

PROMOTING AUTONOMOUS LEARNING THROUGH 'HOT POTATOES'

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate the role of 'Hot Potatoes' in promoting autonomous learning of the English education students at Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta. This study was conducted on some reasons: first, autonomous learning is very significant in the success of learners' learning, and to make the learners implement autonomous learning is quite tricky. Second, the use of Hot Potatoes as the software is very simple and fun to publish any education materials online, and as a result, the students like the program. Therefore, it is very challenging for the teacher to find a way to promote autonomous learning to the students through the use of a simple education software called 'Hot Potatoes'. The study was aimed at exploring the roles of Hot Potatoes in English teaching and learning. Further, it also explored the advantages of the Hot Potatoes in developing the students' ability or habit in having autonomy in their learning. This research was a qualitative case study in nature since it dealt with a holistic description. The setting of the research was Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta with 10 students who have implemented Hot Potatoes in designing teaching materials for them to use at schools. The procedure to collect the data was through questionnaires and interviews with the participants. In analyzing the data, the researcher first categorized the data gained from the questionnaires and then extracted the information from the data collected through the interview process. The data were then grouped into categories and interpreted in accordance with the research questions. The study found that students first had awareness to be better in mastering English due to their online publishing the teaching materials developed with Hot Potatoes. They were aware that by publishing materials online, people all around the globe would have a chance to stop by and read the materials. This awareness led them to learn by themselves on the grammar of the sentences they wrote. As a result, they started looking up grammar books to check if the grammar was appropriate or not. The same process also happened to the choice of words and the spelling of words used in the teaching materials they developed. They checked and rechecked until they were sure of the correctness of the dictions and the spelling. The last but not least is about the cultural issue in the sentences. It dealt with the appropriateness of the sentences they make due to native speakers' cultural background. Therefore, the writer concluded that the use of Hot Potatoes promoted autonomy in students' learning.

Keywords: *Autonomous learning, Hot Potatoes, Students' Awareness, online publishing*

A. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy nowadays has become a very central issue in language learning. Some research has been done in correlation of learners' autonomy in different parts of the world. It does not only become a great issue in Europe, but also in Asian countries including Indonesia.

“The ability to take charge of his or her own learning” that is developed by a learner is what the learner autonomy is all about (Holec 1981:3). Henri Holec in the 1970s was the first person to use the term ‘autonomy’ to the field of second language pedagogy as a very principal tool to look for alternatives to adult language learning. As stated by Gremmo and Riley (1995), the work by Holec and his associates was a response to the political milieu in France in the late 1960s and shared its ideological stance with cotemporary critics of the traditional educational system, such as Ivan Illich (1970),. Paulo Freire (1972) and Carl Rogers (1961,1969). The concept of autonomy has since found a place in mainstream education. Many national curricula in Europe, for example, state learner autonomy as an objective. An increasing number of self-access centers in Asian tertiary institutions have also stimulated significant work in learner autonomy. North American researchers have taken up the idea and integrated it in the tradition of research about the good language learner.

With its rapid spread of the concept, the term autonomy has acquired many different meaning, which have sometimes caused confusion about what learner autonomy might entail. Among the issues is whether learner autonomy is a matter of learner's psychology or if it involves socio-political factors surrounding the learners (P. Benson 1996). Focusing on the cognitive side of psychology, Little (1996a) assumes that the argument concerning how learner autonomy can be developed in pedagogical practice suggests psychological dimensions, but that it is also inescapably political because 'the psychological argument challenges traditional education structures and power relationships' (1996a:8).

On the other hand, the development of Computer Assisted Language Learning is also increasing. Both teachers and students make a good use of the available free resources from the internet to develop their knowledge as well as their skills. Therefore, it is good for the teachers and students to be able to promote the use of the media in language learning. *Hot Potatoes* is freeware and it is capable of creating materials used for teaching and learning Language. The *Hot Potatoes* suite includes six applications, enabling you to create interactive multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering and gap-fill exercises for the World Wide Web. *Hot Potatoes* is freeware, and you may use it for any purpose or project you like. It is not open-source.

