Language Teachers' Autonomy in EFL Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

The study aims to find out practices undertaken by English language teachers for their autonomous development in EFL classrooms. Autonomy has become one of the most problematic and significant issues to be discussed in the field of teacher education in the recent era. This paper deals with the ways to support teachers in their classroom practices, as well as a way of improving professional practices and career development. It is based on qualitative research in general and narrative inquiry in particular. The information is based on four teachers from the community as well as institutional schools. It mainly discusses the perceptions and practices of teachers towards teacher autonomy. From the obtained information, the study found positive feelings of teachers towards employing initiatives taken regarding autonomy, and they note that other stakeholders must encourage the teachers' efforts for successful implementation. It reveals that most schools have strong and self-empowered human resources but proper encouragement and application parts seem to be weak.

Key Words: autonomy, English teachers, self-determination theory, strategies.

Background of the Study

Language teacher autonomy has been gaining increasing interest among educational researchers, policymakers, administrators, and practitioners across content areas over the past three decades. Language teachers' autonomy shows the ability to manage the self-directive performance of the teacher (Felayabi, Purnawarman, &Sukyadi,2022).The word has come to refer to a variety of concepts, depending on whom or what is involved. The concept was derived from the Greek words "autos" and "self-rule" and linked to the living condition according to laws one gave oneself rather than under the control of others (Haworth, 1986). The idea of teacher autonomy was introduced into language education literature by researchers who were primarily interested in learner autonomy (Benson, 2001). Vieira(2007) stated that "pedagogy for autonomy", "autonomy" refers to both learner and teacher autonomy. The development of teacher autonomy is interdependent on the part of learner autonomy since one gives meaning to the other. The term 'autonomy' is used to refer either to a person's capacity to lead such a life or to some condition of situational freedom that facilitates the exercise of this capacity. If we say that one person is 'more autonomous' than another, for example, we likely refer to their relative capacities for autonomy. If we say that a person's autonomy

has been 'violated', on the other hand, we likely refer to some constraint upon their freedom in a situation that has bearing upon their autonomy. This terminological point becomes important when we come to consider the meaning of autonomy from the teacher's perspective.

Autonomy refers to both learner and teacher autonomy. The development of teacher autonomy is interdependent on the development of learner autonomy since one gives meaning to the other. In language learning, a major theme expressed in the relationships between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy is that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent and that the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the promotion of teacher autonomy (Breen & Mann, 1997). Therefore, teachers can be able to develop learner autonomy if they are autonomous in their tasks. In determining the activities, they must be able to exploit their professional skills autonomously, applying to their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning. For promoting learner autonomy, teachers may need to have a capacity for self-directed teaching, freedom from control over their teaching, and a capacity for self-directed teacher learning (Smith, 2003). The transition from learner autonomy to teacher autonomy is how autonomy as language learners' was related to autonomy as language student-teachers, or on the other hand how language learner autonomy affected the acquisition of language teacher autonomy for the same individual student throughout the university education. In this way, based on the argument, it can be stated that no matter whether one is teaching as a regular teacher or a student teacher, he/she is a teacher to the students during that particular period of teaching. In this perspective, teacher-learner autonomy as a conceptual term applies to both in-service teachers and student-teacher.

Statement of the Problem

The theoretical documentation for the implementation of teacher autonomy is the most peripheral part of the teaching, and learning process. Practicality counts greater than what someone talks about. The article focuses on the silent barrier created by environmental factors. The school administration seems passive in the actual autonomous development of the teachers. The weakness of teachers in adopting new trends in teaching autonomously and updating their knowledge autonomously in their specialization remains to be the most important factor that affects their performance in the classrooms. Several kinds of literature mentioned in the introduction section reveal that it works for the advancement of autonomous life. So, I think it is an essential aspect to explore the initiatives undertaken by English teachers for their autonomous development.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the initiatives undertaken by English language teachers for their autonomous development.

Questions for the Study

The following research questions were addressed in the study.

 1. What are the most common practices undertaken by English language teachers for their autonomous development?

2. What are the challenges for the autonomous development of English language teachers?

Theoretical Stances

Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that teacher autonomy, competence, and relatedness support are crucial universal promoters for students' interest in learning, which is in line with the general aims of positive education (Maulana, Helms-Lorenz, Irnidayanti & Grift, 2016). In the same way,Xia, Q, Chiu, T. K. F, Lee, M, Sanusi, I. T., Dai, Y., & Chai, (2022) tell teacher autonomy is determined in terms of teachers' needs and interests. An autonomous teacher can only be able to manage all sorts of teaching-learning activities himself which also helps learners to be independent for themselves. Therefore, teacher autonomy is the prerequisite in the teaching and learning process.

