

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING LEARNERS AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

“Give me a fish and I eat for a day. Teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime.” This proverb is taken from Chinese culture which is closely connected with learner autonomy. This paper deals with the concept of learner autonomy and its challenges and strategies to implement in the language classroom at tertiary level in Bangladesh. To complete the research a mixed methodological process is followed such as questionnaire and semi-structured interview and classroom observation. This study can bridge up the gap between teachers and learners. Teachers and learners will get chance to explore their insight with the help of this study. The newly gained insights will inspire teachers to adopt useful method and plan their lessons making it suitable for learners' involvement and the learners awake to their huge potentiality as confident, independent and adult learners to help them to reweave their thoughts concerning modes of learning and walk through a superior world of knowledge by the guidance of their teachers. The aim of this paper is to find out a clear view of the reasons of using learner autonomy inside the classroom; its significance from the teachers and learner's perspective and give some effective suggestion to make learner autonomy familiar in the context of Bangladesh specially at tertiary level. Based on finding this paper tries to put some recommendations for further consideration which would be useful to novice teachers as well as policy maker.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, challenges, teacher's role, strategies.

Introduction

Learner autonomy is a late twentieth century term introduced by Henri Holec which is against all the old, traditional and teacher centered practice of language teaching; automatically facilitates a learner's psychology and makes him/her ready to learn through own way with better attachment. As learning is not imposed rather achieved so learner autonomy is a useful

term for an adult learner as it is necessary for him to recognize and solve his own problem. According to Hua Weifen (2001), "In the process of autonomous learning, teacher should assist learners in in cultivating their abilities of setting goals, of selecting learning contents, of determining learning paces, of choosing learning methods and skills, of monitoring learning processes and of assessing learning effects. Therefore, teachers should act as a counselor, facilitator and resource person". But it is a relatively new concept on the field of education specially in Bangladesh where language classes are largely dependent on teacher's lectures. Moreover, discussion of learner autonomy has not been entirely positive. Some critics think that the very idea of learner autonomy is part of western cultural tradition and thus by definition alien to non-western learners (e.g., Jones, 1995).

A propagation of this arguments claims that the methods used to foster the development of learner autonomy are likewise alien to non-western pedagogical tradition. Another challenge in the way is that the development of learner autonomy depends on student responsibility and awareness of goals, methods, and topics of learning process which is difficult to implement to the students of our country because Language learning always creates a fear among them and autonomous language learning may increase it somehow. However, this paper is conducted to find out those challenges and strategies for fostering learner's autonomy at tertiary level in Bangladesh. To achieve this goal, the following research questions are posted:

- a. What are the major challenges of promoting learner autonomy inside the classroom?
- b. What kinds of strategies should be followed for fostering autonomous learning in the context of Bangladesh?

Literature Review

What is Learner Autonomy?

The concept learner autonomy is found in moral, political and bio-ethical philosophy which refers to one's ability to decide the laws for oneself. But from the end of 20th century learner autonomy had been used quiet successfully in teaching second language worldwide. Since in "learner autonomy" learners are supposed to play a more active and participatory role than is usual in traditional approaches, its importance in English Language Teaching (ELT), has become more prominent in recent times. It helps language learners to come out from the usual weakness and anxieties they face while learning a new language as here they take the charge of their own learning. It has been imagined as a personal human trait, as a political measure, or as an educational move.

Who can be an Autonomous Learner? All language learners have the capacity of becoming independent and autonomous learners. But some are more aware of the concept and possess certain qualities beforehand. Little suggests, "Autonomous learners are those who understand

why they are learning specific topics, accept responsibility for their learning, take the initiative in planning and executing learning activities and are willing to assess their own learning". Learners' active participation and responsibility for their own learning process are essential for foreign language teaching (Dam, 1995). However, learner autonomy does not reflect learning alone in isolation. As we are social beings and the development of learner autonomy depends on social interaction.

