

## **Supporting Learner Autonomy in the FL classrooms at the Secondary Level in Bangladesh**

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**ABSTRACT:** *English teaching and learning culture in Bangladesh has not changed even after the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the place of Grammar Translation Method (GTM) two decades ago. Majority of EFL teachers do not seem to recognize the significance of learner autonomy, which is one of the vital concerns of CLT. This study investigates the extent to which Bangladeshi language learners and teachers understand the concept of learner autonomy and how far their beliefs about this concept are exercised in their teaching and learning practices. We have investigated this issue by adopting a mixed method approach. The analysis of the data reports the thin presence of learner autonomy in our secondary schools. The study also puts up a list of recommendations which may contribute to the introduction of more learner autonomy in EFL classes.*

**KEYWORDS:** *CLT- EFL- Learner Autonomy- Learner Participation - Motivation -*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Modern humanistic education pedagogy acknowledges learners' rights and privileges. All sorts of facilities should be ensured so that learners can become effective and independent language learners. The concept of learner autonomy is gradually becoming the focal point since the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Bangladesh. CLT approach emphasizes "learners should have a say in what they should be learning and how they should learn it" (Nunan 1988:20). In a CLT environment, education should be concerned with the development of autonomy in the learner. However, in Bangladesh we notice that only government stakeholders and course planners design curriculum and course books according to their own desire or whim. We often observe that learner's needs are ignored and learners have no space to express their views in decision making phase. Learners' opinions regarding education system as well as language learning are never sought. Rather the experts think that learners are too immature and inefficient to place any opinion or argument regarding the education system or teaching materials or teaching techniques that are operative in Bangladesh. When I recall my school days, I still remember the shyness of the students in English classes and fearful state that prevailed inside the classroom. This type of discomfort occurs when the education system does not conform to autonomous learning. It is noticed that the learners are getting educated by the ready-made syllabus of education board. The classroom teaching is still too much teacher centric and students are dominated by the teachers. Teachers are also feeding this conventional curriculum to learners. However, it is believed that the teachers should be the guiding force to establish learner autonomy in the classroom. So, to ensure a meaningful and effective language teaching environment, it would be necessary to promote learner autonomy in our schools. This study aims at exploring the teaching and learning scenario of our language classrooms and to suggest the ways and means for ensuring learner autonomy with a view to creating a supportive environment for learning and teaching English in our country.

#### **1.1. Aims and significance of the study:**

The aim of the present study is to examine the present autonomy condition among learners at secondary level of Bangladesh. It will also investigate the teachers' understanding, willingness and intention about implementing autonomy. On the basis of the finding, it will suggest the effective ways of promoting learner autonomy.

#### **1.2. Research problem:**

It is assumed that learner autonomy is severely absent in the education of Bangladesh. This study is going to find out the effective ways to encourage autonomy inside and outside the classroom. Researchers like Kocak (2003:1-130), Balcikanli(2010:1-15), Jamil(2010:1-8), Barillaro (2011:1-20), Farooq (2012:1-19), Ikonen (2013:1-125), Nga (2014:1-229) have tried to explore the very essence to boost the autonomy in language learning, foreign language learning and second language learning as well. As far as my knowledge goes no study is carried out to evaluate the state of learner autonomy especially at secondary level in the context of Bangladesh. So, I feel the necessity of carrying out a study in this field.

### 1.3. Research questions:

My study focuses on the following issues:

- i) Do the teachers promote the learner autonomy in the secondary school classrooms?
- ii) What are the major challenges to the way of independent learning?

## II. Literature Review:

### 2.1. The definition of Learner Autonomy:

Learner autonomy guarantees learners' rights and privileges of learning. "Autonomous learning is based on the principle that learner should take maximum responsibility for, and control of their own learning styles..." Johnson and Johnson(eds.)(1998:25). Holec's (1981:3) holds learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning"; and Dickinson (1987:11) points out it is a situation in which the learner is solely responsible for all decisions - the learner's 'psychological relation' to the process and content of learning'. Benson (1997:18-34) suggests that learner autonomy can be divided into three versions: technical, psychological and political. The technical version of the autonomy, which implies a positivist approach to knowledge, entails the technical skills such as learning strategies and task implementation. The psychological version of autonomy, which can be traced to constructivism, refers to learner autonomy as an innate capacity with cognitive aspects such as attitudes and abilities affecting learning. The political version of autonomy, which originates in the critical approaches to language, emphasizes control over the processes and content over learning.

