Research Article

Exploring Embedded Contextual Factors and Their Contribution to Facilitating Autonomous Learning

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Abstract: This study delves into the influence of contextual factors on learner autonomy, highlighting that autonomous learning can be manifested differently due to contextual factors. This study engaged in exploring the learners' attitudes and learning practices to understand whether contextual factors facilitate learner autonomy in the university context. This study examined contextual factors, e.g., peer interaction, teachers' role, the curricular context, and prior learning experience, with a view to accomplishing its mission. Data was collected from 20 English language learners using semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data sets. The findings reveal that peer interaction facilitates autonomous learning through cooperation. Teachers' authoritarian roles seem to impede the development of learner autonomy. The curricular context tends to be obstructive since it prioritizes rote learning and delimits opportunities for autonomous practices. Participants' prior experiences of teacher-dependent and rote learning appear to impede their current autonomous learning. The findings of this study implicate that school curricula should create ample opportunities from the early levels of education to maximize learning potential through autonomous learning.

Keywords: learner autonomy; contextual factors; attitudes; practices; peer interaction; teachers' role; prior learning experiences; the curricular context of Bangladeshi universities

1. Introduction

Since its emergence, the concept of learner autonomy has gained considerable acclaim in the global research field and has also drawn attention in the Bangladeshi context, owing to its enormous benefits within classrooms. The notion of learner autonomy simply refers to learners' ability to take control over their learning processes, making decisions about content, methods, and progress assessment (Holec, 1981; Littlewood, 1999). However, due to its Western origins, this notion may not have the same applicability in cultural contexts like Bangladesh (Benson, 2007; Palfreyman, 2003), as it is constructed and perceived differently depending upon the context (Pennycook, 2014). The realization of learner autonomy may take a variety of forms depending on the nature of the learning context (Cotterall, 1995; Murphy, 2011). Researchers (e.g., Benson, 2001; Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Littlewood, 1999) advocated for prioritizing the learning context since it has a significant influence on learner autonomy. Contextual factors such as the teachers' role, peer interaction, the curricular context, and prior experience, have a profound influence on the development of learner autonomy (Alonazi, 2017; Benson & Voller, 1997; Boud et al., 2013; Cameron, 1990; Cotterall, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Little, 2001; Littlewood, 1999). This paper argues that the development of learner autonomy might not be effectual in any context unless the mediation of these factors on learner autonomy is investigated up to the eyes. However, gauging such factors within the Bangladeshi context appears to remain relatively underexplored which indicate a significant research gap for this study. Hence, exploring the embedded contextual factors and their contribution to learner autonomy appears to be necessary for facilitating autonomous learning in the Bangladeshi context.

In addition, the existing empirical studies (e.g., Bashir, 2014; Begum & Chowdhury, 2016; Islam, 2020; Kabir, 2015; Mehrin, 2017) underscore the fact that fostering learner autonomy in the Bangladeshi context seems a bit challenging since it is a cultural trait of Bangladeshi English language learners that they are teacher dependent, and consequently,

reluctant towards autonomous learning. These studies suggest that factors such as the rigid curriculum, prior learning experiences, and teacher-dominated traditions contribute to such dependency and reluctance. Moreover, these studies focus primarily on learners' psychological constructs while investigating autonomous learning in the Bangladeshi context, undermining the mediation of the contextual factors. As a result, there is a significant lack of comprehensive researches that investigate the specific factors, and their contribution to autonomous practices. Under such reality, this study intends to bridge this gap by comprehensively exploring the extent to which contextual factors are mediating Bangladeshi English language learners' autonomous learning. Through this exploration, the study seeks to provide insights and inform the development of effective strategies for promoting learner autonomy in the Bangladeshi EFL context.

