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'It Depends on the Students Themselves': Independent Language Learning at an Indonesian State School

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There is continuing interest in the notion of learner autonomy, both as an effective means and valid goal of a language learning curriculum. However, the concept is recognised as emanating from Western tertiary educational contexts and as open to question in different sociocultural settings. This paper reports on a study of language learning attitudes and activity among adolescents in provincial Indonesia, during their first year in junior high school. Combining questionnaire, interview and classroom observation data, the study found that even younger learners are already learning English independently of their teacher's prescriptions, both inside the classroom and outside formal school. Their openness to the increasing learning opportunities in the local environment is often not recognised in local curricula, however, which instead impose a rigid diet of language items transmitted by teachers and their textbooks and assessed in national exams. In this local context, it seems that the promotion of appropriate forms of learner autonomy is essential if the majority of school pupils are not to be frustrated in their struggle to learn English.

Keywords: autonomy, independence, language learning strategies, motivation, socio-cultural context

Independent or autonomous¹ language learning has mainly been associated with Western and tertiary educational settings; it is sometimes perceived to be more problematic in Asian and secondary level contexts, and has been largely ignored in developing country contexts except where western development agencies are at work. This paper briefly reviews the literature on independent language learning, then reports on research which claims to find such learning in an Asian school context.

Independent Learning and Cultural Differences

Authoritative bibliographies on the subject (e.g. at <http://www.ec.hku.hk/autonomy/>), as well as the papers presented at a recent conference (Independent Language Learning Conference, Open University, UK, 4–5 December 2003) confirm the greater attention given to university settings. Undergraduates are assumed to have the personal maturity necessary to take responsibility for their learning, and the content or method of learning, whether on residential or distance programmes, is assumed to be more under their control than in the teacher, textbook and syllabus-dominated world of the secondary school.

There have been notable studies of autonomous learning in secondary school language classrooms, but these have often been the result of interventions by researchers or teacher researchers aimed at encouraging such behaviour (e.g. Dam & Gabrielsen, 1988; Lamb, 1997). Another approach in general education has been to measure pupils' existing sense of autonomy, on the assumption that a heightened level of self-determination will increase motivation to learn (Deci *et al.*, 1991). Self-determination theory has only recently been applied to language learning (Green, 1999; Noels, 2001; Spratt *et al.*, 2002), but its applicability in non-Western contexts, where the views of respected seniors might be more highly valued, has also recently been questioned (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999).

Indeed, the issue of cultural appropriacy has coloured the discussion of independent language learning in Asia over the past decade. It has sometimes been claimed that the values associated with autonomy, such as personal self-fulfilment and freedom from constraint, mean 'it may have little relevance outside the "individualistic" western contexts in which it first rose to prominence' (Littlewood, 1999: 72). Ho and Crookall (1995) claim, for example, that Chinese students would feel uncomfortable with any educational approach which required them to challenge the authority of the teacher, and Chinese teachers might likewise be reluctant to surrender control to their students. While warning against stereotyping 'Asian learners', Littlewood (1999) suggests that socialisation practices in family and school inevitably influence learners' attitudes and responses to academic freedom, and that therefore different types of learner autonomy may be suited to Asian educational contexts. Supporting this view, both Hart (2002) and Smith (2003) found that their Japanese university students responded well to classroom activities which promoted group rather than individual autonomy.

On the other hand, there are a growing number of examples of successful autonomous learning by individual Asian learners in various contexts. In the UK, Clarke and Gieve (2001) found that Chinese students exhibited autonomous studying practices similar to British undergraduates. In Hong Kong, Spratt *et al.* (2002) report that motivated university students of English used a wide range of independent learning activities, and Yap (cited in Benson, 2001) also uncovered much self-initiated activity among female high school students. Meanwhile D'Ailly (2003) found that, like American children, Taiwanese elementary learners who had a higher sense of autonomy also had greater perceived control over their learning, and this was linked to academic performance.

