

Examining learner autonomy in EFL learning of the undergraduate students

1. Dr. Mohammad Arshad Ali

Professor & Head, Department of English & Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Prime University

2. Md. Alaul Alam, Lecturer of English, Prime University, Email: malaulalam@gmail.com

Abstract:

The study examined the learner autonomy in EFL learning at the undergraduate level in the context of Bangladesh. It investigated the effectiveness of learner autonomy on EFL learning. Besides, it explored the factors affecting autonomous learning in English language class. This study adopted a mixed- method approach. Data were collected from 60 students who had just completed their second semester at a private university in Dhaka city. The respondent students attended the compulsory English foundation course including their two semesters. Data were also collected from 12 ELT teachers teaching at the tertiary education level. Five EFL classes were observed following a sample of classroom observation schedule. Both open-ended and closed-ended questionnaires were used by the researchers for collecting the data from the students and teachers. Major findings of the study showed that lack of confidence, teachers' dependency, lack of motivation, short-term goals in learning, huge confusions and confinement in memorization, tendency of using mother tongue and unawareness to self-evaluation of students affected learner autonomy in EFL learning of the undergraduate students. However, the study revealed that motivated students hardly faced any difficulties in achieving maximum outcomes with autonomous learning in the EFL class. Finally, the researchers gave a number of recommendations to bring out effective EFL learning with learner autonomy.

Key words: EFL learning, learner autonomy, undergraduate education level

Introduction:

Learner autonomy has been an issue of great interest in the field of EFL teaching and learning in the recent years. It has had a very significant influence on the nonnative speakers in learning English though the context of learner autonomy may differ from one country to another. The term 'learner autonomy' was first introduced by Henry Holec in 1981, which refers to the ability to take charge of one's own learning. Benson and Voller (1997) stated the term more precisely that it "is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way". According to Scharle & Szabo (2000), there is a close affinity between autonomy and learners' sense of responsibility and for the want of one the other will be affected and due to that, misconception regarding learner autonomy prevails. To make the context of learner

autonomy more obvious, again they used an English saying that “you can bring the horse to water, but you cannot make him drink”. The very saying indicates that autonomous learning can never be effective until the learners are spontaneous to take their responsibilities.

However, though many non-English countries are prioritizing one of the most popular theories ‘Learner Autonomy’ in fostering English language learning, learner autonomy has still been a controversial issue in applied linguistics. Studies in many non-native countries found that students relied more on their teachers even if they were autonomous in their learning. Though most teachers in Bangladesh are well aware of learner autonomy, classroom in most cases are teacher-centered and students and teachers like to be habituated with traditional approaches of teaching and learning in schools and colleges. Even in the universities teachers follow lecture-based education (Bashir, 2012). According to Gardner (1985), the success of language learning lies in the spontaneity and autonomy of the learners. However, a substantial number of studies on learner autonomy have not been carried out yet in Bangladesh, especially in the field of EFL teaching and learning. Again, there is hardly any study accomplished to investigate learner autonomy in fostering EFL learning at undergraduate level of education. In this consideration the present study will certainly add new dimension in the field of pedagogical practice as it examines learner autonomy in EFL learning of the undergraduate level students. Besides, a list of recommendations has been presented for enhancing pedagogical practices on learner autonomy at the undergraduate level.

Literature review:

The researchers reviewed a number of previous studies conducted on learner autonomy in language teaching and learning. The findings of the most of the studies revealed that learner autonomy fostered language learning and created positive influences among the learners to learn a language effectively. Qi (2011) found the more the learners were autonomous, the more the possibility of achieving language proficiency. Kohonen (2003), Yaşar & Tüm (2021) stated that learner autonomy contributed to enhancing language efficiency of the learners. However, it was found from some studies that learner autonomy could not be an ultimate advantage to language learning.

Umeda (2007) emphasized three reasons to make autonomous learning significant i.e. keeping stick to rapid social changes, maturing learners’ individual attitude and improving the diversity of learner’s cultural and educational background.

