
Personalized English Language Enhancement: Teaching ESP in the Post Covid Era

Lale Fatma Yulia Ningsih

Universitas Islam Al-Azhar
lfyn.ariwijaya@gmail.com

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Email Correspondence: lfyn.ariwijaya@gmail.com

Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has raised challenges for the higher education community worldwide. Of the most fundamental challenges in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) during the pandemic, it is to ensure that the learning is meaningful. Online teaching and learning imply a pedagogical content knowledge, mainly related to organising and designing a better learning environment, with the help of digital technology. In this study, we provide insights into this online learning related pedagogical content knowledge, with the goal of helping novice English language learners to navigate in this challenging time. Particularly, through a Personalised Autonomous (PA) Model approach, we conducted an action research through developing a new approach to language learning and running the course during a semester in the early to mid 2020 towards 97 students. Our qualitative analysis of the samples showed that the personalised teaching model provides a unique opportunity whereby the students could address their own language learning needs to their own satisfaction which in turn stimulated their positive emotions and self-confidence. The students, however, mentioned that they experienced difficulties in finding resources and setting their personal learning goals. Finally, this research recommends that a personalised learning can be a solution to distance-learning during the post pandemic era.

Keywords: personalised autonomous model, English language enhancement, university students

1. INTRODUCTION

Online learning is not actually anything new to learners in general. But, the fact that the learning process has been run under circumstances that nobody had even expected before has exacerbated the situation. Distance learning, also known as E-Learning, is a form of education under which there is a physical separation of teachers and students during the learning process. It has also known by its instructional practice that efficiently utilised technological tools, enriching the students learning experience as well as facilitating student-to-student communication. The minimum requirements for a successful E-learning contain mobile devices, the acquisition of hardware, video conferencing application

such as Zoom or WebEx, Microsoft Windows or Apple operating systems and a stable internet connection.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been forcing educational institutions to shut down, hence, shifting quickly to online and distance modes of learning. From time immemorial, lecturing in a face-to-face classroom setting – students listening, taking notes, asking questions and getting the questions answered – have been the backbone of traditional academic education that we used to be exposed to (Almaiah & Omar Abdulwahab, 2019). With the advancement of the internet, indeed, new teaching methods and systems have emerged so far (Almaiah & & Omar Abdulwahab, 2019). Under the magic of the ‘internet ride’, students can learn from home and obtain instruction by simply touching a few buttons on their screen, interacting with their lecturers a few miles away from home.

According to the statement made by UNESCO in 2020, it is confirmed that schools and universities closure have many adversities on students’ academic wellbeing such as interrupted learning, resulting in the students being deprived of opportunities to grow and develop cognitively (UNESCO, 2020). It is then assumed that online learning system could also be a solution to the problem as long as it is supported with speedy internet connection.

The unexpected shift to online learning became the indicator of organisational excellence with the majority of tertiary institutions have so much focused on adapting with the educational content rather than specifically on the instructional delivery. Nonetheless, it was a reminder of lack of resources in academic institutions, especially to the socially marginalised students, insufficient access to the internet and lack of latest technology affected organisational responsiveness and students’ capacity to participate in digital learning. No face-to-face interaction with the lecturers is also another issue strongly associated with online learning.

In this COVID-19 circumstances, students need to be given an autonomy in their learning as distance learning does not provide them enough chance to consult everything with their lecturers. In this case, they need to find their own ‘needs’ in order to complete their jig-saw puzzles of English language enhancement. This is the space in which personalised and autonomous learning have been pivotal in guiding non-English speakers to improve their skills (Dörnyei, Z, 2009) .

Theoretically speaking, the Personalised Autonomous (PA) model was inspired by Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT) and Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics (SFL) for intermediate and advance language teaching. The PA model is grounded in several sociocultural theories and theoretical concepts in many fields such as second language acquisition (SLA), educational psychology, and reflective practice (Burns, 1998; Byrnes, 2006).

The PA model is deemed suitable to be applied during this COVID-19 era as it adopts a diverse perspective on language learning that is mediated and socially embedded by symbolic, physical and psychological tools within learning environment and is shaped by the interaction between emotion, cognitive, social contexts (Hulstijn et al., 2014). The model therefore puts emphasised on the development and affective components of students' independence. Crucially, language learners, at a university level of language learning, need the ability to use the language in an authentic context (Kim, 2005).

In the PA model, learners are guided towards personalising their learning through five stages – awareness, need analysis, planning, implementation and reflection – as shown in Figure 1 below. It means that each individual student carries out his or her own action research to complete his or her learning puzzle. Every stage can be explained in relation to teachers' scaffolding and students' main activities in classrooms (Kim, M., Edwards., & Hall, 2021).

