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Challenges of Developing Learner Autonomy of English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners in Underprivileged Areas

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Abstract

Learner autonomy, which emphasizes learners' engagement in self-dependent learning to enhance their ability to become self-reliant learners, is the key element in the language learning process. Although many studies have been carried out on learner autonomy, very little is known about the students' engagement in autonomous learning in the resource poor areas. This research uses a mixed-method research design and collected both qualitative and quantitative data from students (n=84) and teachers (n=20) from different colleges (n=15) located in Far Western Nepal and explores students' engagement in autonomous learning and discusses the challenges and practices of learner autonomy in an EFL context in difficult circumstances. This research reveals students' over-dependence on their teachers, and teachers seemed to spoon-feed their students during their instructional practices. This research suggests how learner autonomy can be fostered in the actual instructional practices which can be of interest to the teachers, material designers, policymakers, and researchers working in developing the proficiency level of English language learners in remote and resource-poor areas.

Keywords: learner autonomy, EFL learners, underprivileged area

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1. Introduction

English is considered to be a foreign language (Bist, 2011) and taught as a subject in government schools and colleges up to the bachelor's level in Nepal. In private schools, English is also used as the medium of instruction for most of the subjects. And, English is increasingly used as the primary lingua franca, overtaking Nepali in crucial sectors like tourism, trade and business, and the academic sectors in urban areas (Giri, 2011; Rana, 2008). Regardless of its status, English is learnt formally only in the classroom; there is no natural or direct exposure to the English language outside the school in the remote and resource-impoverished areas. As a result, most students, even at the bachelor's level in the resource-poor and the rural areas, still struggle to communicate in English.

Furthermore, experts in English Language Teaching (ELT) are rigorously attempting to develop new theories, methods, and techniques of teaching English. Although these methods and techniques suggest ways to enhance ELT instructional practices, students' proficiency level in English is generally low, especially in the remote and less resourceful areas. While teachers' pedagogical choices and techniques can support/hinder their students' language learning, their success demands dedicated efforts from students in learning, which encourages them to be more willing to learn independently or with less teacher-dependence (Swatevacharkul & Boonma, 2021). Such independent effort from students is technically called learner autonomy.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The English language curriculum in higher education in Nepal aims to develop fluency in both spoken and basic academic writing skills in English. However, the evidence of the students' performance in English is not encouraging. For example, in the college where the first author teaches, learners struggle to read and write English. Some students studying at the bachelor's level cannot spell even the word 'bachelor' and 'English' correctly, and others write almost all the nonsensical sentences due to the lack of competencies in writing.

Furthermore, most schools and colleges in developing countries like Nepal are not well-equipped with language learning materials and other resources. Additionally, the class sizes are generally large and the access to learning technologies (such as computer, internet, and e-resources) is limited. As a result, teachers cannot practice differentiated instructions to support learners with diverse needs. Moreover, at home and on the street, people use colloquial native language and its various dialects. In such a condition, learner autonomy could help learner develop English language competencies as it can enhance and maintain language learning motivation in a non-native environment (Jiao, 2005). The English language curriculum also expects students to engage in autonomous learning. However, there is limited information on whether students engage in autonomous learning and the challenges teachers and students face in implementing/practicing learning autonomy.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

The researchers conducted this study to explore whether students engaged in autonomous learning and discussed the challenges of implementing and developing learner autonomy in ELT in difficult circumstances. To be more precise, the study answers the following research questions:

1. What autonomous learning activities do students engage/not engage in both inside and outside the classroom?
2. Why do (not) students in higher education (undergraduate level) engage in autonomous learning?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is of significance with reference to the nature of language teaching and learning in the underprivileged areas where teachers still play the dominant role in the classroom and students are given less opportunity to be autonomous learners. The result also identifies the challenges that constrains the advancement of autonomy among the learners and provides the reasons why students have over dependence on their teachers which could be very useful information for the teachers, material designers, and the policy makers to be considered in planning and selecting the methodology and techniques of teaching in order to make the students more active and autonomous in their learning.