Similarly, Dickinson (1987) outlined five reasons such as motivation, practical reasons, individual differences, educational aims, and learning to upgrade learner autonomy in language learning. Benson (2001) stated learner autonomy as the capacity to take control of

one's own learning and prioritized three things, i.e. control over learning management, control over cognitive process, and control over learning content for giving an adequate description of autonomy in language learning.

Yildirim (2008) conducted a study through a forty three item questionnaire. The questions focused on students' and teachers' roles, students' confidence level and students' actual learning practice outside the class. The study was carried out among 103 Turkish students studying English in Anadolu University, Faculty of Education in Turkey and found that autonomous learners took the responsibility but they thought that teachers were more responsible than they were to enhance their learning outcomes.

According to the study conducted by Little (1991), learner autonomy can, depending on the age of the learners, be found in different forms like how far they have progressed with their learning, what they perceive their immediate learning needs to be.

Further, Khenoune (2007) showed that the outcome and the strategies of learner autonomy were related to culture and learning background of the learners and the term 'autonomy' was subject to change in different contexts.

Dang (2012) in a study found that learner autonomy was shaped socially. Again, he recommended the combination of socio-cultural theory and community of practice to investigate the concept of learner autonomy. He also suggested that the contextual aspects and the interactions among the people should be considered for fostering learner autonomy.

Oxford (2003) provided a systematic model for learner autonomy in second language learning. The model includes four perspectives, i.e. technical, psychological, sociocultural, and political-critical. Each of these perspectives has four strands or themes which are context, agency, motivation, and learning strategies. They have claimed that if any of the issues and perspectives remain absent, the model of learner autonomy will be incomplete.

The studies of Benson (2007) & Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) found that learner autonomy hardly contributed to language learning unless there was the presence of motivation.

Again the study conducted by Zarei and Elekaie (2012) found that there was the existence of low but positive relationship between motivation and autonomy. However, Vandergrift (2005) found that autonomy led motivation and thus autonomous learners were endowed with motivation.

Najeeb (2013) conducted a study and found that the learners not only must have their willingness to adjust themselves to an autonomous method of learning but also monitor their own learning for gaining confidence to reach their desired achievement.

However, Macaro (2008) found that there was a risk of both error and comprehensibility when second language learners settled everything in their learning procedures. Again, he stated that risk could be minimized by the learner's strategic behavior along with the role of teachers in facilitating and coordinating learning strategies.

The previous studies show that in most cases their research findings reveal some strategies and recommendations to foster language learning with learner autonomy. They find positive influence between learner autonomy and language learning. Again, it is found that no substantial number of studies have been accomplished yet on learner autonomy. Besides, there is hardly any studies conducted to examine learner autonomy in EFL learning of the undergraduate students in the context of Bangladesh. Based on the above, this study makes an attempt to add to the existing literature.

Objectives of the study

- a) To reveal the perceptions of students and teachers regarding learner autonomy in EFL learning
- b) To find out the factors affecting autonomous learning in English language classroom

Rationale of the study:

Learner autonomy is considered one of the most popular and well-discussed issues in EFL learning context. The previous studies found that learner autonomy had positive effect to language learning (Rebenius, 2003, Kohonen, 2003 & Qi, 2011). However, in the name of learner autonomy students were found to be more dependent on their teachers than they were on themselves (Yildirim, 2008). Besides, Hudson (2011) showed that factors like traditional student, teacher and parental expectations brought limited success from learner autonomy. In Bangladesh mentionable studies on learner autonomy have not been conducted yet and it is hypothesized that in the practical sense, the theory of learner autonomy cannot work well to achieve maximum outcomes in EFL learning. So, it needs to be rational to investigate the learner autonomy in EFL leaning and the factor affecting autonomous learning in the EFL class. The researchers have chosen the undergraduate level for their study which is yet to be explored.

