Autonomous Language Learning: Bangladeshi Undergraduates’ Attitudes and Perceptions

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ABSTRACT
Development in learner centered approaches in education has brought with it the significant notion of ‘learner autonomy’ which refers to the readiness of learners to be responsible for their own learning. However, this is an issue which is not independent of educational culture and context as context and culture construct the site within which the whole learning process takes place. Since autonomy depends on learners’ readiness to take charge of their own learning, it is dependent, to a large extent, on learners’ attitudes and perceptions of autonomy. These attitudes and perceptions, in turn, are shaped by the context and culture where learners live. Therefore, in any given context, it is necessary to assess the level of learners’ autonomy to predict the success or failure of a learner centered approach. This paper investigated tertiary level Bangladeshi learners’ attitudes and perceptions towards autonomous or independent learning. Data were collected from eighty undergraduates of the Department of English, University of Dhaka, using a survey questionnaire and focus-group interviews. The findings of the study revealed that learners share a highly teacher-dependent attitude and they perceive autonomous learning helpful only when there is a teacher to assist and guide them.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, undergraduate learners, attitudes and perceptions of learners

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy in language learning has been of interest since the 1980s, but in the last twenty years it has had significant influence on English learning, be it English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Today achieving learner autonomy is a universal educational goal (Sinclair, 1997, 2000b, cited in Bashir, 2012).
Autonomous learners are those who take responsibilities of their own learning. It is like empowering learners for taking decisions about their own learning, monitoring their progresses and evaluating their performances (Bashir, 2012). Benson and Voller (1997) mention five different uses of this term: for situations for self-learning, for the skills appropriate for self-learning, for exercising the inborn capacity to learn independently, for exercising learners’ sense of responsibility and lastly for learners’ right to self-direct their learning. In this way, this is a very important issue in the global educational context for enabling students to learn independently. However, in Bangladesh, the concept of learner autonomy is a relatively new area. Here, schools and colleges mainly follow a teacher-centred approach. Even in universities, classes are mostly lecture-based (Bashir, 2012). Consequently, it becomes a challenge to implement learner centred approaches appropriately as most of the learners are not prepared for it.

The Department of English of the University of Dhaka has two self-access centers and two seminar libraries with materials for self-study. However, autonomy is not a matter of availability of resources, but of a willing attitude, clarity of perception and capacity. Bangladesh is a context where English is learnt as a foreign language. Hence the availability of opportunities to practice the language is barely sufficient. In an EFL context, students need to be more active to find opportunities for learning and using the language (Bayat, 2011) and therefore, need to be more independent and responsible learners. Nevertheless, teacher-dependency influences learners’ readiness for autonomy. Some common misconceptions (e.g. autonomy means only self-instruction and no interference from the part of teachers) also hinder learners’ willingness to be autonomous learners (Borg & Busaidi, 2012).

All these facts need to be addressed and clarified for the development of learner autonomy, and in order to do that
understanding learners’ perceptions and attitudes is necessary. Keeping this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of 4th year students of the English Department of Dhaka University regarding learner autonomy in learning English as a foreign language. The present study investigates the following research questions:

1. How do 4th year English department students view their own responsibility in language learning?
2. What are learners’ major perceptions regarding teachers’ roles in their learning?
3. To what extent are they ready and motivated to take the responsibility of their own learning?

2. Literature Review

Learners take their first step towards autonomy when they recognize that they are responsible for their own learning (Holec, 1979; Little, 2004). However, the cultural and educational contexts of students and teachers affect the realization of learner autonomy (Yildirim, 2008).

This difference is examined by Khenoune (2007) in her research where she studied 68 Algerian students from the Abderrahmane Mira University of Bejaia who were enrolled in the English Department. Their autonomy level was assessed in three areas: their motivation level, their strategy use and their perception of responsibility to learn the language. The survey findings of this study showed that students were highly intrinsically motivated to invest time and energy in language learning but they would do that only in the presence of a teacher or other classmates. Khenoune (2007) showed that this is related to the culture and learning background of the learners. She concluded that there are differences in meanings of “autonomy” from context to context and the version of
autonomy for Algerian students is the one labeled by Littlewood (2000) as “reactive autonomy” (versus “proactive” one) which means the ability to take responsibility only when it is initiated by an institution, the teacher or the school curriculum.

Another study on readiness for learner autonomy was conducted by Yildirim (2008) on Turkish students. 103 students studying English in Anadolu University, Faculty of Education in Turkey were respondents in this research. Data were collected through a forty three item questionnaire with questions on students’ and teachers’ roles, students’ confidence level and on students’ actual learning practice outside class. Findings showed that students share responsibility with teachers and they hold teachers responsible more for some actions.