Building autonomy among the learners helps them to determine their own actions. Autonomy refers to the learners' broad approach to the learning process. Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his/her learning and implementations of those decisions. Benson (2001: 47) calls it "as the learner's behavior or capacity to control one's own learning". Littlewood (1991: 49) holds that autonomy is a capacity for "detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action". The major challenge for the learner autonomy movement is to take greater account of learner's ability to set learning goals and to organize their own learning ability.

### 2.2. Theories of promoting learner autonomy in foreign language classroom:

Developing learner autonomy is a gradual process. The successful implementation of autonomy depends upon the strong affinity between teacher and learner.

The following segment of the research will show the basic principles of promoting autonomy inside and outside classroom.

Dam, L (1995:6) suggests that fostering autonomy in the classroom is initially "a matter of getting started, of taking the first steps towards creating a learning environment where learners are encouraged to make decisions concerning their own learning".

2.3. Nunan (2003:196-202) offers some valuable steps for creating autonomy among the learners:

**Step 1:** Making instruction goals clear to learners;

**Step 2:** Allowing learners to create their own goals;

**Step 3:** Encouraging learners to use their foreign or second language outside the classroom;

**Step 4:** Raising awareness of learning process;

**Step 5:** Helping learners to identify their own preferred styles and strategies;

**Step 6:** Encouraging learner choice;

**Step 7:** Allowing learners to generate their own tasks;

**Step 8:** Encouraging learners to become teachers;

**Step 9:** Encouraging learners to become researchers;

### 2.4. Measuring learner autonomy:

Learner autonomy has been defined earlier by Benson (2001: 47) as the 'capacity in taking control of the learning processes'. According to Nunan (1996:13) "There are degrees of autonomy and the extent of which it is feasible or desirable of learners to embrace autonomy will depend on a range of factors to do with the personality of the learner, their goals in undertaking the study of another language, the philosophy of the institution (if any) providing the instruction, and the cultural context within which the learning takes place". For this study, fostering learner autonomy for a new comer can proceed in three different dimensions, in terms of the learners' participation, learning mode and learners' role:

