

Why and How Promoting Learners' Autonomy in TESL in Bangladesh?

By

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Abstract

*A great deal continues to be said about the teaching of English at tertiary level in Bangladesh, and the focus has often been on teachers to encourage students to learn and use the language in a variety of contexts. As multicultural and multinational barriers have crumbled down and we are inextricably intertwined in this borderless world, we have to ensure that the Bangladeshi graduates stand out globally as efficient communicators in English. Hence, the paper believes that successful implementation of learners' autonomy can enhance learning English as a second language. Therefore, it tries to explore the scopes and outcomes of implementation of learners' autonomy at tertiary level in Bangladesh. This study basically combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods where research paradigm is pragmatic. Finally, the study directs to promote **learners' autonomy** so that students can be best prepared to face the 'real' and '**much bigger world**' outside the classroom.*

Keywords: *Teaching English as a Second language, Tertiary level, Successful Implementation, Learners' autonomy, Bangladesh*

1. Introduction

English as an internationally shared language now necessitates learning of English to the Bangladeshi people with the ever changing needs in a globalized world where multicultural and multinational barriers have crumbled down and bridges of communication have gone across lands and seas; hence, we are inextricably intertwined in this borderless world.

According to Lightbown & Spada (2006), "**Language acquisition is one of the most impressive and fascinating aspects of human development**" (p.1). Nevertheless, acquiring a second language is anything but a simple uniform process as addressed by Ellis (1985). Ellis defined second language acquisition as a complex process involving many interrelated factors. In his words, there is no single way in which learners acquire the knowledge of a second language. SLA (second language acquisition) is the product of many factors pertaining on the one hand and the learning situation on the other. Different learners in different situations learn a L2 in different ways (p.4). Therefore, to summarize Ellis, SLA is a process of learning or acquiring a language influenced by many factors either in a classroom or naturalistic setting (p.5)

'**How to motivate English language learner**' – is an age old question; yet, it is increasingly important to realize that it is even more necessary to figure out how to encourage ESL/ EFL learners to take charge of their own learning. In Bangladesh, English is taught as the second language, but the pathways to success in teaching English to the Bangladeshi learners are rather challenging as there are no specific language teaching formula that always work with learners in all contexts. Thus the paper tries to explore the scopes and outcomes of implementation of learners' autonomy in the ESL classroom at tertiary level in Bangladesh.

Research Hypothesis

Promoting learners' autonomy in an ESL classroom at tertiary level in Bangladesh can enhance students' second language acquisition.

Research Purpose

To investigate whether and to what extent learners' autonomy can be more effective in case of acquisition of second language.

Research Questions

The questions that have been addressed in this paper as of central importance are given below:

- Is learners' autonomy implementable in ESL classroom at tertiary level in Bangladesh?
- How can it be implemented?
- If learners' autonomy is promoted, do the learners feel more motivated and responsible towards their own learning?
- How much effective is learners' autonomy?

Research Scopes

This study tries to encourage promoting learners' autonomy in ESL classrooms at tertiary level in Bangladesh for second language acquisition. It also aims to open up the scopes to carry out similar investigations on different Bangladeshi students who are struggling to acquire second language within their language classrooms.

2. Literature Review

Various approaches, methods and techniques have been introduced in the field of English language teaching (ELT) with the passage of time. The focus shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach and communicative approach was introduced to provide opportunities to the learners to use the language in real-life contexts. Jacobs and Farrell (2003) suggest that that CLT paradigm shift led to eight major changes in approaches to language teaching/ learning and the most important change is the learner autonomy. This idea emerged having the goal to enable learners being autonomous individuals capable of coping with the ever changing demands of real world outside the traditional classroom. This concept obtained consideration of ESL teachers and researchers in 1980s when Henry Holec defined the term as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Benson, 2006), and much attention was devoted to this concept for creating a better understanding between teachers and students.

Definition of Learners' Autonomy

Some commonly used definitions of learner autonomy are:

'... a capacity and willingness to act independently and cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person' (Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander, & Trebbi, 1990, p.102)

'... an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning' (Dickinson, 1993, p. 330-341)

'... a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action' (Little, 1991, p.4)

In a study Chan (2001) reported that the learners identified the following characteristic qualities of autonomous learners: highly motivated, goal oriented, well organized, hardworking, initiative, enthusiastic about learning, flexible, active, willing ask questions, and making use of every opportunities to improve their learning.

Nunan (1997) found encouraging learners to move towards autonomy is best done inside the language classroom.

Why learner autonomy?

Learner autonomy can be supported by teachers' minimizing the evaluative pressure and any sense of correction in the classroom, as well as by maximizing students' perceptions of having a voice and choice in the academic activities. Researchers suggest that autonomy supportive teaching practices are associated with greater positive outcomes in the classroom. For example, Chirkov and Ryan (2001) studied Russian and US high school students and found that students' perceptions of both teacher and parent autonomy support were associated with greater internalization of academic motivation and a way to facilitate internalization is that teachers provide students with a meaningful rationale or why a learning activity is useful.

