AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AND THE SMART SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSEWARE

by

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Pembelajaran Secara Autonomi dan

Koswer Bahasa Inggeris Sekolah Bestari

Kajian ini berbentuk eksploritari dan deskriptif dalam usaha untuk memahami interaksi pelajar dengan koswer Bahasa Inggeris sekolah bestari serta membangunkan autonomi pelajar dan meningkatan pencapaian Bahasa Inggeris mereka. Kajian ini dibahagikan kepada tiga fasa: Andaian, Amalan dan Cabaran. Dalam fasa amalan, latihan kepada pelajar merupakan fasa penting dalam kajian ini. Bimbingan untuk mendapatkan, menggunakan dan menilai pembelajaran kendiri semasa menggunakan koswer Bahasa Inggeris sekolah bestari amat penting kepada kajian ini. Pelajar dilatih untuk menggunakan strategi kognitif dan metakognitif dalam pengalaman pembelajaran mereka. Mereka menjalankan penulisan jurnal, aktiviti-aktiviti penilaian kendiri dan membuat refleksi tentang soalan-soalan tertentu yang dikemukakan oleh pengkaji semasa menggunakan koswer Bahasa Inggeris ini. Kajian ini adalah berdasarkan ciri-ciri inkuiri yang mendalam, penglibatan diri secara keseluruhan, penekanan terhadap konteks dan pemahaman konsep penggunaan koswer berdasarkan perspektif pelajar. Dalam strategi ini, portfolio digunakan sebagai satu mekanisme untuk memantau kemajuan dalam mencapai autonomi dan meningkatkan pencapaian Bahasa Inggeris kerana portfolio dapat memperlihatkan proses pembelajaran pelajar dan dalam masa yang sama mengukur kemajuan pelajar sepanjang kajian ini. Dalam strategi ini, portfolio digunakan sebagai satu mekanisme untuk memantau kemajuan dalam mencapai autonomi dan meningkatkan pencapaian Bahasa Inggeris kerana portfolio dapat memperlihatkan proses pembelajaran pelajar dan dalam masa yang sama mengukur kemajuan pelajar sepanjang kajian ini. Kajian ini juga mendapati bahawa sekumpulan pelajar telah berjaya mencapai markah yang lebih baik dalam ujian Bahasa Inggeris serta berjaya mempamirkan tahap autonomi yang baik. Pelajar-pelajar ini

mendapati bahawa jika mereka berupaya mengarahkan pembelajaran mereka sendiri, mereka boleh belajar mengikut arah mereka sendiri serta memperoleh kepuasan kendiri yang amat tinggi. Semasa kajian, didapati bahawa pelajar-pelajar ini telah mencapai tahap autonomi yang tertentu. Satu daripada indikatornya ialah pelajar dapat menyatakan apa yang dibuat, membuat refleksi dan seterusnya mengambil tindakan yang sepatutnya untuk meneruskan pembelajaran.

Autonomous Learning

and the Smart School English Language Courseware

This research is exploratory and descriptive in nature seeking to understand how the interaction of students with the smart school English Language courseware could foster learner autonomy and consequently improved their achievement in English. The study is mainly divided into 3 phases: Assumptions, Practice and Challenges. In the Practice Stage, learner training is an important phase of the study. Guidance to retrieve, use and evaluate students' own learning in using the smart school English Language courseware is integral to the research. Students are guided to use cognitive and metacognitive strategies in their learning experiences. They carry out journal writing, self-evaluation activities and reflections on certain questions raised by the researcher while working with the English Language courseware. This research is based on these characteristics: in-depth inquiry, immersion in setting, emphasis on context and concepts with participants' perspectives. The portfolio is used as a mechanism to monitor progress both in the capacity to become autonomous and the achievement of English since it could demonstrate student learning and at the same time, measure the students' progress throughout the study. The research finds that a number of the students progressed quite well into achieving better grades in their English tests and are also able to demonstrate certain degrees of autonomy. The students in this study are found to realize that if they could direct their own learning, they are able to work under their own direction and being able to accomplish that give them a great sense of self achievement. During the study, it is apparent that students have moved from no autonomy to some degree of autonomy. One of the indicators of autonomous learning is the ability to step back from what they are doing and to reflect upon it in order to make decisions about what they need to do next.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 PREAMBLE

