

Learner Autonomy at Tertiary Level English Classrooms in Bangladesh: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is now considered a major research theme in the field of foreign language teaching. Teachers' beliefs play a significant role in practising learner autonomy in EFL classrooms. In this study, teachers' beliefs and practices related to learner autonomy in the EFL classes at the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh have been explored. A mixed method comprising a survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations have been employed to gather necessary data. EFL teachers at the tertiary level and students from both public and private universities have been the subjects in this study. The findings of this study suggest that although both the teachers and students show interest in practising learner autonomy, their actions are limited in this regard due to factors such as losing control over the class, lack of confidence to share responsibilities with learners, lack of confidence among teachers on Learner Autonomy approach, and students' examination-centric study approach. The study also comes up with recommendations

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to facilitate learner autonomy in EFL classes at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Tertiary level learner, teaching approach, Teachers' confidence.

Introduction

One of the aims of a pedagogical approach is to produce individuals who can take charge of their learning throughout their lifespan. Similarly, in the field of language teaching, Learner Autonomy is considered one of the potential approaches where a greater focus is given to learners' reflection and taking substantial responsibility for learning by the learners (Pichugova, Stepura, & Pravosudov, 2016). In the case of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), learner autonomy is now considered as an issue of significant interest among EFL teachers and linguists. In Bangladesh, where English is taught as a second language and is included as a distinct course from primary to tertiary level of education. In Bangladesh irrespective of public or private universities, students of various disciplines are taught English as a major course. They are offered two or three foundation courses so that they can develop their English language skills which will in turn aid them in pursuing their own disciplines which are taught in English. In recent years, language teaching has become communication-oriented. Traditional classroom teaching is facing a big challenge & is gradually being replaced by learner-oriented approaches.

Against this backdrop, the concept of "autonomy" has attracted attention as an alternative approach to language

learning (Duong, 2021). When learners play an active role in their language, they are known as autonomous learners. Learner autonomy is a dynamic process where the learners are expected to have the ability to take charge of their own learning (Holec, 1981). In an autonomy-oriented classroom, as the learner chooses their own goals, activities and assessment tools, he/she is an active agent in his/her learning process. While the traditional methods are encouraging to shift the role of the instructors from information givers to facilitators, students need to be more autonomous to acquire a sense of responsibility for shaping their learning process. Learner autonomy ensures ‘a learner’s freedom as an individual and goes against ‘old, traditional and teacher-centered practice of language teaching.’ (Jamila, 2013).

Aim of the Study

The aims of this study are to explore EFL teachers’ beliefs about learner autonomy and the association of teachers’ beliefs and their teaching practices to foster learner autonomy in a Southeast Asian context such as Bangladesh. Moreover, the cultural acceptability of learner autonomy in Bangladesh also needs to be investigated as the success of learner autonomy depends on such factors as learners’ beliefs about language learning, the roles of teachers and learners in the learning process, roles of curriculum and learning materials, and factors related with contextual constraints such as learners’ attitude, cultural anticipations of classroom behaviour and culturally influenced learning styles.

Research Questions

- (1) What is the level of autonomy in the tertiary level EFL learners in Bangladesh?
- (2) What is the attitude of the tertiary level English teachers towards learner autonomy?
- (3) To what extent can learner autonomy be enhanced in English Classrooms?

Significance of the Study

This research has investigated the extent to which university-level English teachers understand the concept of learner autonomy and how the cultural beliefs about this concept influence their teaching practices. Although learner autonomy is gaining momentum as an educational phenomenon and various research has sought to create solutions for fostering learner autonomy in Asian countries, there is very little research on how teachers' beliefs and attitudes are enacted in teaching practices, especially in the Bangladeshi context. This study has tried to explore the lack of understanding of learner autonomy and the correlation between teachers' beliefs and their actual teaching practices. Hence, it has provided evidence regarding the extent to which learner autonomy is found in the EFL classrooms in the universities of Bangladesh. The findings of this study have been likely to provide teachers and policymakers new insights into learner autonomy against the backdrop of educational reforms in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

Learner autonomy, a late 20th century term, a late 20th century term introduced by Henri Holec (Holec, 1981) is a

concept of teaching opposite to the conventional “chalk and talk” approach. Empowering students is the motto of learner autonomy. To help learners to assume greater control over their learning it is important to help them to become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use. Aoki and Smith (1999), and Littlewood (2001) have talked about learner autonomy. According to them, there remains convincing evidence to support the perception that learner autonomy (LA) is a psychological phenomenon that can surpass cultural variation as behaviours of learning are culturally conditioned without any doubts.