In fact, Benson *et al.* (2003: 24) argue that the 'autonomy in Asia' debate has obscured two essential features of language learning. Firstly, when detailed attention is given to personal language learning histories (e.g. Benson *et al.*, 2003; Norton, 2000; Toohey, 2000), it becomes clear that the process of acquiring a second language 'involves the construction of new and often highly individual, cultural identities through the medium of the target language' (Benson *et al.*, 2003: 24). This is true whether it takes place in a 'collectivist' or 'individualist' society. Secondly, successful language learners are not simply passive recipients of knowledge or 'input', but must actively seek out affordances in their local context of learning. From this ecological perspective, where

learning is 'the result of meaningful activity in an accessible environment' (van Lier, 1997: 783), human agency is always important in successful language learning, although its exercise will be channelled and moderated by social practices and power relations in the community.

Studies of independent language learning in developing country contexts have tended to focus on the appropriacy or otherwise of 'Western' pedagogic principles and practices. In Cambodia, for example, Jones (1995) argued that students there had no familiarity with independent study or personal goal-setting and that this necessitated a more culturally sensitive design for the self-access centre he was responsible for setting up. Similarly, Sonaiya questions the validity of autonomous language learning in the Nigerian education system, and suggests that they may be partly responsible for the 'widespread failures of foreign-aided educational programmes in sub-Saharan Africa' (Sonaiya, 2002: 106).

Nevertheless, there are studies which, while not specifically focusing on independent language learning, have uncovered evidence of autonomous behaviour in developing country school and university classrooms. Coleman (1996) observed Indonesian students forming small 'self-help' peer groups during university lectures in the 1980s, while Shamim (1996) observed Pakistani school girls manoeuvring to sit in the 'action zone' in their classrooms where they could benefit from the teacher's attention. Canagarajah (1999) found Sri Lankan students to be quietly subverting the content of their university English classes (for instance, by glossing their textbooks with locally relevant comments and pictures), while at the same time often seeking private lessons outside of school in order to master the language in their own way.

As Holliday (2003) points out, because these research sites are largely beyond the reach of Western discourses of 'autonomy', what they bring to light are indigenous forms of autonomy which may look different to forms of autonomy found in mainstream TESOL literature. Indeed, Canagarajah (2002: 140) has recently claimed that 'in the remote corners of the world in small village classrooms ... away from the eyes of the professional pundits of the centre', the best teachers have always striven to impart to their pupils a range of language-learning strategies which promote autonomous learning from an early stage.

It is into this emerging tradition of interpretive studies of local practice in natural settings that this paper fits. While working at a university in a provincial city in Sumatra, Indonesia, I had come across small numbers of individual students whose English was significantly better than that of their peers, despite attending the same schools and apparently sharing a common strong motivation to learn the language. A small-scale research study revealed, through retrospective interviews, that successful students felt they had succeeded largely due to their own autonomous learning outside of school, while those who had failed tended to blame their formal learning experience (Lamb, 2002). As a contribution towards our understanding of independent language learning in developing country settings, it seemed worthwhile to investigate more thoroughly the experience of Indonesian children as they began the process of studying the English language in junior high school (JHS).

The Study

The priority was to explore learners' behaviour and attitudes in context, in as much depth as possible, while acknowledging that limitations of time and resources precluded the possibility of a full ethnography. I decided therefore to conduct a case study of a 'focal group' (FG) of learners within one school, planning three phases of research over a 20-month period. Combining quantitative survey data from all first year students in the school with qualitative data from individuals, I hoped to gain both the broad canvas view of levels of motivation and learning activity in the school population, and a set of detailed miniatures showing some of the 'myriad of paths taken by learners' as their agency is expressed in the local context (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001: 145). The 12 FG learners were selected on the basis of their initial questionnaire responses – nine of them appeared very highly motivated, two had unusually low motivation, and one was chosen because uniquely he had just arrived in the city from a remote area. Unless specified otherwise, the quotations and comments in the rest of this paper are taken from data relating to the nine motivated learners during my first two visits to the school in September 2002 and May 2003.

The survey was conducted using a questionnaire containing a mixture of open and closed items, eight items eliciting background information about the students and a further eight items seeking to uncover students' attitudes and motivation to learn English, and their level and type of independent English learning activity. The qualitative data consisted of at least two semi-structured interviews with each of the 12 learners, using their questionnaire responses as a starting point and going on to explore other issues related to the learning of English inside and outside of school, such as the views of family and friends, their attitudes towards the West and their longer-term aspirations. Interviews lasted approximately 20 min and were conducted by myself in Bahasa Indonesia except when the student chose to speak in English. I also conducted longer interviews with the eight English teachers who work in the school, and with one who worked at a rural school. Finally, all the focal group learners were observed at least three times in school English lessons, and those who were currently studying in a private English course were also observed there.

