Teacher's Roles and Challenges in Fostering Students' Learning Autonomy

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Abstract

This paper identifies the challenges of fostering students' learning autonomy and teachers' roles in supporting them. Thirty-one English major students participated in the study conducted in an Extensive Listening class. They were expected to plan their own learning (learning objectives, strategies, activities) and be responsible with their own learning plan. Every student wrote their self-reflection at the end of the activity to describe their experience, feelings, strengths, and weaknesses of the activities to explore areas of improvement. The analysis of the student's reflections and the teacher's observation suggested that most students struggled with the pre-listening activity as they could not identify their own learning objectives and strategies and follow the plan they had previously made before the listening activity. Further, this paper will discuss the result of the student's reflections on the learning activity and how the teacher should deal with that to find the roles of the teacher in supporting learners' autonomy.

Keywords: autonomous learning; extensive listening class; students' reflection; teacher's roles; challenges.

Introduction

The traditional way of teaching in which the teacher becomes the center of the teaching-learning process from the initial stage of planning and monitoring until evaluation consequently puts students as passive receivers who do not have any voice at all in the class. In this approach, the teacher will function as the source of all knowledge (Tudor, 1993), and they tend not to question the teacher (Kengwee & Ochwari, 2017). Besides, Pedersen (cited in Thomas, 2013) adds that this approach requires the teacher to perform different roles, such as the director of the class, the activities developer for students, and the controller of the students' interaction. In other words, this approach allows the teacher to take the directive role in which he/she will control everything that happens in the class and make the students passive receptors who work only to meet the objectives of the teacher's lesson plan.

However, this teacher-centered learning does not match the idea of Extensive Listening. In an Extensive Listening class, which is considered similar to Extensive Reading, students are expected to be more independently working with their listening materials as the objective of Extensive Listening is listening for pleasure, which eventually promotes students' listening fluency as well as their autonomy. As students work more independently, the teacher's role is no longer the directive one, but to assist students in staying on the right track (Melani, 2020). Still, like Japanese students (Ayako, 2020), Indonesian students lack learning autonomy, which affects their learning attitude.

This study aims to identify the challenges of promoting autonomous learning in an Extensive Listening class and what roles teachers need to play to foster students' learning autonomy.

Learner Autonomy and Language Learning

The basic definition of learner autonomy is that learners actively take responsibility for their own learning (Little, 1995). It means that the learners selectively choose the materials, find the strategies, and evaluate themselves. Meanwhile, in the listening context, autonomy refers to a self-directed listening activity in which learners select what to listen to, seek feedback on their understanding, reflect upon their choice, and monitor their own progress (Rost, 2011). Considerably, listeners should also select materials suitable to their interests or related to areas in which they have similar background knowledge (Field, 2009). By bearing this mindset, it makes sense that learner autonomy can bring out successful language learning because students plan and proceed with everything based on their interests.

However, not all learners are completely autonomous. Kanzaka (2007:2) states that generally autonomous learners are also more independent though autonomy does not necessarily mean complete independence. Learners are not born with autonomy capability from the beginning. Therefore, autonomy should be developed gradually, shifting from dependent to independent through some transition phases.

Littlewood (1996) divides learner autonomy levels into; (1) proactive autonomy, which means learners independently are able to control their own learning, including determining their goals, choosing strategies, and evaluating what they have learned; and (2) reactive autonomy, on the other hand, does not create its own directions but, once it has been initiated, it enables learners to organize their learning resources autonomously in order to reach their goals. From these levels, it can be seen that the ideal quality for learner autonomy is proactive autonomy, while reactive autonomy contributes to leading learners to

proactive autonomy. Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that autonomy is not innately achieved, and sometimes it is also influenced by cultural factors.

