

Teachers' Role in Learner Autonomy in Large ELT Classrooms

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Abstract

The study aims to find out the role of learners' autonomy in large ELT class. The learner autonomy is very important and played prominent role in large classroom to make learning effective and interesting and teachers' effectual strategies to generate autonomy in learners. This study adopted qualitative research approach with narrative inquiry design. Five teachers teaching in large classrooms were the respondents. Data for the study were taken by following in-depth interviews as well as the observations of three teachers. The findings suggest that it is very challenging to apply learner autonomy in large number of the students, but it is possible if the teachers have good patterns and techniques to apply it. It also found out that if there are autonomous learners, then the large number of the students don't exist in trouble in teaching learning activities as it contains various possible intelligence.

Keywords: learner autonomy, large ELT classroom, independent and dependent learner

Introduction

Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his or her learning and implementation of those decisions. One familiar definition of autonomy is given by the "father" of autonomy, by Holec (1981) which states that autonomy is "the ability to take the charge of one's learning. This capacity is exercised in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of learning activities, and necessary embraces both the content and the process of learning." He also claims that autonomy is not inborn capacity, it can be acquired either by natural means or by formal learning. In addition, they are given more opportunities to take control of their learning as is implied and encouraged by principles of autonomous learning. With the change from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness in education, every teacher expects the learner to be keen in learning whereas it is difficult to find in large class. Paudel (2019) mentioned that one of the greatest challenges to the teachers is to develop a sense of responsibility among their learners so that the learners will understand why and how they learn and be willing to take an active role in their learning.

Large class is really a challenging one for all teachers as well as for the students of each level for teaching learning activities. Large-class environments are a reality for many who teach at higher education institutions around the world. Teaching large class can be a challenge, regardless of experience of the faculty

members tasked with teaching these courses may experience frustration, especially if one is doing this for the first time (Kirkwood, 2013). It is very difficult for the teachers to deal with the students having different level of the ability with crowded environment. More than that it is difficult to give them immediate feedbacks after the completion of their lesson work. Learners' needs, interests, learning styles, and other individual differences are being considered by their teachers in the learning-teaching environment. But it is very difficult to understand what they are thinking, or what they need or want. However, teacher always expects in their teaching class to have autonomous learner. So that the learning can be easily adopted by the students with teachers' less effort.

Autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). With the change from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness in education, every teacher expects the learner to be keen in learning whereas it is difficult to find in large class. Paudel (2019) mentioned that one of the greatest challenges to the teachers is to develop a sense of responsibility among their learners so that the learners will understand why and how they learn and be willing to take an active role in their learning.

Teaching very large classes effectively requires the same skills and commitment as teaching smaller classes, such as the need to motivate students, being systematic, organized and developing stimulating assessment tasks. These requirements become increasingly difficult with large classes, as expanding student numbers are often accompanied by increasing diversity of the student population, and greater demands and complexities in the processes of teaching and assessment. Lawrence (2022) mentions that problems with large classes include: the lack of opportunities for the instructor to get to know students, and for students to form relationships with peers, students do not get to know each other well, and absenteeism increases; lack of student engagement with course content results in less class participation and increases student anonymity; faculty have a difficult time being able to relate to such a large number of students and the demands made by them; and class discussion may be brief and superficial and acoustics, visibility, and attention may become communication issues.

Literature Review

Self-determination theory (SDT) has become a highly influential theory of human motivation and well-being with a vast body of research evidence. The

theory assumes that human beings are inherently active, with liberally evolved tendencies toward assimilation, seeking and mastering challenges, and the integration of new experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Research indicates that the autonomy orientation is strongly related to more effective performance and to a stronger sense of psychological well-being and health. The theory proposed two types of motivation: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as doing an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When individuals are intrinsically motivated, they feel ownership and are likely to become more autonomously motivated and reliably perform better, learn more efficiently, and adapt more easily (Good et al., 2022). Extrinsic motivation is defined as doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is driven by external rewards. Self-determination theory has introduced three basic psychological needs; competence, relatedness and autonomy. Guay (2022) claims that the need for autonomy is defined as the necessity of experiencing a sense of choice, willingness, and volition as one behaves.

