Collaboration for fostering learners' autonomy in the EFL classroom: Learners' perceptions and practices

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Abstract

The study examined the collaborative practices employed in EFL classrooms and their impact on fostering learner autonomy. To investigate the issue, the researcher formulated the following research questions: How do collaborative practices in EFL classrooms contribute to fostering learner autonomy? And what collaborative practices are useful in promoting learner autonomy among EFL students? The qualitative approach was employed in the study. The constructivist paradigm was followed to explore the practices and perceptions. Narrative inquiry was used in the study. Four participants were purposively chosen from one of the constituent campuses of Tribhuvan University, studying in their fourth year of the Bachelor of Education program, and had experience practicing collaboration in classroom activities. The main finding showed that collaborative work enhanced learners' autonomy. Engagement in groups and collaboration among peers developed confidence and independence among the learners. The study results showed that learners were aware of the final evaluation system, which hindered fostering autonomy. Similarly, they were worried about the work of collaborative partners.

Keywords: Collaboration, learners' autonomy, EFL classroom

Introduction

Learners' autonomy is the ability to take charge of their learning. Frankfurt (2018) explores, in his essay "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," the need for freedom to act independently in order to have moral and purposeful responsibility. In learner autonomy, the focus is on the learner and their goals, with responsibilities. Consequently, many observers observed the development and promotion of learner autonomy as primarily an effort that would take place within their learners (Dam, 2003). Frankfurt (2018) focuses more specifically on the account of acting voluntarily and explores aspects of its situational relationship to causal determination. The pioneer of learners' autonomy theory, Holec (1981), explained that the adult education system should serve as a tool for increasing awareness among learners and promoting liberation in mankind, and, in some contexts, as a tool for changing the learning environment. As in the idea that theory suggests a man is a byproduct of his or her society, and man's ideas serve as a generator for his society.

In this modern era, learners have extensive access to online resources. They consult resources on digital platforms and come to class with the content and related information. They are capable of classroom interactions. As Benson (2001) states, autonomy is the multi-dimensional construction of one's ability and capacity that shapes different identities for every individual. It also has multiple forms for the same person in multiple situations and times. Autonomy is an essential and mandatory factor that must be employed and adopted in any language classroom. Nunan (2000) explains that classroom-based research on learners' autonomy focuses on developing multiple aspects and areas of language learning, including strategies, outcomes, and learning styles. Students will gain sufficient sources of information and understanding of their own ethnic and socio-cultural identity, as well as related information, which can inform their further learning purposes and planning. Autonomous learners are observed as those who can critically reflect on their experiences and learning through their knowledge and experience of learning achievements. They prefer to learn through multiple collaborations among learners (Holec, 1981; Allwright, 1990). However, when I observed them inside the classroom, they expressed hesitation about participating in various activities. When I divide the class into many groups and assign tasks, they are happy to discuss among the group. However, when I ask them to interact with issues individually, they are not interacting. The issue strikes me repeatedly, making me realize the importance of the group. I frequently observe them smiling, happy, communicating, interacting, and sharing freely in the groups. I believe such interactions can contribute to learners' autonomy. We at the simple-to-complex approach, where

simple group activities can also contribute to building personal confidence, is effective. Forming groups in classroom activities builds confidence and existence to promote autonomous practices in learners.

Learners' autonomy is an approach in language teaching that facilitates learners in enhancing their learning outcomes both inside and outside the classroom. It means students acknowledge their potential role in building their learning. It helps them understand their own needs, and they independently set their objectives. Learners' autonomy is a key component of the learning process that involves strategies to support learning outcomes. Both facilitators and learners may have a crucial role in promoting learners' autonomy. Facilitators can contribute to task choice, focusing tasks, and orientation to resources both inside and outside the classroom, such as in the library or learning centers. They may encourage on-task behavior and provide constructive feedback on learning goals. Sinclair (2000) explains that a learner's autonomy is a process that involves the learner taking charge of their responsibility for autonomous learning.

