HIGHER-SEMESTER COURSES AND THESIS SUPERVISION AS FORUMS TOWARDS TEACHERS’ AUTONOMY
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Abstract

This paper aims at providing an alternative mode of educating EFL student-teachers towards teachers’ autonomy. Teachers and lecturers must have pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competences obtained through professional education (MoNE, 2005). The personal competence includes autonomy, which is interrelated with other competences. Achieving these competences is a long process. Similarly, building a teacher’s autonomy takes time and should be intentionally generated and facilitated during their period of study as student-teachers. While efforts should be made from the start of their first semester at the university, more autonomy should be given in higher semesters. Courses in higher semesters and thesis writing supervision should be made forums to practice autonomy so that the student-teachers can leave the university as autonomous graduates.

The practice of learner autonomy application, the ability to take charge of one's own directed learning, requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for self-reflection, and readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others. In this sense, autonomous learners decide what to learn, when and how to learn it by taking responsibility for their learning. Student-teachers can only be autonomous if they are confident about their professional, pedagogical and social competences. While professional and pedagogical competences are structurally embedded in the syllabus of each course, autonomy - an aspect of personal competence - should be intentionally generated and facilitated in the teaching and learning process.

The shaping of autonomy should be present in the structured mode (built in learning tasks) and non-structured mode (at any appropriate time during the course of study). Autonomy building should be realized in the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of teaching. Focuses of the training should include, among others, negotiation skills, review and development of professional and pedagogical competences, willingness to confront learning barriers in socially appropriate ways, readiness to engage in lifelong learning to the best of an individual’s capacity, reflection on the learning process and environment, and commitment to promoting autonomy.

Key words: student-teachers, autonomy, negotiation skills, feedback, and self-confidence.
Introduction

While autonomy is a trait all teachers should possess, undocumented personal observation on the EFL student-teachers in the writer’s institution leads to an inconclusive impression that autonomy is absent from some of these student-teachers. For the lower semester students the absence of autonomy may find an excuse from the fact that they are in the transition period from the high school study mode to that of university. For the students of the fourth semester or above, this can no longer be tolerated as they have been exposed to many classes in which academic honesty, perseverance, hard work, and other traits enabling the establishment of autonomy have been intentionally emphasized. In practice, however, dishonesty can still be witnessed in the mid-semester or end-of-semester examination, whenever the chance allows.

At a point of time within the last ten minutes of a written examination in a Reading class, the writer intentionally left the room to see what the students would do when the lecturer was not in the classroom. As soon as the writer opened the door and stepped out of the room, commotion began. Some students started talking with each other, discussing the answers to some questions. When the writer returned to the room two or three seconds afterwards, disappointment could be seen on some of the students’ faces clearly indicating that, where an opportunity permitted, tendency to cheat, or at least to get confirmation on the answer to some question, was still common among the students, who happened to be EFL student-teachers.

On another occasion, in a TEFL Research Methodology class, the writer asked a student to provide a reason for choosing a title for her research proposal. This student seemed to be unprepared for the question and turned to her neighbor for help. Logically, as different individuals had different titles, this student would not ask for help from her neighbor as she was the one who knew exactly what she wanted to do with her proposal.

The phenomena in these two examples prompted the writer to assume that these students did not possess autonomy as learners. They did not have self-confidence so that they relied on others for help. For these students, the root of the
problem seemed to be, among others, the incompetence in the subject matter of the class they were joining. This incompetence made them feel unconfident and, hence, non-autonomous.

On yet another occasion, a student writing a thesis came for consultation. Her thesis proposal on action research already met most of the components required. However, when the writer asked her to provide justification for choosing the subjects, junior high school students, she was unable to provide a sound argument and asked whether she should switch to elementary school ones. It was not a matter of the correct or incorrect choice of the subjects that the writer was concerned with; it was a matter of her instability in defending the ideas she had written. Her meandering mind and vulnerability to accepting someone else’s opinion was an indicator of her irresolution, her lack of autonomy. She should not have easily given up her stance as the writer merely wanted to check whether she had considered thoroughly what she had written. The writer expected her to defend what she had written. If a change on an aspect of the proposal was needed, it had to be done through negotiation. Indeed, she had not taken the suitability of age and the selected action for problem solving into consideration, but, during consultation, at least she could have mentioned what had underlain her choice of the subject. Whether her choice was correct or incorrect was a matter to be discussed, not anything to be evaded. This student did not seem to possess any bargaining position. This also seemed to be due to a lack of mastery of the research principles in general, so that she was not sure about the reason for choosing the subjects of the research.

