Building Students' Learning Autonomy through Collaborative Learning to Develop Their Language Awareness

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Abstract

Language awareness is defined as a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life. It refers to the development in learners of enhancing consciousness and sensitivity to the form and function of the language itself. Students' language awareness is very important to be developed as it contributes much towards students on how they should learn the language, being well-motivated and how they come into language comprehensively. The activity of students' learning in the classroom typically seems to concern with learning which they need to learn for achievement of life goals than being aware of what they learn. This is exactly what happened in learning English as a foreign language for Indonesian students. They seem to not have any responsibility for their own learning. This paradigm makes students become more less-motivated and increase their passivity. Students need to develop their own learning strategies so that as far as possible to be autonomous learners. Students having learning autonomy tend to be more competitive in learning because they have a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent actions. This autonomy enables students to develop their own potential. The widespread of autonomy provides an environment which stimulates students' critical self-awareness. It also supports awareness-raising about the nature of languages, cultures and language learning. Collaborative learning seems to be one effective teaching technique to foster learners' autonomy. This paper aims to promote the idea of how to build students' learning autonomy though collaborative learning to develop their language awareness.

Key words: *language awareness, learning autonomy* and *collaborative learning*

Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language aims to facilitate students to use language as a mean of communication. In communicative language teaching, students are encouraged to master the communicative competences which allow them to use language appropriately, use English as a social tool which enable them to make meaning and communicate about something for some purposes. Then, in order to be competent in learning a language, students are required more than knowing what to say; as they must also know how to use it appropriately.

In order to accomplish these objectives, it is important for students to have language awareness as it contributes much towards students' capacity in learning language. Language awareness refers to learners' development of an enhanced consciousness of the forms and functions of language. It helps students to reflect on language in use (Callies & Keller, 2008). Enhancement of language awareness can be process-oriented involving students' monitoring of explicit knowledge in analyzing and describing language accurately, or product-oriented involving self-assessment of language performance (Kiely & Roberts cited in Yang, 2012).

The idea of developing students' language awareness can be reached through building students learning autonomy. Autonomy is meant as the ability to take control over one's learning, the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent in action" (Little in Hafner & Miller, 2011:69). The needs to be independent in their own learning should come into realization in order to develop students' capacity and sensitivity in language

learning. Collaborative learning becomes one of the best ways on how to build students learning autonomy to develop their language awareness. Some collaborative learning activities such as role-playing, task-based activities, or group discussions where students are engaged in context-based learning hopefully can raise students' language awareness (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002).

This paper aims to present brief discussions about students' language awareness and learning autonomy as the main solution on how to develop their language awareness. This paper also presents the ideas of collaborative learning in action dealing with building students leaning autonomy. This paper is ended by stating the concluding remark.

Language Awareness: A Brief Discussion

Language awareness has its significances in language teaching and learning. It contributes much in helping learners to get better understanding of what is language in nature. Language awareness refers to "a person's sensitivity to and consciousness awareness of the nature of language and its role in human live" (Donmall in Andrews, 2007:11). The issues of language awareness cover exploring the benefits that can be derived from developing knowledge about language, a conscious understanding of how language works, of how people learn them and use them.

Language awareness involves i) awareness of some properties of language, creativity and playfulness, ii) awareness of the embedding of culture. Learning to read the language is learning about the cultural properties of the language. iii) A greater self-consciousness about the forms of language we use. We need to recognize that the relations between the forms and meanings which language is arbitrary, and iv) awareness of the close relationship between language and ideology. It involves 'seeing through language' in other words (Carter, 1994:5).

As discussed above, language awareness is very important in language teaching and learning. Some research and teaching practiced have proven that language awareness enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching. For learners, being aware of language facilitates the learning process, as it stimulates curiosity about how language works, lead to enhance autonomy and generally foster positive learning outcomes (Carter in Wach, 2014:52).

In term of discussing learners' language awareness, let's understand first what causes someone to have no language awareness. In the most extreme case, lack of knowledge of language becomes the main factor. Those who are not responsive and comprehensible toward language can be said as lacking of awareness (Yi-Shuan, 2013:31). In addition, one is lack of awareness is when language does not yield any meanings: its words appear as randomly drawn lines and its sounds appear as a noise.

Teaching and learning English as a foreign language in Indonesian context faces many problems. Language awareness seems to be the major topic that should be discussed in term of analyzing those problems. For example, teaching and learning English in senior high school does not provide students well-integrated communicative competences as drawn in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Teachers just tend to emphasize the grammatical competence in their teaching process while the other competences (sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence) are ignores.