Learner autonomy is defined as a learners' readiness and competence in taking accountability for suggesting, implementing, monitoring, and assessing their learning in cooperation with, and with support from, the teacher (Benson, 2007). To bear an autonomy within the learner teacher should take charge of it. The teacher is responsible to push the learner to learn independently. According to Lin and Reinders (2019), the teacher is evaluated based on the amount of knowledge that they can transfer to the students. From this I find that the teacher has the great role on promoting the learner's ability. Joshi (2011) said, "autonomy is an adaptive ability allowing learners to develop supportive structures within themselves rather than to have them erected around them." Autonomous learner usually seems to have features like; flexibility, independency, curiosity, self-awareness, logical, responsible etc. qualities on them. Classroom based approach aims to foster autonomy by providing the learners enough opportunities to make decisions for managing own learning. As it is mentioned in Benson (2001), "positive results have been gained in accounts of experiments where the learner has been encouraged to take a certain amount of control over the planning and assessment of classroom learning." In addition, these experiments have shown that learners are able to exercise control over these aspects of their learning provided that they give the opportunity to do so with the necessary of classroom learning.

Le and Le (2022) revealed that the teacher plays a highly essential role in students' learning process by mentioning three pivotal facts; good interaction between students and their teachers can forge their attitudes towards English learning, teacher-

related factors including their personalities, professional knowledge, enthusiasm, and commitment, strongly affect students' attitudes towards English learning and how teachers perceive their students also affects students' feelings and attitudes towards English learning. Ghimire (2014) states many large ELT classes in the Nepalese context are under-resourced, i.e., they do not have minimum facilities. They are not equipped with modern ELT technology and online resources. Some of them do not have even a simple cassette player for listening practice. However, class size in and of itself is not a distinguishing feature of student performance; instead, class size matters in relation to education goals and the quality of the educational experience. As mentioned in Ghimire (2014), sixty to seventy-five students are not so exceptional around the world but she defines large classes as a class of thirty or more students in elementary, secondary and adult in the tertiary setting but in large classes there are always enough students to get interaction going, and there is a rich variety of human resources. Large classes work best when students take an active interest in the subject and when teachers personalize their presentation and respect their students.

A study conducted by Deci et al., (1991) discovered that students in classrooms with autonomy supportive teachers displayed more intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and self-esteem than did the students in the classrooms with controlling teachers. Similarly, Urun et al., (2014) conducted a study with experimental research where, two classes were selected randomly, as an experimental group and a control group. While the experimental group was instructed in the autonomy implementation, the control group continued their education without any alteration. The results showed that the learners in the experimental group scored higher than those in the control group and the experimental group had a strong tendency towards autonomy compared to the control group with a few exceptions. It means that to foster the autonomy in learners there is a vital role of teachers. Cheon, Reeve, and Vansteenkiste (2020) have discovered that teachers' greater motivating style skill also benefited their students. Student of the teachers in the intervention experienced greater autonomy and competence need satisfaction during instruction. It was also mentioned that when teachers take their students' perspective and support their initiative, students generally become more interested and engaged) while teachers gain in teaching efficacy and job satisfaction.

According to Little (1995), "learning arises from interaction and interaction is characterized by interdependence." Şanal (2016) indicates the importance of teachers' role in this process since "the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted." Saeed (2021) states several factors affect learning autonomy and they are

directly or indirectly connected to each other i.e. focus of control, motivation (both intrinsic & extrinsic), choice, the capability to recognize learning needs and to assess learning outcomes, the capability to pursue and utilize knowledge. Pokhrel (2020) noted in her finding that knowledge development process of a child depends on the interaction between the child and environment and it is the teacher's duty to promote learning culture among students.

Urun et. al. (2014) conducted a participatory research study where the findings showed that it is also the interest of the teacher to provide a well-structured learning environment for the students. At the same time, many students also reported that their skills improved in terms of communication and all four skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Experimental research has shown that teacher style effects learner motivation which in return affects learner autonomy.

Though most of the researchers have discussed about learner autonomy and teachers' perspectives towards it but I haven't found the study discussed about learner autonomy in large class so I like to observe that whether the learner autonomy can be helpful to run large ELT classroom well enough or not. Daflizar and Petraki (2022) discovered that it's not easy to transfer control from the teacher to the students whose learning styles have been deeply ingrained in teacher-centered pedagogies and rote learning practices. A gradual transition may be needed to make the students more aware of the benefit of LA, be able to recognize their beliefs and abilities in the process and allow them to take more responsibilities. Hence, learner training, used interchangeably with strategy training or learning-to-learn training are needed as an intermediary phase during which control is gradually transferred from the teacher to students.

Methodology

This research followed qualitative research approach. According to Cresswell, (2018, p.4), "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem." This study was based on the qualitative research approach which is popular one design in educational research. It followed the narrative enquiry process. Narrative research is a design of inquiry from the humanities in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives (Creswell, 2018). Narrative is a basic design for linking human events that creates an understandable combination. Its purpose is to know individual experiences and their meaning (Varnaseri & Alhaei, 2023). By the help of narrative inquiry, I tried to collect their experiences that they had during their teaching in large class.