A recent review by Chong and Reinders observes that learner autonomy has been globally operationalized as an active catalyst for learners’ learning process (Chong & Reinders, 2022). Learners’ metacognitive abilities are now considered one of the major enabling factors of learner autonomy (Nakata, 2019) and often recommended by researchers that fostering such skills helps learners to take control over their learning ability (Palfreyman & Benson, 2019). A recent study in Indonesia finds that students using metacognitive skills are engaging themselves more in self-driven learning activities (Daflizar, Sulistiyo, & Kamil, 2022).

In the current Bangladeshi EFL learning scenario, in the above global milieu, the concept of learner autonomy seems to be in its infancy. When learners play an active role in their learning are known as autonomous learners. Focusing on the current trend of the educational system of Bangladesh, we can see that the tertiary level undergraduate students are in a dilemmatic position. Most of them seemed to be interested in taking charge of their learning. They

want to enjoy the classes express their own needs and thoughts, involving themselves in various activities. However, the current CGPA-focused educational system in Bangladesh does not create a wider scope for the students to be autonomous in their EFL learning process. Besides, the traditional role of the teachers in the classroom, which Benson (Benson, 2001) considers very central for initiating learner autonomy, is not substantially facilitating to practice of autonomous learning at the undergraduate level.

Many studies have been conducted in the field of learner autonomy with the passage of time all over the world to improve English language teaching and learning. Many language teachers and researchers have talked about the huge potential of learner autonomy, such as Benson (2001, 2007), Dickinson (1993), Holec (1981), Little (1991), and many others. The main focus was to shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred classroom.

Balcikanli (2010) analysed the perceptions of 112 student teachers of the ELT department in Turkey. The result has said that the student teachers are positive enough about involving students in decisions about a wide range of classroom activities. He has interviewed 20 volunteer student teachers in groups for further enquiry. There he has found that most student teachers want their students to come forward in taking responsibility for their own learning. But they have fixed some categories where they do not want their students as decision makers. Such as-time segment, place of the course, choice of the text books and many more. At the last of his article, he has recommended the teacher educators to involve students in the activities outside the classroom, in decision making on their learning process. He has also suggested to employ

portfolios and teacher logs for developing practical knowledge and thinking power.

Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) have described a project about the beliefs and practices regarding learning autonomy held by English language teachers in a university language center. They have discussed that in spite of an influential range of research over 30 years, research on learner autonomy has paid limited attention to the sense of the teachers and there is a lack of practice of this concept.

Learner autonomy has been successfully used in “teaching second language worldwide” (Jamila, 2013, p.29). Jamila (2013) has investigated the use of learner autonomy in teaching English speaking to the undergraduate students of private universities of Bangladesh

Jamila has talked about language teaching and the different areas of it. She has worked with 30 tertiary-level English language teachers. She has conducted a questionnaire survey and interviews with them. According to her findings, teachers do not practice learner autonomy entirely. She has talked about some gaps along with the suggestions. She thinks that enough logistic support from the institution and the use of modern technology has a great impact on increasing learner autonomy.

Autonomous learners learn entirely on their own and determine the direction of their own learning. Students mainly focus on the ways of attaining a considerable degree of autonomy, but it is simultaneously very true that their success is mainly ascertained by the educational system and the role of the teacher. As Kumaravadivelu (2003) has

pointed out, teachers must seek no alternative methods, but an alternative to methods. Such an alternative would be based on their experience and awareness of learners' needs.

Teachers hold different beliefs regarding various issues in education (Borg, 2001); and teachers' beliefs have an important influence on their teaching (Pajares, 1992). Some researchers (Balcikanli, 2010; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Chan, 2003; Sakai, Takagi & Chu, 2010) have explored teachers' beliefs and perceptions in promoting learner autonomy. The researchers have used the common term "teachers beliefs" about learner autonomy, nevertheless, they explore different aspects of fields within this broad term.

Chan (2003), for example, provided "a rich source of information on Hong Kong university teachers' perspectives and their language teaching practices regarding learner autonomy" (p.48). The framework to investigate teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy included an analysis and cross-comparison of (a) teachers' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities, (b) their perception of their students' abilities in decision-making, the impact of learner autonomy on teachers' teaching, (c) the teachers' and students' attitudes towards learner autonomy as well as the actual activities that teachers ask their students to take up inside the classroom.