Research methodology:

The study was a mixed method approach (Bryman, 2006) followed by the convergent parallel design in which quantitative study followed qualitative one. Data were collected from the students and teachers of a private university in Dhaka city. 60 students from 5 departments i.e. Law, English, EEE, CSE and Business were selected randomly, who had completed their second semester in the university. The respondent students attended the compulsory English foundation course included in their two semesters. The number of students was 12 from each department, their age range being 20 to 22 years and the ratio of the male and female students 2:1.

The number of ELT teachers responded to the study was 12. Both open-ended and closed – ended questionnaires were used by the researchers for collecting the data from the students and teachers. Besides, five EFL classes were attended and observed by the researcher following a sample of classroom observation schedule. The duration of each class was 1.30 hours and the class size was medium. The teachers' mode of delivery was English-Bengali mixed. To measure the frequency of the outcome of the study quantitatively, five point Likert scale was introduced and the measuring options included *Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely and Never*. The collected qualitative data were presented in the thematic form whereas for quantitative data descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The separate findings and results from qualitative and quantitative approach were presented in a befitting manner. Triangulation was carried out by comparing the participants' responses and observations to identify what was common and to recognize the gaps that might be there in the collected data.

Data analysis:**Students' closed questionnaire:**

Statement of the students	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1. Getting engaged in cooperative learning	13.33%	13.33%	50%	23.34%	0
2. Following different learning styles and strategies by self	00	8.33%	10%	58.33%	23.34%
3. Getting interested to take own responsibility of learning the target language	00	8.33%	20%	50%	21.67%
4. Depending on teachers' strategies and styles	75%	10%	15%	00	00
5. Being nervous while practicing in a group	25%	8.33%	50%	6.67%	10%
6. Feeling embarrassed while learning from the peers	16.67%	56.66%	13.33%	00	13.34%
7. Intending to use Bangla, no pressure to use English	56.66%	00	26.67%	16.67%	00
8. Giving preference to achieving good grades in the exam	73.33%	3.33%	00	16.67%	6.67%
9. Learning English being lifelong goal oriented	00	00	8.33%	38.33%	53.34%
10. Enhancing skills through self-motivation	00	21.67%	20%	58.33%	00
11. Appreciating to collect learning materials more from teachers than other sources	38.33%	20%	33.33%	8.34%	00

Table 1

The findings presented in the first statement showed that the majority (50%) of the students sometimes got engaged in cooperative learning and a small number of students were almost positive to cooperative learning though 23.34% of the students were hardly interested in cooperative learning. The second statement in the table revealed that the highest number (58.33%) of students hardly adopted learning styles and strategies by themselves and another 23.34% chose the option 'never' while a small number of students took learning styles and strategies by themselves.

From the third statement it was found that the majority (50%) of the students rarely showed interest to take their own responsibility over learning the target language and another 21.67% never took their own responsibility in learning the target language while a small number of students were found somehow positive in this regard.

The fourth statement demonstrated that 75% of the respondent students were always dependent on their teachers and the rest of the students were often or sometimes dependent. The fifth statement showed that the majority (50%) of the students were sometimes demotivated while practicing in a group and the other (25%) of the respondents always showed lack of confidence but there were a small number of students who showed their courage while working in a group.

It was found from the sixth statement that 56.66% of the respondents often got embarrassed, followed by 16.67% respondents who expressed the option 'always' and 13.33% of the respondents chose the option 'sometimes' while learning from the peers. However, a small number of students were never embarrassed to learn from the peers.

In response to statement no.7, it was found that the majority of the students became intended to speak Bangla in the class while a small number of students hardly spoke Bangla in their English class.

The statement no.8 revealed that the majority (73.33%) of the students had their preference to achieving good grades in the examination but 16.67% of the students rarely did it.

The statement no. 9 showed that 53.34% of the students never had lifelong goal with English learning and 38.33% rarely had. However, a small number of students sometimes took long-term target with language learning.

With regard to statement no. 10, it was found that 58.33% of the respondent students were rarely self-motivated to enhance their English skills while 21.67% and 20% students respectively chose the options 'often' and 'sometimes' in response to the statement. From the last statement by the respondents it was found that the majority of the students were fond of collecting learning materials from their teachers.

