INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT INDIVIDUAL WORK

Dwi Agustina
Universitas Pekalongan, Pekalongan
tina50@yahoo.co.id

Abstract: This article reports the findings of a study conducted in English Education Department of Pekalongan University Central Java Indonesia in 2017. The study focused on finding out students' perceptions about individual work. The research was conducted in the first semester of the academic year of 2017/2018 by involving 53 students who were required to complete an open-ended questionnaire. The findings showed that around 60% of the respondents favoured individual work as for them individual work gives a sense of self-challenge, self-responsibility and self-satisfaction. It is also seen as a tool for self-evaluation and self-improvement. However the rest of the respondents were less positive about individual work due to their inability to cope with the confusion and difficulties in doing the work. This indicates that not all students had the readiness to work independently and thus trainings need to be given to students before they are assigned the individual work.

Keywords: *perceptions, individual work, learner autonomy*

The teaching and learning of English has now been directed to develop learner autonomy. Learner autonomy has been defined by Benson (2011 p. 58) as "the capacity to take control of one's own learning". To take their own control over learning may means that students should be more responsible over their learning. Being more responsible here means that students can be involved in the decision making within the classrooms. They can contribute their ideas towards the selection of English materials, classroom evaluations, types of assignments, classroom activities, as well as teaching methods. It is no longer necessary for the teachers to decide classroom activities by themselves. Referring to Benson and Voller (1997) the term autonomy in language education has meant different things for different people. They mention at least five ways in which the term autonomy has been used namely:

a. For situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
b. For a set of skills which can be learnt and applied in self-directed learning;
c. For an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
d. For the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning ;
e. For the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

(Benson & Voller, 1997. Pp. 1-2)

Among those various ways in defining autonomy, generally autonomy is associated with the students' responsibility and independence in their language learning. Thus developing learner autonomy may refer to the act of developing students' independence in learning English and thus they can be responsible in their learning. Students are considered to be autonomous when he or she has the ability to work independently or in group with or without the presence of his or her teacher. The more independent the students the more ability they have to manage their own learning. They will not be dependent upon their friends or teachers. Nowadays, promoting and developing autonomy seem to become the teachers' tasks. One way is by assigning individual work to students.

Several previous studies however have shown that developing learner autonomy is not very easy. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) have found that teachers' efforts in developing learner autonomy in Sultan Qaboos University in Oman had been challenged by several factors. The first challenges came from the learners themselves. Borg and Al-Busaidi found that the respondents reported that their learners had low motivation and they had no skills to do independent learning activities. The second challenges came from the institution which covered the overloaded curriculum and the insufficient resources for developing autonomy. The third challenges were from the teachers. The teachers were found to have low level of autonomy and they had low target on students' achievement.

In another study conducted by Wichayathian and Reinders (2015) on teachers' perceptions about autonomy and self- access conduced in a language institute in one of the universities in Thailand, it was found that although teachers were aware of the students' inexperience and inability in managing their own learning, but they felt that the biggest constraints were their own capability in developing learner autonomy along with the institutional constraints.

In Japan, Nakata (2011) also investigated high school EFL teachers' readiness to promote learner autonomy. Nakata used convenience and snowball sampling to recruit 74 participants where the respondents were asked to complete the questionnaires and some of them were invited to join focus group interview. The study found that Japanese EFL teacher lacked the readiness to promote autonomy in their classrooms. Among the reasons they reported, they felt that they were not ready to give the students the chance to learn from their classmates. The teachers also thought that it was not appropriate for the students to be involved in setting the learning goals. In their perspective, setting learning goals was their tasks. Besides, the teachers kept using grammar translation method in teaching English because they viewed the method would help their learners to pass the university entrance-exam. With this method, then the chance to make students active and independent or autonomous was limited.

The findings of the previous studies above suggest that several constraints were faced by the teachers in their efforts of promoting and developing learner autonomy. Teachers faced constraints not only from students, teacher themselves, but also from institutional factors. In other contexts, other types of constraints may also be faced by English teachers who intend to develop learner autonomy, including those teaching English in Indonesia.

