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## **Teachers' Perception of the Students' Readiness for Self-regulated Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

*COVID - 19 pandemic has detrimental impacts on the educational sector along with many other areas of human life. Virtual learning, though not a new topic, has occupied huge space in current pedagogical discourse. However, it has been criticized for exacerbating inequalities between well-resourced and under-resourced people, institutions and geographical location. In this scenario, we propose self-regulated learning as a viable solution to avert the learning gap during possible crises in the future. In this article, we explored how empowered are the learners for carrying out self-regulated learning. This qualitative study in which data were elicited through three focus group discussions with 15 ELT teachers revealed that the students having a lack of sufficient knowledge and skill for continuing learning in the absence of a teacher, indicated to the possible discontinuation of learning during the school closure circumstanced by COVID- 19 pandemic.*

***Keywords:** Self-regulated learning, learning strategies, learner empowerment*

### **Introduction**

The global health emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an educational crisis of unprecedented scale. The prolonged disruption in mainstream education has created a learning gap among learners. According to UNICEF (2020), worldwide more than one billion children are at risk of falling behind due to school closures aimed at containing the spread of COVID -19.

In Nepal, virtual classes have been started to mitigate the immediate impact of school closure. From the government sector, the National Center for Educational Development (NCED) has also started virtual classes for school children. Meanwhile, some private organizations like Karkhana, Deerwalk, Midas to name a few have come up with online learning resources and are offering free video resources for students up to grade 12 (Lamichhane, 2020). As a result, a few institutions are able to accommodate the sudden demand of the time without delay. The major attraction behind these efforts is the use of technology which has provided with improved access, flexibility of time and place,

and the potentiality of accommodating the change to some extent’ However, there arise various issues alongside such as internet connectivity, training for teachers and learners, the proliferation of technological equipment, online security, and so on. Until and unless these issues are convincingly ensured, the effectiveness of virtual classes is put on suspicion.

The distance learning initiated by the Government of Nepal has not been effective as expected. There are several reasons behind this. The most important one is that the students have collected idiosyncratic experiences while coping with the abrupt changes imposed upon them during this pandemic. Hence, they should be allowed to follow their personalized interest, need, and style. In this situation, generalized learning plans have not been fully supportive for them. Thus, conceptualizing, developing, and implementing distance learning in a full-fledged manner is challenging. Moreover, it has been argued that the inability to create an equitable and accessible channel of virtual classes would lead to digital division ‘yet’ another form of marginalization. Here, the possible exclusion of students studying in community schools representing vulnerable and disadvantaged communities cannot be ignored.

Pointing out the challenges of virtual classes we do not intend to indicate that the continuation of learning is impossible during this pandemic. It is because the closure of school does not necessarily imply the stoppage of learning since learning continues beyond the classroom setting and even in the absence of teachers. Here, we propose self-regulated learning as a viable solution for bridging the learning gap among the learners in our context. According to Knowles (1975), self-directed learning strategy is a process in which individuals take initiative, with or without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and mental resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. Seen from this way, a self-regulated learner is able to analyze the situation and need, explore and exploit the available resources and opportunities and continue learning independently.

But this is possible only when the students are prepared enough to handle these types of unpredicted situations and plan for their learning after evaluating the circumstances that they are in. Hence, the present study attempts to explore how prepared the learners are for continuing learning during the school closure conditioned by COVID-19 Pandemic.

In general, the purpose of the study is to bring out the reflection of ELT teachers regarding the classroom activities taking place prior to the school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, the study specifically focuses on the identification of the strategies that the teachers inculcated in the learners, evaluating their effectiveness for developing self-regulated learning and exploring the plans of the teachers for enabling the learners to learn independently in the possible school closure in the future.

## **Literature Review**

This section provides a review and synthesis of the literature related to the present study and intends to establish a theoretical foundation for the problem we unravel in this research paper.

