
Empowerment and Agency in EFL Classrooms Practicing Critical Pedagogy: Evidence from Nepalese Community Campuses

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Abstract

Agency and empowerment issues have been the central concerns of curriculum design and classroom dimension in English as foreign language learning (EFL) context. These issues seek an alignment to the practice of critical pedagogy in language classroom. Thus, the study aims to explore students' perceptions of empowerment and agency in classrooms informed by critical pedagogy within Nepalese community campuses investigating how learners experience voice, participation, and constraints in EFL classrooms in the context of Nepal. Adopting a qualitative design, the researcher chose six undergraduate students from three community campuses located at Bagmati province, Nepal as participants for unstructured interviews and follow up discussions. Analysis of the information revealed four concurrent themes: voice and participation in classroom interaction, critical awareness and reflective learning, identity and confidence as English users, and structural and institutional barriers to agency. Findings indicate that dialogic and interactive classroom practices foster student empowerment and confidence. However, rigid academic structures and exam-oriented traditions still constrain the realization of genuine agency. The study highlights the necessity of teacher professional development in practicing critical pedagogy and advocates for participatory or flexible curriculum frameworks with practical evaluation system that promote learner autonomy in EFL contexts.

Keywords: agency, empowerment, critical pedagogy, EFL classrooms, community campus

Introduction

Agency is considered from a wider perspective (Marin et al., 2020) not limiting to a discipline. It has been accepted as an important part of language learning activities worldwide. The agency is the ability of individuals to make choices. It provides the capacity to act on these choices in a way that makes a difference in the lives of learners in shaping their identity (Block, 2013). A learner's agency refers to their ability to keep themselves within a conversation as an active and responsible beginner of action (Martin, 2016). The capacity of learners to act purposefully and make meaningful choices in their learning has been popular concept of the agency. It has gained a

growing attention in contemporary pedagogy (Bandura, 2001; Biesta, 2010; Lamb, 2017). Fostering student agency is essential to creating autonomous and empowered learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where participation is frequently shaped by power dynamics between teachers and students. Within South Asian contexts like Nepal, traditional teacher-centered methods still dominate, often reducing students to passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in meaning-making (Adhikari & Pandey, 2024). In line with this understanding of agency, Nepalese university curricula depict students as individuals expected to take responsibility for their actions and interactions (Adhikari, 2025). Based on this, the present curriculum of B. Ed. in Tribhuvan University, Nepal expects more engagement of students in the courses than their teachers' presentation in the classrooms aiming to enhance empowerment and agency of learners (Tribhuvan University, 2025). However, as a long time (over two decades) practitioners of language education, I have witnessed and experienced the limitations of practices of agency through critical pedagogy in EFL classrooms.

On the other hand, critical pedagogy, which stems from the work of Freire in 1970s, sees education as a liberating process that makes students critically aware of and capable of changing their social reality. It places a strong emphasis on communication, introspection, and shared authority between educators and learners. This method fosters learner autonomy, critical thinking, and identity building in EFL contexts in addition to increasing linguistic proficiency (Norton, 2013).

In the context of higher education in Nepal, student agency is often referenced but rarely elaborated in terms of how it is effectively encouraged and how it leads to transformative practices (Richert, 2020). To my knowledge from the reviews so far made, I found limited empirical research that examined how students in Nepalese community campuses perceive their empowerment within EFL classrooms guided by critical pedagogy. Therefore, this study attempts to fill that gap by exploring the learners' perceptions of expressions of agency empowered by critical pedagogy. The study aims to explore how EFL students perceive their empowerment and agency in EFL classrooms influenced by critical pedagogy. Following research questions were developed based on the objectives:

- i. How do learners perceive their empowerment and agency in EFL classrooms influenced by critical pedagogy?

Literature Review

This part of the study establishes the conceptual foundation for analyzing how critical pedagogy fosters empowerment and agency among EFL learners.

