

## **Pre-service English Teachers' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning**

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims to explore pre-service English teachers' perceptions of autonomous language learning. For this study, we applied Vygotsky's (1896-1934) socio-cultural theory as a theoretical framework and narrative inquiry research design to explore our participants' stories regarding their perceptions and activities they were involved into develop autonomous language learning. We selected. Four M.Ed. pre-service English teachers majoring in English from two constituent campuses of Tribhuvan University, Nepal located in the Rupandehi district purposively. We interviewed them using a semi-structured in-depth interview to elicit the relevant information. The study revealed that the pre-service English teachers' perception of autonomous learning was positive. They were found participating in autonomous activities in and outside the classroom. They used libraries to read authentic texts, listened to and watched audio-visual materials and used internet resources to maximize their autonomy in learning English. The study can contribute to a better understanding of pre-service English teachers' autonomy to get insightful ideas to enhance their autonomy shifting from teaching culture to learning culture.*

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**Keywords:** *critical thinking, learner autonomy, rote learning, traditional classrooms*

### **Introduction**

In the past, English language teaching in Nepal was teacher-centred where the teachers played an active role in the language learning of students. In this era of rapid

globalization, teaching is shifting to learning in which students construct knowledge by themselves and take charge of their learning. They spend time learning the language independently to develop their language skills both inside and outside the classroom taking over the accountability of their learning with freedom, initiative, self-management, and self-control (Ahmed & Hasan, 2020). The learners devote time to learning the language autonomously to improve their language abilities taking responsibility for their learning. Learner autonomy is the capacity of the learner to take accountability for his or her learning independently (Hedge, 2010). So, it refers to a learner's ability to accept responsibility for their learning. It is one of the key elements in successful language learning where self-directed, learner-centred, and self-managed learning are highlighted (Amirian, 2017) which offers the learners a foundational platform to engage in further life-long learning opportunities.

Learner autonomy plays a central role in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. The learners decide the objectives, identify the contents and select appropriate techniques themselves (Ahmadzadeh & Zabardast, 2014). Autonomous learners can take charge of their learning by participating in various learning activities. They fully do not depend on teachers to learn a language rather they actively take part in the learning process independently. In the Nepalese context, most teachers serve as role models for students to imitate in terms of appropriate behavior as well as subject matter specialists whose expertise should not be questioned. As a result, "excellent" students are just obliged to sit and listen to the teacher. The inquiry "Are there any questions?" will therefore elicit silence as soon as it is posed. As teachers are at the centre of authority in terms of knowledge and power, they are anticipated to make all decisions related to learning (Nguyen et al., 2005).

Learners need to make extra efforts to inquire about what, how, and why it is learned to develop autonomy in learning. They must be trained to be autonomous in learning using appropriate strategies (Lengkanawati, 2017). It is, therefore, by applying appropriate strategies, they will have a great influence in selecting and adapting their learning strategies and styles. Learner autonomy contributes to shifting teaching culture to learning culture with learner-centred teaching as it is a crucial part of language teaching and learning. Autonomous learners can challenge, take the lead, take accountability and manage the tasks in their ways to pursue their goals for language acquisition (Cotterall, 1995 & Benson, 2009). Until and unless the learners

take charge of their learning by setting goals, planning and evaluating their learning process, they are not said to be independent learners. 'Give me a fish and I eat for a day. Teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime.' This old Chinese proverb justifies that teachers have to offer their students fishing skills rather than providing fish every day to boost their learning.

In recent years, the scenario of English language teaching and learning in Nepal has been changing along with the new concepts in the field of education around the globe. Teaching English is not restricted to imparting knowledge to the students by the teacher as in traditional classrooms but learners need to take charge of their learning with active thinking independently. The secondary-level school curriculum of Nepal expects the learners to be autonomous (CDC, 2015), however, the teachers do not provide them opportunities to express their views in the class rather, they underestimate them and they cannot address their interests and develop lifelong skills.

Learners do not get opportunities to express their views if teachers ask them to keep quiet and listen to their explanations without understanding. This is the influence of Nepali culture as Nepali students take their teacher as an authority figure. Therefore, in such situations, students tend to hesitate to express their feelings and ideas openly in front of teachers. They hardly learn from the library and the internet and interact with friends and teachers. Enhancing students' capacity for self-directed learning and their desire to take on more responsibility for their education are thought to be essential components for the growth of learner autonomy. (Sinclair, 2000) During the school and campus days, the teachers do not care about students' interests, needs and learning-related problems. Learners hardly have any chance to question and share their experiences. So, asking questions to the teacher was a sign of disobedience. We believe students cannot learn in such an over-controlled environment. Teachers need to encourage student participation and must maximize the opportunities for teaching for all students providing skills to promote learner autonomy (Vieira, 2007).