The Role of Teacher

There are a number of characteristics that the teacher of the autonomous learner needs to amplify, most important of which is an 'Awareness' of self. The teacher of the autonomous learner need to aware their own personal influence on the learning process. They need to aware of their own beliefs, attitudes, skills, and practices, students' affective and cognitive characteristics and their attitudes and skills relating to autonomy. In classroom practice, the teacher can act in a modified learning environment by creating a more relaxed atmosphere free from continuously threatened by examination pressure; encouragement; by providing a great variety of material from which learners choose the most interesting and appealing to them; by giving guidance and feedback. Teacher can manage a class where students participate actively in decision-making and in the use of a variety of strategies and materials useful to them. She can observe students with a view to enhancing their individual learning styles, and in helping they cope with a degree of uncertainty in the day to day learning process.

The Role of Learner

It is the learner, who is most responsible for autonomous learning. It necessitates a new role for the learner, a role in which he/she is described as: 'good learner', 'responsible learner' and 'aware learner'. According to Holec (1979), 'a good learner' makes decision regarding: choice of objectives; choice of content and materials; methods and techniques to be used; and how to assess progress and outcomes. 'The responsible learner' is the one, who accepts that his/her own efforts are crucial for effective learning and co-operates with the teachers monitoring own progress through the use of opportunities available. Likewise, 'the aware learner' is the one, who sees the relationship to what is to be learnt, how to learn and the resources available in order to take charge or control of learning. Under such learning, it is the learner who becomes most active. He/she has to do a lot on own with the suggestions and facilitation of teachers. They are freer in the selection of every aspects of learning at the same time they have more responsibilities to be accomplished.

Learner Autonomy and Freedom

The term "autonomy" is semantically complex. Among other things it carries a strong implication of freedom. The question is, of course, freedom from what? Learner autonomy

has been illustrated as freedom from the control of the teacher, freedom from the constraints of the curriculum, even freedom to choose not to learn. Each of these freedoms must be confronted and discussed in any serious consideration of learner autonomy but for us the most important freedom that autonomy implies is the learner's freedom from self by which we mean his or her capacity to transcend the limitation of personal heritage (Berofsky, 1997).

Methodology

This study is quantitative in nature. The main source of data was questionnaire survey. The survey was performed through questionnaire and semi-interview among teachers of university level who taught Language courses in different universities at Bangladesh.

In order to find out the problems, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed among students. Students were instructed to answer the questions as truthfully as possible without any intimidation.

A short interview session was also arranged where one fixed open-ended question was asked to the teachers. After analyzing the findings gathered from the questionnaire survey the results were analyzed and tabulated to show consequence and then the result were converted into percentage.

Overall Assessment of Data Analysis

The researcher has studied and observed several factors related to the challenges and strategies for fostering learner autonomy at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. The researcher has also tried to find out teacher role as a facilitator, awareness among learners, students maturity regarding autonomous learning, difficulties as well as possibilities of implementing learner autonomy in Bangladesh and few other things related to them. In the questionnaire, most of the questions were selected to collect appropriate data from the people involved. Data were both qualitative and quantitative in nature. Below, there is a summary regarding the students and their autonomous learning as found by the researcher:

- Most of the students are not familiar with autonomous learning.
 - Students are not enough compatible to know the uncommon topic and willing to share their lacking as well.
 - Students always attempt for getting passed not for learning as they are not interested about their goal.
 - Students prefer teacher-oriented class.
- The important points about the teachers are summed up below:
- Teachers are not aware about their role in autonomous learning.
 - Teachers are not always interested to take students opinion.
 - Teachers are not well trained.

- In Bangladesh, Language teachers are habituated in Gramma-Translation Method instead of Communicative language teaching which hampers them to involve students in pair or group works.
- Examination based education system leads students to be more attracted to results than learning.

The researcher would like to sum up the main points of the classroom observation as follows:

- Classroom management is more challenging than teaching.
- The number of students in most of the classrooms is so large that it hampers the autonomous learning situation.
- Time of class is not enough to learn and practice properly.