Little (1991) has suggested some rich ways in favour of language learners which will help them to become autonomous. Previously he has defined learner autonomy as a problematic term. He has exaggerated indicating learner autonomy as a slippery issue. Later he has said that defining learner autonomy is a difficult term. He has

summarized some arguments where he has briefly considered the process of “autonomisation”. He has told about the usage of the process in the language classrooms and self-directed learning project. He has nicely suggested some basic, lines of research and has ended up with some suggestions to enhance learner autonomy. He thinks that portfolio has the highest chance to bring autonomy in a language classroom.

Theoretical Framework

In this research, I have explained learner autonomy as a basic component in teaching English to the EFL learners. The objective of this study is to explore EFL teachers’ beliefs about undergraduate learner autonomy and the association of teachers’ beliefs and their teaching practices to foster learner autonomy in Bangladesh. My study is based on the theory of learner autonomy, which has its emphasis on a learner’s taking responsibility for his own learning (Holec, 1981) without much involvement from the teacher (Dickinson, 1987). I have felt that the cultural acceptability of learner autonomy in Bangladesh also needs to be investigated as the success of learner autonomy depends on some factors like learners’ beliefs about language learning, teachers’ beliefs about learner autonomy and their actual practices in the language classroom, role of materials, process of Evaluations etc. Besides, some constraints like learners’ attitudes, cultural anticipation of classroom behaviour and culturally influenced learning styles are also related to it. Because of these consequences, my inquiry will be limited to the following six areas:

- a) Setting objectives

- b) Learning materials
- c) Learning process
- d) Methods of evaluation/Evaluation procedures
- e) Role of teacher and learner
- f) Environment of the classroom and learning.
- g) Availability of technologies

In this regard, I have slightly followed the factors stated by Jamila (2013).

Methodology

This study aimed to find answers to three research questions regarding the autonomous EFL learners of the tertiary level of Bangladesh, the attitude of the university-level teachers towards learner autonomy and some suggestions for enhancing learner autonomy in English classes. To find out the answers to these questions, a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative data analysis was carried out. I also adopted instruments like interview questions, questionnaires, and classroom observation for data collection. A mixed method of research is often preferred in conducting research on learner autonomy as the method offers the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Riazi & Candlin, 2014). A survey questionnaire, from the quantitative stream, through statistical analysis offers understanding based on correlations and patterns (Riazi & Candlin, 2014) whereas qualitative approaches such as interviews and observation

findings offer insights regarding the attitudes, experiences and motivations of the learners (Szocs, 2017).

Procedure of the Study

The study followed the following procedure:

- a) Open-ended along with Likert scale questionnaire was prepared for the students.
- b) A semi-structured interview questions were developed for conducting telephonic interviews.
- c) The questionnaire was pilot-tested by the participants who did not take part in the main research.
- d) The questionnaire was revised and modified based on the opinions of the participants.
- e) Questionnaires were distributed to two universities and e-mailed to other two universities.
- f) All the answers were collected and gathered.
- g) Semi-structured telephone interview was conducted with 12 teachers.
- h) 4 classes were observed to check the similarity between teachers' beliefs and practices.
- i) All the data were analysed.

Subjects

12 English language teachers and 40 English language learners from four universities in Bangladesh were the subjects of my study. I selected 2 private and 2 public universities in Bangladesh. I had very easy access there. Fortunately, I had the chance to study in these 2 selected public universities. And for the selected private universities, I took support from my friends, who were the lecturers of these two private universities. Overall, it was a convenient sampling. Since the study was conducted as a part of my MA course, there were time constraints and considering that constraint I have attempted to reach out to as many respondents as possible.

Questionnaire

I had made a questionnaire for the students where Likert scale had been used. Besides, there were some open-ended questions. I had designed the questionnaire for the students to identify whether they were autonomous or not. Besides, I considered the context of Bangladesh and the competence level of the learners of our country while preparing the questionnaire. To complete the procedure, I took the feedback from an expert into consideration.

I conducted a pilot study where two questions seemed inappropriate to me. So, I had to modify the questionnaire. The students who participated in the pilot study did not participate in the main study.

Semi-structured Telephonic Interviews

For collecting qualitative data, I conducted a semi-structured telephone interview with 12 selected participants who were language teachers. They were selected randomly.

The questions were fixed and specific. The focus of these questions was to explore their beliefs and perceptions about learner autonomy. In this study I used semi-structured interviews because of some advantages. Such as-

- a) It was very easy to reach the teachers over telephone through this interview question.
- b) In case of any confusion, the participant could ask for the clarity.
- c) It was a focused interview.
- d) It took less time.

Class Observations

I had observed the classes of 4 teachers from four different universities. I had observed the classes for fulfilling two purposes. One was to check teachers' perception and practices about learner autonomy, and another was to check learners' attitude towards learner autonomy. I selected the teachers from the interviewees who were highly interested in allowing me to observe their classes.