The school is situated in a relatively affluent part of the city and many pupils are children of government officials and university staff – the emerging middle-class. However, the local standard of living is below that of neighbouring ASEAN countries such as Malaysia or Thailand, and the physical structure of the school is poor. Only a minority of pupils' families have a car or computer at home, for example. As the Indonesian educational system gradually liberalises, the school is beginning to operate a partly selective recruitment policy.

Findings

Two characteristics of the first-year JHS students quickly became apparent. Firstly, contrary to expectation and to the experience of undergraduates currently studying at university (see Lamb, 2002), the vast majority of pupils in the school (94.5%) had already studied English formally before they entered the JHS. Over 80% of these had studied English for two or more years at elementary school,

despite the fact that English is not officially part of the national elementary school curriculum. It appears that elementary schools in the city are responding to parental pressure by offering English lessons, although the teacher is rarely qualified in the subject, lessons are usually just one hour per week, and few pupils emerge from elementary schools with anything more than a smattering of English vocabulary and some basic notions of grammar.

Private courses

Secondly, where pupils do make significant progress in English, both they and their teachers attribute it not to formal school lessons but to private courses taken outside school hours. Almost 50% of pupils had already taken a private course before they entered JHS, for an average period of 15 months, at over 22 different institutions. These courses are of variable quality, but successful JHS pupils are in no doubt that they can be valuable for their English, as this girl reports:²

I: How is your English now, T?

T: I think I have increased from I start study in here

I: How have you managed to make good progress?

T: I study in LIA [Indonesia-American Association] and I study about conversation, tenses in there. I think it's very help me [original]

This highly motivated learner clearly thinks first of her private course, rather than her JHS (where the interview took place), when asked how she has managed to make progress in English. Similarly, when asked what advice they would give to a new pupil in the school wanting to learn English quickly, several pupils immediately suggested taking a private course:

M: I would tell them to take an English course, and to buy a book on speaking English, and after buying it, really to study it, not just buy it and put it away.

All eight English teachers in the JHS mentioned private courses as important to pupils' progress, some with startling frankness:

Rt: They can't success in English if they don't take a course in English.

St: I don't know exactly if they make much progress at school, because of, most of the students they take an extra ... they take an English course outside. [original]

Asked who decides on whether a child takes a private course, teachers tended to emphasise the role of parents. 'I think the parents ... with them', said one teacher. The pupils, on the other hand, gave the impression that they were in control. For example, one girl in her first (September) interview said that she had never taken a course because 'I actually prefer to learn from my parents.' The following April I asked her about this:

I: Do you still study with your parents?

N: Rarely nowadays, you see now, Mister, I go out in the morning, come home in the evening; I'm already taking a course ... I get most of my practice at LIA now.

Other pupils told me why they had chosen a particular private course, while one admitted that she had stopped:

Rz: It was too difficult, hard, it was too difficult for me to catch the lessons, too high a level . . . I left, don't do a course anymore.

I: So you didn't like it?

Rz: No. Also it was in the afternoon, so I was too tired, it was difficult to do my homework.

Several of these FG learners have been taking a private course on and off for many years. Initially their parents may have pushed them into it – one girl, for example, complains that as a six-year-old she intensely disliked her course, but her mother forced her to continue and eventually she came to enjoy it. It appears that by the age of 12, the decision is mainly theirs, though of course their parents have to be able to pay the fees.

Most private courses run twice a week, roughly doubling the amount of time that learners study English from four to eight hours. Apart from the general benefit of this extra time, pupils mention specific benefits too. A common view is that private courses provide more opportunity for speaking practice, as this pupil implies:

P: I know I have problems with my speaking, so I've started to want to take private lessons.

Observations of lessons in these private academies, and pupils' descriptions, indicate that the teaching methodology is not very different from that in formal school lessons.³ Perceived improvement in oral skills is probably attributable to the smaller class size (under 15 pupils, compared with over 35 in school classes), which allow for significantly more interaction between learner and teacher. The language knowledge gained at the private course is also valued by several pupils. For example, one boy, who admitted he'd been persuaded to take a course by his mother and older brother, said he would now go by choice because it helped him score well in tests at school.