Reflecting on the early phase of our teaching career, we could not get rid of the ghost of our teachers. So, we followed in the footsteps of our teachers and provided our students with ready-made answers. We were good teachers in the eyes of our students as we did everything for them. They were happy since they did not have to do anything themselves. But now, we realized we did an injustice to our students. We did not facilitate them to generate new ideas using their creativity in the process of

learning. In the past, teachers were regarded as the sources of knowledge delivery to their students. However, the current practice of teaching and learning is different. The present study aims at exploring pre-service English teachers' perceptions of autonomous language learning. We also intend to investigate the activities they join into increase autonomous learning.

In the past, teachers were considered the source of all knowledge and information. They would transfer knowledge to the learners, however, at present; they are regarded as facilitators and inspirers of the learners to create a favourable learning environment. Moreover, autonomous language learning enables them to develop creative thinking to boost their critical thinking by fostering their inner potential capacity.

The teaching and learning over a longer period in Nepal were traditional. However, the tendency of rote learning and memorization is being discouraged at present. As this study seeks to own teaching as cultivating the habit of autonomous learning rather than transmitting a body of knowledge, it can offer valuable insights to teachers and learners who are seeking to promote autonomous learning.

Particularly, the study will be useful to implement autonomous teaching and learning and improve pedagogical practices. The findings of this research offer insights both to the students and teachers about their roles and help the students to take responsibility for their learning as autonomous learners. Furthermore, policymakers, syllabus designers, textbook writers, teachers, students and researchers who are involved in the field of language teaching and learning can benefit from this study. Realizing this fact, we attempt to conduct this research to explore pre-service English teachers' perceptions of autonomous language learning and the activities they join to develop autonomy in language learning. This research study has answered the following research questions.

1. How do pre-service English language teachers perceive autonomous language learning?
2. What activities do they undertake to develop autonomy in language learning?

### **Literature Review**

To better inform our research direction, and methodology and minimize potential limitations, it is essential to review the previous studies on learner autonomy. This critical review serves to provide the context of my research. Although much research has been conducted to explore pre-service English teachers' beliefs and

practices regarding learner autonomy in various contexts. However, only limited studies are conducted to explore their perceptions and activities practice autonomous learning.

Okazaki (2011) in Japan revealed that students could be helped by learner-focused instruction to develop motivation in learning English. Regarding learner autonomy, in the same line, in an international context, Kemala (2016) conducted a study and analyzed the factors influencing learners in learning English autonomously in Indonesia. She found motivation, social environment, tasks, teachers, and materials influenced learner autonomy. Similarly, Lengkanawati (2017) perceived autonomous learning as learners' capacity to control their learning. Autonomous learners can make their own decisions in determining learning objectives, defining learning contents and progressions, choosing learning methods and techniques, monitoring acquisition procedures, and evaluating learning results.

Negi's (2019) research found that students at Nepal's Far Western University are familiar with the notion of learner autonomy. As a result, the pupils concentrate on various trainings and programmes that foster learner autonomy. Similarly, Panta (2019) researched English language teachers' perspectives on learner autonomy in Nepal. The research explored that the teacher's role is vital in generating better language learning chances for learners to enhance their autonomy. So, the school environment has to be homely, autonomous and supportive to develop learner autonomy. Similarly, Truong et al. (2019) in a Vietnamese context conducted research which investigated learners' perceptions of autonomous learning. The study revealed that the students emphasized the value of learning autonomy in English language learning. Although they were aware of their autonomous responsibilities, such as determining learning objectives, selecting learning activities and strategies, and evaluating their learning progress, they reported that their autonomous abilities were limited to some extent. As regards the students' autonomous learning behaviours, they preferred peer interaction to student-teacher interaction inside the classroom, and there was a difference in the selection of activities that they did outside the classroom.

