

## **Engaging Students' Autonomous Learning Across Vocational Secondary Schooling: Teachers' Role and Challenge**

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### ***Abstract***

*In the industrial revolution 4.0., autonomous learning is considered as a desirable goal in English language teaching and learning in Indonesia. The movement towards learner-centered approaches has resulted in more emphasis on the benefits of learner autonomy in the success of English language teaching and learning. The research examines the capabilities of vocational secondary English teachers in Probolinggo, East Java, Indonesia to engage students' autonomous learning. The term capabilities refers to substantive freedom or opportunities that English teachers hold to do and to be a certain thing that they consider valuable. Data for the study were generated through interviews with twenty vocational secondary English teachers across remote area, urban area, Pesantren and state vocational secondary school. English Teachers were interviewed by autonomous learning issues based on their knowledge and understanding of these issues. Further, data were obtained from classroom observations and analysis of curriculum documents which include the national curriculum framework of Indonesia, English teachers' syllabi and lesson plans. Data analysis is qualitative. The study revealed that vocational secondary English teachers in Probolinggo are still problematic and facing several challenging particularly in view of autonomous learning which was centered on traditional didactic and teacher-directed modes of delivery. This indicates that Indonesian vocational secondary English teachers in Probolinggo are not effectively engaged in autonomous learning in spite of their concerted efforts to do so.*

***Keywords : English language learning, learner autonomy, teachers' role and teachers' challenge***

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## **Introduction**

The concept of autonomous learning entered the field of English language teaching in 1970s (Benson, 2001: 8). It can be considered a new concept in the English Language teaching, furthermore in Indonesia. Not many educators and students in Indonesia are aware of this concept. There seems to be a common view among them that learning autonomy merely means that students learn by themselves, in the absence of a teacher.

The traditional educational culture in Indonesia has been obedience to teachers i.e. students were expected to obey and not to challenge their teachers. Additionally, teachers in Indonesia are still occupying teacher-centered approach, thus students become dependent towards their teachers (Karim, 2011). Many students who enter higher educational institutions still bring this trait with them; therefore they lack autonomy in their learning. Crome et al (2009) states that students coming to university are less capable of autonomous learning than before and that secondary education has not sufficiently prepared students for the challenge of autonomous learning at university.

Based on the informal observations in several English classes among vocational secondary schooling in Probolinggo, East Java, the English teachers showed the lack of autonomy in their English Language Learning. For example, the students keep silent when the teacher asked them questions, and they did not actively get involved in the class activities. They also keep silent when there were things that they did not understand during the class, and did not raise questions to the teacher. In addition, some students did not do the assignments given by the teacher: students were unprepared when the teacher gave them a quiz or a test without any notification beforehand; and when the teacher could not come to class and teach, the students used the time for things other than studying.

It seems that there is no significant step undertaken to promote autonomous language learning within the classroom. Learning is mainly directed and evaluated by the teacher, and the students are seen as passive receivers of information. They are unlikely to develop the skills necessary to control and to assess their own learning progress.

The situation above is unfavorable for the teaching learning process and needs to be minimized. English language teachers need to raise students' awareness about autonomous learning and to promote it to students. At this stage, English teachers should engage learner autonomy by acknowledging different ways to goal attainment and learning styles, minimizing external pressure, fostering an intrinsic motivation, and sharing responsibility with the students in the learning process. This can be done by using various techniques and activities which later will be elaborated in this paper.

In the industrial revolution 4.0., autonomous learning has been one of the most discussed issues in language learning for the last three decades. The shift in second language education has influenced the various ways in which language teaching and learning are conducted and conceived. There has been a gradual shift from traditional approaches to communicative language teaching approach and learner-centered approach. Learner autonomy is considered as one of the major changes accompanied the shift in the second language education because it emphasizes the role of the learner rather than the role of the teacher. Thus, the notion of autonomy in language learning is historically and theoretically associated with communicative language teaching (CTL) (Nunan, 2000).

