Assessing Students’ Readiness in Learner Autonomy: A study in an English Education Department

Abstract—Learner’s readiness towards LA is prominent to be researched on, because readiness of a learner has a profound influence on their learning behavior, without it the deployment of strategies may be less effective. The purpose of the study is to analyze learner’s readiness in LA by assessing their past English learning experience, their belief towards teacher role and their learning preference. The research used descriptive qualitative method with questionnaire as its primary tool and it was filled by 39 English Education Department students. The research found out that the students were quite ready in accepting LA in the terms of their past English learning experience, the teacher’s role belief and their learning preference while they still have doubts about the teacher’s role in teaching them LA. It is recommended that the teacher to implement the result to foster LA to the students, and for future researcher to analyze more variables.

Keywords—learner autonomy; readiness

I. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy is one of the deciding factors in learning process which heavily relies to students’ own practice and readiness in learning, therefore the readiness in their learning habits to approach LA is very important. The readiness in LA is very important because the readiness and attitude learners hold have a profound influence on their learning behavior [1]. Learning language is a tedious process and a hold of erroneous beliefs about language learning may lead to the deployment of less effective strategies [2]. Therefore, before interventions aimed and fostering autonomy are implemented, it is necessary to assess the learners’ readiness for the changes in beliefs and behavior which autonomy implies [1].

The study was conducted in order to investigate the readiness of English Education Department students in learner autonomy by assessing their beliefs in learning habits, role of a teacher in learning process, and their past English learning experience. It is important to know their beliefs toward LA in language learning process in order for these English Education Department students to experience LA to the fullest and then applying it into their own teaching in the future. Therefore, this study was trying to investigate whether their beliefs in learning habits, role of a teacher and their past English learning experience is already correlated with the principle of LA.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the 21st century, the learning process has shifted from teacher-directed instruction to student-centre learning. Learning individuality deserved special emphasis because learners are individuals and that their individuality may have significant consequences for their learning [3]. Learner autonomy is defined as the ability to take charge of one’s one learning and it does not come from the inborn talent that the individual has, rather it must be acquired through natural means e.g. inner motivation to reach certain goals or by formal learning e.g. systemic, deliberate way [4].

In the terms of language learning, learner autonomy relates to the reflective ability of a student in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating learning [4]. Little also argues that there are three basic pedagogical principles in autonomy of language learning: Learners involvement, in which it involves engaging learners to divide their responsibility for learning process (affective and metacognitive dimensions). Learner reflection, in helping the learners to think more critically in what they want to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning (Metacognitive dimensions), and appropriate target language use- using the target language as a primary tools of language learning (Communicative and metacognitive dimensions) [4].

Learners’ belief in language learner autonomy is described to be an important variable in L2 learning which forms the basis of our personal decision as to how to proceed [5]. Moreover, the predisposition to action is very related to the students learning progress and ultimate achievement [3]. The students learning beliefs have been assumed to be acquired consciously and unconsciously [3], and the beliefs also influenced by their previous classroom experience, cultural backgrounds and personality that shaped their learning habits and beliefs regarding language learning autonomy [3].

A number of researchers which were trying to investigate students’ beliefs and readiness to language learning autonomy had been conducted in many countries such as Spain and Hong Kong. Chan has researched the readiness of LA in language learning in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong. The study involved a class of 20 students of “English at the workplace” course. The participants were aged between 19-24 years old and have studied English for 14-18 years in local school. The study revealed that the students have already gained awareness of different roles of the teacher, existence of
various learning experience and the choice to different learning practices and they can be judged to be autonomous in deciding their learning goals, preferred styles and expectation in learning language and they welcome the opportunity in contributing in the learning process [6].

Cotterall also researched the readiness of LA by using questionnaire to a group of 139 adult ESL learners that enrolled in English for Academic Purposes course of 1992-93. The result showed that the students were not ready to initiate questions and ask for help to the teacher, and they still required a lot of teacher guidance in their language learning progress. Optimistically, they showed a great interest on learning independently to reach their goals in learning English, and they have tried to experiment several learning methods by themselves [1].

