

Impacts of Learner Autonomy on Presentation Skills: Exploring Students' Perceptions and Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of a group of undergraduate students of a private university in Bangladesh regarding the impacts of learner autonomy on their presentation skills and whether it promotes self-regulatory learning in the classroom or not. Using the self-determination theory (SDT), the study analyzed the interview data of twenty students of a poetry course. The findings show a descriptive qualitative research of 20 participants which led to the conclusion that learner autonomy has a great impact on presentation skills. Moreover, the students can overcome the challenges of oral presentation by practicing autonomy in the classroom. Nevertheless, despite having positive aspects the study also focused on the overall limitations of the research area suggesting that to promote learner autonomy, assistance from the educators and institutions is required in a few key areas.

INTRODUCTION

In the traditional framework of the classroom, the teachers process the activities of teaching and learning where the students can avail very little scope to explore their skill of planning and demonstration. In the present world where Bangladesh is moving forward to embrace the fourth industrial revolution(4IR), creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, flexibility, and teamwork are going to be the most valuable abilities in the coming future. In this changing scenario, the students are expected to be responsible for their learning which will direct them to achieve a definite outcome in the future. The term learner autonomy is defined as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning' (Barillaro, 2011) which points towards the shift from a teacher-centered class to a student-centered class. At the tertiary level of education, especially in literature courses, the students get very little opportunity to explore their ideas as the classes are usually lecture-based. Even if the students get topics for presentation, there is also very little scope for utilizing their skills or developing their planning or ideas. As a result, at tertiary level education where students should be given the highest possible opportunities to implement their planning and ideas neither get the proper scope for building up their abilities nor enough scope to enhance their presentation skills. Therefore, the solution to this problem could be promoting learner autonomy in the classroom which gives access to self-instruction, self-direction, self-access learning, and individualized instruction (Kumaravadivelu,2003).

The current study was done on a group of students of the Department of English of a private university in Bangladesh which was based on an oral presentation that was included in the assessment criteria of a course titled ENG 205 – 16th to 17th Century Poetry. The students were divided into different groups and were assigned the task of taking a class on poems from the metaphysical era. The students prepared their lesson plans, planned for the content of the class, and developed the materials. They divided the content among the group members and different parts of the class were taken by different team members. The task was graded

under the continuous assessment criteria where the teacher assessed the performance of the students based on their lesson plan, content, materials, communication skills, and overall organization. The study explores whether the newly adopted techniques help students develop their presentation skills in comparison with the traditional teaching system and whether it has any further impact on enhancing learner autonomy in the classroom or not.

Learner autonomy and Self-Determination theory

Learner autonomy encompasses the concept of the “ability to take charge of one’s learning” (Holec, 1981) which triggers the fundamental issue that, no learning takes place unless the learner is in charge. Benson (2009) terms learner autonomy as a mixture of abilities, attitudes, or dispositions that can only be identified if the learners get the desired opportunity to exercise responsibility at all levels of the learning process. Littlewood (1996) figured out learners’ ability and their willingness to make choices independently as these are the two main features of autonomy. In language learning, learner autonomy is crucial, which means that students must have the freedom to direct their education by choosing their own learning objectives, learning tactics, and learning styles. According to Holec in Farivar & Rahimi (2015), learner autonomy is the capacity to direct one’s own education. In other words, the ability to perform and exercise autonomy in the classroom is closely related to self-regulation which is understood as the degree to which individuals become ‘active participants of their own learning (Dörnyei, 2005).

As learner autonomy is connected with the concept of self-regulation, the theory of self-determination can be distinctively identified in this context. Self-determination is a macro theory of motivation that explains how human demands for autonomy, competence, and connectivity to self-determined motivation and self-regulated behavior (Deci and Ryan 1985, 2000). According to SDT, when three innate psychological needs are met, people gradually transform social values and extrinsic contingencies into personal values and self-motivation, leading to positive self-regulated behavior and well-being, as opposed to when the needs are not met, which results in decreased motivation and well-being (Hu, P., & Zhang, J.,2017). Therefore, according to SDT, a learner remains intrinsically motivated when his fundamental psychological needs for autonomy and competence are satisfied (Niemi & Ryan,2009). In other words, both learner autonomy and the self-determination theory center on the individual’s motivational orientation which fosters learners’ sense of belongingness, community, and shared purpose in an individual’s efforts (Trenshaw, K. F., Revelo, R. A., Earl, K. A., & Herman, G. L.,2016).