For example, learners in Asian countries tend to be reactive rather than proactive, which has been proven true by the following studies. First, a study conducted by Gamble et al. (2012) shows that learners perceive that they are capable of performing autonomous-related tasks. Still, they are not sure to take responsibility for their own learning due to a perception that it is the teacher's responsibility or a lack of confidence. Further, another study conducted by Aliponga et al. (2013) identifies that the kind of autonomy in the classrooms taught by NSE (native speakers of English) and NNSE (non-native speakers of English) is obviously reactive, which represents East Asian autonomy. Since both studies confirm that learners are reactive, therefore they need to be given such directions toward proactive autonomy. Thus, the role of the teachers is crucial in this sense.

Teacher' roles in Fostering Learners' Autonomy in Listening Class

Teachers cannot expect their learners to be autonomous from the very beginning. Therefore, one of a teacher's most important moral duties is to help learners become more independent and autonomous (Shahsavari, 2014). One way to promote learner autonomy is by having a discussion about how to regulate learners' learning in the class (Doğan & Hakkı, 2017). Teachers, together with the students, could discuss their learning needs, the goals they want to achieve, and what kind of materials they want to practice. These kinds of talks are important in the language classroom. As Ahmadzadeh and Zabardast (2014) highlight in their study that it is inappropriate for teachers to ignore learners' needs in their classroom instruction. Thus, it makes them rethink their own learning, whether they want to perceive the language merely as a compulsory lesson to study or as a long-life subject that they want to learn both inside and outside the classroom. After that, they are supposed to be given the opportunities to have their own choice in their learning, in which they are more in control of the process. The act of decision-making is important for the learners, as Doğan and Hakkı (2017) explained that choices enhanced intrinsic motivation and made it easier for the learners to be self-regulated. In sum, teachers should play a role as the learners' stimulators towards autonomy.

Furthermore, teachers should be the facilitator as well as monitors in the classroom. Teachers should facilitate learners with the necessary knowledge and information to support their autonomy development. Learners also need to be provided with various learning strategies and materials resources that they can choose and that go well with their learning needs and style as Ahmadzadeh and

Zabardast, (2014) state that the teacher's function in autonomous learning is to present the new material and to guide learners in helping them learn the strategies to acquire the foreign language successfully. Then, when learners are implementing their choice, the teacher's responsibility is to monitor the learners' progress to ensure they are in the right direction. Teachers must be alert to the progress made or difficulties faced during the activities related to autonomy; therefore, immediate and suitable support can be offered (Liu, 2015:1172). In the context of listening, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) provide teacher planning to facilitate independent listening in the form of the graph below.
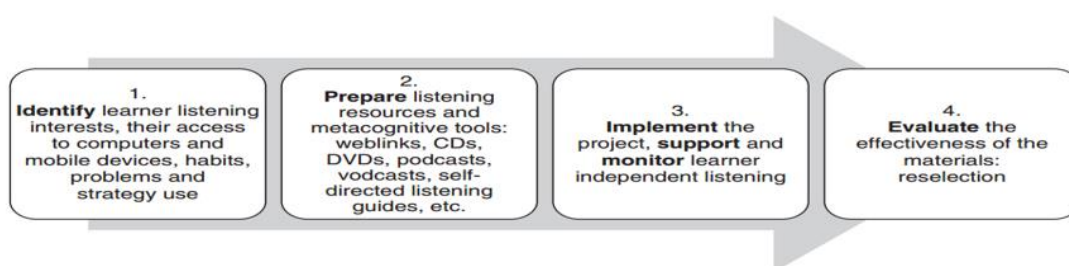

Figure 1. teacher's planning to facilitate independent listening (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012)

Method
Context of the study

There were 31 students who were purposively recruited as the participants of the study. These freshmen joined the extensive listening class when they were studying at one of the universities in East Java, Indonesia. The extensive listening class ran for 100 minutes, each meeting with some online materials such as BBC/VOA podcasts or Youtube videos. This class was chosen due to the nature of the class, which matched the idea of autonomous learning, which suggested more on students' centeredness. In this class, students were motivated to be more active and responsible for their own learning by taking part in planning the activities, finding appropriate materials and working more independently that suited their own pace. The teacher usually provided a listening guide for the students to assist them in making notes or summarizing the listening content.

