depend crucially on:

‘the initiatives the teacher takes ... therefore the first step he should take towards developing autonomy in his learners is to negotiate a joint interpretation of the syllabus with them...Such a process is more likely to succeed if it begins by inviting the learners to make explicit what they expect from the learning process and what they can bring to it, than if it begins with a lecture on the benefits of autonomous learning’ (p. 45).

To develop the learners’ autonomy effectively, Nunan (1997: 194) suggests “a scheme for gradually increasing the degree of autonomy exercised by learners...” This envisages two domains: first, the experiential content domain (What) which has to do with topics, themes language functions, etc. with which the linguistic content makes up the syllabus. Second, the learning process domain (How) which has to do with learning tasks and procedures.

Conceptualization of language advising and language advisors

Kelly (1996: 94, cited in Mynard 2011) espouses that advising as “a form of therapeutic dialogue that enables an individual to manage a problem.” Advising is purported to provide guidance to students about their language learning and to encourage the development of learner autonomy (Reinders 2008). It is focused on encouraging students to think about their

language study and of ensuring that they are better prepared for their self-directed learning and thus more likely to succeed. Thus, language advisors are professional helpers in the domain of language learning aiming at empowering students to become self-directed learning. A learning advisor tends to work outside the classroom and outside class time and is available to work with individual learners on their needs (Mynard 2011). Yet, having dedicated learning advisors available in addition to classroom teachers would be very helpful.

Reinders (2008) suggests that language advising is a form of language support that normally consists of one or more meetings (online or face-to-face) between an advisor (often a teacher or dedicated language support person) and a student, usually one-to-one, whose purpose is to provide guidance to students about their language learning and to encourage the development of learner autonomy. In the same vein, Mynard and Carson (2013) define *advising in language learning* as the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths so as to become more effective and more autonomous language learners.

Types of Advising

There are two types of advising (Smith 2002): prescriptive and developmental (cited in Barbuto, et al. 2011: 657). The traditional relationship between student and advisor is described as prescriptive, characterized by the advisor telling students what to do and students carrying on with the advice. Unlike prescriptive advising, developmental advising is marked by the development of the student and advisor relationship in varying degrees. The advisor here develops a stronger relationship with the advisee and they decide their roles within this relationship. Generally, the advising takes place in an extended session, which is negotiated and highly personalized (Reinders 2008).

Functions of Learning Advisors

Learning advisors can bear an endless function. In general, there are ten identified

functions that a learning advisor performs (Mynard 2011: 1). They include: raising awareness of the language learning process; guiding learners; helping learners to identify goals; suggesting suitable materials by offering choices (rather than prescribing activities); suggesting suitable strategies by offering choices, motivating, supporting and encouraging self-directed learners; helping learners to self-evaluate and reflect; assisting students in discovering how they best learn; actively listening to learners; and helping learners to talk through their own problems. In general, advisors use many different skills during their reflective dialogue with learners. Learning advisors usually employ both macro and micro skills (Rutson-Griffiths and Porter 2016). The macro skills that support the institutional agenda, that is to develop autonomy and management of the advising sessions, while micro skills are concerned with reflective listening and building rapport with the learners.

Position of Learning Advisors and Roles of Teachers

There has been a misunderstanding about the roles of a teacher and an advisor. Some people believe that they play the same roles while others think that they are different and therefore play different roles. Rutson-Griffiths and Porter (2016: 260) note a common misconception about advisors that they give advice to learners about immediate problems encountered during language study, the kind of assistance that classroom teachers already provide. Rutson-Griffiths and Porter suggest that although it may be the case that immediate problems are addressed during an advising session, one of the advisor's aim is to encourage reflection about the learning process so that learners ultimately become able to manage their own learning more effectively (p. 261).

Having a teacher serving as a language advisor sounds ideal. However, it is often counterproductive since a teacher has already had his or her own workload that needs optimizing. When he or she handles two roles at the same time, it is always the case

that when one is exercised, it is in the expense of the other. Hence, having separate independent LAs, available in full-time mode in schools, sounds better. LAs tend to work outside the classroom and outside class time and is available to work with individual learners on their needs. Different from language classes that are compulsory, offering learners the opportunity to discuss their learning outside of class can and should be voluntary (Mozzon-McPherson 2007). This indicates that the learners themselves take the ownership for making their own decisions, including the decision about searching for help in the first place.

Method

This small-scale research used case study method as a means to explore and enunciate the phenomenon under study. This particular kind of research concentrates on one thing, namely EFL learner autonomy (how it is viewed and enacted by Indonesian EFL practitioners), and tried to look at it in detail without an intention to draw a generalization from the result of the investigation (Thomas 2011). The cases were taken from three Indonesian EFL teachers currently taking PhD programs in UK who have taught English for a number of years and had practical experiences in facilitating their students to be aware of the importance of an independent learning. A semi-structured interview was opted for the data collection technique and a thematic analysis (finding themes and patterns) was considered appropriate for this type data analysis.

