SHAPING AUTONOMOUS LEARNERS IN EFL ONLINE LEARNING

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengulas fenomena otonomi pembelajar dalam konteks pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing di Indonesia. Otonomi pelajar telah menjadi topik yang signifikan dalam pendidikan bahasa baru-baru ini sebagai hasil dari penekanan pada refleksi dan tanggung jawab pelajar untuk proses belajarnya sendiri. Banyak guru bahasa, di sisi lain, yang berkomitmen pada pemusatan dan otonomi pembelajar, berjuang dalam hal bagaimana memelihara otonomi pembelajar atau setidaknya untuk mewujudkan konsep otonomi pembelajar di kelas bahasa terutama dalam konteks pembelajaran saat ini yang telah bergeser dari pembelajaran tatap muka menjadi pembelajaran online, dan kini mulai berubah menjadi pembelajaran tatap muka dan atau blended learning. Tujuan studi ini adalah untuk mengulas permasalahan dan cara untuk membentuk otonomi pembelajar di kelas bahasa Inggris. Kesimpulannya, membentuk pembelajar otonom dalam lingkungan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing harus mempertimbangkan prinsip-prinsip pembelajaran otonom. Pendampingan guru tidak boleh absen selama proses pembelajaran bahasa melainkan memfasilitasi proses tersebut, walaupun inti dari belajar otonom adalah menuntut peserta didik untuk belajar secara mandiri.

Kata kunci: pembelajar otonom, Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing, pembelajaran online

Abstract

The paper focuses on learner autonomy in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning context in Indonesia. Learner autonomy has become an essential topic in recent language education due to an emphasis on learner reflection and taking responsibility for one's learning processes. Many language teachers who are committed to learner-centeredness and autonomy struggle with how to nurture student autonomy or at the very least to promote the concept of learner autonomy in the language classroom, especially in the current context of learning which has shifted from face-to-face to online learning, and now starting to change into face-to-face and or blended learning. The study's objective is to ascertain the ways and issues shaping learner autonomy in EFL online classrooms. In conclusion, shaping autonomous learners in an EFL environment should consider the principles of autonomous learning. Teachers' assistance should not be absent during the language learning process but facilitate the process, even though the essence of autonomous learning is to require learners to learn independently.

Keywords: autonomous learner, EFL, online learning

1. Introduction

The current regulation of the Indonesian goverment due to pandemic Covid-19 toward the education system is restricted face-to-face learning or in-person learning. All education units at the first, second, and third levels of the implementation of public activity restriction, known as PPKM (*Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat*), are required to conduct restricted face-to-face learning under the Public Activity Restriction Act starting from January 2022. Regional governments should not prohibit face-to-face learning for individuals who fit the qualifications, nor are they permitted to impose more stringent requirements. The students' capacity and the learning process duration are determined based on the coverage of the 2nd vaccination doses of teachers and staff in each education unit. It is also seen from the vaccination of community residents at the district/city level, except educational units located in particular geographic areas as determined by the Minister of Education and Culture, Research and Technology (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi [Kemendikbudristek], 2021).

Concerning the English as a Foreign Language [EFL] learning and teaching context in Indonesia, it appears that there are many challenges not only about the technologies used but also about how to support the success of the language learning carried out at schools. Due to particular considerations, many parents have not yet permitted their children to go to schools for in-person learning activities, even though they have prepared the health protocols due to pandemic Covid-19. Consequently, the classes are conducted in a hybrid-learning and or blended-learning setting. Some learners engage in class in person, while others do so online in an approach known as "hybrid learning." Teachers use technology like video conferencing to simultaneously teach online and in-person learners.

On the other hand, blended learning combines face-to-face instruction with online learning activities. Some parts of the course are completed online, while others are completed in person (Steele, 2022). The impact of this condition is that the teacher should pay thorough attention to the learners' learning autonomy. How successful the learners are in a hybrid learning and or blended learning course may be attributed to their level of autonomy as learners. Students are expected to take responsibility for working online during self-study hours away from the classroom (Sharma, 2017, p.280). This circumstance implies that shaping autonomous learners in EFL online learning context is essential.

