

## **LEARNER AUTONOMY IN EFL/ESL CLASSROOMS IN BANGLADESH: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of language teaching being more and more communication oriented. The traditional classroom teaching is facing a big challenge and is gradually being replaced by learner-centered approaches putting learner as individual into the core of learning process. This means learner autonomy gets to be enhanced to meet the need of the new teaching mode. While a great deal of researches have been done on the concept and development of learner autonomy, limited studies have investigated the ways and means of classroom practices of teachers in fostering learner autonomy in tertiary level EFL/ESL classrooms in Bangladesh. This paper examines what teachers think about learner autonomy as well as the strategies they use to develop learners autonomy in a university setting using a qualitative approach. The findings revealed that although university teachers are acquainted with what learner autonomy means, there are some challenges of developing learner autonomy in the classroom due to a number of lacking, such as teacher's preparation, students' reluctant attitude, suitability for different disciplined students and class timing.

**Keywords:** EFL (English as foreign language), ESL (English as second language), L2 classroom, learner-centered approach, learner autonomy, achievement, proficiency, learning strategies

### **INTRODUCTION**

Currently, the pedagogical decisions are mainly directed to produce individuals who are able to go through a lifelong learning based on the ability to taking control over any situation and meeting the challenges of any context. Within this era of learner-centeredness in education, learner's active role in EFL classroom is sought. While the traditional methods are encouraging to shifting the role of the instructors from information givers to facilitators, students need to be more autonomous to acquire a sense of responsibilities for shaping their learning process. In EFL classrooms if the learners are not aware of their responsibilities, they cannot be able to learn the language properly and the class hours can easily reduce the enthusiasm and can create a negative feeling among the learners. In line with learner-centered teaching, Meyers and Jones define active learning "in contrast to the worst of traditional teaching in which teachers actively present information and students passively receive it" (Meyers and

Jones, 1993: 19). Language learning in new, unconventional settings beyond the classroom has received popularity in research, at the same time; learner autonomy, with the direction to a more practical understanding and application in formal education has gained interest also. Although learner autonomy has traditionally been linked quite strongly to contexts beyond the classroom, according to current understanding, learner autonomy and autonomous language learning can take place in an institutional setting as well. In fact, when carefully designed and implemented, formal teaching can even promote learner autonomy (Ellis and Sinclair 1989: 10).

Various ways of attaining a considerable degree of autonomy have been focused much so far but it is simultaneously very true that their success is mainly ascertained by the educational system and the role of the teacher. In an EFL context, students always act on what they can actually do and handle. It is the responsibility of the teacher to shift the student's existing knowledge to an

explicit awareness of being more confident and mature. This maturity helps them to have an analysis of every step he/she is taking to carry out classroom activities. Through this process of revisiting their own experiences, the EFL learners can overcome their weakness and increase their strengths. As learner autonomy increases the students' involvement in the EFL classroom, it creates motivation among them. For a L2 teacher, motivation plays a great role in describing his students as successful or unsuccessful learner. Initially, it is believed that “ during the lengthy and often tedious process of mastering foreign/second language(L2),the learner's enthusiasm, commitment and persistent are key determinants of success or failure” (Hadfield and Dörnyei 2013,p. 1). Actually learner autonomy, motivation, teachers' and learners' responsibility –all are related to each other in any kind of learning. From this perspective, practicing learner autonomy inside the language classroom is a bit challenging both for teachers and students.

### **Literature Review**

The previous section highlighted the problem confronted in the target situation. It has also been explained why it is necessary to introduce autonomous learning in the target situation. This section aims to overview the literature on learner autonomy, transfer of roles in autonomous learning, role of teacher and learner and the importance of strategy training for the development of autonomy.

