



## **AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING SECONDARY EDUCATION: A STUDY OF AUTONOMOUS LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE RECOLLECTIONS AMONG ENGINEERING STUDENTS IN A SRI LANKAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Autonomy is a central concern of language teaching and learning that has various sources and wide-ranging implications. There are several advantages of autonomous learning practices in a country like Sri Lanka, where the English language learning contexts are non-egalitarian. Autonomy is a concept that impacts both teachers and learners. It does not mean that the learners are fully independent and alone in this practice. In reality, teachers have a prominent role in fostering autonomy among learners, and it is a process to be started at the secondary education level. Mainly the teachers' willingness to shift the English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy from teacher-centered to learner-centered mode is significant in this context. This basis the learners get from the school makes them lifelong and independent learners, which also minimizes the reluctance and difficulties of using the English language among people from all walks of life. Realizing the importance of the teacher's role in teaching autonomous learning, this study focuses on collecting data through the recollections of 300 engineering undergraduates in a state university in Sri Lanka who had their secondary education from various schools island-wide. A questionnaire was distributed via a link, and the collected data were thematically and statistically analyzed. The data were collected on multiple language learning experiences the learners had from the autonomous learning point of view and the impact of the teachers' involvement in this regard. The study concludes that most learners are unsatisfied with their secondary ESL education and emphasize the importance of increasing speaking practices. Most importantly, the respondents suggest that even though the teachers assigned them various extra activities, the outcome and teachers' awareness of autonomous teaching and learning practices are questionable. Significantly, all the participants emphasized the importance of learning the English language and being independent learners.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Autonomy, Independent learner, Second language learning, Secondary education*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Decolonization and globalization are two significant reasons that have increased the demand for English language proficiency among Sri Lankans for years until today. Since the early 1950s, all successive governments have made several efforts to facilitate English education in all Sri Lankan schools without discrimination Perera, (2010b). Currently, English language proficiency and the need to achieve this skill have increased with the widespread use of Information Technology (I.T.). Further, it is understood that the learners of urban areas were motivated to master English due to various privileges accorded to English-educated people, such as a promising career, higher education, social recognition, and economic success Prasangani Kariyawasam and Nadarajan Shanthi (2015) On the flip side, this language proficiency has also reasoned to broaden the social gap as creating discrimination among the people who are with and without English language skills. The learners have also found English language proficiency a significant barrier to personal development and professional success. Overall, ESL proficiency is still a challenge for most Sri Lankans.

As a solution to this deficiency, it was identified that practicing Learner Autonomy (L.A.) or self-directed learning strategies and principles in language learning would bring more positive outcomes in any language learning situation.

Meanwhile, looking at the LA concept through a theoretical lens, the idea of autonomy in education is based on constructivist learning theories. According to Audrey Gray (1997) in (Wang 2011), the constructivism theory that Jean Piaget introduced is a method of learning which believes that knowledge is not something that the teacher can transform from standing in front of the classroom to the students who are sitting on their chairs. Instead, learners raise knowledge through active mental development; students are the builders and creators of meaning and knowledge. Furthermore, the constructivism theory holds that students are active constructors of knowledge, meaning, and learning subjects.

On the contrary, the theory of constructivism is not only for learners but also for teachers. Further, according to Audrey Gray (1997) (Wang, 2011), the qualities of a constructivist teacher and the organization of a constructivist classroom are as the learners are actively involved, the environment is democratic, the activities are interactive and student-centered, and the teacher facilitates a process of learning in where the students are encouraged to be responsible and autonomous. Further, in a constructivist-related classroom, the instructions are learner-centered and active; the teacher provides students with experiences that allow them to hypothesize, predict, manipulate objects, pose questions, research, investigate, imagine, and invent. Ultimately, the teacher's role is to facilitate this process. Moreover, as mentioned by Dörnyei and Csizér (1989) in (Fernando, 2005), among the commandments for motivating language learners for teachers to set a personal example with their behavior, create a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere in class, develop a good relationship with the learners, increasing the learner's linguistic self-confidence; and promoting learner autonomy has also given priority. Furthermore, it is understood that L.A. has several other aspects to enhance the effectiveness of the ESL teaching and learning process. According to (Perera, 2010a), L.A. can also positively cater to the heterogeneity in the classroom and resource-poor learning environments (Fonseka, 2003a).