One mixed-method case study on the implementation of autonomy in classes was conducted by Koh and Frick (2010). This is a case study on upper-elementary Montessori classrooms in the state of Indiana, USA. This study explored teachers’ strategies for autonomy support. Observation of classrooms, post observational interviews and motivation survey were used and findings showed that teachers provided cognitive autonomy support to students to involve them in activities and to make them able to solve their problems. Teachers ensure student-student and teacher-student cooperation and whenever they set limits for students, they provide rationale and avoid criticisms. This study showed that teachers’ use of strategies help students to be autonomous learners and to be ready to take responsibilities of their own learning.

As the above studies show, readiness for learner autonomy is very important for the learner-centred approaches to be effective. This readiness of students will define, influence and
organize all the other areas of learning. Therefore, before designing any syllabus or activities, teachers need to know the autonomy level of their students. Taking this into consideration, this study attempts to identify Bangladeshi undergraduate English learners’ attitudes towards autonomy and in turn, their readiness to be autonomous learners.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The respondents of the study are 4th year students of Department of English, University of Dhaka. The questionnaire was administered to 90 students, among whom, 80 students provided responses completely. It was decided to limit the survey to the 4th year students in order to provide a fairly homogeneous sample excluding the beginners or the more proficient MA learners. Among the participants, 20 students volunteered to take part in the interviews. There were 4 groups (5 students in each group) who were assigned to the five sessions of the interviews. In this study, all participants speak Bangla as their first language.

3.2. Instrument

A 26 item questionnaire was adapted from the questionnaire designed by Breeze (2002). For the purpose of relevance, some modifications to the questionnaire were made to match it with the context of the learners and to make it appropriate. A five point Likert scale was used in which 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. This questionnaire had closed items under five groups:

A) Group one: General readiness for self-directed learning  
B) Group two: Independent work in language learning  
C) Group three: Roles of teachers and learners
D) Group four: Language learning activities
E) Group five: Objectives, motivation and confidence

For detailed data, focus group interviews were used. The main focus in the interview was to get an insight in mainly three areas: students’ perceptions of teachers’ major roles in their learning; their own roles in their learning; and their readiness to learn. Participants principally talked in English, though occasional switching to Bangla occurred which were translated while transcribing. The questionnaire and the semi-structured interview questions are provided in the appendix.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

Tables 1-5 display the results of the questionnaire survey. The percentages and means for each of the responses in the Likert scale are shown here.

Table 1: The general readiness for self-directed learning

| Item | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | Means | Average Mean |
|------|----|----|----|----|----|-------|--------------|
| 1    | 3% | 3% | 11%| 64%| 20%| 3.96  |              |
| 2    | 4% | 1% | 10%| 20%| 48%| 19%   | 3.68         |
| 3    | 3% | 4% | 23%| 55%| 16%| 3.79  |              |
| 4    | 3% | 39%| 24%| 28%| 8% | 2.99  |              |
| 5    | 3% | 24%| 21%| 40%| 13%| 3.36  |              |
| 6    | 1% | 4% | 3% | 61%| 31%| 4.18  |              |

(1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree)
In Table 1, the general readiness for self-directed learning among the learners is shown. The results show that majority of the students (item 1, 64% agreed and 20% agreed strongly) believed that they were responsible for their own learning. However, majority (40% and 13%) replied that they need a teacher to tell them exactly what to do (item 5).

Table 2: Independent work in language learning

| Item | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Means | Average mean |
|------|---|---|---|---|---|-------|--------------|
| 7    | 0%| 0%| 13%|54%|34%|4.21   |              |
| 8    | 0%|15%|15%|48%|23%|3.78   | 3.83        |
| 9    | 4%|20%|13%|50%|14%|3.50   |              |

(1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree)

The results in Table 2 show that almost all the students (88%) acknowledged the importance of self-study for language learning in response to item 7 and this item also has the highest mean score of 4.21.

Table 3: Role of teachers and learners

| Item | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Means | Average mean |
|------|---|---|---|---|---|-------|--------------|
| 10   | 14%|45%|19%|21%|1% |2.51   | 3.23        |
| 11   | 4% |15%|16%|48%|18%|3.60   |              |
| 12   | 1% |15%|18%|49%|18%|3.66   |              |
| 13   | 5% |19%|21%|40%|15%|3.15   |              |

(1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree)

Table 3 with its four items shows contradictory findings. A substantial number of students (14% and 45%) agreed that they could learn outside class as well (item 10). However, item 12
and 13, which ask whether learners want teacher-controlled classes and teachers’ explanations, show that learners are highly dependent on teachers’ explanation.