From the explanation above, the write was interested in conducting research on *Promoting Autonomous Learning through 'Hot Potatoes'*. The study was conducted to do the following objectives, namely: exploring the roles of *Hot Potatoes* in English teaching and learning. Furniture, it also explores the advantages of the *Hot Potatoes* in developing the students' ability or habit in having autonomy in their learning.

B. DISCUSSION

Reconceiving Autonomy

In traditional sense, individualism became the concept of autonomy. However, that autonomy should not necessarily imply total independence has been claimed by modern method of learning languages. Little (1991, 1996b) shows that second language learner autonomy presupposes interdependence because language development requires interaction. From a communitarian point of view, Benson (1996) argues that the individualistic view of autonomy leads to social atomism, which disempowered individuals; the importance of collective effort in the exercise of autonomy is emphasized.

In addition to these two arguments, another justification for not equating autonomy with complete independence should be added. Nedelsky (1987) states that feminists, while valuing the human capacity for determining one's own life and self, take a view that people develop their identity in social and political relations. She recognizes the inherent tensions in 'the idea of autonomy as both originating in oneself and being conditioned and shaped by one's social context' (1989: 11, emphasis in the original), and claims that the objective in preconceiving autonomy involves not only recognizing that the tension between the two forces leads to trade-offs but also moving beyond a conception of human beings as separate individuals. Furthermore, Nedelsky notes that the capacity for autonomy is unlikely to exist without feeling of being autonomous and claims that this feeling is the best guide to understand the structure of those relationships, which make autonomy possible. She also contends that focusing on the feelings of autonomy gives authority to the voices of those whose autonomy is at issue. Based on these arguments, Nedelsky sees autonomy as 'a capacity that exists only in the context of social relations that support it and only in conjunction with the internal sense of being autonomous' (1989:25). It is in this understanding that I shall develop my arguments in this chapter.

Autonomy as a capacity

By looking at existing literature and making synthesis from them, (Holec 1981), 1985; Little 1991; Bergen 1990 cited in Dam 1995; Benson 1996), **learner autonomy is defined as a capacity to take control of one's own learning in the service of one's perceived needs and aspirations.** It means that the core of learner autonomy is a psychological construct, but what this construct is put to use for is as important because this can greatly influence the feeling of autonomy. In concrete terms, learner autonomy as a capacity refers to the domain-specific knowledge and skills necessary (1) to make choices concerning what, why and how to learn, (2) to implement the plan and (3) to evaluate the outcome of learning. This paper will only limit the scope of autonomy to one domain because, as has been mentioned (Little 1991;4), 'the learner who displays a high degree of autonomy in one area may be non-autonomous in another'.

In the case of second language learning developing the capacity for autonomy entails considering areas such as the following:

- What benefits and drawbacks learning a second language could have in general.
- What benefits and drawbacks learning a particular language could have.
- What the nature of language and language learning is.
- What are the language elements, if any, that need to be learned regardless of one's purpose, and to what degree.
- For the purpose of one's study, what elements of the language need to be learned and to what degree.
- In what order these elements could be learned.
- How these elements could be learned.
- How much time it would normally take to learn a particular element.
- How objectives can be set and study plans made.
- What the necessary resources are and where they are available.
- What kind of language learner one is and how one learns.
- How the learning of a particular item can be evaluated as one learns and after one has learned.

Nowadays, in terms of second language learning, necessary information from libraries, the World Wide Web, and self-access centers as well as from other people's experiences that have always supported everyday cognition are available for learners. (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1995). As long as the learners know that information will be accessible when needed and that it will be transparent, or understandable, to their eyes, their feeling of autonomy will not necessarily be impaired if they do not have everything they need to know right at their fingertips. On the other hand, learners with a lot of knowledge and skills may still feel helpless if they are allowed no choice. The knowledge and skills learners have does not necessarily correlate with the degree of their feeling of autonomy. Thus, we need to take both factors into account learner autonomy can be more fully developed.

Devolvement through Practice

The studies of everyday cognition have shown (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1995) participation in practice reveals learning, although all types of participation are not necessarily empowering. The characteristics of empowering participation are (1) novices are recognized as legitimate members of a relevant community of practice who share or are supposed to share the community's values, beliefs, customs and so forth, as well as knowledge and skills directly related to the practices, (2) novices work with expert practitioners, more experienced apprentices and their peers and carry out a role, secondary as it may be, in the process of the practice with a view to become a full practitioner in the future and (3) support to accomplish tasks assigned to novices is provided by making observation of others' work possible, by providing easily manageable tools, and by sharing experiences. Nedelsky's (1989) view of autonomy suggests learners exercise the practical autonomy that they can handle with social support from the environment and thus develop their feeling of autonomy. The expectation that they will be fully autonomous in the future will further enhance the feeling.