The PA model opens up the link between explicit and implicit knowledge through guiding language learners to accommodate a dynamic interaction of sociocultural and psychological elements of their own learning – self-confidence (Emily Edwards and Peter Roger, 2015), emotions (Swain, 2013), goals and motivations (Dörnyei, Z, 2009), identities (Garold Murray, 2011), as well as access to utilise a range of learning strategies (Peter D. MacIntyre, Kimberly A. Noels, 1997). This way, a language learner can develop his or her ability to master a certain language in the most authentic context. This process, however, requires genuine motivation of the learner in accordance to finding the “missing piece” of his or her own area of focus. In this case, the PA model offers a more longitudinal - self-reflective and self-motivated - learning at the expense of the one focuses on short-term progress in linguistic knowledge and/or skills (Kim, M & Jing, 2019; Meskell, 2001).

The PA model, theoretically was grounded on Byrnes's series of action research cycles (2006), who suggested Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL) for teaching English in advance level such as universities. In this case, students' feedback towards their learning experiences were highly reflected related to theoretical explanation on each cycle. Hence, it is to say that the PA model is grounded in various theoretical concepts and sociocultural theories in the fields such as second language acquisition (SLA), educational psychology as well as reflective practice.

Specifically, the first stage of PA model is awareness in which the students should be aware of their need and desire to enhance specific language skill(s). It could be mainly resulted from their extrinsic or intrinsic motivation to learn. As such, the awareness can be the result of the student' own desire to achieve success or even happiness and quality of life. Whether it is positive or negative, intrinsic or

extrinsic, it is imperative that language learners themselves agree to improve their skills, instead of being forced to, as self-motivation is an essential part of autonomous learning (Ross, 2015).

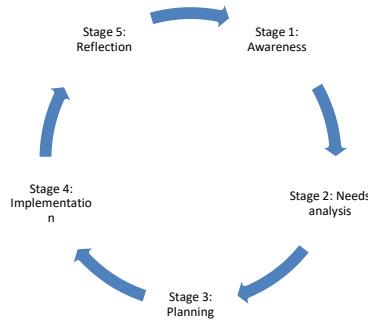


Figure 1. The PA model learning stages

Meanwhile, at the second stage the learners are assisted to select a certain area to which they intend to improve their English language skills. It is too common for a foreign language learner to encounter frustration – on the one hand – and on the other hand they tend to feel not making any progress during the learning process and cycle. This specific dilemma might be influenced by the fact that language context is the integral function of language learning. This notion is so crucial that the way language is used is greatly influenced by purpose and context, which has been systematically explained in SFL-based language pedagogy (Rose, 2008). Hence, it is so crucial for language learners to identify the context in which their desired language area of improvement is not being fulfilled satisfactorily.

The third stage is planning during which the students design a personal project with a specific goal, method, resources, a timeline and of course a progress measurement method. This stage is to be completed upon the students developing their specific focus. They are strongly encouraged to set a specific, realistic, measurable goal as, normally: 1) the students have only a few weeks (3-5 weeks) allocated in a semester to implement their project; 2) the students need to evaluate their own progresses and then reflect on their own learning in their final reflective essay; and 3) they are likely to get motivated to continue their personal project upon the implementation if they are to find it helpful.

At the fourth stage, the students carry out their personal project for a number of weeks, attempting to transform the task into a habit. The students keep the record of their activities and writing a reflective essay regularly in their portfolio. The portfolio can be both in the form of online and offline means. Interestingly, the students are also encouraged to record their emotions as the emotions along the implementation phase is an essential part of self-directed learning journey (Russ, 2016; Andrew, 2015).

At the last stage, students are set to deliver a presentation in which they highlighted what works and what do not. This presentation is scheduled in every final week of the semester.

As described above, the Personalised Autonomous model is an approach to a sustainable language learning. As the model highly emphasises on autonomous learning, this is deemed to be effective in the time of crisis like this. The model offers flexibility and accommodation for students to pick up their learning desire and needs. In a long run, the model can also help students to be self-motivated for life-long learning through the sense of achieving higher, self-reflection, and creating a learning community where students collaborate and inspire each other.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Since being introduced to the university in which this project was implemented (started from 2019), students' feedback has shown that university students have benefited greatly from the application of the PA model in the English teaching. However, in conducting this action research, the authors felt the need to understand the students' learning outcomes through the implementation of the PA model under the COVID-19 learning restriction.

