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Project- Based Learning As A Means To Promote Learner Autonomy In Esl Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The increased of interest in learner autonomy is mainly due to the rapid growth of information technology and globalization. In addition, the idea of learner autonomy is entailed in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB 2013-2025) which highlights the use of Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) to improve language proficiency among students. Outdated pedagogical and conventional educational methods are no longer relevant in preparing learners for thriving in the workplace, and a more self-directed and self-determined approach is needed. Educators today are tasked with developing lifelong learners who can survive and thrive in a global knowledge economy. Hence, project -based learning is seen as one of the ways an educator can use to promote learner autonomy in ESL classrooms. This study is to investigate how the process of project-based learning activities affects students' behaviours as well as develops learner autonomy. In this study, the researcher reports the impact of project- based learning in teaching English language proficiency skills course for semester one diploma students. Twenty-two semester one Diploma students, majoring in Accountancy course was involved in video project work for over one semester. A self-assessment questionnaire was administered at the end of the course to assess their learner autonomy and their perceived gained from the project work. The results showed that the students gained a higher degree of learner autonomy, increased intrinsic motivation and boost their confidence in speaking publicly, after participating in project- work. The gain was largely due to increased self -decisions on learning.

Key Words: *English language teaching, learner autonomy, life-long learners, project- based learning.*

INTRODUCTION

The Learner autonomy (LA) plays a significant role in language education since it can help promote learning achievements. The many significant body of research about learner autonomy in language learning proved that the interest to help students to learn autonomously has been a continuous interest and effort (Holec, 1981, 1988; Riley, 1985; Dickinson, 1987, 1992;Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Little, 1991; Cotterall, 1995; Dam, 1995; Van Lier, 1996). Leaner autonomy is regarded as an essential educational goal, and the link between learner autonomy and effective learning inevitably has directed to numerous pedagogical efforts in widely varying contexts to foster learner autonomy (Jones, 1995; Lee, 1997; Aoki & Smith, 1999). In Malaysia for instance, promoting learner autonomy is becoming one of the most crucial goals in language teaching as the ultimate vision of education is to produce lifelong learners who can learn autonomously.

Ever since learner autonomy was first introduced in Malaysia, various approaches have been developed to implement learner autonomy in the language classrooms such as the implementation of English Corner and Self-access Centres in schools for English Language subject. At tertiary education, project-based learning has been documented as an approach which could develop autonomous learning skills and foreign language skills. It is claimed that project- based learning can develop learner autonomy (Skehan, 1998) This is why project work has been integrated into foreign language education. Project-based learning constitutes a significant part of language learning since it provides a realistic setting which is quite different from in-class and instruction-based teaching and learning. Moreover, being engaged in a project work encourages students to be more responsible of their learning while proving a memorable and authentic leaning experience. (Kearney & Schuck, 2006). Additionally, most language educators believe that learners should be responsible for their own learning and use opportunities to practise language actively outside the classroom. A research by Trinh (2005) relied on a project-based approach to curriculum design to stimulate learner autonomy in terms of self-regulation. Consequently, integrating project-based learning into a training program or curriculum should be considered in the practical educational context for its degree of effectiveness and feasibility. This, however, has been understudied in the context of Malaysia, especially in a teacher-centred English language teaching scenario. In this study, a video project was used as the central tasks and contents for the learning of English.to promote learner autonomy in ESL classroom.

1.1 Problem Statement

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB 2013-2025) highlights the use of Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) to improve language proficiency among students. Unfortunately, autonomous learning which remains a crucial element is found to be missing from English language classrooms due to the exam-oriented system, as well as traditional teacher-centred approaches, widely used in Malaysia (Yunus and Arshad, 2014). Similarly, another Malaysian researcher, Thang (2001, 2003 & 2005) reported in her studies that in the Malaysian context, undergraduates of the National University of Malaysia (both distance learners and on-campus learners) to be very teacher-centred which is no longer fit in this 21st century teaching and learning. In addition, according to a study by Mahamood et al. (2009), 218 undergraduates in a private higher learning in Sarawak stated that the university lecturers used teacher-centered approach and sometimes student-centered approach as their teaching methods. Many learners have a pre-conceived perception about their lack of skills and low self-esteem in taking responsibility for empowered learning. As a result, they display negative attitudes towards self-directed learning.

