TECHNIQUES OF PROMOTING AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Being self directed in learning is the skill that most students need to achieve and most teachers are aware of how important it is to lead students to be self directed. However, the skill is not easily established in classrooms in Indonesia yet. Despite the teachers' awareness about its importance, it is not easy for them to understand how to promote learning autonomy in the classroom. This paper is intended to share the techniques of how to lead students to have autonomous learning in the classroom. The study was conducted in a bilingual primary school in North Bali. The data was collected through a series of observations in the classroom. The finding shows that the teacher implemented several techniques which can promote students' learning autonomy, such as empowering the use of a reading log for students where students are trained to like reading and choose their own reading books, evaluate their reading log in the classroom, given rewards through 'reading rocket system' in order to persuade the students to repeat the behavior and continue reading, and empowering a Reading Response Journal system for extensive reading in order to boost their literacy, critical thinking and build the students' reading habits. Implementing the techniques explained is evident that students' learning autonomy can be improved.

Key words: autonomous learning, bilingual school

Introduction

English is considered as a foreign language in Indonesia and considered to be one of foreign language subjects to be taught from Junior High School. The importance of English as an international language of communications and considering its pragmatic functional use in Bali as a tourist destination, make most schools decide to offer English as a local content in primary schools in Bali.

The status as a local content in primary schools makes the instructional time provided for English very limited. The schools usually decide on English class once a week for 45 minutes. The time limitation causes teachers difficulty in motivating students to learn, as language is too complex for the students to understand what they need to learn in the classroom. With a session of 45 minutes in the classroom, and almost no exposure of the language use outside the classroom, the process of learning English in most primary schools in Bali can hardly motivate students to learn for its real use outside the classroom. For that reason, to compensate for the time limitation in the classroom, students need to be encouraged to develop their inner motivation to study English not only in the classroom of limited time available but also willingly use their free time outside to study English. This is also supported by Nowlan (…) who stated that the time limitation provided in school for class room instruction has contributed to the idea of promoting autonomous learning and increasing demands of its methods and techniques.

Autonomous learning allows students to be agents (enabling them to be the doers rather than the recipients of learning action) which is one way of helping to sustain their motivation (Harmer, 2007). However, the attitude to be self directed does not normally happen in most schools in Bali Indonesia because the students have been raised in a condition of being recipients of learning; they mostly rely on teachers for what to learn and how to learn and as the result, the students frequently cannot see the need of studying English and many are less eager and enthusiastic to take the chance of learning English.

Students need to be taught about 'learning how to mean', a term coined by Haliday in Mckay(2006) which is defined by McKay as learning how to use the language. This is a challenge for most teachers because it is not easy for the students to self-direct themselves in how they are able to achieve the goal.

Being self directed and able to take responsibility for one's own learning processes has become a central concern in language teaching recently. Promoting learner autonomy refers to 'the ability to take charge of one's learning' (Thanasoulas, 2016), encouraging students "to determine the objectives, to define the contents and progressions, to select methods and techniques to be used, to monitor the procedures of acquisition and to evaluate what has been acquired" (Holec, 1981 in Balçıkanlı, 2010).

Kamberi (2013) conducted a study on promoting learner autonomy in foreign language learning by using student journal. The study was conducted on university students. Even though some limitation informed, the results of the study shows positive results that students learned a lot of new vocabularies and phrases and students were able to write more on the topic. Other study was conducted by Hayta and Yaprak (2013). The study was also conducted on undergraduate university students. The study showed the students made use of a good amount of autonomous learning activities and benefited technology in their language learning.

Studies on learning autonomy were mostly conducted on adult learners and hardly found on those of young learners. Many people often underestimate the potential for self regulation in the children, seeing them frequently as too young to be self controlled, and often see them as blank space to be filled in by adults. Cameron (2001) states that young children can, within the limit of their cognitive development, be helped to organize their resources, both internal and external. It is not unusual if students of six or seven years old can self choose the books they need, organize their resources and make their toys tidy in the classroom.

Despite the potential owned by young learners, it cannot be denied that some teachers still experience difficulties on how to promote autonomous learning in the classroom. For that reason, this study was carried out in order to assist the English teachers on how to lead young students to be self-directed in learning English. Besides that, the study was also important for the students themselves on how they are able to be autonomous learners. In relation to that, the problems of the study were directed to answer questions about what kinds of techniques designed in order to promote self-directed learning, and how those techniques to be implemented in the classroom.