The failure of these students in developing themselves as autonomous individuals may be rooted from the lack of clarity as to what autonomy means and how it should be developed. This lack of clarity of interpretation may contribute to different degrees of concerns both the students and the lecturers have in handling this lack of autonomy.

The remaining sections of this paper will look at the views and definitions of autonomy, what practitioners and researchers have reported to encourage autonomy, and the writer’s reflection on what he has been doing to facilitate his student-teachers
to develop their autonomy as learners. The paper is concluded with points worthwhile noting, which may be further developed to aid these EFL student-teachers to leave the campus as autonomous graduates, autonomous teachers.

Some Concepts of Autonomy

According to Act No. 14 of the Republic of Indonesia Chapter IV Article 10, teachers and lecturers must possess pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competences obtained through professional education (MoNE, 2005). It means that any institution educating prospective teachers must arm the student-teachers with the expected competences. The development of professional and pedagogical competences can be seen from the formal subject contents of the curriculum, while the development of personal and social competences should be the responsibility of individual lecturers in their interactions with the students. One of the aspects of personal competence every adult individual must have is autonomy.

Since the primary concern of this paper is the EFL student-teachers' autonomy as language learners, definitions of autonomy in this context refer to both students and teachers as learners. Holec (1981: 3, in Sert, 2006: 182) defines autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own directed learning. This is similar in sense to Little’s (2003) claim that autonomous learners decide what to learn, when and how to learn it by taking responsibility for their learning. This process of personal responsibility in monitoring their own progress entails the use of self-assessment as one of the instruments to determine their level of knowledge and skills (Gardner, 1999). It is seen as one of the pillars of learner autonomy because it helps learners to focus on their own learning (Harris, 1997).

Benson (2001: 51) suggested that, ‘if we are able to define autonomy and describe it in terms of various aspects of control over learning, we should also in principle be able to measure the extent to which learners are autonomous’. We also frequently read of students becoming ‘more autonomous’ as a consequence of their participation in a particular program or activity (Benson, 2001: 77). Autonomous language learners are, therefore, learners who are in some sense ‘in control’ of
important dimensions of their learning, which might otherwise be controlled by others or by nobody at all. Autonomous learning implies, by definition, that the student is in control of the learning process to some degree.

From the point of view of teachers, Little (1995: 179) states that successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers. From the point of view of learners, Little (2000: 2) claims that the development of autonomy in language learning is governed by three basic pedagogical principles: (1) learner involvement – engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process (the affective and the metacognitive dimensions); (2) learner reflection – helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning (the metacognitive dimensions); and (3) appropriate target language use – using the target language as the principal medium of language learning (the communicative and the metacognitive dimensions).

Ashwell et al. (2001 in Sert, 2006) points out that teacher autonomy is related to a teacher’s development of his/her own teaching in order to better the learning experiences of his/her students. The main purpose of a teacher’s autonomy is to allow freedom to develop teaching for the benefit of the students. They further assert that teacher autonomy involves:

- negotiation skills;
- institutional knowledge in order to start to address effectively constraints on teaching and learning;
- willingness to confront institutional barriers in socially appropriate ways to turn constraints into opportunities for change;
- readiness to engage in lifelong learning to the best of an individual’s capacity;
- reflection on the teaching process and environment;
- commitment to promoting learner autonomy.

While Kohonen (2001: 62) claims that the language teacher has a significant role as a resource person for autonomous language learning, Lortie (1975) argues
that teaching is often influenced by the "apprenticeship of observation" i.e., how we teach now is sometimes mirrored by how we were taught ourselves. If we were taught in a teacher-led transmission style, we may be likely to slip into that same mode of delivery despite excellent teacher training into autonomous learning. Therefore, there is common agreement that both learner and teacher training is vital to facilitate and develop learner autonomy (McCarthy, 2000; Scharer, 2000; in Sert, 2006: 183). Training learners to be autonomous should start from the teacher’s autonomy in deciding what is best for the learners. As Little (1995) argues, learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy in two senses: (1) it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner; (2) in determining the initiatives they take in their classrooms, teachers must be able to apply to their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning. Teacher autonomy is thus a continual process of inquiry into how teaching can best promote autonomous learning for learners.

