Students' practice on autonomous language learning behaviors: A narrative inquiry

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Article Info

Abstract

The ability of learners to take an active role in their learning has attracted attention in foreign language learning as the focus of language teaching practice and theory have shifted to a student-centered approach. Thus, this study aimed at exploring how students employed autonomous language learning behaviors, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning, including the challenges that the students may find. By applying a narrative inquiry, this study focused on examining students' experience in doing autonomous language learning behaviors and their challenges. The data were obtained using a semi-structured interview with four bilingual students who live at private Islamic boarding school. The findings revealed that they implemented autonomous language learning behaviors, yet they met some difficulties in doing those behaviors, such as the dilemma in determining the goals or the priorities to learn, the lack of motivation in doing those behaviors, the need of others to help them doing the behaviors and misunderstanding of the autonomous behavior concepts. The findings imply that the participation of the teacher's assistance and encouragement in implementing autonomous behaviors is crucial. Due to the limited data obtained in this study, future research can be done to explore more about autonomous behaviors. The findings of this study are expected to shed some light on autonomous behaviors implemented by students living in Islamic boarding school, specifically who are bilingual.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's recent curriculum, the 2013 curriculum, has required teachers to use student-centered learning in the classroom. It has been promoted for about seven years. Since the focus of language teaching practice and theory has switched to a student-centered approach, the ability of learners to take an active role in their learning has received attention in foreign language learning. However, in Asian societies, language learning is still known to be teacher-authoritative, encouraging obedience and reliance on the teacher (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019). Although it is difficult for some teachers to implement student-centered classroom, it still cannot be ignored due to the significance. One of the purposes to implement student-centered learning is to make students become autonomous learners. It has been argued that active participation in learning outside of the classroom is vital especially for foreign language students (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019).

Learner autonomy is mostly known as the ability to take responsibility for their own learning (Holec, 1981, cited in Little, 2017). It includes the responsibility for determining the objectives, setting the content and progress, choosing the methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the acquisition process, and evaluating what has been obtained. Cotterall & Crabbe (1999) argued that students will be autonomous when they are: (1) promoted to self-monitor and self-assessment; (2) promoted to objectively focus on their learning process; (3) provided opportunities to choose content and learning activities, as well as opportunities to assess their own progress: and (4) promoted to find their own language knowledge and build their own learning assignments. The term 'promoted' shows that teachers need to foster autonomy to the students. It is stated by Lengkanawati (2017) that no matter how experienced a teacher is, if the students do not make efforts by working independently outside the classroom on their learning and by becoming active participants in the teaching and learning process, the good learning outcome will not take place.

Geddes and Strurtridge (1997, cited in Kemala, 2016) argued that autonomous learners decide what they want to learn or why they need to learn, and then decide how to tackle the problems. Furthermore, Dang (2012) divided the characteristics of learner autonomy into three categories: initiating, monitoring, and evaluating. Understanding personal learning preferences, defining goals, preparing study plans, and providing learning opportunities are all aspects of the beginning learning process. The monitoring learning process, which is likely the longest and where the majority of learning occurs, comprises traits linked to learning engagement and maintenance, such as selecting appropriate tactics, adjusting learning paths, and bargaining with others. The evaluating learning process predicts characteristics such as proofreading an assignment and evaluating a piece of writing while reviewing learning results.

However, fostering learner autonomy is still difficult. Nakata (2014) states that fostering learner autonomy in EFL contexts face full of constraints and limitations and thus there is no much freedom because of, for example, fixed curricular goals, large class sizes, textbook and exam-oriented teaching, and teacher-faced instruction. Another clear challenge is the socio-cultural background in which students respect the teachers and make them reluctant to speak up about their wants. As Harmer (2007) asserted that for certain students from some educational backgrounds and cultures who have been led to believe that it is the teachers' role to provide learning, this message can be challenging. Tomita & Sano (2016) investigated students' needs in developing their learner autonomy by dividing them into low and high proficiency levels obtained from their TOEIC scores. The findings revealed that the students need the support of the teachers in developing their autonomy levels. Research conducted by Tuyen & An (2019) also studied the challenge in fostering autonomy. The findings of a study encountered that students themselves might be one of the challenges that the teachers find in promoting learner autonomy. The students with a low level of proficiency prevented the teachers from implementing strategies in their teaching. That can also be because the students are not motivated.