The remaining sections of this paper then discussed about the method of the study, findings and discussions on the kinds of techniques of promoting autonomous learning, and how the techniques to be implemented in the classroom which are ended with closure. It is expected that this paper can inspire other teachers on how learning autonomy can be promoted in their classrooms.

Method

This study was classroom research which was conducted in North Bali Bilingual School (NBBS) Singaraja Bali Indonesia. The data were collected through a series of observations carried out in a grade 5 classroom, and analyzed descriptively.

Finding and Discussion

English as an international language has been considered as paramount important to be mastered by students who are expected to take part in the global era. Its importance is evident by the fact that most knowledge and technology are explained using the language. Realizing the importance and value of English, in North Bali Bilingual School, English is therefore given more instructional time in the classroom such as three to five times of 40 minutes a week. Besides that, English is used exclusively as the language of instruction during English classes and also frequently during the sessions of other subjects. English literacy is the basis from which students are expected to be able to use the language for their life not only for getting the scores for their report. Besides boosting students' English literacy, NBBS sees the attitude of self-directed learning as crucial for successful language learning.

In relation to the problems of the study, the following are the techniques of promoting the attitude of being self directed in learning and how the techniques to be implemented in the classroom in NBBS. The techniques can be described as follows.
   1)   Empowering reading logs for initiating reading habits: giving choices and setting the goals.

In Bali most students grow up and are raised in a talking society not in a reading community. Reading is not part of their life yet, and reading is mostly conditioned by teachers in school. Therefore, it commonly happens that reading is only done if teachers in school instruct students to do it as a part of an assignment designed by teachers. This fact makes empowering self directed learning at schools a great challenge for teachers.

One technique implemented by the NBBS teachers for promoting learner autonomy is to empower the use of Reading Log as shown in the following picture.

Picture 1: Reading log used in NBBS

The goal of this program is double, first dealing with character values such as to build the attitude of reading habits and giving training on how to self regulate their learning, and second pertaining to enhancing their literacy skills.

Building the attitude of self direction is a slow process and something which cannot be instantly formed. The fact that the students are still in elementary school and are not yet capable of independently self controlling themselves needs intervention from the school through school policy about how the students start their reading habits. The Reading Program with Reading

Log is a first step on the road to self-directed learning. Through this program, students are encouraged or expected to take responsibility for what they are doing. To enhance its success, NBBS includes students' parents to take part in this program. As a school policy, this reading program must be carried out for every student on the basis of a daily process and students are asked to choose their own books in the school library. Students must read the books (in English and in Bahasa Indonesia) they borrow every day at home at their free time for at least 15 minutes. To guarantee this activity properly done, students must record the activity in their reading log and have it signed by their parents.

The value and the strength of this program are of many folds.

a) The power of repeating the activity of daily reading outside the classroom stimulates the formation of the behavioral habit of reading.

To encourage the students to willingly and voluntarily do their reading at home, the rule and system must be under the negotiation and agreement with the students in a democratic situation in order to make reading at home as a part of the students' responsibility. With a daily reading activity like this, not only does it improve the students' literacy, students are also trained to exercise their reading habit which slowly forms their character.

b) Besides that, assigning students to this program trains students to set their goals and be able to make their own choice of materials and resources to be read which clearly promotes the start of learning autonomy. Before the students take the books home, the students decide their goal and are able to choose the books themselves at the library. The goal can be very simple to read the book with good pictures or reading the story they like. On this level, the most fundamental thing for young learners like them is they know what to get and are able to choose the materials for establishing the goal.

Involving students in the decisions such as the use of materials, the type of reading activities they do and the type of reading homework activities, provides them with choices of different approaches and understandings to foster learner autonomy (Ryan, 1997; Nunan, 1999; Fenner &Newby, 2000; Benson, 2001 in Balçıkanlı, 2010). This opportunity allows students to have a sense of self confidence because they are given space to decide on the issues, which will guide and lead them to increase their sense of responsibility for the learning process.

Picture 2: Example of the filled reading log

The picture of reading log above indicates that reading activities are done every day by the NBBS students. The constant cycling practice of setting own goals, choosing books themselves, repeated actions of reading outside the classroom promote students to be self directed which develops autonomous learning.

2) Evaluating the reading log

To evaluate that the students carry out the targeted behavior, the filled reading log must be evaluated by the teacher together with the students. This is very important because the involvement of the students is a part of teaching the students to know which things are appropriate and which ones are not. Students learn better when they are engaged with what is happening. Their feeling and attitude matter both in relation to their encounters with the language itself and also in terms of the learning experience in general (Harmer, 2007).

