

Exploring EFL Learners' Autonomy in Virtual Classes: A Survey-based Analysis

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Abstract: This study examines the autonomy of Bangladeshi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, a critical aspect of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It investigates the state of learner autonomy in virtual classes during the COVID-19 pandemic when educational institutions were closed. The research involved higher secondary level students in Bangladesh. Data was collected using a survey questionnaire on Google Forms, comprising eleven statements on a five-point Likert scale. The findings indicate mixed realities regarding learner autonomy. While most learners still relied on teacher guidance, a substantial number demonstrated increased skills in self-directed English language learning. This paper concludes with recommendations for teachers to foster learner autonomy in virtual settings.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, constructivism, online EFL class, learner-centered class, CLT, virtual learning, pandemic education, remote language learning

1. Introduction

In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education, a noteworthy shift has occurred in the roles of both teachers and learners. This shift has progressively moved the focus from educators to students, empowering the latter to become more active and proficient language users. Drawing inspiration from postmodernism and humanism, language pedagogy now seeks ways to enable students to utilize all available resources and opportunities within the classroom, ensuring sustainable and effective learning. This approach places particular emphasis on granting students greater autonomy in language learning. As Kabir (2015) aptly notes, “modern humanistic education pedagogy acknowledges learners’ rights and privileges” (p. 53).

In Bangladesh, we can observe a reflection, albeit not yet complete, of this transformation. Here, students are increasingly seen as possessing the independent zeal, ability, and skills required to learn and use English

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effectively. They actively collaborate with language teachers in setting goals, determining outcomes, choosing content, and selecting materials that facilitate successful language learning. In all these aspects, autonomy for EFL learners, who are lively, responsible, and self-motivated, is considered essential. Chowdhury, Roy, and Kabilan (2021) affirm that encouraging learners to take an active role positively impacts their motivation and autonomy (p. 228). This study delves into the current state of autonomy among higher secondary level EFL learners in Bangladesh, particularly in the context of virtual classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to uncover the extent of learner autonomy in this changed educational landscape.

1.1 Rationale and Context of the Research

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the prolonged closure of educational institutions in Bangladesh, necessitating a shift to online platforms to continue classes, albeit with limited resources. Pratama and Kuswardani (2021) note that the closure of educational institutions forced students to “study in their own space,” physically distanced from their teachers and peers (p. 113). Notably, virtual classrooms differ from physical ones in terms of students’ roles, beliefs, attitudes, psychological orientation, and performance in classroom activities. In virtual classes, students are expected to be independent learners, as direct guidance from teachers is limited (Mulyah et al., p. 383).

This shift raises significant questions about how language classes can be successful in the educational context of Bangladesh, where students traditionally rely heavily on teachers' guidance. In online classes, teachers cannot provide the same level of direction as they do in physical classrooms. Thus, students need to possess the skills and capacity for active and responsible learning autonomously. This study seeks to ascertain whether EFL learners are prepared to be autonomous, which is a timely and pertinent question (Hossain & Mustapha, 2020, p. 82).

This research will investigate the reality of virtual autonomous English learners and shed light on the extent to which they are self-directed, active, responsible, aware, sincere, and interested in becoming autonomous learners.

1.2 Significance of the Research

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the educational system in Bangladesh faced significant challenges. Educators prioritized short syllabi and adapting to technology, leaving little room for considering topics like learner autonomy.

However, the findings of this study hold potential value in shaping language pedagogy in Bangladesh.

Given that the English curriculum in Bangladesh is communicative language teaching (CLT)-based, and autonomy is a crucial aspect of CLT, the study's results can inform future research on learner autonomy in EFL classes, both virtual and physical. This research is significant because it can provide evidence regarding the reality of online EFL learners in Bangladesh concerning their roles, performance, perceptions, and beliefs as active and responsible learners. In a context where learners often depend on teachers for successful outcomes, especially during the pandemic, these results can guide language policymakers in creating more efficient policies.

2. Aim of the Research

This research aims to explore the actual state of learner autonomy among EFL learners in virtual classrooms in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Research Question

In pursuit of this aim, the research addresses the following question:

What is the actual state of learner autonomy among EFL learners in virtual classrooms in Bangladesh?