Another study by Jora (2020) in Nepal shows that learner autonomy is critical for learners' encouragement and the possibility of EFL learning. Yuzulia's (2020) study revealed that both experienced and novice teachers believe that the learner's involvement is vital in promoting learner autonomy. However, a study by Tuan (2021) emphasized the importance of learner autonomy in language learning,

highlighting its role in enhancing students' engagement and effectiveness through out-of-class activities and tailored learning methods. Participants largely agreed that autonomous activities fostered collaboration and cooperative skills. Additionally, learner autonomy empowered students to take responsibility for their learning by monitoring and evaluating their progress. It also helped them gain control over the content and processes of their education, further boosting their overall learning outcomes. A study by Yükselir and Ozer (2022) investigated learner autonomy among EFL students in Turkey, finding that speaking, writing, and engaging in social network activities enhanced autonomy. Popular autonomous practices included listening to English songs, watching English media, and using the internet. Participants showed enthusiasm for decision-making in selecting course materials and activities both in and out of class. However, despite their motivation to learn English, they struggled to fully exhibit key autonomy-related behaviours, particularly in independently improving their skills outside of class. Tareen et al. (2024) revealed that EFL learners had good perceptions of autonomous learning and were eager to take the lead in autonomous learning. The study indicated that individuals must set learning objectives for themselves, examine their ability to govern their learning and participate in both inside and outside classroom activities to increase their language competence.

A recent study by Phan et al. (2024) highlighted that teacher training programmes in Vietnam enable pre-service teachers to take ownership of their learning. Providing opportunities for them to manage their learning in university settings enhances their ability to support school students in developing autonomy and self-study skills. Therefore, teacher training courses should focus on equipping pre-service teachers with the necessary expertise, skills, and resources while also encouraging teacher educators to effectively support future educators.

Few research studies are exploring pre-service English teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning in the Nepalese context. On the other hand, the literature discussed above attempted to examine their perceptions of autonomous learning, however, very few research studies we came across explored university-level pre-service English language teachers' perceptions of autonomous language learning in the Nepalese context. Therefore, we intend to explore pre-service English language teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning.

## **Methodology**

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We adopted a narrative inquiry research design to explore pre-service English teachers' perceptions of autonomous language learning and the activities they participate in to develop it. We selected four participants from two constituent campuses of TU who had been studying English in M.Ed. fourth semester. Out of them, two were females and two were males. We selected them using a purposive sampling procedure to get in touch with those who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues (Cohen et al., 2007). We collected and recorded the life stories of the participants from one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews (Careswell, 2013) from the participants using Nepali so that they could express their lived stories in detail. Then we coded and categorized the collected data under three themes. We used pseudonyms to maintain ethical considerations. We maintained the trustworthiness and authenticity of the raw data by checking member checks (Cohen et al., 2018). Finally, we analyzed and interpreted the data descriptively.

### **Results and Discussion**

Based on the information collected from the participants, we analyzed, discussed and interpreted data under three themes: Pre-service English teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning and the activities undertaken by them in enhancing autonomous language learning.

#### **Pre-service English teachers' perceptions of autonomous learning**

Success in learning depends on learners having a responsible attitude. Students were asked to describe and explain their perceptions of autonomous learning through analysis of the interview. We tried to learn how the participants perceive autonomous learning from their perspectives. The participants were found to have more or less the same perception of it. In this regard, our research participants viewed learner autonomy as a basic concern in the process of teaching and learning. Their perceptions are combined with their efforts to make the learners autonomous in learning. In this line, Milan stressed,

By motivating and encouraging us, our teacher facilitates our learning. I think we have to be independent as the teachers cannot be with us all the time throughout our lives. We have to plan the educational journey of life ourselves.

His lived story showed that his teacher encouraged him to be an autonomous learner. Regarding this, Mohan viewed, "If learners get the freedom to learn, they can learn better so, the teacher has to facilitate and manage learning activities. Sometimes

our teacher gives us project work. He also asked us to select the topics of our interests."Mohan's experience indicated that the learners usually felt comfortable when their ideas were incorporated while designing the tasks for them. They felt empowered got engaged in group work and shared their ideas with their partners. In this vein, Ramaclarified, "We have to use many self-study materials to learn English; have to evaluate ourselves to learn better and build clear vision before learning English." Her life story reminded us of our lived experienceswhenwe learned English from self-study materials in our schooling.

Rama's lived experience shows her positive perception as it activatedstudents in and outside the class in different independent learning activities.Gita stated, "If teachers want to foster autonomous learning in students, they should change their pedagogy but my English teacher hardly focuses on autonomous learning. Teachers should give students an assignment that motivates them to read the textbook beforehand and collaborate in groups to solve the problems is an excellent strategy to increase learner autonomy."Without changing their pedagogy,teachers could not foster autonomous learning in students. She narrated that an effective strategy to increase learner autonomy was to give students assignments that motivate them to study the course material beforehand and collaborate in groups to answer the questions. She claimed that English language teaching is devoid of autonomous learning.