Teachers' closed questionnaire:

Teachers' statements regarding students	Yes	Sometimes	No
1. Depending on teachers in the class	66.66%	33.34%	00
2. Getting involved in peer discussion for self-assessment	00	33.34%	66.66%
3. Showing interest to traditional teaching and learning	58.33%	25%	16.67%
4. Giving preference to obtaining good grades in language achievement	75%	16.67%	8.33%
5. Getting ready to take the responsibility by self	00	25%	75%

6. Giving preference to speaking Bangla in the class	66.66%	25%	8.34%
7. Taking preparation on the selected topics for the exam	25%	66.66%	8.34%
8. Getting inclined to long-term success	16.67%	25%	58.33%
9. Huge confusions in the right choices	33.34%	66.66%	00
10. Confinement in memorization and lecture-based learning	66.66%	16.67%	16.67%

Table 2

The findings presented by teachers regarding students in case of learner autonomy in language class are shown in the table above. In the first statement it was found that majority of the students were dependent on teachers in the class and the second highest percentage of students were sometimes dependent on teachers. Importantly, there were no students who were autonomous in the class, as stated by the teachers.

With reference to statement no. 2, there was a negative response about students' involvement in peer discussion for self-assessment though a number of students were sometimes referred positively.

The third statement by the teachers confirmed that majority of the students had preference to traditional language learning though a small number of students did not choose the approach. In regard to statement no. 4, teachers opined that majority of the students had preference to obtaining good grades in language achievement but there were a small number of students as found by the respondent teachers, who focused on language achievement.

The fifth statement showed that majority of the students did not get ready to take the responsibility by themselves while a small number of students were found motivated to take the responsibility of their own learning.

In response to statement no. 6, the majority of the teachers claimed that students preferred to speak Bangla in the class though there were a few respondent teachers who did not agree to the statement. From the statement no. 7, it was found that students were found to take preparation on the selected topics for the examinations though a small number of teachers disagreed. In statement no.8, the majority of the teachers claimed that students showed no interest in achieving long-term goal with language learning but a number of teachers stated that students had an inclination to achieve long-term achievement with language learning. The statement no. 9 revealed that students had huge confusions in the right choices of learning English language. In the last statement, the highest number of teachers opined that

students had the confinement in memorization and lecture-based learning though a small number of teachers differed.

Qualitative data from the students categorized with codes

Students' attitude to autonomous learning:

The qualitative data from the students revealed that the majority of the respondent students at undergraduate level neither took the responsibility by themselves to learn English spontaneously, nor were proficient enough to take the charge of learning. Besides, they thought that the role of teachers was much more than anything else in the class. Things in the class were made easy when teachers taught them through clarifications, explanations and feedback.

Moreover, there were some students who had misconception regarding autonomous learning that in this learning approach, they have to be instructed by themselves where teachers would have no role in the class. Considering this, they were scared to learn with autonomy. Although learner autonomy focuses on learners' freedom where teachers will be none but the model facilitators intended to provide all the facilities for the students required in the class. One of the students responded,

I intend to depend on teachers as I think, teachers are more authentic in providing knowledge than any other sources. Besides, I am not confident enough to take any strategy or style of learning by myself lest it should not be scientific.

Views about teachers' responsibility:

Majority of the students stated that the responsibility of a teacher should not be confined merely to teaching students. Besides, he/she must be liable to ensure a congenial atmosphere for the students in the class where they will feel relaxed to take the lessons. Some students complained that teachers were not student-friendly and throughout the classes they would

follow lecture-based teaching, which made the students demotivated to learn. Besides, they focused on completing the syllabus and hardly had time to teach their students spontaneously.

One respondent stated,

I have teacher fear that restrains me to ask any questions in the class even if I do not understand and also I dare not enter teachers' room to have any suggestions about my improvement.

Perceptions on motivation:

Majority of the students stated that they felt lack of motivation in the language class. They were more enthusiastic to achieve good grades than to achieve language skills. Besides, some of the students opined that sometimes excessive freedom in the name of autonomous learning may lead them to misconception and have the chance of making a mess. However, there were a number of students who were motivated and influenced by the teachers. Finally, they achieved maximum language proficiency.