4. Literature Review

4.1 Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy in ELT has been a pedagogical concern since the 1980s (Mehrin, 2017, p. 124). However, the concept's roots can be traced back to philosophers like Galileo, Rousseau, and educators such as Dewey, Kilpatrick, Freire, Illich, and Rodgers, who viewed learner autonomy from multiple perspectives as a crucial element of pedagogy (Orakci & Gelisi, 2017, p.25). Holec's (1981) report to the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project is often considered the catalyst for incorporating learner autonomy into language pedagogy (Khaerudin & Chik, 2021, p. 40; Misir, Koban & Koc, 2018, p. 26). According to Holec (1981), learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p. 3), a definition widely cited in the field (Benson, 2006, p. 22). Holec (1981) further elaborates that learner autonomy involves motivating learners "to determine objectives, define content and progressions, select methods and techniques, monitor the acquisition process, and evaluate what has been learned" (p. 3). Little (1991) adds that learner autonomy encompasses learners' abilities for "detachment,

critical reflection, decision making, and independent action” (p. 4). He emphasizes that learner autonomy is fundamentally rooted in the learner’s psychological relationship with the learning process (p. 2).

4.2 Teacher’s Role in Creating Learner Autonomy

In the concept of learner autonomy there is a sense of paradox. According to some scholars (Bach, 2023), autonomy is an ability which is not innate, that means, learners do not bring learning autonomy with their birth, rather, it (autonomy) comprises of some learning skills which learners cannot avail naturally (p.3131). Learner autonomy implies that the learner should possess ability to learn independently from the teacher, but, he/she needs teacher’s help “to aid learners in the pursuit of their autonomy (p. 3131). The relation of learner autonomy with the concept of the nonexistence of the teacher or learning “at home, with a computer, in a self-access center etc.” is nothing but a “misconception” (Smith, 2003; cited in Bach, 2023, p. 3132). We cannot expect that autonomous learners are entirely independent of the teacher. But, expectedly, the teacher should possess the attitude which is autonomy-supportive.

The teacher’s role significantly influences learner autonomy in a language classroom. Breen and Mann (1997) argue that to cultivate an environment of learner autonomy, language teachers must possess self-awareness, belief and trust, and a desire to promote autonomy. This involves recognizing when the teacher can act autonomously, understanding personal beliefs about teaching and learning, and acknowledging how their own experiences as learners and teachers have shaped their current classroom practices. Additionally, teachers must believe in each learner's capacity to learn and trust in their ability to assert their autonomy. They should also have the desire to nurture learner autonomy in the classroom, even in the face of potential challenges (p. 145-146). Voller (1997) outlines multiple roles for teachers in autonomous classrooms, including facilitator of learning, counselor for consultation and guidance, and resource provider with knowledge available to learners in need (p. 01-106). The importance of learner autonomy must be emphasized early in teacher training for EFL educators (Balcikanli, 2010, p. 91).

4.3 The Significance of Learner Autonomy

According to Jamila (2013), learner autonomy offers students the opportunity to select their own learning materials, which has enormous potential for leveraging their experiences. This fosters a sense of responsibility and genuine commitment to self-learning, enhances their confidence, decision-

making abilities and self-worth, and encourages active participation in class (p. 32).

In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, learner autonomy introduces several advantages, including a more flexible timetable and syllabus, thus making learning more learner-centered, motivating, and efficient. This perspective aligns with Dickinson's ideas from 1987, as cited in Breez (2002) (p. 23).

Cotterall (1995) argues for the desirability of learner autonomy in the EFL classroom based on philosophical, pedagogical, and practical reasons. Philosophically, it upholds the idea that learners, as individuals and free human beings, have the right to make choices in their learning process. It also prepares them to become active and capable learners who can thrive in a future where independence in learning is highly valuable (p. 219).

From a pedagogical perspective, learner autonomy contributes to learners' sense of security because those who actively make choices and decisions about their learning program are more likely to feel confident in their learning (p. 219, citing McCafferty, 1981).

Practically, learner autonomy is advocated because teacher availability may not always be possible. Therefore, learners must be equipped to learn independently. In autonomous classrooms, learners become more efficient in their language learning, as they do not have to wait for the teacher to provide resources or solve problems (p. 220).