English in everyday life

The importance of private courses corresponds to comments made by students in my previous study about their experiences several years earlier (Lamb, 2002). Now, however, it is apparent that other sources of exposure or practice in English are becoming available outside school. In the present '*era globalisasi*', English has flowed into many new areas of Indonesian society, such that its words and phrases, plastered over billboard advertisements, line the way to school for many pupils. This is true even in provincial cities such as my research site, where fewer than 50 native-English-speakers reside. My student questionnaire responses indicate the extent to which the language now forms part of their life experience (Table 1).

Despite a very limited proficiency level, these young people listen to English-language music (especially 'boy bands') and watch movies and other TV programmes regularly. Radio is less popular, and books or magazines in English are also a minority interest, although available to those determined to seek them out. Use of computers is still limited by both cost and parental anxiety

Table 1 Frequency of activities involving English at home ($n = 219$)

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Never (%)</i>	<i>Once a month (%)</i>	<i>Once a week (%)</i>	<i>Almost every day (%)</i>
Watching TV or video	11	52	22	15
Listening to the radio	48	44	6	2
Listening to songs	6	47	23	24
Reading books or magazines	27	51	16	6
Conversation	37	50	10	2
Studying the language	6	42	41	11
Using a computer	52	29	12	7

Table 2 Frequency of English-related activities noted in one learner's journal

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Attending private course	23
Watching TV or video	9
Listening to songs	8
Studying (not including homework)	3
Reading books/magazines	2
Conversation	2
Computer use	1
Other	2

about the Internet, although there were already signs on my second visit that these factors were diminishing.

These figures may have been slightly exaggerated by JHS pupils hoping to impress the researcher (for many, I was the first native-English-speaker they had met) but the broad pattern of results is confirmed by entries in a journal completed by one of the FG learners. Over a six month period I had asked her to note down instances of use of English outside of school or school homework, and frequencies are set out in Table 2 (as she admitted herself, these are probably underestimations as there were times she forgot to record events in her journal, and there may have been many hundreds of incidental exposures to English, for instance in billboard advertisements, that are not recorded).

It can be seen from the figures that television, films and pop music are the main ways in which students can intentionally get exposure to English. How far viewing or listening actually benefits young Indonesians' developing English skills is a matter for speculation, however; whether an activity is a learning activity will depend partly on the intention of the doer. Several FG learners commented that they found the dialogue of English-language films too difficult to decipher, relying on Indonesian subtitles to follow the story, and this is no doubt the way that most Indonesians view English-language TV programmes or films. There is one key resource, though, which enables

those with a learning inclination to benefit from such exposure: a dictionary. Ninety-six per cent of the JHS pupils owned a dictionary on entry to the school, and motivated learners with means are able to buy a better class of dictionary (e.g. local editions of the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary*) or, increasingly, an electronic version. In every English lesson I observed, in the JHS and in private schools, learners referred to their dictionaries constantly, and this learner's comments suggest how instrumental dictionaries might be in out-of-school learning too:

I: Is your English better now than last September?

Rz: Yes

I: Much better?

Rz: Yes

I: What is better?

Rz: My vocabulary is much bigger now, maybe because I enjoy listening to songs on the radio so I can get a dictionary and find out the meaning.

As one would expect, there is considerable individual variation in learners' preferred ways of encountering English. In general, reading and studying are less popular activities, and use of computers is still restricted mainly to older teenagers. Nevertheless, one of my FG learners said she was now learning much new English from reading *Cool n' Smart* magazine, an Indonesian publication for teenagers. Another showed me her *Playstation* games and the way she was learning from the English language dialogue heard and displayed on screen. One learner carried a volume of *Practical English Conversation* around in his back pocket (on my second visit a new volume appeared entitled *Let's Speak English Very Eazy*), while another claimed she borrowed exam practice books from the public library and was systematically studying the English tenses.

The English lesson

As stated above, all the teachers I interviewed stressed the importance of out-of-school activities, especially the private course, in determining which learners made progress in English during their time at JHS. One teacher even went so far as to deny any contribution from formal school learning:

I: How does the school help their English develop?