Data Analysis Method

For this study, I have analysed the data using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative analysis provides an in-depth understanding. It is associated with the question "why" and "how". It helps to investigate the "underlying meaning". I have used the descriptive analysis method to analyse the data I collected from the

interviews and class observation. On the other hand, quantitative analysis emphasizes numerical analysis of data that is measurable. This type of data can be used to draw tables and charts. Microsoft Excell application is used to generate charts and tables from the data collected through the questionnaire.

Results

The objective of this study was to investigate learner autonomy among the teachers and students (undergraduate) at the tertiary level EFL classroom of Bangladesh. In this chapter I have presented the findings gathered from my data analysis. The results are the reflection of qualitative and quantitative data collected through the interviews, questionnaire survey, and class observation.

Findings from the Interviews

For this study, I have conducted a semi-structured interview with randomly chosen English language teachers at the tertiary level. I have approached several language teachers for interviews and 12 of them agreed. From these interviews, by descriptive analysis, I have gathered the following major findings against specific questions:

How do you decide the activities for the learners?

Answering this question 3 teachers (25%) have indicated that they decide it based on the course objective, topic, timing level of the class and sometimes their interest. Again 4 teachers (33.3%) think that if they allow their students to decide activities for themselves, it will be a total hotchpotch. They believe that students vary in their

decisions, and they consume time in making decisions and selecting activities. So, according to them to maintain class time, it never becomes possible for the teachers to rely on the students for selecting activities. Another 4 teachers (33.3%) who are from private universities focus more on the completion of the syllabus. Completing the syllabus is a mandatory issue for them. They strongly believe that if they rely on the students for choosing activities for themselves, they will never be able to finish the classes on time and to complete the syllabus in time.

Do you consider learners' engagement in learning English as an important issue? Why/Why not?

All the 12 teachers (100%) believe that without engaging with learners, it is totally impossible to teach a foreign language. According to them, if the learners are not involved in learning activities, it will be almost impossible for them to develop the skills required for learning a language like English. They have exemplified that only memorizing the rules of grammar and not applying them won't help.

Does the current trend of teaching generate learners' participation in the class? If yes, why? If not, why not?

4 Teachers (33.3%) believe that with the availability of the technology in the class specially at the tertiary level, it has become possible to foster fruitful learning in the class. Besides, the post-method era gives the teachers an opportunity of freedom for choosing appropriate teaching methods. Again 4 teachers (33.3%) who are from private universities address that the current trend gives a lot of scope of participation. Another 4 teachers (33.3%) disagree

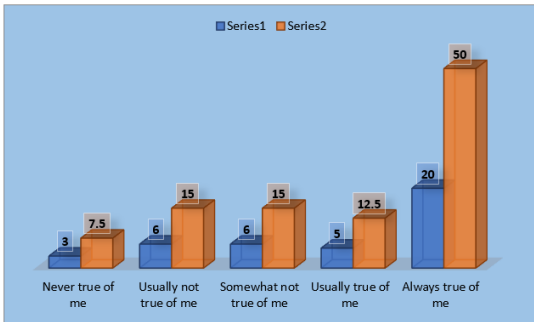
that the current trend of teaching generates learners' participation. Two of the interviewees (16.67%) address 1. A gap in the basic and 2. Less interest, as the reasons for their disagreement.

How can in your opinion students' engagement and interest in learning English be enhanced?

In response to this question, a majority of interviewees (33.3%) focus more on practice. They think that by giving more emphasis to speaking and by engaging in different interesting activities learner autonomy can be enhanced. On the other hand, to enhance learner autonomy, teachers should select teaching materials based on the capability of the students, their primary and secondary educational background and the environment they are provided with-these are opined by 3 teachers (25%).

Findings from the Questionnaire

In this research, I have involved undergraduate students in answering the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, there is a focus on bringing out the real picture of the language classroom in Bangladesh. 40 male and female students were selected randomly to share their perceptions through the questionnaire. There were 28 items in the questionnaire. Most of the questions were formed following the Likert scale and a few were open-ended questions. The major findings from the questionnaire are depicted below.