Table 4: Language learning activities

| Item | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | Means | Average mean |
|------|----|----|----|----|----|-------|-------------|
| 14   | 3% | 16%| 23%| 46%| 13%| 3.50  | 3.24        |
| 15   | 1% | 6% | 19%| 55%| 19%| 3.84  |             |
| 16   | 23%| 33%| 21%| 21%| 3% | 2.49  |             |
| 17   | 5% | 26%| 25%| 36%| 8% | 3.15  |             |
| 18   | 8% | 28%| 23%| 34%| 9% | 3.09  |             |

(1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

The results in Table 4 show that majority wanted teachers to take responsibilities for classroom activities and almost all of them enjoyed collaborative work as is seen in response to item 15, which has the highest mean of 3.84.

Table 5: Objectives, motivation and confidence

| Item | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | Means | Average mean |
|------|----|----|----|----|----|-------|-------------|
| 19   | 1% | 29%| 44%| 24%| 3% | 2.98  |             |
| 20   | 4% | 6% | 25%| 48%| 18%| 3.69  |             |
| 21   | 3% | 38%| 19%| 36%| 5% | 3.04  |             |
| 22   | 8% | 36%| 23%| 24%| 10%| 3.41  |             |
| 23   | 1% | 43%| 20%| 28%| 9% | 3.30  |             |
| 24   | 3% | 13%| 20%| 58%| 8% | 3.55  |             |
| 25   | 5% | 26%| 28%| 30%| 11%| 3.16  |             |
| 26   | 10%| 34%| 20%| 29%| 8% | 2.90  |             |

(1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

In Table 5, students’ lower level of confidence can be seen from their responses to items 22, 23 and 24, where the majority
of the respondents thought that others have a better grasp on English than themselves and were unsure about the ways to achieve their objectives. In addition, majority (30% and 11%) agreed that the exam is the main source of motivation to study (item 25).

The overall means for Table 1 and 2 are 3.66 and 3.83 respectively which demonstrate an affirmative stance towards autonomous learning and provide an answer to the first research question which asks about students’ perception of their own role in learning. These two tables show that students are well aware of their responsibilities. Tables 3, 4 and 5 have significant fall in average means (3.23, 3.24, and 3.25 respectively). These three tables show students’ dependence on teachers, their lower confidence and extrinsic exam-oriented motivation to learn independently and answer the second and the third research questions which ask about students’ perception of teachers’ roles and their readiness and motivation to be autonomous learners respectively. Table 3 and 4 show that students are mostly dependent on teachers for all kinds of learning and they view it as teachers’ role to guide them. Table 5 confirms that their motivation is principally extrinsic and they do not have much confidence in themselves to learn or solve learning problems without a teacher.

These findings indicate that they had a tendency to think like autonomous learners but were not behaving like one. Their dependency on teachers for all kinds of learning and pedagogic decisions and their perception that they were not ready to take charge manifest itself in their attitudes strongly.

4.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

There were four groups, each consisting of five students. The interviewees were arbitrarily marked as S1, S2, to S20 according to their group serial in the interview to make it convenient to
quote them. For example, the students of the first group interviewed, were marked or coded as S₁, S₂, to S₅ and in this way, the rest of them were marked too. All the data presented below are partly translated during transcription as there was occasional code-switching to Bangla.

The focus group interview showed almost similar results but at the same time, some contradictions with the survey results were found too. It also provided an explanation for the contradictory findings in the survey. In response to the question about their responsibility to learn, all students agreed that they were aware of their responsibilities to learn. However, when asked about the ways they took that responsibility, the main finding was teacher dependency. The majority agreed that teachers need to tell them how to learn and how to take responsibility. This echoes the answer to the first research question (i.e. students’ view regarding their own responsibilities in learning).

S₁₁ explained their situation which reconfirms the findings of survey regarding learners’ perceptions of their own roles and those of the teachers’ (research question 1 and 2):

We really need a push in the right direction by the teacher; we need the guidance, the assurance from teacher. Only then we feel like doing or working for that autonomously. Otherwise we just feel and think, but really do not take the initiative.