One student stated,

My teacher told me many successful stories that made me inspired to learn English with motivation. In my school and college I was not a motivated learner and so my English was poor. Now I am very enthusiastic to learn English and trying to remove my obstacles and even I am far better than previously I was.

Qualitative data from the teachers categorized with codes

Students' learning tendency:

The qualitative data from the teachers indicated that majority of the students developed the habit of dependency on their teachers in the class. Most of the teachers claimed that confusion and lack of motivation among students created huge obstacles in ensuring learner autonomy in the class. Teachers found that in most cases students were reactive towards the accomplishment of the class work as well as home work. Most of the students wanted to be rewarded only with good grades by the teachers and were not intrinsically motivated enough to take any initiative for the development of their language skills.

One teacher responded,

I found many of my students in English class remained inactive and not interested to participate in peer activities though they seemed reactive when they were given any suggestion for the upcoming examination.

Influence of motivation in autonomous learning:

Majority of the teachers opined that there was a close affinity between learner autonomy and motivation. They found that learner autonomy never achieved any positive outcome unless there was motivation. Majority of teachers realized the importance of learner autonomy but they found freedom of the learners devastating without the direct control of their teachers. However, some teachers opined that learner autonomy may differ from context to context in respect of how much it would be effective for developing language skills. Moreover, all the teachers pointed out that intrinsically motivated learners had every chance to be autonomous learners.

Strategies of effective autonomous learning:

Teachers stated that learner autonomy is a very problematic concept and because of it misconception prevails in the field of teaching-learning. They opined that to achieve the maximum outcome from student-centered class there would be a teacher playing role as a moderator as well as a facilitator to assist and guide the students. However, most of the teachers found a balance between motivation and autonomy in learning a language.

One of the teachers stated,

As a teacher I have every responsibility to make my students motivated first before making them autonomous, then there will be an atmosphere appreciative for the learners to go a long way overcoming all the obstacles of learning English language.