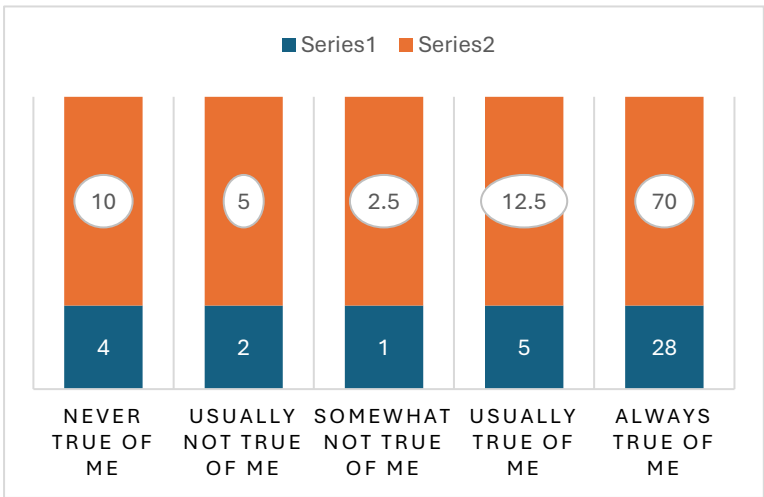


I can't learn English without teacher's supervision

Figure 1

In this graph, it is shown that 20 students (50%) cannot learn English without teacher supervision. On the other hand, 3 students (7.5%) oppose the statement. 6 students (15%) usually do not learn English under teachers' supervision while another 6 Ss (15%) say that this statement is somewhat not true for them. 5 students (12.5%) students think that this statement is usually true for them.

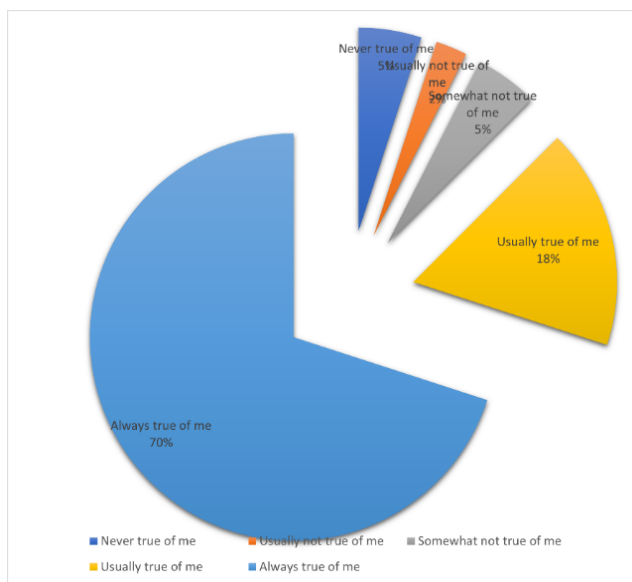
When I face any problem in the English language, I try to



solve it by myself

Figure-2

The above chart shows that 28 students (70%) try to solve any problem by themselves while learning the English language. But 4 students (10%) never think to solve problems by themselves. Two students (5%) usually do not do that while five students (12.5%) usually do it. Only one student (2.5%) believes that the statement is somewhat not true for them.



I enjoy tasks where I can learn on my own.

Figure 3

It is shown that 28 students (70%) always like to learn on their own. Two students (5%) just have the opposite idea. They never like to take charge of their learning. Seven students (18%) usually take charge while one student (2%) usually does not do it. For the two students (5%) the statement is somewhat not true.

I prefer reading books, magazines, materials newspapers



all by myself without my teacher telling me what to read

Figure 4

This chart shows that 33 students (82.5%) prefer reading books, materials, newspapers, magazines all by themselves without any teacher telling them



what to read. 2 students (7.5%) never prefer it. 2 students (5%) usually do not prefer it while 1 student (2.5%) usually do it. Another student (2.5%) thinks that the statement is somewhat not true of them.

- (a) There is not enough time in the classroom to assimilate all the information given by the teacher.

Figure 5

The chart tells us that 32 students (80%) do not get enough time in the classroom to assimilate all the information given by the teacher. While 4 students (10%) directly oppose it. The statement is usually true for 1 student (2.5%) and usually not true for 2 students (5%). For 1 student (2.5%) the statement is somewhat not true.

- (b) I enjoy cooperative and peer learning in class while learning English.