Procedures

As this was the first time the students worked on this activity, the teacher assisted the students by providing some guidance. First, the teacher gave the students a piece of paper with instructions that every student needed to fill out. Each step of the instruction refers to setting the goal/objective of today's listening,

what kind of activity they would like to have to achieve their goals, what learning strategy they would apply and how to evaluate their performance. This was the pre-listening activity. After they wrote all the plans down on a piece of paper, the teacher shared a podcast (the link) to start with. Then, they listened to the podcast and proceeded with the learning by themselves, following the plan they had made before. The topic of the podcast was Asian and Western culture and this was the follow-up activity which meant that this topic was not a brand-new topic as they had already had this topic in the last activity with different sub-themes. The teacher also distributed a listening guide that the students could use to help them focus on the listening content.

During the teaching-learning process, the teacher was in the class to observe and manage what happened during the process and to help some students facing difficulties, such as understanding some unfamiliar expressions from the podcast. The transcript link was also given to the students after they showed that they had come to the evaluation stage where many of them said that they need the transcript to help them verify what they have previously listened to. And the last phase was asking the students to write a reflection about what they learned today and their opinion about this new approach.

Data Collection and Analysis

Following the metacognitive listening approach steps, the data were collected after the evaluation part. However, instead of evaluating the content of the recording, the students were required to reflect on the new activity that the teacher introduced at the time being. The students were asked to write their impressions/feelings on their recent activity that day. They were required to describe which activity they would like to adapt in the future listening class and the one that was hard to proceed with. The students wrote the reflection in English without any word limitation and collected it at the end of the class. The teacher's observation primarily highlighted the students' attitudes and behaviors during the activity took place. This classroom observation also presented the reactions to what the teacher saw during the teaching-learning process.

Document analysis was used to analyze the students' reflections and the teacher's classroom observations. After reading the documents several times to capture the phenomena and develop knowledge empirically (Corbin & Straus, 2012), The following steps included determining the coding categories, analyzing the result of the coded content, and presenting the result to answer the research questions.

Results and Discussion

From the reflections that the students wrote at the end of the teaching-learning process and the teacher's observation, some challenges can be drawn from implementing this approach in this Extensive Listening class. The results identified three major points which referred to challenges of fostering students' learning autonomy in Extensive Listening classes according to the students.

The First was that they were not familiar with the approach, so it was considered ineffective for students' listening activity. Three reasons were identified in students' reflections as they expressed their disfavor to the use of this learning approach in the class. First, they considered the freedom the teacher gave might cause them to work reluctantly. Since every student could set any goal, strategy, and activities by themselves, they were afraid that there was no control from the teacher. In other words, they were still unsure whether they had achieved the goal without any justification from the teacher, such as a score in this case. Following this reason, some students wrote that there was a chance that some students did not do their job or be responsible with their own learning as the consequence of no or standardized task from the teacher. Second, they did not enjoy this approach because it was time-consuming and tedious. From the teacher's observation, the students spent almost half their time planning their learning, from setting up the goals to finding suitable strategies and assessing their performance. It was indeed time-consuming as they looked confused and busily asked their classmates to ensure that they did correctly or whether they had the same plan. This phase somehow did not work too well and was a little bit messy as the students kept asking for clues because they felt confused and hesitant. Consequently, they spent more time dealing with the "technical procedures" rather than the listening process itself. This situation, as some students expressed in their reflection, was tedious. These students implied that it was much easier to follow the teacher's plan and do what the teacher had prepared for them. In other words, confusion about what was considered correct made the students unenthusiastic with the lesson.

