




Exploring Learner Autonomy for Language Proficiency Development: A Mixed-Methods Study in Bangladeshi EFL Education

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Abstract

This study investigates how learner autonomy helps Bangladeshi students improve their English. Learner autonomy means that a student can take charge of his or her own learning. Many experts say this is important for learning a second language. But in Bangladesh, this idea has not been studied much. The study used both numbers and interviews. First, a survey and a test were done with 120 university students. The results in this regard showed a strong link between autonomy and English level. The correlation was $r = .61$, $p < .01$. The analysis showed that autonomy explained 37% of the difference in test scores. Second, interviews were done with 12 students and six teachers. Four main points came out: i) students want more responsibility and control, ii) exams make it hard to practice autonomy, iii) teachers play an important role and iv) technology can help students learn by themselves. Both learners and educators mentioned that autonomy is beneficial. But they also said there are big problems. Class sizes are too big and they are too exam-focused. Besides, the control of the teachers over class is very high. Technology helps. But students need guidance to use it fairly well. The findings show that autonomy is both a predictor of English skill and also part of daily life in Bangladesh classrooms. Culture and system factors affect it. The study concludes that autonomy can grow if the system changes and there is a need for teacher training, learner support and smart use of technology to facilitate the changes.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Learner Autonomy, Language Proficiency, EFL Education

Introduction

Learner autonomy is now a very important aspect of second language learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Bangladesh (Rajib & Jahan, 2025; Ahmed & Hossain, 2024; Jamila & Zubairi, 2022). In the present global world, English is used as a common language for communication, higher studies and professional growth (Bux et al.,

2024; Robert & Meenakshi, 2024). That is why proficiency in English is not only an academic need but also a social and economic demand. In our country, students usually learn English in the classroom and it is taught as a compulsory subject from primary to university level. But outside the class, real chances of using English are very limited (Fatema, in press). For this reason, learner autonomy is very important. Because students who can take care of their own learning can overcome these limits. In Bangladesh, classroom teaching is still teacher-centered (Ullah & Fatema, 2013; Mariyam et al., 2015). The teacher talking time is much higher than the learners' talking time. Learners in most of the classes just listen. Large classes (Ullah, 2015), exam-based education, and poor facilities make students depend more on teachers. But many scholars say that learner autonomy means the ability to control one's own learning. It helps students to set goals, check their own progress and use available resources fairly well (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2011). In this way, autonomy can change learning from teacher-led to learner-led, where students play an active role in their language learning.

Defining Learner Autonomy

Holec (1981) gave the first clear definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3), and this idea has influenced research for many years. In this meaning, autonomy is not full independence but careful decision-making about aims, materials, methods, and evaluation. Little (2007) shows that responsibility is a main part of autonomy, because learners must see that their progress depends not only on teachers but also on their own effort. Benson (2011) adds that autonomy is a matter of capacity, willingness, and practice, and he explains that it can grow if the learning environment is supportive. In Bangladesh, the meaning of autonomy is often taken in a narrow way. To many students, it simply means self-study before exams or memorizing notes given by teachers (Jahan, 2025). However, true autonomy is more than just rote learning. Because it needs creativity, critical thinking, planning and self-reflection. This difference is very important for knowing why learner autonomy is still weak in our classrooms.

Learner Autonomy in the Bangladeshi EFL Context

Several studies have shown that there are many challenges to learner autonomy in Bangladesh. Yeasmin, Kabir and Hossain (2025) explain that classrooms in our country are usually lecture-based, where teachers only deliver lessons and students get ready for high-stakes examinations. For this reason, students often fail to develop independent strategies or to go beyond the fixed textbooks (Ali & Alam, 2023). In the same way, Rajib and Jahan (2015) show that many students depend too much on private coaching and

guidebooks. That is why this practice increases dependency instead of encouraging self-directed learning (Tran & Vuong, 2023). However, in spite of these problems, there are also some signs of progress. With the rapid growth of digital access in Bangladesh, many English language learners are now practicing English autonomously in informal ways with the help of internet facilities, mobile phones and different platforms like YouTube. For example, they watch English movies, listen to podcasts and songs or join online groups. These activities are not always counted in formal education. But they clearly show that learners in our country are able to act independently when they are motivated and when resources are available for them.