Concerning the second research question, some new facts surfaced here which to some extent explain the reasons behind the inability of students to be autonomous learners. The most significant of these new findings was students’ concerns regarding teachers’ frustration about them. One complaint from S₃ reflected the thoughts of all other students:

Teachers are mostly frustrated about our inability to learn or work as they expect us to do. But we have so many confusions, fears and
hesitations which are needed to be eradicated by the teachers. Their scolding actually demotivates and frustrates us to a great extent.

Regarding teachers’ responsibilities, these students’ reliance on teachers can be found elaborately in the interview. When asked if they went to teachers’ room for help, most of them replied they did not. In S13’s opinion:

> We have teacher fear, which we’ve carried with us from our school life. This fear not only prevents us from going to teachers’ room, but it also makes it difficult for most of us to ask questions in class.

Some students (S20, S9, S5) said that as they lacked the minimum knowledge to talk about a topic, they did not go to teachers since teachers would know how incompetent they were.

The responses, presented above, not only show students’ over-reliance on teachers but also provide explanations for this. They were leaning on teachers for all aspects of learning. If teachers wanted them to work autonomously and rebuked them for not doing so, they felt frustrated which led them to be less confident, less motivated and less prepared for taking responsibility for their own learning. These facts, thus, provide and explain the answers of both second and third research questions which ask about students’ perceptions regarding teacher’s roles and students’ level of readiness to take responsibility for their own learning respectively.

Another important finding was the extent of their extrinsic motivation behind learning (third research question). All of their self-study, group work or pair work were done before presentations, assignments and exams, especially when those were looming overhead and the learning items were provided or decided by teachers. These responses show that they lack
motivation to take responsibility for their own learning. The above discussion leads to two main findings:

a) Though largely aware, these students could be autonomous and could really exercise autonomy, only when they had a teacher to ‘push’ them and guide them.

b) Most of the work they did was for passing the exams and for getting good grades.

Overall, the findings from both the survey and the interview indicate similar responses and therefore provide similar answers to the research questions.

5. Discussion of Results

The data drawn from the survey analysis and interview reveal that students know that they need to be responsible for their own learning. But they were greatly dependent on teachers. This situation is similar to that of Algerian and Turkish students reported by Khenoune (2007) and Yildirim (2008) respectively, where it seems that students in general prefer a teacher-centered approach in classroom where teachers will explain and provide learning materials and guide the practice of the language skills. These findings support interview responses where students actually described how they needed the teachers to be supportive. It provides clear answers to the first two research questions which ask students’ perceptions of their own roles and teachers’ roles in learning. To answer the first research question it can be stated that students view themselves as autonomous thinkers but not really autonomous workers. The second research question asks students’ perception of teachers’ role. The answer was strongly present throughout their responses: They put greater responsibility on the teachers.
Students’ confusion and lower motivation also work as huge obstacles. Table 5 which reports the level of confidence and motivation among students answer the third research question about learners’ motivation and readiness to be autonomous learners. The learning process was mostly a need-based learning to pass the exams. This decreased their motivation. This was where dependency on teachers came in which in turn resulted in their lower confidence on their own problem solving abilities. Thus lower confidence and motivation level and teacher dependency work in a cycle, one feeding into the other.

One concrete and repetitively found fact is that learners were aware of the need to be autonomous learners but their past experiences of learning in schools and colleges were restraining them in many ways. It may be the case that they lacked the necessary skills to be independent learners. As a result, they wanted to work for their own learning but within the confines of the classroom in the presence of a teacher. This is what Littlewood (2000) calls a case of reactive autonomy. If this concept of reactive autonomy is applied to the student responses in the study, the answers appear coherent and valid from the respondent’s point of view.

Success in learning depends to a large extent on learners’ responsible attitude. No matter how much they learn by lesson, they will always learn more through self-study (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). Teachers need to make students aware of these facts, share responsibilities, and change their perspectives towards autonomous learning. This will simultaneously accelerate the process and help students to perceive the type of work they actually need to do to be autonomous.
6. Limitations

As it is a mini research involving a small number of respondents from only one class of one university, it would be difficult to generalize the results obtained in this investigation. Therefore, further research is needed at different settings, and with more elaborate instruments. Further research can be carried out in this department on all the four undergraduate years or on the MA students. In this way, a more reliable and generalizable result may emerge.

7. Conclusion

This study provides an insight on the attitudes and perceptions of a section of Bangladeshi undergraduates regarding autonomous language learning. The results show that students, while acknowledging the fact that there is no alternative to self-study, are over-reliant on teachers for learning. Their motivation is principally extrinsic or exam oriented which discourages them from working independently.