Agudo analyzed the Spanish Learners’ beliefs about EFL learning, in which students’ beliefs is deeply correlated with their readiness in LA. The research was conducted in schools located in Extremadura. The data were collected from two secondary education school that involved 218 Spanish secondary school students participated voluntarily. The result of the research showed that the students were unsatisfied with the learning process because of the teacher-centric classroom instruction with spoon-feeding technique, and most of the students wanted more freedom in deciding their own courses and practice [3]. Therefore, it can be concluded that the students ultimately showing their thirst for the practice of LA in the EFL learning classroom.

The research about language learner beliefs about LA was already conducted in the corridor of motivation, expectation, and their preconceived notions about LA with questionnaire, as what Agudo had done [3]. Moreover, Cotterall mainly talks about readiness of LA in language learning with comparative factor analysis in which involves many variables [1]. Therefore, it is important to specifically investigate the learners’ readiness for LA in the corridor of learner’s learning habits, past English learning experience and their beliefs towards the role of the teacher English Education Department students to examine the validity of learner autonomy in tertiary context and search for possible strategies for spreading LA in tertiary level. In order to clarify several terms, several theoretical frameworks should be depicted in order.

A. Learner Autonomy

The concept of LA began in 1979 when Henri Holec wrote Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning [4]. Holec defines learner autonomy as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s learning’, and the ability of LA is ‘not inborn, but must be acquired either by natural means or by formal learning e.g. in a systematic, deliberate way’ [4]. It is also supported by Holmes and Ramos [7], whom said that LA is utilized to ‘help learners to assume greater control over their own learning to make them aware of the strategies that they can use’. From both of the definition it can be assumed that LA is a concept of learning that involves a student-centric approach that can enhance their own knowledge by choosing their own preferred learning methods of learning.

Candy in Benson said that there are over 100 competencies that can be associated with LA. Several of LA learner’s characteristics are mentioned: Methodical/disciplined, logical/analytical, reflective/self-awareness, flexible, responsible, motivated/curious, and independent/self-sufficient capacity [8].

There are more terms related with LA which is not synonymous with LA in general, which are self-instruction, self-direction, self-access, distance learning and out of class learning [9]. Self-instruction means to ‘learning without a teacher’ or ‘learning without the direction of teacher’ [9]. It is very different with the conception from Borg and Al-Busaidi that LA means the full involvement of a teacher as a guide and mentor to inject a good sense of responsibility and morality in learning process, therefore self-instruction doesn’t mean it is a definition of LA. It is also the same with self-access, distance learning and out of class learning, even if it is unquestionably the activities that enhance LA of a student that cannot be separated [10].

Therefore, it can be concluded that LA is a set of methods that encourages the individuality of a students to learn even more on their own with teacher as a guide. Moreover, LA can only be defined as an empowerment of a student to learn on their own, and other synonymous definition can be included in the umbrella of Holec definition as the primary example of how to promote and approach LA [4].

B. Role of the Teacher

To achieve LA, one’s may not forget the relation between students and teacher in fostering LA. Han emphasize the importance of LA with the role of the teacher as the guide in determining student’s objective, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (Rhythm, time, place, etc.) and evaluating what has been acquired [9].