What to Do for the Learners Lacking in Autonomy

Lortie’s argument that teaching is often influenced by the "apprenticeship of observation," i.e., how we teach now is sometimes mirrored by how we were taught ourselves, implies that lecturers must be good models for their student-teachers. The lecturers’ mode of delivery will be modeled by the students later on when they become teachers. Therefore, McCarthy’s and Scharer’s (2000; in Sert, 2006) claims that both learner and teacher training is vital to facilitate and develop learner autonomy are highly justified.

With these in mind the writer reconsidered the phenomena happening in the classroom mentioned earlier. He reflected on why the students concerned did not have autonomy in answering the written examination questions as well as the lecturer’s oral question regarding the reason for choosing a research title. In both contexts the students lacked self-confidence because they were not well-informed about the contents of the subjects they were facing. They had not learned the subject contents they were expected to master. Hence, the writer started the efforts by...
nurturing the student’s self-confidence. As self-confidence comes, among others, from the mastery of knowledge and skills, in building the student’s self-confidence the writer has taken the following steps in regard to the interactions with the students and the class procedures:

- Clarifying what is expected of the students (syllabus as a guide, references/books to read, tasks to complete)
- Developing willingness to confront institutional barriers
- Negotiating with the students on tasks to cater for individual differences
- Monitoring and evaluating their learning progress
- Providing encouraging feedback
- Making time available for group tutorials and individual consultation.

**Clarifying what is expected of the students**

With clarity on what processes will happen in the class throughout the semester, what books or journal articles they have to read, and what tasks they have to complete, the students will be able to plan ahead what they can do best to succeed in the course. It is worthwhile mentioning that the students should be able to manage and be responsible for their own learning. Different students may have different habits and styles of learning. They are free to choose but they have to be responsible for their own choice. They have to stick to the one giving them the best outcome.

This is in line with Richards’ (2006: 25) suggestion that learners’ autonomy be developed by giving them greater choice over their own learning, both in terms of the content of learning as well as processes they might employ.

In the Speaking class, for example, the students learn conversation gambits related to the skills of negotiating. They learn how to agree, to disagree, to differ, to persuade, to reason, to compromise, etc. However, not all the students learn the bottom line of the gambits themselves. They seem to learn the language, know how to use the expressions, but do not seem to have the ability to apply them as skills of negotiating in the real sense in their communication with the lecturers. When they are confronted with a real problem such as that in thesis consultation, some students
are often completely lost. The lecturer may merely want to check whether they really understand some drafts they have written, but they may think that the drafts are incorrect or inappropriate. As a result, they give away what they have written, the drafts they should maintain. The case of the student who is unable to give reasons for choosing the subjects of the research and, instead, spontaneously asks for the lecturer’s suggestion clearly indicates that she does not have the bargaining power, an important aspect of negotiation. They are unable to apply the essence of the conversation gambits they have learned such as “It may be wrong, but I think …” “I know I haven’t completed it with …, but this is the essence of collaborative learning, …, etc.”

Relating a class to the other classes is also necessary to give the students the big picture of the overall classes in the English Education Study Program. The success in one class will determine or, at least, support, the success in other classes. It is worthwhile mentioning that the students’ success also contributes to the standing of the study program, the faculty and, ultimately, the university. It is also important to tell them what the institution’s demand on them and what it can offer to the successful students as well as to the ones having problems.

**Willingness to confront institutional barriers**

As Ashwell et al. imply (2001 in Sert, 2006), institutional knowledge is needed to address constraints the students confront in learning. When problems happen, the students have to identify the source. If the problems come from the lecturer, they have to approach the lecturer concerned and negotiate the solution. They have to apply the knowledge they have learned to solve problems that may arise. As Ashwell et al. put it, they have to be able to confront institutional barriers in socially appropriate ways to turn constraints into opportunities for change.

In regard, many of the students have shown positive responses. Through telephone calls and short messages or face-to-face consultation, they have asked the lecturers to review the submitted thesis drafts as soon as possible. Some have even gone as far as urging the lecturers for the possibility of graduating as soon as possible.
possible due to economic reasons or other tolerable circumstances. Lecturers should not only ask the students to work hard and submit tasks on time but they must also be responsible for providing immediate feedback. They can no longer leave the completed tasks lie on the table too long. They have to keep up with the students’ pace. Otherwise, they will have to face critical students’ protests. However, from what generally happens, the students who manage to complete the tasks on time are also those who have high tolerance. They understand the lecturers’ reasons if they have not managed to review their submitted works. And this is a good sign of the students’ willingness to confront their learning barriers in socially appropriate ways. In return, the lecturers have the obligation to meet these students’ expectation. It is through this kind of reciprocal understanding that the students’ autonomy can be built in a socially acceptable manner.

