

A STUDY OF FRESHMEN'S AUTONOMY IN LEARNING AND THEIR ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT

The shift of teacher-centered to students-centered in English language teaching demands learners to be capable to do a learning method transformation of being dependent into independent. In EFL classroom context, autonomy is viewed as a substantial behavior to conform the demand and achieve the assigned language learning outcomes. In a matter of fact, learners' English proficiency should be considered to make sure that the concept of independent learning might be well-executed. This study aims to find out a correlation between freshmen's autonomy in learning and their English proficiency. Two hundred and one students of 2018/2019 batch were be involved as the sample of this study. They were selected by using proportionate sampling method. Questionnaire was used to collect the data. The results were obtained through the descriptive and statistical analysis, which aimed to find out the correlation between learner autonomy and English proficiency. Furthermore, library study was done to portray additional information of the two variables. The implications of the findings of this study were discussed.

Keywords: EFL, English proficiency, freshmen, learner autonomy

INTRODUCTION

This demanding era provides its own competitive challenge for young people to be involved in social interaction through a language. Language is also viewed as personal reflection which is interpreted into sense, thought and attitude. As one of the worldwide-used language, English is taught and learnt in Indonesia from elementary to tertiary level of education. Since it is used globally, English language might relate people among nations through communication. It also covers many sectors including business, education, engineering, technology, banking, tourism, etc. As stated by Friedman (2005), competent human resources is only economically rewarding in the global context if they speak English. Friedman (2005) takes India as a real example. This country experiences a fast-growing economic condition since they begin to accelerate the human resource quality in various sectors like science and engineering, education and health. They use English as their second language to enable them to communicate widely in the global world. It is in line with the result reported by EF EPI (2018) which revealed that India placed the fourth (4th) highest position among twenty one (21) countries in Asia. Crystal (2003a) suggests that English is necessary for its particular role in the areas of economics and business, international relations, media, education, communications as well as international travel and safety.

Content standard document as a part of Indonesian National Qualifications Framework Curriculum (*Kurikulum KKNI*) shows that higher education curriculum should covers several general and expertise subjects (religion, civic education, Indonesian language, English, and statistics or mathematics) to develop

the graduate competences. Considering the benefits of mastering English communication, the inclusion of English subject into school curriculum is a kind of important judgement made by Indonesian government. English is taught as a compulsory subject in higher education (Kemenristekdikti, 2016). However, it is only allocated in 2 credits which can be assumed that this might not be maximally supportive to obtain higher graduates English proficiency achievement to compete in the global world.

EF EPI (2018) highlights that in 2018, the English language is as important as it has ever been. It is used as communication tool for all types of international exchange—goods, services, and ideas. By the support of trade and technology, Asian countries with strong English proficiency are thriving. Singapore is reported as being consistent as the top 10 score of the EF EPI, which has had a trade to GDP ratio of over 300% since 1960. In the contrary, Japan experienced slight declination on English proficiency achievement. English will become an official subject in primary school in 2020, but with no plans for teacher retraining, Japan will have to do more if it wants to raise its level of English.

Afterwards, not having much different from Japan's achievement, Indonesia placed the 51st position among 88 surveyed countries with the average point of 51.58. Comparing to the previous report by EF EPI (2015), Indonesian English achievement run into depression as categorized in low proficiency. At this proficiency band, several examples of tasks that an individual could accomplish are navigate an English-speaking country as a tourist, engage in small talk with colleagues and understand simple emails from colleagues. In other words, this low proficiency band corresponds level B1 according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) standard. This illustrates individuals as independent users who can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly (encountered in work, school, leisure, etc), deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken, produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest, describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Language proficiency or linguistic proficiency refers to the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language (Wikipedia, 2012). In additional, Blagojevich, Ruiz and Dunn (2004) define the English language proficiency as the English language learners' communication information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of social studies. A learner is called as having limited English proficient corresponds that their first language is not English so they are unable to perform ordinary classroom works in English (Driscoll, 2003). To obtain valid data of English language proficiency, a learner should take an English proficient test. In Indonesia, there are several test ranges from the internationally standardized and admitted to the institutional - internally used. TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC are several examples which might be selected based on its test specification and test-taker's needs.