2. Contextual Factors and its Influences

Learners' ability to learn autonomously is not an inherent attribute, rather it is acquired systematically through formal learning (Holec, 1981). Therefore, the factors associated with the learning context are likely to influence the realization of learner autonomy (Khenoune, 2015; Yildirim, 2008). Existing literature implies that contextual factors such as the teachers' role, peer interaction, the curricular context, and prior experience have a significant influence on the development of learner autonomy. For instance, Basri (2023) explored the factors that tended to influence learner autonomy in the North Cypress context. This study reported that factors like prior experience, the learning context in terms of exam-oriented assessment, and teacher-dependency (on the part of the learners) due to teachers' spoon-feeding tendency that was adversely mediating the realization of learner autonomy. Similarly, Wiranti & Widiyati (2023) investigated 34 Indonesian learners' perspectives to conceptualize the influence of contextual factors on learner autonomy. The study found that the assigned tasks and activities, teachers' roles, and the learning environment are the important influences that positively support learners' autonomous learning. Some identical elements also emerged as fundamental external factors influencing learner autonomy in a study by Tran & Vuong (2023) in the Vietnamese context. Tran & Duong (2020) also studied 35 Vietnamese English Language learners' portfolios through semi-structured interviews and writing logs to investigate the influential factors in promoting learner autonomy. The findings of this study reveal that positive feedback and teachers' roles (as guide, facilitator, resource, and mentor) are the aspects that help develop learner autonomy. Similarly, Mahmoudi & Mahmoudi (2015) underlined external variables such as the teachers and the curriculum that influence autonomous learning.

Among these factors, prior learning experience establishes predispositions among learners, leading them to respond to their current learning process with some degree of positivity or negativity (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). As a result, learners are likely to adopt a negative attitude towards autonomous learning if they have a lack of autonomous learning experience previously (Chan et al., 2002). Cotterall's (1995) study found participants' prior experiences dominated their beliefs about autonomous learning. Correspondingly, an array of research (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2007; van Gog et al., 2009) reported that the learners who encountered highly structured and teacher-dependent learning experience are likely to exhibit less autonomy in current language learning. It is very difficult for learners to cope with autonomous learning in their current learning context if they have experienced teacher-controlled traditional teaching, as reported in studies like Basri (2023) and Yasmin & Naseem (2019). Also, the cultural and educational context of learners' current learning can shape their beliefs towards their roles as autonomous language learners (Benson, 2001; Cameron, 1990; Littlewood, 1999). Research (such as Entwistle, 2000; Housen et al., 2011) indicates that the curriculum exerts a significant influence on learners' language learning, in terms of course design and objectives, teaching-learning methods, assessment procedures, learning materials, workload, and learning skills supports. Consequently, the promotion of learner autonomy can be hampered due to a rigid curriculum which prevails over teacher dominance, insufficiency of resources and support for autonomous learning, and an emphasis on memorization rather than critical thinking (Bligh, 2000; Little, 2001; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Studies such as Basri (2023) and Yasmin & Sohail (2018) reported that educational context which emphasizes passing examinations, and traditional teaching approaches creates limited opportunity for autonomy support. Therefore, Van Loi (2016) argued for the provision of teachers' autonomy in the curriculum so that the teachers can have ample opportunities to

encourage their learners to be autonomous.