On the other hand, learners are in a key determining position in the learning process. They are involved in their decisions related to their learning objectives. They are actively involved in arranging classroom settings and facilitating discussions. They can diagnose their need and identify their strengths and weaknesses. They can learn, discuss, and work independently, interdependently, and cooperatively. They can choose tasks, resources, and activities on their own.

Chong & Reinders (2025) found in their systematic review that learners' autonomy has remained a significant topic for the last four decades. The conceptualization of the approach was based on a constructivist framework. Assessment of autonomy heavily relies on perceived measures, such as questionnaires, interviews, and observations, so the development of an explicit framework for autonomy is necessary. Thus, this study focused on the perceptions, understanding, and practices of learners' autonomy in the EFL classroom.

Collaborative learning in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom involves students working together in small groups or pairs to achieve a shared learning goal. It emphasizes interaction, cooperation, and mutual support among learners to develop their language skills. Dillenbourg (1999, cited in Ezekoka & Gertrude, 2015) described cooperative and collaborative learning as situations where more than one individual or group learn or aims to learn some ideas collaboratively. Language learning is the result of different collaborative

learning. Peer and group interactions are the primary methods and techniques for fostering learning outcomes and achievements. The common understanding and acceptance among teacher educators, educational practitioners, and researchers is that collaborative learning modes are beneficial for fostering learners' autonomy (Feri & Erlinda, 2014; Jacobs & Shan, 2016; Loh & Ang, 2020). This method focuses on students' engagement in group discussions, role-plays, problem-solving tasks, and peer reviews. Practicing these activities allows learners to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing in English while benefiting from one another's knowledge, perspectives, and feedback. Collaborative learning also fosters critical thinking, communication skills, and cultural awareness, making it a valuable strategy for language acquisition.

The study examined the collaborative practices employed in EFL classrooms and their impact on fostering learner autonomy. To investigate the issue, I formulated the following research question: How do collaborative practices in EFL classrooms contribute to fostering learner autonomy? What collaborative practices are useful in promoting learner autonomy among EFL students?

Purpose and research

The study had the purpose of investigating more on collaborative practices held in EFL classrooms at the University level. It aimed to explore how collaborative practices enhance the autonomous practices and activities among the learners. Further, it had also identified the challenges for fostering autonomous practices in qualitative studies through a constructivist approach to connect collaborative learning practices and developing learners' autonomy in the EFL classroom.

Methods of the study

This study was conducted with a qualitative approach. The interview guidelines served as the primary tool for data collection. The research site was one of the constituent campuses of Tribhuvan University. The study employed a constructivist paradigm to interpret the data collected from the participants. The participants of the study were major English students from the B.Ed. fourth year. The participants were selected through the purposive sampling procedure. Four students were selected through purposive sampling, which involves intentionally selecting samples with specific characteristics or qualities that align with the research objectives (Coyne, 1997; Koerber & McMichael, 2008). The selection criteria were that the students had participated in different collaborative activities. Collaboration was utilized in classroom interactions,

discussions, classwork, project work, and assignments. Before participating in the data elicitation, all participants signed a consent form declaring that their participation was voluntary. The researcher guaranteed the confidentiality of the participant that the data collected would not be disclosed or misinterpreted. The study participants were pseudonymously identified as S1, S2, S3, and S4 for the purposes of analysis and other study-related purposes. The interview guideline questions were established based on the study's objectives and research questions, which centered on students' collaboration to enhance learners' autonomy strategies and activities. The interviews were recorded in audio format, and the researcher transcribed those interview sessions into orthography for the analysis and interpretation of the data.

A qualitative analysis followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) model to develop themes, analysis, and interpretation. Firstly, familiarization with the data and transcription of the interview of verbal data was done. It was done through the member's review of the transcribed data. Secondly, initial codes were generated from the data by following the in vivo coding approach (Saldana, 2016). Then, themes were developed from the initial codes to theorize the perceptions and practices of learners' autonomy. After that, the themes were finalized with a revisit to the themes. Then, themes were finalized for the study. Finally, the reporting of the research work was done.