In recent years, researchers have examined the relationship between language proficiency and various areas, such as aptitude, intelligence, and language skills. This study highlights the interrelation between English language proficiency and learner autonomy/ autonomous learning. MacDougall (2008) simply defines autonomous learning as a type of learning that is characterized by personalization, self-directedness, and less dependency on the educator for affirmation, and which therefore enhances, rather than hinders, the capacity for constructive collaborative participation in the learning process. The demand of being independent in experiencing the learning process enables this autonomous learner to be able to achieve the gists of the learning material and construct personal comprehension to interpret the information. Thus, Dickinson (1987) defines learner autonomy as a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his or her learning and implementation of those decisions. This learner autonomy concept is very appropriate for the students in tertiary level of education where they are required to conduct an independent learning through the activities of exploration and self-directed findings.

Learner autonomy is believed as the behavior of driving their own self to do things which are considered necessary. In other words, someone has inner driver to trigger the action as it might be called as motivation. Brown (1994) argues that motivation is the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid and the degree of effort they will exert in that respect. It leads people to achieve the goal.

This study aims to achieve clear information about freshmen's English proficiency achievement and their learner autonomy. The data of English proficiency achievement was obtained from the results of their English proficiency test which was administered when they were in their first semester and the result is used for the internal academic purpose only.

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Learner Autonomy

Since the term autonomous is similar to being independent, it is assumed that an autonomous learner may learn with or without teacher's help and teaching aids. As stated by Holec (1981), a learner may have the ability to take charge of his learning without necessarily utilizing this ability to the full when he decides to learn. Autonomous learners always do things for themselves, but they may or may not do things on their own (Little, 2009).

Autonomous learning is characterized by independence and taking greater responsibility for their own learning, such as: setting learning objectives, selecting learning methods, as well as evaluating the learning process (Yan, 2012), which were traditionally the roles of the teacher. This means that learner is encouraged to achieve maximum amount of responsibility for what they plan for the learning. Autonomy might be seen from various things like finding the reason to learn, preparing things before study, experiencing the learning activities independently by making use of relevant sources and beneficial aids, reviewing the learning result, as well as managing personal learning schedule.

English Proficiency of Foreign Language Learners

Students' performance on their language learning can determine their English proficiency achievement. An English language learner is proficient when they are able to demonstrate the language use fluently and appropriately. Language proficiency is the language ability or ability in language use (Bachman, 1990). Then, Oller (1983) also states that language proficiency is not a single unitary ability but that it consists of several distinct but related constructs in addition to a general construct of language proficiency.

TOEFL, Test of English as a Foreign Language, is probably one of the most often examination in the admission process of foreign students to college and university in the United States (Pyle and Munoz, 1995). As mentioned above, there are numerous types of test based on its own superiority and purpose which might be taken to obtain language learner's proficiency achievement. English Proficiency Test (EPT) is one of the alternative.

Loughead (2000) gives an example of EPT, test of English for international communication, which is used as a standard assessment of English proficiency that has been developed by language experts, linguists and staff at the Chauncey group international to evaluate the English non-native speakers of English in the field of business. In other word, EPT is an international test, it measure the everyday English skills of people working in an environment. It tests all four language skills that effective communication requires: Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing. It emphasizes and measures English usage and communication ability in academic setting.

To analyze the obtained level of proficiency test, this study adapted the the level descriptor of one of English standardized test made by ETS (English Test Center) as follows:

Table 1. Overall Performance Test Result Descriptors

Score Ranges	CEFR Levels
627–677	C1 Proficient User — Effective Operational Proficiency
543–626	B2 Independent User — Vantage
460–542	B1 Independent User — Threshold
337–459	A2 Basic User — Waystage

Learner Autonomy and English Proficiency in Foreign Language Context

Numerous research reported the investigation of learner autonomy and related following issues. Kucukler (2016) conducted a study which involved 600 graduate (Master of Arts) students enrolled in the Institutions of Social Sciences and the Institution of Health at Balikesir University, Turkey, in the academic years of 2014-2015. The study entitled “Autonomous Learning for Proficiency Level in Foreign Language Development of Graduate Students”. It aimed to investigate the impacts of graduate students’ proficiency attitudes on autonomous learning in foreign language learning. Questionnaire and test were used to obtain the expected data. The results revealed that the control group scored a mean of 38.86 while the experimental group recorded 38.06 in the first test. Throughout all tests, the experimental group only scores a few points less. The ultimate YDS (The formal Proficiency Exam) score was (control group= 48; experimental group =47), which was almost the same. There was no meaningful difference between the control and experimental group.

