

“PRACTICING TRANSLATING MAKES ME AUTONOMOUS!”: THE INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS’ ATTITUDE ON TRANSLATION STRATEGY IN ELT

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Abstract

The implementation of translation strategy has become a significant issue in several countries amidst the constant discussion of technology integration in language learning. Although it has long been regarded as not reliable by some researchers since it is highly associated with grammar-translation methods, several EFL countries still regard translation strategy as an interactive learning strategy which focuses on learners. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the attitude of EFL learners in a rural area in Indonesia towards the implementation of translation strategy in language learning. It also attempts to find out whether translation strategy is effective to foster learner autonomy. Applying a qualitative case study to a group of high school students from a rural area in Indonesia, questionnaires and focus group interviews were used to collect the data. The result showed that the participants perceived translation as a useful learning strategy to foster learner autonomy in an EFL context since it encouraged them to work collaboratively instead of depending on the teacher.

Keywords: autonomous learning, collaborative learning, interactive learning, learning strategies, translation.

INTRODUCTION

Translation strategy remains to be a frequently discussed topic in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching area despite the rapid advancement of technology integration in language learning. Many studies in the past few decades are seen to put translation in a shadow when discussing the best method to learn languages since it has long been regarded to be inefficient and unreliable. However, those studies failed to recognize the potential of translation strategy to promote autonomous language learning especially in an EFL context where technology is

barely accessible for the learners. Although integrating technology in language learning provides significant impacts including fostering learner autonomy, it becomes irrelevant when the learners have no access to the technology (Purwaningrum & Yusuf, 2019). Translation has its own strength as a learning strategy that can be useful to foster learner autonomy, as it can be interactive and more learner-centered (Dagilienè, 2012). The use of authentic materials when teachers implement translation strategies is also believed to help students acquire some degree of autonomy in learning target languages (Pekkanli, 2012). Moreover, using translation benefits the students as it can help to improve their first language (L1) proficiency through contrastive analysis (Marqués Aguado & Solís-Becerra, 2013).

Generally, some studies conducted on the use of translation strategy were intended to provide a counter argument that translation is not a dull activity, and it has its own benefits when implemented in the classroom. Although most of the studies were conducted to support the use of mother tongue and translation strategy in the foreign language classroom, there were only few focusing on exploring the attitudes and perceptions of the students on the use of translation strategy in an EFL classroom (Al-Musawi, 2014; Fernández-Guerra, 2014; Karimah, 2020).

Grounded from the above arguments, this study was conducted to discover the learners' behavior during the implementation of translation strategy in an EFL classroom especially when technology is hardly accessible for them. This study was also conducted based on the belief that observing learners' behaviors is necessary to help uncover their perceptions towards the learning strategy, and their perceptions are useful to determine whether this learning strategy is effective in improving their autonomous language learning (Chan, 2003). Combining frameworks from Chan (2001) and Fernández-Guerra (2014), this study formulates a new framework that can accommodate both topics at hand in order to present a fruitful discussion.

Conceptualizing learner autonomy in an EFL context

In recent years, learner autonomy has been considered a debatable notion in educational research, not to mention in an EFL learning context. The term learner autonomy itself is perceived to be problematic as there have been many scholars around the world trying to represent the term in different levels and different ways (Benson, 2007). Despite the variety of opinions regarding the term learner autonomy, the most cited definition of autonomy is the one derived from Holec (1981), who defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”.

Consequently, it is not surprising when some scholars attempt to revisit the concept of autonomy to fit the context where autonomy is being implemented. Dang (2010), for example, attempted to explore the challenges of the implementation of learner autonomy in the Vietnamese EFL context, particularly from the sociocultural perspective. This study further examined how the local situation contributed as the factor facilitating learner autonomy in the Vietnamese EFL context. The result showed that the learners could be more active and involved in the learning process only if they were encouraged to do so. Moreover, Dang (2010) emphasized that the educational system in Vietnam was difficult to be negotiated, so it was suggested that teachers should negotiate with the students instead.