Education in Malaysia is organized in much the same way as it is in most countries in the world. Generally, 'teacher talk' takes up a large proportion of classroom time which leaves very little time for student to participate actively in the teaching learning process. However, during these last few years, many changes have taken place in the education system specifically in Malaysia that show a shift of focus towards placing responsibility for learning where it belongs, which is, with students. Teachers are no longer seen as the experts who hand down the knowledge and understanding to students but rather, they facilitate learning by providing the students with guidance on how to learn and giving a variety of learning opportunities and experience through which such learning can occur.

> *"In the school of the future, students will learn to educate themselves, focusing attention not only on acquiring subject matter but on understanding their own work habits, knowledge bases, insights, aspirations, value systems, how they learn best, and personal talents. This fundamental change – self-directing one's own learning instead of depending solely on a teacher – is the biggest challenge that education will face."*
>
> *Learning for Life: Creating Classrooms for Self Directed Learning*
> *Areglado, Bradley and Lane (1996, p.1)*

These changes in the education system require the teachers to upgrade and refine their technological and facilitating skills and, on the part of the students to acquire new learning skills. Most of these changes are due to changes in the government policies relating to the use of information technology in schools. The reason for these changes is because a nation's economic success in the 21st century will be linked to how well it can

adapt and thrive in a global environment. As a consequence, this will naturally place great responsibilities onto the schools and the education system to prepare children to meet global technological changes. When Malaysia launched her Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project in 1998, Sekolah Bestari (Malaysian Smart School) is one of its flagships. The Smart School project is claimed to be an important platform for building the right skill based human resources to take Malaysia into the millennium.

Central to the Smart School concept is the belief that every student is capable of learning but at differing paces and with different learning styles. One of the main aim of the Smart School curriculum is to allow students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Among the important concerns of smart pedagogy are to help students take control of their own learning, to prepare them for further studies and life, to help them become independent, critical thinkers and to find ways to provide support in teaching learning materials.

As early as 2002, a report by UNESCO made claims about the growing awareness then among policy-makers, business leaders and educators that the educational system designed to prepare learners for industrially-based economy will not provide students with the knowledge and skills that they will need to succeed in the 21st century's knowledge based economy and society (UNESCO, 2002). When a person leaves school, he or she must not only have a foundation of knowledge but more importantly, the skills of an independent learner who is prepared to keep on acquiring knowledge. As Boud (1988, p.8) stated that creating opportunities for students to

develop and exercise autonomy in learning is a vital requisite for someone to be able to function effectively in modern society.

In this study, the employment of critical research would be able to help assess claims and objectives made by the Ministry of Education. Critical research would be interested in the objectives, assumptions, issues of power, justice and who would benefit in the circumstances. It is on these grounds that this research is seen as contributing to wider debates on learner autonomy and the study would draw attention to the role which this concept plays in the practicalities of being a teacher or a student, and therefore adds another dimension to theoretical discussions of the topic, or to generalized discussions of desirable practice. More generally, it could add to further understanding of other educational concepts such as learner-centredness, or even education itself.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A nationwide simultaneous implementation in 88 selected "Smart Schools" began in January 1999 on a pilot project basis. The concept of a Malaysian Smart School is defined as that of a learning institution that has been reorganized in a systematic way, in terms of improved teaching-learning practices and school management in order to prepare children for the future (Smart School Project Team, 1997a). The concept includes a broad curriculum philosophy that considers the different capabilities and needs of all students and the on-going assessment that supports good instruction and a high level of parents and community involvement and supports.

The objectives that are specified in the curriculum are to produce a thinking and technology literate workforce, democratize education and to achieve intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual development of the individual student. These objectives are based on the National Philosophy of Education which states:

"Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high levels of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large."