All 134 students enrolled in the class from mid to early 2020 were invited to participate and 97 agreed to take part. Upon the completion of stage five of the PA model, the 97 students submitted their portfolio online and later the portfolio was qualitatively analysed in three focus areas – areas of focus, self-reported learning outcomes and the changes in their emotion during the project implementation phase.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Areas of focus

Out of the 97 personal projects (PP) and portfolios submitted, 53.61% focused on speaking skills, 8.25% on writing and 24.74% on vocabulary, as shown in Table 1 below. However, among those 24 students focusing on vocabulary enrichment, it is safe to say that 10 of which were conducted the vocabulary project to prepare for their next speaking-related personal project. It is also indicative that the majority of the participants felt that there was a strong need to improve their speaking skills at the expense to writing skills. While it is true that the data volume in this study is too small to generate a generalisation, increased in types of vocabulary and speaking projects each semester also indicates that this trend will be likely to continue even in the post-pandemic era.

Table 1. The PA areas of focus

Listening	Vocabulary	Speaking	Writing	Total
13	24	52	8	97
13.4%	24.74%	53.61%	8.25%	100%

Speaking (52) and vocabulary (24) projects were developed by the students as these two are strongly related to their jobs or future jobs. Meanwhile for the listening project, some of the projects focused on improving the skill in a certain area related to their workplace-context (e.g. economics, legal cases, laboratory works) by building up their background knowledge in their respective fields, while others did so in the listening area that mostly hampered their listening comprehension (e.g. the stress patterns of certain vocabularies). In terms of their listening strategies, mostly note taking is the popular one whereby all of the 13 students doing their listening project incorporated notetaking strategies into their project design and method.

The vocabulary projects were developed with several learning goals. For example, 15 out of the 24 vocabularies projects were chosen by those categorised as adult learners who already have children as a means of teaching vocabularies for the kids. Therefore, the types of words chosen were those children-friendly. The rest of the 9 students, however, did their vocabulary projects to improve their work performance as the vocabularies chosen were the formal ones, necessary for them to do their job such as writing an email in English.

As for the most popular project, speaking projects, were developed with the most diverse goals; improving pronunciation, being clearly understood by a native speaker, and even those wanting to do storytelling for their kids in English.

The rest of the project were focused on writing skills. This the least popular project compared to the other three types. Writing is claimed as an obstacle by most of the students attending our classes. However, with the complexity of conducting a writing project amid the pandemic, only 8 of the students proposed the project types. The writing projects were generally design to improve writing skills in academic writing.

3.2 Learning outcomes

Most students stated that their targeted language skills had improved through their personal project implementation and most of the students were able to provide evidence of their learning progress upon completion of their project. In the PA model, it is least likely to measure individual student's learning progress with a standardised test as they worked on a different types of projects as well as knowledge they endeavoured, not to mention the students' feeling about their achievement (or even their lack of

achievement). Fortunately, the analysis can be done in several ways. In this case, the authors adopted the notions of explicit and implicit knowledge on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as these enable us to explore the nature of the knowledge that students aimed to achieved across different skills.

Through analysing the participants' learning goals and progress measurement methods, it reveals that 74% of the participants wanted to improved their explicit and implicit knowledge. In other words, the students, in conducting their projects, did not really think about the theory and rules surrounding their topics as in fact they wished to use the newly found knowledge in the most authentic context and situation. Regarding the project measurements, the students measured their performance against the criteria being set in their project design, just upon started their project implementation.

3.3 Participants' emotional responses to learning outcomes

The most distinguish phenomenon being observed during the implementation of the English classes, both in the previous semester and during the distance-learning mode, is that students go through a wide range of emotional dynamics and changes. In the end of the project, a majority of students experienced positive emotions – happy, excited, satisfied, motivated – especially those who have achieved their targeted project goals. Even more so that among the students whose projects were not well implemented still thought that they gained other aspects of language learning outside of their project goals.

4. CONCLUSION

The qualitative analysis towards 97 project designs submitted online showed that the Personalised Autonomous (PA) model paves the way for implementing a unique model through which each student addresses his or her learning needs and areas to improve. The teaching challenges faced during this pandemic can be overcome through mediating an autonomous learning model whereby students control their learning journey. Hence, the PA model provides the evidence one of which is through the effectiveness of this kind of implementation under this research design.

Although the PA model is applied and has been developed for language enhancement purpose, it still can be applied by any teachers who want to help students develop an independent and meaningful learning journey. The teachers can adopt the model and help their students to personalise their learning, to accommodate their students' different needs and abilities or even disabilities. This is also to address the issue of institutional constraints many face during a crisis circumstances.

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