Besides, teaching and learning English in the classrooms does not provide students meaningful language context as they can 'speak' fluently but they are lack of meaning and social context on how it is used. Let's take one example of teaching and learning expressions in English. Students are likely able to compliment someone by such kind of complimenting expressions. But, they lack of understanding of how to use them appropriately in the real social and cultural context.

Furthermore, teaching and learning English in the classroom with the "classical methods" – providing students theories, a lot of exercise and a few practices – just forces students to learn without coming into deep understanding. Students just know without comprehend it. This condition makes students get away from the meaning, how to use language appropriately and what cultural contexts it conveys. By encouraging students to analyze and describe language accurately, they will be more effective language users (Andrews (2007:10).

To solve these problems, we need to promote students language awareness where learning language is not only "knowing" but more than it. The formal setting of learning in the classroom requires learners to acquire some explicit understandings and knowledge of the nature of the language alongside the development of practical language skills (Michel et al. cited in Andrews, 2007:1)

In order to be aware of language, students need to be independent in their own learning without depending too much on teacher's guide. Consequently, the need for learners' autonomy has come into realization in the field of language teaching. Students need to find their own way to learn the language including all of its parts. Raising awareness of one's own learning and gaining an understanding of the processes involved is another important key for the development of autonomous learning (Kohenen: 1991).

What is Learning Autonomy?

Autonomy is defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec in Mona & Morvarid, 2012:1293) and is also described as a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent in action" (Little in Hafner & Miller, 2011:69). The autonomous learner takes a proactive role in learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Bound, Kohonen & Knowles cited in Thanasoulas, 2000:2)

Promoting learners autonomy refers to encouraging students to determine the objectives, to define the contents and progressions, to select methods and techniques to be used, to monitor the procedure of acquisition and to evaluate what has been acquired (Holec cited in Cem, 2010:90). Through this process, the autonomous learners find their best way to learn including the directions of planning, pacing, monitoring and evaluating the writing process. Autonomy can be seen as part of individual process where the teacher is only as a classroom guide, but it affects much more. It also involves raising students' awareness of their responsibility as a language learners as well as knowing themselves and understand their goals and their work inside and outside of classroom.

Learning autonomy is based on the idea that if students are involved in decision making processes regarding their own competence, they are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning and learning can be more focused and purposeful for them (Littlejohn cited in Cem, 2010:90). Additionally, the notion that learners have power and right to learn for themselves is seen as an essential aspect for learner autonomy. Thus, in order to contribute the development of learner autonomy in language classrooms, it is vital that students should be involved in making decisions about their own learning. There is an important role for this process since the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating classroom culture where autonomy is accepted (Barfield et al., 2001)

There are three reasons for helping learners to take on more responsibility for their own learning according to Ellis and Sinclair (1989:2). They are: (1) learning can be more responsible when learners take control of their own learning because they learn what they want to learn. (2) Learners who are responsible for their own learning can carry on learning outside the classroom. (3) Learners who know about learning can transfer learning strategies to other subjects. Considering this ideas, autonomy becomes a need for language learners and a must for language teacher who have different tools to help learners to develop autonomy.

Fostering students learning autonomy seem to be one of the best solutions in order to build students language awareness. The assumption is the more autonomous is a student the more they have language awareness. Both students' learning autonomy and language awareness are interrelated each other. Students' learning autonomy make makes them independent on their way of learning while language awareness gives students deep understanding to get into the deeper meaning of the language.

Trebbi (2008:37) in his research finding explains that learner autonomy seems to rely on a firmly structured frameworks that supports awareness-raising about the nature of languages, cultures and language learning, learner initiatives and exploration of the target language

including the relevant choices of learning activities. Thus, it can be seen that fostering learners learning autonomy has significant impacts on developing their language awareness.

Researched has proven that learners who decided to study language in isolation from teachers and other learners would not necessarily develop autonomy. Therefore, the concept of autonomy as being a feature of the learner moved toward a conception that considered autonomy a feature of the learning situation. Based on the important role socialization plays in the learning situation, autonomy resides in the social worlds of the students which they bring with them. Little in Mona and Morvarid (2012:1294) argued that collaboration is essential to the development of autonomy as a psychological capacity, stating that the development of learner autonomy depend on the development of an internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions.

Why Collaborative Learning?

A collaborative learning supports students learning autonomy and language awareness. It provides new sense of teaching and learning where the paradigm of the "traditional learning" is changed. Macaro (1997:89) explains that through collaborative learning, learner can be empowered to be more responsible and highly controlled on their learning and have a greater awareness of the learning process itself. Through collaborative learning, students can open mind to learn in social interaction so that it could improve their critical analysis.