Curriculum Division Centre, 2003, p.3

The introduction of the smart school concept specifies several very pertinent factors. With the launching of the concept, the need for changes and readjustment are imminent and these are:

- The teaching and learning process; taking into account aspects of curricular, pedagogy, assessment and teaching and learning materials

- Management functions; in areas of school governance and channeling school information to the stakeholders (parents, immediate community, general public)

- People, skills and responsibilities

- Technology

These smart schools are provided with network-based software called SSMS (Smart School Management System), which is an integrated electronic management system where every aspect of school management is taken into account, from

registration of students daily to assigning tasks to students online. Apart from that, the teaching-learning processes in a smart school, which relate to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and teaching-learning materials, are to have been reframed to help make lesson delivery more effective, efficient, and meaningful to ensure fuller realization of students' capabilities and potential (Smart School Project Team, 1997a). One of the features of the SSMS is the interactive smart school electronic courseware or in other words; computer-aided learning materials, for the four main subjects which are Science, Mathematics, English and Bahasa Melayu.

These courseware or computer aided learning materials are designed to provide students with extensive amount of information in a number of different format including text, sound, animation and interaction so as to make it possible to appeal to the different learning styles of the students and to offer a variety of materials for students to use at their own pace, time and convenience (Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse, 1999). Students are expected to become actively involved in the learning experience and learning is hoped to become more meaningful to them. For the purpose of this research, the investigation and discussion would centre upon one of the teaching learning materials available in the SSMS which would be referred to as the smart school English Language courseware from here on. This research aims to focus upon the smart school English Language courseware and to explore students' interaction with the smart school English Language courseware in helping to foster autonomy among them.

The curriculum emphasizes upon the importance of allowing students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. The teaching continuum is specified to

move from teaching to facilitating as students in one smart school English Language classroom is identified to be doing different activities according to their abilities. The *'Sage on the Stage'* approach would move to *'Guide by the Side'*. The technology is seen, in the process, to facilitate this move. The smart school English Language curriculum states that with the aid of multimedia technology, self-accessed, self-paced and self-directed learning could be practiced, allowing students to develop their strength to excellence. Technology has been identified as a significant tool in assisting towards 'smart' management, i.e. from facilitating teaching and learning to assisting with school management.

Language teaching in recent years has seen an increasing interest in promoting learner autonomy or independence (Little, 2000a; Warschauer and Kern, 2000). Learner autonomy has been claimed to be the ultimate goal of education (Benson, 2001, 2007; Waterhouse, 1990) and particularly in second language learning, the concept has been argued to be very complex (Little, 2007) and socially driven (Smith and Ushioda, 2009). Many current approaches to learning, eg. constructivist approach, cognitive approach, project based learning etc., are based on the concept that learners learn best if they are placed at the center of the learning experience and are required to construct their own understanding. In such a situation the learner immediate experience is taken as the focus of learning, giving life, texture and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process (Kolb, 1984 p.21). This experiential model, as Kolb propagated, helps learners to integrate knowledge into their own systems of meaning and take control of their own learning. In this study, the interaction with the

courseware provides the language experience which is seen as important in achieving meaningful learning. Little (1991, p.4) stresses that the development of learner autonomy does not depend on the content materials alone, but on the relationship that the learners establish to them.

Learning English in a smart school environment is envisioned to focus on individual student's needs and promote student's ability to act and think independently, flexibly, critically and creatively (Bahagian Sekolah Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1998). The smart school curriculum is designed to incorporate elements which would allow for the flexibility in accommodating different learning needs and at the same time ensure that the students are given scope to develop to their fullest potential. The student is seen as an active player who is able to interact with other learners, to collaborate and develop independence and self-awareness of his or her own learning process (Little, 1991). This means that students are encouraged to be responsible for their work and to be aware of what they learn. By being given some control over what, how and when they learn, students are more likely to be able to set realistic goals, plan programmes of work, develop strategies for coping new and unforeseen situations. They would also be able to evaluate and assess their own work and generally, to learn how to learn from their own successes and failures in ways which would help them to be more efficient learners in the future (Dam, 1995).