### **What is learner autonomy?**

When the learners play the active role in their learning are known as autonomous learner. Learner autonomy is a dynamic process where the learners are expected to have greater responsibility and “the ability to take charge of their own learning”.(Holec 1981, cited in Bashir, 2014, p.172). Autonomous learners learn entirely on their own and determine the direction of their own learning. They have the scopes for exercising their responsibility for their own learning. In David Little's terms, learner autonomy is

essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning—a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. (Little,1991:4). Autonomous learners need to make significant decisions about *what, how, and when* to learn (Van Lier, 1996). In the process, they establish a personal agenda for learning (Little, 1994) that sets up directions in the planning, pacing, monitoring, and evaluation of the learning process. The autonomous learner is a self activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning. Things merely do not happen to him; rather his strong willingness causes things happen. It seems that learning is the consequences of his own self –initiated interaction with the world. In autonomy oriented classroom the learner will enjoy the freedom of choosing their own goals, activities and assessment tools. In like manner, Benson (cited in Inozu,2010, p,523) assumed that “Learner –centered practice generates autonomy in the language classroom.”

### **Why it can be beneficiary?**

There are two general arguments in favor of trying to make learners autonomous: Firstly, if the learners are actively engaged with their learning process, they can be more efficient and effective. They become more personal and focused as they take an active approach to their learning process than otherwise.

Secondly, the success of learning activity is to some extent, contingent upon learners' stance towards the world and the learning activity in particular their sense of self and their desire to learn.(see Benson & Voller,1997: 134-136).As an autonomous learner proactively participate in the learning process, there is no problem regarding motivation. In large EFL classrooms , especially in Asian context ,like in Bangladesh, these proactive students are motivated enough to learn both independently and as a group while others are satisfied simply with the limited exposure

that they get from the class and some of these students choose not to focus during the lessons. In a 1995 research project on learner agendas, it was suggested that "while the teacher is busily teaching one thing, the learner is often focused on something else"(Nunan,2000).So if all the learners in the classroom are made involved in the learning process or if they can be made more proactive, then they might be expected to learn better. Another influential impetus was the work done in the 1970s and 1980s on identifying the characteristics of the 'good language learner' (Naiman et al.,1978). It was found that successful language learners shared a number of characteristics, such as being proactive in their learning and self-motivated.

### **Teachers 'Role**

The general consideration regarding learner-centered approach to teaching is that it alters the role of the learner. But it is less focused that this approach also brings a parallel change in teacher's role also. In order to foster students' leaning autonomy, teachers need to adapt a variety of roles such as a manager, an organizer, a facilitator and a counselor. (Richards and Rodgers 2001). In a learner-centered classroom, the teacher should take the responsibilities of organizing various kinds of activities and games which are appropriate, effective and relevant to the classroom teaching and which will best meet the students' needs and expectations. Different scholars present their views on the role of the teacher in an environment of learner autonomy. According to Breen and Mann (1997), a teacher of autonomous learners should have three attributes – self awareness (of his role), belief and trust (in the ability of each learner), and desire (to develop learner autonomy). They describe the teacher's performance within the classroom very resourceful, authentic and co-operative for ensuring learners' autonomy. Whereas Yalden (1987) reduces a teacher to a part of instructional resources for an autonomous learner. But Rubin (1987) clarifies that the introduction of successful

strategies to the learner and providing alternative strategy are important in the development of autonomy. She also believes that learner's critical faculty should be trained by the teacher to keep monitoring himself. So, the most important qualities of a teacher in this new role are increasing the level of confidence of the learners via bringing a realization that his efforts can make a difference and showing him the next step to forward.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study is an exploratory research done to examine the role of learner autonomy in the academic achievement as well as producing a guideline for the teachers for practicing learner autonomy in their classrooms. As the techniques accumulated here are gathered from the classroom experiences of several teachers, it makes the study experiential and qualitative too.

### **Instrument**

The concerned teachers' reflection, classroom observation and experience of executing the guideline have produced the main resources for the study. Moreover, there were other instruments like semi structured and informal interview(see Appendix A), focused group discussion (FGD), etc. All the responses were recorded through cell phone as well as noted down in note books. Different activities practiced by the concerned teachers and their observations have been consulted to ensure the reliability and validity of the study.

### **Sampling**

A Semi structured interview, several informal interview and one FGD session have been conducted with six ELT teachers who use to take language classes at a reputed private university in Dhaka. The main focus of these activities was to get an intense view of the respondents regarding the possibilities of using learner autonomy in L2 classrooms.