In Indonesia, it is reported that teacher-centered minimizes the opportunities of the learners to be autonomous (Lengkanawati, 2016; Rukim, 2010). Other countries like Turkey, claims the learning process still implements traditional drilling method by the instructor. Moreover, the teacher-centred activities have resulted in limited interaction among teachers and students. The teacher usually spends a great deal of time speaking and explaining to the class; while students are required to sit passively and listen to the teacher attentively. (Kesli, 2015) Similarly, Wang (2010) states that the teachers who implement teacher-centered activities believe that their main duty and activities are to transfer their knowledge to the students. Thus, the only interaction allowed to occur in the classrooms is examinations or quizzes in which students have to answer the specific questions given by the teacher. Reviewing the conditions of English instruction in different countries above, the teacher-centered activity definitely gives less opportunity for the learners to manage their own learning. It yields nothing but the dependence of the students to the teacher. The learners do not master strategies to handle problems during the learning process. To be worse, Mullis (as cited in Lengkanawati, 2016) stated that the students will not be able to reach higher order thinking skills which are important to handle complex problems in their daily life. Concerning this unexpected fact, teachers have to change their mind. They have to implement a learning method which gives independent learning opportunities as much as possible for the learners. Hence, they can enhance their learner autonomy.

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Referring to the issue above, it is apparent that the teacher-centered activity denies the learners opportunities to be more independent in the learning process. Therefore, the solution to this problem lies in the hands of the teachers. Teachers are required to find the technique or method which gives the learners more opportunities to be more independent in the learning process. It means that both the teacher and the learners have to be aware of the importance of being autonomous in learning. The teacher has to facilitate the learners to be responsible in determining matters for their learning, such as the objectives, the learning activity, the material resources, the assessment technique and reflection. In other words, the teacher must encourage the learners to be actively involved in the learning process so the learners can promote their learner autonomy.

Understandably, promoting learner autonomy in the education system which relies heavily on traditional spoon feeding, exam-oriented system and top down curriculum and fixed syllabus may face a lot of obstacles. However, research findings have also shown the benefits of autonomous learning such as greater motivation to learn a language as well as to improve language proficiency. It is also reported that students tend to choose receptive activities more than productive learning activities. The reason relates to the many difficulties' students face in developing their autonomy. As the need for ESL learners to be autonomous is imperative, teachers must consider having change of roles and started using a more student-centred approach in teaching the language. Hence, it is mandatory for the ESL teachers to have a paradigm shift in their teaching approaches. Teachers must play a significant role in providing students with an autonomous learning environment and proper instruction One of the ways is using project-based learning. In project-based learning activities, students have the chance to take charge of their learning and therefore to develop their capacity for learner autonomy. research on language learning is generally confined to classroom instruction, including pre-selected curriculum and activities. Project-based learning seems to be significant to promote and foster learner autonomy in English language classroom. Thus, a study about students' project- based learning activities, and how learner autonomy affects students' behaviours during the process of these learning activities should be investigated.

1.2 Research Questions

The study is conducted to sought answers of the following questions

1. Will a drama-based project engage more active interaction and involvement of students in the English learning process?
2. Will a drama-based project enhance students' learner autonomy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Definition And Concept Of Learner Autonomy

The term autonomy has sparked considerable controversy, as linguists and educationalists have failed to reach a consensus as to what autonomy really is. As explained by Nunan (1997) learner autonomy is not a fixed, all-or-nothing attribute but a matter of degree and defining it becomes even more troublesome since the context that changes a learner's position on that continuum also needs to be considered. Despite the various definitions of autonomy, the common points and the major features of the autonomy remain the same.

The most commonly used definition is "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec,1981) which refers to learning activities that provide the learners the opportunities to determine the objectives, to define the contents and progression, to plan for learning, to select methods and techniques to be used, to be innovative in the learning process, to monitor the procedures of acquisition and to be able to evaluate that learning. Based on this definition, taking charge of one's own learning is described in terms of the capacity to make decisions at successive

stages of the learning process which is aligned with Tudor (1996) who proposes that the fundamental underpinning principle of this is learner-centeredness which can be defined as learners being more independent and responsible to assure success in learning a language. Contrastingly, Little (1991) argues that Holec's (1981) definition as problematic because he has failed to clarify the cognitive factors involved in the development of autonomy. In his justification, Little (1991) claims that 'autonomy is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of how learning is organized'. Little (1991), on the other hand, proposed a more convincing suggestion which emphasises on maturity of age, learning progress, learning needs and other factors within the learners for the students to be able to take charge and be responsible in his own studies.

