Exploring the Attitudes of the Teachers and Learners towards the Learner Centered EFL Classroom at the Tertiary Level in Bangladesh

Research Paper

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Abstract

Learner centered approach emphasizes on the autonomy of the learners in the classroom where the learners will be mostly responsible for their learning. But, in the context of Bangladeshi tertiary level education system, teachers and learners have mixed attitude for autonomous classroom. Realizing the necessity of learners' centeredness in EFL classroom, the present study investigated the perceptions of both teachers and learners regarding learners' autonomy. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative data regarding learners' perception are collected from one university and qualitative data were collected from four teachers belong to two different universities. The respondents were 2nd year students of BA (Honors) in English. The results show that both the teachers and learners feel the necessity of learner centered classroom but because of some constraints they cannot implement this approach successfully. The learners still have highly teacher dependent attitude though they believe in autonomy.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, tertiary level EFL learners, attitudes and perceptions of learners, learning strategies

1. Introduction

There is debate among language teachers and scholars on the learner centeredness or learner's autonomy in EFL classroom. Since 1970 many researchers have been working on the strategies to develop learner centered classroom. It has become a bit challenging for the foreign language contexts. Currently, the researchers are conducting studies on how teachers can promote learners' autonomy and increase learners' independence. Though the debate of learner centeredness is unresolved, many researchers are now studying in favor of learners' autonomy. Even in universities, classes are mostly lecture-based (Bashir, 2012). Consequently, it becomes a challenge to implement learner centred approaches appropriately as most of the learners are not prepared for it. Today achieving learner autonomy is a universal educational goal (Sinclair, 1997, 2000b, cited in Bashir, 2012). Scholars argue that this autonomy in classroom makes them well prepared for their job function and real life in general. In the EFL situations, learners rely on

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teachers more. While ensuring learner's autonomy teachers face several problems including cultural, infrastructural and psychological constraints. Based on the demand of the present world, scholars are now emphasizing the development of individual freedom. To remove those misconceptions and to make the teaching-learning process more effective, both the teachers and learners should be aware of it.

Freire (1973) emphasizes that, as members of society, it is extremely important to be aware of our actions/performance. That means every decision and choice made, every path taken, every reaction to our partners' affliction or happiness will make a difference in our group.

The aim of this paper is to know the perceptions of the learners and teachers regarding learners' autonomy in learning English language as well as to find out the effective strategies of making learner centered classroom. Definitely it will make both teachers and learners aware of learners' autonomy. The present study will investigate the following questions:

a. To what extent do the teachers and learners have motivation for learner centered classroom?
b. What are the effective strategies of arranging learner centered classroom in the context of Bangladesh?

2. Review of Literature

Generally, autonomy refers to the ability to take control of one's own learning individually or in collaboration with others. According to Holec (1981), one autonomous learner develops "the ability to take charge of one's learning". By identifying his/her learning needs and by setting up learning goals, the autonomous learner can apply appropriate strategies. Moreover, one can evaluate the outcomes of their learning. Similarly, Little (2004) opines that autonomous learners are cast in a new perspective. They have an individual critical reflection with decision-making capacity. They can take independent actions and are expected to undertake greater responsibility for and take charges of their own learning. While, Thanasoulas (2000) suggests that autonomous learners can take the risk of communicating in the target language. They are more productive as well are positive towards the target language. Littlewood (1999) also emphasizes on developing learners' capacity through autonomous learning. He argues that learners will not have teachers as guides throughout life. So, it is important to ensure learners' individual perception which should be essentially a goal of learning. According to Borg & Busaidi (2012) some misconceptions about learners' autonomy such as autonomy means self-instruction and no interference from the part of teachers create hindrance to the willingness of being an autonomous learner. Bayat (2011) also suggests that in EFL contexts, learners need to be more independent and responsible. Khenoune (2007) conducted a study on the Algerian learners and found that learners' autonomy varies from context to context. It is related to the background and culture of the learners. Yildirim (2008) conducted a study on Turkish learners and found that to some extent learners share the responsibility with teachers but they depend more on teachers. Mehrin (2017) conducts a study on the 4th year students of University of Dhaka about their perception of learner centeredness and her findings show that though they believe in learners' autonomy, they do not behave like an autonomous learner. They are not completely prepared to take the responsibility. However, Charmain (2014) conducted a study on learners' autonomy and its implication in Bangladesh and finds that teaching learning environment is still traditional. The classrooms are teacher centered and learners have the mind set up to sit for examination at each term of their study.

According to the view of Bashir (2012), in Bangladeshi context, learner centered classroom is a new area because schools and colleges basically follow teacher centered approach. Even in case of tertiary level, classrooms are lecture based.

As the above studies show, learners' autonomy is necessary to build up the sense of responsibility and independence. Again, it depends on various other things like culture, background and motivation of the learners. Review of literatures also show that in EFL contexts, like Bangladesh, learners are not totally ready to be autonomous but they feel the necessity to be autonomous.