Room for Negotiation

The ultimate purpose of promoting learner autonomy is for a learner to come to see him or herself as a 'producer of his (or her) society' (Janne 1997, cited in Holec 1981). Although dropping out and silent resistance may be considered forms of exercising one's autonomy (Breed and Mann 1997; Pennycook 1997), they are not likely to be the most constructive ways of doing so. If autonomy is to develop, there must be an opportunity to act upon the environment and change it through negotiation, in a way that is favorable to oneself.

Institution also needs to be prepared to be flexible if they claim learner autonomy as their goal. In this respect Jones' (1995) description of the physical design of a self-access centre in Cambodia and the student's involvement in the designing process seems to be a very good example of support to practice learner autonomy. Jones gave up his own image of what a self-access centre should be like and made way for student's ideas to be implemented. This must have had an immense influence on the students' inner feeling of autonomy. Jones reports that 'with enthusiasm came a sense of pride in the responsibility for the self-access centre which, we believe, other students are beginning to share' (Jones 1995).

When Learner Need a Teacher

A teacher for a variety of reasons is required by learners in the process of becoming autonomous. As Brookfield (1993) contends, exercising autonomy requires access to resources.

However, teachers need to be flexible in determining what exactly they should or could do in fulfilling this role, because it all depends on where each learner is along the path of becoming autonomous. To be a useful but not interfering resource requires teachers to always 'be' with the students, although this does not necessarily mean that teachers need to be physically present.

Self-Evaluation

In the case of university students, there is, of course, pressure to accumulate credits for the successful completion of their degree. The evaluation from the teacher is still necessary but the fact that teachers cannot have knowledge of all aspects of the process they are going through; therefore, truly accurate evaluation of learning by a teacher is not possible.

In this situation, asking the students to evaluate themselves with whatever criteria they have and to tell to the teacher about the grade they give to themselves and why would be supporting to creating autonomous learner.

Of course, there are some who are unsure about the level of knowledge they have acquired. Others show concern that they might evaluate themselves higher than those who really deserve a higher grade. But even those students tend to take self-evaluation as an opportunity for reflection. The teacher's role here is evidently not to evaluate. She or he should rather help students to clarify what they feel are appropriate criteria for evaluating their own learning

Comments

In supporting the development of learner autonomy, social relations is very significant factor. Unfortunately, in Indonesian context, social relations is not so supporting that it will help improve learner autonomy. This is due to the situation where most of Indonesians studying foreign language do not have great social pressure in which they are forced to use the language. What we have is merely institutions where they have a very small social pressure.

I agree that learner, to be an autonomous, needs a psychologically secured environment. However, to create such situation, creative efforts and learners' psychological states are still the main factors to result in such situation. The presence of teachers will also be burden for learners when they are having class discussion. What we may suggest is that the teachers can either leave the classroom or pretend to be busy doing something else, and when students need a teacher, he is absolutely there.

Self-evaluation is always becoming a great deal in teaching learning process. I kind of disagree if the students should be given full authority to assess themselves and to give grades for themselves. They would evaluate themselves fairly, but when it comes to grading themselves, they would consider many things such as embarrassment from classmates or and parents, when getting C or D or even E. that way, learners somehow tend to give themselves good grades, that is B, or A.

Hot Potatoes

Hot Potatoes is freeware and it is capable of creating materials used for teaching and learning Language. The *Hot Potatoes* suite includes six applications, enabling you to create interactive multiple-choice, short-answer, jumbled-sentence, crossword, matching/ordering and

gap-fill exercises for the World Wide Web. *Hot Potatoes* is freeware, and you may use it for any purpose or project you like. It is not open-source.

Research Methodology

Relevant to the nature, the purposes and the research questions above, this study was a case study attempting to understand the subjects' perception on a certain issue. The design of the study employed a qualitative research design, since qualitative approach provides an insight into what is happening and why it happens. It concerned more with process of the objective.