### Method of Data Collection and Analysis

All collected data from semi structured interview, informal interviews and FGD were analyzed qualitatively. In this method the researcher carefully listen to the recorded answers and read the answers attentively which have been noted down .The responses to the open-ended questions have been accumulated here in the form of discussion which is directed toward the classroom procedures, learning tasks and suggestions for teachers to adapt these procedures and also some sample activities for practicing in L2 classrooms.

### DISCUSSION

In Bangladesh, the classrooms of most learning contexts are run in a traditional teacher-directed manner. This type of learning environment does not accelerate learner autonomy. Here students are characterized as dependent, shy and passive. So, ensuring learner autonomy appears to be something challenging in this local context. In the subsequent section, the findings and analysis of the qualitative data have been presented in the form of discussion. However, the main focus of this part is to discuss the learning tasks, through which learner autonomy can be implemented in classrooms in tertiary level. While analyzing the answers of the semi structured and informal interviews, some issues mentioned by the teachers have been found very crucial for the practical implementation of learner autonomy in the ESL classroom. They are:

1. **Goal Setting:** The first step in giving learners a voice is to make the instructional goals clear to them. In most ESL classes the teachers do not spell out the pedagogical agenda to his/her learners.
2. **Using their L2 outside their classroom:** To speed up the learning of language students should use the language they have learnt in the classroom outside the classroom. Though, in many countries opportunities to speak and practice English are rather limited, still learners should be encouraged and motivated to

use it as maximum as possible in their real life.

3. **Becoming aware of learning processes:** Learners need to be aware of the strategies followed in classroom tasks, They not only should know what to learn but also how to learn. In some cases, it may happen that regardless of working with a mandatory curriculum and materials, the teacher is using something else which suits better to the learning process to make the students understand the lesson.

### Autonomous Language Learning Activities

#### *Small talk*

This small talk ESL activity is the perfect way to get your students speaking English. It's ideal for a warm-up activity to start the class, or as a way to finish off a lesson on small talk. Put students into pairs, with 2 pairs in one group (4 students total). The first pair chooses a topic such as "this morning" and must talk about it for 2 minutes (advanced), 1 minute (intermediate) or 30 seconds (beginner). The other team is the "timer" and can use their cell-phones to do this. If the team can keep up a conversation about this topic for the full time, they get to mark that topic on the board with either an "X" or "O," with the goal being three in a row, which equals one point. If they couldn't do it, there is no penalty but they don't get to mark that square off on the board. The game is essentially S-O-S/Tic-Tac-Toe. Then, the next team chooses a topic and the game continues. For a short activity, the winner can be the first team with one row of three. For a longer game, continue for a certain amount of time (10 minutes is good) and the winner is the team with the most rows (see Appendix B).

#### *Journal writing*

Keeping a reflective journal is one of the most effective ways for the students to improve language skills in their own time. They could focus on the events occurring

during school, work, travel, social activities etc. Writing Journal about the general events of the day can help students to increase their writing ability and it provides an effective means to focus on areas where they may experience problems in their speaking. However, the benefits of writing a journal are greatly enhanced when the student gets the opportunity to make and explain the corrections in a coherent fashion by their peers or the teacher, allowing them to rectify mistakes.

#### *Using face book groups*

In terms of social constructivism, a person constructs knowledge through the process of negotiating meanings with others (So & Brush, 2008). In this case, Face book can provide an opportunity for students to learn and reconstruct knowledge through social interaction. Face book enables students to support each other in solving problems. By discussing, sharing, and exploring various topics on Face book, students link existing knowledge with new stimuli and constructed a new understanding of their experience. They developed technological skills, shared problem-solving ideas, gained academic knowledge, and finally complete the learning tasks successfully. Face book provides a convenient avenue to engage students in discussions inside and outside the classroom.

#### *Using the internet and technology*

With the advancement of communication technology via the use of internet and computers around the world, it seems obvious that electronic means will provide some new perspectives in learning environment of the future. Instant messaging and other forms of communication over the Internet, like discussion boards, interactive blogs, and online forums have been quite popular for some time and the rate of usage around the world is increasing. In addition, many students are downloading English music, movies, and TV shows that allow them to get exposure to different accents and expressions from around the world. Other

virtual environments can also be used to develop language skills.