4.4 The Potential for Learner Autonomy in Online Learning

In a study on relationship between online EFL learning and learner autonomy in Indonesia Hidayati and Husna (2020) found very interesting issues. They discovered how the learners' experience during online learning shaped the basic trends of autonomy of the learners. The contexts of online learning offered supportive conditions for the learners to attain autonomy. They found that the whole learning process was very pleasant to the learners. Many of them manifested some positive points of learning autonomy. This finding reveals an encouraging proximity between online learning and learner autonomy.

Online learning primarily relies on technological resources. As Misir, Koban and Koc (2018) noted, there has been recent scholarly interest in the relationship between learner autonomy and technology and how technology-based learning can foster autonomy (p. 26). Technology is seen as a central

element in enabling learner autonomy (Inayati, Rachmadhani & Utami, 2021, p. 60).

Reinders and White (2016) point out that the use of technology for learning often demands a degree of autonomy (p. 143).

Muliyah et al. (2020) argue that online learning promotes the independence of learners who are physically separated from educational institutions and teachers. This autonomy provides them with a more convenient self-learning environment, the flexibility to adapt to individual learning styles, and the ability to set their own pace and access unlimited internet resources (p. 383).

In online classes, learners have the advantage of studying from home using their personal computers and devices, which brings a sense of psychological ease and encourages the development of autonomy (Muhammad, 2020, p. 321).

4.5 Learner Autonomy and the Constructivist Theory

The concept of learner autonomy has gained increased attention, as it aligns with contemporary socio-political views emphasizing greater respect for individual autonomy in society (Khaerudin & Chik, 2021, p. 40). O'Leary (2018) argues that the application and development of learner autonomy in pedagogy are rooted in various paradigms and theoretical frameworks (p. 2). Notably, the theory of constructivism exerts a profound influence on learner autonomy. Wang (2014) underscores that learner autonomy is rooted in the constructivist learning theory, which places learning at the core and emphasizes the pivotal role of learners (p. 1553). Aljohani (2017) posits that in constructivism, knowledge is actively constructed, requiring learners to be proactive in shaping their understanding rather than passively absorbing information (p. 98). As Benson (2001) emphasizes, the constructivist theory of learning underscores learners' full involvement in the learning process (p. 36). Consequently, the concept of learner autonomy is closely tied to the constructivist theory.

4.6 Learner Autonomy in the Bangladeshi EFL Context: A Brief Overview

In Bangladesh, like many other countries, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is being practiced, although doubts persist regarding its practicality. Learner autonomy is a fundamental aspect of CLT, wherein students are expected to take on greater responsibility for their learning (Richards, 2006, p. 5). However, in Bangladesh, the actualization of this learner responsibility remains a challenge despite ongoing efforts to

implement CLT principles in the English language curriculum. Rahman et al. (2019) contend that Bangladesh has not yet achieved autonomy in English language teaching, a reality often downplayed by language policymakers (p. 11). In line with this, Huda (2003) notes that learners still grapple with 'CLT phobia' due to their strong dependence on traditional teaching methods (p. 8), and both educators and students are often hesitant to embrace CLT guidelines (p. 9).

The complete and necessary adoption of CLT seems unfeasible in Bangladesh due to practical and cultural realities. In an autonomous classroom, learners are expected to have independence in setting goals and actively participating in the learning process. However, the educational culture in Bangladesh still leans toward teacher-centered approaches, with teachers playing a central and dominant role in the EFL classroom. This, in turn, results in a marked absence of learner autonomy (Kabir, 2015, p. 53). In this context, learners are often viewed as passive receivers of knowledge provided by teachers (Huda, 2013, p. 70). While learner autonomy aims to foster long-term pedagogical development and life skills, the prevailing focus among EFL learners in Bangladesh centers on achieving good grades in examinations. Consequently, the reliance on teachers for guidance and supervision is perceived as sufficient, making the cultivation of learner autonomy a challenging endeavor in this context.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was prepared using Google Forms, consisting of eleven items adapted from Breeze (2002) and Muliya et al. (2020). The questionnaire was modified to ensure relevance to the context. A five-point Likert scale was used for scoring, with the following points: 'Always True (AT)-5', 'Mostly True (MT)-4', 'Sometimes True (ST)-3', 'Rarely True (RT)-2', and 'Never True (NT)-1'. The questionnaire was divided into four groups:

Group 1: General readiness for self-direction in online learning.