Discussion and Analysis

The discussions are classified into two sections based on three exploratory questions mentioned earlier. All the discussions are based on the results of interviews that have been transcribed and edited available in the matrix (see Appendix II). The discussion, however, does not cover the whole question items due to limited space. The discussions entirely focus on the single exploratory question below.

How do the Indonesian EFL teachers perceive and practice the roles of language advising in their classroom teaching and beyond for deriving autonomous learners?

The answers to this question are categorized from item 3 to 16.

Item 3: Being a la in Addition to a Language Teacher Formally or Informally

The three interviewees mentioned that they had never been formally assigned as a language advisor (LA) in their institutions. However, each of them confessed that once a while they played the role informally when they did teaching. The common case was that they had to provide answers and guidance to their students be it in class or outside the class. In particular, interview 3 stated that he often had to correct students' words, grammar in writing and pronunciation in speaking. Many of the Indonesian students are shy to speak or not confident to speak English probably because of being afraid of making mistakes. Therefore, interview 3 encouraged their students to be confident to express their ideas, feelings and intention in English since making mistakes in language learning is natural and normal.

Item 4: Areas and Ways of Advising

In principle, all of the interviewees have helped students in many areas of language learning. There were at least five most frequently asked areas: speaking, grammar, translation, vocabulary and writing. Many of the students in Indonesia have problems in speaking. They might have learnt the sentence patterns but they cannot smoothly express it in their conversation. Consequently, their speaking ability develops quite slowly. All these LAs applied Smith's (2002) types of advising, namely: prescriptive and developmental (cited in Barbuto, et al. 2011: 657). Interviewee 1 often faced this situation where his students were eagerly wanted to be able to speak the language fluently. Usually, he motivated his students to speak freely without considering right or wrong sentences they might produce.

The other areas where interviewee 1 were often involved in were on grammar and translation. It is true that to translate correctly one has to learn very well, how sentences are construed grammatically. Therefore, when he was advising about translation, he was also advising on grammar. He also advised his students to watch youtube to learn how native speakers speak their language so that the students can imitate them as near as possible. Interviewee 2 had another focus (vocabulary) when doing the advising. His students were wondering how to keep as many words as possible in their mind which can help them in reading and writing. What he suggested was strategic. According to him, the best ways to increase our vocabulary were by writing the new words on papers then stuck them on tables, walls, and windows in their own rooms or houses so that students could see them easily every day.

In terms of speaking, interviewee 2 advised his students to have someone to talk to on daily basis. Interview 3 was focused on students' writing ability. He said that it is important for students to be able to construct correct sentences, write ideas, and compose a paragraph or an essay. Thus, all of the interviewees shared the same ideas that students need proper advice in certain areas in language learning. Those areas are actually interconnected one another.

Item 5: Raising the awareness of the learners about the importance of learning process

There were three different areas of language awareness the interviewees advised to their students. They included 1) awareness of the importance of practice, 2) awareness of English values and 3) awareness of good writing. According to interviewee 1, students have to be aware that language learning is very challenging. Language learning, in his view, is not a matter of reading books or watching videos then they become proficient users of English. He adds that language is mostly a skill; therefore, students have to take time and pain practicing their language. Without which language will not result anything and will not improve anything.

The second awareness, values of English, highlights added values students can gain from understanding English well. Interviewee 2 took an example of invaluable information contained in newspapers, which students will never grasp if they learn English very poorly. This is true since most of the science and technology are stored in English archives. Many recent invention and research findings are recorded in English. Hence, if students learn English well, they can access those knowledge and information easily and they can cope with current trends and advancement of science and technology.

The last awareness was focused on the ability to write logically and structurally correct. If students, he asserts, do not master English well, especially in academic writing, they will find it hard to express their ideas clearly and meaningfully. Thus, mastering English properly is a demand in current decades that can help students to keep tract on scientific discovery and academic enhancement. This, certainly further develop students' perspectives on science and technology development.

Item 7: Helping to identify learners' learning goals

All of the interviewees came to a common term that they have helped their learners to identify their learning goals. Coincidentally, their learning goals happened to be the same mostly, that is, they learn English in university because they wanted or would be an English teacher at school. Some other deviated yet related goals were that they wanted to go abroad, they wanted to get Master degree overseas, and they wanted to go travelling. The second interviewee, especially, strongly reminded their students that they had to have a good master of English so they could be a good teacher at school. Consequently, all attributes of a good English teacher should be in their mind right from the beginning of their language learning.

Item 8: Suggesting suitable materials (matching learners' needs) by offering choices

Two of the interviewees did involve their students in deciding what materials to teach. For instance, interviewee 1, he always asked their students in the first meeting regarding, for example, the reading materials that they were interested in. He just offered some topics and let their students decide what sort of materials they wanted to learn. They used negotiated and highly personalized approaches (Reinders (2008). Here, it is important to keep students' interest and attention to contents of the reading materials. He wanted his students to be more engaged in the classroom. Therefore, in most of his teaching activities, he usually used student-centred approach, where students' needs and interest are put above the teachers'.