Other technological means that can be used by the students to improve their language ability by themselves are voice-chat programs such as Skype, iChat, and messenger programs such as MSN and Yahoo. These voice-chat programs allow them to talk to others around the world in real time and they are free to use. When initial connections are made through social networks on the Internet, users can then use these voice programs to call each other and practice oral skills by applying new language items learned through writing and reading. To fully take advantage of the internet during the learning process, one should consider other on-line programs and functions such as relative readings, blogs, online quizzes, and podcasts. By downloading podcasts onto a listening device many students and professionals who have lengthy commutes can make exposure to spoken language possible on a train, bus or even while stuck in traffic jam.

#### *Crossword puzzle*

Very often learners complain that they are short for words and use rudimentary vocabulary because appropriate terms have not been learnt effectively. For many students learning professional vocabulary is a tedious task. Learners find it difficult to retrieve a specific item instantly. To recollect and process the task-based vocabulary this crosswords can be administered as a warm-up or between other activities, like writing or reading or in the follow-up lessons. In this activity, students use the list of target vocabulary from the topic-based reading materials. In this activity, It is advisable to limit the number of vocabulary items (about 10) and to set the time limit (7 to 10 minutes). Students can do it in pairs and each pair is expected to deliver their crossword either on the chalkboard or transparency using an overhead projector. One student reads the definitions, and another writes the item as soon as somebody generates the answer. Each pair will be awarded a point for

each correct answer. In case of an inaccurate definition, a point is awarded to a person who corrects it. In order to ensure a fast performance and delivery the guessing activity should not take longer than 10 minutes. Naturally, different pairs will choose diverse vocabulary items, which also encourages revising. As students argue over different matters like definitions, pronunciation and spelling, learners' interaction, exposure to spoken language possible on a train, bus or even while stuck in traffic jam.

#### *Jigsaw activity*

The jigsaw strategy is said to improve social interactions in learning and support diversity. The workplace is often like a jigsaw. It involves separating an assignment into subtasks, where individuals research their assigned area. Students with the same topic from different groups might meet together to discuss ideas between groups. Jigsaw activity is such a simple activity that can be done with a variety of content. The content or reading assignment is a metaphor for a "puzzle" that students break into smaller pieces to learn. The Groups can be small, such as four to six students. Each student will be given a piece of the puzzle to learn or to investigate. For example, a long reading assignment can be broken into six smaller "chunks." Each student will take a chunk and become an expert on the content. When the pieces of the "puzzle" are put together or when the group comes back together, each student will share what he or she has learned. They can share their knowledge with the class after the groups have their information organized and compiled.

#### *Group investigation*

Another student -centered classroom activity is group investigation. When a group investigates a new topic, it can be very fun, and the group will take ownership of the topic and the presentation. The teacher should select a broad topic, such as the Liberation War of 1971. The group of three-to-five students should narrow the topic

down to a topic that they could research. Then, the group will share the information in around a five-to-ten minute presentation, depending on the age of the student. The group will need to assign each person a subtopic of the group topic to research. The group will come back together to share and organize the information. The group will present its information to the class.

#### *Group debates*

Group debating (see Appendix H) is another student-centered activity to enhance learner autonomy. The class can be divided into three debating teams of five students, one being the team captain. The class will draw up a list of possible debate motions, deriving principally from their current academic concerns. Then, three debate motions will be selected. Students then draw lots to decide on which side (the affirmative or negative) they would be. Each debate team needs to complete focused discussions (both in and out of class) on the various aspects of the debate like developing the main line of argument, assigning responsibility among individuals for researching particular aspects. As in the other group activities, the debate incorporates a learning evaluation element as the class has to design their own assessment criteria for evaluation. The group that is not taking part in the debate can serve as the panel of adjudicators. Their main task was to give constructive feedback on the two teams' performance, using the criteria that had been set.