One last thing that made the students not approve this approach was that they must spend more time finding some information relevant to the topic to understand the content of the listening by themselves. In the previous listening class (intensive listening), it was the teacher who usually took the lead in digging into the student's background knowledge, for example, by showing some pictures or giving a question-and-answer session, providing some facts about the topic during the pre, whilst and post-listening activity. However, in this approach, the students felt lost as they did not know how to do that by themselves. They were unfamiliar with the new activities and seemed flustered

about the sudden changes. Further, they felt discouraged from asking for help from the teacher. They added that they chose to keep silent and follow the class passively. Consequently, these students thought that the teaching-learning process was not as effective as the usual one. These responses seemed to be expressed by the shy students who had difficulty expressing their ideas openly or directly communicating with the teacher during the teaching and learning process.

On the other hand, almost 90% of the students showed that they loved this new approach and activity. These students showed a positive attitude; even a few wrote that they would like to have this kind of freedom in every listening in the future class if they could. Their reflections expressed that setting the goals by themselves made them know what to do during the teaching-learning process, and they felt it was much easier to do the tasks if they could choose their own way to finish them. Although, during the process, most of them did not know the goal of their learning. With assistance from the teacher, the students brainstorm ideas together until each student sets the learning goal/s. It took quite some time to finish this activity since they had never had any experience planning their own learning.

The main reason why the students enjoyed this approach was that they could choose and modify their strategies for learning. When many of the students, in the beginning, chose to work by themselves, it was found later that they tended to switch their strategy to pair or group work. They loved the idea of talking, sharing, and discussing things with their partners instead of following the teacher's instructions as it was usually applied. They also indicated that it was interesting to get the first access to the recording as well as the transcript to evaluate their understanding compared to when the teacher decided how many times they could listen to the recording as they usually had in intensive class. In other words, they were more convenient to learn in this class atmosphere because they could work based on their own pace without worrying about the teacher's instruction and steps which might not be preferable for some students' styles.

DISCUSSION

The objectives of the study were to describe the challenges of fostering autonomous learning in an Extensive Listening class and identify the roles of teachers in raising students' autonomy. There are some points needed to be highlighted from the results of the analysis. This segment provides relevant literature and research findings that could explain the results and some suggestions for teachers' roles to support students' learning autonomy.

Agota and Anita Szabo (2000) mention that there are three phases of the development of autonomy: raising awareness, changing attitudes, and transferring roles. Each step of these phases accordingly carries its challenges in the implementation which also prescribes the roles of a teacher in class while it is being implemented. Little (1995) describes that a teacher is not anymore, the only person who is responsible for the whole process of learning but shifts into a facilitator of learning and manager of learning resources.

The challenge that every teacher must first deal with when they try to promote autonomous learning in the class is raising the students' awareness. What is meant by raising awareness is making the students consciously accept the responsibility of taking control of their own learning. When a student is aware of their responsibility for their learning, they work to achieve their learning target, and when they successfully manage to achieve it, they tend to maintain this positive attitude to learn in the future (Little, 1995).

In order to make the students aware of their learning, they need to know their role in learning and one way to make them know is by involving them in making decisions about their own learning. Nunan (2003) mentions that students need to become aware of their course goal/s and materials at this stage. This is where the teacher's role is needed to create a learning environment that lets the students foster their autonomy and give the students control over what they want to achieve as the learning goal. Although most of the students said that they enjoyed the autonomy given by the teacher, the fact that it took quite a long time to set their plan and spent their time more on planning than the learning time should be taken into account. They have no idea of what the learning goal is or what they need and what their weaknesses lie (Reinders, 2010), as on a regular basis, the teacher decides the learning goal and everything. What makes it worse is that the teacher does not give each student enough information about their individualized profiles of strengths and weaknesses in everyday teaching. Perhaps, this is what is meant a teacher cannot expect the students to be autonomous from the beginning (Little, 1995) since some preparations are needed to make the students ready to participate in an autonomous class approach. However, it is unfortunate that only a few students who take part in this kind of classroom partnership have the adequate knowledge, skills, and attitude to start with (Nunan, 2003). Therefore, a teacher has a vital role in preparing the students to foster an autonomous learning environment by keeping their plan implicitly clear for the students to learn and adapt in the future. Furthermore, Littlewood (1996) proposed that students' ability to complete their responsibilities in their own learning is one of the two aspects ensuring the success of autonomous learning.

