

Role of Learner Autonomy in Using Language Learning Strategies among Tertiary EFL Learners in Bangladesh

A synopsis of the PhD thesis

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Chapter Plan

Chapter 1: Context of the Study

Chapter 2: Problem of the Study

Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures

Chapter 4: Result and Interpretation

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Chapter 1: Context of the Study

Introduction

As learning English is a lifelong process and cannot be confined within the boundaries of the language classrooms, learners need to devise their own learning strategies and become autonomous in order to learn it successfully. Oxford (1996) claims successful learners are mostly autonomous and proficient in using language learning strategies. However, to become autonomous and efficient, learners need to take more responsibility of their own learning and make proper use of the learning strategies. Therefore, both learner autonomy and language learning strategies are considered to be crucial factors in successful learning of English (Chan, 2001b; Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Dickinson, 1987; Littlewood, 1999).

Learners autonomy is a process “in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (Knowles 1975: 18) and an ability “to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981: 3). Dickinson claims “there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught” (1995: 165).

On the other hand, language learning strategies are “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques — such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task — used by students to enhance their own learning” (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992: 63). These have significant roles in developing learner autonomy (Oxford, 1990; Scharle & Szabo, 2000) and enable learners to learn and use the target language in a proper way (Cohen, 2007; cited in Khan, 2012). Effective use of language learning strategies helps “unsuccessful” learners comprehend the causes of their failure, as well as facilitate them in designing effective plans for successful learning (Brown, 1994; Chamot, 1999; Cohen, 1990; Faerch & Kasper, 1984; Gregersent, 2001).

Chapter 2: Problem of the Study

Review of Literature

The researcher studied numerous books and articles in order to generate a clear understanding of available knowledge regarding this study. However, a total of 46 scholarly works from across the world were found to be relevant. A few of those relevant ones are as follows:

Khan (2017) investigated teachers' cognition about learner autonomy and its role in choosing learning strategies in Bangladesh. Findings suggest the improbability of any universal model for learner autonomy as it can be adopted only contextually. Also, existing practices in the academia makes learners less autonomous in choosing learning strategies.

Begum (2018) investigated teachers' beliefs about autonomy and learning strategies in Bangladesh. Findings reveal teachers' familiarity with these notions, as well as various challenges in implementing these in academia.

Ranjan (2018) found no substantial differences among males and females in using learning strategies in India. Moreover, students use social strategies the most, and memory strategies the least.

Dawadi (2017) found Nepalese males preferred social, compensation and affective strategies, whereas females preferred the cognitive and metacognitive ones.

Significance of the study

However, as the interrelationship between learner autonomy and language learning strategies plays a significant role in learning English, it therefore deserves an important stand in language education research, particularly in the non-English-speaking countries like Bangladesh. Yet, there exists a vast knowledge gap as no study has so far been conducted depicting the interrelationship between these two, in particular, identifying the role of learner autonomy in using language learning strategies in learning English as a foreign language in Bangladesh. Therefore, this research is very significant as its findings may add new knowledge in literature and reduce the existing knowledge gap, as well as provide feasible

guidelines in eliminating the obstacles in learning English in the non-English-speaking countries like Bangladesh.

Research Questions

In order to reduce this knowledge gap, the researcher took initiative to investigate this much needed significant study and coined the following research questions as its guiding principles:

- To what extent do learners learning EFL at the tertiary level in Bangladesh use language learning strategies?
- Do learners have any preference in using any particular language learning strategies in relation to their individual, academic and social aspects?
- How much autonomy do learners have in learning EFL at the tertiary level in Bangladesh?
- What is the relationship between learner autonomy and language learning strategies in learning EFL at the tertiary level in Bangladesh?

To find out the answers of the aforementioned basic research questions, the problem of the present study has been specified as *“Role of learner autonomy in using language learning strategies among tertiary EFL learners in Bangladesh”*.

Delimitations

However, due to limitations in scope and resources, this study was delimited to the following:

- To measure only learner autonomy and language learning strategies;
- The sample of the study consisted of only learners learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in different universities in Bangladesh;
- The sample group were from the undergraduate years only and their age ranged from 19-22 years;
- Only public universities from five divisions in Bangladesh, viz. Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna and Barishal were chosen for the study;
- Few social, academic, and personal indicators of the learners' were considered; and
- Data was collected through only two instruments, viz. the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1989) and Learner Autonomy Scale (Zhang & Li, 2004).