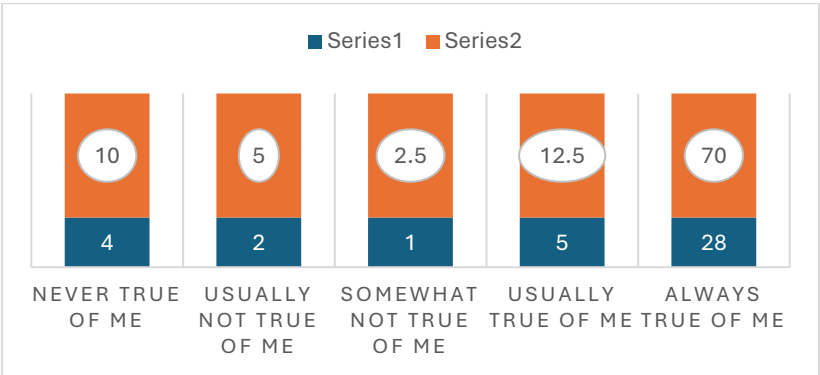


Figure 6

It is seen in the chart that 28 students (70%) enjoy cooperative and peer learning in the class while learning English. But 4 students (10%) select that the activity is never true for them. For 2 students (5%) it is usually not true while for 5 students (12.5%) it is usually true. 1 student (2.5%) says that it is somewhat not true for him.

I like presentations instead of class tests

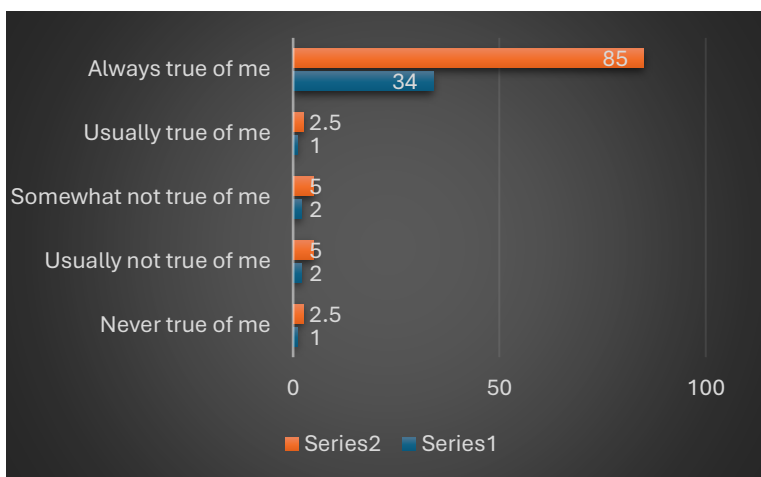


Figure 7

The chart shows that 34 students (85%) like presentation instead of class test but 1 student (2.5%) never like it. 2 students (5%) usually not like it while 2 students (5%) usually liked it. 1 Student (2.5%) somewhat not like it.

I like to do assignments in certain topics as I can show my creativity there

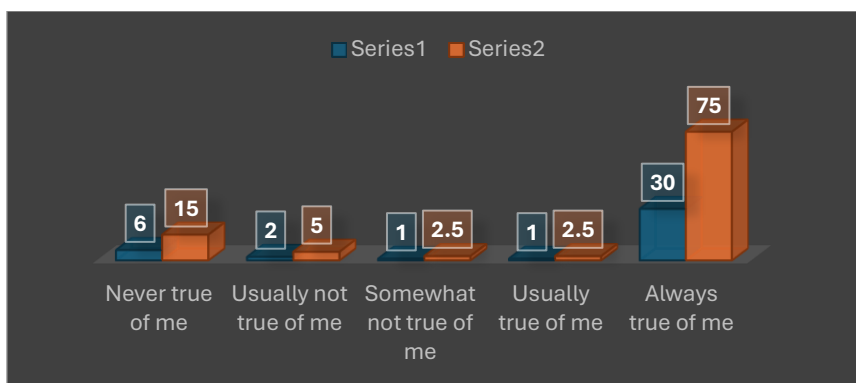


Figure 8

The chart explains that 30 students (75%) Ss like to do assignments in certain topics as they can show their creativity there but 6 Ss (15%) never think that. 2 students (5%) assert it is usually not true for them while 1 student (2.5%) think it is usually true for them. And the last student (2.5%) believe it is somewhat not true for them.

I can learn by slide sharing, video, audio records etc. shown by the teachers. These elements fasten my learning