Goodsell et al. (1992) explain that in collaborative learning, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions or meanings, or creating a product. There is a wide variability in collaborative learning activities, but most center on the student's exploration or application of the course material, not in the class is participating, working as partners or small group.

Panitz in Watkins (2007:100) explains some benefits of collaborative learning. In summary it covers collaborative learning could improve learning and achievement. It also improves skills, engagement and responsibility for learning. Collaborative learning also improves students' relationships (responsibility for each other, the classroom as a community, positive race relations and diversity understanding) and classrooms resemble real life social and employment situations. Students wean themselves away from considering teachers as the sole sources of knowledge and understanding.

Before talking more about collaborative learning, let's discuss first what makes collaborative learning different that cooperative learning. Chris et al (2007:88) explains that the distinctions that people are cooperating when they adjust their actions so that each person achieves their individual goals, whereas people are collaborating when their actions are adjusted in order to achieve a shared goal. Thus, we can highlight that collaboration has two main characteristics. They are during collaboration something new is created that could not have been created otherwise and collaboration takes place when all participants can contributed to a anew shared product.

As a first step of collaboration, many studies have shown that when learners explain their meaning-making to each other their learning is richer and deeper. The act of having to make sense to a peer challenges someone to clarify and communicate such a way that their own understanding is enhanced. In such conversations, the process of explaining is all important, not the status or accuracy of the explanations. When learners are practiced in such discussion, those who are deemed 'low ability' are successful in helping those of 'high ability' to extend their learning (King et al. cited in Watkins, 2007:89).

How to facilitate collaborative learning in the classroom? Watkins et al (2007:90) explain three aspects that are involved in facilitating collaborative learning in the classroom. Those are promoting collaborative interaction, designing collaborative task and building collaborative structures.

The first aspect is promoting collaborative interaction: thinking together and acting helpfully. Promoting students collaborative interaction will encourage them to have interactions. That is the main important point to have. The second aspect is designing collaborative tasks.

The design of the task given to a group of learners has significant impact on whether they collaborate each other. The group task should have two main characteristics. They are i) it requires the resources (information, skills, material) that no single person processes; success on the task requires the contribution of many and there must be interdependence, and ii) interdependence between students must be reciprocal. Task in collaboration are often described as a higher order thinking that they require a thoughtful approach and the negotiation of meaning. The task would involve students in variety, strategy and decision-making. Their interaction would need to bring their perspectives together and reconcile them together.

The third aspect is building collaborative structures. At the end of collaborative learning, learners will feel how the result of what they have done in their group is. Some reflections come up covering comments, opinion and suggestions of collaborating each other. Most of students indicate that they like working in groups and appreciated getting help from other students, especially for difficult concepts.

Developing Learners' Language Awareness: Classroom Practice

As discussed briefly in the previous section, facilitating students' collaborative learning covers promoting collaborative interaction, designing collaborative tasks and building collaborative structures. Here is a proposed classroom practice of building students learning autonomy to develop their language awareness through collaborative learning. These activities are designed based on task-based activities.

Phase 1

In this phase, teacher decides one topic to discuss as a student's project. Then students are divided into group by considering their diversity. Students have to start learning collaboratively by discussing the major issues with pairs. The writer propose News Item Text as the topic where students are required to work together to construct a good text. It includes finding the appropriate sources of topic of the news, newsworthy event, background events and sources. The narrow topic depends on each group creativity.

At this stage, students – in their group – should think together to find the material and they are encouraged to share ideas each other in order to find the accepted ideas. The main point here is students should think and share the ideas together and decide the appropriate shared-goals.

Phase 2

This phase is the continuation of students' activity in Phase 1. In this phase, producing or finishing the task covering all of the members' ideas becomes the highlight activities. The task includes composing a good news item text as creative as they can. Students should get involved in preparing the text, writing draft, and finishing text product. At the end of this activity, students should finish a project in full text form.

Phase 3

This is reflective section where every student (group's member) has right to give their reflection. It includes giving opinion on how collaborative learning helps them in finishing a project collaboratively. Students should reflect themselves based on what they experienced during doing the task. The question such as "How do you think working collaboratively such this activity could help you?" can be asked to students to get their opinion.

Conclussion

Language awareness plays the crucial roles in English language teaching and learning. Students need to be aware of the nature of language and the cultural context it contains in order to use the language appropriately. Language awareness also helps students to not only 'know' the language but get into the deeper meaning of the language itself. In order to have language

awareness, students need to develop their capacity and responsibility on their own learning. Building learning autonomy has it significances toward students' language awareness so that it is important for teacher to promote students' learning autonomy. One of the best ways is involving students to learn language through collaborative learning as it is effective to build students' learning autonomy to develop their language awareness.

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