In Indonesian context, the concept of learner autonomy is currently explored by many scholars especially in an EFL learning area. Current research reveals that Indonesia is included in the developing country with ‘difficult circumstances’ to foster autonomy in language learning since

there is a lack of ICT support especially in rural areas (Smith et al., 2018). In addition, Suharmanto (2003) even stated that Indonesian students are regarded as 'passive, introverted, and resistant to change'. However, various studies conducted in Indonesia show that it is potential to foster learner autonomy in Indonesia (Purwaningrum & Yusuf, 2019). Yuliani and Lengkanawati (2017), for instance, explored how project-based learning fosters learner autonomy in the Indonesian EFL learners. This study revealed that although it takes time, learner autonomy can be promoted gradually using the proposed learning strategy even though the level of autonomy varies between the students. Therefore, it does not mean that autonomy cannot be developed at all in countries with 'difficult circumstances' since it can be managed by implementing appropriate learning strategies.

The development of learner autonomy in Indonesia may be different from its development in other countries, as fostering learner autonomy should also consider each local context (Dang, 2010). Considering this fact, this study will limit the concept of learner autonomy into the way students learn independently to acquire the skills by having the responsibility of their own learning. However, learning independently as defined in this study does not mean that students do not need teacher's support in the process. Instead, students regard the teacher as a facilitator in the learning process that helps them understand the learning strategy better.

Translation as a learning strategy to nurture learner autonomy

Implementing translation strategy in an EFL classroom is hardly regarded as significant to foster learner autonomy in 21st century learning. Translation strategy is deemed to be a reminder of grammar-translation method which has been put aside as a learning method especially by scholars with a strong belief in direct method (Fernández-Guerra, 2014). In addition, several researchers argued that using native language during the process of learning a new language interferes with the acquisition of the target language (Asgarian, 2013; Pekkanli, 2012). However, those arguments do not seem to bring an end to the translation strategy implementation in several countries.

Despite the dismissal of translation strategy implementation in most inner-circle countries decades ago, this case is obviously not applicable in several countries in the other parts of the world, especially when English is learned as a foreign language. The written obligation is sometimes irrelevant with the real practice in the classroom. Students sometimes still need assistance from a dictionary or even some help from their friends to translate, and the teachers often unconsciously use translation in their classroom (Cook, 2007). Moreover, translation is also deemed to be useful in promoting language learning through the interference between the L1 and the target language (Marqués Aguado & Solís-Becerra, 2013). Cook (2007) also claims that translation has constantly been regarded as a helpful skill, especially in a more multicultural and globalized society. However, it is worth noticing that translation is not always possible to be employed in a classroom, especially when it is a multilingual class or when the teacher is monolingual (Cook, 2007).

The problem in teaching English in an EFL context is in looking for the appropriate learning strategy that can accommodate learners' needs. This issue has been a constant challenge in teaching English in non-Native English-Speaking Countries (non-NESC) (Hasanah & Utami, 2019), and Indonesia is not an exception. Accommodating students' needs means taking the students' perspective on the learning strategy as a primary concern in the process of language learning. A study conducted by Fernández-Guerra (2014), for instance, reported that students'

voices regarding their preferred learning strategy led to an effective foreign language learning process. This study revealed that the students prefer translation strategy in their foreign language learning since it helped them to acquire the knowledge faster and easier. In a similar manner, Chan's (2001) study explored how learners' learning preferences influenced their language learning. It showed that the learners were aware of their preferred learning styles, and it led to a positive attitude towards autonomous learning.