3) Rewarding through Reading Rocket and other systems to enhance the power of repetition.

In order to reward a student or a class for excellence, and to establish a fun and exciting situation, a reward program is conducted by design in NBBS. This program is carried out by empowering the power of positive. Positive behavior is rewarded in a positive way, and thereby encourages more positive behavior. Rewarding positive behavior is a kind of teaching and showing to other students that those behaviors are desired, so when other children see positive behavior being rewarded, they will also be impacted in a positive way. The reward program is also intended to empower the students to make choices for themselves and for their behavior. When they are rewarded, THEY are choosing the reward because they are choosing to "do the right thing". To establish its most powerful impact, the rewards must be as immediate as possible.

One example of the reward program is called Reading Rocket Reward. In the reading rocket program, the behavior is rewarded using a point system. If the student did reading at home as indicated by the signature of the parents, the student will then get points for their class; and if all students in the classroom did reading at home, then the point must be multiplied to the number of all students who read the books as written and shown in the log. The result of calculated points is then written down in the reading rocket on the wall so every student can see it. The reward for the behavior is usually given after a certain number of points have been reached, and the teacher decides the type of rewards given which can be in the form of 15 minutes free time on a certain day or a chance for other free activities chosen by the students. The example of the Reading Rocket is shown in the following picture.

Picture 3: Reading Rocket reward system sticked on the wall

The point system implemented in NBBS is very powerful because the students are partly motivated to read every day in order to get points. In interviews with parents during teacher-parents-student conference it was confirmed that their children were always enthusiastic to read during free time at home partly because of the points. It is an indicator that the behavior of reading daily at home has formed a habit which makes reading become parts of students' daily life.

Based on the observation, it was found out that the most effective reward is a cooperative reward, a combination of individual and class reward where each individual student works towards a reward for the class. The effectiveness of the system is also indicated by the situation that if there are students who would seldom get an individual reward can still benefit and be motivated as they too can receive the reward.

Another type of rewards awarded to students is the certificate of Super Reader. This reward is specially given to students who have been able to exhibit the initiative of reading books or other materials during end-of-the-year or mid-semester holiday. Taking the initiative to read during the long holiday manifested an attitude that the students have already been able to have autonomous learning. As a result, the award as Super Reader can be given to them. The administration of the award is conducted on Saturday when NBBS carries out Saturday Assembly, a gathering of all students where teachers or students present activities including the administration of any awards given to students about their achievements. "Super Reader" certificates (as shown in the following picture) go to deserving students who displayed outstanding behavior in reading and have been able to show efforts and also exemplary character of being self directed in reading.

Picture 4: Example of Super Reader Certificate

The implementation of reading log and its reward system is primarily intended to build the attitude of enjoying reading and form the reading habit. After this can be established, the next step is to assist the students in learning how to learn. Cotterall (2000) in Harmer (2007) suggests that language classes which aim to promote learner autonomy should have a number of defining characteristics such as the course should reflect the learner's goal in its language, tasks and strategies. This means raising the students' awareness of ways of identifying goals, specifying objectives, and identifying resources which will help them to realize the goals. Next, the tasks should be explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process. In other words, the students will find it difficult to manage their own learning if they have no idea of how learning works. It is by developing an awareness of language learning theory that they are able to adopt learning strategies for themselves. The last characteristic is that

the English tasks should replicate real-world communicative tasks and finally the course should promote reflection on learning (Cotterall, 2000 in Harmer 2007).

Since promoting autonomous learning is dealing with young learners like elementary school students, they need to be assisted in how to manage their own learning especially to understand how learning works. Pertaining to this condition, NBBS implemented Reading Response Journal which has shown that it can lead students to self-direct themselves in learning to read.

4) Novel Study to train students' agency for their own learning

To confirm and enhance the attitude of self directed learning and to build critical thinking, reading response journal was implemented in NBBS. Reading respond journal was started from grade 4 students and the materials read were in Bahasa Indonesia. Along with the progress of the students, reading response journal will be also implemented for reading materials in English when the students are ready.

Journal provides an opportunity for students to think both about *how* they are learning and also about what they are learning. This kind of introspection may lead students to develop their critical thinking and provoke them into reflecting on how and why things have happened so that they decide what to do next (Harmer, 2007).