Promoting learner independence means that a learner is given autonomy over what he wants to learn, how he wants to learn it and when he wants to do it. In a smart school environment, learner autonomy is a capacity that could be achieved as students

work with the smart school curriculum and the interactive smart school electronic courseware in particular. Language learners in particular, could develop some degree of autonomy through the smart school English Language courseware which is made available to them as they themselves determine the objective, progress and evaluation (Benson, 2001). In turn, they become effective language learners hence improving their language proficiency. The issue that is raised in this study is in what ways have students achieved control over their learning especially through the use of the smart school English Language courseware in the learning of English as a second language. Little (1991, p.7) makes strong suggestion that the transfer of responsibility from teacher to the learner has far-reaching implications, not simply for the way in which education is organized but for power relationships that are central to social structure.

Learner autonomy refers to the learner's ability to decide what to study, how fast to study and what path to follow through the learning materials. Learner autonomy is where direct manipulation by the learner gives them maximal control and this results in much greater effort on the part of the learner to succeed. Little (1991, p.4) says that autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In using critical theory, all the variables and the structure of the community are studied so that specific areas of interaction or activity paths are clearly identified. The smart school programme is now 10 years old, so its structure is now already mature and fully identifiable. The structure of teaching and learning that is currently implemented in Malaysia, whether in smart schools or otherwise, is represented below:
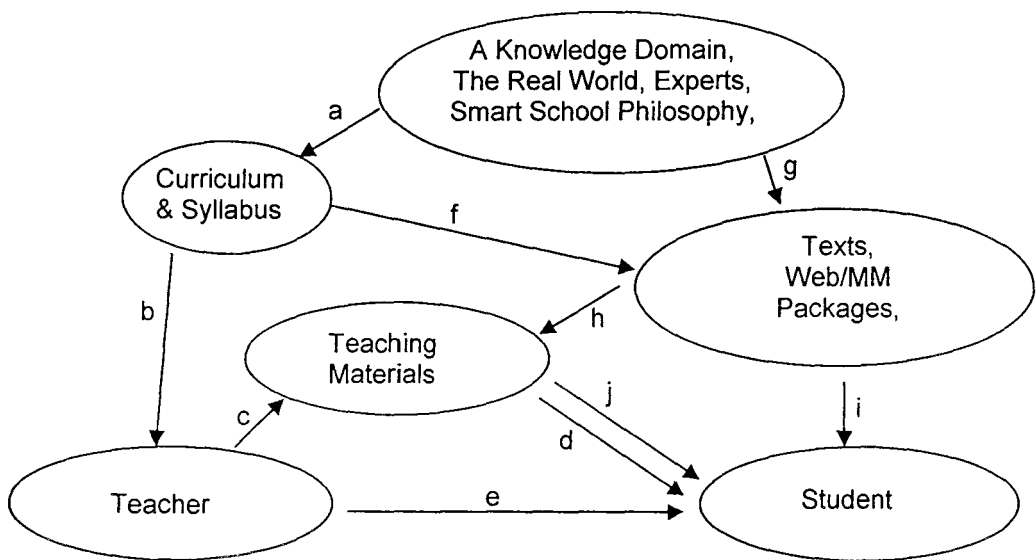
Figure 1.1 The Structure of Teaching and Learning

This structure (as in Figure 1.1) is the traditional objectivist teaching framework that consists of task or activity arrows which starts from the knowledge domain leading to (a) curriculum and syllabus, (b) teacher, (c) teaching materials. The teacher could be creating teaching materials that could produce instructions through arrows (d) and (e) to students, a top down process, which means, where everything is done for the students. On the other hand, resources such as texts, web/MM and packages prepared based on the knowledge domain and the curriculum are also organized for students use (arrows j and

i). The arrows show the connection of one variable to another. The curriculum and the syllabus is based upon certain philosophy, knowledge domain, the real world, the experts etc and teachers' work within this curriculum and syllabus. Teachers create teaching materials and teach students based on what the curriculum propagates. Well-prepared packages would contribute to effective teaching materials and would have direct impact on students' learning as required by the curriculum.