### **Self-regulated learning**

Self-regulated learning is an active constructive process in which the learners take charge of their learning. The learners are characterized by high motivation level and actively involved in planning, setting goals, implementing and monitoring, and evaluating the entire process and their achievement. According to Zimmerman (1990) self-regulation refers to the self-directive process through which learners transform their mental abilities into task-related academic skills. He views that learning takes place as an activity that students do for themselves in a proactive way, rather than as a covert event that happens to them reactively as a result of teaching experiences. In the same vein, Leaver (2009) connects self-regulated learning and learner autonomy and predicts that self-regulated learning might result in a person who autonomously learns at different levels. The specific characteristics mostly attributed to self-regulated learners concern their motivational beliefs or attitudes, their cognitive strategy use, and their metacognitive abilities (Wolters, 2003, p.189). Hence, self-regulated learners are able to skillfully managing resources, exploiting the learning environment effectively, taking ownership of learning, are independent and highly motivated.

For developing self-regulated learning habits, it is essential to equip learners with self-regulated learning strategies. Zimmerman (1990, p.5) defines self-regulated learning strategies as 'actions and processes directed at the acquisition of information or skills that involve agency, purpose, and instrumentality perceptions by learners. Self-regulated learners possess an awareness of the strategic relations which exist between the regulatory process or responses and learning results. Similarly, they can make use of the strategies they are aware of to achieve pre-established objectives (Bramuci 2013). Discussing the relation between learning strategies and self-regulated learning, Dornyei (2005, p. 195) considers the learning strategies to be "a useful kit for active and conscious learning and these strategies pave the way toward greater proficiency, learner autonomy, and self-regulation". Thus, learning strategies form the foundation of self-regulated learning.

### **Learning strategies**

Learning strategies are commonly defined as deliberate attempts that learners make in order to facilitate learning. They include the techniques, approaches and tactics used for optimizing learning. In this light, Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as specific actions, behaviors, or techniques that the learners use to improve skills in

second language learning. Similarly, according to Rubin (1987), learning strategies are “any set of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information” (p.19). Effective learning strategies enable the learners to expand their knowledge horizon, grow more independent and autonomous through enhanced learning experiences. Discussing the significance of learning strategies Kalati (2016) writes that effective learning occurs when learners often use organizing, assessing, and planning which are the meta-cognitive strategies and accompanied by cognitive strategies such as analyzing, reasoning, transferring information, taking notes, and summarizing.

It has been critical to empower learners for fostering self-directed learning. Discussing the need for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, Harari (2018) notes that children need to learn adaptability, learning how to learn, resilience, curiosity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective collaboration. The availability of teachers at every step of life is nearly impossible and beyond imagination too. Meanwhile, a teacher can't satisfy the learners providing every bit of knowledge. Considering this fact current pedagogy has recommended learner autonomy to be one of the targets of teaching-learning activities. In a similar vein, Wegner, Minnaert and Strchlke (2013) explain that in modern education systems learners are expected to possess an increased degree of autonomy and show initiative in learning processes, inspecting learning materials and understanding contents. Efficient growth of knowledge inside and outside of school is only possible if students have skills that initiate, guide, and control the search for information and later on its processing and storage. They discuss six broad categories of learning strategies for making the learners automated. They are cooperation strategies, elaboration strategies, motivational and emotional strategies, revision strategies, organizational strategies and control strategies.

Strategically empowered learners know how to learn the best and can take the responsibility of learning. They can analyze their needs, plan for learning and reflect and evaluate the entire process. Strategy instruction can contribute to the development of learner mastery and autonomy and increased teacher expertise (Chamot 2005). Learning strategies are important in second language learning and teaching for two major reasons. Firstly, by examining the strategies we gain insights into the metacognitive, cognitive, social and affective processes involved in language learning. Secondly, less successful language learners can be taught new strategies for helping them to become better language learners (Grenfell & Harris 1999 as cited in Chamot 2005). Thus, empowering the learners is a pre-requisite to self-regulated learning which has been critical in the current scenario.