- How to start

    The first step was to give training on how reading response journal would be done. The training was conducted by scaffolding the students in the series of steps done in the classroom; and the material to be read was a novel. The training consisted of:
    1) Introducing novel study.

        The teacher explains about it, what activities are involved, and how the students carry out the novel study itself. This orientation at this stage did not need to be too details because each step of the activities would be conducted by the students, so if there is a confusion, it would be clarified through the process they would take.
    2) Brainstorming.

        The students are invited to guess about the contents of the novel from its cover and pictures, and asked students about possible content of the stories. Besides that elements of a novel were also discussed by the teacher in order that the students have complete understanding about the profile of a novel.
    3) Reading each chapter.

        Reading activities in this step can be of various kinds, like reading aloud, silent reading, pair reading or group reading. The teacher decides based on the situation of the students. To lead students to understand about the content, the teacher provides them with questions as a scaffold for students how to analyze and comprehend the content.
    4) Mini Lesson.

        This step was done in order to emphasize the linguistic and grammar aspect of the language. The teacher can explain certain keywords or types of sentences pertaining to key competency that needs to be achieved.
   5) Conducting Activity Card.

        This is the extended activities which can be chosen by the students after they read a pre-determined number of chapters. The students can make pop-up books dealing with the content of the chapter, make a diorama, a poster, comic strip, puppet, or mini drama. Carrying out the Activity Card must be under the criteria, time frame agreed, and assessed based on the criteria. At the end, students must present their Activity Card.
    6) Presentation:

        Students must share the activity card through presentation
        The picture below states the summary of one of the novels the student read. The summary can be very short and simple (like shown in the picture on the right, or longer and more advanced like shown by the picture on the left).

        Picture 6: Examples of summaries made by the students
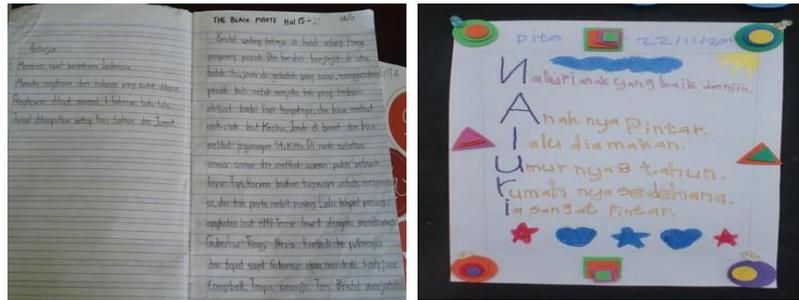
The time frame for introducing the novel study as informed above is between 3-5 weeks (1 week is 4 – 6 times @40 minutes)

From the steps explained above, it can be stated that introducing about novel study was conducted by involving students in the activities and let them experience the process. By experiencing, students build hypothesis, and their understanding is processed in the form of hypothesis testing through their interactions and involvement in the activities conducted in the classroom with their teachers. From this process, it can be reconfirmed that knowledge is attained by the 'hypothesis-testing' model, and that it is more effectively acquired when 'it is *discovered* rather than *taught*' (Thanasoulas, 2016)

The way the teacher introduced the concept is underlined by the concept of constructivism theory where students reorganize and restructure their experience to form new knowledge. Constructivism leads directly to the proposition that knowledge cannot be taught but only learned (that is, constructed)', because knowledge is something 'built up by the learner' (Candy, 1991 in Thanasoulas, 2016). As a result, constructivist approaches encourage and promote self-directed learning as a necessary condition for learner autonomy (Thanasoulas, 2016)

At the end of the novel reading, the students must be able to write a report of critical review about the novel read. The picture below shows an example of the review made by the student.

Picture 7: Example of review about the novel read
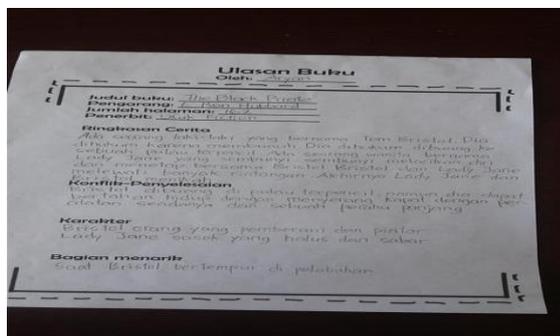
- Extended activity card : drama presentation

    After the students make a report/review then the students need to choose an extended activity card. They can choose the activity they like to do, and at the final step they have to present it in front of the classroom.