The capacity for learner autonomy develops through learners' interaction with their teachers and peer learners (Little, 2001). As discussed in Kumaravadivelu (2001), learners usually develop and exercise autonomy through engaging in peer interaction and sharing learning responsibilities within their groups. Subsequently, peer interaction allows learners to take more control over their learning through collaboration in finding resources, solving problems and co-creating knowledge (Boud et al., 2013; Topping, 2005). Similarly, peer interaction engages learners in helping each other by reflecting on their learning and monitoring their progress (Barkley et al., 2014). Thus, one learner's autonomy entails autonomy among other learners in a classroom (Little et al., 2017). Teachers' role is also an important consideration since learners need teachers' assistance in autonomous learning (Alonazi, 2017; Little, 2007). In their study, Spratt et al. (2002) found that teachers who created a supportive learning environment have a positive impact on learners' attitudes towards autonomy. Therefore, teachers are supposed to provide their learners with the encouragement, opportunities, and sense required to form positive attitudes towards learner autonomy (Benson & Voller, 1997; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). Even teachers' feedback can contribute to developing a positive attitude and encouragement among learners towards autonomous learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Mercer & Ryan, 2010). Therefore, to assist learners in autonomous learning, teachers are required to play such roles as the role of counsellor, facilitator, organizer, manager, evaluator and resource (Alonazi, 2017; Tran & Duong, 2020). Cotterall (1995) mentioned two types of teachers: teachers as authority figures (who direct and control the learning process), and teachers as facilitators (teachers facilitate learners for autonomous learning). Hence, it is assumed that a teacher's role in a language classroom might facilitate or impede the promotion of learner autonomy.

3. Materials and Methods

This study revolves around this research question:
• To what extent the contextual factors are conducive towards Bangladeshi English language learners' autonomous learning?

To reach this aim, semi-structured interview schedules were administrated for data collection since this approach allowed the examination of the participants' ideas, thoughts, and reflections on the interpretation of their experiences and activities (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Roulston, 2013). The themes and the tentative questions for the interview schedules were divided into two categories namely, attitude and practice, and then, these categories have been divided into relevant subcategories. Under these subcategories, the representative tentative questions for the semi-structured interviews were finalized. Besides, during the pilot study, necessary changes have been made.

A total 20 English language learners from different Bangladeshi universities took part in the interviews. These participants have at least one year of experience of learning English in the university context. To maintain the ethical issues, the participants were identified by numbers (e.g., S1, S2, S3) in this study, and de-identified quotes have been used throughout the discussion. All the interviews were audio-recorded. For data analysis, this study followed the sequences of data transcribing, pre-coding and coding, and interpreting suggested by Dörnyei (2007) and the thematic analysis introduced by Braun & Clarke (2006). A small portion of the data was provided to an independent researcher for data analysis to ensure intra-data reliability and similar kind of results were found.

4. Results

4.1. Peer Interaction

Active engagement in social interactions opens up opportunities for learners to helping and supporting each other within or beyond the classroom contexts, and thereby, leads everyone towards developing learner autonomy (Little, 2004; Little et al., 2017). Likewise, the participant learners of this study seemed to be impregnated with this view, emphasizing the positive impact of peer interaction on autonomous learning. For instance,

*discussing with friends and seniors helps me to know and understand the thoughts of others. Also, if there is any problem, I can say it freely, without any hesitation. It feels very comfortable. **[S11]***

We do group study with friends. In that case, it is more effective than learning alone. We all carry different ability and different level of understanding. When we sit on group discussion, we all contribute. Thus, we can easily learn everything and very quickly. complete learning on a certain topic by discussing that in group

discussions. **[S15]**

This aforementioned statement appears to be reflected by the disposition of Little et al. (2017) who observed that learners entail autonomy through developing a sense of cooperation by helping each other to learn. Such support and collaboration within the classroom context are believed to lead everyone towards autonomy through sharing and monitoring their learning with each other, as pointed out by Barkley et al. (2014), and Johnson et al. (2014). Moreover, the participants reported such support and collaboration to be beneficial to their learning. For instance,

I think it clears any confusion in understanding if I go to friends with problems. If I go to my seniors, they provide me with various suggestions from their experience. Group study helps a lot in discussing literature or language. We usually study in groups first and then engage in solving problems. **[S17]**

This statement is indicative of some elements (such as engage in active participation, problem-solving, and shared responsibility) of learner autonomy as argued in Boud, Keogh, and Walker (2013). Additionally, the above-stated statements imply that participants find it comforting in peer interaction, which seems to help them motivated for autonomous learning.