**Tasks to cater for individual differences**

In regard to individual differences on the part of the students, the lecturers should be flexible in accommodating the students’ preferences in task completion without allowing the quality of instruction to degrade. In high semester classes such as advanced TEFL class, the lecturers should allow the students to relate the classes to their individual interests. For example, they should allow the students to use the task to explore the areas which may support the initiation, the development, or the completion of their research studies for their projected thesis. This flexibility will allow the students to take charge of their own learning, to be autonomous in deciding what they consider best for the completion of their tasks and, ultimately, their study.

**Monitoring and evaluating the learners’ learning progress**

Giving the students flexibility does mean that the lecturers let everything go as they wish. The lecturers must make sure that they are in the right track for the achievement of their learning target. In other words, the lecturers should monitor every progress they make and how they overcome constraints encountered in the process of securing their responsibility for their own learning. As one example,
Richards’ (2006: 25) suggest the use of tasks to be completed by small groups as well as the use of self-assessment. While the final decision on the learners’ grades is in the hand of the lecturers, sharing the responsibility of assessment with the learners, asking them to assess themselves and their classmates, can have multi advantages. On the one hand, it gives them some form of privilege which may raise their self-esteem; on the other hand, it may increase fairness in the lecturer’s assessment of the learner’s progress. In addition, the learners (i.e., the student-teachers) are able to model one of the ways a fair assessment is carried out, following Lortie’s argument that teaching is often influenced by the “apprenticeship of observation” (Sert, 2006).

**Providing encouraging feedback**

One aspect that may often be neglected is the importance of timely feedback. Feedback given at the time when the learners are still thinking about specific aspects of their work, such as test or homework answers, will have great impact on their learning achievement. Comments given by the lecturer immediately or within a relatively short period of time after a test will be most appreciated as they are relevant to their need for certainty. These comments will also be meaningful if they are directly related to the test items about which the learners need to confirm their understanding or misunderstanding. If the lecturer can provide feedback of this sort, it will improve learning on the specific items discussed. This kind of feedback extends the opportunity to teach by minimizing misunderstanding and reinforcing learning. Providing the right kind of feedback will give the learners the opportunity to improve their success.

Another way of encouraging students is by deliberately showing them that no one is perfect. Lecturers can be erroneous and that the students have the ability to correct them. One approach Mynard (2006: 2) uses is to produce deliberate mistakes for the students to reflect on and respond to. Being able to reflect on and respond to the lecturer’s errors may build up the students’ self-confidence. When students come to the ability to respond appropriately to the lecturer’s (deliberate) error, the lecturer

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should pretend to be surprised and show appreciation to whoever has spotted the error and provided a proper correction. Such a positive and encouraging feedback can have great impact on the further development of the learners’ autonomy.

**Making time available for group tutorials and individual consultation**

Considering the students’ different interests and needs as both course participants and thesis writers, lecturers who are also thesis consultants should make time available to accommodate the students’ need for consultation. Students preparing proposals or reports for the same type of research studies, for example, may need group briefing for the general aspects of proposal or report writing. In this regard, group tutorials will be more efficient than the individual ones. When it comes to details of individual proposals or research reports, individual consultations should be facilitated as the students need exact information pertaining to their individual research studies. When both general and specific information can be obtained, the students will feel confident and, hence, autonomous about what to do to complete the tasks at hand. Lecturers should be flexible about the time for consultation despite the schedule agreed upon as there are moments when some students need consultation outside the schedule already established. This flexibility also gives the students the feeling that it is not always the lecturers who have control over the time. This feeling may, to some extent, contribute to the development of their self-confidence and, hence, autonomy.

Different lecturers will certainly have different styles in helping the students to become autonomous. Similarly, different students may also take different routes in developing themselves into autonomous individuals. The proposed scenario is only one of the alternatives. However, with the steps above taken, the students are expected to feel that they have the authority in the process of developing themselves. They do need the cooperation of the lecturers as facilitators rather than the deciders of their fates. With this in mind, these student-teachers are expected to develop themselves into autonomous individuals and at the same time to model their
experience of interactions with the lecturers in their future task of developing their pupils into autonomous learners, confirming Lortie’s (1975) argument that teaching is influenced by the "apprenticeship of observation."

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