Blended Instruction to Encourage Students' English Learning Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

This research and development study was aimed at developing a web-based learning program to encourage students' learning autonomy. The research was conducted in Yogyakarta State University, and the steps consisted of needs analysis, development, evaluation, and try out. The data were collected using questionnaires and were descriptively analysed. The developed program was rated very good both by the experts and also by the students. This program can be applied in Blended English Course intended to encourage students to develop their study skills and English skills, and to provide students with links for learning English independently outside the class. Blended instruction offers both promises and challenges for the improvement of the English Course to meet the expectation from various parties- students, institution, as well as the society. It opens up students' learning opportunity, not only limited in the classroom but also outside the class, at anytime, anywhere, and thus students are expected to learn more. However, to get the most benefits of this model of instruction, institutions should do their parts, such as providing the facility, managing the system, and encouraging the staff to develop and implement the program.

Keywords: blended instruction, English, learning autonomy

1 INTRODUCTION

English competence of graduates is a quality indicator of Higher education institutions in Indonesia. To reach this quality, higher education institutions facilitate their students to improve their English competence through various ways, one of which is through an English course that is commonly called Bahasa Inggris MKU or English for General Course Program (EGCP). This subject is commonly offered in the first academic year, either in the first or second semester. With only two credit units, this subject is expected to make students able to use English both for their study and for their jobs in the future. The aim of the subject is too ambitious. How can a two-credit-unit course transform students with various levels of English competenceinto competent users of English? The ambitious expectation of the subject has affected higher education institutions in various ways. Some are so apathetic that they leave the business to the students. Students, for example, are required to reach score 500 of TOEFL, whatever ways they take. Some other institutions leave the business to the study programs or departments. It is up to them to make their students improve their English ability. Other institutions work harder to make the English course run better. Efforts should be done to improve the quality of the course, no matter how hard it is, even though the result may not as high as it should be.

Yogyakarta State University is a university that tries hard to improve the EGCSP so that students are able to improve their English competence. Due to the limited allocated time for the course, the institution should choose which English to teach. Based on many scholars such as Hutchinson & Waters (1987), Jarvis (2001), Hyland

(2006), Brick (2012), and Nations (2012), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is the appropriate choice for this setting. It is the kind of English used in the academic context, or, English that is used for learning contents of other subjects in higher education. Hyland (2006) classifies EAP into two, EGAP and ESAP, while Brick (2012) adds another, which is study skills approach. In Hyland's classification, study skills are included in EGAP. Brick (2012:171) states that the choice between EGAP and ESAP is much affected by the fields of study and professions the students take. If they are specific, ESAP should be chosen, but if they are general, EGAP should be taken. Many study programs in YSU and the professions the students will take are general, so that EGAP is more appropriate to offer. Furthermore, it is offered in the first year, in which students still need more general EAP for their study. They still need study skills training to familiarize themselves with the study context in universities.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is one of the approaches of content-based language instructions or CBI (Stoller and Grabe, 1997). CBI is a language teaching approach which makes use of school subject contents as the learning materials, in which the students learn the content and at the same time indirectly learn the language being used (Richards & Rogers, 2001, Wesche & Skehan, 2002, Nation & Webb, 2012, Crandall, 2012). Stoller & Grabe (1997) further explain that EAP is commonly implemented using three prototype models. They are sheltered instructions, adjunct instructions, and theme-based instructions. In sheltered and adjunct models, the contents being taught are the fields of study taken by the students, while in the theme models, contents taken can be of various kinds. Davis (2003) further adds that sheltered and adjunct models are commonly implemented in universities that use English as the language of instruction while theme based models are commonly implemented in the setting in which English is used only as an additional language, such as cases in Indonesia, including YSU. Theme-based language teaching is more language driven than the two other models of EAP, and therefore is considered as the weak version of CBI (Met in Snow, 2001).

In order to be able to use English in the academic context, students need a high level of English competence. Nation (2012) states that students need to master at least 5000 word families, or 8000 word families is better, plus academic terms in order to function well academically. They need to read, listen, speak, and write in various academic settings. They also need various study skills, such as note taking in listening. In speaking they need skills to present prepared talks, take part in discussions. In reading they need skills such as note taking, reading academic texts, using library resources, using internet resources, while in writing they need skills for coping with written assignments, understanding and applying the research article formats, understanding referencing conventions, avoiding plagiarism, and developing skills in computer use. There are so many skills to teach in EAP that it is impossible to teach them all and reach the goal of competent users of EAP with only a two-credit-unit English course. The course is merely a preparatory program that prepares the students to learn further on their own.