Therefore, it can be said that autonomy here does not mean complete dependence on the self. Following Khenoune’s (2007) study on Algerian students, it seems that this is also a case of ‘reactive autonomy’ (Littlewood, 2000) where responsibility is taken only when it is initiated from someone else (teacher or any other institution). This version of autonomy is different from the ‘proactive’ one (Littlewood, 2000) where learners have full autonomy and independence and they can self-learn successfully.

These two versions of autonomy prove the fact that autonomy is perceived differently in different contexts. So reflection is needed on the apparent dependence of students on teachers. For Bangladeshi learners, teachers play a very
important role and they have assigned greater responsibilities to teachers. However, it does not mean that they cannot or will not work independently. As learners suggested in the focus-group interviews, teachers have to provide the empathy, assurance and guidance if they want their learners to be autonomous.

As already shown here, moving the focus from teacher-centered approach to learner-centered one requires a changed role for teachers, as well as learners. It requires careful understanding, planning, organization and needs to be undertaken in association with learners, fellow teachers, administrators and parents because all these stakeholders bring in their own expectations regarding the roles of teachers (Turloiu & Stefánsdóttir, 2011, Scharle & Szabo, 2000).

As students are dependent on teachers, teachers can use this situation in a variety of ways for developing autonomy. As Du (2013) states, teachers can facilitate this process by adopting some measures which help students see and self-reflect on their ideas and activities. Teachers can give marked assignments where students have to do self-directed study and reflective works and since these kinds of works will have scores which would be added to the final exams, they will be motivated to work independently. Besides, homework can be decided collaboratively or even chosen by the learners sometimes. This gives them an opportunity to take responsibility of their own learning. Learners need proper training to be able to behave as autonomous learners and teachers have to play vigilant roles there to supervise and guide learners (Han, 2014).

Finally, research like this can help teachers to adopt supportive strategies for making students more autonomous and can also help students to find out about their own level or position on the autonomy continuum and improve that if necessary. Therefore, to help our learners achieve the proactive
version of autonomy, a step by step process is needed where students will work in a teacher-guided environment and in collaboration with peers to be acquainted with the principles of autonomous learning.

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Appendix

Scale:
Likert scale: 1- Strongly disagree
2- Disagree
3- Neutral
4- Agree
5- Strongly agree

Questionnaire
a) General readiness for self-directed learning
1. I think that the responsibility for learning resides with me
2. I know what I want to learn
3. I feel deterred by the things I do not understand
4. I can learn successfully on my own
5. I depend on teacher or expect the teacher to tell me exactly what to do
6. I think that student participation is necessary in deciding what is to be learnt

b) Independent work in language learning
7. For me language learning involves a lot of self-study
8. I find self-study enjoyable
9. If the language class is not useful, I will work on my own

c) Role of teachers and learners
10. I feel that I can only improve with a class
11. I have to have a teacher to learn a language effectively
12. I want classes where teachers explain everything
13. The best way to learn a language is by a teacher’s explanation
d) Language learning activities
14. It is important for the teacher to give students vocabulary to learn
15. I enjoy collaborative project work
16. Reading and listening activities are pointless in the class, it should be done outside the class
17. Cassettes and videos are best used by individuals rather than in a language class
18. Language classes should be used mainly for speaking practice
e) Objectives, motivation and confidence
19. I know exactly the kind of materials I like to work on in the language classes
20. Self-assessment works best for assessing language proficiency
21. I am confident about my own problem-solving abilities
22. I can define my own learning objective or I know what is best for my learning
23. ‘I know how to achieve my objectives’ - agree or not?
24. I feel others have a better level of English than me
25. External assessment (exams) is the prime motivating factor in most cases of learning

26. All exercises should be marked by teacher: agree or not? (Moderated version of Broady’s (1996) questionnaire, cited and used in Breeze (2002))

Focus-group Interview Questions
A) Views on students responsibility:
1. Do you think that you are responsible for your own learning?
2. How do you take responsibilities for your own learning? What are the signs of making decisions: making effort to learn on your own, having enough practice?
3. How do you feel about self-study? Do you think that you can learn alone?
4. Do you consult with teachers about your problems? Why or why not?

B) Views regarding teachers’ responsibility:
5. What do you think are the responsibilities of your teachers?
6. Do you think a teacher must be there always to help you learn?

C) Motivation level:
7. What is your main motif behind learning English: doing better in exam or be a better user? Going abroad? Love for English?
7.1. Why do you work mainly for exam or assignments? (asked after they replied that the motivation is primarily extrinsic)
7.2. You work mainly for exam but would you like to work freely or autonomously? What factors must be there to motivate you intrinsically?