In the case of the smart school, the smart school program is introduced onto the existing traditional spoon-feeding backbone and the introduction did not exactly entail a radical reformulation or a reinvention of the teaching framework. The smart school English Language courseware for the secondary school is prepared for Form One to Form Five students in Malaysian Secondary Schools. Teachers are given guidelines on how to carry out the lessons with the integration of technology in the classroom including the use of the smart school English Language courseware. Considering that the smart schools pilot project has entered its tenth year, there is little empirical evidence to show the effectiveness in the use of the smart school English Language courseware in the teaching of English Language especially in promoting learner autonomy. Based on Acceptance Level Survey carried out by the Telecom Smart School Change Management Team on English Teachers in 2001, students failed to show that they have acquired a certain degree of autonomy in their own learning and teachers are still spoon-feeding students, preparing them for their examination. Boud (1988, p.23) says that autonomy can only be exercised on an occasion where something is being learned, and

on many occasions the demands of the situation dominate, for example to pass the external examination may be given first priority by teachers and students alike.

Based on the researcher's own experience as a smart school English Language Resource teacher, students were culturally not prepared to work independently in any language learning situations. They were more comfortable to let the teachers think for them and they followed the teacher's lead. Therefore, to reverse these roles would need major restructuring of the whole classroom organization and intensive training on the part of the learners to assume responsibility for their own learning. Even with self-access materials, students demanded that teachers 'hold their hands' through the whole programme. A comment such as this was recorded by one of the teachers in the school. This is one of the two teachers who were involved in the initial stage of the study and the researcher has named her as Teacher 1.

"I think letting students work with the courseware is more tiring than in a normal classroom because students demand a lot of attention from me. For the whole lesson, I was running from one station to another". (Teacher 1)
This comment could indicate that students were probably not ready to work on their own and thus, the teacher was required to attend to their individual question. It could also indicate that the teacher was not ready to work with or use the smart schools English courseware for teaching and learning .

While trying to actively promote autonomous learning among students, teachers often fail to understand that to throw students into total autonomy without leading them

to work autonomously was detrimental to their sense of security and stability (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). The Smart School courseware, however, is seen to have plans for self-accessed, self- paced and self-directed work. The focus, not unreasonably, is on the students, who individually or together with their friends are supposed to get on with the work themselves. Apart from setting students' assignment when using the Smart School courseware, the teachers' role in ensuring the success of a computer- aided language learning task is not viewed as an important consideration.

Although the smart school English Language courseware is available for use in smart schools, the practice of independent learning is unfamiliar to many teachers and students alike (Nakhoul, 1999). While students have easy access to computer laboratories for their English classes, they however fail to get proper guidance and assistance as to how exactly they could use the materials and resources available. They fail to see that it is the interaction with technology itself that is seen to be supportive of autonomy (Benson, 2001; Nadzrah 2007). Although the syllabus indicated that one of the objectives is to have independent learners who will take responsibility for their own learning, in reality the level of learners' independency is very low (Nadzrah, 2007). Therefore, an environment needs to be set up to motivate, provide feedback and interaction and also to evaluate the students identified. That is why an intervention is planned and set up in the first week of interaction with the students to assist them in paving the way towards the development of autonomy. The intervention comes in the form of intensive training prior to getting the students to use the smart school English Language courseware.

In sum, the problems investigated in this study revolves around the lack of documentation for accounting for learners' progressive acquisition of autonomy which ought to be in tandem with their improved achievement in English as they work through the Smart School English Language programme. Also the need for both taechers and learners to understand their roles in facilitating and developing autonomy in English Language learning has to be researched to understand the problem of learners lack of improvement in their English Language proficiency after following the Smart School English Language Programme. Additionally, the importance of investigating students ability to reflect critically and their attainment of either 'reactive ' or 'proactive' autonomy is also closely tied to addressing the problem of the use of the Smart School English Language courseware in fostering learner autonomy to help improve students' language proficiency. Finally, the study would like to explore the issues stated above in relation to the central question of this study which is:

- o **To what extent does the Smart School English Language courseware foster learner autonomy to help improve students' language proficiency?**