## **Learner empowerment and learner training**

The transformation of learning to the real world situation is the primary goal of education. Wagner and Dintersmith (2015) suggest that the purpose of education is to engage students with their passions and growing sense of purpose, teach them critical

skills needed for career and citizenship and inspire them to do their best to make their world better. For realizing these purposes empowering learners is crucial. Learner empowerment is a process of supplementing the learners with autonomy, motivation, and ownership which in turn results in active learning. In this regard, Sewagegn and Diale (2019) explain empowerment as a process that enables the learners to think, believe and carry out an activity and criticize his/her own work and make decisions autonomously. There are many areas where a learner can be empowered. Stone (1995, p. 294) identifies three main areas as respect, validation and success. She further asserts that students can be further empowered through ownership, choice, autonomy, decision making, responsibility, independence, risk-taking, collaborating, and self-evaluation.

Promoting learning strategies should be carefully guided by the theory of particularity that is what works best for an individual learner in a particular context. It is because there are no intrinsically good strategies. People need to discover them (Mariani, 2002). The choice of strategies depends on a number of factors, including the language being learned, the level of proficiency, the learning goals, and the learners' characteristics, such as age, sex, learning style, beliefs and motivations (Oxford, 1989). Thus, a creative teacher needs to supplement the students with a full range of strategies they could be choosing from and direct the learners towards personalized learning. Kallick and Zmuda (2017) define personalized learning as an umbrella term under which many practices fit, each designed to accelerate student learning by tailoring instruction to individuals' needs and skills as they go about fulfilling curricular requirements. Stressing on the need for personalized learning they state that we must move towards schools that offer students more choices as they learn how to fully develop their voice, hone their capacities to co-create, and explore the benefits of social construction and self-discovery. Discussing the implementation of this type of learning they further write that there will be many different projects going on simultaneously in the class. The choices that the students will make will be based on their curiosity and interest. In short, varieties and flexibility are the main attributes of personalized learning.

For promoting self-directed learning, the teachers must design the lesson in such a way that they can inculcate in the learners the attributes like initiating, risk-taking, collaborating, and taking responsibility and so on. In this regard, Hedge (2008) discusses three types of learner training activities that have significant implications for developing self-directed learning. These include activities that help learners to reflect on learning, activities which train strategies and equip learners to be active and activities which encourage learners to monitor and check their own progress. These broad categories incorporate the activities which promote reflection, feedback, motivation, collaboration, scaffolding, critical thinking, taking responsibility, evaluation, planning, making choices and many more.

It is not necessary that the strategy training takes a separate space and be introduced directly. That is to say, a proficient teacher can cultivate the desired strategies indirectly too. The teachers can weave learning strategy training into regular classrooms even

in a natural but highly explicit way, providing ample opportunity for practicing strategies and transferring them to new tasks (Oxford 2002, p.130). Discussing the ways of directing learners towards self-regulation. McGarry (1995) explains that students who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own work, by being given some control over what, how and when they learn, are more likely to be able to set realistic goals, plans, programs of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, evaluate and assess their own work and generally, to learn from their own successes and failures in ways which will help them to be more efficient learners in the future.

To put in a nutshell, self-regulated learning is self-planned and self-initiated learning in which learners bear the primary responsibility of learning. A self-regulated learner is supposed to analyze the learning context, make learning plans, exploit the materials available, and reflect on the entire process. He/she takes increasingly more responsibility for the decisions associated with learning endeavor. For this to happen the teachers are supposed to inculcate in the learners' self-regulated learning strategies such as planning, risk-taking, initiating, exploring, co-operating with others, making choices, reflecting and so on. Empowered with these strategies the learners would be independent and autonomous who can think critically and can continue learning even in the absence of teachers during the time of crisis, for example, the one we are facing today due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Methods and Procedure of the Study**

As this research solely builds on the teachers' reflection on empowering the students with learning strategies, this study is naturally guided by the qualitative method of inquiry. This research tries to make an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon by exploring subjective opinion assuming that reality is subjective (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Focus group discussions were used as a tool for eliciting data. Focus group discussion is a form of group interview but does not reflect the forward and backward turn-taking between interviewer and group. Rather, the data emerge from the interaction of the group (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The interaction allows a researcher to elicit a multiplicity of views. In this regard, Kitzinger (1995) features interaction as a crucial attribute of focus groups because the interaction between participants highlights their view of the world, the language they use about an issue and their values and beliefs about a situation.