In Indonesian contexts where students are familiar to the teacher-centred approach, the efforts for developing learner autonomy have also been challenged by various constraints. Agustina's study (2017) has shown that in the Indonesian context, teachers' limited knowledge and experiences of developing learner autonomy have been a particular constraint in the development of learner autonomy in Indonesia. Agustina also found that students' low mastery of English along with their dependency on the teacher have limited the development of students' autonomy. Agustina's findings call for more research to discover what students actually prefer to do in their English learning to develop their autonomy. The call for doing further research has come at the time when the writer had to teach the students she never met before. The writer believed in the importance of developing learner autonomy in her students but she had no background information about the students. The lack of information about students' characteristics, English proficiency, motivation and readiness to learn and work individually arouse the writer's interest to conduct a study to reveal important information about the students. By having sufficient information about the students, the writer thought that she could design the teaching and learning activities which were appropriate to the students' needs. Moreover, by knowing students' characteristics it would be much easier for her to plan how she would develop her learners' autonomy as she strongly believes that learner autonomy will support and help her students' mastery of English. Therefore, before she started teaching, she studied students' perceptions about individual work as she planned to use individual work to develop her students' autonomy.

The objectives of the study are stated below:
a. To find out the students' perceptions about individual work.
b. To reveal the students' reasons for liking and disliking individual work.

METHOD

The study was in the form of survey. Survey belongs to one of non-experimental studies under the big umbrella of quantitative studies. Survey is used to "gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions, or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared, or determining the relationships that exist between specific events" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 205). Survey is characterized by "the collection of data using standard questionnaire forms administered by telephone or face to face, by postal pencil-and-paper questionnaires or increasingly by using web-based and e-mail forms" (Muijs, 2004, p. 34).

In this study the students had to answer several open-ended questions related to what they wanted to do and what they would like to have in the classrooms especially on the types of work or assignments. Open ended questions provide the chance for the respondents to answer the questions in their own words or "in a manner that reflects the respondents' own perceptions rather than those of the researcher" (Frey, 2004, p.769). The writer used open ended questions because her study aimed to reveal students' perceptions about individual work. In this study, the survey was presented in English and students needed around fifteen to twenty minutes to answer the questions.

The study has been conducted with the third and fifth semester students of the English Department of Pekalongan University Indonesia in August 2017 through the use of convenience sampling. Convenience sampling refers to "choosing the nearest individual to serve as a respondents

and continuing that process until the required sample has been obtained or those who happen to be available and accessible at the time" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007 pp. 113-114). As nearly all of the students in the class were willing to join the survey, the writer involved those students in the survey and considered them as the research respondents or participants. The use of convenience sampling however became one of the limitations of this study as ideally in a survey, it was advisable to use random sampling. Even so, the survey had fulfilled the requirements for obtaining at least 30 participants and thus the findings were acceptable and generalizable in the research setting.

The study involved 53 students of the morning classes. The questionnaires were completed by the students in the first meeting of the *Introduction to English for Specific Purposes (ESP)* Class and *ESP Course Design* classes.

After the data were collected, the writer analysed them by using thematic content analysis. First, she read each of the students' answers for each of the questions. Then she typed all of the students' answers and did the analysis by calculating the percentage of students having similar preference over individual work. After calculating the percentage, the writer analysed the students' answers one by one and did the coding on each of the answer. After the coding was done, the writer tried to find the themes which emerged from the coding.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Here the writer presents the main findings on the students' perceptions about individual work. The discussion is also presented based on the findings of the study.

Findings

In this article, the writer presents the findings based on the students' answers on the questions concerning whether they like individual work along with their reasons. The data showed that out of 53 answers (from 53 students), 31 students or 58.49% of the students had positive perceptions about doing individual work and 22 students or 41.51 % had negative perceptions about doing individual work. The comparison of those numbers is presented in the following table:

Table 1: The students' perceptions of doing individual work

Students' perception of doing individual work
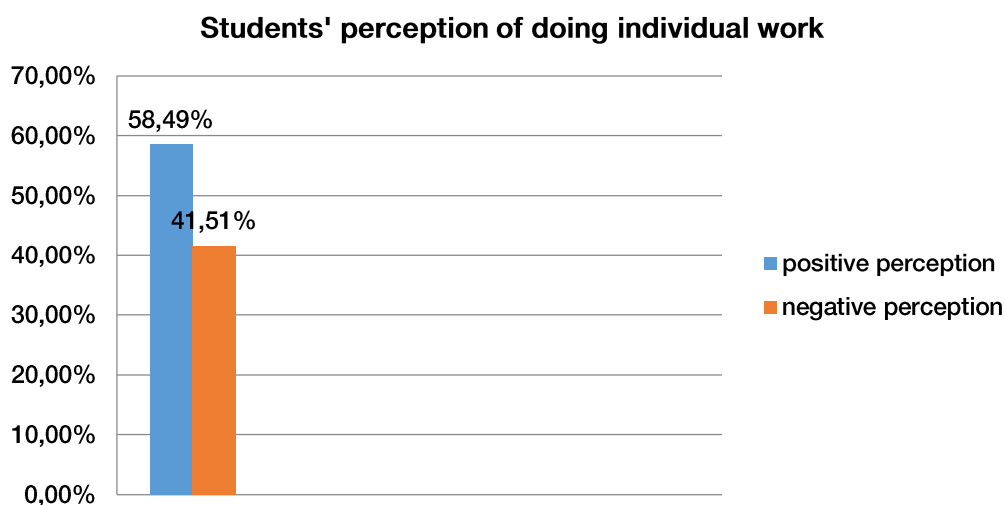
The findings show that those holding positive perceptions were higher in percentage than those holding negative perception. Even so, the writer thought that the number of the students' holding negative perception was very high as it was more that 40%. Therefore a deeper analysis of the reasons on why students had those perspectives was important to reveal.