Students will ultimately become independent from teachers and teaching and thus in education, "*the development of autonomy and self-sufficiency may be desirable ends*" (Dickinson, 1994, p. 3). The communicative language teaching methodology tends to develop learner autonomy. In the communicative language teaching, language learners are expected to "*take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning*" (Richards, 2006, p. 5) while teachers work as facilitators helping learners to develop their own purposes in learning and giving them greater choice over their own learning, which involves the content and processes of learning, self-assessment and their use and awareness of learning-strategies (Richards, *ibid*, pp. 24-25). The idea is that if learners have developed their own autonomy, they will then take the necessary responsibility for their own learning and become intrinsically motivated and engage themselves in their learning initiatives and actively (Little, 2006). What's more, autonomous learners can apply the knowledge.

Characteristics of the Successful Autonomous Learner

In David Nunan's 2000 study, he outlines common characteristics for people who successfully and dramatically improved their language skills through learning autonomously. These characteristics and requirements include: a diversity of skills, passion and enjoyment for a particular field, a focused and active approach to learning, and finally, pursuit of learning and success despite high probability of failure and public disapproval (Nunan, 2000). While most learners in Japan are wary about taking these risks, there are many examples of those who do with favorable results. Nunan (2000) presents a couple of success stories in Hong Kong of students who took their learning in their own hands and excelled.

There is nevertheless broad agreement that **autonomous learners** understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness (cf. Holec 1981, Little 1991).

3. Research Methodology

Methods

This study basically combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods, where research paradigm is pragmatic. While doing so, there is an attempt to triangulate the researcher's observation with primary and secondary data.

Subjects

The 25 respondents were students who were in the same class in summer trimester, 2016 (June – September) doing a core course called 'Basic English' where they were learning English as a second

language as part of their BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) programme at United international University, a leading private university in Bangladesh, where the researcher has been teaching for eight years. However, their English language proficiency was still at below threshold level.

Instrument of the Data Collection

The main instrument of this case study was the questionnaire. Moreover, there were other instruments, like, informal interview, journal writing, focused group discussions (FGDs), etc.

Data Analysis

A questionnaire was given to the students in the first class of the trimester, and after collecting them it was analyzed qualitatively as most of the questions were open ended; then, the topics and materials to be taught in the classes were designed accordingly. Another questionnaire was given to the students at the end of the trimester after applying autonomous learning throughout the trimester. Then all collected data from questionnaire, informal interview, journals were analyzed qualitatively through some procedures. In this method the researcher carefully read the answers written by the subjects in the questionnaire, took notes while taking informal interview or group discussions, monitored the students' performance in different activities, evaluated the students' journals.

4. Result

The results revealed that after implementation of autonomous learning, EFL students were learning English more effectively and independently taking responsibilities on their own. The following results were found:

The students were working more diligently in the classroom

Most of the students listened carefully, answered questions willingly and took down notes carefully, which could be read in their exercise books. What was most impressive was that since the fifth week they were found coming to the classroom at least half an hour earlier than their 8.30 o'clock class to do their morning study. This was new.

They became more active in the classroom activities

Compared with before, they seemed to be thinking more actively in the classroom. They interrupted when they wanted to add something to what the researcher was saying. Even the "quiet" ones sometimes whispered something amongst themselves, and were given chances to express their ideas.

They were able to complete their assignments independently

The students depended too much on their reference books at the beginning of the new trimester. Later it was found that they were using the dictionary a lot in the classroom. As it was an intensive reading course, using the dictionary was necessary for a thorough understanding. Sometimes they were able to explain the new words by themselves.

In the journals they recorded and evaluated their learning based on their initial plan

The students focused on their learning in their journals. Apart from recording what they had and hadn't done according to their plan, they reflected on what needed to be improved the next weeks. They could recognize what they acquired and what they missed.

They tried to use some effective learning strategies

As their learning was progressing, the students reacted actively to difficulties in their learning. They didn't wait to see as before but began to employ some strategies to improve their learning.

5. Discussion

In the existing myriad scenes of globalization, the English language classroom can provide the right platform for skills development, and learning opportunities for understanding, empathizing and evaluating the world around. To enable the students to obtain all these opportunities and possibilities, it is needed to find out the challenges they face, and guide them, facilitate them to overcome the hurdles by promoting autonomous learning.

Implementation of autonomous learning

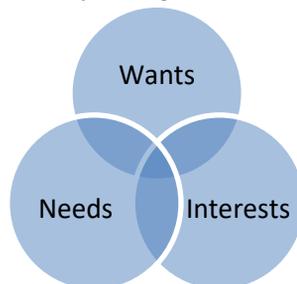
For successful implementation of learners' autonomy in ESL classroom, it is needed to consider both the role of teachers and students.

Role of the Students

Students have to be taken through four phases of autonomous learning – planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating.