The researcher had two research question. In relation to first the question, the researcher found that the major challenges of promoting learner autonomy inside the classroom are large in number. Among these, lack of resources, learners' poor language skills, lack of awareness about autonomous language learning, learners' unwillingness to learn new techniques, examination based education system are the important points which can be mentioned. To answer the second question, the researcher pointed out some strategies that facilitate the development of learner autonomy. Among these, increase extra-curricular activities involvement, increase awareness among learner as well as teachers, create environment to develop learners to be autonomous, involve students into creative activities through assignment, presentation, project, test are remarkable suggestions which can be noticed.

Therefore, the hypotheses of the research formed by the researcher are justified as the researcher has found them similar with the real situation through her studies, survey and observation. Other factors that have been mentioned above are responsible as well for finding out the challenges of fostering learners autonomy at tertiary level in Bangladesh. From the study it is evident that teacher can effectively motivate a learner but in that case teacher needs to help the students to solve their mistakes so that the learners can judge themselves the findings also indicate that 20% of the students believe that the extra activities are not connected with the exam result in the department. In that situation teacher can motivate a learner by the suggestion that the precondition of doing well in the exam is to involve oneself with autonomous learning.

According to the findings most of the learners think that the students who are autonomous in learning have higher proficiency and their quantity is about 86%. By effective awareness about the fact that anyone can be an autonomous learner by his/her self-interest and higher proficiency is essential at all.

This kind of awareness will help to create an appropriate environment for implementing the idea of learner autonomy. The findings also support that as majority of the teacher (80%) think it is possible to implement autonomous learning in the context of Bangladesh.

Recommendation

Based on the findings and discussion a number of recommendations can be put forward:

Role of teachers

1. Teacher should motivate learners to create a mentality to discover new aspects of language and involve students within the classroom activities in a systematic way so that they can understand that they are capable of solving their own problems.
2. A big part of implementing learners' autonomy in the classroom is to teach diverse learning strategies and assist the learners in finding the methods that best suit them. So, a teacher should inform the learners and make them capable of choosing the best learning strategies according to their need.
3. Teachers should involve the learners within the world of information and technology by giving them training that how to find relevant and necessary information in the internet and how to make a proper use of social sites for learning.
4. Teacher should teach the learners how Teacher should give praise and feedback to solve the error done by the learners.

Role of Learners

1. Learners should create mentality that they are the maker of their own fortune and valued members of a learning community and that is their class. Learners become successful if they take responsibility of their own learning. It is up to the learners if they want to learn.
2. Learner should build up their own personal criteria for the quality of their work and develop independence as the judge of their weakness and strength. This helps the learners make informed decision about their next steps in the learning process and removes the dependence on the teaching. With minimum help on the part of the teacher, learners need to complete the situation process.
3. Learners should involve themselves within the out of class activities to facilitate their process of learning by implementing learner autonomy.
4. Learners can browse internet and gather information and knowledge about their required lesson by using the internet facility.

Classroom Activities

1. In the first class instructor should have included the briefing session on the autonomous nature of the program, the benefits of autonomous learning, the procedures autonomous learning, the objectives of the course by implementing autonomous learning.
2. Classroom activities should be organized by including some creative learning task such as seminar discussion, group presentation, debate newspaper project, dissertation, student-teacher consultations so that learner can get a scope to explore their intellectual thinking.

3. Teacher should give equal opportunity of participation to the learners inside the classroom and should give equal value to both weak and strong students in order to the classroom autonomous.
4. Give challenging and enjoyable task for example, arranging a debate on most talked issues presentation session about some practical fact and research activities. Teacher should take initiative to reward the best performers inside the classroom.
5. Learners should be given the opportunity to ask question and the instructor should give effective feedback of each and every problem.
6. There should have scope for extracurricular activities in every educational institution to promote spontaneous learning.