1.3 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

As early as 2002, the field of language learning in Malaysia has been undergoing change (Norlida Ahmad, Rohizani Yaakub & Puteri Rohani, 2002). The main change has been the shift of focus from teacher-centredness to student centredness. The reasons for this shift are due to the change in the goals of language learning and insights into the process of language learning. Society has imposed its demands on education and has influenced its shape. Research into fields such as psychology,

cognitive psychology, sociology, linguistics and others have added to our knowledge of how language learning takes place. These two developments have, among others, led to a greater interest in learner autonomy. Little (1991, p.1) describes learner autonomy as a buzzword then and it has morphed from a buzzword to an active concept in the field of applied linguistics and discussion concerning autonomous learning in language learning especially has been gathering momentum. Like communicative language teaching, it has become an unquestionable goal and an integral part of language learning methodologies throughout the world (McGarry, 1995; Dickinson, 1992; McCarthy, 1998; Koper, 2006). Large amount of time, energy and money are spent on its promotion and implementation.

Benson (2001) claims that technology-based approaches to language learning are supportive of autonomy and rests in part on the assumption that they provide learners with the opportunities to self-direct their own learning. In this matter, the smart school English Language courseware has been produced to provide learners with the kinds of support they need in order to develop skills related with autonomy. With the smart school English Language courseware, students are said to be able to reach the desired end of learner autonomy. However its implementation has considerable influence over educational practice and involved changing roles for teachers and learners, who might not wish to change their status quo. Thang et al (2010a) found that teachers being the primary deliverers of this radical and innovative Smart School concept, would need a period of intensive training in ICT and strategies for the integration of technology in classroom practice.

On the other hand, for successful implementation of the smart school English Language courseware in the teaching of English as a second language, it needs to prove that it has things to offer that other types of educational provisions do not. If it is primarily aimed at developing learner autonomy, it needs to be shown that that is what it does. If it claims that it allows learners to learn better and faster, then that needs to be proven. If there are additional advantages to it, then they need to be identified.

A number of studies in this field is seen to rely on the learners as the main source of information (Martinez, 1999; O'Bryan, 2008; McCarthy, 1998). It is thus very important to explore learners' understanding of the concepts and the phenomena under review. Also any misconceptions is likely to influence the success of language learning methodologies based on the promotion of learner autonomy and of smart school English Language courseware. The success of smart school English Language teaching learning courseware in particular also relies on a clear understanding of the obstacles it poses to its users as well as on an identification of the factors that enhance effective and efficient use. There are however few evaluations that exists today to give insights into these matters. There is a need for a practical evaluation from the students' perspective, on a sound theoretical basis. This study aims to provide some of the answers that previous research has left open.

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as follow:

a) To clarify the conception of the supporting variables which are integral to the background of the research.

b) To investigate the progressive acquisition of learner autonomy throughout the study

c) To monitor learners' achievement in English throughout the study.

d) To investigate teachers' understanding of their roles as facilitators in an autonomous learning environment.

e) To investigate changes in the learners' conception of learner autonomy before and after using the courseware in the study.

f) To study changes in the teachers' conception of learner autonomy before and after the study.

g) To investigate the English Language achievement among the learners before and after using the courseware in the study.

h) To investigate the development of students abilities to reflect critically.

i) To investigate students attainment of either 'reactive' or 'proactive' autonomy.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aims to explore and investigate the effectiveness of the smart school English Language courseware in fostering independent learners of English as a second language. Central to this investigation are these questions which are listed in the next page.

1. What are the assumptions for learner autonomy underlining:

⇒ the instructional design

⇒ the ELT syllabus

⇒ learners' pre conception

⇒ teachers' pre conception

⇒ learners' performance in English

2. To what extent do students become increasingly autonomous as they progress through the courseware in the study?

3. To what extent do students' achievements improve as they progress through the courseware in the study?

4. To what extent do teachers show understanding of their roles in an autonomous learning environment?

5. To what extent do learners' conception of learner autonomy change after using the smart school English Language courseware in the study?

6. To what extent do teachers' conception of learner autonomy change after using the smart school English Language courseware in the study?

7. To what extent do learners show improved performance in English after the study?

8. To what extent have the learners developed the capacity to reflect critically on the learning process, evaluate their progress, and if necessary make adjustments to their learning strategies?