Autonomy and Language Proficiency

Many research studies in different parts of the world have shown that there is a strong link between autonomy and language proficiency. Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) showed that learners who used self-regulated strategies gained better results in vocabulary and oral fluency. In the same way, Al Asmari (2013) found in the Middle Eastern context that self-directed learners did well in communicative tasks. In our country also, Ahmed (2024) reported that students who practiced English activities outside the classroom, such as reading extra books or speaking with friends, performed better in both speaking and writing. However, the relation is not always simple. In Bangladesh, many learners still think that good exam results mean good proficiency (Ullah et al., 2022). For this reason, they give more importance to memorization than to real communication. Though autonomy can support language development, much focus on exam preparation and grades most often changes the way students use autonomy. That is why, instead of building true communicative skills, many learners in our country use their independent study only for test preparation and this limits the wider benefits of autonomy (Ismayilli & Nuri, 2025).

Role of Teachers in Promoting Autonomy

Teachers play a central role in shaping learner autonomy in Bangladesh. Dam (2011) points out that teachers can promote autonomy by slowly giving responsibility to learners so that they can make choices, join in reflective work, and evaluate their own progress. However, research shows that in our context many teachers face serious barriers in applying these methods. In reality, large class sizes, lack of training in learner-centered pedagogy, and the pressure to finish fixed syllabi discourage new and creative practices.

The study of Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) in Oman also has meaning for Bangladesh, because their findings are similar to our situation. Teachers may accept autonomy in theory, but they often doubt if learners are ready for it in practice. In fact, Begum (2019) reported that many Bangladeshi teachers think their students are too

dependent and not mature enough for independent learning. At the same time, it is seen in our context that learners themselves expect teachers to give direct guidance, which reflects the cultural norm of respect and authority in teacher-student relations.

Technology as an Aid

One important and hopeful change in Bangladesh is the use of technology. As mobile internet spreads fast, students are now using digital tools for their own practice (Ullah, 2023). Lai and Gu (2011) and Hui et al. (2023) found in their study that out-of-class learning with technology has a strong link with autonomy, and this result is also true in our context. Bowles (2024) and Lai and Gu (2011) showed that university students who used mobile apps, online dictionaries, and digital resources for their independent study improved more in listening and vocabulary (Khan et al., 2024). For this reason, it is clear that technology can give Bangladeshi learners a good way to develop autonomy, even though in practical classroom situations teaching still remains teacher-centered.

Rationale for the Study

From the above discussion, it is clear that learner autonomy is accepted everywhere as useful, but in reality, its practice depends a lot on local context. In our country, traditional methods of teaching, the exam-oriented culture, and less exposure to English make autonomy difficult. However, there is also evidence that students can take responsibility of their learning when they have the right opportunities and resources with the help of technology. Though some research has been done in Bangladesh, most studies are descriptive or focus on only one side of autonomy. That is why there are very few works that use a mixed-methods approach to study both the link between autonomy and proficiency and also the detailed views of teachers and learners together.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

- i) What is the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency development among EFL learners in Bangladesh?
- ii) How do EFL learners and teachers of Bangladesh perceive the role of autonomy in the language learning process?

By addressing these questions, the study attempts to give a good understanding of learner autonomy in the Bangladeshi EFL context. The mixed-methods approach ensures not only measurable evidence of autonomy's impact on proficiency but also insights into how autonomy is understood, enacted, and challenged by both learners and teachers in

everyday educational settings.

Methodology Research Design

This study followed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, as suggested by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018). In this design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed separately but later combined during interpretation. The reason for using this design is that the study had two main purposes. One purpose was to measure the statistical relation between learner autonomy and English proficiency, which is the quantitative part. The other purpose was to study the views of learners and teachers about autonomy in the Bangladeshi EFL context, which is the qualitative part. For this reason, both approaches were used together, and it is expected that this will give a more complete understanding which could not be found by only one method.

Research Site and Participants

The research was carried out at a public university in Bangladesh where English is a compulsory subject for all undergraduate students in different subjects. This place was chosen because it shows the common situation of higher education in our country. In reality, these situations are large classes, teacher-centered teaching, and exam-focused courses, along with more student access to digital tools. Participants were divided into two groups according to the two strands of the study:

Quantitative sample: A total of 120 undergraduate EFL students took part in the survey and language test. The group included first- and second-year students in English foundation programs. Stratified random sampling was applied so that both male and female students and students from different faculties were included. The age of these participants was between 18 and 22 years.