Some previous researchers in Indonesia such as Agustina and Fajar (2018), Khotimah et al. (2019) and Ramadhiyah and Lengkanawati (2019) discovered how learners view autonomy in language learning. For example, Agustina and Fajar (2018) found that although students believed that being autonomous and independent is important, they have not been able to sustain their autonomy as English learners because of a variety of reasons, such as their lack of motivation, consistency, willingness as well as supportive atmosphere. The findings are supported by Chan et al. (2002) who said that motivation is an important aspect in determining whether or not a student is ready to learn independently. Similarly, Ramadhiyah and Lengkanawati (2019) discovered that despite the fact that the students believed they were capable of controlling their own learning, they delegated that responsibility to their teacher. It could be due to socio-cultural factors in the Indonesian environment,

which keep teacher-centered learning in place. A study conducted by Khotimah et al. (2019) discovered that not all students comprehend the concept of autonomous learning in English lesson. They also found that among the autonomous behaviors, the monitoring phase, according to the third-year students in the study, was more important than the other two stages. Other findings by Kemala (2016) showed that independent learners are primarily impacted by their own desires, followed by the environment, learning activities, teachers, and materials. The majority of high autonomous learners were motivated to study English by their desire to advance their careers in the future, as well as other factors.

The findings above indicate that being autonomous learners is influenced by many factors. Since students may have various backgrounds and cultures in language learning, it will sometimes provide different situations in implementing autonomous language learning behavior. The students may have their own reasons why being an autonomous learner is challenging for them, especially the students in the dormitory area. It then becomes significant to be studied since students studying and living in Islamic boarding school have many agendas outside their study at school which can be one of the factors to influence how they implement autonomous learning behaviors. The author, then, had curiosity on how students' studying in private Islamic boarding school who are in bilingual class implement their autonomous language learning behaviors. The previous studies had not covered autonomous behaviors from students living in Islamic boarding school, specifically who are bilingual. This study is going to search how students who live in private Islamic boarding school, specifically who are bilingual, do autonomous language learning behaviors, and the obstacles that they encounter in implementing the behaviors by using a narrative inquiry. Hence, the research questions of this study is 'How do the students plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning?'.

METHODS

This study used a narrative inquiry method. It is the study of the ways in which people experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). DeMarrais & Lapan (2004) claimed that narrative inquiry represents the researcher who wishes to understand a phenomenon or an experience rather than to formulate a logical or empirical theory. A narrative captures human experience through the creation and reconstruction of personal and social stories; and learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Webster & Mertova, 2007). In language teaching, narrative research attempts to recount the learner's perspective with his language learning experience (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). It is relevant to the purpose of this study, which was to explore the students' experiences in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning, including the challenges they encountered. This study asked the participants to share their experiences by letting them tell their stories, which was a part of a narrative inquiry.

As this research aimed at exploring students studying and living in Islamic boarding school doing autonomous language learning behaviors, this study was conducted in private Islamic boarding school in Central Java with four bilingual students that speak Arabic and English for their daily activities. The school was purposively chosen because it provides two languages to be used by the students. It also provides autonomous learning environment in terms of English or Arabic study club after the school hours. Two of the students were in the second grade and the rest were in the third grade. All the names in the findings were pseudonym. They were chosen because of their availability in participating in the study. According to Hamied (2017), in qualitative data, the participants can be based on the researcher's convenience, hence the number of participants is insignificant.

The data were collected using semi-structured interview. As Connelly & Clandinin (1990) stated, interview can be a tool to collect data in narrative inquiry. The interview questions were the elaboration of the questionnaire created by Karababa, Eker, & Arik (2010) who had studied the skills of autonomous learning notion in Turkey. The items covered students' planning abilities, monitoring abilities, evaluation abilities, and the obstacles that they encountered during the process of autonomous learning behaviors.

During this study, COVID-19 pandemic was arising. The study in the private Islamic boarding school was still conducted offline. Yet it could not receive any visitors. Since the researcher could not visit the school, the researcher contacted some students who were going back to their homes because of their individual reasons. At first, the author asked the students to be her respondents. They were going back to their home because of certain conditions so the author could reach them through phone. The collection of the data was done from 16 to 19 November 2020. After they agreed, the author sent the list of the questions to them by WhatsApp. The author focused on asking how the students plan,

monitor, and assess their learning and the challenges in implementing it. The researcher allowed the students to answer using English or Indonesian language depending on their preferences. Adhikara and Nanda answered using Indonesian language, and Rijal and Rohman answered the questions using English. Adhikara, Rohman, and Nanda answered the questions by typing them. Meanwhile, Rijal answered the questions by sending the researcher a voice note. Some of the answers were not clear enough, so the researcher clarified it by validating the answers or by asking the participants another question regarding the answer to avoid misunderstanding. For instance, when the researcher asked Rohman about how he evaluated his learning, the researcher asked another question to validate his answer.