2. Review of the Literature

Learner autonomy is independent learning (Bakar, 2007; Little, 1995). It is the capacity and the ability to take charge (Holec, 1981) and become more responsible of their learning (Bensons & Voller, 2014; Smith, 2008). Autonomous learners plan for their learning by setting the learning objectives and strategies to be used to organize and monitor the

learning processes, and evaluate the outcomes independent of teachers' input (Andrade & Bunker, 2009; Lengkanawati, 2017). Autonomous learners are responsible, persistent, resourceful, and take initiative in making and implementing language learning decisions (Dickinson, 1994; Lin & Reinder, 2019) without depending entirely on their teachers. Such independence makes their learning more effective than when they actively rely on their teachers (Rao, 2018). It, therefore, decreases teacher dependence and enhances students' self-reflective ability, which is an effective strategy to learn from success and failures (Crabbe, 1999). Since the primary purpose of learning a foreign language is to use it for various communicative purposes, learners need to be more active, participatory, and responsible in language learning in order to enhance their foreign language skills and develop communicative competence without the intervention of a teacher (Najeeb, 2013). It's because it's up to the learners if they want to learn (Lowes & Target, 1998). From this brief review, we can conclude that learner autonomy is an independent learning process where the learners plan their learning, set learning goals, take more learning responsibilities, and self-reflect on the learning process.

Although the role of the language learners is at the centre of learning, the teachers' role should not be underestimated and cannot be diminished in the learning process. Teachers play an essential role in negotiating learners' participation in planning for learning, putting the plans into action, monitoring and evaluating their learning to carry out the learning tasks autonomously (Nguyen, 2014). In most cases, the success of language learning depends on the teachers, how they teach and what learning opportunities they provide to their students by creating various learning contexts as facilitator, counsellor, and resource persons (Alonazi, 2017).

2.1 Review of Empirical Studies

As evidenced by the relevant literature in the field, the enhancement of learner autonomy has a significant positive impact on student learning. It has received considerable research interest since 1981 as there have been many research studies focusing on teachers' and students' perceptions, beliefs or attitudes towards learner autonomy (Alhaysony, 2016; Alonazi, 2017; Asiri & Shukri, 2020; Asmari, 2013; Bekleyen & Selimoglu, 2016; Cirocki, Anam, & Retnaningdyah, 2019; Dogan & Mirici, 2017; Duong, 2014; Hajimaghsoodi & Saghaieh Bolghari, 2019; Khalil & Ali, 2018; Shahsavari, 2014; Tuan, 2021). Most of these studies have concluded that while both teachers and students have a positive attitude toward learner autonomy, they are not autonomous practically. For example, using the survey data from 60 teachers at Taif University English Language Centre, Asmari (2013) argued that while teachers expected students to engage in the decision-making process to learn independently, they lacked proper skills and expertise to facilitate autonomous learning.

Yunus and Arshad (2015) also explored 35 teachers' perspectives on autonomous learning practices in their classrooms in Malaysian public secondary schools. Their study found that teachers were very positive in implementing autonomous learning among students. Similarly, Duong (2014), who explored EFL teachers' understanding of learner autonomy and related instructional practices in the Thai context, found that teachers had a theoretical understanding of learner autonomy and their roles in autonomous learning. However, they struggled to implement the strategies to support learning autonomy.

Studies have also suggested that implementing autonomy in EFL lessons is challenging because learners often lack the attitude and skills to become independent learners. Shahsavari's (2014) study revealed that learner autonomy is necessary to learn language expeditiously; however, the learners did not take responsibility for their learning. When asked to take a more active role, the students thought that the teachers who asked them to be more responsible were not dynamic and experienced. Similar findings were also reported in Bekleyen and Selimoglu (2016) and Alhaysony (2016), Khalil and Ali (2018). All three studies found students lacking the skills and attitude to learning independently because they believed their teachers were more responsible for teaching than making them learn independently.