3. Methodology of the study
3.1. Participants
The researcher has made a selection of respondents from a public university of Bangladesh. The researcher has chosen total 100 samples who are 2nd year students of Department of English from "University A". In case of learners' response, the researcher has selected only one university "University A". The name of the university is omitted for the sake of some ethical issues. The samples are selected randomly to collect quantitative data. The researcher has conducted the qualitative open ended interviewed of 4 teachers from the same department of two different university. In respect of teachers' interview two universities are selected which will be mentioned as "University A" and "University B"

3.2. Instrument
A questionnaire of 12 items was administered among the respondents and a five-point Likert's scale. To indicate the result of each statement of the questionnaire, the mean score of the respondents' responses on the statement has been worked out.

In this respect, strongly agree (SA) =5, agree (A)=4, undecided (U)=3, disagree (D)=2 and strongly disagree (SD)=1 point or points have been counted as the values of the responses. The Mean scores above 4 are regarded as 'very high', above 3 but below 4 as 'high', above 2 but below 3 as 'low' and below 2 as 'very low' preferences. The questionnaire is closed ended. For the teachers open ended questionnaire is used and the interview is recorded. The area of questionnaire is related to the awareness of teachers and learners regarding learners' autonomy, motivation, and learners' roles in learning. The data will show the extent of their agreement, perception and awareness regarding learners' autonomy.

3.3. Results of learners' questionnaire survey

SL	Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
1.	I prefer classes where teacher explains everything.	10%	30%	6%	42%	12%	3.82
2.	I generally speak in class when the teacher asks me.	38%	34%	4%	12%	12%	3.74
3.	I myself can understand the text without the help of teacher.	20%	20%	0%	50%	10%	2.0
4.	I read English texts myself before the class.	20%	20%	0%	50%	10%	2.0
5.	I feel comfortable working in group.	24%	48%	2%	14%	12%	4.1
6.	I can understand texts better when the teacher monitors our group work.	70%	16%	10%	4%	0%	4.52
7.	I prefer asking question to my teacher in classroom.	24%	36%	6%	6%	24%	3.18
8.	I think lecture-oriented class helps us to complete syllabus in time.	58%	24%	14%	4%	0%	4.36
9.	I do not feel uneasy while speaking in front of my teacher.	60%	26%	0%	2%	12%	4.2
10.	I like my teacher will guide me, correct my errors.	76%	22%	0%	2%	0%	4.62
11.	I enjoy self-reading under the guidance of teacher in class.	34%	34%	4%	16%	12%	3.62
12.	I can understand a text better when the teacher explains unknown words.	70%	16%	10%	4%	0%	4.52

3.4. Analysis of learners' questionnaire survey

Statement 1 represents the traditional teaching method where the teacher explains everything. Data shows that learners disagree with this view because the mean score of this statement is 3.72. That means learners still prefer traditional teaching method whereas another half do not prefer this. According to the statement 2, learners strongly agree that they speak only when the teacher asks them or insist them to speak (Mean 3.74). It shows that the tertiary level learners are not that much willing to speak until the teacher asks them. The result is a bit contradictory to the idea of learner centered classroom. The 3rd statement shows the extent of learner's responsibility by themselves. Here the mean score is low (Mean 2.0). It shows that majority are not mentally determined to take the responsibility of self-learning.

Moreover, statement 4 reflects that very few of the learners can manage to read the text before the teacher teaches them (Mean 2.0). The result shows that though the learners believe in autonomy, they cannot read the English text before the class. According to the statement 5, learners feel highly comfortable in working with groups (Mean 4.1). The extent of their preference is very high. Thus, they have high preference for group work in class. In relevance with the statement 5, statement 6 also shows that the learners like to be monitored by their teachers while working in groups. The mean score for this statement is 4.52 which shows their very high preference for teachers' monitoring. The learners are not willing to be completely independent because they need teacher's direct support while they work in group. Statement 7 seeks the views of the learners regarding asking question to the teacher during the class. Here the mean score (3.18) shows that they have high preference in asking questions. But the preference is below 4 and around 3. That means, a very significant number of learners in tertiary level still feel shy or afraid to ask question during class. According to the statement 8, learners have high preference for lecture-oriented classes because they are in a hurry to complete syllabuses. Mean score for this statement is 4.36 which is very high. This statement is again a bit contradictory to the learner centered classroom because the learners need to sit for exams. They are in a hurry to complete syllabuses for the exams. They think teachers lecture is more influential than to take responsibility of their own.

Similarly, statement 9 shows that learners feel uneasy while speaking in front of teacher. The mean score of the statement is very high that is 4.2. Majority of the learners do not have any kind of fear of speaking in front of teacher. The number of extrovert learners is increasing. In the 10th statement, learners feel highly motivated to be corrected by their peers. The mean for the statement is 4.62. They want their classmates to correct their errors because the learners agree with this view. Still there are some learners who do not like to be corrected by their peers. It might affect their personality. Statement 11 shows that majority of the learners enjoy self-reading under the guidance of teacher. Though they cannot take the responsibility of self-reading completely, they enjoy reading during class. The mean score for this statement is 3.62 which shows that they like to have interactive class in front of teacher. Final statement 12 shows that learners demand explanations of the unknown vocabulary from their teacher. The mean score is 4.52 that has relevance with the statement 11 because they enjoy self-reading only when the teacher facilitates their reading by explaining unknown words.