Another definition is by Dickinson (1987) describes autonomy as a situation where learners are fully responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions, in fact in full autonomy there is no involvement of instructors or of any specially prepared material. He emphasised six concepts of autonomy which are interrelated to each other which includes:

- Self- instruction – refers to situation when learners work without the direct control of the teacher;
- Self -direction – a learner's specific attitude to his tasks, where he accepts responsibility for all decisions concerned with his learning but does not necessarily implement them;
- Self-access materials- appropriate to and available for self-instruction.
- Self-access learning – self instruction, during which learners make use of a repertoire of self-access materials.
- Individualized instruction – a learning process which is adapted to an individual, taking consideration his characteristics.

In language education, learner autonomy is interpreted in various terms such as 'learner independence', self- direction and independent learning have been used to refer to similar concepts of autonomy. In the field of language learning, there is much concern about the classroom techniques and strategies to be employed by teachers to help the low achievers. The term of autonomy which seems more relevant to learners performing academic tasks is by Pintrich and Schunk (1996) who refers autonomy as the degree of choice the learners have when they perform academic tasks, as well as the degree of choice they have regarding when and how to perform them. In similar vein, Brophy (2004) points out that autonomy happens through the choices the learners make during the learning process. By being able to make choices, learners will become more independent and self- directed in making decisions regarding their learning. Similarly, Harmer (2007) also agrees that the best context of learning is the one that students are keen to take charge of their learning without been directed by instructors. In addition, as Littlewood (1996) observes, the learners taking opportunities to interact in real life communication and making choices will yield actions that determine their goals.

Giving opportunities for learners to be independent in learning is the desired goal of learner autonomy. Learner autonomy has some bases on theories of language learning, one is that when learners are involved in the decision-making process on their language competence, they will be more involved in learning and it will be more meaningful for them. Furthermore, research shows that learners are more inspired and self-determined when they have control of their learning. Therefore, for the development of autonomy in language classroom to take place, making decision about the learning must involve the students. (Balçikanli, 2010). In the literature, learner independence is regarded as counterpart of successful language learning.

Autonomous learners are learners who can overcome the obstacles to the learning related to educational and cultural background and their previous experiences. The learners are considered as having good autonomy when they fulfil the criteria of learner autonomy such as self-instruction, self-direction, self-access learning and individualized instruction (Dickinson, as cited in

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Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The more the criteria are achieved, the higher learner autonomy is. As proposed by Dickinson (Dickinson, as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003), through prolonged process, the learners will master 1) self-instruction, which refers to a situation in which learners control their own learning 2) self-direction is the situations in which learners accept responsibility for all the decisions concerned with learning, 3) self-access learning, in which learners make use of self-access teaching material or instructional technology and 4) individualized instruction, which means the learning process is adapted, either by the teacher or by the learner, to suit the specific characteristics of an individual learner. Largely, by the implementation of learner autonomy, the leaners have the opportunity to be autonomous both in learning and in life.

2.2 Previous Studies

The findings of previous research investigated how some strategies of learning, such as portfolios, student's journal or student's log, technology-based learning and project-based learning, promoted learner autonomy. Researchers indicated that the implementation of the learning strategies mentioned above improved learner autonomy. Nevertheless, there are many constraints in implementing it, because it is not an easy work. In agreement to the idea, Lengkanawati (2016) states that to be successful in learner autonomy, it needs the commitment of the teachers to make their duty a major factor in its success. It has been highlighted by Yan (2012), the role of the teacher as manager and organizer is considered as the first and foremost role teacher needs to play in an autonomous leaning setting. In a learner-centered classroom setting, teachers are advised to create opportunities for learners to learn spontaneously and creatively and to take their own initiatives to construct their knowledge and should play an active part in finding solutions whenever meeting with obstacles.

Consequently, researchers like (Loveless&Gildfard, 2002) claim that being engaged in a project work will promote active and creative learning, and will also stimulate social interaction among the learners. Besides giving learners authentic learning experience, being involved in project work will influence the learners to hold greater responsibility of their learning. (Kearney&Schuck, 2006) Being motivated by the advantage of learner autonomy in the learning process and the success of the previous research, this study sought to investigate how learner autonomy promotes the learning process, especially by implementing project-based learning.