St: Yeah, but I think there is no contribution from the school but I think it depends on the students themselves. [original]

Yet formal English lessons at JHS still give motivated pupils a chance to focus on the language for a 90 min period, twice a week. The second visit to the school enabled me to elicit the FG learners' perceptions of their school English lessons over the previous eight months. Despite my assurances of confidentiality, I encountered a general reluctance to criticise the school, perhaps reflecting a culturally ingrained respect for 'elders', and for the *guru* (teacher) in particular. It also seemed to reflect, however, a genuine appreciation for the benefits gained from their English lessons. During this period, the school had established two 'elite' classes, to which five of my FG learners were assigned. Each of these learners were glad to be selected, one because it

would enable him to finish school more quickly (in two years rather than three), but others because of the specific benefits of getting a new teacher:

P: My English has improved because if we're with Mr B, we get more practice, debates, introducing ourselves, telling about hobbies and the rest. I don't want to compare teachers with each other, but with Ms J it wasn't like that, and our progress is caused by many different factors, including how the teacher explains, and Ms J had a very quiet voice, and frankly my English declined while I was in her class. But with Mr B, it's got better again. It's the 'teacher factor'.

This 12-year-old learner seems able to reflect on her English language education with admirable objectivity.

Another learner also expressed real pleasure in her English lessons, and identified the same teacher's encouragement to speak English without fear as an important contributor to her and her peers' learning:

T: Only a few don't like to speak Eng – they're ashamed [shy] ... I think they're afraid if he have a mistake when they say in English.

I: And you?

T: Mr B always say, we don't ashamed, we must try.

I: Right, yeah, how do you feel if you make a mistake?

T: I only a little ashamed, and I want to try better than from now. [original]

Observation of these 'elite' classes revealed a much calmer more disciplined atmosphere than the regular classes, where there are more pupils, of lower levels of ability, and where the teacher herself may be less confident of her language or teaching methods. The regular classes may be more typical, in fact, of those in other schools in Indonesia, but even here I found my informants expressing positive attitudes towards English lessons, like this learner:

I: What do you like in your English classes?

S: I like dialogues

I: Do you sometimes get bored in English lessons?

S: Yes sometimes I get a bit bored, but only occasionally, not all the time. You know in BK [a rural area of the province], over there we didn't have any English lessons but in [the city] we need English, if you don't have English, it's difficult. Wherever we go here we need English.

It seems that he uses his long-term desire to acquire competence in English to override short-term frustration in school lessons. It remains to be seen whether he can maintain this self-regulation over a longer period than eight months. Nevertheless, there is evidence of individual pupils using a variety of strategies to counter frustration and to maximise their learning opportunities. Motivated learners tend to sit in the middle rows of a classroom, towards the front; from this position they can be sure of hearing the teacher and of seeing what's written on the blackboard, and they increase their chance of being chosen to answer questions or write on the blackboard themselves. In other words, they maximise their chances of participating fully in teacher-organised activities.

This does not mean they rely on the teacher for learning opportunities, however. There were many occasions in classes I observed where the teacher

would set up an activity (often, to this observer, a mundane task) and then allow pupils considerable freedom and time to complete it – and while less motivated pupils lost concentration, motivated pupils would invest considerable effort in the task, working naturally in pairs or small groups of like-minded friends to go beyond what the teacher had asked of them, for example using a dictionary to translate a whole text where only short answers to comprehension questions were required, or improvising and practising an English dialogue together when they had already performed the textbook task.

The teacher remains a central figure in these school pupils' world, but the words of motivated FG learners, enduring some frustration in 'regular' classes, reinforce the sense that they are not helplessly dependent. Here two girls discuss how to deal with the class teacher:

- A:** If [a pupil] doesn't like the teacher, so automatically she won't like these English lessons, and the English lesson won't 'go in'.
- I:** But pupils don't choose their teacher, so if you don't like them what can you do?
- M:** All the lesson depends on the teacher but if we have the desire, even if we don't like them, we can still do it.
- A:** We have to make an effort to get close to the teacher.
- M:** We may not like the teacher, but what's more important is that the teacher likes us.