Skills to be focused on the program, therefore, should be selected. Based on the needs survey, reading is the skill mostly needed by students in Indonesia, since most teachers assigned their students to read references written in English. Furthermore, plenty information sources available in the libraries and the Internet are also in

English. This is in accordance with Grabe and Stoller (2011) who state that among the four language skills, reading is an academic skill mostly needed by students. Another scholar, Anderson (2012) states that in a meaningful English course, a teacher can put reading as the core skill, which then can be used to develop other skills, such as vocabulary, grammar, speaking, writing, and also listening.

The lack of time for learning English in the classroom is not a big problem when students know how to learn it independently outside the class. The EGCP class can be used to train the students how to learn English independently, show various sites in the Internet for learning English, and give students pleasant experience in learning English autonomously. Learners' autonomy is one of communicative language teaching principles that are proposed by many scholars, such as Brown (2002), Kumaravadivelu (2008), and Nation & Macalister (2010). Nation & Macalister state that a language teaching program should teach the learners how to learn the language and monitor their own learning so that they can develop into effective and autonomous learners. Brown (2006) states that the students' success in mastering the target language is the results of their own efforts, therefore they should be taught how to learn the language independently.

Blended instruction can be an alternative to solve problems related to time limitation and to familiarize the students to learn English independently. It is a teaching program, most of which is done through offline face-to-face instruction and some other part is done online (Dudeney & Hockly, 2008). In the face-to-face instructions, students are shown and trained how to use various learning strategies, and then they are assigned to use those strategies to do tasks online outside the classroom. Equipping students with learning skills or learning strategies, and developing students' learning autonomy can be advantageous and worth trying. To reach this aim, a web-based English learning program needs to be developed.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The program development was done by applying an R & D model, starting with fact finding and needs assessment, and then, design and development, expert judgement evaluation, revision, and field testing. The data were collected using four questionnaires, each of which was for needs assessment, expert judgement for evaluating the developed learning materials, expert judgement for evaluating the online learning media, and for students in the field testing. The subject of the research was the students of Yogyakarta State University. The respondents for needs assessment were chosen systematically to represent each faculty while those for field testing were chosen purposively.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Developed Products

Results presented in this article were limited on the developed products, the result of expert judgement evaluations, and the field testing. There are two products of the research □an English learning module and an e-learning course. The module was

developed based on the theme-based learning approach, following Stoller and Grabe's 6 Ts model□Theme, Topics, Texts, Tasks, Thread, and Transition (Stoller & Grabe, 1997). The themes chosen were English in Higher Education and Study Skills. The two themes were, then, developed into 14 topics, each of which was developed into a lesson. The lessons focus on the reading skills with the texts taken from university textbooks. Each lesson was sequenced starting from pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading tasks. Tasks for pre-reading covers question and answer tasks to activate students' background knowledge, tasks for vocabulary preparation and for predicting the text. While-reading tasks consist of reading and understanding to find topics and main ideas, stated detail information, unstated information, guessing meaning of words in context, differentiating between facts and opinion, and understanding the use of references and transition markers. Post-reading tasks consist of making outlines or summaries, making notes, and responding to texts. The thread chosen to unite the two themes was "English and Study Skills to develop students' learning autonomy in higher education". Transitions were inserted between two tasks, as well as between topics to make the whole lessons coherent.

The developed learning materials in the form of module were then evaluated by an expert. The filled questionnaires produced the following data

Table 1. Learning Material Expert Evaluation Data

No	Aspects	Number of questions	Score	Means	Category
1	Content	8	29	3,63	Very good
2	Language	5	19	3,80	Very good
3	Presentation	7	22	3,14	Good
4	Graphical design	5	20	4.00	Very good
	Σ	25	90	3.60	Very good

The table shows that the developed materials were rated very good by the expert. He also gave comments and suggestions for the improvement of the materials. He stated that many spelling and grammatical mistakes were still found here and there that they should be corrected. Besides, there were many reading texts directed copied from other textbooks so that they still brought the original pages. He suggested that the texts be retyped and the pages omitted.