The third interviewee also did a similar thing. He always tried to intensely involve his students in deciding what to learn, how to learn and how to evaluate especially in the first meeting. He used to do so-called "students need analysis" in the hope that his class would run smoothly as all related technical aspects have already been settled down. Different from the other two interviewees, interviewee 2 openly declared that he has never done it, never involved his students in any subject related decisions. He assumed that he knew what his students wanted as he used to be a student and knew the psychology of the students. Thus, he simply took the role of a controller in this respect. Yet, he admitted that it could be a good idea to involve students in curriculum decisions in the future in the hope that the students would learn what they actually want to learn.

Item 9: Helping learners to do self-evaluation and reflection on their language learning

There were two interviewees who claimed that they asked their students to do a kind of self-evaluation. Interviewee 1, for instance, said that he always asked his students to talk to their peers and ask for the input from them concerning the weaknesses so they could know what to improve in the future. The input could come from different individuals who could provide different evaluation for improvement. Another way of doing this

was, in interviewee 1's view, asking students to read some reading passages and asked them to answer some comprehension questions and see how many were correctly or wrongly answered.

The second opinion, from interviewee 3, explains that he asked students to make some written 'reflection' about what they have learnt successfully, what they have failed to learn, what they have understood clearly and what they have not been able to understand. This is in conjunction with the advisor's aim, which is to encourage reflection about the learning process so that learners ultimately become able to manage their own learning more effectively (Rutson-Griffiths and Porter 2016: 261). In this way, the teacher would have a clearer idea regarding the appropriate area that needs enhancing and what is not. Unlike interviewees 1 and 3, interviewee 2 boldly stated that he did not ask his students to do a self-evaluation. He just did it himself since he was not quite familiar with the procedures of self-evaluation.

Item 12: Active listening to learners' voices

All of the interviewees have similar points where they were actively listening to their students' voices. Since the number of students in a class sometimes exceeded 100 students, according to interviewee 1, he could not listen to every individual. Normally, he would consider the voice of the class. If, for example, the class voice wanted him to teach them about a certain topic, then he would take that into account. Interviewee 2 also performed a good listening in which he tried not to be tempted to correct every single sentence or to identify all mistakes in his students' talk. He focused more on the message delivered. Interviewee 3 did the listening through students' writing. He tried to make notes on what his students put in their writing. He tried to find a good way out for any situation faced by his students.

Item 14: Giving solutions for learners' learning problems or helping them discover their own solutions

The three interviewees share quite similar ideas. They differed in their actualization. Interviewee 1, for instance, would not leave his students with unsolved problems. He had to give them his solutions first. If the offered solutions did not match students' cases, then he would help them discover their own solutions. So, it really depends on two things: the nature of the problem and the kind of solutions they sought. According to interviewee 2, students came to us because they needed our solutions so we had to give the solution to them. Since we used to be a learner and now become a teacher, we heavily rely on our experiences. Interviewee 3 had a slightly different conception. In his view, very few students could solve their own problems. Even if they got solutions from us, they seemed reluctant to do it. They tried to gain compensation for not doing what they were supposed to do.

Item 16: Urgency of having LAs at every school / university formally or embedded within the roles of language teachers

Interviewee 1 believed that LA is needed in both schools and universities. Yet, this role should be set formally and separately. It is not a part of teachers' job. Teacher should focus on their classroom teaching and learning. This LA does not only work in the classroom but can be anywhere. Logically, an LA should be someone who is not a teaching practitioner.

In line with interviewee 1, interviewee 2 spelled out that in Indonesia, the schools can have LAs but the LAs should come from their own institutions to prevent a sense of gap, not good feeling from the teachers inside. Otherwise, they will question the different status between the advisors and them. According to interviewee 3, autonomous learning is not just about how the learners learn autonomously, it is related with ideas that they can reach. To create an autonomous learning atmosphere, he asserts, the institution should also provide materials or resources such as hard copy resources, soft copy resources, or just links to other resources. He suggested that the institution should build a mechanism to improve students' learning autonomy.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be inferred that the idea of establishing learner autonomy cannot be separated from the profession of language advisors whose jobs and responsibility are to ensure that the mechanism of autonomous learning run properly in schools and universities. There are few students who can be autonomous learners without direct guidance and supervision from language advisors. However, the majority of students relies on the caring hands of language advisors. Therefore, both schools and universities should have sufficient language advisors ready to hand an encouraging support and assistance for students. This even becomes more fitting for Indonesian schools and universities where English serves as a foreign language where it is not used as a means of daily communication and a means of classroom instruction. Many of Indonesian students learn English better not in schools or universities but in informal language courses offering more dynamic classes with intensive care and guidance of well-trained language advisors. If the very notion of learner autonomy is wished to run effectively where students are 'capable of taking charges of their own learning' (Holec 1981: 3), all stakeholders concerned have to have a shared idea of the important values LAs can bring about for the success of students' learning and education in the future. To end, if the first option, having separate LAs, gets stuck, then teachers, though not particularly assigned for acting as LA, can and should be equipped with knowledge and skills of professional LA. At least, they can teach with a great care.

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