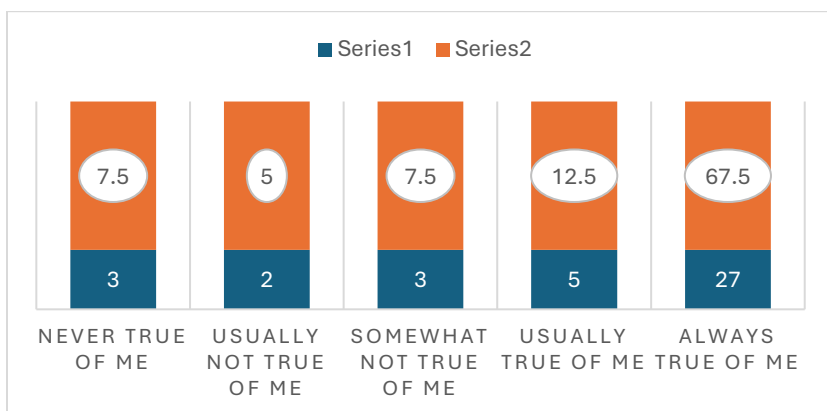


Figure 8

The chart shows that 27 students (67.5%) can learn by slide share, video, audio record etc. shown by the teachers. These elements speed up their learning. But 3 students (7.5%) can never learn in this way. 2 Ss (5%) Ss usually do not learn in this way, which it is usually true for 5 students (12.5%). 3 students (7.5%) Ss think that it is somewhat not true for them.

Before every English class, I preview my lessons

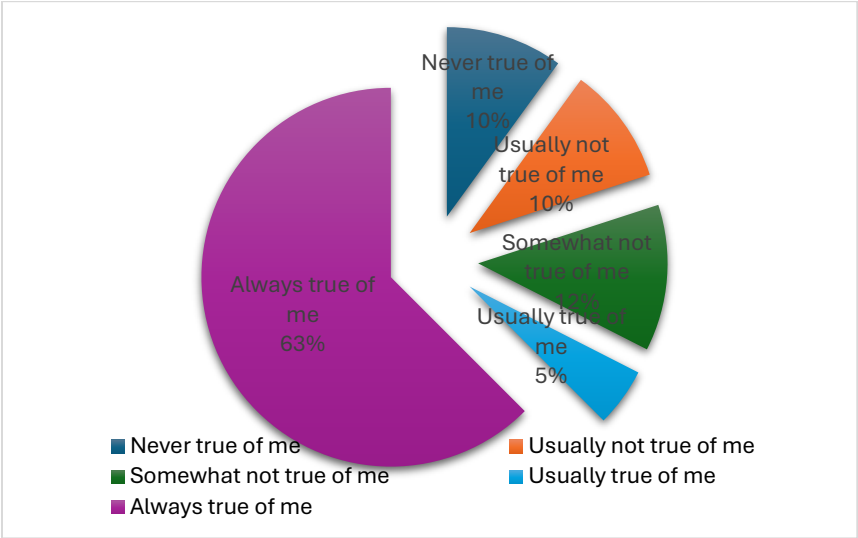


Figure 9

The chart shows that before every English class, 25 Ss (63%) preview my lessons, 4 Ss (10%) never do it, 4 Ss (10%) usually not do it, 5 Ss (12%) Ss somewhat not do it and the last 2 Ss (5%) usually do it.

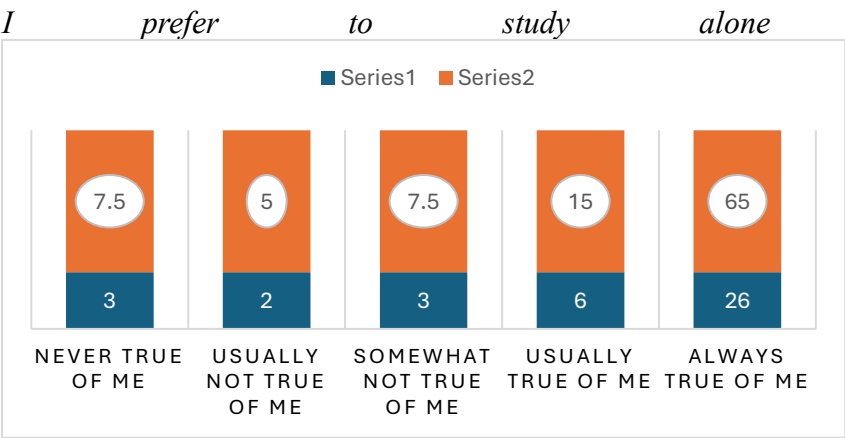


Figure 10

It is shown that 26 students (65%) prefer to study alone, 2 students (5%) never do it, 2 students (5%) usually not do it, 3 students (7.5%) somewhat not do it and the rest 6 students (15%) usually do it.