Concept of Student Agency

Scholars have conceptualized agency as the learner's ability to act purposefully, take decisions, and manipulate their actions (Bandura, 2001; Biesta, 2010). In language learning context, agency comprises the learners' engagement in deciding goals, taking leads, and reflecting on their own learning (Gao, 2010; Lamb, 2017). The agency depends on the context. It is relational and shaped by societal, cultural, and institutional settings (Mercer, 2011). However, rigid teaching programs such as 'one-size-fits-all' fail to foster the agency among learners (Adhikari, 2025; Adhikari & Pandey, 2025). The agency is echoed in learners' active engagement and negotiation for making meaning, and their capacity to employ language for interactions (Murray, 2014) in EFL classrooms. This shows that when the learners identify ownership of their learning, their inspiration and success improve.

In the context of language teaching, educators can foster the situations that enable students to enhance their ability to use, influence, change, and strengthen learning opportunities (Vaughn, 2020). Teachers can influence students by motivating them to make choices associated with their cultural interests, pedagogical needs, and chosen activities, for strengthening their sense of agency (Adhikari, 2025). Thus, agency is necessary for extending learning environments that allow students to promote intentionality and act upon their inclination to learn. When learners operate with their own sense of purpose and collective capacity, agency influences both the processes and outcomes of their learning (Lindgren & McDaniel, 2012; Martin, 2016). Moreover, agency influences students' academic achievement, consistency in learning (Anderson et al., 2019), and their critical thinking skills. Therefore, fostering student agency entails boosting their ability to think both critically and creatively. To fully realise the critical dimension, it is essential to integrate critical pedagogy for enhancing the agency.

Critical Pedagogy and Empowerment

Critical pedagogy views education as a political act aimed at social transformation (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). It challenges notion of hierarchy between teacher and learners seeking to create dialogic spaces where the learners question dominant ideologies and express their voices freely. As a pioneer of critical pedagogy, Freire's main focus was on 'critical education' against the traditional banking model of

education which only feeds students as passive recipients. Against the notion of feeding knowledge to learners, critical pedagogy is committed to fostering a school culture that amplifies the voices of culturally marginalized and economically disadvantaged students. It seeks to transform classroom structures and practices that sustain undemocratic conditions. Furthermore, it seeks to boost freedom through both individual and social transformation (Braa & Callero, 2006), focusing on critical pedagogy that carries meaningful change within classrooms and society at large (Adhikari & Pandey, 2024).

In this context, empowering learners involves becoming critically conscious and self-determined actors in their learning experiences. In framing the academic dimension of learner empowerment, Cummins' (1986) perspective is practical, which asserts that empowered learners promote the ability, confidence, and motivation essential for academic achievement. Scholars further argue that empowered learners gain awareness of the economic, political, and social forces shaping their lives and individual identity (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Giri, 2020). They further believe that learning to read both the "word and the world," thereby develop a deeper understanding of the challenges they face in their everyday life. However, enhancing learner empowerment is difficult because it needs more than simply modifying traditional structures and practices. It also requires transforming underlying beliefs and values, especially educators fundamental understanding of what it means to be a learner within the educational system (Soeiro, et al., 2011). This is also challenging in language education.

Moreover, in language teaching, critical pedagogy demands teachers to go beyond teaching grammar and engage students in interactions that link language use to broader issues of power, identity, and culture (Norton, 2013; Canagarajah, 2012) related to their everyday life. A complex interplay between dominant social structures and individual agency shapes the voice, positionality and identity of adolescents in EFL classrooms and broader society (Devkota, 2025). By doing so, it repositions learners as co-constructors of knowledge which is the fundamental aspect of the learners' empowerment. This empowerment enhances the learners to express their voices, choices, and interests within dialogic pedagogical practices. That encourages the learners for making decisions. Studies worldwide have shown that learner-centered and dialogic pedagogies increase students' engagement, confidence, and autonomy (Lamb & Reinders, 2008; Crookes, 2013). However, in this context, research in Asian and particularly Nepalese contexts remains scarce. Existing literature within this territory focus that rigid curricula, exam pressures, and hierarchical teacher authority often limit critical engagement (Phyak, 2016; Sharma & Phyak, 2019) of the learners and the

teachers in language classrooms. This limitation of critical engagement of the learners masks their representative voices, identity, participation in EFL classrooms.