Today, learner autonomy is considered as a desirable goal in language education. It is the main goals in education is assisting individuals to view learning as a life-long process and to learn in a self-directed way. Actually, the movement towards learner-centered approach has resulted in more emphasis on the benefits of learner autonomy in the success of language learning. It is seldom to find independent and autonomous learners in a teacher-centered learning environment (Weimer, 2002). Being autonomous learners is important because the most competent learners are those who have developed a high degree of autonomy (Little, 1991)

The concept of learner autonomy has become a popular topic in the modern language education. Although there are different definitions and descriptions of learner autonomy in the literature, it can be generally defined as the ability to take responsibility of one's own learning. Learner autonomy is

sometimes misunderstood in a way that it can be realized without a teacher. In fact, teachers are responsible for developing autonomous learners through their roles and practices in the classroom. Little (1996) states that learners usually do not automatically take responsibility for their learning but they need teachers to help them to do that. Teachers should have other roles than just being the source of knowledge to students. By changing their traditional role to the role as an organizer or facilitator, teachers help their students to be more responsible for their own learning.

There are many definitions of autonomy proposed by some experts. Benson (2001:47) assert that autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own learning. Autonomy as the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and implementation of those decisions". Besides, autonomy includes the notion of interdependence, i.e. learners are able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts constructively.

Holec (1981) states that autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning and the ability to have and to hold the responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of learning such as determining the objectives, defining the content and progression, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired. Briefly, Autonomy means the capacity of making decisions at successive stages of the learning process.

Crome et al (2009) assert that autonomy as the ability to think and act critically and independently, to self-manage study and learning, and realistically to appraise one's strengths and weaknesses as a learner. They further explain that the capacity for autonomous learning is recognized by its expression in various forms, such as the ability to search for, read, and understand relevant primary and secondary materials: to explain an issue in oral and written form to others: and to demonstrate an awareness of the consequences of what has been learned.

Little (2011) states that autonomous learners means to understand the purpose of their learning program, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and

executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness. This means that the practices of learner autonomy require a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others.

Thanasoulas (2002) asserts that the term autonomy has been used in five ways: (1) for situation in which learners study entirely on their own; (2) for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning; (3) for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; (4) for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning and ((5) for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning. From the definition above, we can see that autonomy cannot be easily defined. Autonomy can be seen as learner's behavior or capacity, and it can be expressed through a range of activities and skills. Furthermore, Thanasoulas (2000) asserts that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials methods and tasks, exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation.

Benson (2001:85) states that some characteristics of autonomous learners as follows: (1) methodological and disciplined; (2) logical and analytical; (3) reflective and self-aware; (4) demonstrate curiosity, openness and motivation; (4) flexible; (6) independent and interpersonally competent; (&) persistent and responsible; (8) venturesome and creative; (9) show confidence and have a positive self-concept; (10) independent and self-sufficient; (11) have developed information seeking and retrieval skills; (12) have knowledge about, and skill at, learning process; (13) develop and use criteria for evaluating. These characteristics show that the learners should be able to do in order to manage their learning effectively. To achieve success in developing these characteristics, students need to be presented with autonomous learning opportunities and support in the development of the necessary strategies to be successful.

Little (2001) states that there are two reasons of trying to make learners autonomous. First, if learners are reflectively engaged with their learning, it will

be more efficient and effective, because it is more personal and focused. The efficiency and effectiveness of autonomous learner means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom. Second, if learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is solved. Autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning, and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation. In the case of foreign language there is a third reason. If language learning depends on language use, learners who have a high degree of social autonomy in their learning environment should find it easier to master the full range of discourse roles on which effective communication depends.