Moreover, providing an answer to the non-egalitarian nature of the Sri Lankan English education system through a critical eye (Fonseka, 2003b) states, "the learning tasks and reading materials presented in the textbooks can be described through the famous metaphor in Sinhala: *Ballantö leli pol denöwa wage*; "Like giving unhusked coconuts to dogs." Although dogs like to eat the kernels of coconuts, they cannot extract them when they are covered with a husk" (p 2-3). This expression suggests how much the government attempts to provide the opportunity to learn English. Still, the actual outcome is questionable, especially among learners of underprivileged families and teaching backgrounds. With that understanding, it is evident that fostering autonomous learning practices among almost all Sri

Lankan learners of English would bring many positive outcomes.

However, it is understood that there is a shortage of local studies based on autonomous teaching and learning practices. Thus, among the existing literature Fonseka (1996, 2003a) are two notable empirical studies focusing on how children's songs can promote learner autonomy. These studies are written as solutions for a society where learners carry out their studies in circumstances that are far from easy. Factors such as geographical distance, timetable disagreement, limited classroom accommodation, and lack of teaching personnel are some common examples of practical complications of this situation. However, it is notable that despite the said negative factors, the learners from the urban areas also find it challenging to achieve English language proficiency due to a lack of authentic language exposure and opportunity to practice English outside the classroom, financial issues, low education level of parents, limited time allocation for English in the school timetable, and non-conducive classroom learning environment caused by lack of L.A. Apart from these negative impacts, mother tongue influence, teacher dependency, fear and anxiety, internalization of the idea that English is a complex language, and that English grammar is difficult to study; have also detached learners from learning and speaking English, Seefa, (2017).

Due to the lack of equality in English language teaching, such as demographical, social, and administrative reasons, in the local ESL education system, it is worthwhile implementing autonomous practices among local ESL learners and teachers. Further, as L.A. is not very popular in the local education context, it is essential to brief the concept first.

The term 'autonomy' has been diversely interpreted by scholars over time. However, Dayananda and Yapar, (2020) state that L.A. has no universal definition. The concept is diversifying with the research findings in L.A. Largely, L.A. is perceived as learners taking responsibility and developing the capacity to take control of their learning.

However, among many other definitions, Benson's (2006) thoughts on autonomy are as follows: "people

taking more control over their lives - individually and collectively. Thus, autonomy in learning is about people taking control over their learning both in and outside the classrooms, while autonomy in language learning is about people taking more control over the purposes for which they learn languages and how they learn them". This definition is more similar to the famous description given by Henri Holec (1981), considered as the father of autonomy: "... the ability to take charge of one's learning, and to take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning". Further to Holec, an autonomous learner can determine learning objectives, define the contents and progressions, select methods and techniques to be used, monitor the procedure of properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.), and evaluate what has been acquired (Yang, 2005). Further to Dickinson (1993) in (Yang, 2005), autonomous learners can identify what has been taught, formulate their learning objectives, select and implement appropriate learning strategies, identify ineffective strategies, and monitor their learning. However, according to many scholars' (H. Holec, D. Little, D. Nunan, D. Thanasoulas, H. Reinders, B. Sinclair, M. Usuki, A. Ikonen, etc.) points of view, in (Pichugova Inna, Stepura Svetlana, and Pravosudov Matvey, 2015), there should be the following conditions to implement learner autonomy: choice, goals and needs, support, emotional climate, learning strategies, learner attitude and motivation, and self-esteem.

Further, it is notable that L.A. cannot be achieved without teachers' involvement, and it is a two-way process for both learners and teachers. A learner cannot be autonomous without the support of a teacher. The teachers' multiple roles as facilitators, counselors, resource suppliers, evaluators, organizers, designers, managers, cooperators, inspires, supporters, monitors, and atmosphere creators are crucial in developing an autonomous learner, Yan (2012). This fact suggests that the teacher has a significant and prominent role in this context. However, the teachers' identification of their responsibilities and importance is questionable. Further, unawareness of the L.A. concept, institutional rules and regulations, attitudes, and cultural issues are common negative causes of promoting L.A. in most educational

contexts.