Findings and discussion

In this section of the study, findings were presented along with a discussion. The responses obtained from the interview guidelines were discussed in relation to the study's research objectives and questions, as well as the themes identified through the coding process, based on the research objectives and questions of the study. Firstly, the perceptions of university students toward fostering learner autonomy were presented. This includes how they connect collaboration to enhance learner autonomy and their expectations of autonomous learners. Next, they adopted their experiences of collaborative work during classroom activities, assignments, and project work to engage. Finally, challenges to fostering learner autonomy are identified to improve future teaching and learning practices.

Perception of students toward collaborative learning

As I interviewed the participants discussing collaborative learning, they explored that collaboration made them active in language learning. They stated that when the teacher assigned a task to be completed in the group, we collaborated with friends, which was useful for enhancing learning.

Collaboration for confidence

Factors of student independence include the students' role, which includes motivation and learning goals, the teachers' role, which consists of the teacher as facilitator, the teacher as source, and the teacher as control, the task for supporting students' autonomous learning, and the environment to support students' autonomous learning (Muhammada, 2024). Learners' collaboration helped develop confidence, which in turn evolved into autonomy. We can examine the following excerpts from participants on collaboration, confidence, and fostering learners' autonomy.

S2 asserted that *once our group was assigned to develop a research tool on the topic "Strategies used by the teachers to teach guided writing at a basic level," we worked together for three days and developed a tool for the research, which brought our group members closer together. We learned together; it was fun to work in a group. I developed my confidence and self-learning ability in the group.*

I also had a similar type of story when I was a B.Ed. First-year student. Our teacher asked us to write a paragraph in standard English. We wrote the paragraph, and then he divided the class into five groups, asking each group to discuss the topic and come up with a final and edited paragraph. Then, we worked on the group, which was fun learning and helped me develop my confidence.

S4 uttered that *when I worked with a peer for micro-teaching purposes, the feedback provided by my peer was memorable in my learning. He gave me the feedback that you make material that much more engaging because you can display it and speak on it, so you will not have problems with the content and will have no problem forgetting it while presenting. This feedback has always worked in my teaching career as well.*

S1 and S2 asserted that *they feel at ease working in a peer or group because there is no threat of a teacher. They feel at ease because the group members use simple vocabulary and clear examples, making collaborative work accessible to every individual learner.*

To some extent, learners created a sense of distance to share with the teachers, so they enjoyed working in collaboration with their peers. This collaboration made them confident enough to share their plans, objectives, and goals. Cooperative and collaborative learning is a philosophy of interaction in a learning group where people take responsibility for their own

learning while recognizing their peers' abilities and contributions (Chowdhury, 2021). So, working with collaboration enhanced the learner's capacity and confidence.

Collaboration for autonomy

Autonomy is the self-initiation for learning. Learners these days have plenty of resources for learning. Web-network and other related digital tools can assist learners from multiple perspectives. For those who utilize classroom practices, classroom activities, and discussions are equally important. Classroom discussion and interactions are possible only in collaborative work. The integration of self-assessment and motivation into the language learning process may help increase learner autonomy (Artut, E., & Gazioğlu, M., 2023).

S1 asserted that *working in a group or with peers encourages us to consult many more resources online or in the library, thereby building our knowledge and making us more informed and directed in our learning. So, collaboration means developing autonomy on our own*.

Autonomy cannot be enhanced in isolation or a vacuum. It is developed with effort and determination. So, the learner's autonomy is a collaborative effort.

S3 said that *deciding on our destination is not easy, so we need help or guidelines from others as well, especially for friend circles in the classroom or peer collaboration matters. Suppose we work in a group or with peers. In that case, we will have plenty of time to improve ourselves and be guided to our destination, developing autonomy through collaboration*.