Shaping autonomous learners are essential. There are three main arguments for making learners autonomous within the second and or foreign language learning. First, autonomous

learning is more efficient and effective because it is more personal and focused. Autonomous learning is more likely to support learners' more significant goals. Second, if learners are proactive in their commitment to learning, the problem of motivation is solved by definition; In contrast, autonomous learners may not always feel optimistic about all aspects of their learning. They have developed the reflective and attitude-forming resources necessary to overcome temporary motivational setbacks. Third, a high degree of social autonomy in the learning setting should make it easier for learners to acquire the complete spectrum of discourse roles required for effective spontaneous communication. (Little, 2003)

Most research has proven the value of emphasizing learner autonomy, whether in an offline or online learning setting of EFL learning. Some studies have been focused on hybrid and or purely online learning, such as in virtual classes (Bedoya, 2014), in hybrid learning (Shams, 2013), and online learning settings (Yosintha & Yunianti, 2021). The studies showed that learners showed positive attitudes regarding their autonomy during EFL learning. Additionally, they indicated that teachers' ways of developing course design and platform selection had supported the learners' autonomy.

Due to the importance of learning autonomy, this paper explores the paradigm of language learning autonomy and how to promote autonomous learners in an EFL online learning setting. This study aims to provide insight for the betterment of the implementation of online learning in Indonesia, particularly the development of learners' autonomy. Teachers, in particular, can utilize this writing as a resource for organizing classroom activities and generating learning materials that will aid in the development of learners' autonomy and independence.

2. Discussion

2.1. Autonomous Learners

There are various definitions of autonomy. Learner autonomy is defined as the "ability to take charge of one's learning", which means

> [...] to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.:
> - determining the objectives;
> - defining the contents and progressions;
> - selecting methods and techniques to be used;
> - monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);
> - evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, 1981, cited in Little, 1991)

Language learner autonomy engages learners into self-reliant activities:

'language learner autonomy' denotes a teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their learning. From the beginning, they do this as far as possible in the target language, which thus becomes a channel of their individual and collaborative agency. By exercising agency in the target language, they gradually develop a proficiency that is reflective as well as communicative, and the target language becomes a fully integrated part of their plurilingual repertoire and identity. (Little, 2022)

Moreover, according to Richard (2016), "learner autonomy refers to the principle that learners should take an increasing amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it.". Because autonomous learning is tailored to the requirements and preferences of the learners, it is said to be more personal and focused. As a result, it provides higher learning results than traditional learning methods.

When autonomous learners accept responsibility for their learning and devote themselves to developing self-management abilities, they draw on their intrinsic motivation. All learning is likely to succeed to the extent that the learner is autonomous. Furthermore, because of the efficiency and effectiveness of the autonomous learner, the information and abilities learned in the classroom may be applied to circumstances that happen outside of the classroom setting. Little (1991, p.38) said that "successful [autonomous] learners could carry their capacity for autonomous behaviours into every other area of their lives."

There are a set of characteristics for an autonomous learner offered by Breen and Mann (1997, as cited in Mehrabi & Bagheri, 2016). Autonomous learners are those who:

- View their relationship with the material to be learned, the method by which they will learn, and the resources available as one in which they are in charge or control;

- Have an authentic relationship with the language they are learning and a genuine desire to learn that language;

- Have a robust sense of self that is unlikely to be undermined by any actual or perceived negative assessments of themselves or their work;

- Can take a step back from what they are doing and critically reflect on it in order to make decisions about future actions;

- Aware of change and capable of adapting, resourceful, and productive change;

- Have a capacity for learning that is independent of the mainstream educational processes in which they are engaged;

- Can make strategic use of the environment in which they find themselves;

- Can negotiate between meeting their own needs strategically and responding to the needs of others.

2.2. Paradigm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Online Learning

In the context of foreign language learning, the development of learner autonomy and the development of target language competency are mutually supportive and completely interwoven with one another (Little, 2007). Therefore, it is essential to shape autonomous learners since it is their nature to be independent, be proactive in studying and responding to their surroundings, and persist in pursuing their objectives, namely mastering English as the target language.