Challenges in incorporating autonomous learning in EFL classrooms due to the lack of skills in learners were also highlighted by Alonazi (2017). The author concluded that while teachers lacked pedagogical ideas, implementing autonomous learning was challenging due to learners lacking related skills. Similar results were also reported by Dogan and Mirici (2017). They explored the EFL instructors' cognizance and practices on learner autonomy in nine geographically distinct public Turkish universities. Based on the data collected from 96 EFL instructors using questionnaires and interviews, the researchers concluded that the instructors were highly positive towards the values of autonomous learning. However, they could not implement autonomous learning due to the learners' inability to become self-dependent and more responsible in their learning.

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Furthermore, research also suggests that the competencies in English language and cultural factors can result in negative attitudes in students towards autonomous learning. For example, in the study by Khalil and Ali (2018) in Egypt, the students expected their teachers to spoon-feed them because they lacked competencies in English despite being more positive about autonomous learning. A study based in Indonesia by Cirocki, Anam, and Retnaningdyah (2019) found many students were unaccustomed to learner autonomy and had low motivation to learn English. Therefore, their teachers believed that they were not ready to learn independently.

Regarding the perspectives of the students in learner autonomy, Asiri and Shukri (2020) revealed the negative perspectives of the students towards learner autonomy; they were completely dependent on their teachers and did not have the habit of learning by themselves. Similar result was found in Dunog (2021) too. The researchers carried out the study in Vietnamese context in order to investigate the Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions and practices of autonomous learning. The result showed some practice of learner autonomy. However, it was not satisfactory because many students were found more teacher-centered. They also lacked the ability to learn independently. Based on the review above, we conclude that learner autonomy is critical in building confidence in learning and gaining success. However, studies suggest neither the teachers nor the students seem autonomous in their teaching and learning practices in many EFL contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

We have used a sequential mixed-method design because we were interested in exploring the findings of the statistical data further and gaining an in-depth understanding of learner autonomy.

3.2 Instruments

Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The questionnaire was developed in two versions - one for teachers and the other for the students (see appendices A and B). The questionnaire contained question items that explored participants' current English language teaching and learning strategies in difficult circumstances. These questions were based on the a-priori themes identified and compiled during the literature review on learner autonomy and teaching English in difficult circumstances. The questionnaire items were arranged on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree for questions 1-10 in the first set (questionnaire for students) and questions 1-15 in the second set (questionnaire for teachers). In the first set, item numbers 11 to 20 had five options: Always, often, occasionally, rarely, and never.

The validity of the questionnaire was determined by using expert opinions. Five English Language Teaching (ELT) experts reviewed the questionnaire to evaluate its clarity and pertinence to the research objectives, and then the questions were revised as per the suggestions made by the experts. The revised questionnaire was administered to ten students and five teachers (they were not included in the actual data collection) to find out whether the language in the questionnaire was comprehensible and to check if they needed any assistance to complete the survey. Based on the suggestions from the teachers and students, technical jargon was changed into plain English. While interviews were conducted face-to-face, questionnaires were distributed in hard copy.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elaborate/clarify their responses in the questionnaire in-depth and to understand the participants' perspectives on learner autonomy and the role of teachers on learner autonomy. Interview prompts were based on the teaching and learning strategies of the participants and their responses on the questionnaire, for example, teaching and learning difficulties, taking responsibilities both in teaching and learning, assignment and completion of the tasks, reasons for students' dependence on their teachers, teaching and evaluation, selection of teaching and learning materials, participants' teaching and learning strategies and activities participants involved and get involved during the instructional practices.

3.3 Participants

The respondents in this study were the teachers and their students from 15 different colleges located in the Far-Western region of Nepal. Students (n=84) were selected randomly using snowball sampling procedure. Their age ranged between 18 to 23 years. Most of the students were female (n=56) and the number of male students was 28. Regarding their learning experience, they had been learning English as a subject for 12-15 years at the time of data collection. Teachers (n=20) had 6 to 17 years of teaching experience.

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The qualitative data consisted of semi structured interviews. The participants for interviews were selected purposively. Ten students and five teachers were involved in the semi structured interview (Table 1).