9. To what extent do learners show attainment of either 'reactive' autonomy (concerned with the self regulation set by others), or 'proactive' autonomy (concerned with the initiation of self direction of activities – beyond the courseware)?

The students in this study came from a culture of traditional teaching and learning where they were very much dependent upon their teachers in every aspect of their learning. In order to assist these students to move towards autonomy, they were engaged in an intervention which was geared towards capturing a period of careful and

deliberate planning, which gave everyone involved in the study a sense of stability and direction, a time during which everyone knew what he/she was trying to do and where he/she was going with it. In the usual practice, planning is left to the 'experts', normally teachers/ researchers but in this study, apart from the framework of planning by the researcher, learners were provided with assistance in learning how to plan for their own learning. The twelve weeks interaction was devised so as to provide the platform to shift the curriculum in the direction of greater autonomy.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Across the nation, the government has invested heavily (billions of Ringgit Malaysia) on computer hardware and software in schools for instructional purposes. Yet little or no information is available about the most effective ways to leverage that investment into successful achievement for students. In spite of its long history, there has been very little empirical research on the effectiveness of computer-aided language learning towards students' performance or the accomplishment of autonomous learning and that research often fails to provide convincing empirical evidence that the practices associated with autonomy are effective either in helping learners to take greater control over their learning or in improving their language learning (Benson, 2001 p.141).

By carrying out this study, the researcher seeks to observe the effectiveness of the smart school English Language courseware in fostering learner autonomy and whether performance in English would improve in the process. The study is also interested the sort of questions that expose contradictions, eg the Education System's assumptions that teachers were experts and students were seen to depend on them. The

study also aimed to provide insights into students' and teachers' thoughts on learner autonomy and how this could help to further improve the use of computer aided language learning to support autonomy. It also aimed to provide information on the factors that contribute to the success of learner training as a means to develop learner autonomy. It is hoped that the data and findings of this study could contribute to the knowledge about autonomy in second language learning particularly in the Malaysian contexts. Lastly, this study hopes to dispel most of the confusion and misplaced assumptions made where learner autonomy is concerned in the Malaysian smart schools particularly in a technology-based learning.

1.7 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The research is carried out in a semi-rural secondary school in Taiping which is one of the pioneer smart schools in Malaysia. The smart school English Language courseware is available to be used for students from Form One until Form Five. The investigation was carried out on two groups of Form Two students. Questionnaires were issued to the teachers and students of these classes. Students from these classes were also observed while they were using the courseware in their English lessons. Since the observation was carried out for only twelve weeks, about six to eight learning units were dealt with in the study. The scope of the study was quite in depth due to the nature of the study. Apart from observing students interaction with the courseware in their English classrooms, students' conception of autonomy and the use of computer aided learning was looked into using the questionnaire. Interviews with selected students involved in the study were also carried out. In ensuring the success of a given lesson, teacher's role in the learning situation is very important. It is therefore necessary to also look at

teachers' conception on learner autonomy and whether they know what support to provide for their students. A questionnaire and interviews were also administered for the teachers to get a better explanation for issues which relate to facilitating learner autonomy in the classroom.

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is driven by the critical inquiry methodology because it views research as a critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves (Neuman, 1997 p.74). It is descriptive and exploratory in nature and it seeks to understand those processes that are already at work, by working within them, in a fully integrated way that is pedagogically productive for teachers, both pedagogically and linguistically productive for learners and indefinitely sustainable by all parties (Allwright, 1993). It is aimed at gaining insights into autonomous language learning in the Malaysian education system. It is also designed at uncovering teachers and students' roles and their perception and conception of learner autonomy specifically in the use of the smart school English Language courseware to accomplish an autonomous learning environment.

Prolonged engagement and extensive observation are central to gaining in-depth understanding of a classroom and this is carried out for an intervention period of twelve weeks. Data in this study are in the form of interview notes, observation records, documents and field notes, besides questionnaire and achievement tests. These would be further discussed in Chapter 3.