In all classes I observed there were times when motivated FG learners would ignore the teacher altogether, for example to talk among themselves – a situation apparently tolerated by the teacher. Meanwhile, some learners found other adults to help them. One girl (M) explained how she found that the trainee teachers doing their practicum in her class were a useful resource: 'if I have difficulties, say I have to do exercises in the workbook, I tend to go to the trainee teachers'. Another girl explained why, although he was not her class teacher, she liked talking to the popular Mr B:

- I:** Compared to when I was here before, is English more important to you now, or less, or just the same?
- Rz:** Important. Because there are teachers in the school like Mr B who often use English with the pupils, so according to me it's important to be able to speak with him.

Without any prompting from the researcher, Teacher B himself commented on this characteristic of students:

- Bt:** It's the interesting [idea] that I got from my research at that time, that the students want to study based on their, their activity, they don't want only to wait, wait on the teacher. [original]

Finally, in discussing their learning experience these young adolescents frequently acknowledge the contribution of other elders. This short exchange between learners well illustrates the influence of parents:

- P:** If Mr B gives me five, my mother will be very angry with me.
- N:** What about your father?

P: Wah, even more angry!

N: But my parents just . . . my father doesn't think about that, they don't have any expectations about five or whatever, what's important is 'speaking' not the score.

It is interesting to note here that pupil N has absorbed her parents' message to distinguish between the communicative value of English and its position as an academic school subject. Eight of the nine motivated FG learners say they have practised English to some degree with parents, older siblings or uncle at home; the one exception makes a point of saying that, in contrast to some of her peers, 'I learn by myself, without the help of anyone'.

Discussion

It should be remembered that the learners and teachers quoted here are in a relatively good school, and that the learners themselves are relatively highly motivated. Certainly the learners should not be considered 'typical' of school pupils in the local community. We must also exercise the usual caution when interpreting self-reports of attitudes and activity, especially when these were offered up to the first native English-speaker many of them had ever met.

Nonetheless, I believe a clear picture emerges of sustained autonomous learning behaviour among these 11–12-year-old Indonesians. Much of their learning of English takes place outside of formal school English classes, either at afternoon private courses or at home. A variety of sources of exposure to the language now exist in the environment, and motivated learners can and do turn these into opportunities for study and practice, despite having had no overt 'training' in learning strategies. School lessons are also important sites of learning, and there is evidence of pupils manoeuvring to try to maximise their practice opportunities, although actual lesson content may not be so significant in the long run as the relationship a pupil establishes with a teacher, and the encouragement to continue learning independently which (s)he thereby receives.

This is not to suggest that these young adolescents are fully autonomous learners, in the sense of having full control over their own learning (Benson, 2001). The kind of autonomy which they exhibit, however, has much in common with descriptions of the concept in the TESOL literature. For example, the earnestness with which some of them talk of their learning experiences in and out of school implies an 'attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning', which to Dickinson is an important corollary of autonomy (Dickinson, 1995: 167). There is evidence of planning courses of action (e.g. taking a private course again), monitoring learning activity (e.g. reflecting on how to benefit from formal English lessons, or how to utilise the dialogue of English-language films), and evaluating progress (e.g. considering how different aspects of their English are developing), the three capacities which Little regards as central to autonomy (Little, 1991). Finally, we can also see these learners adopting their own goals for learning (mostly related to the communicative value of the language), a characteristic which Benson *et al.* (2003) found important in sustaining the learning activity of the two successful Asians in their study.

This scenario challenges the view that learner autonomy is not an indigenous feature of Asian cultures. Indeed it is interesting to speculate how many European or American 12-year-olds invest as much effort in learning foreign languages outside of school as these Indonesians do. The autonomy exhibited by these learners is shaped by, and for, the local context. It may be precisely *because* state provision of English language education is so limited that motivated children are forced to find learning resources for themselves. Government investment in education in Indonesia has lagged behind its ASEAN neighbours over the past two decades and signs of public dissatisfaction abound (see www.britishcouncil.org/promotion/getis/subs/indonesia_new/schools.htm). The private sector has eagerly exploited the chance to satisfy the needs of ambitious parents, while an expanding and diversifying media offers sources of exposure to English which far surpass the school textbook in appeal to young teenagers. Similarly, there are aspects of their autonomous behaviour which educators might not find desirable in Western school pupils, such as their readiness to go beyond the teacher's precise instructions in class or sometimes to ignore them altogether. This is similar to the behaviour that Holliday observed in Japanese high school classrooms and which he saw as their 'autonomous means for dealing with the pressures of the classroom' (Holliday, 2003: 119). He argues that this kind of 'social autonomy' can be found in a wide variety of educational settings, but may not always be recognised by Western educators because it is exhibited in the