2.3 Promoting Learner Autonomy By Project Work

Learning through project work is one of the most common activities in subjects across the disciplines. It can be defined as an activity in which students develop an understanding of a courses learned by involving themselves in real-life problem in which they have some degree of responsibility in designing their learning activities. For example to get important information about a personality the students need to interview the persona in real via life interviews. The key goal of the action stage is to help students move from relying on teachers to being able to select their own achievable goals, make and exercise plans, monitor and evaluate their progress step by step. However, in Malaysian classrooms, teachers are usually seen as an authoritarian figure and the teacher-student relationship is usually maintained in a hierarchical way, in which stresses are easily produced. To promote autonomous learning, the classroom phenomenon should be kept less hierarchical and friendly, which will make learners feel relaxed and act more actively.

Littlewood (1999) observes that Asian learners have a high level of proactive autonomy in collaboration and communication when they are amongst equals, but not when they are in a hierarchical educational context, where they lose this proactive autonomy and become the 'passive' learners. In fact, most Malaysian learners just behave the same way. They are mostly dependent on teachers and less active in classroom. So maintaining a less hierarchical teacher-student relationship in Malaysian classroom setting is critical to successful application of

autonomous language learning. In the current study, project work was employed as a support activity or task to create supplementary practice and a facilitative environment for learning English.

Projects used in the current study have a broader denotation. They are seen as major tasks that learners complete in groups over an extended period (10-13 weeks) to produce a specific product like a video, a handbook, etc. The criteria of a project in this study are:

- creativity in product performance,
- focus on one issue or topic relevant to real life or the course content,
- integrated language skills,
- active and independent choice and decision about products, content presentation, etc.,
and
- criterion-based assessment of project work.

A previous study has documented the impact of the project approach on learning outcomes (Fragoulis, 2009; Simpson, 2011; Baş, 2011; Cusen, 2013). Project-based learning has shown to be an effective way to enhance motivation, and create positive attitudes towards and independence in learning (Levine, 2004; Ke, 2010; Maftoon, Birjandi, & Ahmadi, 2013; Zhang, 2015). Research on project-based learning in teaching General English, English for Communication, English Tourism and Information Science English, Business English skills has also documented learner progress in social communication skills and collaborative abilities (Levine, 2004; Simpson, 2011; Janjua, 2013; Affandi & Sukyadi, 2016).

In short, projects used as the central teaching and learning activity have shown a positive impact on learning attitudes and motivation, achievements, and skills related to learner autonomy. Project work was employed in this study alongside regular classroom activities (e.g., lectures, discussion, language practice) to provide the opportunity to develop autonomous learning skills. By doing this, the current research aims to further examine the role of project work in enhancing students' LA. The extent to which a project-integrated model of teaching language skills impacts LA will be presented so that implications can be drawn for integrating projects into teaching and learning foreign languages in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the descriptive qualitative research design to answer the statement of the problem aforementioned. This method is generally aimed at revealing a comprehensive summary or complete description on phenomenon happening during the intended treatment (Thorne, 1997; Sandelowski, 2000; Lambert and Lambert, 2012). The purpose of this study was to reveal and to gather evidence whether project-based learning could enhance students' learner autonomy in an ESL classroom. By employing this research design, It was specifically intended to reveal a comprehensive information and a complete description of an authentic phenomenon concerning how project based learning can promote learner autonomy, especially viewed from the four criteria of learner autonomy mastered by the participants, namely self-instruction, self-direction, self-access learning and individualized-learning. In other words, this study investigated every phenomenon happened when the participants carried out every stage of project-based learning, then it identified the criteria of learner autonomy which had been promoted by the participants during the learning process.

3.1 Population and Sample of the Study

In the current study, the population consists of Diploma students who are learning English Language Proficiency course at Universiti Teknologi Mara Kedah Branch. The sample is selected purposively. The study sample consists of 22 Diploma in Accountancy students during the June-October 2018 semester. The students form teams of 4-5 persons, each team worked on their video project for the duration of the semester.

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3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data included observations of the students' work progress, conversations and discussions with them at various stages of the project implementation and the students' answers to questionnaires containing open-ended questions. This study carried out a qualitative analysis of the data, adopting an interpretive paradigm as described by Cohen, Manion and Marrison (2007).