From the students' answers to the survey, it was also revealed that students had various reasons for liking and disliking individual assignments or projects. The following figure represents several reasons that the students had for favouring individual work.
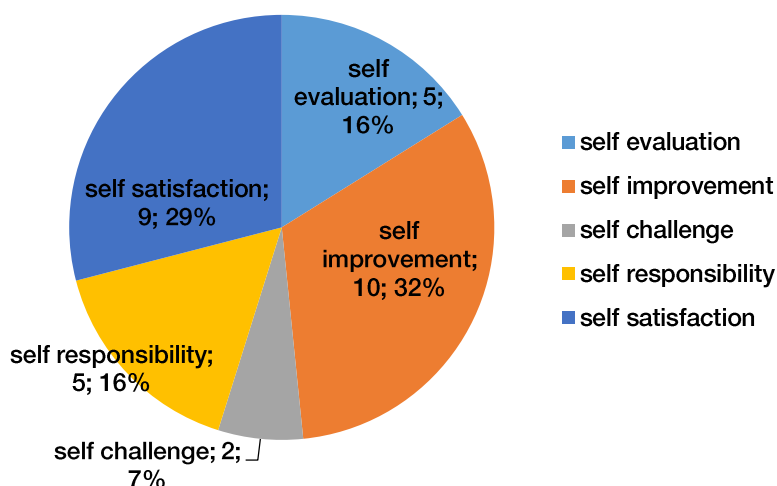
Reasons for favouring individual work

Figure 1: Students' reasons for favouring individual work

The figure above shows that from 31 students who felt positive about the individual work, 10 students (32%) felt that the work gave the sense of self improvement. Another 9 students (29%) felt that the work improved their self-satisfaction. A sense of self evaluation and self-responsibility were perceived by similar number of students (5 or 16%) as the benefits of dong individual work. The other 2 students reported that individual task gave them a kind of challenges in learning. The following section covers the students' more detailed answers for holding the positive perceptions.

Positive Perceptions about doing individual work

More than half of the respondents in this study expressed their positive perceptions about doing individual work. For them the individual work serves as tools for self-evaluation and self-improvement. They also perceive that individual work gives them a sense of self-challenge, self-responsibility and self-satisfaction.

a. Individual work for self-evaluation

For most of the students, individual task or work provides them with the chance to evaluate their ability and skills. One of the students said:

"I like to do individual project because I can see my skills on it."(S6)

Another student stated a quite similar thing:

"It [individual work] can help me to know about my knowledge."(S17)

Apart from improving the skills, a student mentioned that they could see the progress they have made in their learning:

"I like to work alone to know how much I grow." (S9)

In addition, individual work was perceived to provide information about individuals' capability in the class:

"From it [independent work] we can see and know how the real quality of each student."(S29)

From the students' statements above it seems that the students were aware of the advantages of doing individual work especially as individual work helped them in measuring their own competence and mastery of the subject learnt.

b. Individual work for self-improvement

Students also perceived individual work as improving their ability or mastery of the material. They said:

"Individual work can make me more understand about the material."(S16)

They also stated that every task, project, and exercise will help them to upgrade their quality as a language learner. At the same time they felt that their independence or autonomy as a language learner also got improved:

"I like it because it makes [me] independent and not depending on others." (S36)

The students' statements above suggest that the students obtained better understanding about the materials learnt and they also felt that they became more independent and autonomous in their language learning.

c. A sense of self-challenge from individual work

For some students they liked to do individual work because they feel the sense of being challenged by the work. A student described it in the following answer:

"I am kind of like it. It's more challenging to have an individual project." (S39)

Another student showed the love of doing independent work to challenge him/ herself:

Yes [I like individual work] because I like to give myself a challenge. (S9)

These answers describe the students' contentment on individual work as they can challenge themselves. This also suggests that the students could push themselves to do more than what they actually can do.