Building upon the gap, this study investigates how Nepalese EFL learners perceive empowerment within classroom practices informed by critical pedagogy and by identifying pedagogical and institutional factors that enhance or hinder students' sense of voice and participation in language learning classrooms.

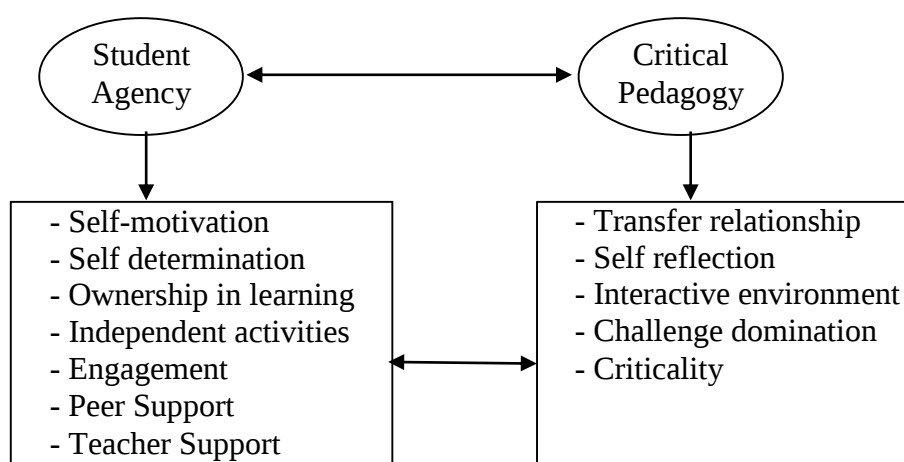
Theoretical Framework

Principally, this study combines Freire's (1970) theory of dialogic education and Biesta's (2010) view of agency as relational and context-dependent. Their frameworks guide the understanding of how learners' voices, participations, and reflections create empowerment in EFL learning settings. Both as a theory and a practice, critical pedagogy promotes learners' critical consciousness through the practices of agency in language learning. In this context, the agency characterizes the capacity to act within and against sociocultural constraints (Ahearn, 2001) through language education which is fundamentally concerned with transforming oppressive power relations within and beyond classrooms. Further, the agency looks for humanizing and empowering learners (Kincheloe, 2008) in language learning. The agency enables learners' ability to engage in autonomous social action and to act beyond the limiting forces of social structures. It also promotes their capacity to think and act critically which underscores their roles as independent, self-directed participants in the classroom (Kelly & Pelech, 2020). As language learners, these roles are assumed to act within and beyond the classrooms.

Viewing on language the aspect of learning, Jaaskela et al. (2021) perceive student agency in higher education as the sense of empowerment students experience through three correlated components—personal, relational, and participatory resources. This empowerment supports learners to act with purpose, intention, and meaning within their academic settings. Talking on these components, Marin et al. (2020) describe personal resources as learners' beliefs, relational resources as the quality of classroom relationships and environment, and participatory resources as the contextual opportunities for involvement in learning activities. Specifically, personal resources encompass students' self-efficacy, competence, motivation, and interest in learning, while relational resources highlight peer support and teacher-student interactions. Participatory resources are reflected in the teaching-learning activities that promote engagement. Furthermore, teacher guidance and instructional strategies significantly influence how students exercise agency and develop effective self-regulation skills (Holmes et al., 2020). Similarly, Luo et al. (2019)

consider that student voice allows the students to choose their task and activities where teachers passively participate. Student's voice allows the students and the teachers to decide their instructional tasks collaboratively. The teachers facilitate the learning process by considering their students' voices. They become responsible for guidance and feedback to the students (Adhikari & Pandey, 2025). They are actively involved when demanded by the students. Thus, student voice is an important aspect of agency practiced through critical pedagogy.

The following figure represents the relation between student agency and critical pedagogy.