The research was undertaken in Yogyakarta, with UMY being the host institution. There are several reasons for Yogyakarta and particularly UMY being the host institution of this study. The first one is that this institution places ICT something important in its curriculum. Second, the teachers in PBI FPB UMY are those who are very critical. They like sharing ideas and opinions especially in the frame of teaching learning improvement. Fourth UMY is located in the same town as the researcher. This will give ease to the researcher in terms of time management in running the research. The fifth reason is that in term of accessibility, I have no problem. This is because I know every single person to which I conduct my research. I have good relationship with the bureaucracy. In addition, the last but not least, I teach in the institution. Therefore, the result of this research will be of importance for my institution in evaluating its programs, especially the ICT subject in Semester III.

The participants of this study were 5 students of English Education Department of UMY. Those who agreed to participate in the program were asked some questions regarding with the subjects using *Hot Potatoes* for ICT subject in semester III. Due to the great number of Students of English Education Departemnt in UMY, the research decided to choose 5 respondents out of 150 EFL students. The respondents participating in this research were the students who had taken ICT subject in semester III. These students do not only understand the course materials but also were trained how to use the *Hot Potatoes* in practice. This study employed a qualitative research using techniques of data collections, conducted not only at the conclusion of the study but also in an ongoing way (Fraekel and Wallem, 2000; Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). Here, interview was used. Defined as "an interaction between two people, with the interviewer and the subject acting in relation to each other and reciprocally influencing each other (Kvale, 1996), interviews in this study were important means of helping participants articulate their perceptions about the effectiveness of *Hot Potatoes* in students' autonomous learning in ICT subject in semester III. Interviews in this study also played an important role to enable the research "to check the accuracy of – to verify or refute – the impressions researcher gains from the previous stages" (Freakel and Wallen, 2002).The questions in the interview cover the areas of learners' autonomy in learning the language through the creation of the materials, which were published online in students' blog.

The interview data obtained were analyzed qualitatively. It means that the data are recorded, summarized, and interpreted accordingly. In addition, the interpretation can be also described in numbers and then discussed accordingly. In this study, I applied inductive analytical approach (Becker, 1958) where I presented facts or general statements from the obtained data to come to the conclusion. I used some techniques for analyzing the data. First I interviewed 5 selected English students to transcription and then I transcribed them. Secondly, I read the interview transcripts and then I used categorizing strategy that involved coding (Maxwell, 1996) and sorting the data. After coding and categorizing the data, I also sorted or reduced the data that were not necessary. Finally, the data were displayed in thick description of the study. Related do data displays, Maxwell states that displays constitute additional analytical strategy; matrices or tables, networks, and various other forms. Meanwhile, Glesne & Peshkin (1992) argue that data display is another ongoing feature of qualitative inquiry that can be a part of developing the problem statement, data collection, analysis, and final presentation of the study.

Validity Issues

According to Maxwell (1996), validity is a goal rather than a product; it is never something that can be proven or taken for granted. Validity is also relative: it has to be assessed in relationship to the purposes and circumstances of the research, rather than being a context-independent property of methods or conclusion.

Further, Merriam (1988) states that validity deals with the question of how one's finding match reality? Do the findings capture what is really there? Are investigators observing or measuring what they think they are measuring? She also adds that there are some strategies to ensure the validity of the investigation, such as triangulation, member checks, long term observation, providing a rich, thick description. To ensure the validity of this study, I used member check strategy.

Member check was used to maintain and ensure the internal validity. I come to the respondents to check whether the obtained data were acceptable as well as reasonable. The respondents read again their opinion, sometimes twice or three times, and when they felt necessary, they added more information.

When the findings were not so convincing, the researcher met the particular participants again, first to ask them to read the findings, and then to make sure that the findings were in line with what they once said in the interview. By so doing, the validity was preserved.

Students' Perception on *Hot Potatoes*

Finding#2: *Hot Potatoes* is an easy yet fun software to operate.

All students agree that *Hot Potatoes* is easy to operate and they feel that they can play around with the software to create the teaching learning materials. In the beginning, they feel a little bit confused but when they are used to it, they enjoy and feel good to work with it. the following quotation shows the fact.