After being revised, the module was developed into an e-learning program. The e-learning program applied the moodle, which has been used by the institution so far. The program contains the learning material completed with discussion forum and well known websites for learning English such as, BBC, UEFAP, Cambridge, EducationCorner, English-Zone, and Rong-Chang. The appearance of the front page of the program is as follows.
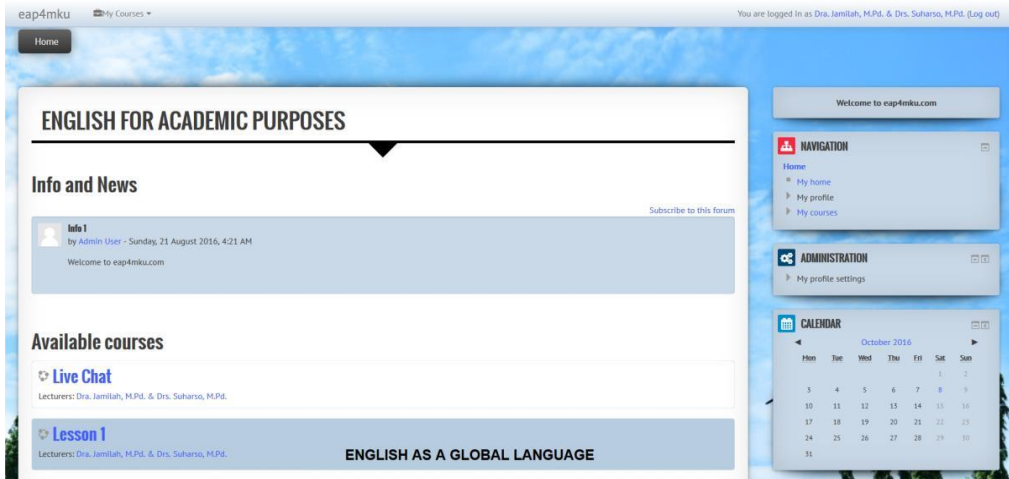
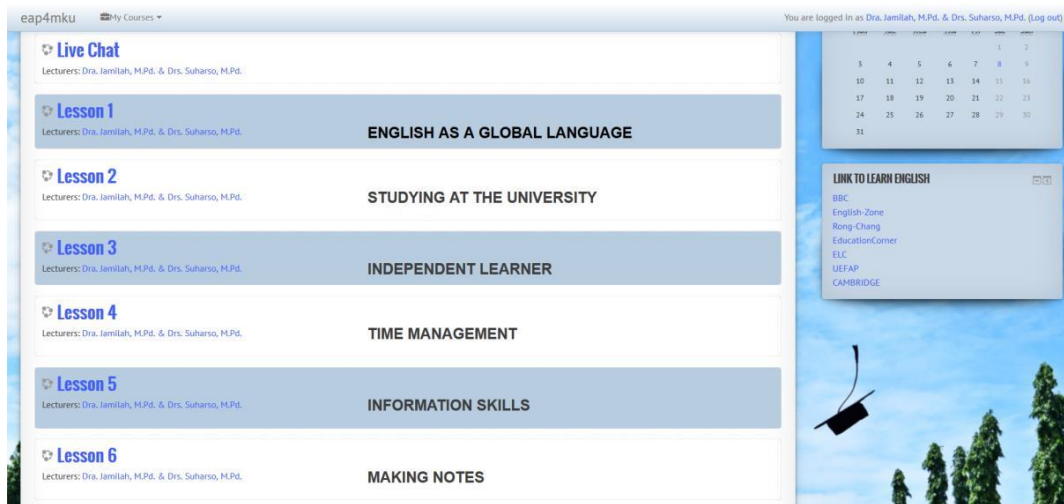Figure 1. The Front page of the Developed E-learning

Figure 2.The Front page of the Developed E-learning

The e-learning program was evaluated by an expert and was rated as follow.