Qualitative sample: From this group, 12 students were chosen for interviews on the basis of their survey scores. They represented low, medium, and high levels of autonomy. Along with them, six English teachers who had at least three years of teaching at the university were interviewed. This was done to collect the teachers' views about autonomy in practical classroom situations. The purposive selection helped to include different types of experiences and gave more depth to the study.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data:

Learner Autonomy Questionnaire (LAQ)

The questionnaire was taken from Zhang and Li's (2004) validated tool and used for the quantitative part. It measures several areas like goal-setting, strategy use, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. I used five-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Also, I conducted a pilot study with 30 students in our context and it showed reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .84.

English Proficiency Test

The English proficiency of students was measured by an institutional test that followed the TOEFL ITP format. It included listening, reading, and grammar parts. This test was selected because it matches the academic needs of learners in our country and has proven reliability in other EFL contexts.

Semi-structured Interview Guides

I prepared two sets of interview guides for this research, one for students and another for teachers. Interviews with learners looked at their self-study habits, their thoughts about autonomy, how they use technology and the problems they face in taking responsibility. Teacher interviews looked at what they understand about autonomy, how they teach and the challenges they face in helping students become independent. The questions were open-ended so that participants could explain freely and give detailed answers.

Data Collection Procedures

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time over four weeks. The steps were as follows: First, the researcher received ethical approval from the university and informed consent from all participants. Second, the Learner Autonomy Questionnaire was given to students in their regular classes, and the English proficiency test was arranged in the following week. Third, the students were divided into low, medium, and high autonomy groups based on their scores. Four students from each group were chosen for interviews to get different views. Finally, interviews with both students and teachers were held in quiet rooms inside the campus. All interviews were recorded with permission, and each lasted about 30–40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Data from the survey were entered into SPSS and coded for analysis. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were calculated to show autonomy levels. Pearson's correlation (r) was used to find the relation between autonomy and proficiency scores. Linear regression was also applied to see how much autonomy could explain the difference in proficiency results.

Qualitative Analysis: The interview recordings were written out word for word and then analyzed by thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher followed six steps: becoming familiar with the data, coding, finding themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and finally writing the report. NVivo software was used to help in coding. It is seen in our context that the main themes were responsibility, dependence on teachers, exam pressure, and technology for autonomy. Direct quotations were included to show the real voices of participants.

Integration: The findings of both parts were compared and brought together in the discussion. The quantitative part showed whether autonomy and proficiency were related, while the qualitative part explained how teachers and students in our context understand and experience autonomy. For this reason, the combined result gives a broader and deeper picture of the issue.

Ethical Considerations

The research followed the accepted rules of ethics in education. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured about confidentiality. They were also told that they could leave the study at any stage. In reporting the qualitative results, pseudonyms were used to protect identity. In addition, all data were stored carefully and were used only for research purposes.

Findings

By integrating the results from both the quantitative and qualitative strands, this section presents the findings of the study. The quantitative data examine the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency, while the qualitative data explore how learners and teachers perceive the role of autonomy in the Bangladeshi EFL context. Later, the two strands are compared in order to provide a more holistic interpretation of the situation.

Quantitative Findings *Distribution of Learner Autonomy Levels*

The Learner Autonomy Questionnaire revealed some variation in students' autonomy levels. Based on their scores, the learners were divided into three categories: low autonomy (below 60), medium autonomy (61–75), and high autonomy (76 and above). Out of 120 participants, 30 (25%) were in the low-autonomy category, 55 (46%) in the medium-autonomy category and 35 (29%) in the high-autonomy category.

This distribution is illustrated in Figure 1.

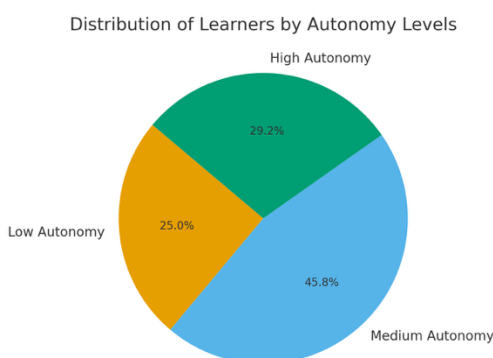


Figure 1: Distribution of Learners by Autonomy Levels

As the figure shows, the majority of learners (46%) demonstrated medium levels of autonomy. On the other hand nearly one-third (29%) reported high levels. However, one-fourth of the participants scored low which indicates that in our context a significant proportion of learners still depend heavily on teacher guidance. For this reason, it is seen in our context that developing learner autonomy remains a crucial issue.