Related to learner autonomy, there is also a quality in translation strategy that should not be neglected by teachers in this case. Using translation strategy tends to promote learner autonomy as it usually uses authentic materials and the practice tends to be more learner-centered (Dagilienė, 2012; Van Lieshout & Cardoso, 2022). Although promoting learner autonomy is quite a challenge in an EFL context, EFL learners are aware of the significance of learner autonomy in their foreign language learning (Quoc, 2020). Since the recent national curriculum in Indonesia emphasizes on teaching students to be self-learners, learner strategies that could encourage students to be autonomous learners should be implemented effectively in the classroom. Therefore, it is crucial to find out how the students perceive the translation strategy in their learning process, and whether it can be used as a tool to nurture learner autonomy effectively in the Indonesian EFL context.

METHODS

Research design

The present study employed a qualitative case study design. This design is chosen since qualitative research allows researchers to distinguish the problems from the perspectives of the participants (Hamied, 2017). Meanwhile, a case study is useful to investigate the behaviors of the students and there is less control over the data (Yin, 1994). Since case study design requires the study to be unique, some boundaries are set upon this study (Gillham, 2000). The first boundary is the context of the study, which is limited to EFL settings in a secondary school. Then, the translation strategy used by the teacher is written translation, which encourages the students to indirectly work on their writing.

Participants

A total of 23 secondary EFL students from a private high school in a rural area in Indonesia were selected as the participants in this study. They were selected since technology was barely accessible for the students in this school. They were Islamic-school students and mostly stayed in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding house), which made them have a limited access to technology due to the boarding house regulation. However, the school enabled them to use technological facilities provided by the school although it was also limited in terms of internet connection.

Data collection and analysis

Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect the data in order to make the most of the validity of the data. The questionnaires were distributed first to examine the students' initial understanding of learner autonomy and their opinions on translation strategy in teaching and learning process. The questionnaires included several questions on their understanding of learner autonomy and on their knowledge toward the language learning strategy implemented in the classroom adapted from the questionnaire developed by Chan (2001). There are 30 items in the questionnaire with 23 close ended questions using 3-scale Likert scale (range: Agree, Not Sure, Disagree) that allowed the participants to give flexible responses (Cohen et al., 2000) and

seven open-ended questions that enabled them to convey their responses based on their own perceptions (Cohen et al., 2000). The data from the questionnaires were analyzed using the predetermined framework. The result was used to divide the participants into two categories: the students with higher awareness of autonomy and the students with lower awareness of autonomy, as well as to select the participants to join a focus group interview.

The focus group interview was conducted to clarify the data perceived from the questionnaires, as it was helpful to extend the discussion and offered variety of responses from the participants (Cohen et al., 2000). It was also useful to obtain common perceptions of the participants involved in the discussion, as well as to gain different points of views on the topic (Creswell, 2012). A total of four participants were purposefully selected to join the focus group interview based on the result of questionnaire analysis. They were considered qualified to provide fruitful data as they understand the topic quite well. The data from the focus group interview were transcribed and translated first since the interview used Bahasa Indonesia to avoid any misinterpretation of the statements from the students. After the written data from the interview were obtained, they were coded and classified into three categories: students' learning preferences, students' perceptions toward autonomous learning, and students' perceptions toward translation strategy.

After all data were obtained, they were analyzed using the frameworks from Chan (2001) and Fernández-Guerra (2014). Both frameworks were combined due to the lack of frameworks on the implementation of translation strategy in autonomous language learning. Chan's (2001) framework emphasizes on the learners' attitudes and expectations toward learner autonomy, meanwhile Fernández-Guerra (2014) set the focus on the learners' attitude on the use of translation strategy in EFL learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study presents three major findings for further discussion, including learners' learning preferences, their autonomous learning, and their attitudes toward translation strategy to foster their autonomous learning.