In the current classroom setting in Indonesia, the learners are required to join the classroom activities either in-person or online, so pursuing students' autonomy is important. Amidst pandemic Covid-19, learners should have been adaptive to digital learning in the online setting. They should have become digital learners familiar with the internet and technology-based activities. They should be capable of accepting responsibility for their learning, including defining goals and objectives, selecting content and materials, selecting methods and approaches, organizing their learning, and measuring their progress (Boulton et al., 2008). Thus, online learning/ICT-based instructions appear appropriate for developing autonomous learners since it is believed to allow greater freedom and flexibility to learn at one's speed and convenience, whether within the context of language learning or outside.

With the advancement of digital learning, EFL online learning is expected to fulfil the educational goals designed for the curriculum, namely its learning outcomes, by utilizing digital-based technology. Churches (2018) proposed a concept of digital taxonomy that evolved from Bloom's revised taxonomy and took it a step further by integrating digital objectives (see Figure 1).
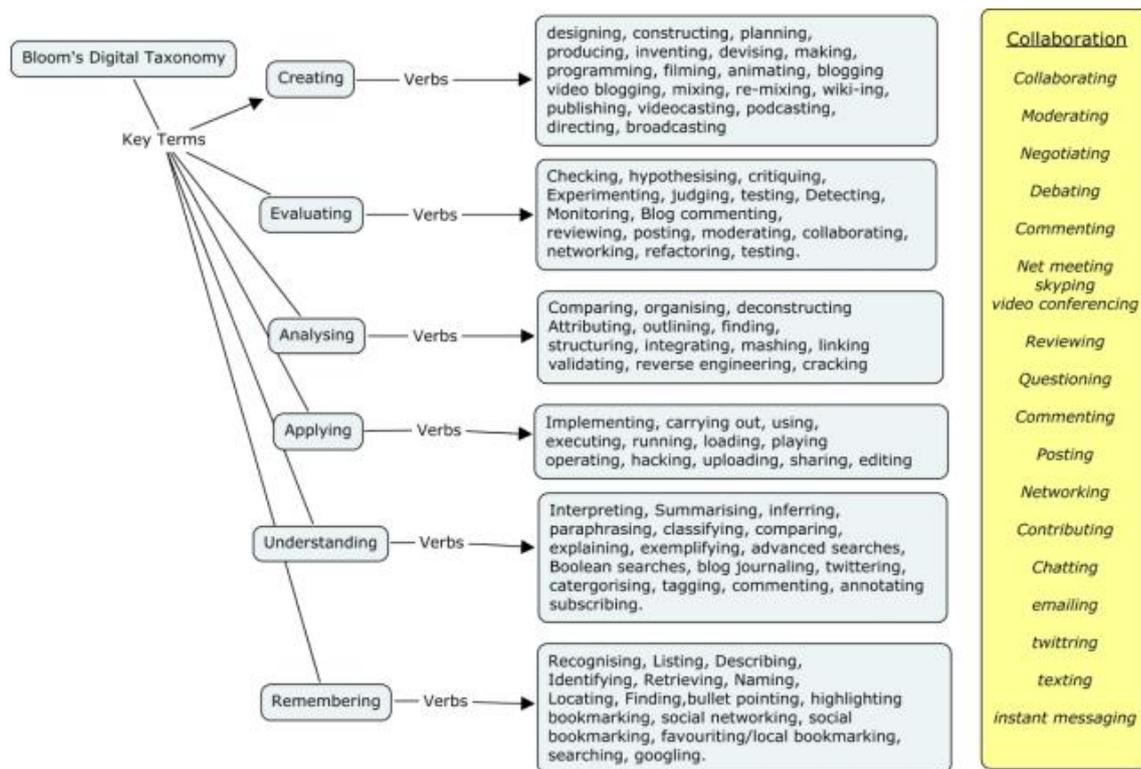
Figure1. Mind map of Bloom's revised digital taxonomy (Churches, 2008)

Figure 1 shows the activities for each level of the taxonomy and the collaborative activitios that may become supportive activities to engage learners in language learning more collaboratively and autonomously.