Adapted from Adhikari (2025)

Methodology

This section deals with the methods and materials used in the study such as design, sampling, site, data collection and analysis procedures.

Research Design

A qualitative design was employed to capture students' lived experiences and perceptions in naturalistic contexts (Creswell, 2014). This approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which values the subjective understanding of human experience and recognizes that knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue between researcher and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I believe that unstructured interviews within qualitative approach allowed participants to express their views freely, aligning with the interpretivist paradigm.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted across three community campuses in Bagmati Province, Nepal. Six undergraduate EFL students (three male and three female, aged 22–24) participated voluntarily. All participants were enrolled in Bachelor of Education programs with English as their major subject. I randomly selected campuses from three districts and purposively chose two participants from each campus who had experience of being taught by at least two teachers practicing participatory or dialogic teaching in the classroom. All participants I selected were the regular students of Bachelor final year. I ensured that the students as participants were being taught by the teachers who adopted dialogic, interactive, and participatory based methods through the interactions with the students, their respective department heads, and the teachers themselves.

Data Collection

The main focus of qualitative research is to explore participants' experiences within their natural settings, taking into account the diverse interpretations individuals bring to a phenomenon (Hapsari, 2025). Therefore, the goal of qualitative research is not to achieve generalizability but to gain a deep understanding of context-specific meanings (Phakiti et al., 2018). The qualitative research design facilitates the collection of rich, descriptive data through interviews to capture the lived experience of the participants (Harjono & Wachyuni, 2025). Thus, I gathered information through unstructured, one-on-one interviews, each lasting 42 to 60 minutes. After establishing cordial relation, I also made some informal discussions with them when available through WhatsApp and Facebook messenger. While discussing I encouraged them to describe classroom experiences, feelings of participation, their teachers' pedagogical practices, and their own perceptions of empowerment. I used both English and Nepali (depending on participant comfort) while interviewing.

Data Analysis

In qualitative studies, information analysis involves a continuous, non-linear, and iterative process of interpretation (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015) to categorize patterns and infer meanings from the students' perspectives regarding empowerment and agency in EFL classrooms informed by the critical pedagogy. I adopted the four steps process; selecting the recall data, preparing it for coding, developing a frame-work for coding, and achieving triangulation to ensure reliability and validity of the information collected (Gass & Mackey, 2017). I scanned each transcript many times, coded segments related to agency and empowerment, and arranged them into patterns. From

the patterns, four overarching themes emerged, representing students' perspectives on voice, participation, confidence, and organizational barriers.

Ethical Considerations

I took ethical approval from the respective campus administrations. I informed the participants about the study's purpose, gave written consent, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. I used pseudo names of the participants maintaining anonymity while presenting the information in the findings section.

Findings and Discussions

Analysis of the students' perceptions regarding empowerment and agency through critical pedagogy resulted in four patterns: voice and participation, critical awareness and reflection, identity and confidence, and structural and institutional barriers. The findings of the research have been presented under these four patterns as overarching themes. They are dealt below.

Voice and Participation in Classroom Interaction

Participants described feeling empowered when given opportunities to express opinions and share experiences. One of the participants, Preeti noted, "When my teacher asks what I think about a topic, I feel like my ideas also matter. It gives me energy to speak and learn." Another student, Prem expressed, "I feel more excited when our teachers listen and appreciate our ideas." These exploration of voices of students through their opinions and ideas from interactions instil them the enthusiasm for further learning. Suhani put, "When our ideas and opinions are accepted by teachers, I feel more interested in exploring new ideas. I like to learn from more resources to get new ideas to present in my class." When teachers hear, care, and appreciate their students' new findings or explorations the students remain active in interactions. They bring ideas for further interactions that promotes continuous dialogues in the classroom. Suman pointed, "Our classes are more interactive when we get chance to present our own ideas. When teachers like our sharing, I feel that I should seek other new ideas for another interactions. Next day I like to present with another ideas." Similarly, Pusps mentioned, "What I like in some teachers' classes is that they never dislike our ideas." Teachers' acceptance of their learners' sharing enhances more interactions in the classroom. The students like to involve in further and extended interactions in their own initiatives. They prefer to continue their actions and interactions that foster learning environment in the classroom.

