

The Use of Technology to Promote Learner Autonomy in Teaching English

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of the use of technology to promote learner autonomy in teaching English. A focus group research was used as its design with qualitative analysis for data interpretation. The participants of the study were five English teachers who teach English as a foreign language in Indonesia. The data were collected from an online discussion forum and analysed through data reduction, data display for categorization, and conclusion. The study reveals that EFL teachers had positive perceptions of the use of technology in promoting learner autonomy in teaching English. Dealing with the use of technology in the teaching language classroom, the majority of teachers have already used technology such as the Internet, and some applications (Quizlet, Grammarly, English Central, Padlet, Mentimeter) with the potential for promoting learner autonomy. Moreover, the interviewed teachers reported that using technology in teaching and learning English in the classroom is not without constraints. The main problem is the limited internet connection. These results indicate that EFL teachers understand and are aware of technology to promote learning autonomy in teaching English.

Keywords: *Digital technology, Information Communication, and Technology (ICT), learner autonomy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Using technology in teaching and learning in the 21st-century era is highly needed. 21st-century teachers are challenged to integrate new technologies into their teaching practice (Kurniawati, Maolida, & Anjaniputra, 2018; Suherdi, 2017). Besides, using technology in the EFL classroom could increase the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process and improve students' English proficiency (Ahmadi & Reza, 2018; Costley, 2014).

Teachers sometimes have difficulty using technology in their teaching practices. However, teachers have willingness to bring technology in their classes to improve language teaching and learning. They realize that technology, if used effectively, can help teachers to explore their creativity and make the activities in the classroom authentic (Fitriah, 2018), give a new experience in teaching and learning, and help students to acquire 21st-century skills (Insani, Suherdi, & Gustine, 2018).

Since learners today are 21st-century learners or digital natives as they possess high technology

(Prensky, 2001; Trilling & Fadel, 2009), bringing technology into the classroom will meet the needs and increase their motivation especially in learning the language (Pazilah, Hashim, & Yunus, 2019; Ramadhiyah & Lengkanawati, 2019), and provide a great opportunity for them to study autonomously and collaboratively (Benson, 2001; Gilakjani, 2014; Insani et al., 2018; Rinekso & Kurniawan, 2020; Yeh & Lan, 2018).

Technology is needed by students in schools and the workplace as one of the basic skills in the 21st-century (Suherdi, 2017). They have the skills to use technology as part of their lives. Students can use ICT in learning process to explore any information connected to their lesson and help them to access learning materials through Internet (Kee & Samsudin, 2014). It is supported by Lam and Lawrence (2002)'s claim that using technology allows the learner to control their learning process and provides learners with ready-access information.

Regarding Indonesian context, there have been many studies that discuss the importance of using technology in teaching English (Al-Munawwarah, 2015; Aminah,

2018; Budiman, Rahmawati, & Ulfa, 2018). Hidayati (2016) investigated integrating ICT in English language teaching and learning in Indonesia. Emaliana and Inayati (2017) investigated the relationship among Indonesian pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs about English language learning, pedagogical beliefs, and beliefs about ICT integration for EFL classroom practices. Warni, Aziz, and Febriawan (2018) examined the use of technology for learning English outside the classroom. Avisteva (2020) investigated teachers' competencies on the implementation of ICT in language teaching as well as the obstacles faced while teaching practice.

The majority of studies focused on the impact of using technology approximately on language learning rather than on the aspect of learner autonomy. Accordingly, we conducted a research regarding using technology tools to promote learner autonomy in teaching English. Specifically, the current study was conducted to shed light on teachers' perception of the use of technology in promoting learner autonomy in the EFL classroom. To gain insights into teachers' perception, there are several questions addressed: (1) what are the teachers' perception towards the use of technology to promote learner autonomy in the classroom?, (2) what types of technology do teachers use in the classroom? , (3) what are the challenges encountered by the teachers in using technology in their class?

1.1. Teacher's Role in Language Learning and Promoting Learner Autonomy

A large number of studies report that learner autonomy is essential to be promoted in the EFL classroom (Cheng, 2019; Lengkanawati, 2016; Melvina & Suherdi, 2019; Nguyen, 2011). For instance, showing students how to be autonomous learners will set them up successfully for life. By creating autonomous learners, teacher will help them think critically about their learning and understand what they need to do to improve.

English teachers have the responsibility for the development of learner autonomy. They are responsible to develop learners' ability to be autonomous in learning the language; therefore, teachers should have the braveness to shift their teaching practice (Benson, 2009). To promote learner autonomy, teachers can adopt technology in teaching and learning. The use of technology provides more opportunities for EFL learners to use the language in a meaningful situation, enable them to access authentic materials for self-directed learning, and learn outside the classroom (Pazilah et al., 2019; Rahman, 2017). Thus, it can empower learners to learn independently.

1.2. Technology and Learner Autonomy

The use of new technologies in teaching and learning English promises the emergence of autonomous language learning. It provides students easy access to a variety of resources, tools, and environments for learning outside of the classroom (Benson, 2001; Motteram, 1997). Also, the aspect of motivation, metacognitive, self-confidence, and social skills can emerge when technology is used to learn English outside the classroom (Warni et al., 2018).