Population and Sampling with Sampling Strategy

In research study, population is defined as the people who appeal to the interest of the researchers in generalizing the outcomes of the research. Sukmawati, Salmia & Sudarmin (2023) state two parts of population: the target and survey population. During this research, the target population were the ELT teachers of Dhading of various levels who were having large classroom in their teaching activities. Sampling was based on the specified population area. So, among them I selected five teachers as sampling. I selected experienced participants so that I could get rich information for my research from their experiences that they had in their teaching phases. I adopted non-random purposive sampling because I had to select the teachers who were teaching in large classroom which are very rare to find in every schools.

Data Collection Tools and Methods

Data collection is a very important stage in research (Sukmawati, Salmia & Sudarmin, 2023). Therefore, as per the study, the primary source was used for collecting data. Data collection process started after taking consent from the school administration by submitting consent application to observe and take interview with their teachers. Then the process went through interview because it helps to reveal the in-depth details needed for the study. Classroom observations were made. I also took follow up interviews to get more relevant data for my study by calling the participants. The sampling size was smaller and to find out the sufficient data I adopted deep structure interviews.

Ethical Consideration

The quality of behavior of academic researchers is governed by research ethics. have stated that ethical principles are essential to protect the dignity and rights of research participants (Gajjar, 2013; Hasan et al. 2021). To address ethical concern, first of all I took consent from all participants for the interview. I informed them about the purpose of the research and why were they chosen. As the protocol of interview, I assured all the participants anonymity by assigning pseudocode names as Ram for T1, Shyam for T2, Hari for T3, Gita for T4 and Sita for T5 of their real names.

Findings and Discussions

Perceptions Towards Large Classroom

Large classes are undouble problematic and challenging. Ram thinks that the learner should have high quality or high interest in learning but while coming

to English class, students seem to be passive and lack of interest because of subject difficulty. According to him in a class there should be maximum 40 students only but he has been teaching the classes mostly having 55 to 70. He said:

I have been teaching for 15 years where I have been teaching for 10 years in large ELT classroom. Whenever I tried to make my class interesting by using some techniques then large number of students create difficulties and there remained no longer any desired to continue furthermore. Although I planned to use student- centered techniques but later it changed into teacher- centered. And I agreed that I frequently used it too.

He said that the class with large number is so uncontrolled and noisy where teacher couldn't give complete attention and enough time to watch them individually. Shyam said that teaching becomes effective when there is small number of the students because while teaching English, to make them good at it we must create interactive class to motivate them to communicate in second language which is only possible to judge in small class having limited number of students. Still discussion and interaction can be done in large class but the class becomes so noisy and the students also become easily distracted.

Similarly, Hari and Gita also had the same opinions regarding large classroom that the limited number of the students' performance can be judged more closely and can be given proper feedback frequently as per need where in large classroom it may not be possible. In other hand, Sita presents her separate view among all. She stated:

I don't believe that the large number of the students affect the teaching learning activities much if they are disciplined, active and curious towards subject matter of learning because in my experience sometimes having the less number of the students also might create trouble in learning environment when they found the subject matter boring and don't understand but sometimes if the subject matter is of the students' interest or presented in an exciting way then the large number of the students also become attentive and learn well.

Teachers' techniques to present the subject matter play the pivotal role to maintain the classroom environment suitable as learners are more focused if the subject matters are of their interest and presented in enthralling ways. According to Sita it results that even the large classroom can also be expected noise free, attentive and effective in such conditions.

Strategies Used by Teachers to Make the Students Participate in Learning.

While talking with fifteen years experienced teacher Ram, he said that he usually starts and ends his class by revising some questions that were taught previous day and discussing the lesson taught that day at the end respectively. Similarly, Shyam used mostly student-centered technique to make them more attentive towards learning by providing them the tasks like pair work, group work and some of the information gap activities. According to him these activities help the students to be independent and to use their discovery technique in order to search and find out the answers. While talking with Sita, she has revealed her very interesting techniques which can make the learners active, creative, and autonomous. She said:

I usually start my class with some warmups. I divide 6 to 7 equal numbers where each groups get some of the activities like; telling stories, news, speech on their choice topic, set up instructions etc. and they must deliver on their turn in the beginning of the classes. For this activity, I always separate initial 10 mins daily from my teaching learning activities. This technique has really helped the students to build up their confidence and develop their knowledge.