Similarly, the learners also have negative aspects of L.A. due to a lack of understanding of the L.A. concept. They do not know how to learn and study, are unable to think outside the box, and are not critical thinkers; most do not have goals, no research skills, and lack motivation Borg Simon and Alshumaimeri Yousif, (2019). Especially in a country like Sri Lanka, where the teaching and learning contexts are conservative, these features among learners and teachers are widespread. Further, learners' over-dependency on teachers, and on the other hand, the teachers' targets on preparing the students for examinations, hinder the promotion of L.A. However, the concern Bowman (2011) in Kariyawasam and Shanthi (2015), teachers should facilitate three human requirements of autonomy as follows: freedom for choices and determine the future, mastery (ability to learn and expertise), and purpose (search for the use of learning to the life). However, Kariyawasam and Shanthi (2015) state that L.A.'s expectations of students from teachers are high, as 90% for both in and outside learning. Especially the students expect great support from the teachers to motivate their learning. According to the referred literature, it is clear that Sri Lankan learners expect a very close relationship with their teachers. Therefore, Breen and Man (1997) in Yang (2005) list some essential factors required to be a teacher of autonomous learners as follows: self-awareness as a learner, belief in each learner's capacity to learn, and trust in each learner's ability to assert their autonomy, and the desire to foster L.A. However, Borg Simon and Al- Busaidi Saleh, (2011) show that most language teachers' understanding of this concept is shallow. This reason further represents a gap in the literature because teachers' instructional behaviors influence student learning, and teachers' beliefs impact these behaviors.

Fostering autonomy is a responsible task where the teachers' thorough understanding and positive attitudes are required. As Sara, (1998) mentions, autonomous language learners are charged with designing their own language programs, are encouraged to clarify what they want to learn, set goals, identify problems, and propose and implement solutions. Further, reflection is an

essential aspect of the learner's new role. Therefore, the assistance of the teachers in adopting these new autonomous behaviors among ESL learners is efficient and necessary. Thus, the responsibilities of learners and teachers will facilitate a smooth transfer between each other. However, Raya, Lamb, and Vieira, (2007); Al-Saadi, (2011b) point out an obstacle that directly disadvantages learners. According to them, "both teachers and student-teachers may show some resistance to innovative pedagogies that assign the teacher a new role as a facilitator of autonomy-oriented processes" (p.1). On the other hand, transferring some of the tasks the teacher traditionally holds to their learners may be viewed as losing control over learning and discipline to some teachers.

Nonetheless, it is unavoidable that teachers and learners encounter several drawbacks, challenges, and negative experiences in adapting to this novel process of fostering and teaching L.A., especially in a country like Sri Lanka.

Considering the ESL context in Sri Lanka, English has been given recognition as a foreign language rather than a second language. Further, it is being taught as an academic language rather than a part of their regular lives. Additionally, the local ESL context is very different from that of the countries like Canada, Australia, and the U.K., where formal English language learning is primarily interactive with an authentic learning environment. The Sri Lankan ESL education system is more classroom centered, and the students are extrinsically motivated to learn English to get through higher examinations, get foreign job opportunities, etc. Perera, (2010a).

The existing literature provides ample examples of teachers' and learners' drawbacks in teaching and learning English. Mainly heterogeneity of the language classroom is a vivid challenge in most ESL contexts. Here the textbooks and the syllabuses are commonly prepared, and the learner outcomes and the effectiveness of lessons are questionable. Furthermore, the learners engaged in higher studies also find it challenging as most local primary and secondary education is conducted in the vernacular media, and almost all higher studies are in English. This sudden transition of the medium of

instruction significantly affects most learners, simultaneously mastering language and subject knowledge.

Establishing learner autonomy is essential for a society where learners carry out their studies in circumstances that are far from easy, such as geographical distance, timetable disagreement, limited classroom accommodation, and the lack of teaching personnel. Further investigation Fonseka Gamini, (1996) gives prominence to songs. It explains how songs enhance learner autonomy with multiple features such as a sense of responsibility, self-direction, metacognition, and motivation amalgamated into operation in a carnivalesque spirit.

However, suppose a particular society does not have enough resources to cater to every individual's learning needs. In that case, individuals must develop the autonomous capacity to acquire the necessary knowledge Al-Saadi, (2011b). This argument is very much applicable to a country like Sri Lanka. Thus, the development of autonomy and independence of present learners have become essential as an answer to various changes which have taken place in recent times, not only in the field of language teaching but also in worldly affairs Al-Saadi, (2011b).

Finally, considering the current study, the main focus has been given to a group of Engineering undergraduates in a state university in Sri Lanka. In reality, graduates should be able to apply knowledge when working with people, and they need the skill to work independently, become efficient problem solvers, do self-evaluation, and enhance higher-order skills to become lifelong learners in an increasingly globalized and technological world. Therefore, the need to become autonomous learners during secondary education is highly beneficial, especially in ESL. Hence, directing the learners toward new dimensions of learning and introducing new pedagogies of teaching English has become a significant concern.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Observing most undergraduates' struggle with the

English language in following an English medium Engineering degree program and their teacher-dependent nature with lack of self-motivation in ESL learning, the researchers realized the pressing importance of introducing autonomous language learning practice. Since fostering independent learner qualities is a time-consuming and lengthy process, determination, motivation, and patience on the part of teachers and learners are very important. Therefore, this study sought to answer first the question of teachers' readiness to foster learner autonomy in the classroom, secondly, that of Sri Lankan ESL learners' autonomous learning exposure at the school, and thirdly, that of students' satisfaction with the English education during school time, and what suggestions they have to improve the local ESL school education.