Higgs in Han also has his own opinion in teacher’s role of LA. He said that “During the learning process, in order to help the students learn how to learn independently and effectively, the teacher play a role of a manager....who is available as a resource person...who helps learners to become aware of institutional....expectations......associated with the discipline in which they are studying” [9]. Yang in Han said that in accordance with Higgs that teacher always have a big role in developing students’ learning strategy, which facilitate the growth of LA, that’s why a teacher should be responsible for strategy instructions [9]. Students also have their own interpretation regarding the role of a teacher. Xu and Xu points out several of their interpretation [11]: Guide – Teaching English learning strategies and methods; teaching effective ways of learning English autonomously; developing students skill in listening and speaking as well as communicative competence. Facilitator – offering necessary enlightenment and assistance for the students to make English learning plans and objective; Organized & designer – organizing some communicative activities to get students to have more chances to practice English; Co-operator – making friends with the students; able to offer correct suggestions; willing to
communicate with students about their English learning; working with students to solve their learning problem; Supporter – stimulating students’ interest and enthusiasm in English learning; encouraging students to use English, motivating students to participate in communicative activities; encouraging students to do more speaking in English

Based on the theories above, the role of a teacher to foster LA includes their action in proliferating students’ independence while not forgetting their role as a guide to determine the goals, method, and evaluating the progress of a student in fostering LA. Teacher may become the backup supporter and a primary setter of a goal, while still maintaining a distance in learning process in order to encapsulate students’ practice in LA.

C. Learning Preference

Every learner has different inherent capabilities and personality, needs, and their preferred learning method. Learners also need to feel what they have learn is meaningful for them, especially because the whole person is part of the learning event [12]. Learners need to be actively involved in the learning process as well to increase their efficacy in the acquisition of knowledge. Thus, learner is encouraged to initiate the learning process, not just responding to the guide. Deller also said that ‘learner-centered approach or learner-centered activities are essential in FLT (Foreign Language Teaching and Training)’ [12]. In order to achieve autonomy, there is a need to assess their learning preferences and different learning strategies.

Ellis described a learning style as the consistent way in which a person perceives, conceptualizes, organizes and recalls information [13]. All of the students’ learning styles will be influenced in their cultural and ethnic differences, previous learning experience and the society in which they live. Ellis further emphasis the learning style in several classifications: Sensory preferences [13]: Visual (seeing), Auditory (hearing), Kinesthetic (moving), Tactile (touching); Personality types: Extrovert/introvert, intuitive-random/sensing-sequential, thinking/feeling, judging/perceiving; Degree of generality: holistic/analytic, field dependent/field interdependent.

McCarthy also divides learning styles into four categories: Innovative learners, analytic learners, common-sense learners and dynamic learners [14].

Therefore, a good language learner in learner autonomy based on Stern is the learner that has active planning strategy, academic or explicit learning strategy, social learning strategy and affective strategy [15]. Still, later studies have found that there was no single set of strategies used by the GLL (good language learner) [16]. They combine the strategies and utilize it according to their interest and need, resulting in more autonomy and efficacy in learning strategies. The learners’ preference in assessing readiness of LA is necessary because the theory can describe their preferred method in approaching LA, in which the analysis will increase the engagement of LA acquisition strategies by the teacher.

D. Previous English Learning Experience

Learning English for EFL students is a lifelong process, and the language mastery will not come that easily, given that students have different genetic make-up, their culture and the differences in society they live in Ellis [13]. Some students may be able to learn quicker than others due to their early exposure towards English e.g. privilege in accessing better and more interesting learning materials from games, books and the like, or they have a talent in perceiving foreign language better than everyone else that has different capabilities [15].

Assessing students’ previous English learning experience is needed for analyzing their confidence in learning English in the future, especially in fostering LA as the main method of learning language, because LA requires the student to have a sufficient confidence in learning language and conversing with other learners. With that in mind, There were two questions that guide this present study: 1). What are the students’ beliefs towards autonomous learning? 2). To what degree are the students able to learn autonomously?

III. METHODS

This research was designed as a descriptive study. Descriptive study is utilized to describe and to interpret the subject that is being analyzed and what event has influenced and affected the present condition. From the description above, the present study is meant to be the research to the present situation that happened when the research took place, without necessarily giving the participants any treatment or interventions [17].

A survey in the form of questionnaire was conducted in the research. A 5-Likert scale was administered in the questionnaire. The data was taken on November 2, 2017 until November 7, 2017 from one public university in Bandung. Data collection section will be divided into four aspects: samples, instruments, procedure and data analysis.