Considering the above-mentioned findings, it can be said that 2nd year learners of BA (Honors) in English are aware of the learner's autonomy. They want to cope with the present world and they also like to perform, play role and speak in front of teachers. Except some minor amount, majority of the learners want to be self - dependent learner. However, there are some limitations as well regarding duration of the class, pressure of completing course in just time and cultural constraints. So, the learners have a tendency to be autonomous but they are not behaving the same.

The data shows a gap between the perception of the learners and their behavior. They want to be autonomous still they prefer guidance and direct monitoring on behalf of teacher. To make the teaching and learning effective this gap should be minimized.

3.5. Results and discussion of Teachers' interview

The teachers are asked about their experience of arranging learners centered classroom. The teachers show mixed attitude regarding learners' autonomy. Teachers are aware of the demand of the present world and they feel the necessity of arranging learners' centered classroom. However, they have shared their classroom observations with the researcher. One of the teachers from "University A" shares experience in this way-

> *I generally try to make the class interactive because I think this is helpful for the learners. Whenever I assign them to read something alone at home, they cannot grasp it completely but whenever I assign them anything in class, they feel free to talk with peers. With the presence of teacher, they can respond confidently. Again, there is other category of learners who are very good at extracurricular activities but they feel shy at class while using target language.*

For the large class size, it becomes impossible to reach each particular student. Moreover, same learners like to participate in interaction repeatedly. Another teachers' response from "University A" is given –

> *When I ask for anyone to perform an action in target language, I find the same learners are willing to participate. Sometimes, I assign them to read poem individually and analyze in front of the class. Here other learners do not concentrate much on their peer rather everyone feels anxious of his/her turn.*

Another faculty member (University B) who is also aware of the learners' autonomy in classroom has shared personal observation with the researcher. A portion of the interview is quoted here-

Regarding the question of class size, I want to mention that the class size is ideal here. The number of learners at each class is around 15-20. In the context of private university, a spoon-feeding technique is followed. Though the learners believe in autonomy, they are not willing to take responsibility of learning. But they find interactive classroom enjoyable.

In response to the question of the researcher another teacher (University B) shares the thoughts and emphasizes on learner centered classroom and adopts different techniques to make them interactive. A part of the statement is given below:

> *I try to make them active in the class by assigning different written and oral tasks. I find that lecture method is sometime boring to the learners. I divide the class within some groups. At each group I try to keep one or two advanced learner who can understand the target language better. This way he/she monitors other group members and helps them to understand the lesson. By turn each member of the group need to play the role of monitor while others are free to correct the errors and help each other. Again, through this technique the teacher can minimize the load of managing large class.*

Teachers' interview shows homogeneity but there is a certain gap between the perception of the teachers and learners. The gap is certain even with the perception of the learners themselves. They want to be autonomous but they need direct monitoring of the teacher. Again, according to the teachers' observation, they do not find the learners much active in classes.

So, it creates a gap between their perception and real classroom environment. Besides, they have also mentioned some barriers that create hindrance while arranging learner centered

classroom. In response to the question they all agree that they are aware of learner centered classroom, in fact they are trying to arrange learner centered classroom. There is commonness in their observation. The learners believe in autonomy in the class, they are not fully ready to take responsibility and they are not behaving in that way.

5. Recommendations

Considering the finding of learners' questionnaire survey and teachers' interview, here are some recommendations to be implemented for arranging learners' centered classroom at tertiary level in Bangladesh. Cultural awareness should be nurtured both in teachers and learners in order to remove the barriers and fears of learners. More student friendly environment should be created in the classroom. Teachers should be broad minded as well as away from any kind of social, racial and gender complexity.

Teachers should be given training on the important updates of teaching learning methods so that they can utilize unique and enjoyable strategies to arrange learner centered classroom. Teachers can make the learners introduced with the foreign virtual classrooms which are learner centered so that they can capture some strategies from there. Teachers need to play various roles as Cohen (2000) states, they are like agents in the classroom shifting the responsibility for learning more onto the shoulders of the students themselves. At the same time, they should play the role of learner trainers, coordinators, coaches, and language learners and researchers.

As the learners are in a hurry to complete syllabuses as well as to seat for exams, the syllabus should be designed in such a way that they become independent learners.

6. Conclusion

The study has got the answer of the research question it has made at the very beginning. The study finds that both the teachers and learners are aware of the learner centeredness. They are trying to implement successful strategies to make the learners competent in target language. To cope with the competition of the present world, tertiary level learners should be more responsible. Regarding appropriate strategies of learning, the study finds that still the learners need teacher as their guide. Because of their cultural and hierarchical background, they cannot be fully autonomous as the natives. Autonomous learning will facilitate them to be fluent in using the language. In the context of Bangladesh, the classroom environment is still teacher centered only because the syllabus and curriculum demand so. Still both the teachers and learners are trying to make the classroom interactive and communicative through different strategies.

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