Little (2001) asserts that in educational contexts, learner autonomy entails reflective involvement in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating learning. Language learning depends on language use, so in language learning, the scope of learner autonomy is constrained by what learners can do in the target language. And the development of autonomy in language learning is governed by three basic pedagogical principles: (1) learner involvement, i.e. engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process; (2) learner reflection i.e. helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning; (3) appropriate target language use, i.e. using the target language as the principal medium of language learning.

Teachers' role in developing autonomous language learning should be taken into account and never be ignored. In the relevant literature, there are many theoretical research articles and books on the roles of language teachers while empirical studies are quite limited (Han, 2014). Additionally, most of the studies on learner autonomy were mainly conducted in universities. Therefore, studies in secondary school contexts deserve much investigation. Although promoting learner autonomy has been considered an educational goal in several contexts, cultural and educational settings greatly affect the way teachers incorporate its principles into their teaching practices (Yildirim, 2012). Thus, it is imperative to

examine the current roles that EFL secondary school teachers play in order to promote learner autonomy in Indonesia context.

There have been few studies conducted on learner autonomy in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Existing studies have investigated the topic from a different perspective as an illustration Chan, Spratt, and Humphrey (2002), Ming (2009), Littlewood (2000), Yildirim (2008), Ustunluoglu (2009), and Hozayen (2011) discussed on the effect of culture and the educational context in which students learn English on learner perceptions and readiness for autonomous learning. Other researchers have investigated the relationship between learner autonomy and English language proficiency. For giving an illustration Dafei (2007), Mineishi (2010), and Maftoon, Daftarifard and Lavasani (2011) asserted that learners' autonomy and their English proficiency level were positively and linearly correlated.

Furthermore, Tok (2010) and Varol and Yilmaz (2010) examined the relationship between learner autonomy and gender. The authors concluded that although there were no significant differences between the types of autonomous learning activities that males and females engaged in, females tended to engage in a greater number of activities than males. Other researchers examined the most effective ways of promoting EFL learner autonomy. For instance, Xhaferi (2011) Lo (2010), Sirina and Buyukduman (2010), Vickers and Ene (2006), and Bayat (2010) inference that portfolios, learner diaries, vocabulary notebooks, and learners' engagement in autonomous classroom activities are effective ways of promoting learner autonomy.

Researchers on learner autonomy emphasize that learner autonomy is crucial to effective language learning, but at the same time they suggest that intensive support is needed. Autonomy helps learners apply the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom in real life situations that may arise outside the classroom. In Indonesian learning contexts, English teachers often complain about their learners' learning habits of over-reliance on the teachers. They feel frustrated for the little response they get in return for the efforts they devote to their classes. Before implementing any interventions that aim at promoting autonomous

learning, many areas need to be investigated first. One essential area is to have adequate information about the roles that teachers should adopt in order to encourage learner autonomy.

The following are the research questions: (1) what types of role that Indonesian vocational secondary English teachers play in order to engage students' autonomous learning? (2) what are the challenges that Indonesian vocational secondary English teachers meet in applying of students' autonomous learning?. On the basis of the research question, this study explores the process of teaching and learning across vocational secondary schooling in the regency of Probolinggo Indonesia. The study identifies the participating teachers' role and teachers' challenge that potentially lead to teachers' professional learning and development of capabilities to teach English in autonomous learning.

This study contributes to a better understanding of how teachers' views on learner autonomy are demonstrated in their teaching practices in Indonesia EFL context. It also provides empirical support for identifying the challenges that constrain the promotion of autonomy in language classrooms and examines their relation with the notions found in language learning literature. In Indonesia, very little research has been conducted on teacher and learner autonomy. As a result, this study aims to address this gap in the research with the goal of making promoting learner autonomy an appropriate pedagogical goal in Indonesia EFL environment.