Objectives

However, the objectives were much focused in this regard. They were:

- To find out the extent of use of language learning strategies among learners learning EFL at the tertiary level in Bangladesh;
- To find out the variations in the use of language learning strategies in relation to the individual, social, and academic aspects of the learners;
- To find out the extent of autonomy among learners learning EFL at the tertiary level in Bangladesh;
- To find out the variations in the level of autonomy in relation to the individual, social, and academic aspects of the learners; and
- To explore the relationship between learner autonomy and language learning strategies among the learners learning EFL at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

Hypotheses

With such specific objectives in mind, the researcher formulated quite a good number of Hypotheses (Null form) in relation to this study:

- **H₀1:** Preference of different language learning strategies occurs with equal probability among learners learning EFL at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.
- **H₀2:** Preference of language learning strategies and gender of the learners' are independent of each other.
- **H₀3:** Preference of language learning strategies and the number of siblings of the learners' are independent of each other.
- **H₀4:** Preference of language learning strategies and the locality of the institutions (where learners studied before taking admission at the university) are independent of each other.
- **H₀5:** Preference of language learning strategies and the medium of instruction in learners' previous institutions (before taking admission at the university) are independent of each other.
- **H₀6:** Preference of language learning strategies and the duration of learning English before taking admission at the university are independent of each other.

- **H₀7:** Preference of language learning strategies and parental education of the learners are independent of each other.
- **H₀8:** Age of the learners does not affect the use of language learning strategies in a significant manner.
- **H₀9:** Both male and female learners make equal use of different language learning strategies.
- **H₀10:** Learners from both urban and rural institutions make equal use of different language learning strategies.
- **H₀11:** Learners used to having instructions in Bangla (in their previous institutions before taking admission at the university) make equal use of different language learning strategies as those used to having instructions in English.
- **H₀12:** Use of different language learning strategies does not vary among learners in terms of their number of siblings.
- **H₀13:** Use of different language learning strategies does not vary among learners in terms of their prior years of English language learning.
- **H₀14:** Use of different language learning strategies does not vary among learners in terms of their parental education.
- **H₀15:** The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of learners' gender.
- **H₀16:** The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the medium of instruction (Bangla or English) in the institutions the learner studied before taking admission in the university.
- **H₀17:** The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the locality of institutions (urban or rural) the learner studied before taking admission in the university.
- **H₀18:** The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the learner's number of siblings.
- **H₀19:** The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the duration of learning English by the learner before taking admission in the university.
- **H₀20:** The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the parental education of the learners'.

- **H₀₂₁:** Learner autonomy does not differ significantly in relation to the preferred language learning strategies adopted by learners learning EFL at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures

Having gone through the aforementioned stages, the researcher then designed a cross sectional survey to quantitatively measures the role of learner autonomy in using language learning strategies among learners studying EFL in tertiary level in Bangladesh.

Out of the 10,000 learners (the population) learning English at the tertiary level in Bangladesh at that time, a total of 1200 learners were selected as the sample of this study through the convenience sampling method from 10 public universities (purposive selection) in 5 divisions in Bangladesh.

Variables

The following Independent and Dependent variables were considered in this study:

- Independent variables –
 - 1) Gender – *Two categories were considered, i.e., male and female;*
 - 2) Medium of instruction – *Two languages as mediums of instruction, viz. Bangla and English, were considered;*
 - 3) Locality of institution - *Two types of locality were considered, i.e., rural and urban;*
 - 4) Number of sibling(s) – *Five categories were considered, i.e., no sibling, one sibling, two siblings, three siblings, and more than three siblings;*
 - 5) Duration of learning English before taking admission in university – This indicates the number of years a learner had learnt English before taking admission in the university. *Three tenures were considered, i.e., between 1 and 3 years, between 4 and 6 years, and more than 6 years; and*
 - 6) Parental education - *Five levels were considered, viz. illiterate, primary, secondary, higher secondary and graduate.*
- Dependent variables –
 - Learner autonomy; and

- Language learning strategy – *Six types of strategies were considered, i.e., Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social.*

Instruments

The present study used two main instruments for obtaining data, i.e., Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1989) and Learner Autonomy Scale (Zhang & Li, 2004). However, a basic information schedule was also used to collect participants' background information as a requirement.

Collection of Data

The researcher followed all the standard procedures and collected the required amount of data during 20th August 2019 to 18th November 2019.

Quality of Data

However, out of the 1254 responses, the researcher had to exclude 54 responses as those were either incomplete or faulty. Thus, the final count of data summed up to 1200.