Relationship Between Autonomy and Proficiency

To examine whether autonomy was associated with language proficiency, autonomy scores were correlated with proficiency test results. The results revealed a strong correlation ($r=.61$, $p<.01$). This means higher autonomy scores were significantly related to higher English proficiency.

Average proficiency scores by autonomy level are displayed in Figure 2.

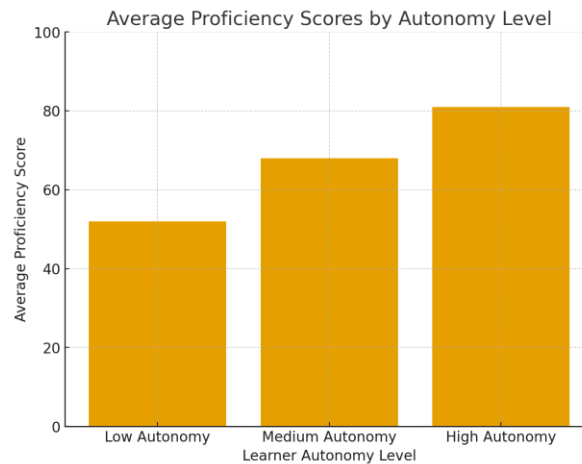


Figure 2: Average Proficiency Scores by Autonomy Level

Learners with low autonomy had an average proficiency score of 52/100, medium-autonomy learners averaged 68/100, and high-autonomy learners averaged 81/100. Regression analysis showed that autonomy explained 37% of proficiency scores. This means autonomy strongly predicts achievement, but motivation, resources, and teacher support also matter in class. The results show learner autonomy is real and measurable, and it greatly affects language learning in Bangladesh. That is why the promotion of autonomy deserves more attention in our country. In reality, these results indicate that learner autonomy is not merely an abstract concept but a measurable factor that significantly influences language development in the Bangladeshi EFL context. That is why the promotion of autonomy deserves more attention in our country.

Qualitative Findings

Interviews with 12 students and six teachers generated rich insights into how autonomy is perceived and enacted in practice. Thematic analysis revealed four dominant themes: responsibility and control, exam-oriented constraints, teachers' roles, and technology as an enabler.

Responsibility and Control

Many students expressed awareness of the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning. They recognized that waiting for teachers alone would not be enough in our context. One student clearly mentioned:

"If I only depend on my teachers, my English will not improve. I need to study

extra, listen to English podcasts, and practice with my friends.” (Learner 4)

Teachers also repeated this point, emphasizing that learners who showed personal initiative generally performed better. One teacher explained:

“The students who make their own study plans and follow their progress are usually the ones who succeed.”

One teacher commented:

“The students who make their own study plans and keep track of their progress are usually the ones who succeed. They don’t just depend on what happens in class.” (Teacher 3)

It is seen in our context that these reflections align with the quantitative results: learners who practiced greater responsibility tended to achieve higher proficiency scores. For this reason, responsibility is a key component of autonomy in practical classroom situations.

Exam-Oriented Constraints

A common theme that emerged in both students and teachers’ narratives was the impact of the exam-centric study in Bangladesh. Instead of using language genuinely, learners often felt pressured to focus on memorization and rote learning . One learner confessed:

“I want to improve my speaking. But most of my time I need to spend to prepar for exams. If I don’t pass, nothing else matters.” (Learner 7)

Teachers also expressed frustration with this system. One remarked:

Our students are capable of autonomy, but the exam system does not support it. They memorize model answers instead of learning to communicate.” (Teacher 1)

In reality, this exam orientation was seen as a significant barrier to developing authentic autonomy. That is why students’ independent efforts are redirected towards test preparation rather than meaningful language development.