Table 1. Details of participants in the interview

Participants (all pseudonyms)			
Students	Study year	Teachers	Teaching experience
Bimala	B.Ed. 6th semester	Gopal	13 years
Pramila	B.Ed. 5th semester	Rajendra	9 years
Jyoti	B.Ed. 5th semester	Krishna	17 years
Arjun	B.Ed. 4th semester	Parwati	6 years
Sabitri	B.Ed. 4th semester	Laxman	11 years
Kiran	B.Ed. 3rd semester		
Vishnu	B.Ed.3rd semester		
Raju	B.Ed. 3rd semester		
Govind	B.Ed. 2nd semester		
Naresh	B.Ed. 1st semester		

3.4 Data Analysis

Following the analysis of the survey data with simple mathematical tool percentage, the responses to interview questions were categorized into themes. The researchers had recorded all the interviews and transcribed them. The researchers closely read and reread the transcripts, coded them, and developed five major themes: Students taking responsibilities in learning, self-evaluation and completion of the tasks, reasons for students' dependence on their teachers, selection of teaching learning materials independently as well as learner motivation and autonomy in EFL classroom. In the rest of the article, The researchers talk about the major findings from our analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

The table below (Table 2) shows the results of the surveys. As it can be seen from the results, despite being located in an underprivileged area, all the students who participated in the study showed interest to learn English and they seemed to be aware that they are responsible for their learning. However, they also relied on their teachers heavily and not all students participated in self-study, which was also corroborated by the teachers' responses. The researchers discuss these findings in further details in the ensuing sub-sections.

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Table 2. Results of the student and teacher survey

Statement	SA	A	U	DA	SD
I am interested in learning English	100%				
I learn English because it is prescribed in the course of study	29%	48%	10%	5%	10%
I complete my learning task by myself		57%		43%	
I can identify my mistakes and weakness by myself	5%	48%	19%	29%	
I am responsible for evaluating my work for mistake	24%	24%	38%	10%	5%
I think we should be self-dependent in learning English	29%	29%	10%	24%	10%
I prefer my teacher to be around me/us to learn English	14%	52%	24%	10%	
I cannot learn English without the teacher	24%	24%	38%	10%	5%
I like my teacher to teach everything to me in the class	52%	29%	5%	14%	
It is my teacher's task to evaluate my strength and weaknesses	5%	48%	24%	19%	5%

*SA=Strongly Agree, A= Agree, U= Unsure, D=Disagree and SD= Strongly Disagree

	A	O^1	O^2	R	N
I make my learning plan according to my learning needs	33%	19%	24%	24%	
I am able to set my learning objectives		38%	29%	24%	10%
I study English outside the class on my own		19%	24%	33%	24%
I make notes and summaries by myself after the class		10%	24%	36%	31%
I attend the English language extracurricular activities				19%	81%
I can select learning materials for my study and homework	19%	48%		24%	10%
I read English Books (short stories, essays, novels, etc)	10%	19%	33%	14%	24%
I watch English TV (CNN, BBC, National Geographic etc.) and movies	14%	14%		14%	57%
I read English newspaper/magazines outside the classroom		5%	10%	19%	67%
I communicate with foreign friends in English using social media			5%	10%	86%

*A= Always, O^1= Often. O^2= Occasionally, R=Rarely, N= Never

Teachers' Section Statement	SA	A	U	D	SA
Students can learn English without their teacher	5%	15%	5%	55%	20%
Learners have the opportunities to work independently	20%	45%		30%	5%
I encourage my students to read English books/magazines/newspapers etc. outside the classroom	50%	25%		15%	10%
Learners have the ability to work independently	30%	45%		25%	

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Students have the opportunities to express themselves	30%	50%		15%	5%
Learners select the tasks and activities they do	10%	15%		60%	15%
Students can evaluate their learning progress independently	5%	10%		60%	25%
Students are interested in learning English	10%	35%	5%	50%	
Teachers set up the learning objectives for their students	15%	55%	10%	15%	5%
Teachers should select the learning materials for their students	40%	50%		5%	5%
Teachers are responsible for checking their students' mistakes	35%	55%		5%	5%
Teachers should make the plan for their students' learning	30%	55%		10%	5%
Teacher is responsible for evaluating the students learning progress	30%	50%		15%	5%
Teachers encourage students to carry out the self-reflection	40%	45%		10%	5%
Students complete the learning tasks by themselves		4%		65%	15%