After the data had been gathered, the interview data from the voice note were transcribed. The transcription and the data in written response was coded and arranged into certain themes, such as planning the learning, monitoring the learning, and evaluating the learning; and based on the themes a further interpretation was developed. According to Kim (2016) data analysis involves interpretation. Analysis implies objectivity and interpretation implies subjectivity. After the narrative was created, to ensure the trustworthiness (developed by Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Elo, et. al, 2014) of the data analysis, the author sent it back to the participants to check whether it represented their ideas correctly and to have their comments and feedback. The participants stated that the interpretation matched to what they have told the researcher.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Planning the learning
Students' autonomous behavior was discovered by asking them how they planned their learning. From the six participants' answers, it can be seen that they plan their learning by setting goals and priorities to be learned. They have different goals and priorities in learning English. For example, some of the participants stressed their English learning in memorizing new vocabularies, and some of them prioritized mastering the grammar. Adhikara, Rijal, and Rohman shared their experiences:

> Adhikara: *"Yes, before learning a language, I set goals and priorities. The first priority for my learning, I stress in memorizing new vocabularies that I didn't know before. Usually in the beginning I always try to memorize new vocabularies as much as possible, after that I begin to think about how to pronounce it, then understand grammar and study English literature."*
>
> Rijal: *"I set a goal to be able to speak to native speakers fluently. Another goal that I set was to watch a movie without any subtitles. To reach the goals, What I did was memorize as many vocabulary words as possible.*
>
> Rohman: *"Yes, the first goal I plan is mastering English grammar, then speaking."*

Planning a learning is one of necessary aspects that students studying and living in Islamic boarding school must have to become autonomous learners. Thus, they can manage what to learn and do first among many agendas they have. In relation to the question regarding the importance of planning students' learning, they all agreed that planning their learning is essential to their English learning. Adhikara, for example, asserted that planning his learning was important since he thought it was difficult to learn many things at once. So, he needed to plan his learning to see the first to the least learning priorities. Then, he could start to learn English based on the priority. Although the participants believed that planning their learning was important, they often found difficulties in planning their learning, determining the priority to learn, and deciding the strategies to reach it. For instance, Rijal said that there was a lack of media as the source of learning in the dormitory to support his learning. So, it sometimes makes a little bit difficult to plan what to learn. Meanwhile, Rohman thought that it was difficult to find the methods that suited him the most.

Monitoring the learning
In monitoring the learning, most of them would compare their progress by talking to their friends. For example, Adhikara would compare his friends' ability to his or listen to a song or watch a movie to know whether he understood the story. He thought that he would be good in English when he understood what the native said. It is also stated by Rijal and Nanda who often talked to their friends to see their progress. Rijal usually observed his speaking and writing ability day by day to check his weaknesses to improve it. Rijal said that:

> *"I often had a discussion with my friends. I write and I speak to find out my weaknesses. I observed it from my friends' and my point of view so that I will always develop my English ability."*

Meanwhile, Rohman observed his learning progress by doing a test, to what extent he could answer the test at school and how long he could speak English fluently.

From the four participants, only one who was aware of his weaknesses and strengths. Rijal said that his ability to speak or talk about a topic in front of many people was his strength in learning English, while his weakness was that he still found obstacles to watch a movie without any subtitles. The rest of them was not certain about it.

Adhikara: *"Sometimes I am aware and other time no."*
Rohman: *"To be honest, I know a little about my strengths and weaknesses. I feel I am strong in grammar and analyzing a structure of a sentence. While my weakness is in vocabularies.*
Nanda: *"Yes, I am aware that I am not really good in learning English. English is something relatively new for me."*

Regarding the question about who took the responsibility of monitoring their learning, Adhikara thought that it should be the teacher's task. He thought that the responsibility of his learning was not solely his job, but it needed a connection between him and the teacher. Meanwhile the other participants believed that it was their own responsibility to monitor their learning. Nanda put in words like *"Of course my learning is my responsibility. No way it is going to be another person's responsibility."* Rohman, in contrast, said that his learning is his responsibility, but he did not give much attention to his language.