In the same context, Ramarecalled, "In my class, teachers hardly focus on promoting any autonomous learning. Most of the time, they useclassical methods of teaching and dominate classroom teaching which hampers them from using innovative teaching methods.They feel pressure due to rigid syllabus to finish the coursein time".Her narratives revealed that herteachers rarely provided them with opportunities to learn independently.Institutional limits are the main challenge they run across. These limitations result from the rigid course syllabus, which, by dictating the teaching materials, puts time pressure on students and hinders the use of innovative teaching methods. Thus, most of the participants' perceptions of their lived experience in learner autonomy indicated that they had a positive attitude towards it. Their perceptions clarified that learners should be provided freedom by the teachers however, most of the teachers did not provide them with such opportunities due to the exam-oriented educational context.



### **Activities undertaken by pre-service English teachers to develop autonomy**

Autonomous learners learn language by being involved in different activities beyond the class. They can read a variety of authentic texts in the self-access center or the library. They also search, discover, analyze and report their learning as well as they can be encouraged to assess their learning process. Knowles (1975) claimed that there is convincing evidence that pro-active learners learn more things better than reactive learners (as cited in Hedge, 2011). For successful language learning, learners need to be encouraged to develop their learning by engaging them in autonomous ways. Regarding the activities that he has been involved in, Mohan asserted,

I have discussions with my classmates on learning problems. I always learn through reference materials, media such as movies and listening to the news in English. It assists me in improving my teaching skills. I learn new vocabulary from an online dictionary and use that vocabulary to practice with my friends.

Mohan claimed that he learned English by discussing with his classmates on learning problems and he also actively learned English beyond the class by using reference materials from the internet, the movie online dictionary and listening to news himself. These materials could support the students in learning the target language. The reason is obvious: today's English classroom should no longer be confined to memorization and rote learning (Eaton, 2010). He encouraged students to take more control in the classroom, discover the subject by themselves and learn from other sources.

Regarding this, Rama stated, "I practice my English by reading English newspapers watching YouTube and watching movies. I can also use the internet and grammar books that help me so much in learning English." Her narrative showed that she practised English by watching YouTube and movies using the internet and grammar books. The participants' lived experiences were in harmony with Bajrami and Ismaili (2016) who claimed that the use of authentic materials such as video and audio materials could be used as motivational tools in learning English. The well-chosen materials could be suggested to create a positive classroom atmosphere. As stated above, most of the students learned English through media and the Internet. Students' views are in harmony with Inpenga and Nomnian (2020). They found that Facebook and online media offer opportunities to the learners for professional growth in ELT, emphasizing knowledge sharing between experienced and pre-service teachers in improving teaching and learning.

Both teachers and learners have equal responsibilities in the learning process. The teacher can assist learners in finding out their appropriate strategies for learning and make them feel more responsive and safer in classroom activities. The teaching style and teaching techniques of teachers also play a crucial role in influencing students' learning. So, teachers should train their learners to manage their learning to enhance learner autonomy.

The teacher's role must be shifted from teacher-focused to student-focused teaching. Teachers need to build a supportive rapport based on structured supervision, which permits the teacher to identify the track of their students' difficulties they come across and the support that they require (Lin & Reinders, 2019). In an autonomous classroom, the teacher does not have the dominant role. Instead, he or she encourages the students to take full and greater responsibility for their learning but he or she is not free from his or her responsibility. It is, therefore, he or she plays the role of a mentor, prompter and counsellor because his/her traditional role is going on changing. Autonomous learners can learn from the available resources in the class and beyond the classroom. Teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are interconnected to each other. Therefore, they should go side by side. The teacher's guidance makes students feel more aware and secure in classroom activities. Autonomous teachers can involve their learners to set their own goals and learning activities and engage learners in classroom discussion and evaluation collaboratively.

Regarding the role of the teacher, Milan pointed out, "My teacher uses the target language as a medium of instruction and helps us set learning goals, observes our tasks and facilitates us but he usually does not impose the subject matter to be learnt." His narratives justified teachers and learners needed to be more active and reflective themselves to achieve better outcomes in learning. The teachers were regarded as the guides and facilitators for their learners' learning and research. Therefore, learning is not only the transformation of knowledge from the teacher but it is the reconstruction of experiences between learners and teachers (Johnson et al., 2000).

Regarding learning materials, Mohan stated, "In my opinion, we can choose the essential learning materials but we need a teacher to provide us guidelines as a guide and facilitator when we are unable to solve the problem ourselves." Mohan's lived experience clarified that learners were able to choose and adapt the learning materials but the teachers' role is still essential to facilitate the learners find out their

appropriate strategies in learning English. In this context, Gita mentioned, "In my opinion, we also learn many new subject matter from different learner-centred learning strategies and methods with which we may not be familiar previously. I think the teacher's role is to encourage students to do the task easily themselves."