At first, I had confusion towards the software. I was afraid of making mistakes. But, my lecturer encouraged me to explore it and experiment with the facilities in it. Finally, with

some trials, I felt that I was good in operating the software. Finally, it felt good to be able to create some types of teaching and learning materials using the software.

Students' Learning Autonomy using *Hot Potatoes*

Finding#3: *Hot Potatoes* develops students' self awareness to be better in mastering English.

This can be understood because it is due to their online publishing the materials developed using *Hot Potatoes*. They were aware that by publishing materials online, people all around the globe would have a chance to stop by and read the materials. This can be drawn from the following quotation of the interview with the student.

"I fully understand that by publishing my works online, they will be viewed by many people around the world. It's not only seen by Indonesians with little English, but it can also be read by people from English speaking countries. I am not pleased if they put a negative comment on my works online"

This awareness is good and the keyword for the revelation of it is the word 'publishing online'. This will make the students understand that 'online' means going to the whole world, not only local readers.

Finding#4: Autonomous learning occurs in terms of studying the grammar of English.

Again, this is the effect of online publishing of their works. It is the result of their awareness and this is good in terms of learning autonomy. The following quotation expresses the finding.

*"I again and again checked my grammar books for possible mistakes I might make in my sentences. I also asked my friends to take a look at my sentences and asked their feedbacks and comments. I hardly ever checked my grammar book before and I usually do not ask to many questions to friends, but I did when working on my *Hot Potatoes*. By so doing, I felt more confident to publish my work online"*

Most English learners believe that grammar is very important when they produce sentences. Moreover, the English they produce is in the form of writing which requires more precision in grammar. They are aware of the situation and they therefore want to avoid making mistakes. The situation draws them to be more autonomous in learning.

Finding#5: Students' Autonomous learning also occurs in English spelling.

Spelling for most students is a bit tricky. Some students make some spelling errors. Therefore, by working with *Hot Potatoes*, students work harder to make sure that the spellings they make have no mistakes.

Although spelling is now helped by Microsoft Words, but most of my work is done in a worksheet that has no spelling check. I check and recheck again. I do not want to make a mistake in spelling because to me mistakes in spelling feel silly. It is an indication that the writer is silly when making mistake in spellings. I open dictionary more often to check the spelling.

Other quotation shows that the same thing:

To me, spelling is very important. I really check every word I write because I know it is going to be seen by many people. when I am sure I do not make any mistakes, I feel good. Sometimes I also ask friends to check the spelling.

Finding#6: Cultural aspects of English becomes students' concern.

The last but not least is about the cultural issue in the sentences. It dealt with the appropriateness of the sentences they make due to native speakers' cultural background. See the quotation below.

Once my teacher in High School told me that when we learn a foreign language, we should also know the culture of the people. I know that the question "how old are you?" is not appropriate question to be asked to westerners especially when they are grown up. And other questions such as how much salary do you get in a month? And I also find some other cultural issues in a sentences that I use to be published. I not only want my sentences grammatically correct, but they are culturally appropriate because it will be seen by western people as well.

It can be seen that the students were also motivated to autonomously learn about the cultural issues dealing with the language. It initiates from students' awareness towards the issues in culture in English.

C. CONCLUSION

With *Hot Potatoes*, as it can be concluded, students can work to create some teaching and learning materials especially in making Close, Match, Cross, Quiz, and Mix. The software of *Hot Potatoes* is a friendly user to the students. Although the students find it a bit difficult in the beginning, but when they are familiar with the software, they feel good towards the software. It is easy yet fun to the users. Moreover, it is a free software with quite many facilities.

The study also found that students first had awareness to be better in mastering English due to their online publishing the teaching materials developed with *Hot Potatoes*. They were aware that by publishing materials online, people all around the globe would have a chance to stop by and read the materials. This awareness led them to learn by themselves on the grammar of the sentences they wrote. As a result, they started looking up grammar books to check if the grammar was appropriate or not.

The same process also happened to the choice of words and the spelling of words used in the teaching materials they developed. They checked and rechecked until they were sure of the correctness of the dictions and the spelling. The last but not least is about the cultural issue in the sentences. It dealt with the appropriateness of the sentences they make due to native speakers' cultural background. Therefore, the writer concluded that the use of *Hot Potatoes* promoted autonomy in students' learning.

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