Analysis of Data

This data was tabulated using Microsoft Excel 2019 and analyzed using IBM SPSS (version 20) in relation to variables. Descriptive statistics indicating Percentage analysis and Mean and Standard deviation was used to comprehend the characteristics of the sample. Graphical representation was illustrated through Bar, Stacked and Line diagrams in order to make a clear representation of the learners' preference and use of learning strategies in relation to their learner autonomy in terms of different independent variables. Moreover, Independent sample T-tests, One-way ANOVA, and Chi-square goodness of fit, and Chi-square test of Independence were also employed in distinguishing the population from the sample statistics.

Chapter 4: Result and Interpretation

Some of the major findings are as follows:

- The frequency count of learning strategies shows that the majority of the learners (27.8%) preferred Memory strategies and only 7.8% of the learners preferred Cognitive strategies under the present study.
- Out of all the participants, the majority (28.09% of all males, n=159; and 27.60% of all females, n=175) prefer Memory strategies. On the other hand, only 7.42% of the males (n=42) and 8.04% of the females (n=51) prefer Cognitive strategies.
- Learners who studied in urban institutions before taking admission in the university prioritized Memory strategies (n=311, 28.61% of total respondents) and those from rural institutions prioritized Metacognitive strategies (n=33, 29.20% of total respondents). However, both these groups chose Cognitive strategies the least (n=87, 8.00% of total respondents from urban institutions; and n=6, 5.30% of total respondents from rural institutions).
- There was no difference in choice of language learning strategies among learners in terms of the medium of instruction (being Bangla or English) where they studied before taking admission in the university. Learners from both of these groups preferred Memory strategies (n=202, 28.41% of total respondents from Bangla medium instruction; and n=132, 26.99% of total respondents from English medium instruction). And for both of these groups, Cognitive strategies were the least preferred (n=57, 8.01% of total respondents from Bangla medium instruction; and n=36, 7.36% of total respondents from English medium instruction).
- Female learners were a little more autonomous (mean=69.99) than their male counterparts (mean=69.77).
- Learners who had instructions in Bangla in their previous institutions before taking admission in the university exhibited more autonomy in learning (mean=69.91) than their counterparts having instructions in English (mean=69.84).

- Learners were from institutions in rural areas (mean=70.30) were more autonomous than from urban areas (mean=69.84).
- Learners who learnt English for more than six years before taking admission in university proved to be the most autonomous (mean=70.05) and those who learnt English for one to three years (mean=68.77) turned out to be the least autonomous.
- Learners having parents with graduate education were most autonomous (mean=70.22) and those with illiterate parents the least autonomous (mean=64.33).
- Learners with highest level of autonomy preferred Compensation strategies (mean=75.76) and those with lowest (mean=66.64) level of autonomy prefers Metacognitive strategies.
- It was hypothesized that each learning strategies is preferred by learners with equal probabilities. But a significant deviation from the hypothesized value was found $\{\chi^2(5) = 204.950, p < .05\}$ using a chi-square goodness of fit test. Therefore, the learning strategies do not seem to be preferred by students with equal probabilities.
- No significant relationship was found $\{\chi^2(5) = 8.956, p < .05\}$ between the preference of learning strategies between the male and female learners. Therefore, choice of language learning strategies appears to be independent of gender of the learners.
- No significant relationship was found $\{\chi^2(20) = 27.812, p < .05\}$ while comparing the preference of learning strategies among learners in terms of their number of siblings. Therefore, choice of language learning strategies appears to be independent of whether learners have siblings or not.
- No significant relationship was found $\{\chi^2(5) = 6.998, p < .05\}$ comparing the preference of learning strategies among learners in terms of the location of the institutions where they studied before taking admission in university. Therefore, choice of language learning strategies appears to be independent of the location of previous institutions.

- No significant relationship was found $\{\chi^2(5) = 3.425, p < .05\}$ comparing the preference of learning strategies among learners in terms of the medium of instruction in their previous educational institutions. Choice of learning strategies appears to be independent of the medium of instruction in learners' previous educational institutions.
- No significant relationship was found $\{\chi^2(10) = 10.755, p < .05\}$ comparing the preference of learning strategies among learners in terms of the duration of learning English before taking admission in university. Choice of language learning strategies appears to be independent of learners' duration of learning English before taking admission in university.
- No significant relationship was found $\{\chi^2(20) = 21.513, p < .05\}$ comparing the preference of learning strategies among learners in terms of their parental education. Choice of learning strategies appears to be independent of learners' parental education.
- A Pearson correlation coefficient found a weak negative correlation $\{r(1198) = -.075, p < .01\}$, indicating a significant linear relationship between learners age and scores in Memory strategies. With increasing age, learners' inclination towards Memory strategies comes to a gradual decline. Other than this category, learners' age was not found to be related to their use of other learning strategies.
- A one-way ANOVA found a significant difference among the six types of learning strategies $(F(5,1194) = 38.446, p < .01)$ while comparing the mean scores of learner autonomy of six different learning strategies used by learners. It indicates that with increasing learner autonomy, learners shift their learning strategies.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Significant findings from this study indicate that:

- i. Learning strategies do not seem to be preferred by learners with equal probabilities. This finding is similar to many other researches like (Khan, 2012; Bristi, 2015; Ranjan, 2018; Hadi & Guo, 2020; Dawadi, 2017; Ellis, 1994; Tsan, 2008; Alhaysony, 2017) around the world. It is quite natural as learning strategies are dependent on the particular context of learning and as no two situations are same, preference of learning strategies can also not be the same.
- ii. With increasing age, learners' inclination towards Memory strategies comes to a gradual decline. Similar findings were reported in Khan (2012) and Ellis (1994). However, other studies like Bristi (2015), and Rezalou (2014) reported different findings. Bristi (2015) reported a consistency in the choice of learning strategies, whereas Rezalou (2014) did not find age to have any significant effect on strategy use. However, the researcher holds the view that with increasing age and experience in learning, learners become more capable of exploring and relying on other strategies effectively and consciously. Therefore, their dependence on memorizing goes down.
- iii. Learners whose parents were educated up to higher secondary level used Memory strategies to a significant extent (mean=31.30, sd=5.241) compared to other groups of learners. However, there was no significant mean difference among the groups of learners in the other five learning strategies. The researcher holds the view that as parents who are illiterate or have only primary education do not have much idea about learning strategies, they do not interfere with their children's learning strategies. And as learned or graduate parents know the importance of cognition and practice in learning a language, they do not encourage their children to indulge in memory strategies. However, the parents who are educated up to higher secondary level come in between the other two categories are neither devoid of any strategies nor have any full understanding of learning strategies. Therefore they think memorizing to be the way to learn a language and thus teach their children to memorize English.

- iv. With increasing learner autonomy, learners shift their learning strategies from the Memory and Metacognitive ones to the Compensation and Cognitive ones. Similar findings were reported in Ranjan (2018) and Ellis (1994). However, Bristi (2015) reported a consistency in their choice of learning strategies at various levels of proficiency. The researcher holds the view that with increasing autonomy, learners become more mature enough to analyze their learning requirements and context and thereby take charge of their own learning. Therefore, they can move beyond the initial level strategies of Memory and Metacognition and start using the more mature level strategies of Compensation and Cognition.

The findings that were not found to have any significant differences in the study indicate that:

- i. Choice of language learning strategies appears to be independent of the gender of the learners. Similar findings were reported in Rezalou (2014). However, Dawadi (2017) and Liu (2015) reported different findings. Both of them reported language learning strategies to be biased by gender. However, the researcher holds the view that it is the learning context, not the gender of the learners that determine the learning strategies. It is expected that learning strategies will be similar in the same learning context.
- ii. Choice of language learning strategies appears to be independent of whether learners have siblings or not. The researcher holds the view that using learning strategies is an individual characteristic of the learner. Therefore, having siblings or not is not a determining factor in this regard.
- iii. Choice of language learning strategies appears to be independent of the location of previous institutions. The researcher holds the view that choice of language learning strategies is an individual characteristic of the learner. Therefore, location of institution where the learner previously studied is not a determining factor in this regard.
- iv. Choice of learning strategies appears to be independent of the medium of instruction in learners' previous educational institutions. The researcher holds the view that

choice of language learning strategies is contextual, and depends on the learning context. Therefore, the medium of instruction in learners' previous educational institutions is not a determining factor in this regard.

- v. Choice of language learning strategies appears to be independent of learners' duration of learning English before taking admission in university. Similar findings were reported in Alhaysony (2017). However, Ellis (1994) claimed that experienced learners (with longer duration of learning English) are found to make more use of the functional strategies than that of the less experienced ones (with shorter duration of learning English). The researcher holds the view that choice of language learning strategies is contextual, and depends on the learning context. Therefore, duration of learning English is not a determining factor in this regard.
- vi. Choice of learning strategies appears to be independent of learners' parental education. The researcher holds the view that learning strategies are need-specific individual responses to solve learning needs. Therefore, though parents may influence learners in various ways, learning strategies would remain exclusive to the learners' individual style and the learning needs and situation.
- vii. Both male and female learners make equal use of different language learning strategies. Similar findings were reported in Ranjan (2018). However, Samaei, Khany and Habibi (2015) and Alhaysony (2017) reported female learners to use more learning strategies than their male counterparts. The researcher holds the view that language learning strategies are need-specific responses to a learning situation, not a gender biased one. Therefore, both males and females would make equal use of learning strategies in response to that particular learning need.
- viii. Learners from both urban and rural institutions make equal use of various language learning strategies. The researcher holds the view that as language learning strategies are need-specific individual responses to a particular learning situation, location of their previous learning institutions is not a determining factor in this regard.