Technology is as an accompaniment of recent online learning. If technology is utilized appropriately, it has the potential to significantly improve foreign language learners' interaction with the target language. Whether or whether not the technology lives up to this promise is depending on how it is integrated into the curriculum. The optimal use of technology in foreign-language curricula is to increase and deepen learners' interaction with the target language, therefore assisting the process of foreign language learning (Blake, 2008). Technology is not only aids in the maintenance of learning that occurs in the classroom, but it also promotes the learners to be more self-reliant in coming into touch with native language materials on their own, without the teacher's direct interventions. It shows that the EFL online learning may provide opportunities for shaping autonomous learners.

Additionally, many potential advantages are offered by Technology Mediated Language Teaching known as TMLT (Richards, 2013) in the context of EFL online learning, as follows:

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- *Wider exposure to English*: learners with little exposure to English can use the Internet to access genuine and educational resources.

- *Compatibility with current theories of SLA*: many TMLT activities are designed to be compatible with current SLA theories, which identify five qualities of successful language learning environments, including learners have numerous chances to read, write, listen to, and discuss oral and written materials; its focus is on English grammatical patterns; learners can utilize English productively; learners can rectify their blunders and improve their English; and the teacher may include activities that encourage students to interact in English with others.

- *Increased opportunities for authentic interaction*: TMLT allows learners to have a global connections with other learners and communicate in real time.

- *Enables flexible learning:* learners may learn at their own speed. So they don't have to go to school.

- *Supports different ways of learning:* learners may select learning tools that suit their learning styles, such as visual or auditory.

- *Supports different skills*: learners may desire to focus on a certain ability (e.g. reading or speaking) and access materials that support the skill.

- *Suitable for learners of different ability:* learners are able to select activities and materials based on their competence level, from beginners to advanced.

- *Encourages more active learning:* No longer passive learners, they actively participate in their own learning and are in charge of the process and consequences.

- *Encourages learner autonomy*: learners have more control over what they learn and how they learn it.

- *Provides a stress-reduced environment*: TMLT is less stressful than classroom-based activities where they feel judged by their classmates. It supports personalized learning activities.

- *Provides a social context for learning:* TMLT allows learners to join a learning community and socialize with other learners. This promotes collaborative learning.

- *Increases motivation*: TMLT increases motivation and decreases disciplinary issues.

- *Access to more engaging materials:* TMLT gives access to learning materials that engages learners such as digital games and YouTube videos.

- *Encourages situated learning:* mobile devices can help learners utilize English when they need it, such when traveling.

- *Offers opportunities for more and alternative types of feedback:* Many applications provide instant or delayed feedback to students, and collaborative features like email and chat allow students to collaborate with others to receive peer feedback or assistance from a (remote) teacher.

2.3 How to Shape Autonomous Learners in EFL Online Learning

Autonomy is important in language learning. Taking a reflective role in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating learning in formal educational situations is what learner autonomy is all about. However, it should be noted that language learning is very dependent on language use: we can only learn to talk by speaking, and we can only learn to read by reading, and so on. For this reason, the extent of learner autonomy is constantly bound by the learner's ability to do tasks in their target language. In other words, the scope of the learner's autonomy as language learners is partially a function of their autonomy as target language users. Besides, according to Benson (2006), "some degree of freedom in learning is required if learners are to develop their autonomy. It implies that to develop autonomous learners, self-reliant activities must be afforded. Accordingly, the teachers' duty in this regard is dual. On the one hand, they must convince learners to design their learning, carry it out, and assess the outcome. Simultaneously, they must assist them in developing the capacity to do so (Dam, 2011). The teacher's primary responsibility is to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners may be autonomous to grow more autonomous. It is never possible to separate the development of their learning abilities from the substance of their language learning since learning how to study a second or foreign language is fundamentally different from learning other disciplines in some crucial ways (Little, 2003).