4.2. Teachers' Roles

As previously discussed, teachers may play a diverse role in fostering learner autonomy, such as acting as counselors, facilitators, organizers, managers, evaluators, and resources, etc. (Alonazi, 2017). The participants of this study also acknowledge the presence of such kinds of roles among their teachers. For instance,

…Our speaking course teacher used to split us into groups. Giving a topic she asks to make a conversation in pairs. Sometimes they give us incomplete stories to complete in groups. Sometimes they ask to share our experience. **[S17]**

The kind of teachers' role that emerges in this statement appears to align with Alonazi's (2017) categorization of teachers as managers and organizers which includes organizing activities such as group discussions, presentations and debates. Similarly, the statements of the participants suggest that teachers also play the role of facilitators, as they reported teaching activities such as assisting learners in setting objectives, selecting appropriate learning materials, and solving problems (Alonazi, 2017; Chiu, 2005; Dörnyei, 2001; Voller, 1997). For instance,

…he advised me to watch English movies… notice the subtitles... He also suggests watching YouTube videos. He suggested speaking in English while talking to my friends. **[S3]**

…Sometimes I browse (on the internet) a thing and take it to the teachers, then they give directions, suggestions, and guidance… They listen to my problem and hear from me how I can solve the problem. Then they give me guidance that you can approach in this way. **[S14]**

These statements seem to highlight teachers' role as counselors, providing feedback, and teachers' role as resources, assisting learners in problem-solving, as suggested by Benson & Voller (1997), Hattie & Timperley (2007), and Mercer & Ryan (2010). Such roles can shape learners' attitudes positively by providing learners with a supportive and encouraging environment and offering opportunities for autonomous learning (Dweck, 2008; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). However, the teachers' roles that emerged in this study do not always facilitate autonomous learning. The participants' statements also indicate glimpses of the teachers' authoritative features, as suggested by Cotterall (1995). For instance, in response to *how teachers usually teach in the classroom,* **S1** replied, *"Our teachers do not follow any rules while teaching. They basically teach by following their own rules."*

This statement indicates the sense of teachers' dominance, which seems to align with the findings of Begum & Chowdhury (2016) regarding Bangladeshi English language teachers. Similar kind of authoritarian traits have been found among the Pakistani university teachers as reported by Yasmin & Sohail (2018). Moreover, in some cases, teachers are reported to provide fewer opportunities for autonomous learning practices, such as deciding on learning contents and strategy and giving opinions in this regard. For instance, in response to "who decides your learning contents?", **S7** reported that *"The teachers select these contents."* He further added that *"they do not take any kind of opinion from us."* These statements emerged as typical in this study which implicate that the participant learners barely have opportunities to take part in deciding on learning material. Therefore, these kinds of teachers' roles supposedly hinder fostering positive attitudes among the learners (Benson & Voller, 1997), indicating that the teachers' roles could impede autonomous learning to some extent.

4.3. The Curricular Context

The curricular context indeed plays an influential role in shaping learners' learning practices and their attitude towards autonomous learning, as noted in Cameron (1990). The analyzed data set extracts a certain level of conducive features of the Bangladeshi English language curricular context that positively influences autonomous learning. For instance, **S17** stated, *"In the university, I have to study on my own… for my own survival."* This statement reflects the participants' acceptance of learning responsibility which eventually helps result in autonomy in language learning, as suggested by Little (2006). However, it is important to recognize that the Bangladeshi curricular context may not always be conducive, as indicated by the participants' references to having less scope for autonomy in classroom activities and assessments. For instance, **S3** reported that among their classroom learning activities, *"most of them are lectures. 80% lectures and 20% is assignments and presentations."* This statement is typical in this study that implicates that Bangladeshi curricular context is hugely dependent on lectures which imposes impediment on the promotion of learner autonomy. Because lectures have been often criticized as a teacher-dominated and unilateral approach that involves learners with more passive and less active participation in problem-solving (Charlton, 2006; Kaur, 2011; Mascolo, 2009).