- ix. Learners used to having instructions in Bangla (in their previous institutions before taking admission at the university) make equal use of different language learning strategies as those used to having instructions in English. However, Ellis (1994) claims that learners need to deploy more strategies while dealing with a language that is significantly different from their mother tongue. The researcher holds the view that as the use of learning strategies are need-specific individual approaches to any learning situation, the learner will use every strategy he is familiar with regardless the medium of instruction in previous educational institutions.
- x. Use of different language learning strategies does not vary among learners in terms of their duration of learning English before taking admission in the university. However, Ellis (1994) claims that more experienced learners with higher level of duration in learning English make more use of functional strategies than that of the less experienced ones. The researcher holds the view that this is a reflection of the overall social approach towards learning English in the given context. More than adjusting to the needs of the learning situation, learners feel secure in following the popular learning strategies.
- xi. The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of learners' gender. Similar findings were reported in Bozkurt & Arslan (2018). However, Al-Khawlani (2018) came out with a different finding. He claimed that female respondents score higher in all the sub-domains of learner autonomy compared to their male counterparts. The researcher holds the view that this difference is culture and context bound and therefore cannot be claimed as a global phenomenon. Al-Khawlani (2018) also suggested the same in justifying the findings in relation to learner autonomy among Polish and Yemeni learners.
- xii. The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the parental education of the learners'. The researcher holds the view that though learner autonomy is an individual-specific approach and various variables come into consideration, parental education alone is not adequate enough in determining learner autonomy.

- xiii. The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the learner's number of siblings. The researcher holds the view that though learner autonomy is an individual-specific approach and various variables come into consideration, the number of siblings alone is not an absolute and very significant factor in determining learner autonomy.
- xiv. The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the medium of instruction (Bangla or English) in the institutions the learner studied before taking admission in the university. The researcher holds the view that learner autonomy is an individual-specific approach and that depends on various variables. However, medium of instruction in their previous learning institutions is not a determining factor in this regard.
- xv. The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the duration of learning English by the learner before taking admission in the university. The researcher holds the view that learner autonomy is an individual-specific approach and various variables come into consideration. However, the duration of learning English alone is not adequate enough in determining learner autonomy.
- xvi. The mean score of learner autonomy does not vary significantly in terms of the locality of institutions (urban or rural) the learner studied before taking admission in the university. However, Iamudom & Tangkiengsirisin (2020) and Al-Khawlani (2018) claimed that duration of exposure to different culture and locality of learning affects learner autonomy in a significant way. The researcher holds the view that as learner autonomy is an individual-specific approach and depends on various variables, there can be different findings in different contexts. Confining it to any particular finding will be over rated.

Overall Importance and future implications of the study

As learner autonomy and language learning strategies are very instrumental in learning a foreign language, particularly English, they require special attention. However, majority of the research in these areas relate to the Western perspective. With only a few studies relating to the East Asian contexts, there remains a big knowledge gap in terms of the South Asian perspective. Such a contextual knowledge gap, particularly in depicting the interrelationship between autonomy and learning strategies and how they shape one another in relation to learning English as a foreign language in the South Asian context, has inspired the researcher in conducting this study that investigates the role of learner autonomy in using language learning strategies among tertiary EFL learners in Bangladesh. Findings indicate a varying relationship between learner autonomy and language learning strategies in the context of this study. It details the role of autonomy among university learners in Bangladesh in using language learning strategies in relation to learning English as a foreign language. Moreover, as this study is the first of its kind in available literature in relation to the South Asian context, particularly Bangladesh, it offers significant implications as well as opens up a plethora of interest among various stakeholders – researchers, teachers, learners, and parents. Researchers can use its findings as a guideline in exploring further areas of research. Teachers can utilize its findings in facilitating learners become more autonomous and use appropriate learning strategies. Parents can also benefit from this study by having a clear conception of autonomous learning thus guide their children in a proper way. And finally, the learners can make the most out of this study and become successful learners by a proper identification of their level of autonomy and the learning strategies that suits them best. This study therefore is highly significant and has much to offer to all the relevant stakeholders.