d. A sense of self-responsibility from individual work

Some students expressed the idea that they became more serious when the lecturer gave them individual task:

"I like individual project because it can make me serious" (S20)

Besides, individual project makes them more focused:

"Yes [I like individual work] because I can focus and understand about the project." (S19)

These answers imply that sometimes students did not pay full attention in doing the work given by the lecturers especially when they worked together with their friends. Once they were asked to work individually, they felt that they had the full responsibility to complete the work and thus they worked on it more seriously.

e. A sense of self-satisfaction from individual work

Doing independent work was also seen as making them satisfied with their ability in accomplishing the task. One of the students said:

"I was more satisfied if the project is the work of my own" (S49)

Apart from this statement, another student strengthened the idea of the satisfaction they obtained from doing the independent work. This student said:

"I will feel proud if I can finish the project by myself." (S38)

These answers suggest that the students felt the satisfaction and pride in seeing the result of their hard work. This is a good sign that the students feel the sense of making achievement in their learning, especially through the individual work they have done.

The students' answers above suggest that students saw multiple benefits of doing individual work. Similarly, those who have negative perception about the individual work presented some reasons

why they disliked the work. Figure 2 below summarizes the students' reasons for perceiving the work negatively.

Reasons for disliking individual work
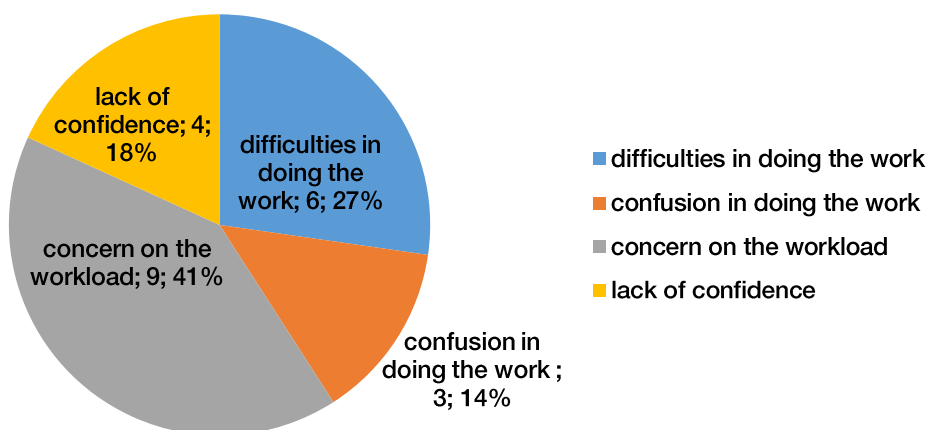
Figure 2: Students' reasons for disliking individual work

From the figure above, out of 22 students, 41% (9 students) had the concern on the heavy burden or workload if they had to do individual work. Another 27% reported that they disliked doing the individual work because of the difficulties they faced in completing it. Three students also reported the confusion felt when they were required to do the work individually. The other 4 students (18%) had the concern on their own confidence in accomplishing the work. The following section explored further the students' reasons for not favouring the individual work.

Negative Perceptions about Doing Individual Work

Among the reasons presented by those who had negative perception about individual work were that they faced the difficulties and confusion in doing the work. Apart from that, they perceived their low level of confidence in working alone, thinking that they were unable to complete the work. They also felt that individual task would make them tired, due to the burden which had to be managed individually. The followings are the examples of the students' statements for each of the reasons.

a. *Inability to cope with the difficulties in working alone*

A number of students argued that it was difficult to do the individual work. They mentioned:

"I think individual project is more difficult." (S47)

They also said that it would be hard for them to search everything by themselves. This suggests that they were not ready to take the responsibility in completing the work. Perhaps they had not built the habits of learning individually and thus when they were asked to work on their own they felt that the work was too difficult for them.

b. *Inability to cope with the confusion in working individually.*

Some other students also perceived that their efforts in doing the individual work often resulted in their confusion. Their statements clearly reflect this:

"I do not like to have individual project because sometimes I feel confused with my project" (S1)

And some other thought similarly:

"I don't like it. It makes me confused." (S4)

These statements suggest that students might not always be clear about what to do and how to do the assignment. They might also assume that they could not consult the teachers or other friends when they were doing the work.

c. Inability to cope with the workload

There was also a student's statement which signals that the students perceived the individual work as a burden which made them tired. This student expressed the perception in the following statement:

"I do not really like it ... because study alone is tiring me a lot." (S42)

This statement described the student's discontentment about working alone due to the fatigue they felt. This may be also due to the boredom students felt as they learnt without friends. Without the enjoyment in doing the task, the students may feel the task harder to do and thus they felt that it took more time to finish.

d. Problems with self-confidence

The last problem students expressed in doing individual work was their less positive perceptions about their level of confidence in doing the task. As an example, a student said:

"I am not really sure if I can do individual project because I cannot discuss with others. I just search myself." (S35)

This answer signalled that the student did not really trust his/ her ability in completing the task. They felt unable to do the task alone which suggested their beliefs that they could do better in team.