A study entitled “The Correlation between Learner Autonomy and English Proficiency of Indonesian EFL College Learners” by Myartawan, Latief and Suharmanto (2013) found investigated the correlation between the two-mentioned variables in terms of behavioral intentions (self efficacy). The participants of the study were the first semester English-majored students of a state university in Bali, Indonesia. Data were obtained through questionnaire. The result of the study found out that learner autonomy and English proficiency had significant, strong, and positive relationship.

This study also highlight several similar variables as the two previous studies did with different participants and learning context.

Methodology

This study investigated the relationship between English proficiency and learner autonomy in a correlational study. As stated by Creswell (2005), a correlation is a statistical test to determine the tendency or pattern for two (or more) variables or two sets of data to vary consistently. This type of research design provides opportunity to predict scores and explain the relationship among variables.

The participants of this study were two hundred and one freshmen of 2018/2019 batch. They were selected by using proportionate sampling technique from a population of 577 students of Musi Charitas Catholic University. The sample of this study has taken an English Proficiency Test which was prepared and conducted by the Language Center. The results were interpreted and described based on level descriptors guidance.

Questionnaire was also administered to obtain the data about learner autonomy. It was designed by Zhang and Li (2004), which covers 11 statements. It has been proved to have high content validity and high reliability. The responses of 11 statements are in the form of scales ranging from never (1) to always (4).

The data were interpreted descriptively and statistically through Simple Linear Regression performed by SPSS. In terms of regression model, the subjects’ learner autonomy served as X variable and the Y variable was represented by English Proficiency Test (EPT) score.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This part highlights three (3) main findings of the study, namely the results of normality test, descriptive statistics and simple linear regression. Before the obtained data were descriptively and statistically analyzed, the normality test was administered in order to find out whether or not the data were distributed normally through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. If the normality spread is $p > 0.05$ then it is normal, whereas if $p < 0.05$ then it is considered not normal or approximately normal (Pallant, 2005). The result of the normality test is shown below:

Table 2. Summary Statistics of Normality Test

Independent Variables	N	One-Sample Kolmogorov-Sminorv Test			
		Normal Parameters		Kolmogorov- Smirnov Z	Asym. Sig (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std Deviation		
English Proficiency Test (EPT) score	201	421.09	65.537	1.246	0.089
Learner Autonomy Questionnaire Result	201	27.52	4.547	1.139	0.150

Table 2 shows the Kolmogorov-Smirnov significant value on EPT score and Learner Autonomy Questionnaire result respectively were 0.089 and 0.150. It is assumed that the data of this study were distributed normally ($p > 0.05$).

The 201 subjects of this study have participated the English Proficiency Test (EPT) which was administered when they were in the first semester as required by the university. The scores were conformed into proficiency level by presenting the English level descriptor made by ETS (English Test Center). The lowest score was 290 whereas the highest score was 610. This implied that there were only three (3) types of proficiency levels achieved by the subjects. The test result showed that 72% of the subjects placed the A2 level (Basic User), 24% of them belonged to B1 (Independent Level – Threshold), and only 4% at the B2 level (Independent User – Vantage).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of English Proficiency Test (EPT) score

No.	Proficiency Level	Score Range	Total	Percentage
1	C1(Proficient User - Effective Operational Proficiency)	627–677	0	0%
2	B2 (Independent User - Vantage)	543–626	8	4%
3	B1 (Independent User - Threshold)	460–542	48	24%
4	A2 (Basic User - Waystage)	337–459	145	72%
Maximum Score		610		
Minimum Score		290		
Mean		421.09		
Standard Deviation		65.537		

Table 3 above also displayed the mean of subjects' score, namely 421.09 (the standard deviation value was 65.537).