Similarly, Hari states that to make the students participate in learning the teacher should take more responsibility and make sure that all the students are involving in learning process. Regarding that he used to give project work that also as group work and fixed the duties within the members of that group and let them do that in the school premises. Likewise, Gita believes that if the students are not in ready position to learn then whatever the teachers give them the task they won't involve in it and don't want to do it as well. So, if the teachers wants to make the students participate in learning, the topic should be presented interestingly.

Teaching Method Mostly Used by Teachers in Large Classroom.

Teaching methods or strategies are planned. Sita introduced one theory about 'Each One Teach One'. It believes that when the teacher sometimes can't complete the target part to teach then the capable students present in the class also can help other students. It increases the students involvement where almost all the students are present. She believes that this method could help the learner to enrich their autonomy as well as increase their participation in independent learning. Likewise, Ram used different techniques according to the context by considering students level, interest, environment they had. There are various aspects to select the techniques and he used mostly the student-centered technique where he could involve the students. Students when they don't know or don't understand the subject matter, they remain passive, and they expect to translate later in English. Questionnaire, problem solving method,

taking viva etc. are some of his often-used methods to increase the involvement of the students. Sometimes he talks with them casually so that they can feel free and build up their confidence to interact and have a talk in English. There are some autonomous learners but fail to identify and recognize because of large number of students. Interested and active students make the teaching learning activities very effective where it brings half of work easy for the teachers. Shyam stated:

Teaching in large ELT classroom is very challenging but it is ELT class so we have to make class communicative. If that brings noise also it doesn't matter. Because that noise which is related to subject matter then that is known as healthy noise.

As said by Hari, teacher should use different techniques in their teaching based on subject matters. He believes that same techniques can't be useful for all types of lesson to be taught. There is no fixed one but sometimes according to the situation we are compelled to use the method that is suitable. Similarly, in his large class generally he used lecture method especially. Gita also uses the strategies of teaching according to the subject matter. But for her lecture method is the most suitable as well as found effective in large classroom too.

Factors that Affect Learner Autonomy

Students age, their level of performance, learning styles and strategies, classroom environment, motivation, home environment, their interests and ability etc. are some factors that affect students learning activities. According to Ram's observation in the class during teaching, students don't want to learn by themselves. They are so much dependent that whatever teachers will give them the information they will believe it and don't do even cross check as well. They strictly based upon the teachers and always seek for help and assistance from teachers. Though they are willing to learn also it becomes very difficult because of linguistic problem as English is their second language. Similarly, Shyam sees large classroom and the second language as the factors affecting learner autonomy. Though the learners want to be active and autonomous the problem of second language make them less confident to explore their ability. And also the large classroom and the environment create problems for the teachers as they couldn't provide sufficient time and care the learners.

In Hari's view the students who are well in study they can be let free to learn but the students who are very weak they are always seeking for guidance and letting them free can affect their study. Gita presents that the factors that kill the learner's autonomy is sometimes because of the large class and lack of the time of

the teachers to give enough attention towards them. There is a long-standing belief that the number of students in a class affects the quality of the learning environment (Ehrenberg et al., 2001). Sita said that lack of confidence is also one of the main factors which affect the learners in the process of learning. Students when they lack competence in second language then they start to have problem in learning and exposing their talent.

Activities Shown by Autonomous Learner

Learners' perceptions regarding the role of a teacher and their own in learning might be different from one to another. A self-directed learner is who takes initiatives: one who has a clear idea of what he wants to learn and one who has his own plan for pursuing and achieving his goals. As we know that autonomous learners are self-dependent learner but the activities that they show during their learning might be different from each other. Ram and Gita find that in their classes the learners who are autonomous are always in ready position to learn and frequently ask questions to meet the information with their curiosity whereas Sita finds in her class those students are not only ready but already learned themselves the subject matter that is going to be taught. Also, she finds that they use various related resources to eradicate their doubt while learning: library, other related book materials and mostly found the use of social media. Similarly, after identifying those types of students she gets them to help other students who are weak and lack proper and enough attention in class for their study in their quality time.

Social media has become the new sensation and mostly used platform as teaching materials in the field of teaching and learning by teachers as well as students. Shyam and Hari also find the students taking help from the internet to search any new information. Students where they are already known about the subject matter before teaching, provide great relief for the teachers in teaching learning activities. As we know that, after the pandemic of Covid the use of social media was slightly increased where most of the related teaching methods, ideas and strategies were frequently shared to create the ease in teaching learning activities which still is in process. Teachers and students are greatly benefitted with these resources to improve their knowledge and expertise.