Since teachers are reluctant to listen to their students, they may not foster further dialogues in the classroom. This reluctance may obstruct interactive activities among the students and the teacher. However, the information reveals that the activities such as dialogic practices, group discussions, debates, and open-ended questioning etc. are perceived as spaces for participation. The participants felt that their voices were heard when teachers listened responsively and cherished their perspectives in front of others. This arouses interest among the learners for further participation in activities inside classroom and beyond.

Critical Awareness and Reflective Learning

Participants linked empowerment to reflecting on social issues through English learning. For example, Suhani mentioned, "We discussed gender roles in changing society in our lessons. I realized English can help us speak about our society and our roles. It gives us ideas regarding awareness. It made learning more meaningful and practical." Students reflect their feeling of being empowered when they realize their potentials in negotiating social issues through language learning. Biraj shared, "I think I could do more when I get the lessons related to our social issues. My interest often goes to contemporary issues. If teachers allow me to discuss the issues in classroom, I can present in English that helps me to develop critical ideas discussing with my teachers and friends." Students often like to catch the issues of their interest. They put more efforts to flourish their ideas, opinions, and reflections on new concerns. For this they often look for the opportunities in classrooms. Preeti pointed, "I always seek chances in classroom to discuss on our concerns. When teachers allow for dialogues and interactions with our friends and with the teachers themselves, my energy boost. I like to give my full efforts to put my arguments." It is the role of teachers' techniques to sustain students' interest in different concerns. Dialogues in the classrooms help continue the students' efforts in learning language. It provides them the way to engage in the matters they realize importance in their practical lives. Puspa said, "I have experienced that interactive classes can only sustain our interest to involve in the issues brought in the classrooms through dialogues. Teachers' techniques without creating interactive atmosphere could not create dialogues in the classrooms. It will hinder our interest in further discussions." Students are critically aware that when they have ample opportunities of interactions in their classrooms, they can enhance different skills such as listening, writing and speaking in learning language. This helps to build up confidence. Prem expressed, "I feel more excited to learn further through reflections I got from the interaction with my teachers and friends in the classrooms." Reflective

learning is crucial to develop self-consciousness and potential to decision making among the learners for further directions.

Such moments and practices reflect the development of critical consciousness—connecting classroom learning to real-life contexts and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions. The participants' reflections and experiences illustrate how interactive classroom activities improves learners' motivation, confidence, and engagement. Their increased excitement to learn further indicates a growth mindset fostered by the dialogues with peers and teachers. This sense of learning aligns with principles of critical pedagogy, emphasizing reflection, communication, and cooperative learning as means to promote student agency. Overall, the participants' experiences underscore how classroom interactions transform students from passive recipients of knowledge into active, self-motivated learners.

Identity and Confidence as English Users

Students associated empowerment with gaining linguistic confidence and self-worth. Participatory learning environments made them more willing to communicate in English, even when making mistakes. Biraj shared, "It was difficult for me to present the ideas that I had in my mind. I did not know why it happened. However, when I took some classes of a few teachers who used interactive methods in classrooms, I developed my habit of speaking and writing. Now, I can easily write and present my feeling, thoughts, and ideas. It was possible in two ways: first, by creating an interactive classroom environment, and second, by the teachers intention on not focusing too much on grammatical errors." Students' identity remain unshaken when they are not corrected often by their teachers in time of interactions or presentations. Their courage may dismiss to sustain the interactions when they are often corrected by grammatical rules. Correction may require, however, the teachers can encourage the students allowing them to continue even if they commit errors in order to regulate their attention in learning.