Learners' learning preferences

Regarding the preferred learning style of the learners, this study found that the students were aware of what they wanted in their learning. They clearly expressed what they preferred for their learning and why they preferred one method over the others. In general, the learning preferences of the students participated in this study can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Learners' Preferences on Language Learning

	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
I like to learn by reading English articles	4.4%	30.4%	65.2%
I like to learn by watching English movies	73.9%	21.8%	4.3%
I like to learn by listening to English radios and songs	26.1%	39.1%	34.8%
I like to learn by speaking to native speakers of English	0%	65.2%	34.8%
I like to learn by language games	43.5%	39.1%	17.4%
I like to learn by reading bilingual texts	78.3%	21.7%	0%
I like to learn through role-plays	65.2%	34.8%	0%

Table 1 shows that the learners perceive themselves to prefer learning through the activities they found entertaining and fun, including watching English movies, listening to English songs, using language games, reading bilingual text, and doing role-plays. Meanwhile, reading articles seems to be the least popular activity the students preferred for their language learning.

According to the students, all activities above required them to translate the target language into their first language or vice versa to understand the content better. For instance, when the teachers assigned them to do role-plays in English, they would prepare a draft in their first language before translating the draft into the target language to be presented in front of the class. In addition, students reported that reading bilingual text was one of the best strategies to learn target language since they could match the target language with their first language and highlight the difficult words they found while reading. They further mentioned that they usually read the text in the target language first while trying to understand the meaning and used the text in their first language to check whether they understood the text correctly. This kind of activity also unconsciously facilitated the students' autonomous learning since it helped to improve their noticing ability.

Regarding the learning preferences, the following statements further explained the students' points of views:

Dira: I liked it when the teacher asked me to go in front of the class to role-play. It was fun. I also enjoy listening to English songs. When I don't know the meaning, I look up the dictionary for help.

Rian: For me, learning English is easier if we practice translating a text. Because we can learn some vocabulary, understand it, and make us independent without the help of others. I also think that discussing a text and translating one text and another help a lot, especially when we need to answer some questions. That way we will understand the meaning better.

Zidan: When I watch movies, I use the one with subtitles. Because it helps me to understand the story.

(FGI #1)

Regarding translation strategy, the students mentioned that it became the preferred strategy to help them understand English better. Students were found to rely on dictionaries to look up difficult words they discovered. Role-play was included as one of the activities commonly used in translation strategy by the students in this study. It was mentioned by Dagilienė (2012) that translation could be helpful for EFL students to enrich their understanding toward the structure of target language as well as their first language. Thus, the findings of this study complemented this argument since the participants also mentioned that translating text helped them to understand the target language better. They also perceived that the translation of the movie subtitle appeared to be helpful for them to understand the content of the movie.

Although the learning preferences of the participants varied, they drew on one similarity, in which they unconsciously preferred the use of translation strategy on their language learning. Moreover, the tendency of the participants on the authentic use of target language which fostered autonomous learning (Chan, 2001) was evident in this study. It showed that there was an opportunity to

develop autonomous learning by exploiting their learning preferences effectively and considering each of the student’s opinions towards the implementation of translation strategy in the long run.

Autonomous language learning in EFL classroom

Although in practice the teacher still used traditional learning strategy with less technology involved in the learning process, it was observed that the teacher always encouraged the students to be responsible for their own learning. Table 2 below shows students’ perspective on how they managed to be responsible for their own learning.

Table 2. Learners’ Perceptions toward Learner Autonomy

	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
I like the teacher to explain what and how I am learning	78.3%	21.7%	0%
I like the teacher to give me problems to work on	34.8%	47.8%	17.4%
I like the teacher to let me find my own mistakes	91.3%	4.4%	4.4%
I like to be responsible for my own learning	34.8%	56.5%	8.7%
I have a right to be involved in selecting learning tasks and activities	60.9%	21.7%	17.4%
I like to assess my own progress	86.9%	13.1%	0%
I like to study by myself	8.7%	39.1%	52.2%
I like to work in pairs	95.6%	4.4%	0%

Table 2 provides enough evidence that teachers’ support during the learning process remained essential although the participants perceived themselves to be autonomous learners to some degree. The degree of autonomy was indicated by how the students were showing preference in collaborative learning such as working in pairs (95.6%), aware of their weaknesses by preferring to reflect on their own mistakes (91.3%) and their learning progress (86.9%). That awareness exhibited by the students led them to develop learner autonomy more effectively (Chan, 2001). It was not a surprising finding since Bekleyen and Selimoğlu (2016) also found similar results in their study in which students still regarded the teacher’s support to help them learn effectively.