The above narratives of Gita indicated that it is equally important for students to improve their language skills proficiency and self-dependency in learning with different learning strategies and methods. Her story reaffirmed the findings of Smith (2007). He claimed that learner autonomy is activated when learners have the power and right to learn for themselves. The teachers seemed to have a significant role in fostering learner autonomy in the classroom as they are no longer the providers of knowledge (Keiler, 2018). Constructivists also argue that a teacher acts as a facilitator to help students become active participants in their learning.

Likewise, regarding classroom activities, Rama put her views this way, "Involvement of students in classroom activities depends upon teachers' techniques. Some teachers do not pay attention to the students' interests rather they impose things. Most often my teacher discouraged us to bring in questions to build on knowledge." Rama's experience showed that there are no best and explicit ways to promote autonomous learning in the English language classroom that good teaching includes students how to learn things independently from various resources themselves as they were self-directed learners. Self-directed learners know their needs and work efficiently with the teacher toward the achievement of using resources independently (Hedge, 2014). Life does not exist beyond stories and stories are part of life. Experiences of pleasure and pain shape our lives. The shared stories of my research participants applied to me as they provided me with a lot of information.

To promote learner autonomy, Gita mentioned, "As a student in school, we did not expect so much freedom from our teachers. It was a culture then. What the teacher said would be the law. As our culture, we used to treat them as our god." She narrated that her culture did not provide much freedom to the students so, they treated teachers as their gods. The same applied to Hedge (2010) who claimed that good language learners use cognitive, metacognitive, communication and socio-affective strategies in language learning. The promotion of pre-service teacher autonomy appears to be somewhat hindered by the power distance factor of Nepalese culture. Teachers should therefore encourage students to take the initiative and learn on their own. Teachers

might also make an effort to avoid being authoritarian and give students more autonomy over the learning process.

Regarding learner autonomy, Milan believed, "In my view, autonomous learners are independent; can overcome the potential challenges that they face in learning language confidently and effectively using the most suitable learning techniques for themselves." His views toward learner autonomy revealed that learner autonomy kept learners in the centre and regarded them as capable learners who directed their learning and were independent over the learning programme. The participant's view echoed the findings of Anderson (2011) relating to how autonomous culture demands personal autonomy that prepares individuals for critical reflection independently.

Autonomous learners find out their learning needs, set learning goals, identify resources, choose and apply proper learning strategies and evaluate their learning outputs. Therefore, the teachers who choose textbooks and other learning materials for students and direct the activities and correct their homework, learn very little things. Emphasizing the role of the teacher in learner autonomy. Autonomous learners are motivated and eager to learn and take risks to make certain accountability for their learning (Hedge, 2011). They are ready to learn and they are willing to accept the risk of being held accountable for their learning.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study aims to explore pre-service English language teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy in language learning. The study reveals their positive perceptions toward autonomous language learning and enhances their learning as it develops pre-service teachers' creativity, and critical thinking and motivates them to learn independently inside and outside the class taking the responsibility and potential risks associated with their learning. The development of pre-service teacher autonomy seems to be somewhat constrained by the hierarchical nature of Nepalese culture. Their perspectives revealed that teachers should grant them more freedom; however, many teachers fail to do so due to the exam-focused nature of the educational system. Furthermore, participants are found participating in various activities such as visiting libraries to learn authentic books, reading grammar books, listening to and watching audio-visual materials and getting resources by engaging in social network activities such as using online dictionaries and the internet in English to enhance their

autonomy. However, teachers rarely provided them with a favorable atmosphere for autonomous learning to boost their autonomy in English language learning.

Additionally, the study may contribute to pedagogical contributions to fostering learner autonomy for a better understanding of students to get insightful ideas to enhance their learning shifting from teaching culture to learning culture in English language learning in the Nepalese context. However, by confining students only to the teacher-controlled classroom; their autonomy cannot be promoted. It is, therefore, teachers should become familiar with the different learner-centered activities to address their needs and interests that can facilitate the enhancement of autonomous learning rather than passively transmitting a body of knowledge. Students should be provided with more authentic materials that allow them to study independently. Further research, thus, needs to be conducted in similar areas in wider contexts with a large population to obtain a deeper and wider understanding of-service English teachers' perceptions and the activities they participate in enhancing autonomous language learning.

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