3.3 The Project

The project was a role-play and was carried out in groups. The students themselves decided the theme of their video. However, they were advised by the class instructor to include materials and topics from the syllabus content. This is to make sure the students re-activate their prior knowledge and to employ the linguistics skills they had acquired during their language course. T It lasted for about a semester (14 weeks) and consisted of three stages, planning, implementation and presentation stage. The students uploaded their videos in their Facebook closed group. Facebook has been chosen as a medium because it is user-friendly and more suitable for learning purposes. The classmates can view other group's videos and pose positive and constructive comments. The lecturer would also provide constructive comments to each video uploaded. Students were taught to accept suggestions made by their friends. At the end of the project the students were required to answer a self -assessment survey questions. All the answers are posted in Facebook via the student's e-portfolio.

Figure 1 Video 1 "Interesting Places in UiTM Kedah"

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Figure 2 Video 2 "Role-Playing Different Situations For Each Groups"

Figure 3 Video 3 "Food Hunting"

Figure 4 Video 4 "Promoting Places in Merbok"

RESULTS

The learners answers on the open-ended questions were analysed using a thematic analysis. The analysis was based upon the research questions.

4.1 Research Question 1

Will a drama-based project engage more active interaction and involvement of students in the English learning process?

To answer this question, the students need to "explain whether their activities inside and outside the classroom pertaining to their project will help them to improve their speaking skills"?

A few positive themes have been revealed based on the analysis.

4.1.1 Improve speaking skills

watching others videos improve my pronunciation
I learn to speak spontaneously without relying on scripts
My vocabulary has improved as well

4.1.2 Communication skills

The process of the video making teach us to communicate with other people and be independent.

To get the information about the places, we need to communicate with other people ourselves
We need to interview people

4.1.3 Boost Confidence level

I improved my public speaking skills from 4 to 8
I was too embarrassed at first now I am brave
My involvement in videos boosted my confidence to speak in English
By sharing about my videos I am more confident to speak in English

4.2 Research Question 2
Will a drama-based project enhance students' learner autonomy?

To answer this research questions the students need to describe how the process of video making can help them becoming and independent learner? The question in the questionnaire is as follows:

"Describe how does the process of working on your video can help you become an independent learner?"

Based on the students answers, a few themes have been discovered such as:

4.2.1 Independent learner

I edited a video by learning from google
We decide the places ourselves and manage our own time
We did the video ourselves. It's ours.
We completed the video without our lecturer's help.

4.2.2 Cooperation in a team
We divided the tasks among our teammates
We help each other, tolerate each other

4.2.3 Learn new things
I have to describe the places and eventually learn many new words myself
I get my information by asking UiTM staff, read books, search in internet
We self taught ourselves the technical skills in making a movie and have to edit before uploading it.

4.2.4 Leadership skills
I learned how to lead my group effectively to produce quality video

4.2.5 Learn from mistakes
I can read the comments from my friends and lecturer to improve my speaking and acting skills
In the video we speak in English so we need to speak correctly
I learned to improve my grammar
Be cautious of any mistakes before uploading the videos
I practice many times

DISCUSSIONS

Based on the results, several irrefutable assumptions can be made such as :

5.1 Cooperative Work Influence on Autonomy

Students decided to work in teams in order to reach a common goal and they were able to develop their own autonomy after being explained what project work was.

5.2 Self-Regulation

Peña Dix (2013) highlighted that self-regulation was "the highest form of cognitive engagement" (p. 76), which was used by students to perform successfully in class. Students developed self-regulatory processes to find strategies to cope with their learning difficulties which was evident in their video project.

5.3 Intrinsic Motivation

In terms of enjoyment and satisfaction, intrinsic motivation refers to the "inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70).

Intrinsic motivation is a key factor that allows learners to learn autonomously. Students were motivated to learn and were engaged in an activity, displayed tendencies such as desire for knowledge and accomplishment during the implementation of this research project.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the current study provide insights into the position of project work doing in fostering Learner Autonomy. For educators, project work can be seen as a potential measure, but the way it is integrated into a course needs careful considerations. The findings from this study show that when used as a supplement, project work has little effect on students' learning skills and behaviors, but it definitely enhances their intrinsic motivation. Teachers need to further train students in learning skills, especially self-regulated learning skills, and allow them to exercise these during the process of learning by doing. It could be concluded that the effect of learning by doing project is more likely to be substantial in increasing motivation. However, evidence about improvement of LA as a capacity needs further corroboration from future research. It is possible that the ability to take control of learning takes much time to grow, and intensive training as well as opportunities for exercise are essential to foster LA. As the students do more projects in their training program, the skills and behaviors related to LA will probably develop. Therefore, a regular integration of project work into the learning courses is suggested to create extensive opportunities for exercising, and thereby promoting learners' ability to control their learning.

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