Additionally, **S17** reported her department's exam marks distribution, *"90 marks for the final written exam."* This is a typical answer for almost all the participants which implicate that the assessment system is hugely dependent on written tests and there is less scope for alternative assessment tools like assignments, presentations, and group work. The participants also reported that their final examination engages in memorization. For instance, **S14** reported that, *"…looking at the previous questions, I understand that if I do it this way, it will be done. Thus, memorization comes inevitably."* Autonomous learners are more likely to be engaged in critical thinking and deep learning, whereas a memorization-based learning approach can negatively affect their autonomous learning (Ambrose et al., 2010; Hase & Kenyon, 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Winne & Nesbit, 2010). In such a context where assessment is focused on the final text and learners can easily answer the exam paper by memorizing previous years' questions, learners tend to incline towards teacher-dependency (Basri, 2023). Moreover, learners' attitudes towards autonomous learning may not be shaped positively unless they feel a sense of belonging and engagement in their learning process (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Wenden & Rubin, 1987).

However, learners' participation in learning content and strategy seems to barely be observed in this context. For instance, **S12** reported, *"It is decided by the department authority."* This statement is a typical in thus analysis which implies that learners' attitudes may be inclined towards dependent learning due to the less opportunity to decide on content and strategy. The instance seems to align with the findings of Islam (2020) and Mehrin (2017). As a whole, the above stated findings appear to be reflected by a bunch of studies (e.g., Begum & Chowdhury, 2016; Kabir, 2015) which suggest that the Bangladeshi curricular context is more likely to be traditionally teacher-centered that prioritizes rote learning and does not provide a scope to participate in deciding learning contents and strategies. Thus, it can be inferred that the Bangladeshi EFL curricular context also plays an obstructive role towards autonomous learning.

4.4. Prior Learning Experience

As argued by Knowles (1976), language learners are less likely to exhibit autonomous behavior currently if they have encountered dependent learning previously in their past educational experience. The findings from the analyzed data in this study indicate that the participants have barely experienced autonomous learning in their previous academic institutions. For instance, the participants were asked how did they learn in their schools and colleges. In response, they replied:

We were actually forced to learn by the teachers… They used to teach us by solving model questions… Besides, they used to teach by practicing grammar rules. **[S9]**

…I studied in school and college just to face exams. Read grammatical rules, do grammar. There was no practical speaking, or listening atmosphere… the school and college's (learning) is memorization based… very narrow and exam-focused. **[S3]**

These statements highlight the presence of memorization-based and dependent activities, teacher dominance, and less scope for autonomous learning. Such experiences of dependent learning may contribute to shaping learners' attitudes with a degree of negativity towards their current autonomous learning (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007; Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2007). Similarly, the participants have provided a glimpse of their attitude towards autonomous learning by ex-pressing their preferences in current language learning practices.

For instance, in response to *'who should be responsible for selecting learning content and strategy'*, **S11** opted teachers and stated that *"I think the teachers. Because... they are quite experienced in this field."* This statement suggests the participant's lack of confidence in taking charge of learning responsibility which might be a result of their dependent learning experience. Similarly, Gog et al. (2009) found that learners with experiences of structured learning activities that engage memorization are likely to be less effective in autonomous learning. Therefore, the prior experience of Bangladeshi English language learners seems to be obstructive towards their autonomous learning.

5. Discussion

Among these factors, peer interaction appears to be conducive to facilitating learner autonomy in the Bangladeshi university context. The findings indicate that participants usually learn through the support and collaboration of their peer learners, which eventually leads them towards active learning and problem-solving (Barkley et al., 2014; Boud et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2014). Moreover, they perceive peer interaction as highly beneficial to their learning which eventually helps sustain their motivation and positive attitude towards autonomous learning (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Liu, 2014). Thus, the engagement of peer interaction in the classroom not only evokes autonomy among individual learners but also entails autonomy among their peer learners (Little, 2001; Little et al., 2017). Hence, there is a scope to foster learner autonomy in Bangladeshi EFL classrooms through peer interaction.