The participants also shared the problems that they found during monitoring their learning. It seemed that all participants could not monitor their learning well. Adhikara said that he needed other people to monitor his learning. He told the author that only a few of his friends could monitor his English mistakes and progress in learning.

Adhikara: *"Yes. There is no person who can always monitor my English mistakes and see my progress during my studies."*

Rohman thought that monitoring his learning was challenging since he did not know his ability well. In the meantime, Rijal and Nanda argued that laziness was what made monitoring their learning did not work well. Being able to monitor their learning by themselves is one of the characteristics of autonomous learners. In this part, students studying and living in Islamic boarding school must be able to see how far they have made the progress.

Evaluating the learning

Evaluating the learning is the last autonomous behavior that is discovered in this present study. It was revealed that all the participants evaluated their learning. From their story, it can be seen that they evaluate their learning in different ways. Adhikara sometimes evaluated his learning with his friends who were smarter than him to ask the materials that he did not understand. He understood that by evaluating his learning, he would get a maximum score. Rohman evaluated his learning by doing a test, such as the TOEFL test without brushing up the materials. When he was able to finish it, it meant that he learned it well. However, when he did not do well on the test because he did not know or forget the materials, he would learn it again. He put in words "*Usually I do practice with some questions such as TOEFL without brushing up the materials. If I do not know or forget about some of them, then I will open my English book again. If I can answer the questions, it means I still remember the materials."*

Some problems appeared from the participants' story. The same problem that Adhikara and Rohman encountered was they were too lazy to evaluate their learning so that they did not do it regularly.

Adhikara: *"I did not regularly do it because I was not **so** serious in learning. That was why the difficulty of evaluating my learning was the continuity since I evaluated my learning depending on my mood.*
Rohman: *"Yes, evaluating my learning important. But usually, I am still too lazy to do it. I did not evaluate my learning very often. Maybe around once in two months. It was also because I*

> *studied many subjects at school, so I found difficulty in seeking the time to evaluate each subject, including English subject."*

In contrast, Rijal *told* the author that he often evaluated his learning, even when he was at home having his holiday. He could play on his mobile phone when he was at home.

> Rijal: *"When I was at home where I could play on my mobile phone, I usually uploaded my speaking or writing so that other people could see it and could give comments to it. When other people gave comments about my speaking or writing, I could evaluate it."*

While he was at the dormitory, he usually evaluated his learning with the groups for learning English, such as English daily mistakes, English debate group or the other small groups. Lastly, Nanda usually evaluated his learning progress by checking whether he had reached the targets in the time he planned.

It can be seen that the participants need help in evaluating their learning. For example, Rijal stated that he believed that evaluating his learning was important because it helped him know what he would do next. He said that he should develop himself from many sides. Yet, he still found difficulty in evaluating his learning. He needed other people to help him evaluate or appraise his learning, but he could not find it easily. He was sure that he made a lot of mistakes, but no one reminds him. Therefore, he thought he should be brave to ask them in person. Meanwhile, Nanda thought that evaluating his learning was not difficult. On the contrary, he also said that what was difficult for him was to find out why the targets were not reached and how to fix it. He put in words *"For me, evaluating is not difficult. What is difficult is to observe why the goals are not reached and how to fix it, or I am too lazy to fix it."* He believed that evaluating his learning was important because it could help him realize what he had done or learned. Students studying and living in Islamic boarding school must have the ability to evaluate their learning since they cannot depend on their teachers or friends to check on the progress that they have made.

Discussion

From the participants' story, it can be perceived that they planned, monitored, and evaluated their learning, and they encountered some challenges in doing those behaviors. Some participants did autonomous behaviors due to their needs in reaching something. For example, Rohman has planned what to learn because he wanted to successfully speak to foreigners when he joined School Outing Program (SOP) conducted by his school. It is in line with the finding discovered by Kemala (2016) who stated that the majority of high autonomous learners were driven to study English for a variety of reasons, including a desire to enhance their jobs in the future. In planning their learning, some of the participants have difficulties determining the goals and methods they should use to reach them. It is aligned with the study conducted by Cirocki, Anam, & Retnaningdyah (2019) that revealed students in Indonesia were not ready to set learning objectives and choose learning resources for classwork or home study. Whereas planning is a thinking skill that helps them develop strategies to reach their goals and take full control of their own learning. Therefore, both parents and teachers need to guide the students to plan effectively including their learning strategies; since as stated by Jin and Cortazzi (1996, cited in Talley, 2014), students are skeptical of changing their learning methods, as these changes may have a direct effect on their learning outcomes.