'informal order of education': organizing seating, distributing lecture notes, forming informal learning groups, negotiating with lecturers and generally coping with a considerable scarcity of resources, as well as assenting to and appreciating the nature of power bestowed upon the lecturer. (Holliday, 2003: 122)

I have argued elsewhere (Lamb, 2004) that these learners' motivation to learn English stems from a deep sense of identification with the language which cannot easily be categorised as 'integrative' or 'instrumental'. Rather, they aspire towards a 'bicultural' identity (Arnett, 2002), which incorporates an English-speaking international version of themselves, with access to the knowledge, freedom and prosperity which global citizenship promises, in addition to their Indonesian-speaking self who is still comfortable in (and a contributor towards) the local community. It is too early to say how stable this motivation is, but it appears sufficiently strong to enable these learners to seek out affordances for learning in the environment, and to overcome some of the myriad frustrations which they face in school and elsewhere. Possibly its power lies in the fact that at the heart of this motivation is a desire to 'move beyond the constraints of their cultural backgrounds', something Benson *et al.* (2003: 39) found 'from a relatively early stage' in the two successful learners they described. Thus the independent learning of English, as a communicative tool rather than as a school subject, is itself an assertion of their individual autonomy. This may be particularly true for adolescents if, as in this context, the older generation are not competent in the language.

Independence should not be confused with solitariness. As I repeatedly observed, these learners enjoy cooperating with friends in class, and much of

their out-of-school learning takes place in the social context of a private language course. What is more, we can see that their learning is, as Kramsch claims it always is, 'co-constructed between humans and their environment, contingent upon their position in space and history, and a site of struggle for the control of social power and cultural memory' (Kramsch, 2002: 5). Teachers are under no illusions about the connection between socio-economic background and language learning achievement:

Nt: Most of the students who are good at English, they have good family, they have good background, they have many motivation to study, it is something that influence . . . if their parents give motivation to study . . . there are many factors which influence . . . like economy . . . if we want to take a course, it need much money. [original]

Motivated pupils whose parents can't afford the fees of a private course may therefore have to get by on the short afternoon extra lessons provided by the school, for example, or with a cheap locally produced dictionary rather than a versatile electronic version. However, as this teacher points out, it is not only raw economics which helps determine who becomes an autonomous learner; it is also the encouragement given at home by parents or other English-speaking relatives (several FG learners mention uncles or cousins who made an impression on them when young). Peers too are an important influence. This is well illustrated by the FG learner who had just come to the city from a rural area. Despite being encouraged by the aunt with whom he's living, he is diffident about autonomous learning because he is afraid that his friends will mock him. As the teacher from the rural school says, active learners of English are at risk of being considered 'pretend Westerners'. No such fears are mentioned by the other motivated FG learners, whose home environment deems participation in English-learning activity as entirely 'legitimate' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this relatively remote EFL environment therefore, good language learners may not be those with the right learning strategies but rather, as Norton and Toohey (2001) argue on the basis of their research in ESL situations, those with access to the right social networks in their community.

Implications – for research and pedagogy

As we have seen, the study appears to confirm that learners of English can and do work autonomously in Asian school contexts. In fact, it may be that 'the development of autonomy forms part of the sociocultural process of second language learning for many Asian learners' (Benson *et al.*, 2003: 24), and what we are witnessing here is an early stage in this process of development. The third phase of data collection, near the end of these pupils' second year in Junior High School, should confirm whether individuals' motivation to learn has been maintained or whether the rigours of school learning or other factors have dampened their enthusiasm. Nevertheless, this study strongly supports Benson *et al.*'s (2003: 38) contention that 'to focus narrowly on what happens inside the school system would be to limit our academic research to a small aspect of what is going on in individuals' sociocultural and personal worlds'. Sociocultural perspectives on language learning in any

case demand that we look at all instances of interaction, wherever they may take place, for evidence of learning and to understand the way that it is shaped by local cultural context. If our interest is in independent or autonomous learning, then what learners do beyond their formal course requirements, or beyond the direction of an instructor, must be of central concern.