The study was conducted in one public university in Bandung. The respondents of this study were 39 students, 25 female and 14 male students. They were all English Education Department students. The reason why there were chosen was because the participants is learning to become an English teacher in the future and generally they want to become a good English learner, and later on the teacher that reads this research will be able to design the appropriate LA promotion method for these students in their respective goals; as a good learner and an influential teacher in the future

The study’s questionnaire was adapted from Victoria Chan’s journal about Readiness for Learners’ Autonomy and Sara Cotterals’ journal with the same topic as the former. The questionnaire focused on the assessment of students’ learning preferences, their past English learning experience and also their belief regarding the role of the teacher.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section included the questions regarding the information of the participants; their age and gender. The second section consisted of 5 questions with 5-likert scale regarding the learners’ past English learning experience. The questions were designed to assess their confidence and their worries in learning English
language in the past. The third section consisted of 5 questions with 5-likert scale regarding the learners’ belief towards role of the teacher. The questions were designed to assess the students’ primary belief about teacher, and the responses were able to conclude their readiness in teachers’ role in LA, which is considerably different than the role in non-LA language learning method. The fourth section consisted on the students learning preferences in 14 questions with 4-likert scale. The questionnaire was formulated in order to ‘assess the students’ preferences in learning language, be it sensory, personality or their degree of generality [13]. The response of the questionnaire could conclude the student’s primary learning habits; whether it already corresponds in LA learning method or not.

The reason why the questionnaire used the model from Victoria Chan’s & Sara Cotterall’s journal is that their instruments was considered to have established validity and reliability over the last two decades and it has been used by a lot of people around the world to assess students’ readiness in LA.

The primary data was gained from a questionnaire. First, the questionnaire was given to the students of English Education major in the paper form on Thursday, November 2nd, 2017 until November 7th, 2017. After that, the questionnaires were tallied in order to have general result of the data. The data collections were analyzed by tallying each question and drawing it on the percentage basis, therefore the general information was generated.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study aimed to investigate the readiness of LA in tertiary education by analyzing their past English learning experience, their belief in teacher’s role and their learning preferences.

A. Students Age and Gender

From the calculation of the students’ responses towards the questionnaire items of their personal information, which consisted of age and gender, here is the result:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Items</th>
<th>N = 39</th>
<th>Strongly Agree/Agree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)</th>
<th>Neutral (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 – 23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>46.2% (8)</td>
<td>10.3% (4)</td>
<td>43.6% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 – 28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>71.8% (15)</td>
<td>7.7% (3)</td>
<td>20.5% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 – 38</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>76.9% (16)</td>
<td>2.6% (1)</td>
<td>15.4% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39 – 43</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>84.6% (8)</td>
<td>7.7% (1)</td>
<td>7.7% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>64.1% (12)</td>
<td>20.5% (4)</td>
<td>15.4% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>76.9% (17)</td>
<td>5.0% (1)</td>
<td>18.1% (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the participants were aged 19-23 years old when the research took place, and the majority of the participants’ gender was female. Contrary to popular belief, the gender of the participants in research does not determine their capability in language learning, as being said by Chan [6], while the age is relatively important to assess the language learning capability. Therefore, the participants’ majority of age depicted that the research mostly assessed the readiness of LA of the students in the beginning of their adulthood, in which it is very beneficial because LA can be fully implemented to the fully capable, adult individual [7].

B. Students’ Past English Learning Experiences

From the calculation of the students’ responses towards the questionnaire items that have 5-likert rating scale, here is the summary of the result from 39 students:

TABLE III. THE SUMMARY OF THE RESULT FROM 39 STUDENTS

From the result of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that there were a divided experience regarding the students' experience in the past. 18 of the students (46.2%) answered that they strongly agree/agree that they have been successful in language learning in the past, yet there were 17 students (43.6%) that answered in neutral scale. Neutral answer in this questionnaire, as being stated by Chan [6], depicted uncertainty of the students. Thus, 17 students (43.6%) were unsure about their past experience in language learning, whether it was successful or not. Students’ past learning success is deeply correlated with their confidence in future learning process, thus also correlate with their capability in LA method [6]. Confidence is a strong factor in LA because autonomous learning requires a continuous engagement with materials with or without guidance from the teacher [9]. Therefore, it can be concluded that close to half of the respondents felt not-so-good in their past English learning experience.