Group 2: Independent work in language learning.

Group 3: Roles of teachers: explanation/supervision.

Group 4: Importance of class/teacher.

5.2 Respondents

The research involved 174 higher secondary level students and senior learners from twelve cadet colleges in Bangladesh. Although 177 individuals

submitted responses, three of them submitted the Google form without any responses. The senior learners included SSC examinees-2021, cadets of class XII, and HSC examinees-2021. SSC candidates were included in the survey because they were transitioning to the intermediate level of education. Higher secondary level learners were targeted as respondents due to their greater experience and understanding of the questionnaire's statements.

5.3 Research Design and Data Analysis

The research employed a quantitative approach, with respondents selecting the most relevant option from the structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms, and the link was distributed through Messenger ID, Messenger groups, and email. Gender differentiation was not considered during the survey. Responses were quantitatively analyzed by calculating the mean of each statement based on the Likert Scale, with values ranging from 1-5.

6. Data Presentation

Group 1: General readiness for self-direction in online learning

Statement	AT (5)	MT (4)	ST (3)	RT (2)	NT (1)	Mean	Average Mean
1. Online learning gives me the motivation to learn English.	32 18.4 %	59 33.5 %	55 31.6 %	20 11.5 %	8 4.6%	3.50	3.34
2. Online learning doesn't hamper interaction between teacher and learners in class.	18 10.3 %	49 28.2 %	47 27%	41 23.6 %	19 10.9 %	3.03	
3. I find flexibility in terms of time in online learning.	42 24.1 %	50 28.7 %	47 27%	27 15.5 %	8 4.6%	3.50	

The mean score of statement 1 is 3.50, indicating that most respondents feel motivated to learn English online. However, statement 2 suggests that most believe physical classrooms offer better interaction with teachers. Statement 3 shows that the majority perceive time flexibility in online classes. The average mean of the group (3.34) suggests that most learners are not fully ready for self-directed learning.

Group 2: Independent work in language learning

Statement	AT (5)	MT (4)	ST (3)	RT (2)	NT (1)	Mean	Average Mean
4. Online learning has enabled me to solve my academic problems.	31 17.8%	53 30.5%	50 28.7%	34 19.5%	6 3.4%	3.40	3.60
5. Online learning has taught me how to study by solely relying on me.	51 29.3%	67 38.5%	30 17.2%	16 9.2%	10 5.7%	3.80	

The mean score of the 4th statement is 3.40, indicating that most learners can solve academic problems independently. Regarding self-reliance in learning English, statement 5 shows that a sizable portion agrees that online learning is conducive (mean score of 3.80). The average mean of the second group (3.60) suggests that most learners have developed some self-dependence.

Group 3: Roles of teachers: explanation/supervision

Statement	AT (5)	MT (4)	ST (3)	RT (2)	NT (1)	Mean	Average Mean
6. I need direct control of my teacher for learning English.	50 28.7%	41 23.6%	48 27.6%	26 14.9%	9 5.2%	3.6	3.82
7. Direct feedback is better than online feedback to me.	87 50.3%	40 23.1%	26 15%	10 5.8%	10 5.8%	4.06	
8. I always need the teacher's explanation to better understand the class contents.	57 33.1%	43 25%	53 30.8%	13 7.6%	6 3.5%	3.8	

The response to the 6th statement (mean score of 3.6) suggests that most learners feel direct teacher control is necessary. This aligns with the preference for direct feedback (mean score 4.06 in statement 7). Statement 8

also supports this, with a mean score of 3.8. The average mean of this group (3.82) indicates that most learners rely on teachers' supervision and explanation.

Group 4: Importance of class/teacher

Statement	AT (5)	MT (4)	ST (3)	RT (2)	NT (1)	Mean	Average Mean
9. I need face-to-face guidance, not online guidance, from my teacher.	61 35.3%	54 31.2%	34 19.7%	18 10.4%	6 3.5%	3.84	3.08
10. I can learn only when the teacher is beside me.	18 10.3%	22 12.6%	40 23%	58 33.3%	36 20.7%	2.59	
11. I cannot work and study without my classmates.	18 10.4%	36 20.8%	46 26.6%	44 25.4%	29 16.8%	2.82	

The mean score of the 9th statement is 3.80, indicating that most learners believe teachers should provide face-to-face guidance. However, statement 10 shows that many learners believe they can learn both with and without the teacher (mean score 2.59). Statement 11 suggests that most learners have developed self-dependence (mean score 2.82). The average mean of the group (3.08) implies that few learners strongly rely on the class teacher and classmates for learning English.