The findings above suggest that the respondents in this study had different perceptions about individual work: positive and negative perceptions. These students also had various reasons for having those perceptions like those described in the findings above.

Discussion

Referring to the findings above where students in the English Education Department of Pekalongan University had different perceptions about individual work, this study supports the ideas proposed by Riener and Willingham (2010) in which learners were believed to have different interests. This has been proven by the data where students differed in their interests in individual work. Riener and Willingham also stated that "learners are different from each other, these differences affect their performance, and teachers should take these differences into account" (p.33). In line with Riener and Willingham's assertion, the findings of this research call for more lecturers' or teachers' awareness of the learners' various interests in their learning. It is also necessary for the lecturers and teachers to provide some options for students to work with their own styles, either through individual or group work.

As the students also had various reasons for liking and disliking the individual work given by the lecturers, it is also necessary to discuss them one by one. First, those who had positive perceptions about individual work perceived the assignments as improving their autonomy and independence in learning. Looking at this reason from the theory of autonomy, to a certain degree, it is true that students' independence and autonomy will develop when they are given the opportunity to work individually. This makes sense as when students had to do their work individually, they were forced to be more independent in completing the work. They also had freedom and autonomy in approaching the individual task. Second, the students also perceived that individual work could improve their ability and responsibility. This particular reason is sufficiently strong as when the students were required to work individually, they were responsible to complete the work by themselves. Working on their own could also increase their ability in accomplishing the work as there was no chance to ask for their friends' assistance.

Similarly, when students argued that the individual work created more positive attitude toward the work, this could be due to the satisfaction that they obtained from completing the individual work. This is a normal response as when learners were capable of accomplishing the work, they might feel pleased, proud as well as confident with their ability which further could increase their positive attitude towards individual work. Individual work was also seen by the respondents in this study as an evaluation tool to measure their capability in doing the tasks. This reason for favouring the individual work tends to be supported by the fact that when students did the work alone, they could test their own ability in the task accomplishment. When they could do the work well, they could assume that they had good mastery of the subject being learnt and vice versa. Thus, the accomplishment of the individual work may be used as a tool for evaluating the mastery of a particular course material.

However those who were less positive about doing individual work perceived that they could not cope with the confusion and difficulties in doing the work. This reason was presented due to the

learners' lack of understanding of the instruction about the work. Once the instruction was unclear, it was very possible that the students felt the individual work as much more difficult.

Another reason emphasized the burden of doing the individual work. For the students who often did the group work, doing the work individually made them feel they had to do extra work. Apparently the individual work was seen as a double work and not as a training or practice for students to handle the work individually. The students had little understanding that even when they did work in group, at the end, they were basically required to be able to do the work individually. Many times, the group work done in the class was a training to prepare students to accomplish the individual work at home. In practice, however, students did not really get this idea.

The other reason for disliking the individual work was because the learners felt unconfident with their ability in completing the work. These students perceived they worked better in group. This was due to the ease and the enjoyment in working with others where they could share and discuss the work with their friends. The learners might also feel more confident with what they did as they got the support from the team or the group.

Overall, this study had brought some insights about how university students perceived the individual work, especially in the English Language Education Department of Pekalongan University. As not all students felt positive about individual work, the differences of students' interests in individual work became clearer. This became important feedback and consideration for the writer and her colleagues in assigning the students any individual work.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This article has reported the study on the students' perceptions about individual work. The findings have shown that not all of the students in English Department of Pekalongan University favoured individual work. Both students who liked the individual work and those who disliked it had presented their views why they liked or disliked the work. Referring to the findings in this study, there is a need to increase students' level of autonomy or independence in their language learning. The students may also need to be trained on how to manage and complete individual work. Once the training has been given, the lecturers can assign the individual work to the students. Even so, students may still need the experience to work in a team or a group and therefore the lecturers may balance the individual work with the group work. It is necessary for the lecturers to help the learners to develop a more positive perception about both individual and group work as the learners need to be able to do both types of work. Finally, as this study has some limitations which the writer had mentioned previously, future research need to address those limitations to capture better representation of students' perceptions about individual work.

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