The administered Learner Autonomy Questionnaire designed by Zhang and Li (2004) was expected to derive the data of how autonomous the participants were in learning English as a foreign language. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed by Simple Linear Regression as shown in the following findings.

Table 4. Variables Entered/ Removed

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Learner Autonomy Questionnaire Results ^a		. Enter

a. All requested variables entered.

b. Dependent Variable: EPT Score

This first output implied the entered variables of the design. It can be clearly seen that Learner Autonomy Questionnaire Results was the independent variable, whereas EPT Score was the dependent variable.

Table 5. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.253 ^a	.064	.059	63.570

a. Predictors: (Constant), LearnerAutonomy

Table 5 displayed the results of simple linear regression and determination analysis. The obtained R value was 0.253 which implied strong correlation between the X and Y variables. Since this study only focused on one X variable to one Y variable, the ANOVA output was not necessarily displayed in describing the findings.

The beta value of X variable identifies direct relationship to the Y variable. Table 6 showed that the beta value was 3.684 which indicated significant relationship between the two variables since this t value was rather closed to 1 as the requirement. The coefficient output also informed that learner autonomy was positively correlated to the subjects' EPT score by the significant value of 0.000. In other words, the higher the students' learner autonomy was, the higher their English proficiency was.

Table 6. Coefficient Output

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	320.848	27.578		11.634	.000
	Learner Autonomy	3.642	.989	.253	3.684	.000

a. Dependent Variable: SkorEPT

Dornyei (2011) states that learners who are capable of learning independently may gain greater proficiency. It is in line with the obtain results of this study that the learner autonomy was strongly, positively, and significantly correlated to English proficiency. Similar studies by Myartawan, Latief and Suharmanto (2013) as well as Lengkanawati (2014a) also implied similar results which confirmed that learner autonomy was correlated to the other variables.

Lengkanawati (2017) states that autonomous learning refers to the ability of the learner to take charge of one's own learning by making himself capable of making his own decision in determining learning objectives, defining the contents and his progress, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring the procedures of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired. Several possible achieved advantages of autonomous learning are: (1) giving the same opportunities for different level of students; (2) encouraging students' confidence and responsibility; and (3) focusing the students' attention (Francis

& Flanigan, 2012). Moreover, Zulaihah and Harida (2017) emphasize that learner autonomy is greatly influenced by internal motivation. In their study, they also highlight the advisor's availability, text book, internet, supportive atmosphere, self discipline, cozy and quiet place, and early morning are among students' choices for their autonomous learning.

To develop learner autonomy, O'Malley & Chamot (in Wang, 2010) offer three possible strategies; cognitive, metacognitive, and social mediation strategy. The cognitive strategy is done through the method of reading, remembering, note-taking, and questioning. The metacognitive strategy involves the activity of planning the learning, data collection, self supervision, self evaluation, learning reflection, and arrangement of the individual's learning file. Social mediation includes relaxed behavior during the learning activities, the making of group's rule, the cooperation with fellow students, effective communication, and help for evaluating fellow students' task (Wang, 2010).

Considering the beneficial results reported by previous studies, learner autonomy is viewed as an important self qualification to help learners, especially in tertiary level, to achieve successful learning in this demanding era. The use of supporting facilities such as books, internet and technological inventories might contribute assistance on developing learner autonomy.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Learner autonomy is still not that common in the freshmen's contextual setting of this study. Therefore, its necessity would provide significant impact on students' learning.

In conclusion, this study revealed that learner autonomy was strongly, positively, and significantly correlated to English proficiency. This result is expected to give positive impact on freshmen's autonomous learning development. Although it cannot be denied that challenges and constraints might be occurred in the implementation.

Learner autonomy does not always mean learning without teacher. This misconception is caused by insufficient knowledge of learner autonomy concept and principles. Limited learning time and lack of experiences can influence students' interest in developing their learner autonomy. More practical tasks are expectedly assigned to students by language teachers through a thoroughly plan as the realization of teacher's professional commitment and various learning access exposure to students.

Doing self- identification of personal motivation also contributes to the development of one's learner autonomy. Additionally, the results of this study is hoped to widen learner's insight of cultivating their own interest in building up self-learning independence.

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