It should be remembered that most of the evidence presented here has been gathered from a small number of chosen motivated learners. While the questionnaire data indicates that independent learning activity is not restricted to them, further qualitative research is needed with more 'averagely motivated' learners to find out whether they too share some of the autonomous attitudes of these learners. It is also impossible to say whether learners in other schools, in the city outskirts or rural districts, strive to learn English independently. The teachers' comments about the importance of family background emphasise the need once again to avoid generalising on national as well as ethnic grounds. It may be, for example, that the children of the emerging middle class in developing country cities have more in common with each other, in the way they seek out learning opportunities outside of school, than with their compatriots who lack the means or will to utilise available informal resources. Given the oft-stated importance of English to the economies of many developing countries, it is important that more research is done to discover who is actually succeeding and how.

The fact that autonomous learning appears to exist in this setting should be a source of encouragement for educators. At least one teacher in the school, Mr B, is fully aware of this, and works to enhance their already partially self-directed learning; for example, he has used English-language diary writing very successfully in the 'elite' classes to encourage pupils to reflect on their learning and use of the L2 outside of school. This approach is similar to Smith's 'strong version' of pedagogy for learner autonomy (Smith, 2003: 131) 'based on the assumption that students are, to greater or lesser degrees, already autonomous, and capable of exercising this capacity'. As Yap (cited in Benson, 2001) concluded from her study of high school learners in Hong Kong, teachers need to build on what students already do, both by showing genuine interest in their activities outside of school and encouraging them to exchange information about them. At the very simplest level, this could mean bringing to each class examples of English words or phrases which they have come across in the intervening days. At a more complex level, it could mean joint projects to find and interview foreign residents, or transcribe favourite films. The respect which pupils in this context naturally show their teachers, and their readiness to cooperate with each other, make this approach particularly suitable to this context.

This approach is also in line with Canagarajah's advocacy of learning strategies as a basis for pedagogy in 'periphery classrooms' in the 'postmethod' era, when the need is not so much to move from a native language to a target language (the assumption of teaching methods, where the focus is always on attaining native-speaker-like mastery) as to 'shuttle between cultures and communities', requiring students to develop a 'meta-linguistic and meta-cultural awareness of codes and conventions' (Canagarajah, 2002: 146). A strategies-based approach is better suited to this pedagogical goal, as

it focuses on process rather than product, and encourages reflexivity among learners. Moreover, Canagarajah claims that it is an approach that the best teachers have traditionally used with their students before they were pressured into adopting centrally distributed methods and materials.

Unfortunately, many of the teachers in this context are burdened not just by a heavy curriculum set by the national government but by insecurities about their own communicative competence in English. What is more, they may be unable or unwilling to engage with the newly available English-language resources which appeal to their pupils (such as pop songs and computer games). Their understandable response is to safeguard their authority by sticking closely to the textbook and exam practice materials, ignoring their pupils' genuine motivation to learn to speak English. A widening gulf opens up between in-school and out-of-school learning, to the detriment of both; and without any guidance from the teacher, progress in oral English at least comes to depend, as the teacher put it, 'on the learners themselves'.

This is not just a problem in this part of Indonesia, of course. One of the learners in Benson *et al.*'s (2003: 37) study, for example, says that in Hong Kong schools 'language teaching takes place in a "cultural vacuum"'. By contrast, the language *learning* that is going on is culturally-inspired – through identification with a global culture and its possible future rewards – and facilitated by popular culture with its English-language media in the form of songs, films, computer technology and so on. If schools are to make a full contribution to pupils' learning, they have to open their doors to this culture, and 'recognise the relevance of everyday life' (Giroux & Simon, 1989: 221).

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Notes

1. I use these two terms interchangeably when referring to learning behaviour, implying that it is self-directed. It is not meant to imply that the behaviour is solitary, however.
2. All quotations are translated from Bahasa Indonesia, except where noted as 'original' (as here).
3. This is not surprising considering that, apart from in the most prestigious academies, private school teachers are usually state school teachers earning much needed extra income in their spare time.

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