1.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the present study has supplied much useful information about the smart school English Language courseware and learner autonomy, it has several limitations that must be acknowledged. This study provided information on a small group of students in a semi-rural school, and thus it may seem as though it is being underrepresented. While this qualitative research design worked well with this population, it may differ in important ways from other smart schools all over Malaysia. Hence the most important limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be directly generalized to the larger population being studied or for whom the smart school English Language courseware is being designed.

Secondly, some participants tend to express views that are consistent with social standards and try not to present themselves negatively. This social desirability bias may lead respondents to self-censor their actual views, especially when they are in a group setting. Thirdly, potential shortcomings in this research that are sources for bias include the large amount of data which may have led to missing important information or overweighting some findings due to focusing on a particular and large set of data. Personal involvement with the research also increases the possibility that recorded observations in working logs highlighted particular incidents while ignoring others.

Fourthly, the study was carried out within a limited period of time. The respondents were not able to provide appropriate responses to the scales in the questionnaire used since they were doing it in a hurry even though it was planned to be answered during a well-planned meeting. Therefore the responses for each item in the

questionnaire might not truly depict the opinion and stand of the subjects as they might not give any in-depth respond to all the items. Hence the interviews and journal writings were also included during the observation period to triangulate and produce more substantial data.

Allthough this research could lead to deeper understanding of the research context, full comprehension of the site and its inhabitants was not possible. So it should be kept in mind that "all research gives us a simplified version of reality; an abstraction from the whole" (Gay and Airasian, 2000 p.23). No matter how many variables were studied or how long the field work took, there would always be other variables and aspects of context that had not been taken into account.

The study was carried out with cooperation of participants who agreed to provide researchers with data. Since the researcher dealt with human beings, issues such as ethical concerns and responsibilities to the participants, had to be given careful consideration. For example, participants had to be protected from real and potential harm above all else.

Finally, this research relied too heavily on the researcher as the instrument of data collection. Hence, it is very important that the researcher took into account her own behaviour, assumptions and whatever else that might have affected the data that are gathered and analyzed. The researcher did this by keeping a careful record of her behaviour through her self-reflective activities, apart from the auditing trails that she left behind. By doing this, the researcher aimed to address untoward influences.

1.10   DEFINITIONS OF TERM

The following are the terms and the definition for each as used in the context of this study:

Learner Autonomy - "…students take a greater degree of control over the content and methods of learning than is usual in classroom language learning contexts. Taking control over learning also implies that students have or develop the capacity to learn independently and that the institutional context in which they are learning allows them to do so" (Benson, 2001). In this study, it will be shown that learner autonomy is a recurring dynamic process adaptable to 'educational interventions' (Candy, 1991), as opposed to a static product or a state which is reached once and for all.

Reactive autonomy - Reactive autonomy is defined by learners organizing their resources autonomously to reach a goal that has been set in advance by another party for example teachers, curriculum etc. This is the kind of autonomy which does not create its own directions but once initiated, enables learners to organise their resources in order to reach their goals.

Proactive autonomy - Proactive autonomy refers to a condition when the learners participate autonomously in setting the goals themselves and they initiate their own plans and resources. In this way, they establish a personal agenda for learning (Little, 1994 p. 431).

Autonomous learners (independent learners) - learners who have achieve some degree of autonomy in a learning situation, who can work on their own, set their own objectives, decide on the resources that they would use and evaluate their own performance.

Learner Training – "an attempt to bring a sense of awareness among the learners about the factors which affect their language learning and train them to discover the learning strategies that suits them best" (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989).

Smart School - "...a learning institution that has been reinvented in a systematic way, in terms of improved teaching-learning practices and school management in order to prepare children for the future" (Smart School Project Team, 1997a).

Smart School English Language Courseware - computer aided teaching learning material which is non-linear in structure, interactive and allows different paths for learners to follow while integrating the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and different media specially designed based on the smart school (Bestari) curriculum (Smart School Project Team, 1997b).

Instructional Design – the systematic development of instructional specifications using learning and instructional theory to ensure the quality of instruction.

ELT Pedagogical Design – the definition of linguistic content and specification for the selection and organization of content and a description of the role of teacher, learner and teaching materials.