Teachers' Role in Autonomy

Interviews revealed a paradox in teachers' perspectives. Although they valued autonomy, they most often doubted readiness of the learners. For instance, one teacher commented:

"Students expect spoon-feeding. They want me to tell them everything. Even if I give them projects, many don't take them seriously." (Teacher 5)

Yet, some teachers acknowledged their own role in this dependency:

"We also don't always encourage autonomy because of large classes and tight syllabi. Sometimes it's easier to lecture than to guide students to work independently." (Teacher 2)

It is seen in practical classroom situations that institutional factors—class size, syllabus pressure, and exam culture—interact with teacher practices to influence autonomy. For this reason, the teachers' role becomes crucial in balancing guidance and independence.

Technology as a Facilitator

Perhaps the most positive theme which came out of the interviews was the role of technology. Many students reported that they were regularly using mobile apps, online videos, and digital dictionaries to support their learning outside the classroom. In our context, it is increasingly seen that young learners are depending on digital platforms for additional practice. For example, one student explained:

"YouTube helps me a lot. I can listen to different accents, learn vocabulary and practice without waiting for class." (Learner 9)

Teachers also recognized this trend although some of them expressed their caution that students often needed guidance to use technology properly. As one teacher remarked:

"Technology is powerful, but students waste time on irrelevant materials. They need training to use it effectively for learning." (Teacher 4)

In our country, it is seen that technology can provide a very practical pathway for fostering learner autonomy. For this reason, the role of digital tools is becoming more

important day by day. However, in reality, the use of technology also requires structured support and proper monitoring so that learners can use it meaningfully in practical classroom situations. That is why both teachers and learners need to be trained in how to integrate technology into language learning more effectively. In short, this part of the study indicates that in the Bangladeshi EFL context, technology can act as a bridge towards autonomy if it is used with proper guidance.

Integration of Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative results provides a more complete and clear understanding of learner autonomy in Bangladesh. From the quantitative side, it is clearly seen that autonomy is a very good predictor of proficiency. Learners with higher autonomy not only performed better in the language tests but also showed greater confidence and engagement in learning a foreign language. Qualitatively, the findings explain why: autonomous learners take responsibility, make use of digital tools, and persist despite systemic challenges. At the same time, the qualitative themes also reveal the barriers: exam-driven learning, cultural expectations of teacher authority, and institutional constraints. In reality, these challenges cannot be ignored. While technology provides new opportunities, both teachers and learners need guidance to harness it effectively. For this reason, it is seen in our context that learner autonomy should be promoted systematically, not only through individual effort but also through supportive policies and classroom practices.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to find out the relation between learner autonomy and English language proficiency in the Bangladeshi EFL context and also to explore how learners and teachers understand the role of autonomy in language learning. The findings from the mixed-methods approach show that there are both possibilities and challenges of promoting autonomy in our country.

The quantitative findings showed a strong positive relation between autonomy and proficiency ($r = .61, p < .01$). This means that learners who take more responsibility for their learning usually achieve higher levels of proficiency. For this reason, the results support earlier studies. Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) found that learners using self-regulated strategies developed better vocabulary and fluency. In the same way, Ahmed (2024) observed that Bangladeshi students who joined independent activities like extra reading and peer practice did better in speaking and writing. The present study adds new evidence from a Bangladeshi university and shows that autonomy is not only desirable but also measurable as an important factor of academic success. This relation also agrees with

major theoretical views. Benson (2011) explains that autonomy improves motivation and gives learners more control that results in long-term learning benefits. In a similar vein, Little (2007) says that autonomous learners can connect classroom learning with their personal aims that makes learning more meaningful. In our country, where there are limited opportunities to use English, this connection is very important.

Although autonomy is a strong predictor of proficiency, the qualitative findings point to serious systemic barriers. Both students and teachers repeatedly mentioned the exam-focused culture as a major problem. Learners said they prefer memorizing model answers instead of real practice, while teachers said that exams increase dependency. In reality, this reflects Amiri et al.'s (2025) finding that Bangladeshi classrooms are mostly lecture-based and exam-centered. For this reason, higher-order thinking and communicative skills are often neglected. This situation—where autonomy is useful but less practiced—is also found in other contexts. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) noted that Omani teachers supported autonomy in theory but faced limits in practice. In our context, Alam and Chowdhury (2016) found that teachers thought students were dependent, while students wanted spoon-feeding. That is why exam systems in Bangladesh not only reduce learners' interest in responsibility but also stop teachers from trying autonomy-based teaching.