### **Research Method**

The researcher has employed a descriptive survey design in this study. Sekaran (2003) assert that using descriptive research helps the researcher to fully comprehend characteristics of the participants and phenomena. Since this study focuses on the actual roles that English language teachers play in fostering learner autonomy, the descriptive method is appropriate for addressing the research questions and finding the research outcomes. The research instrument for this study is a interview constructed by the researcher. Items on the interview were constructed from the researcher's knowledge and the literature reviewed on



learner autonomy. In the current study, the population consists of vocational secondary school teachers in Probolinggo. The sample is selected randomly. The study sample consists of twenty EFL teachers. The participants are vocational school teachers teaching in Probolinggo, Indonesia during the academic year 2018-2019. They are different in their teaching experiences and educational qualifications. The main instrument used for the purpose of data collection is a interview.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Findings**

Teacher as facilitator is a commonly used term in the literature on communicative language learning, autonomous language learning and self – instruction language learning. Furthermore, teacher's role as facilitator is to encourage their learners' autonomy. By serving as a facilitator, teachers make the development more flexible and successful. A facilitator provides the technical support by helping learners to plan and carry out their independent learning by means of needs analysis, objective setting, work planning, and the materials selecting. A facilitator provides the psychological support by being supportive helping learners to overcome obstacles being prepared to enter into a dialogue with learners and raising learners' awareness of the importance of independent learning.

The practices of English teachers become a learning facilitator which indicates that the respondents often play the role of facilitator in order to promote autonomous learning. The following are teaching practices for the role "facilitator" namely helping students to set up their own learning objectives, encouraging students to reflect on their learning process, helping students to evaluate their own learning and progress and helping students to select their learning materials.

Teacher as a counselor is another role that is widely used in the discussion of language learning autonomy. A counselor refers to a person who provide advice to those who need it counseling assists learners to talk to someone about

their achievements, problems, and the ways to solve these problems. The role of a counselor is more like a supervisor who help learners to be more self-directed.

With regard to the practices of English teachers for the role of a counselor which suggests that the English teachers often play the role of counselor in order to promote learner autonomy. The following are teaching practices for the role “counselor” namely being positive and supportive especially when giving feedback, encouraging students to make study plans, identifying psychological problems that inhibit students’ progress, making dialogues with students to find solutions for their learning difficulties with students to find solutions for their learning difficulties and making students aware of the skills and strategies needed to learn by their own.

Compared to the teacher roles of facilitator and counselor, the role of resource is less explored in the literature. The teacher as a resource enhances learning conditions to encourage learner autonomy by assisting learners to be aware of a wide range of knowledge resources and learning strategies. The role of the teacher as resource become activity builders, creators of new learning environments, fostering autonomy implies that learners get appropriate resource material available for use either as individuals or in groups.

The following are teaching practices for the role “resource” namely encouraging students study with their peers, suggesting tools and techniques for self-assessment, using computer based learning materials, encouraging students to read English books, magazines and newspaper outside classroom, selecting websites, videos or online dictionaries that motivate students to use the target language outside the classroom and using internet-based activities. The benefit of the internet is that student can study whenever they want using an unlimited range of authentic materials. The significant internet-based activities include writing e-mails and joining on-line discussion which provide opportunities for collaborative learning. Hence, students can interact with other students, teachers, and target language users. There are also many websites providing English learning sources and activities which can be utilized by the students to improve their skills.

There is an e-learning program developed by the computer center of vocational secondary school two Kraksaan Probolinggo. It has some features which support the teaching learning process such as courses, quizzes, discussion forum, e-mail and chatting. English teachers can upload the learning materials, tasks, tests, and links to other online resources. Students can download materials, upload their homework, and have discussions with the teacher and other students through discussion forum or chatting facility. As a result, when an English teacher cannot come to the class to teach, they can use e-learning to guide the students in learning English comprehensively.

The role of the teacher as manager and organizer is considered as the first and foremost role teacher needs to play in an autonomous learning setting. In a learner-centered classroom, the teacher should be responsible for organizing different kinds of games and activities such as role play, group discussions, presentations and debates. The different activities need to be effective and suitable for the learners' needs and interest. The following are teaching practices of the role as manager and organizer namely giving learners opportunities to tell their opinions in their learning activities at the classroom management, explaining the purposes and the significances of the tasks assigned to students and organizing different kinds of games and activities at the classroom cheerfully.