Perceived Autonomy

The 10 domains of autonomy described in the theoretical framework are used as a starting point (Vangrieken, Grosemans, Dochy, & Kyndt, 2017).I have also applied these points as theoretical guidelines for my research work. 1. Preparing lessons. 2. Choosing topics and skills to be taught. 3. Decisions about the curriculum.4. Choice and use of textbooks. 5. Student assignments. 6. Setting goals for students. 7. Student evaluation. 8.Teaching methods and strategies. 9. The use of time and planning. 10. Managing student behaviour.

Teacher Development towards Autonomy

The role of the teacher in the classroom is typically seen as a central figure as he/she is the supreme authority of all the decisions concerned with language learning. In contrast, learners have little voice in the learning process and play a passive role in the classroom, behaving like mere 'containers' into which knowledge is poured (Vázquez 2015). New research on professional development as a means for teacher autonomy has brought the positive impact that action research and study groups, among other alternatives of development, may have on teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and actions depending on the content and process of these types of efforts. Teacher autonomy is based on the dynamic thoughts teachers exercised for their empowerment in terms of context (Chinpakdee, 2022). Regarding subject matter, research has shown that professional development experiences may be better received by teacher-learners and have a stronger impact on their performance when the topic under discussion relates to their concerns and needs.

Action Research and Reflective Practices

Action research (AR) and reflective practice (also "reflective approach" or "reflective teaching") are almost related in terms of teacher development because reflection is an integral process of AR (Kemmis& McTaggart, 1988). A review of

research in recent days on autonomy in language learning (Benson, 2001) opines that AR is particularly suited to the field of autonomy because it is a style of autonomous learning which can assist teachers to enhance their autonomy. The main idea about teacher autonomy is that learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy, especially on teachers' capability to reflect on what they do (Huttenen, 2003). Drawing on current theoretical perspectives on learning and reflection, Huttenen (2003) analyses the role of teacher reflection in the process of planning learning. Awareness is the major concept in either teacher autonomy or learner autonomy and that reflection comes as a key term in both teacher awareness training and learner awareness training.

Exploratory Practice (EP)

Exploratory Practice (EP) is the next form of practitioner research as AR (action research). What makes EP more directly relevant to autonomy is that EP is taken as collegial activity (Allwright, 2003). The development of collegiality between teachers and learners, and among teachers in the same institution, is especially beneficial to the development of the learner and teacher autonomy (e.g., by involving also learners to investigate the "puzzles", developing more equal and collegial teacher-learner and teacher-teacher relationships, etc.). On the other hand, AR seems to contribute less to the sort of collegiality that EP seeks to promote because AR practitioners seem to "isolate the 'professional' as the source of topics to investigate and as the only people willing to work for understanding (Allwright, 2003).

Methodology of the Study

This research is based on qualitative research in general and narrative inquiry in particular. I have used purposive sampling for selecting teachers. I have selected four English teachers teaching in different schools located in the Butwal sub-metropolitan municipality in the Rupandehi district. Out of four English teachers, three are teaching in government-added schools and one of them teaching in a private school. The information is based on their presentations of perceptions and assumptions that focus on teachers' pedagogical decisions and professional lives (Chinpakdee, 2022).I have used my perception and self-prepared semi-structured interview for collecting the information.

Analysis and interpretations of the information

The teachers were selected from Kalika Manavgyan School, Shree Gyanodaya Secondary School, Tilottama Secondary School, Maria Montessori International School and my own observation during the field visit was incorporated in this study. A set of separate semi-structured questionnaires were prepared for the teachers. Along with the semi-structured interview, I observed the classes and other activities of the teachers

To collect the data, I planned for purposive sampling. I prepared a questionnaire for selecting the teachers interested in working on teacher autonomy. A teacher's narrative is a story that represents how teachers make sense of their professional experiences and how their understandings can change over time in their teaching contexts

(Chinpakdee, 2022, p. 590). A few examples of the theme-based responses from the participants are as below.

Self-regulating resources and materials, skills to be taught

1. "*We want to be innovative, studious and resourceful for our promotion but we do not have a learning environment in school." "We would be more grateful with school management if we get online access in each classroom" Janak Koirala (pseudo name)*

2. Choice and use of textbook and curriculum, setting of goals and objectives

"I do not have authority in choosing curriculum, textbook and setting goals and objectives but I can perceive in my way. It would be better if we could have made our final evaluation flexible". Pradip Tondon (pseudo name)

3. Preparing lesson plans, providing assignments, and student evaluation

"*We are autonomous in terms of lesson planning, providing assignment and student evaluation but we need to be based on certain guidelines provided in our curriculum" Kamala Sapkota (pseudo name)*

4. Availability of ICT tools in the classroom/library/staffroom "*Recently municipality has set up a computer lab at the side of the library and PowerPoint projector in each classroom but we are not using them"Balaram Karki (pseudo name)*

5.Managing students' behaviour, choosing a methodology and strategies " *Although there are suggested guidelines for teachers, I can apply my methodology and strategies in terms of need, level and interest of the learners" Janak Koirala (pseudo name)*