We conducted three focus group discussions virtually among fifteen ELT teachers teaching at secondary level. Each group consisted of five participants. We purposively selected the teachers teaching in public schools in the Bhaktapur district who have not been able to communicate with their students during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure online security during the meeting, we used the Microsoft - Teams application (Tung, 2020).

Prior to the discussion, we briefed them on the nature of the discussion and its general purpose. Regarding ethical consideration, informed consent was sought (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Then we put forward the matter of discussion (Morgan 1997). The discussions lasted for fifty to seventy minutes.

The responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis and interpretation. The transcription was carried out as succinctly as possible. The data were further analyzed using a descriptive approach to data analysis. For this, we first noted down the points and categorized them broadly under three headings namely learning strategies, teachers' reflection on classroom activities and perceived roles of teachers.

## **Findings and Discussion**

In this section, we present the findings and discussion under three subheadings: learning strategies, teachers' reflection on classroom activities and the perceived role of teachers. Here, under each heading, we have included both the reflection of the teachers about their classroom activities carried out prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and their plans for the post-pandemic situation.

### **Learning strategies**

Reflecting on the teaching-learning activities prior to the pandemic it was revealed that the common strategies the participants intended to inculcate in the learners were exploration, collaboration, taking notes, summarizing, revision and self-evaluation. While discussing on these strategies, majority of the teachers emphasized that they focused on the general learning strategies that English language teachers commonly intend to promote in the learners which contradict with an argument made by Chamot (2005) that learning strategies are sensitive to the learning context and to the learner's internal processing. The majority of the participants were not selective and agreed that they followed the general techniques and tried to inculcate similar types of strategies as other language teachers commonly do.

Meanwhile, all the participants admitted that the pandemic caught the students not well prepared. They agreed that the strategies were not sufficiently practiced enabling the learners to feel complete independence and develop the ability to engage in learning on their own without much guidance. Thus, the teachers expected that learning might have been continued despite the school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic but could not be sure about that.

While talking about the future plan, firstly the participants expressed their regret for not directing their teaching-learning activities towards self-regulation. They further confessed that they could not prepare the learners for the initiation, planning, organizing, monitoring, risk-taking, making the choices, engaging in self-learning

and taking responsibility and ownership in learning. These strategies are key to self-regulated learning and partially cohere with strategies prescribed by Wang (2004) who categorise the self-regulated learning strategies under eleven broad headings. These include self-evaluation, organizing and transforming, goal setting and planning, seeking information, keeping records and monitoring, environmental structuring, self-consequences, attentional control, rehearsing and memorizing, and seeking assistance. In this regard, most of the participants emphasized on the fact that these strategies are difficult to empower in the learners, hence need rigorous planning and efficient implementation. For them, the teaching-learning activities taking place prior to the pandemic was not efficient enough to develop learner autonomy and self-regulation among the learners. They further admitted that only those who were empowered with learning strategies like reflecting, evaluating, and initiating can exploit virtual classes and other learning opportunities even in the absence of teachers during the school closure.

### **Teachers' reflection on classroom activities**

While reflecting on the activities carried out in the classroom it was found that most of the teachers used similar types of activities in the classrooms. They are pair and group work, role-play and simulation, games and puzzles, reading supplementary books, group discussion and dictionary work. To be specific, some of them made their learners choose any two words daily and present them in the class with their meaning and usage. Similarly, the majority of them also encouraged the students to watch English movies and speak English among their friends even in the absence of teachers. Here, the participants intended to promote the learning strategies used by good language learners like collaborating (playing language games and puzzles), accountability and responsibility (choosing any two words daily and presenting them in the class with their meaning and speaking English among their friends even in the absence of teachers), exploiting learning opportunities outside the classroom (watching movies and reading supplementary books). However, they admitted that the learners are hugely dependent on the teachers while performing these activities. They can rarely choose any materials for their learning. It indicates that the teachers tried to inculcate some good learning strategies through common learning activities but were not able to empower the students with learner autonomy.