In other words, the challenges among English teacher meet in engaging learner autonomy are roles and regulations of the schools restrict the teachers' freedom in making choices on their teachings, students' lack the skills for autonomous learning, teachers' lack the essential strategies to promote learner autonomy, teacher themselves are not autonomous, and technology is not effectively implemented in language learning.

### **Discussion**

As stated by some experts, autonomous language learning is important and can lead towards language proficiency. Autonomous learners will be better language learners and motivated learners. Their learning will become more efficient and effective. With regard to the first objective of the study, the results showed that vocational secondary EFL teachers often play multiple roles in order

to promote learner autonomy. Ranked from the highest to the lowest, these roles are resource, classroom manager, counselor, and facilitator. The roles of the language teacher in an autonomous environment as a facilitator who encourages decision-making processes, a counselor who reacts to the constant needs of learners, and a resource who makes his or her knowledge and expertise available to the learners when it is needed. In a learner autonomous classroom, a teacher becomes more of a manager, a resource and a counselor.

The results indicated how frequently teachers implement different teaching practices in their classrooms with relation to each role. It was found that vocational secondary EFL teachers play the role of facilitator through encouraging the students to reflect on their learning process and helping them evaluate their learning progress. Besides being used in communication, the target language should also be used as a tool for reflections and channel for learning. The results also showed that other strategies such as involving students in selecting objectives and materials for their learning are occasionally implemented. In order to foster learner autonomy successfully, teachers need to shift from being knowledge transmitters to learning facilitators. This requires teachers to involve learners in selecting and modifying both the content and the process of their learning.

The current study findings revealed that teachers usually play the role of a counselor through strategies such as being supportive and positive, especially when providing feedback and making dialogues with the students to find solutions for their learning difficulties. Teachers seem to play the role of resource mostly through selecting and evaluating the resources according to the students' needs, using technology in their educational materials and suggesting websites, videos or online dictionaries that motivate students to use the target language outside the classroom. Undeniably, the new technology has significantly expanded the ways in which teachers can create a motivating learning environment.



Picture 0.1. English Teachers across vocational secondary schooling

The study sample teachers highlighted constraints that hinder the development of learner autonomy. As agreed with 8 EFL teachers, these constraint include learners' lack of independent learning skills, rules and regulations applied in school and teachers' lack of the basic strategies to encourage autonomous learning. The study data also revealed that 8 EFL teachers expressed agreement that schools policy is not supporting their autonomous teaching that institutional pressures and institutional inflexibility were obstacles on learner autonomy.

### **Conclusion and Suggestion**

Students entering higher education might lack autonomy in language learning because their learning experience in the secondary level is usually teacher-centered. Therefore, English teachers among vocational secondary schooling in Probolinggo should make their students aware of learning autonomy to improve the learning process. There are many ways of engaging autonomous learners, and students are free to choose the ones which are suitable for themselves However, teachers should also guide the students in developing learning autonomous learners. When autonomy has been fostered in English language learning, teachers and students can expect for a better language performance and students' personal development. Another point is that future researchers may need to allocate a longer time span in the field in order to develop and investigate more closely the complex issues of students' autonomous learning in particular classrooms. Research with more longitudinal designs and a wider

range of data sources and multiple perspectives will not lend itself to just simple answers and solutions. Hence, it is important to suggest the larger context for future research in that teachers are certainly not free from a system that frequently demands a narrow dimension of measureable outcomes as indicators of success for schools, teachers, and students. In-service teachers should be exposed to professional development programs such as courses, workshops or seminars on learner autonomy to equip them with the best strategies of fostering autonomy.

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#### **BIO STATEMENT**

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