Strategies to Generate Autonomy in Learner

Ram's most common technique is giving different paragraphs to the learners to be prepared and to present in front of the class what they had understood while starting new lesson. Some of the learners didn't want to present but as they had got the task, so they at least try to do it. And while discussing question answers and other

exercises he always let the students to do first and at last did cross check and provided correct answers. According to Shyam, forceful learning can't be a deep learning. To create the feeling of autonomy in learner he usually let the students to ask questions themselves to their friends. Each day different students had to ask the questions and other remaining students should provide the answers and if they are unable then they have to search themselves the answers too. He believes that this method make the learners creative and eager to search question as well as answers. He proposed TPS which means think, pair and share and one of the way to make learners free to learn and independent. Teaching styles and teaching strategies are different. Students should be encouraged to use new technology as they love to use it too. So, teachers have to focus to make students to use that technology the positive way towards learning.

Hari's one of the techniques that is used to make the students autonomous is letting the students to tell a short speech on the topic they wish. Every day, he separates 5 minutes from his teaching time for this activity to make all students to participate. In his view it helps the students to build up self-confidence, and proficiency level in speaking. He informs the students on the very previous day for their turn but let the student be free to choose their own topic where they feel comfortable to speak. For enhancing more autonomy power, he encourages the students to use new technology as well because for him in this globalized era one should be aware of the fact of technology and its uses.

Gita motivates the students to search the answers by using latest technology as providing them the home assignment. Her home assignments are mostly creative like art works, paper works etc. She believes that whenever the learners are given new task beyond text they feel more interested and excited to learn. Likewise, she also provides group work as she believes that in group work, students learn with mutual efforts and have autonomy to work together and complete the tasks successfully. It helps to create number of talking opportunities which can increase the speaking skill in target language and promotes learners' autonomy by allowing students to make their own decisions in the group.

Discussion

The result of the present study on the teachers' role in learner autonomy in large ELT classes brings similar views and ideas regarding teachers' role but also about the large classroom demerits. Teaching strategy is an educational strategy which can be interpreted as a method or series of activities designed to achieve learning objectives (Pertwi, Yanto & Ahmad, 2022). After the talk with several

participants I found that in the engagement of the students either in large class or small class there is always a prominent role of teachers who can activate the learners interest by using varieties of enthralling strategies. Teachers' planning, strategies and efforts are the vital part to make teaching learning activities fruitful and effective. According to Lin and Reinders (2019), the teacher is evaluated based on the amount of knowledge that s/he can transfer to the students. Therefore, teacher must be creator for presenting subject matter.

Sengupta (2000) found that instruction in revision improves performance of school students on subsequent topics as well as 8 min of instruction led to considerable improvement in the second draft when these were compared with the second drafts of those who did not get any instruction. No one chooses to have a large group since it makes the job of teaching more challenging than it already is. But also, our participants are also one of them who are teaching in such classes. But all of them don't have same thoughts regarding the number of students. As Sita said that sometimes the class having few numbers of the students are also difficult to handle whereas the class having large number of students are easier.

Ghimire (2014) also claims that large classes work best when students take an active interest in the subject and when teachers personalize their presentation and respect their students. Large ELT classes require a different technique to be implemented. The result brought that the same learning tasks and activities are not appropriate for all the students. Therefore, the teacher should devise different levels of activities according to their abilities. Hari also said that teacher should use different techniques in their teaching based on subject matters. He believes that same techniques can't be useful for all types of lesson to be taught and there is no fixed one.

Collaborative activities are very helpful in large ELT classroom (Ghimire, 2014). Therefore, collaborative activities such as group work, pair work, jigsaw activities, collaborative community projects and collaborative writing need to be focused in a large under-resourced ELT classroom. These activities play significant role not only to involve large number of the students with a certain time as well as help in making the learner autonomous. One of the participants has given main focus in TPS which is found to be more effective technique used in his classroom. The findings also shows that most of the students expect the use of modern technology from their teacher in their teaching. As Hari also stated that the teacher should be up-to-dated with the new and modern technologies which can be used in teaching learning activities. Likewise, a very few students like to solve their problems themselves by consulting materials and resources. Instead, a vast majority of them expect that the teacher work as a problem solver for them.

Conclusion

From the analysis and interpretation of the data collection, it is inferred that the presence of learners' autonomy plays immense role to comfort the classroom learning activities. Moreover, the findings of this study suggests that in large classes there are always enough students to get interaction going, and there is rich variety of human resources. And if the autonomous learners could be identified then it doesn't matter whether the student number are large or small. Similarly, there is teachers' main role to generate autonomy in learners by using interesting techniques; group work, pair work and one theory has also been discovered 'Each One Teach One' which is also found to be effective strategy to enrich the learner autonomy.

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