The role of teachers was found to be both helpful and creating limitations. On one hand, teachers admitted that autonomy is important and saw that active students performed better. On the other hand, they also explained that large classes, long syllabi and institutional pressures made it difficult and challenging to promote autonomy. These findings support Dam (2011), who argued that teachers need to transfer responsibility step by step, but this process requires time, training, and support from the institution. It is also seen in our context that teachers' doubts about autonomy are linked with cultural traditions. In South Asian education, teachers are often viewed as the authority and main source of knowledge (Rajib & Jahan, 2015). For this reason, many teachers in this study said that students were not ready for autonomy. However, Benson (2011) reminds us that autonomy is not a fixed quality but a skill that can be developed. In reality, teachers' lack of trust may prevent students from getting chances to grow as independent learners.

One of the most hopeful results of the study is the role of technology. Learners reported that using mobile apps, online videos and digital dictionaries also support their study. This result is similar to global trends. Lai and Gu (2011) found that technology-based out-of-class learning had a strong link with autonomy. In the same way, Hossain (2016) reported that Bangladeshi university students using digital resources improved more in vocabulary and listening. In practical classroom situations, where exposure is limited, technology creates new chances for learners. For this reason, technology may act as a bridge between classroom instruction and learners' need for practice. However, as one teacher in this study noted, sometimes students waste time on irrelevant digital content.

This shows that learners cannot use technology. They still need guidance from teachers to use technology effectively. It is also clear that training in digital literacy and proper selection of resources can make use of technology more effective in promoting autonomy.

By combining the quantitative and qualitative results, I found a clear pattern: autonomy is important. But its practice depends on many contextual factors. On one side, autonomy predicts proficiency and supports language development. On the other side, autonomy is limited by exam culture, teacher-centered traditions, and institutional problems. Though technology provides new opportunities, without teacher guidance its full value may not be achieved. These findings support Benson's (2011) argument that autonomy depends on context. In our country, autonomy cannot be seen only as an individual matter; rather, it is shaped by exams, teaching style, cultural norms, and access to technology. For this reason, the promotion of autonomy in Bangladesh requires reform in systems, teacher training, and support for learners.

For learners, the study shows that they need to take more responsibility and use resources outside the classroom. For teachers, the findings highlight the need to apply autonomy-supportive methods like reflective tasks, project-based learning, and guided use of digital tools. For policymakers, it is seen in our context that the exam system still favors rote memorization. That is why there is a strong need to rethink assessments so that communicative skills and higher-order learning get more importance.

Conclusion

Using mixed-method research, this study investigated the role of learner autonomy in the development of English language proficiency in Bangladeshi EFL context. The quantitative findings showed a strong positive relation between autonomy and proficiency which confirmed that students who take more responsibility for their own learning achieve higher test scores. Also, regression analysis recognized that autonomy explained a great deal of difference in proficiency results of the learners in exams. For this reason, it is not only an extra factor but in reality a key predictor of success. The qualitative findings gave more depth to these numbers. Learners explained that autonomy is to take responsibility for self-study, using digital tools, and practicing English outside the classroom in Bangladeshi context. Teachers also admitted that active and proactive students did better than others. At the same time, both groups pointed to some barriers. In our country, the exam-based education system, teacher-centered classrooms, and limited institutional support often push learners to use their autonomy only for memorization before exams instead of real communicative skills. It is also seen in our context that technology plays a very strong role in supporting autonomy, because it gives access to real materials and practice opportunities. However, without proper guidance from teachers, the benefit of technology is not fully realized.

Taken together, these findings make it clear that learner autonomy in Bangladesh is both measurable and highly contextual. It predicts proficiency outcomes, but it is shaped by culture, by exams, by teachers, and by the resources available. That is why, to improve autonomy, reforms are needed at different levels. Teachers need training so that they can guide autonomy-supportive learning, learners must be motivated to take responsibility beyond exam preparation, and policymakers should rethink an assessment system that still favors rote memorization. In practical classroom situations, autonomy is not only about learning English but also about preparing learners for lifelong learning. Ultimately, in our context, promoting autonomy means giving Bangladeshi learners the skills, the confidence, and the independence that they need to survive and succeed in a globalized world.

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