Materials to Facilitate Autonomous Learning

1. There should have well decorated classroom with audio visual materials.
2. There should have language club, debating club, sports club, reading room, self access center in every institution.
3. Social sites such as, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc can attract learners more than any other learning materials.
4. Instructor should provide extra sheets, slides, notes to the students.
- 5.

Conclusion

Implementation of 'Learner Autonomy' is not easy at all. In the third world countries like Bangladesh learner autonomy is still unfamiliar. Here the teaching and learner methods are still very traditional. The classrooms areas are move teacher-centered. It is clear that it is the responsibility of the teacher to promote autonomous, critically-thinking students in a classroom where the content becomes a secondary goal. The promotion of learner autonomy requires a change in beliefs about language learning on the part of both learner and teacher, as well as a corresponding change in roles, and learners and teachers may need preparation (if not explicit training) to involve in self-instruction. As the development of learner autonomy is a complex process and the teacher must not expect instant results. To achieve such goals, together teacher and students will need to select their way and to take some risks.

Having that in mind we can conclude by saying that in the context like ours, now it has become a great responsibility for all the teachers to learn how we can teach our students the easier approaches to the learning. For this, we need to understand ourselves and develop our awareness in language teaching. This will lead us to application of promoting learner's autonomy at tertiary level in Bangladesh.

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Teachers' Questionnaire

Topic: Challenges and strategies for fostering learner Autonomy in language learning at the Tertiary Level in Bangladesh.

Name:

University/college:

Put tick (√) mark on appropriate answer.

1. Do you identify the learners' need while giving lectures to the learners?

(a) Yes (b) No (c) Sometimes

2. Do your learners share/ discuss their problems with you without any hesitation?

(a) Always (b) Sometimes (c) Never

3. Do you play the role as a guide, organizer, and friend inside the classroom?
(a) Always (b) Sometimes (c) Never
4. Do you create any kind of awareness among the learners regarding learner autonomy?
(a) Yes (b) No (c) Sometimes
5. Do you think students are matured enough to be autonomous to select their learning content?
(a) Yes (b) No
6. How often do you involve your students to solve the problems to make them self-reliance?
(a) Always (b) Sometimes (c) Never
7. Do you organize something extra for your students to enhance their ability to be autonomous learner?
(a) Yes (b) No (c) Sometimes
8. Do you think it is possible to implement Learners' Autonomy in the Bangladeshi context?
(a) Yes (b) No
9. What kind of difficulties do you face in teaching at your class?
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10. What in your own opinion are the factors that facilitate the development of learner autonomy?
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Students' Questionnaire

Topic: Challenges and strategies for fostering learner Autonomy in language learning at the Tertiary Level in Bangladesh.

Name:

University/college:

Put tick (√) mark on appropriate answer.

1. How often do your teachers take your opinion while choosing classroom activities?
(a)Always (b) Sometimes (c) Never
2. How often do your teachers follow different types of learning strategies according to the learners need?

(a) Always (b) Sometimes (c) Never

3. Which learning strategies in class would improve your ability of learning autonomously?

(a) Work on my own (b) Group work (c) Project work (d) Independence in choosing the homework

4. Do your teachers involve you in group work or pair work?

(a) Yes (b) No

5. Does your English teacher assign you to prepare English presentation on a particular topic after class and give them in class?

(a) Always (b) Sometimes (c) Never

6. When you find out your mistakes does your teacher help you to solve your mistakes?

(a) Yes (b) No (c) Sometimes

7. Do you think that this sort of activities has any connection with exam result in the department?

(a) Yes (b) No

8. Does your English teacher organize debate in class?

(a) Always (b) Sometimes (c) Never

9. Does your English teacher suggest or discuss about easy ways of English learning strategies and methods in class?

(a) Yes (b) No (c) Sometimes

10. Do you think that the students who are autonomous in learning have higher proficiency?

(a) Yes (b) No