The present study is based on the experiences and the recalling of 300 engineering undergraduates, and the study employed an online structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to gather data in three sections: teachers' understanding of autonomous teaching strategies and the concept, the learners' experiences and exposure to independent learning strategies, and the students' suggestions and comments on the ESL education they had during the school time. The questionnaire was distributed among 327 first-year engineering students, and 300 were considered, excluding the non-received and unanswered questions. The data were gathered from male and female students studied in various schools island-wide. The collected data were both qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed.

Considering the general questions of the first section of the survey, all the participants, 100%, agreed that learning English as a second language is essential; 92% mentioned that learner autonomy is vital in this learning process, while 8% said no. Initially, answering the question on what learner autonomy means to you, the highest percentage of 41.3% of participants have chosen L.A. means learners' right to take control of their own learning. Accordingly, 32.7% state it is the same as self-study, and 29.7% state it is a situation where learners are responsible for their education. In comparison, 12.7% believe L.A. is a capacity for teachers to help learners develop in the learning

process, and 12.3% mentioned that it is a teaching methodology that focuses on learners. In contrast, 0.7% to 0.3% of participants said they do not have any idea or understanding of the L.A. concept.

Based on the given answers, most students believe L.A. substantially impacts self-studies, which is essential. Analyzing their responses, it was categorized into three themes: L.A. is a responsibility of the learners, it is self-learning, and I have no idea about fostering autonomous behaviors among learners.

The most common misunderstanding of autonomous learning is that it can be achieved without the teacher's support. The learner is fully independent within this process, and the teacher has no role to perform. However, in reality, a teacher has to play a prominent role, and especially the teacher has to create an autonomous learning environment and guide the

learners by providing necessary activities and monitoring their work with essential feedback. Likewise, a monitored scaffolding provided by the teacher until the learner develops confidence is required.

### 3. RESULTS

To inculcate L.A. in students, the teachers should also understand and be willing to shift their role from teacher-centered to learner-centered while sharing the responsibilities of the classroom activities.

Therefore, in the second section of the questionnaire, the following questions were forwarded to the participants to identify whether the teachers had given them enough opportunities to develop L.A. Also, the answers convinced to what extent the teachers are aware and familiar with the concept of L.A.

NO	Items	Yes	No
1	Have your English teachers talked about autonomy and its values?	117	183
2	Have you been allowed to decide your study goals at the beginning of each year regarding English language learning?	147	153
3	Have you been allowed to check how much progress you have made in English language learning by the end of the year?	205	95
4	Have you been given a chance to decide on the textbooks and extra learning materials to be used in the class for English language learning?	160	140
5	Have you been given a chance to decide on the topics and activities used in the class to learn English?	139	161
6	Have you been given the freedom to decide on classroom management, such as seating arrangement and class rules?	142	158
7	Have you been asked to keep a diary in English?	106	194
8	Have you been asked to watch and listen to T.V. and radio programs in English?	233	67
9	Have you been asked to practice speaking English with your friends?	220	80
10	Have you been encouraged to use the library for extra reading in English?	161	139
11	Have you been encouraged to have cooperative and peer learning activities in the class?	196	104
12	Have you been advised to be more responsible about what you do to improve your English language learning skills both in and outside the classroom?	208	92
13	Were the students given a chance to explain the lesson or to express ideas about the lesson to peers?	183	117
14	Who had the most authority during the English lesson in the class?	Teacher	Student
		90% (270)	10% (30)
15	Who did the most speaking in the class, is your English teacher or the students?	287	13

The selected sample of the study is currently following an Engineering degree program in English medium. Therefore, it is essential to get their opinion on the English education they had during school time, its effectiveness, their ideas, and most importantly, their suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the process.

It is also noteworthy that, in response to the question, are you satisfied with the education you gained regarding English language proficiency from your school? among the respondents, 59% of 177 participants mentioned that they were not content with the ESL education they received. In comparison, 41% of 123 participants said they were comfortable.