More students agree to have positive feedback on this pilot project of autonomous learning is actually relieving and sends a good vibe for future implementation. This positive response attracts the teacher's attention to why they enjoyed this series of activities. It seems that working with their own tempo while discussing things with their friends during the while listening phase makes them feel at ease. Working in pairs or groups appears to be the main point of why this approach is interesting for the students, as the students admitted in their reflection. This finding echoes what Jacobs and Thomas (2001) said group activities play a large part in autonomous learning because students' collaboration brings them to a new way of sharing and receiving support from their classmates. They learn how to be more independent from their teacher when they work with their friends as they find a new source of learning besides the teacher. Al Asmari (2013) highlights that pair and group work become one of the important characteristics of an autonomous classroom as a means to develop learner autonomy. In other words, being an independent learner does not mean working independently and isolating the learner. Student collaboration helps students rely on each other and build confidence in taking charge of what happens during their learning. Therefore, to build autonomy, students could rely on each other and learn from their classmates instead of working alone to facilitate their need as social beings. To accommodate students, the teacher needs to play a role as a resource person. According to Alibakhshi (2015), the teacher prepares students with learning conditions/knowledge that makes them aware of different kinds of learning styles/strategies as well as their own learning styles.

In addition, from the result of students' reflection, the teacher finds out that some students are worried that they might not reach optimal competence if the teacher lets the students take the roles that the teacher usually does in the teaching-learning process as the students in their opinion do not have enough competence to decide what best for them and it might lead to the wrong decision instead. This worry implies the second stage of autonomy, where students are challenged to change their attitude toward autonomous learning, where students still perceive that the teacher is the most authoritative and knowledgeable person in class and must take control of what happens in the class instead of letting the students decide on it. This situation seems to reflect that the idea of learning autonomy is a Western ideal that emphasizes active participation (Benson, 2007), and it is not a familiar concept of teaching and Learning in the Indonesia context (Lengkanawati, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2014) which consequently influences the way of how the students think and learn in class. These students are accustomed to the old paradigm in which the teacher dominates the class and only listens and does what the teacher asks them to do. As a result, they resist the autonomy of

taking charge of their learning as it is believed that it is not their duty, and they also lack the confidence to take the initiative.

Conclusion

This study identifies the challenges of fostering active listening classes to build students' learning autonomy. That the students are not familiar with the current approach makes them feel anxious. They are not confident enough to join the class activities and afraid of making mistakes. Their learning paradigm always puts the teacher as the center and the highest authority does not match the goal of active listening or independent learners. With this result, it is important for teachers to change students' perceptions by providing ample opportunities for the students to charge their own learning. Being responsible for their own learning does not mean that the students can follow all teachers' command and answer every question in the class so that they can get good marks and pass the class. To be responsible means they are aware of their progress and the effort they make to learn something. In other words, making mistakes is not a problem as it teaches them what is right. As the process is more important than the end product, the teachers play a major role in educating the students, so they acquire this attitude during their learning process. This suggests that teachers must be well prepared, especially in selecting suitable materials, methods, and activities that could foster students' autonomous learning. Because the students are not familiar with this approach, changing their attitude will take some time, and it is a natural process that every teacher should be aware of. In other words, teachers might need to learn different strategies to build students' autonomy and independence so that they are aware of what it takes to be independent instead of giving up during the process due to teachers' inability to design the class.

From the findings, some important points can be drawn. The first, as students love working together with their friends, teachers can start by grouping them or making them in pairs so that they could share their plans and make them more confident. The second, let the students decide the topics since day 1 and the targeted materials they want to learn. The third, teachers should help the students by providing some assistance when they need one, such as provide some varied materials that they could access by themselves. Some students have difficulty in finding materials as they are not used to finding it alone, even some adult students find it hard to find appropriate level listening materials (Doreen & Rebecca, 2011) Reflection is a must activity so that everyone could look back what they missing and revise it next time.

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