Moreover, the students were quite sure about their future regarding their success in language learning, with 33 students (84.6%) strongly agree/agree about the statement. Only 3 students (7.7%) disagree/strongly disagree and the other 3 students (5.3%) that were unsure about their future in language learning. The belief of future success in language learning is essential in fostering LA because it shows the motivation of the students to achieve their preferred goal in learning language [7].

Most of the students know the purpose of their English language learning, because 30 students (76.9%) strongly agree/agree that they have a certain idea/goals when they learn.
English, while only 1 student (2.6%) disagree and 8 students (20.5%) were unsure in their answer. The acknowledgement that the language learning served their own preferred idea/goal is the main contingent in fostering LA to an even wider audience, because the students’ goal is the primary tool to drive their learning autonomy [7]. With this result, it is ensured that the students in English Education department has a good drive in learning English language, and they’re ready to utilize LA in their learning method.

Many of the respondent shows their LA readiness with 28 students (71.8%) strongly agree/agreeing about their drive to look at the solution of the problem by themselves, with only 5 students (12.9%) expressed their disagreement and 5 students (15.4%) were unsure about the issue. The drive to look at the solution of the problem by the individual shows their readiness in LA, because it depicts their drive to learn on their own without a guide/teacher [1]. With this result, it can be concluded that many of the participants were able to learn on their own without nagging guidance of a teacher.

One of the important results was that the students strongly agree/agree that 25 students (64.1%) know when they made an error when using English, while 8 students (20.5%) disagree and 6 students (15.4%) were unsure about the result. Han agreed that the student’s capability in identifying error in their usage of language in language learning is the most basic aspect in the seeds of LA, because it shows that they are aware of their fault, willing to admit their mistake and most likely will fix the mistake when they realize their fault [9].

From the findings above, it can be concluded that almost half of the students were divided in their success regarding English language learning in the past, while they were quite sure about their future success in learning English. Moreover, most of the students also know their exact purpose in learning English, and they agreed that they are able to search for the solution of the English problem themselves and able to identify error when using English. Based on the past learning experience questionnaire, it can be concluded that most of the respondents were ready to engage with LA learning, even with a non-successful past English learning experience.

C. Students’ Belief about Role of the Teacher

The questionnaire result shows that many of the students strongly agree/agree that they like to have a teacher that explain what and how they learn, with 27 students (69.2%) strongly agree/agree and 5 students (12.8%) disagree about the result, while 7 students (17.9%) were unsure about their own beliefs. Little explained that students who believed that the teacher should dictate how and what they will learn is a good student, because they understand what is the job description of a teacher and know how to use it for their own advantage, in which depicts LA GLL characteristics. Therefore, the result shows GLL in LA [4].

Also, most of the students (23 students, 59%) strongly agree/agree that the teacher should give them problems to work on, while 5 students (12.8%) disagree and 11 students (28.2%) were unsure about their choice. Cotterall said that the students should be guided in what to learn and what problem to solve, because students usually do not have a single inkling in understanding their mistake before it was pointed [1]. Therefore, the problem that the teachers give can become a catalyst for the language learner to understand their mistake, and in the future they will be able to identify the mistake and fix it by themselves [9]. Thus, the result showed that most of students were able to cope with the problems and, in the future, develop LA characteristics.