Similarly, the finding demonstrates the teachers' dependence on common learning activities without rigorous effort on developing individualized skill on reflecting, monitoring and taking responsibility. The findings here aligned with McCarthy's (1995, p.1) argument that the majority of students are still being taught in ways that promote dependence and leave them ill-equipped to their school-learned knowledge and skills to the world beyond the classroom. This revelation indicates to the fact that English language learning has not been significantly undertaken during this pandemic.



## **The perceived role of teachers**

Regarding the roles of the language teachers for empowering the learners with learning strategies, it was found that the teachers have a significant role in motivating and inspiring the learners. In this regard, all the participants agreed that the students were more teacher dependent. Thus, it is possible that they might have been waiting for the teachers' assistance in selecting the learning materials and prescribing the strategies for dealing with them. For getting rid of this in the future they avowed that they would play the role of facilitator rather than that of director and controller. This resonates with Kalati (2016) who argues that teachers are responsible to facilitate learning besides awakening curiosity and inspiring creativity in learners. Furthermore, all the participants agreed that the teachers are responsible for teaching the strategies like planning, monitoring and evaluating for making them autonomous. It conforms to the findings of Picon- Jacome (2012) who claims that these strategies are responsible to enhance learners' autonomy, boost their metacognitive skills, and enhance their personality so that they can fight for their rights.

The participants further opined that the pandemics and catastrophes are abrupt, but the preparation needs to be done in advance. Tracking the various possibilities and challenges of sudden catastrophes in a creative way is the responsibility of a teacher primarily. Thus, they should craft their classroom in such a way that they could inculcate the qualities of autonomy and independence in the learners and prepare them for self-learning during uncertainties.

For this, the ELT teachers should bear the primary responsibility of empowering the learners with learning strategies that help the learners accommodate change, best utilize the resources available and exploit the opportunities at hand on their own. In this regard, Harari (2018) broadly argues that schools should downplay technical skills and emphasize the general purpose of life skills. Most importantly, learners should be able to deal with change to learn new things and preserve their mental balance in unfamiliar situations.

As an ELT teacher, it is our first priority that we ensure to facilitate the continuity of education for all. For this, empowering the learners with learning strategies can be a viable solution. The proliferation of technology equipped instructional setting is the demand of the day, however, this is not an end. Similarly, the transition from a face-to-face class to a virtual class is a daunting task. For exploiting the advanced technology as a support for their learning process equipping the learners with efficient learning strategies would be helpful. It is because learning strategies are one of the most important determinants leading to learning autonomy; an ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec 1983, as cited in Benson and Voller, 1997, p.1). Moreover, autonomous learners bear the highest responsibility of learning from initiating to evaluating themselves.

## **Conclusion**

COVID- 19 pandemic, in most cases, caught the stakeholders of education including students and teachers not well prepared. On the one hand, the possible discontinuation of learning is worrying everyone concerned. And on the other hand, with the growing complexities and uncertainties this crisis has created, it has been critical to rethink and transform our ways of customizing learning. We are compelled to plan for the educational paradigm shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. For this, it is necessary to make learners aware of multiple strategies and let them decide which works best for them. Flexibility is key when planning to facilitate learning strategies. Similarly, the learners should be actively involved in the entire learning process from goal setting to evaluation. And once the students internalize the strategies practiced in language classes they will be able to replicate and adapt them to some extent even in the absence of the teachers, hence, will achieve self-regulation and autonomy in learning.

Had the learners been empowered sufficiently, the probable learning gap in the learners would not have been something to worry about. Thus, anticipating possible crises in the future and preparing the learners for it would be worthy. Here, empowering the learners and getting them ready to take the responsibility of learning is one of the best things an ELT teacher can do. It is because by equipping the students with learning strategies we equip them with learning tools for the rest of their lives.

Though catastrophes are abrupt and unintentional preparation can be gradual and deliberate. Teaching may stop during these types of crises but learning would not be paused if the teachers can plan efficiently and prepare the learners. Preparedness can bridge the learning gap especially in the resource-constrained countries like Nepal. For this, teachers' planning and facilitation play the key role.

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