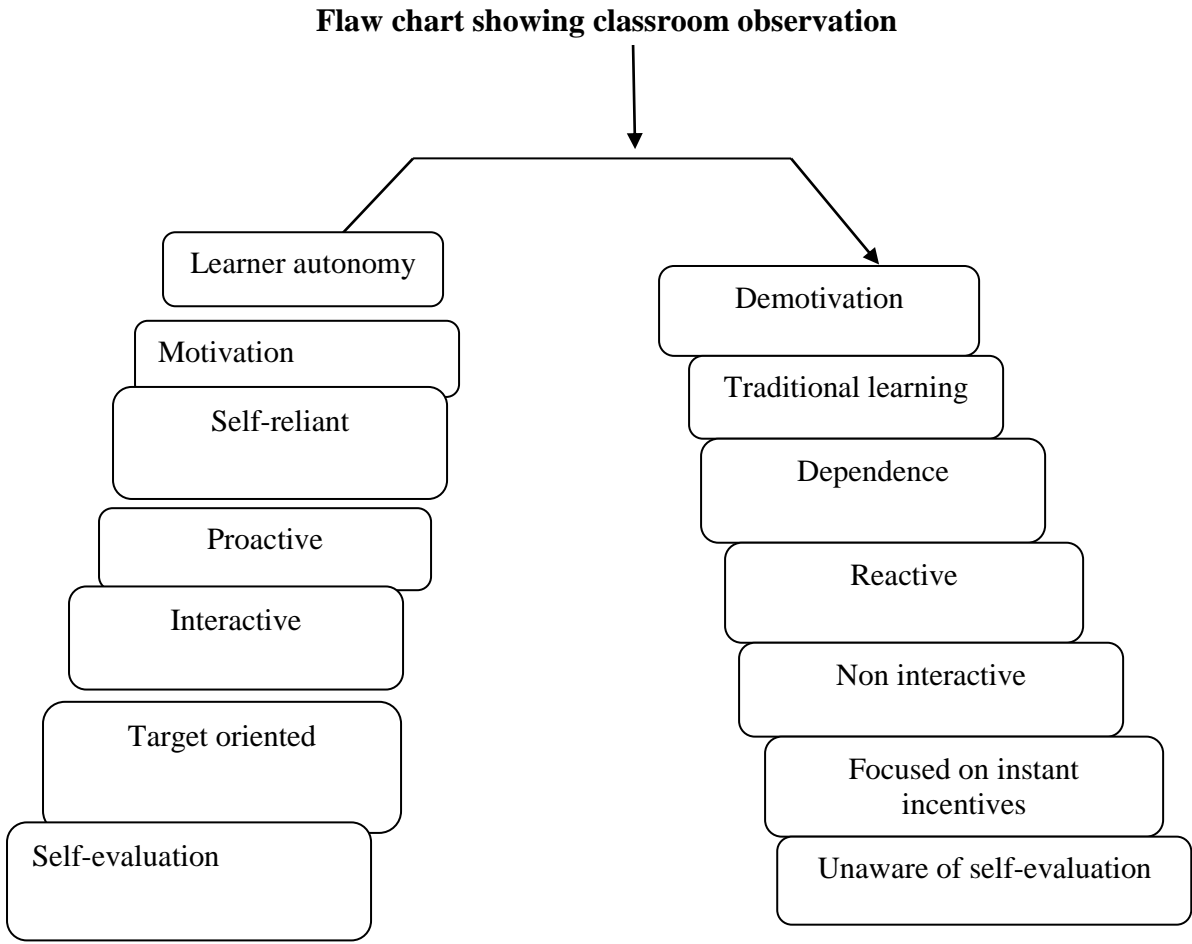


Figure: 1

Major findings and discussions:

The data drawn from the survey analysis and in-depth interview revealed that students were somehow cooperative in their learning process but felt lack of confidence and also embarrassed to learn from the peers though peer evaluation was thought helpful for students to accelerate EFL learning. The findings from Khan (2003) found the same as were experienced here.

In another phase it was found in most cases that students hardly followed any learning style by their own and were not interested to take the responsibility of learning EFL language by themselves, rather they were found to depend on teachers in the class. This created a one-way approach of learning and student-centeredness could hardly contribute to it.

Besides, students were habituated to collect learning materials from the teachers as they considered teachers as the most authentic source of knowledge. Impliedly, they supported teacher-centeredness approach. These findings were supported by Khenaune (2007) & Yildirim (2008). The study revealed that students prioritized on obtaining good grades than achieving life-long language skills. Again, students were not interested to enhance skills through self-motivation causing huge confusions leading them to the confinement in memorization as well as lecture based traditional learning. It was worth noticing that students got involved in classroom activities in considering the fact of accomplishing the tasks assigned by the teachers for gaining instrumental rewards. This context may be considered as reactive approach taken by the students in the class. The findings from Mehrin (2017) & Littlewood (2000) stated the same as those were found in this connection. From the study it was revealed that students were not motivated enough to speak English in the class, rather they were found habituated to speak Bangla as they hardly got pressurized from their teachers and peers to speak English in the EFL class.

Khan (2017) expressed the similar view in this regard. The researchers found that communicative teaching and learning was still confined inside the class. Findings showed that students had misconception between teacher-dependent learning approach and autonomous learning approach. Students were not conscious enough to develop their English language skills being autonomous. Thus, learner autonomy did not bring maximum outcomes on EFL context at undergraduate level.

However, the study found that motivation was one of the prime contributors of bringing outcomes from learner autonomy to an optimum level. Cotteral (1999) stated the same as found in this study with the power of motivation. Moreover, in most cases, autonomous learning was found effective for those who were intrinsically motivated apart from a few motivated extrinsically. In this connection, Noels et al. (2003) found the same findings in their study that students' internal desire was required to achieve long-term goal of language learning.