Richard (2016) states that there are five principles that must be followed to achieve autonomous learning i.e. first, participation in the learning process of students; second, providing alternatives and resources for consideration; third, providing options and decision-making chances is important; fourth, providing assistance to students; and fifth, providing an opportunity for reflections. Accordingly, Little (2007) affirmed that when it comes to language learning, three fundamental pedagogical concepts regulate the process of developing autonomous learners: first, learner involvement – involving learners in sharing responsibility for the learning process (the affective and metacognitive dimensions); second, learner reflection – assisting learners in thinking critically when planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning (the metacognitive dimensions); and third, appropriate target

language use – using the target language as the primary medium of language learning (the communicative and the metacognitive dimensions). Following the three principles, the teacher should use the target language as the preferred medium of classroom communication and insist that her students do the same, engage her students in a never-ending search for good learning activities that can be shared, discussed, analyzed, and evaluated with the entire class – initially in the target language and very simple terms, and assist her students when it comes to determining their own learning objectives and making choices about their own learning activities (ibid).

Correspondingly, there are some other important principles for developing autonomous learners proposed by Dam (2011), as follows:

a. The importance of choice: allowing learners to make choices and have a say in their learning process instils a sense of responsibility and fosters self-esteem.

b. Clear guidelines for the learners for what to do: it is important that learners feel comfortable understanding what is expected of them and what is required of them.

c. Focus on learning rather than teaching: teachers must consider activities where all learners may participate enthusiastically. The activity given must allow all learners to contribute to and benefit from the activity.

d. Authenticity in the language classroom: if the learners are expected to be authentic users of the target language outside of the classroom, the teachers must establish a learning environment that is authentic in and of itself. The continuous contact between the teacher and the students and the students themselves must be real. It requires participants to perform and communicate authentically within their assigned roles in the teaching/learning setting.

e. The importance of evaluation: the teacher needs to frequently and systematically engage their students in reflection, review, and assessment; it is critical to equip them with reasons and resources. Students must see their development on a regular basis (not just when tested). This type of positive evaluative feedback will sustain their motivation. (Dam, 2011)

Moreover, encouraging peer tutoring, using interesting and easy-to-use online learning platforms, and applying the Project-Based Learning approaches are three potential options to increase learner autonomy. Peer tutoring should be practised on a regular basis. Second, the teacher should choose the learning activities for English online learning with consideration. It is advised that the selected platforms/activities be engaging and

straightforward to use so that materials or assignments may be accessed without difficulty. Third, the teacher who uses the Project-Based Learning paradigm will be more effective in increasing learning autonomy. Learners would actively seek resources to develop their understanding and so inspire them to be more self-reliant through projects relevant to real-world situations. (Yosintha & Yunianti, 2021)

Finally, to foster the development of autonomous learners in EFL online learning. It appears that the EFL teachers should be more deliberate in their selection of learning activities and classroom settings that promote the growth of learners' autonomy in online learning settings. It is suggested that the teachers consider Bloom's revised digital taxonomy while designing the teaching instructions and learning materials to support the learning autonomous and digital literacy and prominently English language mastery. It demonstrates that the teacher's involvement with learners' existing autonomy may be viewed as a critical foundation for its progressive development. Teachers who carry out online learning should understand that fostering learner autonomy is not only the responsibility of the learners.

Additionally, teachers can take initiatives to improve their awareness of the significance of learner autonomy to assist students in learning autonomously. According to Little (2007), there are three requirements to develop autonomous learners: first, the teacher should understand what it means to be an autonomous learner since it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the development of autonomy in their students if they do not; secondly, teachers must be capable of exploiting their professional skills autonomously in determining the initiatives they take in the classroom, applying to their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning; and thirdly, teachers must learn how to create and manage the numerous variations of target language discourse that the autonomous classroom requires. It is a significant task, but language learner autonomy will continue to be a minority accomplishment until teachers rise to it.

3.   Conclusion

In conclusion, developing learning autonomy must be viewed as a multifaceted process. Learner autonomy results from an interactive process in which teachers gradually relinquish control over the methods and contents of the learners' learning to shape the autonomy itself. EFL teachers appear to be crucial in promoting learners' autonomy. While the concept of autonomous learning is to require learners to study independently and autonomously, teachers cannot be excluded entirely from language learning. Although no

empirical data are included in this study, they are intended to be comprehensively supplemented in future work.

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