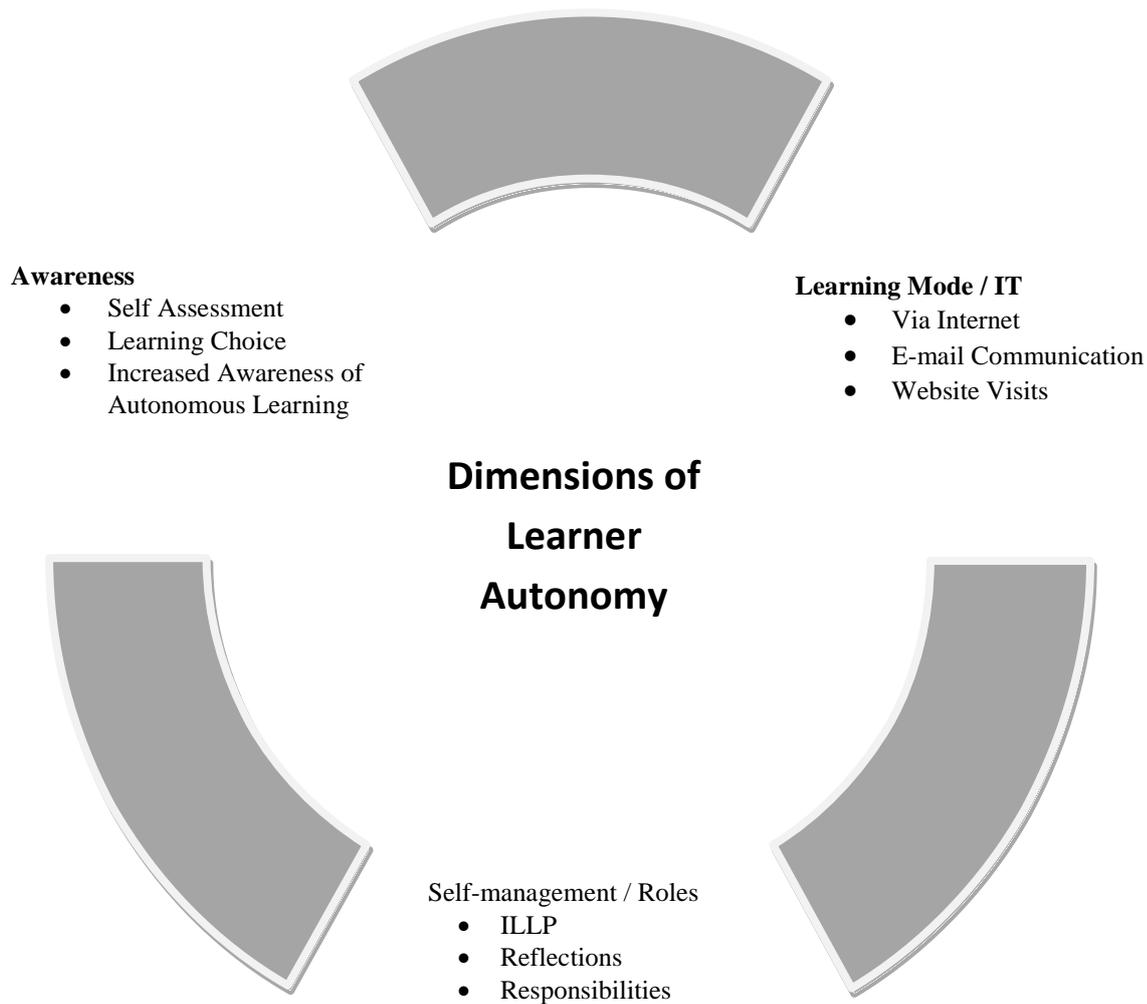


Fig 1: Adapted from Kenning (1996:15)

The three dimensions can be outlined as follows:

- i. **Learners' participation:** Involvement in self-assessment and selection of learning materials, thus raising the awareness of autonomous learning .
- ii. **The learning mode:** Imposing on the learning environment and conditions of learners use and the choice of it.
- iii. **Self –management in the independent language learning programme:** To take the responsibility in completing the learning tasks or activities and providing feedback or comment for self-reflection.

### 2.5. The role of the Teacher in an autonomous classroom:

Now we will make an attempt to explore the role of a teacher in an autonomous classroom:

Voller (1997:183-197) points out that in an autonomous classroom the teacher may act as---

- ✓ a facilitator, who initiates and supports decision-making processes.
- ✓ a counselor, who responds to the ongoing needs of individuals.
- ✓ a resource, who makes his or her knowledge and expertise available to the learners when it is needed.

Clearly, teachers who want to foster autonomy should not see themselves as the masters of classrooms or as the fountains of knowledge who will pour knowledge into the brains of the learners. A second important question concerns the social side of learner decision making in the classroom. Autonomy simply implies interdependence, rather than independence.

All teachers have to comply with the institutional and curriculum constraints that limit the freedom they are able to grant their students. For this reason, the ways, in which we foster autonomy, will depend on our individual judgments of what is possible or reasonable in our own situations.

**2.6. The interrelationship between teacher and learner:**

In autonomous learning, learner and teacher are partners in the learning process. The development of learner autonomy is a complex process and the teacher must not expect instant results. Autonomous learning must be graded very carefully. The teacher, who accepts responsibility for providing an environment that helps students learn how to learn more effectively, faces a daunting task.

**III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**3.1. Adopted methodology with rationale:**

This survey uses mixed method research to explore the issue of learner autonomy. This study is the combination of qualitative and quantitative research. Our adopted method stands upon collecting, analyzing and blending of qualitative and quantitative data.

**3.2. Data collection instruments:**

In order to investigate the answers of my research questions, I have used two instruments- questionnaire and interview.

**3.2.1. Questionnaire for quantitative data:**

Two questionnaires have been used for the collection of quantitative data. It is an opinion poll which consists a multiple-choice question sheet. It has also some closed ended and open ended questions for the teachers and for the student participants as well.

The questionnaire has two major parts: part A and part B. Part A contains questions for students and part B for the teachers.

**3.2.2. Interview for qualitative data:**

An interview is necessary for the qualitative data collection of a research project. It is a face to face meeting for collecting some information. It is a formal discussion that gathers information for some specific areas. I have arranged a structured interview for the participants.

**3.3. Data collection procedure:**

In order to collect data for the research, I have met seventy (70) students from secondary schools. For collecting data, questionnaires are distributed among the participants. For the collection of qualitative data, I have arranged interview sessions. I have selected twenty (20) teachers from different secondary schools and recorded their speeches in my cell phone and at the same time I have taken them down in the notebook.