This study also showed the students’ perspective towards their teacher’s roles in the classroom. All participants clearly stated that the role of teacher in the classroom was teaching them the lesson. Some of them also elaborated their answers by stating that the teacher’s job was to explain about everything. Yet again, it only confirmed Bekleyen and Selimoğlu (2016) findings since they also showed that the students perceived the teacher as the person who was responsible for the learning process in the classroom, while the students were responsible for their learning outside of the classroom. Therefore, the findings indicated that most of the participants in this study still had a low degree of autonomy. Although they argued that they found learning independently challenging and that it provided some benefits, they could not deny that they still needed the guidance from the teacher almost all the time.

In general, although the participants showed positive attitudes toward the development of learner autonomy, it emphasized the role of the teacher that could not be replaced as the resource of knowledge for the students. It is related to the culture in the Indonesian educational context where teachers tend to dominate the teaching-learning process (Lengkanawati, 2016), so it is a challenging task for the teachers to promote learner autonomy in the Indonesian EFL classroom to a certain degree. However, it does not mean that learner autonomy cannot be developed at all

in the Indonesian EFL context. Instead, once the teachers find out how far the learners perceive themselves as autonomous learners, they can start to promote learner autonomy with a particular strategy that can help enhance their autonomy by considering learners' perspectives and abilities. One of the strategies discussed in this study was translation strategy, since it allows the students to learn in an authentic environment and to engage more with the target language.

Translation strategy to enhance learner autonomy

In order to perceive the effectiveness of translation strategy to be used as a tool to promote learner autonomy in Indonesian EFL context, the opinions of the participants toward the use of translation strategy in the language learning were explored. Table 3 shows the perception of the students on the use of translation strategy in their learning process.

Table 3. Learners' Perception on the Use of Translation Strategy

	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
I prefer that the teacher gives lessons using mother tongue	47.8%	43.5%	8.7%
I prefer that the teacher gives lessons using target language	26.1%	60.9%	13%
I prefer that the teacher gives lesson using both mother tongue and target language	91.3%	4.4%	4.3%
I always translate what the teacher explains to understand the lesson	39.1%	52.2%	8.7%
I like to use the target language out of class	21.7%	13.1%	65.2%
I like to make a list of vocabulary in the target language	47.8%	52.2%	0
I always use the dictionary to help me learn the target language	86.9%	8.7%	4.4%

How the learners perceive translation as a learning strategy that helps them learn better is evident in Table 3. Dictionary was still perceived by the students as an effective tool to help them learn the target language, and it was also verified to be a crucial tool in translation. In addition, the participants also explained in further detail that translation was very important in their learning process because it helped them to understand the text in the target language easier and better. They also stated that by being involved in translation activities, it helped them one step closer to be autonomous learners as it allowed them to try figuring out the meaning of the words they did not understand with the help of a dictionary or by asking their friends.

The following statements are some of the participants' views on how translation strategy was effective particularly to enhance their learner autonomy.

Rian: For me, practicing translating a text makes me autonomous.

Zidan: I often write a difficult word I found in a text and look up the meaning in the dictionary. That way I feel independent and it helps me to understand the language better.

Dira: I make a mini dictionary myself as well. So, I would write down the difficult words I don't understand and look them up in the dictionary.

(FGI #2)

The students were also asked about the language that their teacher should use when explaining the materials or lesson in the classroom. It was found that almost all students participating in this study perceived that it was better for the teacher to use both native and target language during the language learning. In addition, the participants elaborated their opinions as can be seen in the following statements.