*SA=Strongly Agree, A= Agree, U= Unsure, D=Disagree and SD= Strongly Disagree

4.1 Students Taking Responsibilities in Learning

It is widely accepted that autonomous learners are ready to take significant responsibility (Boud, 2012) and take charge of their learning (Dam, 2008; Holec, 1981). However, this study showed that students (48%) have an over-reliance on their teachers. Although teachers (65%) agreed that students have opportunities to work independently, students (57%) did not seem to complete their tasks by themselves. Considerable number of students (81%) wanted their teachers to teach everything in the class because of lack of habit of learning by themselves. For example, Jyoti (excerpt 1) said that:

Excerpt 1: *I do not have the habit of learning independently because my teachers have taught me everything since my early classes. Nowadays, when I try to do the task myself, I cannot because I do not understand the task in the textbook. I need teacher's support to do the task from my textbook*

Teachers (90%) seem taking more responsibilities in selecting the materials and implementing them in the classroom. Most of the teachers (80%) agreed with Jyoti (excerpt 1), they revealed that students do not have the habit of completing their tasks independently. As Krishna (Excerpt 2) said students were not given the opportunity to learn independently rather they were spoon-fed by the teachers which was also supported by another teacher Rajendra (Excerpt 3). Since students were given opportunity to get the ready-made answers of exercise in the textbook, they did not have the interest in selecting the learning materials in order to carry out the independent learning.

Excerpt 2: *Students' base for learning English is impoverished. They were not taught to be self-dependent. Instead, they were spoon-fed by the teachers since the early grades, so the students came with the same habit in the advanced level as well, with the expectation of getting the readymade answer.*

Excerpt 3: *Students did not have the habits of selecting learning materials; they even did not have the textbooks. They expect everything to be explained and dictated from their teachers.*

Student response to the survey questions and the interview excerpts of both the students and the teachers above demonstrate that students were dependent on their teachers in learning primarily because they have never been independent learners from the beginning of their schooling. As a result, they struggle to find learning materials and complete their tasks on their own. And they expect teachers to provide readymade answers to them.

4.2 Self-evaluation and Completion of the Tasks

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Autonomous learners establish a personal agenda for learning (Little, 1994); enhance innovative thinking and problem-solving skills by directly participating in the learning program (King, 1995). They plan their learning, set learning goals, take more learning responsibilities, self-reflect on the learning process, and evaluate their outcome. However, students in this study were less confident in self-evaluation. They (52%) depended on their teachers to find out their strengths and weaknesses. Although teachers (85%) encouraged their students to reflect on their learning progress, students did not seem active in it and self-evaluation. The teachers (75%) also assigned tasks to their students and inspired them to read English books, magazines and newspapers, watch English movies and television programs to do the tasks independently, but students (86%) did not show interests in learning English outside the classroom. Instead of being active in learning tasks, as Parwati and Laxman (Excerpt 4 and 5) said, their students did not seem to take advantage of these learning opportunities.

Excerpt 4 *Students are not active and independent in their learning tasks; instead, they talk non-relevant stuff with their classmates in the classroom*.

Excerpt 5 *I know students should work independently. So, I assign them some independent learning tasks such as reading English magazine, newspaper, watching English movies and share them in the class. I also assign some writing tasks based on the textbook as well as from other referential materials, but rarely students do the tasks, instead they request me to dictate the answer.*

As can be seen in this section, while teachers put efforts into making their students independent learning, the students did not take active role in their learning. Students' lack of interests to take active role (and high dependency on their teachers) in the learning was counterproductive to autonomous learning.