Recommendations:

Based on the qualitative and quantitative data drawn from the respondents i.e. students and teachers, the following recommendations are put forth to ensure effective autonomous learning which is of great significance in the field of EFL learning:

1. Student-centered classroom should be ensured where teachers will be in the role of model facilitators. Autonomous learning strategies should be followed in the class.
2. All the misconceptions regarding learner autonomy should be clarified by the teachers.
3. Students should be encouraged to participate in classroom activities as well as cooperative learning while lecture-based teaching should be discouraged.
4. Teachers' responsibility should be to make the students motivated towards autonomous learning and help them realize the importance of taking their own responsibility over successful language learning.
5. Maintaining English speaking environment should be mandatory for all concerned.
6. The focus of the teachers should be towards the enhancement of self-motivation of the students intrinsically and extrinsically by encouraging them about the incentives or rewards of English language learning.
7. At the top of all, there should have accountability among teachers and students to confirm maximum outcomes from learner autonomy.

Conclusion:

The study has explored the findings about learner autonomy on EFL context at undergraduate level. The perceptions of students and teachers about learner autonomy in EFL learning have been explored using different lenses in this study. Findings elicited from different angles of the study have confirmed that learner autonomy as an approach to language learning can be effective. But to ensure maximum outcomes through autonomous learning it is very imperative to address the affecting factors which have been explored in this study. Finally, a number of recommendations have been given that will help students and teachers ensure effective autonomous learning in EFL context.

References

- Alam, A. (2019). The role of instrumental motivation in English Language Learning (ELL) at Tertiary Level. *NAEM Journal*, 13 (25), 111-120.
- Allwright, D. (1990). Autonomy in language pedagogy. *CRILE Working Paper*, 6. University of Lancaster, UK
- Bashir, A. (2012). Promoting learner autonomy through learner training in English Language classroom. *The Arts Faculty Journal*, July 2012-June 2013, 23-41.
- Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles*. Longman, New York.
- Benson, P., & Voller, P. (1997). *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. Longman, London.
- Benson, P. (2001) *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*, Longman, London.
- Chan, V. (2002). Autonomous language learning: Hong Kong Tertiary students' attitudes and behaviors. *Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*.16 (1), 1-18.
- Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum Press, New York.
- Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychological and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. Edward Arnold, London.
- Khan, R. (2003). Responding to student writing in the TESOL environment: Some feedback options. *The Dhaka University Studies*, 1-16.
- Khan, R. (2017). *Developing learner autonomy in the South Asian context. Best practices in ELT* (ed). BELTA, Bangladesh.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy: Definitions, issues and problems*. Authentik, Dublin, Ireland.
- Littlewood, W. (2000). Do Asians really want to listen and obey? *ELT Journal*, 54(1), 31-36.
- Mehrin, I. (2017). Autonomous language learning: Bangladeshi undergraduates' attitudes and perceptions. *BELTA Journal*, 1(1), 124-138.
- Qi, A. (2011). On the relationships between learner autonomy and language proficiency: An investigation of Chinese English majors. *Energy Procedia*, 13, 9976-9982.

- Yaşar, Ü. & Tüm, G. (2021). EFL teachers' perceptions on learner autonomy. *The Journal of Limitless Education and Research*, 6 (3), 316-33.
- Scharle, A. & Szabo, A. (2000). *Learning autonomy: A guide to developing learner responsibility*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Umeda, Y. (2007). "The teacher's role in Japanese language attaching importance to learner autonomy", available at http://leo.aichi-u.ac.jp/%7Egoken/bulletin/pdfs/NO12/04_Umeda.pdf.
- Vandergrift, L. (2005). Relationships among motivations, orientations, meta-cognitive awareness and proficiency in L2 listening', *Applied Linguistics*, 26 (1), 70-89.
- Yildirim, O. (2008). Turkish EFL learners' readiness for learner autonomy. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 4 (1), 65-80.
- Zarei, A. A., & Elekaei, A. (2012). *Learner autonomy and language learning strategies: An empirical analysis*. Lambert Academic Publishing, Germany.