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Online Peer Feedback and Learner Autonomy in EFL Writing Class

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Abstract: The information and communication technology has been utilized by most universities in Indonesia though it is rarely integrated in teaching and learning activities in classes. This paper, as part of a study to foster learner autonomy using technology based approach, investigated the roles of online peer feedback toward learner autonomy development. The data used in this study involved students' interview transcriptions. The results showed that online peer feedback has facilitated students' metacognitive strategies and enhanced their motivation to learn writing.

Keywords: learner autonomy, online peer feedback, metacognitive strategies

1. Introduction

One of the prominent issues in the theory and practice of language teaching recently is the importance of facilitating students to foster autonomy in their learning (Benson, 2011). It is in line with the goal of Indonesian national education agenda, which puts learner autonomy as a part of its higher education goals (Indonesian National Education Law 2012). Benson (2011) suggested that one of the approaches to foster autonomy is technology based approach. This paper is part of a study to foster learner autonomy in EFL writing class using technology approach that focuses on the roles of online peer feedback toward learner autonomy development.

2. Literature review

As the aim of the study is to investigate the roles of online peer feedback on fostering learner autonomy, the areas of literature discussed in this section cover learner autonomy and online peer feedback.

2.1 Learner autonomy

Autonomy has been broadly defined by Benson (2011) as "the capacity to take control over one's own learning". This definition becomes the basis of this study since the construct of 'control' is open to empirical investigation. Dimensions of control suggested by Benson involve control over learning management, control over cognitive processes and control over learning content. As the forms that learner autonomy takes differ according to the person and the context, an autonomous learner then is described as someone whose learning has some of those components, but not necessarily all of them (Benson, 2011).

Reinders (2010) emphasises autonomy as a process and distinguishes a number of phases in the process that start with awareness raising. A useful concept of learner autonomy development in language classroom context involves four phases; defining tasks, setting goals and planning, enacting study tactics and strategies, and metacognitively adapting studying (Reinders, 2010). Since learning in classroom context involves social aspect, "autonomy thus includes the notion of interdependence, that is being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways" (Kohonen, 1992). This implies the importance of collaboration in developing learner autonomy.

2.2 Online Peer feedback

Peer feedback is defined as "a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards"(Liu and Carless, 2006). Hyland and Hyland (2001) mentioned three functions of feedback which are praise, criticism and suggestion. During the peer feedback activities, students may receive appreciation, or they might be criticized. Furthermore, students may receive suggestions for improving their works.

In this study, online peer feedback refers to peer feedback activities that are done online by making use of blog or weblog as the online medium. A blog is "a web application that displays serial entries, asynchronously developed, by employing simple user interfaces and allowing users to easily maintain content or add new dated entries, with the advantages of inserting graphics, multimedia,video and audio, not to mention the text, which is an important aspect of blogging" (Wei, 2010; Meyer,2010; Lai& Chen, 2010; Deng & Yuen, 2011; Fageeh 2011). One of the characteristics of blog is that it enables self-publishing that encourages ownership on its contents (Jones, 2006).

3. Methodology

The study involved 16 students of English Education Graduate School at University of Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. HAMKA, enrolling academic writing class in the first semester of 2013. During the semester, students completed 3 writing assignments. Each assignment involved posting the writing draft on their blog, peer feedback activities, making the revision and posting the final draft. Among those 16 students, five were chosen to take part in the in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews were applied to reveal students' perceptions toward the roles of the online peer feedback on fostering learner autonomy. Semi-structured interviews can be a meaningful way to generate data by talking interactively with people, asking them questions, listening to them, gaining access to their accounts and articulation or analysing their use of language and construction of discourse (Mason 2002).

4. Findings and discussions

The findings of the study discussed in this paper are restricted to metacognitive strategy and motivation as two of important aspects in fostering learner autonomy.

4.2.1 Metacognitive strategy

Even though the word strategy was not used explicitly, metacognitive strategies emerged as prominent themes from the analysis of students' interviews. According to O'Malley and Chammot (1990), the metacognitive strategies involve 'thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring the learning tasks, and evaluating how well one has learned'. These strategies are the potential components of learner autonomy because "they are concerned with control over learning management", a dimension of control over learning that an autonomus learner needs to have (Benson, 2011).

Giving feedback on others' works has guided students to understand the writing aspects they need to learn more. They realized that in order to give constructive feedback, they had to understand well the aspects of writing they commented on. Regarding the feedback they received from others, they believed that others could be better in looking at the mistakes they made, that they themselves might not be aware of. The peer feedback has raised their awareness of their weaknesses and enabled them to concentrate on the areas of writing they need to improve. Moreover, the feedback has given them direction to plan further learning for a better achievement in the future.

4.2.2 Motivation

The effort to foster learner autonomy cannot be separated from enhancing students' motivation since motivation is the pre-condition for autonomy (Jiménez Raya et al., 2007). In the study, students

perceived that publishing their works to the public by making use of blog as the online medium was a motivating factor for them in the academic writing class. This finding is relevant to a study conducted by Jones (2006), revealing that publishing for an authentic audience motivated the students' writing and interaction. Among motivation components in the learning situation suggested by Dornyei (1994a), *intrinsic interest* and *satisfaction* in the outcome of an activity have emerged in the study. Students felt satisfied with their progress and the learning process occurred there. People could see how their writings had improved because the blog enables their progress to be documented from time to time. The praises they received from their friends about their works had raised the feeling of satisfaction as well. Furthermore, the choice of Wordpress as the blog site to publish their writings and do the peer comments became an interesting part for the students especially those who like designing a lot. The blog site offered them advantages of features and space to create a blog design as they like.

5. Conclusions

This paper, as part of a study to foster learner autonomy in academic writing class, was aimed to reveal the roles of online peer feedback toward learner autonomy development. Results of the study showed that the online peer feedback has supported students in facilitating their metacognitive strategies and raised their motivation to learn writing.

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