7. A Critical Examination of the Findings

When analyzing learner autonomy in the EFL classroom, it is essential to gauge the degree of reliance that learners place on their teachers. The participants in this research exhibit a consistent reliance on teachers in terms of guidance, supervision, and direct involvement in their learning processes. In an online class setting, which cannot fully replicate these elements, learners often experience feelings of insecurity as they navigate the learning process.

Notably, when examining the lowest points of the scale (RT & NT) within the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th statements, only a small percentage of learners, ranging from 11.1% to 20.1%, believe that teachers' direct control, feedback, explanation, and guidance is not indispensable. This trend reflects the deeply ingrained dependence on teachers within the educational culture of Bangladesh. Despite the abundance of learning materials accessible through the Internet in the 21st century, learners in this context still largely adhere to their reliance on teachers for direction and content explanation.

Additionally, most learners express the belief that a physical classroom offers greater opportunities for interaction and communication with the teacher compared to an online class. This reliance on the teacher underscores the findings of recent research on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Bangladeshi schools, which highlights the continued teacher-centered nature of the EFL classroom in the country. In CLT, learner autonomy is a crucial aspect, yet the prevailing dependence on teachers for guidance and supervision leaves little room for its development. Consequently, the application of CLT principles in this context does not yield positive results.

Surprisingly, responses to the 10th and 11th statements reveal that a sizable number of learners believe they can learn independently without direct proximity to their teacher and classmates. This indicates a growing sense of self-reliance, which is a positive development for achieving autonomy in language learning. This progress is also evident in responses to the 4th and 5th statements, facilitated by the extended period of compulsory online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. This prolonged exposure to the virtual learning environment has increased learners' confidence and motivation, as evidenced by the first statement, where most learners express motivation to learn English online.

In conclusion, the average mean of the first group suggests that learners' readiness for self-directed language learning, and thus autonomy in the EFL class, falls within the lower middle range of the scale. This indicates that a sizable portion of learners remains unprepared for self-direction in language learning. They believe in the flexibility of time and the motivation offered by online classes, but they strongly feel that online classes do not provide sufficient opportunities for communication and interaction with their teacher, reinforcing the idea that learner autonomy remains elusive in the pedagogical context of Bangladesh. The second group of learners has shown a limited ability to work independently in solving academic problems and relying on themselves, indicating an increasing capacity for self-reliant learning. In contrast, the third group exhibits a consistent dependence on teachers' explanation and supervision, while the fourth group reflects a preference for the teacher's guidance but also demonstrates an ability to learn independently without direct teacher and peer support.

8. Pedagogical Implications of the Research Findings

Even though learners have returned to physical classrooms, the possibility of a return of the pandemic in a severe form remains. The pandemic has also underscored the importance of online platforms as a means of teaching and

learning. Considering these factors, language policy makers should develop contextual and effective policies to help both teachers and learners adapt to the new pedagogical landscape. Based on the research findings, this paper suggests that, as learners still heavily depend on teachers for guidance and understanding of the learning content, teachers should strive to be as accessible as possible to their students. Given that learners' learning style preferences cannot be changed overnight in favor of virtual classes, teachers should provide ample learning support in terms of direction and guidance. The research findings also indicate that a substantial number of learners have developed self-reliance in learning English. EFL teachers should investigate the teaching styles that have facilitated this positive change and adapt them, with necessary modifications, to achieve further pedagogical improvements.

9. Conclusion

Through the findings and discussion of the research, we can see what the practical scenario of the EFL learners' autonomy in virtual classes in Bangladesh is. If we can ensure learner autonomy in our country's EFL classrooms, as Hossain and Mustapha (2020) claim, this will lead to a constructive outcome for learners in their English language performance (p. 91). Moreover, the current reality of Bangladesh's educational environment suggests that the online platform will become an effective and common substitute for real classrooms in the coming days. Therefore, if needed, the curriculum should be redesigned. This is because both the teachers and the learners of English should be accustomed to the new normal.

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