The students had divided beliefs regarding the teacher’s role in letting the students identify their own mistake (18 students, 47.4% strongly agree/agree while 13 students, 34.2% disagree, while 7 students, 18.4% were unsure). Chan said that a good language learner should be able to identify his/her error in learning process, so that they will be able to fix it on their own later [6]. Therefore, the scattered beliefs show that the students do not have a good understanding regarding the importance of teacher’s role in letting them finding their own mistake, because the students implicitly believed that teacher should pinpoint their mistake, while in LA, it is not encouraged to do so because it depicts one of the hindrance in promoting LA a.k.a. spoon-feeding technique [7].

Students mostly believe that teacher’s role is the provider of the English resource material (21 students, 53.9%) which is deeply correlated with one of the way to foster LA is to let the teacher be the main source of language learning, while maintaining their distance in learning process and avoiding domination of teaching-learning process [7].

Meanwhile, the beliefs of the students also split in the statement that depict the teacher’s role as a problem solver, with 17 students (43.6%) strongly agree/agree about the issue, 12 students (30.7%) disagree about the result and 10 students (25.6%) were unsure about that. As stated by Xu and Xu (2005), teacher should act as a guide and a facilitator for the student that includes solving student problem when they explicitly said so. The split decision shows that the majority of the students believed that it will be quicker and better to talk to their teacher about the problem, while several of them did not agree about the issue. It shows that in this term, fostering teacher’s role as problem solver in LA is quite problematic.

The conclusion regarding the findings in the beliefs about teacher role is that many students agree that teacher should explain in what and how they learn, and they agree that teacher
should state the exact problem that they need to solve in order to enhance their learning process. Meanwhile, students also have divided belief to the teacher’s role in letting the student to do erroneous identification by themselves, with the majority of the students strongly agree/agree that identifying their own mistake is a good thing. Also, they believed that the teacher should become an English material provider while maintaining their status as a problem solver, with several students disagree that teacher should fix the students’ problem. Therefore, their readiness about LA in this term is still good, considering that the belief only split in several questionnaire items.

D. Students’ Learner Preference: Learning Materials

From the questionnaire result, there was a wide range of other language learning activities that the students favored. 87.2% of the students preferred the language learning based on English TV and movies, and 82.1% of them like to learn English by listening to English radios and songs. Learning with native speaker (64.1%), and role play (59%) were also preferred. These responses showed the evidence that students have a strong desire in learning with authentic use of target language [6], thus more activity geared towards this context is encouraged.

E. Students’ Learner Preference: Way of Study

With this result, it can be concluded that most of the students still has lack of LA readiness in the terms of social context, in which 74.3% of the students like to study by themselves, but they also want to study in pairs (58.9%), work in a small group (56.4%) and work with the whole class (48.7%). The preference for involvement in collaborative group work arrangement is one of the ways to foster LA [18-20], therefore the result that the students’ preference in learning alone over learning with groups showed several lacking LA characteristics from the students.

V. Conclusion and Recommendation

It can be concluded from the present study that the past English language learning experience, the belief about role of the teacher and the learning preference has a strong correlation regarding LA readiness. The study found that most of the students inhibit a good LA readiness, depicted by the students’ certainty of future success in LA, goals in learning English and identifying and solving the problems by themselves. It is also supported by their belief towards role of the teacher, in which they agree that teacher’s role is to explain how they learn language, give them the exact problem to solve, and the teacher’s role as material provider. Although several disagreements come from several test items, the majority of the response still can be considered as a good readiness in LA. Lastly, the students showed a split agreement to the learner’s preference, with the majority of the students preferred to learn on their own while still wants a company in pairs, small group and working with a whole class. Also, there was an analysis regarding the students preferred learning materials, and the result depicted that most of the students preferred an authentic use of English learning in the target language.

It is recommended for the teacher and the students that read this research to consider the result of this research as their guidance in promoting LA and to design a more constructive approach in LA methodology. For further research, it is recommended to consider other factors that ignites LA in other context, since this study only research a limited amount of variables and it may be not that reliable without enough comparative study with another research.
REFERENCES