Accordingly, the students have given various suggestions to enhance school ESL education's quality, effectiveness, and expectations. Thematically analyzing the given answers, three main themes emerged: giving more priority to practical language usage, effective learning environment, and teaching methods.

With the thought of giving priority to the practical use of language and assigning more interactive sessions, the participants said, *"Not only grammar and writing but speaking also should be improved by giving them more group activities and presentations," "Try to encourage students to talk in English. They will gain confidence in the language. Otherwise, it will be challenging to face the future" "Practice speaking should include a separate period for spoken English." "Becoming more interactive between teacher and students may be the way to give more knowledge and proficiency in the English language among school learners." "Drama, speaking activities, writing poetry, reading stories, watching YouTube videos with English subtitles ..."*

Meanwhile, *"emphasizing to study the English language along with other subjects,"* the participant highlighted the importance of creating an effective physical and mental learning environment. As per the suggestions, *"teachers have to make a better environment to practice English for students";* therefore, *"first teachers have to change the mentality of students."* The following answer is an example that

highlights the need for understanding among teachers on establishing a suitable mindset to learn English. *"Teachers speak like there is nothing more important than English, you are going to die without English, so every kid in the school like, no, I am not going to do it because you are forcing me to do it..."*

Thus, the participants have mentioned that the allocated time to study in the timetable is also insufficient to get a significant level of language proficiency. Meanwhile, one participant noted, *"teachers only care about the completion of textbooks, not to teach us even the basic grammar."* At the same time, another said, *"most teachers tried to cover the syllabus but not to develop the language skills of students."*

Interestingly, the participants who had education in private schools were fully content with their general education in English.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Considering the gathered information, it is understood that several aspects of ESL pedagogy must be improved to make the process more fruitful and efficient. Focusing on the Sri Lankan ESL learners' autonomous learning exposure in the classroom, the collected data indicates that, even though the teachers assign certain activities to learners, which are partially reasons to enhance their autonomous qualities in them, it is still questionable whether the teachers do these with a fundamental understanding of the values of independent learning and the exact necessity of inculcating autonomous behaviors among the learners. Moreover, it is questionable whether these activities are supportive enough to enhance the language requirements of the learners, as most of the assigned activities do not have the guidance and monitoring of the teachers.

Thus, Ellis (1999) in Al-Saadi, (2011b) also emphasize that the collectivity of language awareness, learning awareness, social awareness, cultural awareness, and metacognitive awareness are interrelated with autonomous learning. Therefore, teachers' thorough understanding and clear vision are crucial in fostering



autonomy among learners.

Considering the *teachers' readiness to foster learner autonomy in the classroom*, the identification that the teachers have not discussed the importance of L.A. with the students, continuing more teacher talk time, and maintaining the authority in the class among the teachers themselves indicates that the teachers do not encourage or create an autonomous supportive learning environment. Further, it suggests that the teachers are unaware of independent learning principles and are not ready to share the teaching and learning process responsibilities with the learners.

Finally, exploring *the student's satisfaction with the English education during school time and what suggestions they have to improve the local ESL school education*, it is understood that the teacher's primary concern is to complete the syllabus and prepare the students for the examinations. Therefore, the need to convince the learners that learning the English language is not a mere subject but a study throughout their life has not been fulfilled. This situation has further reason to neglect speaking and practical usage of the English language both in and outside the classroom. As a result, many students are backward in using English.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The pedagogical practices must be modified and changed with time, especially in language teaching and learning. Especially in a country like Sri Lanka, where primary and secondary education is being conducted in vernacular media and higher educational streams are being taught in English, the learners find it more challenging to study both language and the particular subject contents simultaneously.

However, the learners are not ready to accept responsibility for their learning automatically or at once. Therefore, the teachers have to play a significant role in helping the learners to perceive their new roles as active and independent learners by designing tasks and activities which will gradually assist learners in accepting responsibility and taking control over their learning.

Moreover, implementing autonomous skills will also bring awareness to minimize significant difficulties that most Sri Lankan learners have, such as limited resources, lack of space, limited hours allocated for a course, and union strikes. These challenges are typical for learners from school to higher education levels in Sri Lankan education.

Finally, the study's findings imply that now the time has come to shift from 'brick houses' to 'click houses,' which is to move from traditional bounds to modern out-of-bounds to do self-explorations and expand the horizons of wisdom. Especially the responsible authorities have to pay attention to designing the school curriculums for the English language and the teaching practices to be more student-centered like in many other developed countries. These amendments would make the local learners more autonomous in mastering the English language as lifelong learning.

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