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that the teachers' roles encompass both conducive and obstructive features. Teachers barely offer opportunities for autonomous learning, particularly within classroom settings. It is obvious that learners might not develop a positive attitude towards learner autonomy if the teachers provide fewer opportunities (Benson & Voller, 1997). Such dominant traits exhibited by the teachers seems identical with the notion of the authority figure suggested by Cotterall (1995). Similar traits among Bangladeshi English language teachers have been also identified by Begum & Chowdhury (2016). As discussed in the interviews, the teachers are observed to play crucial roles such as counsellor, facilitator, organizer, manager, evaluator, and resource, which contribute to fostering autonomous learning by creating a supportive environment (Alonazi, 2017; Spratt et al., 2002; Tran & Duong, 2020). Empirical studies (e.g., Tran & Duong 2020) have identified these specific teachers' roles as conducive to fostering learner autonomy. Therefore, it can be argued that Bangladeshi English language teachers' roles are conducive to autonomous learning. However, the presence of traditional teaching practices impedes the development of learner autonomy.

The findings suggest that participants are significantly encouraged to accept responsibilities their learning within this context which potentially evoke autonomy among them (Little, 2006). However, it is important to shed light that the findings indicate a lack of opportunities within the curricular context for learners to participate in autonomous learning activities, specifically in terms of content selection. As a result, the lack of a sense of belonging and active engagement in the learning process may contribute to shaping learners' attitudes negatively (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). Similar observations regarding the Bangladeshi EFL context have been made by Islam (2020) and Mehrin (2017). Moreover, the findings indicate that lecture-based learning is predominant in this context, supporting the observation of Bashir (2014). Indeed, lecture-based learning approaches have been criticized for promoting passive learning (Charlton, 2006; Kaur, 2011; Mascolo, 2009). In addition, the exam-focused assessments that involves participants in rote learning has the potential to develop teacher-dependency among them (Ambrose et al., 2010; Hase & Kenyon, 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Winne & Nesbit, 2010). The findings also suggest that teacher-centered approaches are prevailing throughout different levels in the Bangladeshi EFL context, where learning is mainly exam-focused, and subsequently, prioritizes memorization. Such findings correlate with some of the studies (e.g., Begum & Chowdhury, 2016; Kabir, 2015; Mehrin, 2017).

In addition, the findings highlight the participants' prior experience of teacher-dependent and memorization-based learning which may potentially restrain them from being autonomous currently (Knowles, 1975). The findings also indicate that their prior experiences contribute to shaping negative attitudes towards current autonomous learning, as supported by several studies (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 2007; Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2007). Hence, both the curricular context and learners' prior experience in the Bangladeshi EFL context can be inferred as obstructive towards autonomous learning.

6. Conclusions

This paper concludes that the mediation of contextual factors is not entirely conducive for developing learner autonomy in the Bangladeshi EFL context. In addition, the results of this study indicate some pedagogical and empirical implications. Firstly, peer interactions should be encouraged through fostering collaboration and cooperation among learners, and thereby, addressed in the curriculum to enhance learners' autonomous practices effectively (Little, 2001; Little et al., 2017). Secondly, this study highlights the importance of providing teachers with training and raising awareness about the necessary roles for promoting learner autonomy among their learners as suggested by Alonazi (2017). Thirdly, like Van Loi (2016), this study also urges the provision of teachers' autonomy in the curriculum, enabling them to create opportunities and encourage learners to develop autonomy. Finally, this study highlights the importance of readdressing learner autonomy in the curriculum at the early levels of education to maximize learners' learning potential through autonomous learning in the Bangladeshi EFL context.

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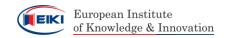
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