**IV. Data presentation and analysis :**

**4.1. Quantitative data and analysis:** My quantitative data comes from questionnaires.

**Part A: Findings and analysis of the students' questionnaire:** This table comprises the complete estimation of learners' opinion:

Topics	Statement	Response alternatives				
		Not at all	Little	Partly	Much	Very much
Learning choices	i. My English teacher allows me to take part in the planning of class schedules.	60	2	6	0	2
	ii. My English teacher offers various tasks alternatives from which I can choose the one that suits me best.	66	2	2	0	0
Goals and needs	iii. My English teacher allows me to work according to my personal goals and learning needs even if they do not match with my English teacher's goals.	68	2	0	0	0
	iv. My English teacher offers me the possibilities to work on my weaknesses.	35	5	0	30	0
Support	v. My English teacher encourages me to ask for help and advice.	35	3	2	0	30
	vi. My English teacher offers me reference materials. (E.g. dictionaries, internet sites).	68	0	2	0	0

Meta-cognition	vii. My English teacher allows me first to correct and evaluate my tasks/ tests/ assignments and then he/she helps me in correcting them.	65	2	3	0	0
	viii. My English teacher allows me to try out different learning methods.	68	2	0	0	0
Emotional climate	ix. I can question the practices of my institution that do not work well in my opinion.	70	0	0	0	0
	x. My English teacher encourages me to take part in decision-making.	68	2	0	0	0
Motivation	xi. My English teacher helps me understand why learning English is useful.	20	0	0	5	45
	xii. My English teacher encourages me to use English in other areas of my life, such as in free time.	40	0	5	15	10

#### 4.1.1. Learning choices:

- ***My English teacher allows me to take part in the planning of class schedules:***

The responses to the above question show that 8.5% of the students agree that their English teachers allow them to take part in the planning of class schedules. On the other hand, 85.70% participants affirmed that they are excluded from this activity.

- ***My English teacher offers various task alternatives from which I can choose the one that suits me best:*** 94.28% respondents stated that they never got any opportunity to choose alternative language task that suit them best. Surprisingly, not a single student stated that they are given the opportunity.

As the above analysis shows the **Learners' Choice** is seriously absent in our language classes.

#### 4.1.2. Goals and needs:

- ***My English teacher allows me to work according to my personal goals and learning needs even if they do not match with my English teacher's goals:***

Here, the data indicates learners' personal learning goals and needs are ignored. We can assume, from the data, that maximum students (97.15%) feel that the teacher's principles and /or education policies do not match with the students' preferences.

- ***My English teacher offers me the possibilities to work on my weaknesses:***

As the above data demonstrates, 42.85% of the learners support that their English teachers offer assistance to overcome their weaknesses in foreign (English) language learning and 50% of the respondents denied that they receive any teachers' assistance to overcome their linguistic weakness.

#### 4.1.3. Support:

- ***My English teacher encourages me to ask for help and advice:***

We received a mixed reaction when the respondents replied the above question. 42% of them agreed that their English teachers encourage them to ask for help or advice regarding their language related difficulties. However, 50% respondents disagreed with the above view.

- ***My English teacher offers me reference materials ( e.g. magazines, dictionaries, internet sites):***

Among the respondents 97.15% said that their English teachers hardly provide the students with authentic materials.

#### 4.1.4. Meta-cognition:

- ***My English teacher allows me first to correct and evaluate my tasks / tests / written assignments and then he/she helps me in correcting them:***

Here, the majority of the respondents (92.85%) stated that their teachers do not engage them first to evaluate themselves through the tasks, tests or assignments.

- ***My English teacher allows me to try out different learning methods:***

The data tells that 97.15% of the respondent students agree with the fact that their teachers do not permit them to try out different learning styles according to their desires.

#### 4.1.4. Emotional climate:

- ***I can question the practices of my institution that do not work well in my opinion:***

The responses to the above question show that no teacher can get any opportunity to express his/her personal opinion regarding the practices of her/his institution.

- ***My English teacher encourages me to take part in decision-making:***

Here, most of the respondent learners (97%) say that their teachers never encourage them to participate in decision making regarding any kind of pedagogic and non-pedagogic activities.