My Impression*:* I did not find the teachers as dutiful as they said. I found discussing thepresent political matter in their staffroom. They were not very punctual in class time and were fully responsible towards students' attention. There was a library in the school but only a few teachers were found to be using it. Though they had taken several training programmes, they had used the training certificates for their promotion rather than a change in teaching-learning activities. Some of the teachers had known about teacher autonomy but they were not applying teachers' autonomy in practicality. I did not find any teachers' efforts on research-based professional autonomy. In short, if we can change teachers' perspectives regarding teaching-learning activities, we can achieve a lot. At the end of the data collection processes, a focus group discussion was organized in each of the schools. To validate the information, triangulation was made among the teachers. Their class observation and the focus group discussion activities were conducted. Finally, an analysis was made based on the information obtained.

Challenges

The present study revealed that lack of access to required resources and encouragement by the administration and policy formulators were the major challenges faced by English teachers. In the process of autonomy development as the common reaction of my participants was that we want to be potential by taking part in different pieces of training, seminars, conferences, and work-shop but we can't get the required sources and motivation from the administration. Teachers understand having appropriate

level of autonomy only when they perceive themselves to have a fair authority for organizational autonomy for everyday teaching learning activities (Felayabi et al, 2022). The teachers do not mention the internal factors that hinder their efforts for autonomy development like the time they spent, the way they chat, the way they perceive things, the concept they formed regarding teaching and learning etc. The teachers' emphasis on the limited resources and administrative negligence on the part of the school and local government was clearly shown in the study. The provision of encouragement plays a great role in autonomy development. Self-motivated and self-initiated autonomy development demands teachers to be committed regardless of the available inspiration and encouragement.

Results and Discussion

In our government school, the teachers regard autonomy as staying without the control of the school administration, which is the wrong perception of teacher autonomy. Government schools' teachers were found to have good knowledge of the subject matter but the knowledge delivery system was a bit weak. School teachers were found to have no proper concept regarding time management, and strategies for full utilization of time. Most teachers were found slightly neglecting class time. Both school administrations were found to be weak in monitoring and supervision regarding autonomy. In the second phase of writing, I interpreted and analysed the information of each teacher to find out their autonomous practices (Chinpakdee, 2022). In the same way, their similarities and differences between the cases and other emerging findings that were relevant to the research questions were observed. Private school teachers were found more active and self-reactive than government school teachers. Self-reflective nature of teachers enables teachers to analyse diverse needs of teachers, learners and administration (Felayabi et al, 2022).I found a big gap between documentation and implementation. *Most government schools had a very strong policy and planning but the implementation part was found to be weak - Kamala Sapkota (pseudo name).* If policy and implementation of actions in teaching learning favour based on teachers' empowerment, we can have a great revolution on teachers' autonomy in class performance. No teachers were found to have professional research work conducted.

The government has to change the provision of file promotion in terms of service years. The school administration has to take immediate action plan on the use of ICT (teaching online resources and audio-visual materials).Teacher training and professional networks (like NELTA) have to be connected with schools' teaching-learning activities. The local government has to take the initiative role of constant mentoring and supervision. Policy and planning of actions on teaching-learning activities in schools have to be immediately upgraded.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the initiatives undertaken by English teachers for their autonomous development appear noticeable. The responses show that associating in the learning communities, participating in work-shop and training, engaging themselves in academic

activities and being digitally literate are essential for autonomous development. The teachers expressed their positive feelings towards employing initiatives towards autonomy, and they note that other stakeholders must encourage the teachers' endeavor for successful implementation. However, the teachers do not seem to be consistent in their responses to the inquiries of employing the initiatives of autonomous development tasks and activities. The teachers respond that the factors affecting implementations of autonomy are like lack of resources and encouragement. They note that there are difficulties of accessing materials and resources required for better autonomy. We can make concluding idea that there can be flourishment of teacher development if we empower in the perspective of autonomous upliftment of the teachers. However, the surprising result for this study was no remarkable responses shown to their personal commitment as a factor affecting for their autonomous betterment

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Appendix-1

Dear Sir/Mam,

Please provide the information regarding teacher autonomy based on your teaching experiences and work place.

 Name: ………………………………………….. Gender: Male/ Female

Age: ………Qualification:…………… Academic degree:…...

Appointed level……………. Years of Experience: ……………………

Grade level(s) currently taught:…….. Research work if any…………..

1. How have you been using self regulating resources and materials, skills to be taught in your teaching learning activities?

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2. What autonomous activities have you participated?

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3. What autonomous activities have you marked in your teaching?

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4. What do you consider as the most important for teacher autonomy ?

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 5. What strategies do you apply on choice, use of textbook, curriculum, setting of goals and objectives?

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 6. What are the different technologies which can be handled with your professional autonomy?

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7. What techniques are you using managing students' behaviour, choosing methodology and strategies?

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8. What are your research-based efforts for your professional autonomy?
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