Students increase confidence when they are exposed in activities without assessing their minor mistakes. Suhana mentioned, "Earlier, I was afraid to speak. Now I feel confidence to express my ideas even if my grammar is not perfect because my teachers do not concern minor mistakes." Similarly, Puspa understands that she was able to take part in interactions due to her teachers continuous efforts without being much corrective in her use of language. She felt identical in her classroom and in her teaching career. She expressed, "I was quite shy in the beginning and always feared of being corrected. When I found my teachers helpful and non-corrective in my mistakes. I

gradually improve myself. Now, my friends know me as a good language user in classroom and at my school where I am a novice teacher." This kind of feeling represents confidence and identity among language learners. Their use of language increases in their practical lives. This growth in confidence can be interpreted as both linguistic and psychological empowerment.

Suman associated his feelings of being identical in the classroom among his friends to the teachers' use of techniques. He appreciated the methods applied by his teachers for gaining confidence in speaking. He shared, "I increased my confidence in speaking when my teachers often make environment in classrooms to discuss on issues. I also started writing ideas to present so that my writing also improved. It's all due to teachers' techniques." Biraj and Preeti also expressed similar feelings to Suman.

These information highlights how teachers' practice of pedagogies directly influence students' sense of agency and confidence in language learning. The participants' reflections show that interactive and discussion-based techniques fostered their speaking and writing skills, empowering them to participate actively. The teachers' use of inclusive participation without being much corrective also reflects a supportive classroom environment, where learners feel valued and encouraged for more participations. Their similar response reinforces that teachers' dialogic and participatory approaches play a crucial role in nurturing student engagement, self-expression, and autonomy which are the core aspects of learner empowerment through dialogic and interactive techniques.

Structural and Institutional Barriers to Agency

Despite positive experiences, the participants accepted the constraints in fostering their agency. Exam-oriented curricula, teacher authority, and large class sizes often restricted their participation. As Puspa noted, "We like to have more discussions in classrooms not only the issues given by the curriculums but we do not have time to do this." Another student, Prem said, "Sometimes teachers wanted us to discuss more, but time and syllabus pressure stopped real discussion." Students feel limitations when they develop the habit of interactions. They feel that they lack sufficient time to carry and hold the discussions. Teachers pressurize them to finish the course and focus on exams. Biraj mentioned, "Sometimes we feel why we need fixed curriculum and examinations. They just limit us within a boundary. We cannot boost our practical linguistic skills sufficiently." Students have to face written exams in the scheduled given by the university. They need to prepare accordingly. Teachers also face challenges to

finish the courses in time. This eventually limits the activities to be carried out in classrooms to enhance agency of the learners.

Suman explained, "Our teachers wanted to conduct more dialogues and interactions in classrooms that we liked but they had limitation of time." Prem added, "When teachers conducted more interactive classes, they often lacked time to finish course in time. So, finally they speed up to finish the course." Although teachers are aware of their pedagogies and their implementations, they run off time as the courses are not flexible. University has focused on written examinations so that the teachers are in pressure to cover all the courses. Suhana pointed, "Although our teachers try to focus on practical activities, the courses do not allow for practical examinations. Finally we have to face written examinations. Only our competency in writing is evaluated. It impacts our performance level in other skills of language." It is clear that guidance of the curriculums and evaluation system has limited the use of interactive methods in classrooms.

However, language teaching requires more interactive and dialogic techniques so that students can have chances to enhance their skills in using language sufficiently. Form the information of the participants it is obvious that this is not being adequately practiced due to limitations of time and the fixity of the courses. These limitations highlight the tension between critical pedagogical ideals and institutional realities to furnish agency among the learners.

Discussion

The findings of the study ensures that critical pedagogy can significantly foster students' sense of agency and empowerment in EFL classrooms, consistent with Freire's (1970) vision of dialogic pedagogical practices. Learners perceive themselves as real contributors rather than passive recipient when they are invited to participate, reflect, and make decisions. Through critical pedagogy, this can be achieved in a flexible environment created in classrooms. Li et al. (2024) argue that teachers can emphasize students' learning agency by applying critical pedagogy shifting the focus from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching. In this context, teachers need to identify the fundamental characteristics of a classroom environment aiming to foster agency in language teaching that encourages students to actively participate and take ownership of their learning (Adhikari, 2024; Li et al., 2024). This view is similar to the view of Love and Wilbur (2025), who believe that environment has a direct effect on any action, even physical objects offer a challenge to traditional notions of agency.