Autonomy is not freedom where one is perfect enough to decide on one's own; rather, learning can be more effective with the guidance and counseling of a peer or group.

S2 and S4 agreed with S3's view. They sought *help and guidance from their friends as milestones to decide on the future directions*.

Learners felt it was easy to interact and collaborate in groups. The group was homogeneous, so they easily shared their understandings and proposed for further planning as well. The collaborative inquiry helped establish a community of learning, whereby students supported each other emotionally and cognitively, and they collectively wanted to achieve well (Zhong, 2021). So, Collaboration enhanced learners' autonomy and directed them to their learning goals and purposes.

Challenges for Fostering Autonomy

The word autonomy is a relative word. We need to measure autonomy by comparing it to the past situation. By this time, creating challenges to current classroom practices and fostering learners' autonomy is challenging. First, we must create a classroom environment that allows students to easily participate and explore their ideas and plans. The current classroom practices, pedagogies, settings, and inherent psychology among the students are the main challenges to fostering autonomy. The students are not fully prepared to take responsibility for their learning, which arises from a lack of motivation, fear of failure, and a deficiency in language acquisition, thereby impeding their capacity to demonstrate proficiency (Charef, H., 2024). A lack of sufficient resources, motivation, and readiness among learners affects the fostering of learners' autonomy. Some fixed systems that learners need to follow during the course completion period are another challenge, as they require learners to foster their autonomy in the ELE classroom. The following is the direct verbatim evidence to support the developed theme by the researcher.

S1 asserted that *it is challenging to direct our learning because we have such a fixed annual examination system, so we need to follow teachers' directions; otherwise, we fail the examination*.

S2 was in line with S1 and says that *if we decide on our learning, who will evaluate, qualify, and upgrade us? Okay, we can collaborate with the course facilitators and comprehend the contents in our own way and style. However, we cannot ignore the system prescribed by the university, so it is not easy to decide for ourselves*.

Every learner faces challenges in learning, but challenges are different according to individual differences and abilities. **S3** asserted that *collaboration is a phenomenon, but if the collaborating partner does not contribute to the group, it becomes a problem for the partner. The task is also assigned for evaluation, so the partner's contribution poses a challenge in fostering autonomy in collaborative work*.

S4 said that *if we entirely decide on our own learning, then we may not have an explicit orientation on the course. Without guidance and direction, we may become disoriented. So, autonomy is a challenge for me*.

Multiple purposes guided learning; learners were compelled to pass examinations and earn grades, so they were oriented to the curriculum and the guidance of their teachers.

Application of learner-centered methods; the willingness of students to take responsibility for their learning (Romanyshyn, I., & Freiuk, I., 2024). Fostering the learner's autonomy in the language classroom became a challenge.

Key insights

After the completion of the study, the major take away is that collaboration in the EFL classroom functions as a positive agent for the enhancement of learners' autonomy. Collaborations build confidentiality and independence for autonomous learning activities and behaviours. At the same time, fixed assessment and examination systems have limited learners from taking responsibility for their learning. Collaborative activities build confidence, support for learning, and develop autonomy. Collaborative practices have promoted autonomous related competencies in learners and are useful for building inner capacities, but, at the same time, an inflexible evaluation system and structures have limited collaborative practices in the EFL classroom.

Conclusion and implications

A qualitative approach was employed to explore learners' perceptions of autonomy, yielding three themes: collaboration for confidence, collaboration for independence, and the challenges of fostering autonomy, which were derived from the collected data. The sub-theme, such as discussion in groups, enhanced confidence among the learners. The collaborative work and results made learners more independent, and individual and group presentations further enhanced their independence. Learners were aware of the final evaluation system, which hindered fostering autonomy. Similarly, they were worried about the work of collaborative partners. The findings show that collaborative work enhanced learners' autonomy. Engagement in groups and collaboration among peers developed confidence and independence among the learners. Although such a small-scale qualitative study may not be applicable or generalizable in other settings, it may serve as a reference.

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