Additionally, the digital video project (Hafner & Miller, 2011); 3D virtual learning (Yeh & Lan, 2018) Kahoot apps (Yürük, 2019); learning English from YouTubers (Wang & Chen, 2020); a flipped EFL instructional model (Tsai, 2019) give the idea to promote some form of learner autonomy.

2. METHOD

Focus group research was used as the design with qualitative analysis for data interpretation. Focus group discussion is a method of collecting qualitative data, which involves a small number of people in informal group discussion (or discussions) that focus on a particular topic or set of problems (Wilkinson & Silverman, 2004). The design of this study was chosen for several reasons. In group situations, interviewees may feel more comfortable and spontaneous to answer questions. Focus group discussions also save time and are more effective than interviews one by one. However, it was not easy to get all interviewees together at the same time because they have different schedules.

The participants of this study were five English teachers who teach English as a foreign language in Indonesia. All participants came from Java province. One of them is a male. The researchers set the criteria for the purposes of this study. The participants had attended ICT training or workshops. The participants of the study were chosen based on purposive sampling.

The data were collected from an online discussion forum. Online discussion forum are considered [adjective] to facilitate the collection of qualitative data from focus group interviews (Ping & Chee, 2001). In online situations, group members can speak openly. That will be rather difficult to achieve in face-to-face groups (Turney & Pocknee, 2005). Then, the data were analyzed using the Interactive Model Analysis of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) based on several steps, namely data reduction, data display for categorization, and conclusion. In data reduction, we selected, simplified, and reduced useless data. We focused on the data that answer the research questions. Next, we described all data obtained and then drawing conclusion by revisiting the data as many times as needed.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Research Question 1: Teachers' Perception of the Use of Technology in Promoting LA*

Regarding the teachers' perception of the use of technology to promote learner autonomy in the EFL classroom, all participants agreed that technology can promote autonomous learning. They believe that technology is very useful for teaching and learning especially in promoting learner autonomy.

"After exploring all the applications, I must say that all of them all pretty useful in promoting autonomous learning". (T1)

"I think all the features can promote autonomous learning in the classroom. The applications have their own characteristics and usefulness to help the student being autonomous". (T3)

"For me, all these applications can help teachers in teaching activities and improve my students' autonomy". (T2)

Based on the research findings, the teachers who participated in the online discussion forum perceived that technology can be one of the ways to promote autonomous learning to the students in the classroom. The majority of teacher have explored some applications which have the potential to promote autonomous learning. These applications can help and lead teachers to provide interesting activities, and of course, the learning process will be more meaningful. Besides, the teachers agreed that the applications can help students being autonomous.

3.2. *Research Question 2: The Types of Technology Used in the Classroom*

When asked about the types of technology utilized in their EFL classes, teachers who participated in the online discussion forum reported that they have already used technology in teaching and learning process.

"I amazed by the app of Grammarly, why didn't I find it a long time ago? But I still feel fortunate that I could find it now and know the beneficial apps for both me myself as a teacher and for my students. I believe the apps can help students to do their autonomous learning". (T1)

"I do, however, feel interested in Quizlet. It offers flexible features to learn new sets of words and phrases. Using the Quizlet will enable the teachers to review the vocabulary or to give the vocabulary before the meeting". (T2)

"I think Grammarly and English Central are the best to site to train our student's autonomous learning in writing and speaking English". (T3)

"I like to use Padlet, besides the beautiful appearance of this app, it serves many tools to make learning material". (T4)

"Mentimeter is so fun app. We can learn by playing the game". (T5)

In this study, the interviewed teachers asserted that they have introduced and utilized several applications, namely Grammarly, Quizlet, English Central, Padlet, and Mentimeter to their students. They argued that these applications have potential to promote learner autonomy. In addition, they offer many interesting activities.

Furthermore, the teachers believed that these applications such as 'Grammarly' and 'English Central' are the best application to train their student's autonomous learning in writing and speaking English. 'Mentimeter' is a fun application in which students can learn by playing the game, and Quizlet enables the teachers to review the vocabulary or to give the vocabulary before the meeting. It can be said that Indonesian English teachers reported in this study have been familiar with digital technology. Introducing these applications to their students, the teachers believe that it can help students to do their autonomous learning.

3.3. *Research Question 3: The Challenges Encountered by the Teachers in Using Technology in the Class.*

The challenges encountered by the teachers in using technology in the class were limited connection and facility.

"I've experienced it, some of my students complained about the internet connection if I gave them some assignment dealt with it and they said that they don't have the gadget to do the assignment. I must understand their reason and can't force them". (T5)

"We cannot force our students to use those apps while they don't have a smartphone/pc and internet connection". (T2)

To accomplish the assignment, smartphone that have advance features and large capacity to download learning applications was needed. However, not all students in the class have smartphone. Some of them only have cell phone which function only for calling and sending chat message. Teachers are aware of and understand these problems. Therefore, they cannot force their student to use those applications.