#### 4.1.5. Motivation:

- ***My English teacher helps me understand why learning English is useful:***

The data reveals that about 64.28% of the participants confirmed that their English teacher helps them to understand why learning English is useful in their day-to-day life. However, 28.57% respondents do not receive any sort of support from their teachers, the data analysis reveals.

- ***My English teacher encourages me to use English in other areas of my life such as in free time:***

Here, the analysis shows that only 14.28% of the respondents support the statement that their English teachers encourage them to use English outside the classroom such as in free time or with their parents and classmates while 57.14% respondents disagreed with this view.

### Part B: Findings and analysis of the teachers' questionnaire:

This following table focuses on the overall measurements of the teachers' opinion:

	Statement	Response alternatives				
		Not at all	Little	Partly	Much	Very much
Planning and setting objective	i. I decide the learning objectives of the learners.	15	1	4	0	0
	ii. I inspire the learners to fix their learning objectives according to their goal of learning languages by themselves.	10	0	0	5	10
Learning material	iii. I/ my institution decide all materials for learning English language for learners.	0	0	0	0	20
	iv. The language learning materials are decided by the syllabus of my institution.	0	0	0	0	20
Learning method	v. I give same amount of time to all learners for doing English language activities.	4	0	4	4	8
	vi. Assignments for learning foreign language vary from the weakest to the strongest.	13	0	0	4	3
Evaluation	vii. I allow learners to evaluate their own English language tasks by themselves and then I myself evaluate learners' work.	7	3	0	5	5
	viii. The testing methods of the English language skills vary according to the learners' ability.	20	0	0	0	0

Environment	ix. I create an informal and relaxing environment in the class.	4	2	6	8	0
	x. I allow my learners to go through debate / challenge / disagree with my ideas.	0	0	4	4	12
Teacher-learner relationship	xi. I help the learners to overcome their fear in English language.	0	0	3	6	11
	xii. I meet the learners individually outside the class hours to solve their problems.	0	0	6	6	8

#### 4.1.6. Planning and setting objective:

- ***I decide the learning objectives of the learners:***

Here, the responses (75%) show that learners' learning objectives are decided by teachers.

- ***I inspire learners to fix their learning objectives according to their goal of learning languages by themselves:***

Here, 50% of the teacher participants stated that they inspire learners to fix their learning objectives according to the students' goal of learning language.

#### 4.1.8. Learning material:

- ***I decide all materials for learning English language for learners:***

The data demonstrates 100% teacher participants expressed that they / their institutions decide the materials to be taught for English language learners.

- ***The language learning materials are decided by the syllabus of my institution:***

As we see in this analysis, 100% teacher respondents stated that the language learning materials are decided by the syllabus of their institutions.

Here, we see that in the case of **learning material** section, most of the time teachers and institutions select the learners' English language learning materials which is against the principles of autonomous learning.

#### 4.1.9. Learning method:

- ***I give same amount of time to all learners for doing English language activities:***

As this analysis indicates, 40% of the teachers stated that they give same amount of time to all learners for doing English language activities.

- ***Assignments for learning foreign language vary from the weakest to the strongest:***

The above data shows that 65% respondents reply that language assignments do not vary from the weakest to the strongest student.

#### 4.1.10. Evaluation:

- ***I allow learners to evaluate their own English language tasks by themselves and then I myself evaluate learners' work :***

As the responses reveal, 25% of the participants admitted that allowed they their learners to evaluate their own English language tasks first by themselves and then the teachers do it; but 35% of the teachers do not allow this.

- ***The testing methods of the English language skills vary according to the learners' ability:***

From the response to the above question, analysis we see that 100% respondents stated that testing methods do not vary according to the learners' ability.

#### 4.1.11. Environment:

- ***I create an informal and relaxing environment in the class:***

The responses reveal that, 40% teachers much and 30% teachers partly create an informal and relaxing environment in the class but 20% teachers do not have.

- ***I allow my learners to go through debate/challenge/disagree with my ideas:***

From the responses it is noticeable that the majority (60%) of the respondents allow learners to go through debate/challenge/disagree with the teachers' ideas; but the others (partly 20%, little 20%) are not so much concerned about it.

#### 4.1.12. teacher-learner relationship:

- *I help the learners to overcome their fear in English language :*

The respondent teachers stated that 55% of them voluntarily support the learners to overcome their anxiety in learning English language.