#### *Double entry journal*

A double entry journal can be completed with a pair of students. Students can each make one on their own. Then, the pair can collaborate and compile their ideas into one double entry journal. Teachers can use this with novels, textbook reading assignments, news articles, research information, etc. Students need to create a large T on a piece of notebook paper. On one side the student needs to write down interesting or important information from the reading assignment. On the other side, the student needs to write what

he or she thinks about the information. When the journal is complete, the student needs to share his or her journal with another student. The students need to compile one journal with information that the pair believes is important or intriguing. The best part of this activity is that students are bouncing ideas off each other and helping create interesting products.

#### *Newspaper project*

A newspaper project (see Appendix C) is another important step in the development of learner autonomy. Students have to work collaboratively in several (3 or 4) editorial groups to produce a class newspaper. Each editorial group is responsible for a number of tasks which includes (a) deciding the text types (b) drafting and revising (c) reading one another's drafts to help improve them, and (d) doing the final editing and design of the newspaper. To manage and monitor the project, students need to hold editorial meetings (both in and out of class) to plan and discuss progress. One important aspect of the newspaper project is text analysis. Each group will select two text types from authentic newspapers to analyze and to present to the class. The time limit for each group could be of 20-30 minutes. These group presentations on the chosen texts will serve several purposes:

1. Raising the awareness among the students regarding the characteristic features e.g., content, style, tone of the text types.
2. Through the presentations students would better understand the purposes, the intended audience, and the macrostructure of the range of texts in a newspaper.
3. Such knowledge would help students write their own texts more effectively.
4. Encourage learning evaluation and revision of writing as students will exchange their drafts for peer comment.
5. To enhance reciprocal learning among individual writers by reading each other's texts critically.

#### *Student-teacher consultations*

Student-teacher consultations are other activities to be practiced in mid-semester. These are 30 minutes consultation sessions between the teacher and each individual student. To give them a greater sense of purpose and responsibility, students are put in charge of the discussion. They set the agenda, and they have to come prepared, ready to talk about areas of major concern (e.g., usefulness and relevance of the course problems with learning tasks). A set of questions can be provided to guide the discussion. (see Appendix D).

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it can be said that boosting autonomy is not an easy endeavor in the EFL/ESL class. There must be commitment on both parts: teachers' and students', to vary the orientation of current trends in teaching and learning. It is not always clear how individual teachers can implement the underlying principles. In some cases there may be terminological confusion and existing materials and tools may not be sufficient to ensure students' development of necessary awareness and skills. A climate of relative freedom for both teachers and students is needed. Successful language students can reach their desired levels by supplementing their classroom and textbook learning with autonomous learning. It can be argued that it requires a particularly motivated student to succeed with autonomous learning; however, by using the activities mentioned in this paper and by becoming more educated about the opportunities presented here, an increased interest in independent and formal language learning should ensue.

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- Appendix A: The interview questionnaire:**
- What does 'learner autonomy' mean to English language teachers?
  - How learner autonomy can be implemented in ESL classroom at tertiary level in Bangladesh?
  - To what extent, according to the teachers, does learner autonomy contribute to L2 learning?
  - What are the autonomous activities he/she uses in his/her class?
- Appendix B: Topics for Small Talks**  
Give a small talk (5-10 minutes) on one of the following topics:
- Education in public and private universities
  - Your university English course
  - The English learning attitudes/successes/problems of students in Bangladesh
  - Bangali and western culture
  - Dreams/Fashion/Music
  - Street Children
  - Cricket
  - The popularity of video game
  - Stress management
- Appendix C: Preparing a Newspaper Project**  
The group presentations should focus on the following areas:
- content (i.e., what generally about)

- Style/tone (e.g., subjective, persuasive, serious, objective, biased)
- Register
- Structural features (e.g., typical grammatical features/vocabulary / collocations and stylistic devices / textual organization/information structure)
- Headlines
- Layout (e.g., shape of text, use of fonts, headings)
- Punctuation

#### **Appendix D: Questions for Student-Teacher Consultations**

- Which parts of the course (e.g., activities, materials) do you find most

useful? What are the less useful aspects?

- Do you find the student-centered/student-generated activities useful in developing your proficiency level? (Why? Why not?)
- Was the course helpful for you to learn autonomously? How autonomous do you think you are now?
- According to you what are the factors that facilitate the development of learner autonomy? What are the factors that constrain it?