Planning

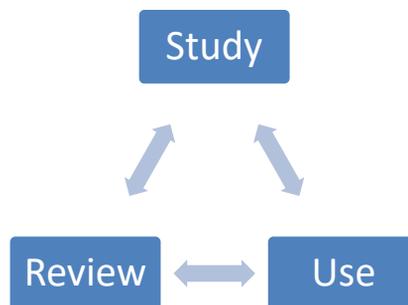
WIN analysis: The students may be asked to make a list of their English wants, interests, needs and then write them in the diagram below (some may belong in more than one circle)



Now every individual can be inquired of “Which of these is the most important for you now?”
And final suggestion can be “**This is your personal learning goal.**”

Implementing

Successful language learning needs more than just study. They need to make time to use what they are learning and review regularly. So they have to follow a cycle:



Monitoring

Mid –activity:

Stop & think!

The can ask themselves

- Are the materials helping me to reach my goals?
- Am I using them in a way that will help me to reach my goals?

Weekly monitoring:

- Was my weekly work balanced?
- Am I happy with my learning balance?

Evaluating

The students should be advised:

- After working towards your learning goal for some time, go back and compare your level NOW to your level BEFORE you started.
- Use the RECORDS you have kept to check your progress (logs, diaries etc.)
- Are you getting better?
- Do you need to change your plan? If so, what will you change?

The Role of the Instructor

In their 2002 study, Chan, Spratt, and Humphreys conducted a large-scale study on learner autonomy at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University where they aimed to represent the students' views on responsibility, motivation, and decision making outside of the classroom. In this study, Chen et al. conclude that the vast majority of students view their instructor as playing a major role in the development of their language skills. This study has pedagogical implications, as it is argues that understanding the students' perceptions on learning can help a teacher identify what responsibilities can be transferred to the student. (Chan et al., 2002)

Attempts to theorise the process of 'autonomisation' (e.g., Little 1999, 2000a, 2000b) have been strongly influenced by neo-Vygotskian psychology, which sees learning as a matter of supported performance and emphasizes the interdependence of the cognitive and social-interactive dimensions of the learning process. According to this model, the teacher's role is to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners can **be autonomous** in order to **become more autonomous**.

The facilitator can play a vital role for efficient autonomous learner development to take place. In the four phases he/ she can perform various roles, such as:

- Organizer of resources
- Inventor of Activities
- Manager
- Facilitator of the communication process [Prompter + independent participant]
- Assessor and feedback provider
- Researcher/Learner
- Need Analyst
- Syllabus designer and reformer
- Motivator and guide
- Role Model

(William Littlewood (1981) and A K Paliwal (1996)

The teacher can also take different strategies, like:

- Asking students to ‘Journal Writing’
- Dictating the new words and short paragraphs regularly in the classroom
- Constantly persuading them to take risks in developing their language skills
- Finding chances in the classroom to monitor and promote their independent learning
- Monitoring whether the materials helping them to reach their goals
- Acknowledging their achievement and thus encouraging them to move on.

Learner autonomy is advocated by the New Curriculum of Bangladesh

In the New Curriculum of Bangladesh, there is a great shift in school teaching and learning – the shift from “*teacher-centered*” to “*student-centered*” methods that helps the students “*move from competence to performance*”, that is from “*what the students know in their minds, their theoretical knowledge*” to “*what it is that the students can do with that theoretical knowledge*”. It suggests “*a task-based approach to language teaching and learning,*” in which more opportunities will be provided for students to take much of their initiative “*to use the knowledge they gain*” in the situation which can resemble real life rather than just “*remaining as knowledge in their mind*”. Students are encouraged to experience and learn the language by self-discovery rather than just receive the information passively. During this process, students are expected to develop their interest, motivation, confidence as well as learning strategies and cultural awareness along together with their language knowledge and skills. Thus in such a creative learning atmosphere, it is quite necessary for the students to develop learner autonomy.

Effectiveness of Learners’ Autonomy

There are two general arguments in favour of trying to make learners autonomous. First, if they are reflectively engaged with their learning, it is likely to be more efficient and effective, because more personal and focused is more likely to serve learners' wider agendas. Second, if learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is by definition solved; although they may not always feel entirely positive, autonomous learners have developed the reflective and attitudinal resources to overcome temporary motivational setbacks. Gardner and Lambert (1972) define ‘motivation’ in terms of the L2 learner’s overall goal or orientation. The motivated individual is goal-oriented, persistent, attentive and aroused. In fact, motivation plays a role in various ways in the process of learning a second language. According to W F Mackey (1965), “Good teaching is no guarantee of good learning, for it is what the learner does that makes him learn”. As the learning takes place inside the learner, the teacher should motivate them to make the classroom activities a success.

6. Conclusion

Autonomy in learning is a process and not a product. It is difficult to improve language skills exclusively through autonomous learning. Skills can be learned by studying independently and with other EFL students, but skills are only truly assimilated when they can be confirmed and responded to by a qualified mentor. As it has been seen successful language students did not reach their desired levels of fluency exclusively by autonomous learning but by supplementing their classroom and textbook learning with autonomous learning.

In attempts to promote a higher level of learner autonomy in Bangladesh, it is important for the instructor to encourage and organize team activities and homework assignments that will force students to explore realms and means that could ultimately pique a greater interest in autonomous learning so that the students can be best prepared to face the ‘real’ and ‘much bigger world’ outside the classroom.

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