- *I meet the learners individually outside the class hours to solve their problems:*

From the responses it is understood that 40% of the teachers always are offering help to their students outside the classroom and 30% very much and rest of the 30% partly offer help learners individually outside the class hours to solve their problems

#### 4.2. Interview (qualitative data) analysis:

The analysis of the interview part reveals that teachers cannot go beyond the institutional context. They have to abide by the rules of the institutions where they serve. The Headmasters / Principals of the institutions decide what books will be taught in the classrooms. Learners' voice is unheard in the class. They cannot include the learners in the decision making process. Some of them say "our curriculum design does not permit it". Some of them acidly asked "Why should they engage learners in deciding what materials to be used in the class? How can a student give opinion in this affair"? Almost every teacher participant said that different students' learning strategies cannot be addressed in the class. All teacher participants agree that learners cannot decide their learning objectives. None of the teachers feels that learners cannot be engaged in the evaluation process. However, 100% of the respondents stated that they motivate their students to learn English for brighter future. Every teacher participant opined that authentic materials cannot be used in our secondary school classrooms. They feel that NCTB(National Curriculum Textbook Board) textbooks/ commercially published guidebooks must be taught in the class. Otherwise, students' performance in the SSC (Secondary School Certificate) examination will not be up to the mark. The interviewees believe that teachers are absolute source of knowledge and students should memorize the class-notes for better results. Without memorizing those notes, students may not be able achieve A+ grade in the final examination in English.

### V. Summary of the findings:

After analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data, we presume that learner autonomy does not exist in our English language classrooms at Secondary level. The very notion of learner autonomy is still unfamiliar to our language teachers. Our rigid English curriculum does not permit teachers and students to practice learner autonomy. Despite our curriculum statement asserts that CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) principles should be followed, we assume that learner autonomy which is a fundamental part of CLT is absent in our teaching learning process at Secondary level. Self-assessment or independence among learners is missing in our classrooms. Learners either are not allowed or encouraged to take active part in English learning classrooms. Language teachers do not have any scope / intention to use authentic materials in language class.

#### 5.1.2. Findings of the first research question:

In our First research question we attempted to explore whether teachers promote learner autonomy in the secondary level. We found that overwhelming majority of our teacher community do not realize the value of learner autonomy. They fail to understand that learner autonomy will facilitate language learning.

The structure of our education system is based on textbooks, not on universal knowledge. Our teaches hardly promote learner autonomy at the Secondary level.

#### 5.1.3. Findings of the second research question:

Our second research question aimed to explore the impediments to the implementation of learner autonomy. Our data analysis section explores that teachers' lack of orientation, Education Ministry's unawareness and rigid and stereotyped language teaching policy, learners' ignorance and misapprehension of CLT etc. are the major challenges in the way of independent learning.

#### 5.2. Recommendation:

I would like to suggest some recommendations to develop independent foreign language learning in Bangladesh:

- ✓ Proper implementation of CLT in our language classrooms.
- ✓ Allowing learners to create their own learning goals.
- ✓ Helping learners to identify their own preferred styles and strategies when they attempt to learn a foreign language.

- ✓ Not only the strong but also the weak learners should be given the equal value to encourage self-governance among the learners.
- ✓ The learners should be given the right to question the practices of their institutions regarding education system/ teaching methods/assessment procedure.
- ✓ Allowing learners to generate their own tasks.
- ✓ It is recommended that there should be scopes for extracurricular activities in every institution of Bangladesh to promote spontaneous learning.
- ✓ The instructional materials should be developed according to the choices of learners and teachers as well.

#### V. Limitations:

I could not consider all studies related with learner autonomy thoroughly and the participants are very few in numbers in comparison with the millions of learners and thousands of teachers. My questionnaire could be more detailed and the interviews could be more productive. So, the findings could not be generalized however, it may be indicative.

#### VI. Conclusion:

Learners cannot be sidelined from the teaching-learning process. Their voices must be heard. “learners will naturally need to engage in the process of both comprehending and producing language” McDonough and Shaw(2003:51). It is advised that abilities, interests and needs of the individual learner should be taken into consideration. Our teachers are to teach NCTB (National Curriculum Textbook Board) textbooks, a fixed syllabus of their respective institutions and they cannot engage students in the evaluation process. Despite there are scopes for ensuring learners’ autonomy, learners roles in the classrooms may be enhanced and they may be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities. Teachers can inspire learners to participate in pair /group work, picture description activities, etc. All of these activities will ultimately promote learner autonomy in our secondary level classrooms.

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