4.3 Reasons for Students' Dependence on their Teachers

The majority of the students (57%) agreed that they should learn English independently, but, most of the students (48%) did not make the learning plan; those who made it, did not follow it genuinely. For example, 52% students claimed that they regularly made their learning plans but, they did not seem to be learning according to their plan practically. They (67%) fully depended on the teachers and expected the explanation or translation of the text in English to Nepali or dictation of the answers. Other students (57%) lacked confidence to complete their tasks on their own and seemed to believe that the answers provided by the teachers could help them pass the exam. As Bimala and Arjun (Excerpt 6 and 7) mentioned students seem much interested in passing or getting the good marks in the exam rather than developing language competency.

Excerpt 6: *I do not write the answers myself ... I think my teacher knows better and his answers are more standard in order to get good marks in the exam.*

Excerpt 7: *I expect my teachers to dictate the answers so that I can learn better and pass the exam easily...making notes and writing summaries is time-consuming and boring".*

As students, Bimala and Arjun (excerpt 6 and 7) mentioned, many other students (Sabitri, Kiran, Govind, Raju, and Vishnu) also seemed to rely heavily on their teachers because they seemed to lack confidence in their ability to solve their task independently. The over-reliance of the students on their teacher might be the reason why students (67%) in this research agreed that they did not make notes and summaries after the class.

In order to create an autonomy-supportive learning environment, teachers' role in language teaching is identified as a facilitator, counselor, a resource (Voller, 1997), material developer, manager, and evaluator (Gardner & Miller, 1999) in promoting student learning autonomy. Contrastingly, the participants' response in this study shows that teachers are considered to be the 'sage on the stage' and are expected to dictate answers to students. Teachers worked with the ELT resources and prepared the answers/summaries for the students, as a result they had limited opportunities to practice and improve their English language competencies. Although teachers had realized that dictating the class note might not be useful for the students, as Krishna (excerpt 8) has experienced, they are helpless, since students make frequent request to dictate the answers, teachers are compelled to prepare the notes and dictate the same in the class.

Excerpt 8: *I do not want to dictate in the classroom, but what can I do? Students do not practice by themselves. They are just habituated to read the ready-made answers and they request me to provide the answers too. If I dictate the short notes and answers of sample test questions, some of the students seem reading those notes at least for the examination purposes. If I do not dictate students neither read*

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the textbooks nor do they prepare the notes based on their textbook. At least I have to make them to pass the exam.

Moreover, the students' response in the interview also showed learning difficulties and lack of resources in order to work independently. They did not understand the text in English and could not answer the comprehension questions because of under-development of their English language competencies. One of the students, Bimala (excerpt 9), revealed:

Excerpt 9: *I do not understand the text because there are so many difficult words...I do not have other materials like guidebooks or the notes on the reading texts. I just try to memorize what the teachers dictate us to pass the exam".*

The data in this section show that teachers take more responsibilities and support the students by dictating answers or directing them in every aspect of the learning. The students then memorize the answers by heart to reproduce them during the test. Therefore, while teachers might have encouraged their students to be self-dependent, in the actual fact, they seemed to have deterred autonomous learning by over-supporting them.

4.4 Selection of Teaching and Learning Materials

Students need to have access to the appropriate resource and reference materials for learning either as individuals or in groups for independent learning (Alonazi, 2017). Although 67% students in this study mentioned that they could select the learning materials by themselves, their materials were limited to the guidebooks (supporting materials, especially the solutions of the questions based on the exercises and the tasks on the prescribed textbook) only. Students did not have enough learning materials; they did not have the resourceful library or learning centers; some of the students even did not have textbooks. Most of the students did not have internet facilities either at the college or at their home to search for learning materials on the internet, and the college library did not have enough resources. Although teachers (75%) encourage their students to read the supporting materials in English like stories and novels, students (71%) did not have the habit of studying other books in English, such as stories, essays, or novels, nor did they watch English TV and movies due to different constraints as Naresh and Pramila (excerpt 10 and 11) said students lack the resources and facilities.