Similarly, the findings of the study line up with Birt et al. (2019), who see the relationship between physical and psychological aspects of the teaching environment and students' agentic practices. The agentic practices encompass teachers' beliefs, behaviors, and values through interactive activities. In long run, these interactive activities transform attitude into action, fostering students' voice in practice (Cook-Sather & Matthews, 2023) through the use of different language skills. This perspective is also consistent with Erss et al. (2024), who argue that student agency is expressed through agentic engagement. This brings up the capacity of students to shape their learning environment to make it more beneficial to language learning. On the way environment influences students' agency potential is through the availability of resources (Kuzhabekova & Amankulova, 2024), especially when critical pedagogy is employed in classrooms. On the other hand, the classrooms that incorporate student voice practices are typically characterized by high levels of active learning (Conner et al., 2024; Vaughn, 2021). Within the framework of critical pedagogy, these practices collectively foster the development of student agency, which in turn positively influences learning outcomes (Warnby, 2024) in language classrooms.

Moreover, the findings of the study agree the idea of Mitra (2004), who perceives that student voice impacts agency by strengthening ability of students to articulate what they think, share, and believe that help to shaping one's identity in educational and social-cultural ecology (Giri, 2020).

On the contrary, the findings reveal that students have limited opportunities due to institutional structure (such as curriculums, syllabi) to make their own choices, which contradicts the notion that a greater range of options enables students to select alternatives that best align with their personal preferences (Martin, 2016). It is because of the fixed courses and rigid exam systems (Sharma & Phyak, 2019) guided by structured curriculum.

Similar to the findings of the study, students' growing confidence, identity, and ownership align with Lamb's (2017) framework of motivational agency, suggesting that empowerment is both cognitive and emotional as expressed by the participants. The emergence of voice and participation as a dominant theme resonates with Norton's (2013) argument that language learning involves identity negotiation and the right to speak. However, the grit of structural barriers such as examination loads, rigid syllabi, and teacher authority echo wide systemic challenges in South Asian education (Phyak, 2016). The findings also support Biesta's (2010) concept that agency is always found in learners' ability to act depends on the relational and institutional structure and

environment. This demands the similar finding of Adhikari and Pandey (2024) that envisions the position of teachers' role in promoting students' voice and participation within and beyond classrooms through critical pedagogy.

Therefore, the study contributes to the understanding of how critical pedagogy operates within controlled educational contexts to exercise agency for challenging the existing social structures and shape their positionality, voice, and identity in education spaces (Devkota, 25). This stresses that empowerment and learner agency are not merely the result of student motivation but of enabling pedagogical relationships that highly value learner voice and participation in language learning.

Conclusions and Implications

The study uncovered students' perception on empowerment through opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and participatory engagement in EFL classrooms. The opportunities enhance students' confidence for using English. The study revealed that teachers' practice of critical pedagogy directly influence students' sense of agency and confidence in developing skills of language. The participants' reflections show that interactive and discussion-based techniques fostered their speaking and writing skills, empowering them to participate actively. Language teaching requires more interactive and dialogic techniques. However, the study shows that this is not being adequately practiced due to limitations of time and the fixity of the courses. These limitations highlight the tension between critical pedagogical ideals and institutional realities to furnish agency among the learners. Institutional traditions, rigid curriculums, and exam-oriented practices continue to limit full realization of agency. These insights offers valuable guidance for teachers to embrace critical pedagogy to teach English cultivating democratic, reflective, and autonomous practices to make the learners capable of transforming their educational realities into real life settings.

This study highlights the importance of training programs that should equip EFL teachers with strategies for dialogic and participatory teaching integrating flexible curriculum. Community campuses should encourage reflective classroom cultures that balance content delivery with empowerment-oriented learning in their language based courses. While this study embraced a small sample size that limits generalizability, future research could employ mixed methods or comparative studies between private and community campuses to deepen understanding of agency in diverse EFL contexts.

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