Monitoring and evaluating learning are two behaviors that are also crucial to do. From the participants' story, it can be understood that most of them could not monitor their learning well. Adhikara, for example, believed that monitor his learning is one of his teacher's jobs. It is similar to the finding of Ramadhiyah and Lengkanawati (2019), who found that while believing they were capable of regulating their own learning, students assigned that task to their teacher. Most of the participants. In monitoring students' own learning, it is important to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. From the participants' stories, two of them are aware of their strengths and weaknesses. However, two the rest are sometimes aware and sometimes no. Hermagustina & Anggriyani (2019) argued that by being able to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses, students will note other materials that they still need to improve and materials that they have already mastered. Besides, Gardner (2000) stated that self-assessments help students track their level of progress in particular learning tasks. Similarly, Pitaloka (2008) stated that self-assessment increases awareness among learners of students' own learning the errors and accomplishments and gives them a tangible sense of

involvement in the learning process. As a result of aforementioned findings, it can be concluded that being autonomous learners is important because students who study and live in Islamic boarding school are fostered to be independent. When they do the aspects of autonomous behaviors, they can manage their time to study more effectively.

However, from the participants' story, there are two kinds of obstacles that they encountered. Firstly, some of the participants felt too lazy to monitor or evaluate their learning. The laziness may come because they had a lack of motivation. It is aligned with the finding discovered by Agustina and Fajar (2018) who stated that one of the factors hindering learner autonomy is the lack of motivation and consistency. Whereas the lack of motivation can prevent students from being autonomous learners. Therefore, before promoting learner autonomy, it is crucial to develop students' motivation because motivation is a prerequisite for learning and responsibility development (Scharle & Szabó, 2000 as cited in Talley, 2014). Similarly, a study conducted by Chan et al. (2002) revealed that students with greater motivation could achieve a higher level of autonomy. Another problem that this study found was that the misunderstanding of autonomy conception. For example, Nanda thought that evaluating his learning was not difficult, yet he said that what was difficult is to observe why his goal was not successful and how to fix it. The previous statement shows a contrary. It can be because he does not grasp the attributes of evaluating a learning. This finding is in line with what Khotimah et al. (2019) found that not all students in this study comprehend the concept of autonomous learning in their English classes.

Secondly, the participants may have not understood how to do those behaviors, in which they need others to do so. It is assumed that since the ability to take charges of one's own learning is not innate, learning to organize their work on their own must be taught. Students need a great deal of an encouragement and input from the teachers (Hermagustiana & Anggriyani, 2019; Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012). It implies that a teacher plays a great role in encouraging and guiding students to do autonomous language learning behaviors.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore bilingual students' experience in doing autonomous behaviors, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning as well as the challenges that they discovered during implementing the behaviors. Using the interview, it revealed that the students usually plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning. When the participants planned their learning, the problems they faced were the difficulty in determining the goals or the targets, the methods to apply in reaching the goals, the lack of the media to support the learning, and the lack of motivation, such as laziness. During monitoring their learning, the students encountered some difficulties, such as the need for other people to help them monitor their progress, the doubt on their abilities, the desire to move on to the other plan/ the inconsistency in the first plan, the lack of motivation, such as laziness. While in evaluating the learning, the problems that students encountered were the need for other people to help them appraise their learning, the limited time, the lack of motivation, such as depending on moods.

Students who live in Islamic boarding school are being assisted to be independent. They are not watched by their parents directly. Moreover, the participants of this study are bilingual who often held some agendas by themselves to learn English or Arabic together. Thus, they need to be able to implement autonomous behaviors, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning. From the explanation above, it is assumed that in doing autonomous language learning behaviors, students still find many challenges. Some of them thought that monitoring a learning is not their task but the teacher's. Yet, there is also misunderstanding about the concept of evaluating a learning. It seems that the participants are still not comprehend autonomous behaviors well. Therefore, the participation of the teacher's help and encouragement is needed the most.

The author believes that this study has many limitations. Firstly, due to the limited time and media, far distance, and unavoidable situation such as covid, the data was too little. In the future research, it can be carried out by having broader questions to have more data. Secondly, this study only explored the challenges that the participants found. Further research should be carried out to examine the solutions to the problems this study encountered.

FUNDING STATEMENT

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