Excerpt 10: *I do not have internet at home, college do not provide us the Wi-Fi password and always buying books is beyond my economic condition. I have only the guidebooks. Teachers should provide the soft copies that are helpful for the students.*

Excerpt 11*:* *I want to buy the books, but they are not available in the local market...I normally read the books written by Nepalese authors ... I mean guidebook because books written by foreign authors are very expensive... most of the time I read the classroom notes dictated by my teacher because they are easy to understand and to pass the exam.*

Additionally, due to their socio-economic status, they could not afford the books. Those who could buy the books did not get the books in the local market. Hence, some of the students in remote areas even do not have the prescribed textbooks. This limited their ability to engage in learning autonomously and made them rely on their teachers. Students relied heavily on single source of learning material, which is designed to support the summative exams by providing model answers; students' exposure to English language outside the classroom was limited. While some students did not try to learn from other sources, others did not have access to such resources due to lack of internet access or low socio-economic status. As a result, they seemed to rely heavily on their teachers.

5.5 Learner Motivation

Autonomous learners have more positive beliefs and are more confident in learning. Benson (2013) indicates that learner autonomy generally supports the learners to succeed and contributes to the advancement of the language acquisition process. Moreover, autonomous learners have intrinsically motivated approaches to learning the target language (Cirocki, 2016).They are enthusiastic about making and carrying out the learning choices by themselves (Littlewood, 1996) and understand the goals of their learning program, take active participation in planning and executing learning activities and examine its effectiveness (Najeeb, 2013). The participants in this research showed the low level of motivation in learning English. They (76%) revealed that they were learning English to fulfill the course requirements because it was prescribed as a core subject in their course of study. As Vishnu (excerpt 13) stated, students did not want to continue learning English once they passed it as a core subject.

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Excerpt 13: *"I am learning English because it is prescribed in the course otherwise, I would never have enrolled in this course...I will never study English once I pass this exam."*

Research evidence in learner autonomy also advocates that if learners take more responsibilities in learning, their level of self-determination and motivation for independence in learning increases (Chan, 2001). The learners in this study did not seem to have control over their study - they solely depended on their teachers for a myriad of reasons as discussed above. Regarding the poor performance of the students in English, teachers as Gopal and Krishna (excerpt 14) thought that it was due to the lack of proper exposure.

Excerpt 14: *Students did not have proper exposure of English language and learning platforms like libraries and the learning centers...students are poor in vocabulary and the reading and the writing skills.*

The findings and related discussion in this section show that students in resource poor areas may not have necessary motivation to study English because of lack of exposure of English language resources. Lack of resources implies that students cannot practice or learn English outside the classroom. When students lack motivation and resources, they miss out on opportunities to develop skills to become independent learners. A learner without skills and agency cannot necessarily set goals to enhance their language learning.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Learner autonomy is one of the effective strategies for quality learning outcomes. However, developing learner autonomy can be challenging, where students have extensive experience of teacher-instructed learning. In such contexts, they may not fully consider the ideas of autonomy at once. Teachers, therefore, need to support the students gradually and develop the sense of taking more responsibility among the students by actively involving them in decision making, selecting learning materials as per their learning needs starting teaching from where the students are. Additionally, teachers must change their pedagogical practices. Instead of dictating answers, they could encourage students to work individually, in pair and group to find answers. They could also leverage on student first language (L1) if needed to make them understand the task. While they can provide model answers, they could motivate their students by providing positive feedback to build their confidence and to encourage them to complete their tasks. Extracurricular activities for learning autonomy should be included in the English curriculum. These activities should not have an advanced level of difficulty- although the students are at an advanced level, the activities should be based on the lower level because some students do not have even the basic level of knowledge; for these students, advanced-level courses and activities do not work. Students do not have well-resourced libraries or learning centers at the college. So, the library in each college should be upgraded with a variety of resources. The course entitled 'developing learner autonomy for teaching and learning for the self-reliant individual' should be introduced in the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) courses in advanced level so that both the teachers and students will become familiar with learner autonomy and its importance; later, these skills will transform the learners into self-reliant individuals.

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Appendix- A

Questionnaire

Dear Student,

We would like to invite you to participate in a study titled '*Challenges of Developing Learner Autonomy of English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners in Underprivileged Areas'*. Through this study, we want to investigate various issues and challenges related to learner autonomy in an EFL classroom. We would be grateful to you if you could spare some time (10-15 minutes) to respond to the questions below.