The activity cards chosen by the students can be a role play/drama about the story written in the novel they read. The long processes of training the students to be self directed, is a success if students are their own learning agency which is manifested in their behavior of being capable of handling democratic discussions on what to perform, how they identify the cast of the characters and choose their friends, designing the costumes used in the play and even on drafting the scenario of their drama. The teacher acts as a consultant and also sometimes as a helper for their students.

Picture 8: How students perform a drama about the novel they read

Picture 8 above is the data when students performed a drama about the novel they read. Along the process of preparing the play, students mostly negotiated themselves about how to describe about decorating the doors explaining about the story in the novel. The teacher gave them chances to discuss among themselves and the teacher acted only as facilitator. The same happened when they had to decide about the costumes. The students decided and the teacher only helped if the students had problems and could not solve them themselves.

5) How to keep going – Reading Response Journals

If the novel study is well comprehended by the students, this means that the students have an experience about how learning works and takes place. The next step is to start Reading Response Journal, a program where students should write in a journal about novels they are reading which is then submitted to the teacher. At the first stage, the students can simply write a plot summary of the novel they are reading. The next step or "level" would have students writing about things the students like/dislike from the novel, things they do not understand about the story, predictions about the next chapter, or relating the student's personal experience to the story in the novel. From this point, the teacher then can respond the student's journal by providing leading questions to critically think about many different elements of the story. This stage is intended to train students to experience learning as the result of their own self-initiated interaction with the world.

The picture below is an example about the reading response journal showing about the number of novels the student had read.

Picture 5: Example of reading response journal

From the view point of the teacher, the students' summaries can be used as a kind of indicator whether the students know how to mean. From this point, the teacher then provides the students with leading questions in the journal to scaffold students to critically think and slowly self regulate their own learning.

- Responding to the Journal

    The responses given by the teacher to students are unique to each student. It is different depending on the needs of the students. The response can be in the form of leading questions which can be answered back by the students in their journal. The teacher response and the back and forth is meant to be a "conversation" between the student and the teacher about their reading, in the form of writing.

The shift of teaching learning paradigm manifested in the programs from the teacher as the agent and the doer of the teaching process then changed into being the helper, and the students shifted their roles as the learning agency for themselves has been proven very successfully beneficial. The learning process experienced by the students has made their learning meaningful and authentic as stated by Thanasoulas (2016) that learning is not simply a matter of rote memorization; 'it is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning on) events'.

Besides constructivism theory, the philosophy underlying the process of promoting autonomous learning have been strongly influenced by neo-Vygotskian psychology which view learning as a matter of supported performance and emphasizes the interdependence of the cognitive and social-interactive dimensions of the learning process. Based on this theory, the teacher's

role is to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners can be autonomous in order to become more autonomous (Little, ….).

The strength of autonomous learning can be proven to be multi beneficial. The process of learning-how-to-learn training designed along the stages of Reading Respond Journal Program by the teachers is a clear indicator that the attitude of self-regulation has been significantly improved. The choice of performing drama as an activity card as described above clearly indicated that the students have been able to self direct themselves because they have been successful to negotiate among themselves and take a good control until the decision can be made. Not only that the activities were fun and creatively interesting, but also the fun element itself creates a desire to communicate which promotes the urge to communicate even though sometimes with inept language. This kind of opportunity boosts the students' literacy.

Even though the success of the techniques can be clearly performed by the students, it should be honestly admitted that the study has limitation of not investigating quantitatively the effects of each technique on the students' English literacy. In spite of that limitation, the performance of the students' behavior and attitude clearly indicates that the students have been able to exercise its autonomous learning in their levels.

Through many kinds of innovative tasks which are followed through by the students as mentioned above has made the school able to enhance student literacy skill as well as English mastery. The success is also rooted from the manifestation of the principles of communicative language teaching as mentioned by Richards and Rogers (2001) that learners learn a language through using it to communicate in the forms of authentic and meaningful communication activities as the goal of classroom activities. Communication involves the integration of different language skill, and learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error.

Closure

Autonomous learning cannot take place instantly but through a long process. The students must be provided with learning training for autonomy through involvement in activities which allow them to take part in order for the activity to be a success. Giving the opportunities for the students to experience the process and taking responsibility for their own learning is a kind of exercising the shift of learning as the doer which leads students to be self regulated. The techniques of leading students to be self-directed consequently need careful preparation and serious commitment in order to receive the best results.

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