Table 2. Media Expert Evaluation Data

No	Aspects	Number of Question	Score	Means	Category
1	Lay-out and Appearance	8	29	3,65	Very Appropriate
2	Operating system	6	21	3,50	Very appropriate
3	Interactivity and feed back	6	19	3,17	Appropriate
	Σ	20	69	3.45	Appropriate

The table shows that the e-learning program is appropriate to be tried out in the field. However, the third aspect, interactivity and feedback, can further be improved. The expert suggested three things: 1) add manuals for the users, 2) add other learning media, such as audio and video, to make it more attractive, and 3) improve the down-load and up-load facilities to make it easier to use.

3.2   The Result Of Field Testing

To try out the developed program, additional facilities were needed. It needed computer sets and internet connection. The try out could not be implemented in the usual classrooms, so a computer lab was rent to run the teaching and learning process. The try out was conducted on 30 September 2016, which was attended by 17 first year students of YSU. It started with explanation from the teacher on how to use the program, and then the students were allowed to use it to try out all the existing features, and at the end of the session they filled out the questionnaires. The data from the questionnaires were classified into two, students' evaluations on the learning materials and the other on the web-based program/media. The learning materials were rated very good by the students with the means score 3.59, and the media were also rated very good with the means score 3.53. In addition to the quantitative data, the students also stated comments and suggestions to improve the program.

Many students commented that the program was really good. It was very useful and interesting. It motivated them to learn independently. It also allowed them to learn anytime and anywhere. They could learn from other websites provided on the program, so that various learning English materials could be accessed from whichever they wanted, and they could choose whichever they needed and wanted. However, they also still found some weaknesses, such as the choice of colour and the attractiveness of the look. For some of them the colour was dull, and it could be made brighter. The appearance looked monotonous, that it could be added with other features to make it more attractive.

3.3   Discussion

The web-based learning program can be used as supplementary materials or additional materials to the face-to-face teaching. The topics chosen, study skills, give knowledge of study skills to the students, while the reading practice activities allow students to develop the reading habits. Reading skills can only be developed when students do a lot of reading. A lot of practice is also needed to develop fluency (Nation, 2012). The web-based learning program also provides students with various well-known websites for learning English. This can open up students' mind that learning English is not only limited to the classroom activities and to the materials prepared by the teacher. They can learn anything and anytime from any sources. They can choose whatever they want to learn. They can find authentic texts and use the language in an authentic way (Dudeney and Hockly, 2008). On the other side, the program allows the teacher manage and monitor students' learning outside the classroom. He can assess students learning, give feedbacks and encourage students to make more efforts in accomplishing the tasks. This feature of web-based program can lengthen students' learning time and students-teacher interaction. The use of the program as additional

learning material and activities gives students more chance to learn more.

Besides some claims presented as the advantages of the use of web-based program in a blended learning instruction, there are also points to consider. Not all teachers are ready with the challenge. Some are not familiar with the use of internet in language teaching, and some others have no enthusiasm due to the complicated procedures and more efforts. They have to use computers, internet connection, and even they have to work extra time to monitor students' work. As stated by Reinders (2012) that the use of technology in language teaching has posed certain demands on teachers that are not normally found in traditional classroom, so that they need to adapt themselves to the new environment and the new roles. Another challenge to the implementation of web-based learning is that it needs additional facilities and equipments. The program cannot be implemented in the usual classroom. A classroom completed with many computer sets and strong internet connection is required, since not all students have their own laptops, and the internet connection is troubled when used by so many people. The third challenge is the development of the program. Developing an appropriate language program with internet technology requires collaboration among many parties. Collaboration among language teaching experts, computer experts, and graphical experts is a must (Banchari, 2006). Without this, an appropriate English language program with internet technology can never be materialized.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Blended instruction can be an alternative to help students learn English and develop their autonomous learning. A web-based learning can be developed to be used outside the class as additional learning materials to the face-to-face instruction. This model of instruction offers many advantages, i.e. lengthening students' learning time, increasing students' learning, allowing students to find authentic learning materials and use the language in authentic ways, opening up students' awareness that learning English is not limited by classroom program and materials presented by the teacher, and thus, students are encouraged to learn autonomously. Learning autonomy is crucial to help students succeed in language learning. However, this model of instruction also poses great challenges for teachers, program developers, institution, and also students. They need to work harder and adapt their attitude towards their jobs and the use technology in the language instruction.

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