When I am asked to use technologies that I have not used before-

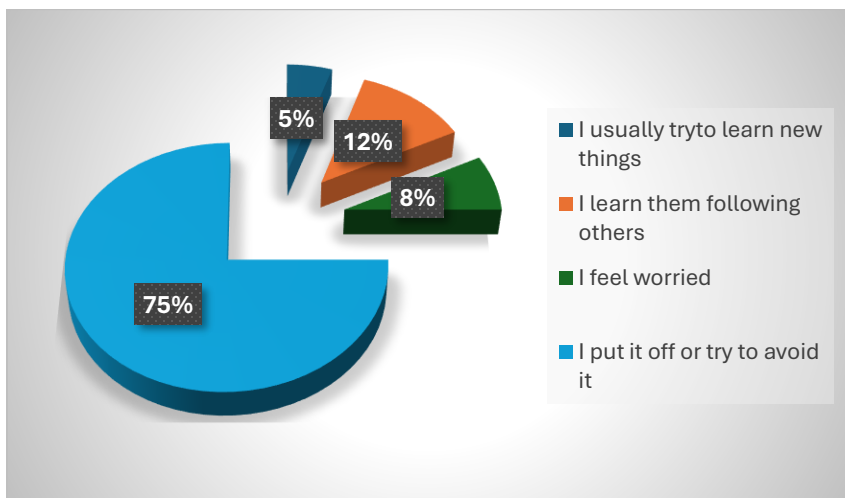


Figure 11

From the above graph it is known that 30 students (75%) put it off or try to avoid it if they are asked to use technologies that they have not used before. In that case, 2 students (5%) usually try to learn new things while 5 students (12.5%) learn them following others. The rest 3 students (8%) feel worried about this situation.

Findings from the Class Observations

Classroom observation is considered a complementary research tool. It has provided me with extra empirical data on teachers' classroom practices. I observed 4 classes in the English department of four different universities. I aimed to discover if the classrooms were actually autonomous. The observed classrooms were not autonomous at all. Almost all the teachers were hankering after the completion of the syllabus. They were concerned about the duration of the class. They were delivering their

lectures, and the students were listening to them passively. In the classes where the teachers started the new topic, students remained almost dumb there. They did not have any idea about it. On the other hand, when teachers revised any topic, some of the students could answer. Others did not have any concerns about the topic because there was not sufficient scope to engage themselves in activities. Classrooms were fully influenced by the traditional method of teaching. The teacher was all in all for making almost all the decisions about learning. Group works were not used frequently. The teacher acted only as the provider of knowledge. Students attended the lecture but most of them did not enjoy the class.

Despite the teacher-centred nature of the classrooms, students exhibited a lack of interest in the class. They were not engaged and did not enjoy the lessons. Most of the students sat idly, with some taking notes, others staring at the board, and some appearing absent-minded. It was only at the very end of the class, when the teacher posed a question instead of continuing the lecture, that the students displayed any interest in responding. Similarly, in the classrooms, students' attitudes towards practising more autonomous behaviours were frequently hindered by factors such as an excessive emphasis on examinations and the short duration of classes. These observations indicate that, although students were capable of autonomy, they were unable to take control of their learning. There was a noticeable shift from autonomous learners to traditional learners. I found that the current educational system is entirely responsible for this shift. It restricts students from maintaining autonomy and redirects their full focus towards achieving high grades.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the majority of teachers at the tertiary level in Bangladesh are unable to implement learner autonomy in their English classrooms due to several factors, including time constraints, the pressure to complete the syllabus, exam-focused students, minimal engagement from class participants, and students' fear and shyness in speaking English. Furthermore, while some teachers advocate for an autonomous learning environment to some extent, the results remain largely unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, it is challenging to generalise this situation across all universities.

The result of this study will be useful for tertiary-level students and teachers who are concerned with learning and teaching English as a foreign language in Bangladesh. It has brought out the actual practice in the tertiary level English language class in Bangladesh. The findings of this study might also be useful in other ESOL countries with similar cultural and structural contexts leading to policy interventions such as targeted professional development and structural reforms in teaching English.

From my work, language teachers will get scope for further research. They will be aware of benefits of learning autonomy and its usefulness. It will increase their scope to reshape their old teaching system. Most importantly they will have the clear idea about do's and don'ts of their teaching procedure.

Following the procedure, the teacher can easily modify materials, method, selecting objectives, environment, teacher-learner relationship and environment

according to the principles of autonomous learning. Besides, universities will also give enough logistic support to the classroom to make them effective. It will be understood that the use of technology is also a great support for conducting a language classroom.

The most important thing is that what a learner feels about his learning is beyond the capacity of a teacher (Jamila, 2013). So, if we can implement an autonomous environment in the classroom, the teaching-learning process will be facilitated more than what it is existing now.

One of the major limitations of this study was time constraints. I had approximately six months to conduct my research. The study could have been more representative had it had the opportunity to include MA level students as subjects. A further review of the literature could have enriched this study.

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