From the findings above, it is revealed that the teacher's perception of the use of technology in the EFL classroom is generally positive. The teachers in this study believe that using technology in the classroom can promote learner autonomy. When the teachers have positive beliefs about using technology, they would spend more time and provide more activities to promote learner autonomy in their instructions. In general, teachers tended to believe that the use of technology in the EFL class was beneficial. Technology helps them to motivate their students to learn independently.

This result was in line with research of Al-Munawwarah (2015). Her study revealed that Indonesian EFL teachers believe that the use of ICT promotes learner autonomy. Technology allowed students to find a variety of authentic sources and materials from the English language website. In addition, Rinekso and Kurniawan (2020) reported that English teachers have a positive understanding of the concept of promoting learner autonomy through the involvement of ICT. They agreed that ICT gives them an opportunity to promote learner autonomy, helps students to be more independent in finding learning resources, and makes students more motivated learning. It can be said that technology enrich students learning resources.

Similarly, research findings of Mollaei and Riasati (2013) report that EFL teachers in Iranian Language Institutes had positive attitudes towards the use of technology in their classes, particularly the computer. Furthermore, they found that utilizing technology promotes students' communicative competence and autonomy. It can be concluded that technology positively promotes learner autonomy. Therefore, in language learning today teachers must utilize technology prudently to help students more autonomous in learning.

Related to the use of technology in language classrooms, the majority of teachers have used technology such as the Internet, and several applications (Quizlet, Grammarly, English Central, Padlet, Mentimeter) with the potential to promote learner autonomy. They believed that utilizing these applications give benefits for teachers as well as students. For teachers, it assists them to develop meaningful activities that can make students are become autonomous learner. For students, it can help students to do their autonomous learning.

In line with research of Durriyah and Zuhdi (2018), they found that popular digital technologies such as Facebook, blogs, Skype, and WhatsApp offer unique potential to facilitate and improve language learning. Other findings reported by Agustina (2017), she reports the use of Facebook, BBM, and Twitter along with internet usage, e-mail, and short messages are effective for promoting students' autonomous learning.

Purnawarman (2018), also found that the use of smartphones in learning English shape the strategies of student learning activities in autonomous learning. In addition, using smartphone can assist students to get additional resources quickly such as discovery the meaning of the difficult words, examples, and specific explanation to compare ideas (Ramamurthy & Rao, 2015). Moreover, Smartphone, e-learning, and Kahoot application have several benefits such as flexibility to submit tasks outside the classroom, collaborative learning through discussion, independent in finding relevant learning resources, and the increasing students' engagement with the lessons (Rinekso Budi & Kurniawan, 2020).

It is interesting to note that when teachers have a positive attitude towards technology, they will not hesitate to use technology in teaching practices. It even helps the teacher in designing teaching activities. Suherdi (2017) stated that technology offers opportunities for better language practices. It can also help teachers design interesting learning activities. Furthermore, they can make the activities more realistic, and of course it builds teachers' creativity (Fitriah, 2018). It can be said that the use of technology in the EFL classroom can help teachers to conduct interesting and fun learning activities.

The development of technology-based language-learning programs provides many opportunities, especially for students to learn a second language and it gives a lot of the learning material needed to learn autonomously (Benson, 2013). So, it is time for EFL teachers to move away from traditional methods to start integrating technology in teaching and learning (Taylor, 2009). In this case, teachers are expected to play a more challenging role in supporting students' potential for autonomy. For example, making use of multimedia tools in instruction. It means that English teachers must be ready to be a navigator in their class to create effective teaching and learning activities.

Regarding the challenges encountered by teachers, students who do not have smartphones and internet connections are the main problems. This is similar to what Rodliyah (2018) and Avisteva (2020) reported that the main barrier in integrating ICT in ELT is limited access and facility. Even though teachers feel the benefits of using ICTs, some teachers claim that there are some obstacles to integrate new technologies into EFL classes. In the present study, the prominent problem was unstable access or connection to the Internet and some students do not have smartphones to support them in learning. Teachers are aware of and understand these problems. Therefore, they cannot force their student to use those applications.

This problem actually can be solved by designing a group task (Chen, 2015). Students can work by collaborating with other students who have a

smartphone. One of the characteristics of learner autonomy is collaboration. In autonomous learning, collaboration and communication between a teacher and students and among students are required. Being a part of member in group as well as personal chats could enhance student's communication and collaborative skills (Ramamurthy & Rao, 2015).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that Indonesian EFL teachers generally show positive attitude towards the use of technology to promote learner autonomy in teaching English. The teacher generally believes that utilizing technology in the classroom helps students to be autonomous learners. The majority of teachers have used technology and several applications (Quizlet, Grammarly, English Central, Padlet, Mentimeter) with the potential to promote learner autonomy. Using the technology in teaching and learning in the classroom not only has the benefits but also has some barriers for both the students and teachers. Developing learner autonomy in the classroom is not an easy task for the teacher. However, the teachers believe that it is important to apply technology in the teaching and learning process to promote learner autonomy. Therefore, based on those findings, it is suggested that teachers upgrade their understanding and skills to teach in this digital era.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

M contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript. NSL, and YW supervised the work.

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