Lian: I would rather the teacher use both languages (L1 and L2), because we can understand better that way.

Zidan: The written and spoken language of English is different; that's why it is better when the teacher uses both languages. So, we know the meaning.

(FGI #3)

Although some of the students agreed that using both languages was better, some of them argued that using target language during the lesson could help them acquire the target language faster. Their arguments are presented in the following excerpts.

Rian: I prefer the teacher to use full English in the classroom, because it will make us familiar with the language. Once we are familiar (with the language), it will make us understand the language better, right?

Dira: Yes. If the teacher uses full English, it will be helpful when we speak with native speakers.

(FGI #4)

The findings of this study showed that translation strategy had a potential to foster learner autonomy of the students. Most of the participants perceived that translation helped them understand the target language better, and it was noticed from the way they showed an interest for the teacher to teach them using full English. This finding is aligned with the study conducted by Dagilienè in 2012 which found that translation strategy helped students to understand the structure of two languages at the same time, and it helped them improve their English skills.

In conclusion, the participants' attitudes during the study implied that they considered translation strategy as a means to help them understand the target language better. Unconsciously, they also showed a positive attitude toward the use of this strategy to nurture their learner autonomy, as it was claimed to be interactive; the use of authentic materials was also encouraged in the best way possible during the teaching and learning process (Dagilienè, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Fostering learner autonomy is not an easy task for teachers, not to mention for EFL teachers in Indonesia. Some factors are constraining the teachers to develop learner autonomy. One of the biggest problems is coming from the learners who play a vital role in the development of learner autonomy (Benson, 2007). Their beliefs hold an importance on how teachers should apply a suitable strategy to foster autonomous language learning.

In general, Indonesian learners are viewed as passive, introverted, and resistant to change (Suharmanto, 2003). It has become a cultural problem as the learning process has tended to be

teacher-centered for decades. Although at present the national standard curriculum emphasizes the reinforcement of learners-centered learning, the practice remains unchanged. It takes time to change the tradition, but it does not mean it cannot be done in the current situation of Indonesian context as learner autonomy is not constructed in a blink of an eye. There are some efforts that should be prepared both by teachers and students in order to develop learner autonomy gradually and effectively.

Translation strategy proves that learner autonomy in the Indonesian EFL context is one step ahead of its development. By considering the culture of the Indonesian learners, we cannot neglect the fact that teachers have their fair share in the development of learner autonomy as being autonomous learners does not mean learning without teachers (Lengkanawati, 2016). By implementing translation strategy in the classroom, teachers facilitate the learners to work collaboratively and interactively which fosters their learner autonomy and actively provide guidance for the learners whenever they encounter a hardship during the learning process.

This study provides some insights from the learners' point of views on the implementation of translation strategy in autonomous language learning. It also highlights two major findings. First, the students showed a positive attitude toward autonomous language learning, as they were open to the idea of collaborative learning which is an attribute of learner autonomy. Second, they perceived translation strategy as an effective learning strategy to help them become autonomous learners as it encouraged them to solve the problem in understanding the target language they learned in the classroom, in this case English as a Foreign Language.

Therefore, teachers can make use of this result as a foundation to determine the next step in promoting learner autonomy. Since investigating learners' behavior is useful to understand learners' awareness towards their autonomous learning development, teachers can consider conducting needs analysis for a prosperous and enjoyable autonomous language learning experience. Furthermore, in areas with limited access to technology like the context of this study, the teacher can develop the traditional teaching strategy in a more enjoyable and creative way by considering the students' learning preferences. Although the current education system cannot be separated from the use of technology in the process, taking the students' situation into consideration is the best strategy for the teachers to deliver a quality English as a Foreign Language lesson. Therefore, considering the recent shift of the education system in Indonesia from offline to fully online or hybrid learning that requires the use of technology, it is highly recommended for future research in this field to include researching about the challenges of fostering autonomy in an environment where technology is not accessible for the majority of the students.

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