There is no right or wrong answers to these questions. Your answer depends on your point of view and your learning practices inside or outside the classroom. We are interested in what you feel or think about the statements/questions. You do not have to write your name, and, even if you do write your name, your identity will be kept anonymous.

By responding to this questionnaire, you declare that you are 18 years or above and agree to participate in this research study. We want to ensure that the information provided in this survey will exclusively be used for this research purpose and nothing else.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact the researchers in the email address mentioned below.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this research!

Researchers

Janak Singh Negi (janaksingh@fwu.edu.np)

1. Dr. Suman Laudari (suman.laudari@cdu.edu.au)

Section 'A'

Name (optional): .....

Name of the college (optional): .....

Semester ……

Sex…….

Age…….

Did you start learning English from grade one?

Yes	No
If not when did you start learning English?	

Below are beliefs that some people have about learning English. Please go through the statements carefully and tick (√).

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
I am interested in learning English.					
I learn English because it is prescribed in the course of study.					
I can complete my learning task by myself.					
I can identify my mistakes and weakness by myself.					

I am responsible for evaluating my work for mistake.

I think we should be self-dependent in learning English.

I prefer my teacher to explain the text in Nepali.

I cannot learn English without the teacher.

I like my teacher to teach everything to me in the class.

It is my teacher's task to evaluate my strength and weaknesses.

*SA=Strongly Agree, A= Agree, U= Unsure, D=Disagree, and SD= Strongly Disagree

Section 'B'

Statements	A	O	O	R	N
I make my learning plan according to my learning needs.					
I am able to set my learning objectives.					
I study English outside the class on my own.					
I make notes and summaries by myself after the class.					
I attend the English language extracurricular activities.					
I can select learning materials for my study and homework.					
I read English Books (short stories, essays, novels, etc).					
I watch English TV (CNN, BBC, National Geographic etc.) and movies.					
I read English newspaper/magazines outside the classroom.					
I communicate with foreign friends in English using social media.					

*A= Always, O^1= Often. O^2= Occasionally, R=Rarely, N= Never

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Appendix-B

Questionnaire

Dear Teacher,

We would like to invite you to participate in a study titled '*Challenges of Developing Learner Autonomy of English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners in Underprivileged Areas'*. Through this study, we want to investigate various issues and challenges related to learner autonomy in an EFL classroom. We would be grateful to you if you could spare some time (10-15 minutes) to respond to the questions below.

There is no right or wrong answers to these questions. Your answer depends on your point of view and your learning practices inside or outside the classroom. We are interested in what you feel or think about the statements/questions. You do not have to write your name, and, even if you do write your name, your identity will be kept anonymous.

By responding to this questionnaire, you declare that you are 18 years or above and agree to participate in this research study. We want to ensure that the information provided in this survey will exclusively be used for this research purpose and nothing else.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact the researchers in the email address mentioned below.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this research!

Researchers

Janak Singh Negi (janaksingh@fwu.edu.np)

2. Dr. Suman Laudari (suman.laudari@cdu.edu.au)

Name (optional): .....

Name of the college (optional): .....

Teaching experience…….years

Below are beliefs that some people have about learning English. Please go through the statements carefully and tick (√).

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
Students can learn English without their teacher.					
Learners have the opportunities to work independently					
I encourage my students to read English books/magazines/newspapers etc. outside the classroom.					
Learners have the ability to work independently.					
Students have the opportunities to express themselves.					
Learners select the tasks and activities they do.					
Students can evaluate their learning progress independently.					
Students are interested in learning English.					
Teachers set up the learning objectives for their students.					

Teachers should select the learning materials for their students.	
Teachers are responsible for checking their students' mistakes.	
Teachers should make the plan for their students' learning.	
Teacher is responsible for evaluating the students learning progress.	
Teachers encourage students to carry out the self-reflection.	
Students have the habit of completing the learning tasks independently.	

*SA=Strongly Agree, A= Agree, U= Unsure, D=Disagree, and SD= Strongly Disagree

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