Learner autonomy and enhancing presentation skills

Presentation is one of the strategies to foster learner autonomy which is linked with several important factors. The key focus of learner autonomy is to provide the learners with the opportunity and control over their learning process. Trisnawan (2019) quotes Littlewood (1996) in his article, “An autonomous learner is a person who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions.” In terms of enhancing presentation skills, some basic factors need to be carried out which eventually promote a sense of leadership in the learners’ minds and as a result create a positive environment for the learners to practice autonomy in classrooms. While presenting a topic, if a student gets complete control over the class, it will certainly help him carry out his performance as a presenter in a better way. In presenting materials, the teachers must be aware of the fact that they should let the students get involved in the process completely so that they can be responsible for their own learning which is the key concept of learner autonomy. When the students are provided with such an environment where they can find complete liberty, their level of confidence grows which eventually helps them to develop as proficient presenters. Leech (1993) figures out three key ways of a formal presentation which differs from a formal discourse in three main categories. Firstly, it may be presented spontaneously. Secondly, it frequently uses visual aids, and finally, a presentation is typically made to a very engaged audience, who quickly ask questions and start conversations. The audience listens to most remarks, with the possibility of following up with questions.

Therefore, a presentation is such a platform where a student gets an opportunity to deliver his ideas in front of the audience, communicate with them directly, and get feedback from them which allows him to practice autonomy in the classroom.

Background:

ENG 205- 16th to 17th Century Poetry is taught in the 3rd semester of a private university in Bangladesh. In the assessment criteria, the students have to give a group presentation on selected topics based on the selected poems from their syllabus. This has been noticed for quite a long time that while giving presentations, the students mostly depend on multimedia where the slides are prepared from the notes taken from the class lectures or directly copied from Google. Moreover, the students feel less motivated about the presentation and their class performance as there is very little scope for them to work on the topics from their zone of liberty. As a result, the students neither get involved in any development of their cognitive skills nor they can avail any opportunity to enhance their presentation skills.

In Spring 2023, the framework for the assessment criteria of that particular course was redesigned by the course teacher. This time the students were allowed to take any topic from the metaphysical era of their own choice. The students were instructed to take a class where they were allowed to adopt any technique of their own choice. The whole class was divided into 8 groups, and each group took a class on the topics that they selected for their group. This time they explored a wide range of topics and brought in all sorts of angles of metaphysical poetry into their presentation. As their main concern was to make their presentation interesting for their classmates, they did not just collect some information from Google and put them on their slides, rather they went through detailed research on their selected topics. The whole process of presentation was carried out in several stages. At first, the teacher provided them with a sample lesson plan based on which they prepared their own. In the lesson plan, they included the contents, study materials, time, etc. which reflected their efforts in strategic planning. After they completed preparing the lesson plans, they distributed the lessons among themselves equally. The lessons included content analysis, stylistic analysis, imageries, themes, etc. Each of the students had adequate preparation for taking the class as it was completely a new experience for them. While taking the class each student took the role of a teacher and tried to give their best performance. After each presentation, the other students along with the teacher asked questions to the presenters which allowed them to reflect more on their understanding and competence.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the students' perceptions and experiences, this study employed a qualitative approach. The qualitative method enables researchers to capture in-depth perceptions of learners as it brings out multiple realities that are based on the construction of reality as perceived by the individual (Krauss,2005). The purpose of this study is to determine whether learner autonomy can be promoted through oral presentations practiced in classrooms or not.

Data Collection

Interview has been used as a research tool for collecting data. The researcher interviewed 20 students from a private university in Bangladesh to explore their experiences and perceptions regarding the newly adopted procedure to enhance their presentation skills. Semi-structured interviews were used to get the thorough opinions of the interviewees. A semi-structured interview allows the researcher not only to pursue a detailed inquiry into existing opinions but also to obtain reactions to new ideas (Adams, 2015). Using a semi-structured interview method, the researcher gathered the participants' responses based on a list of predetermined guided questions. To learn more about the interviewees' perspectives and experiences, both closed-ended and open-ended questions were posed to them during one-on-one and in-person interviews.

One of the key considerations while conducting interviews is maintaining ethical issues. The study has addressed these issues with care. Therefore, the name of the university was not been mentioned, and the participants were also ensured that they would remain anonymous.

Data Analysis

The students shared their perceptions regarding their experiences with the whole procedure of presentations, how they dealt with the newly adopted techniques, and whether it helped promote learner autonomy in the classroom or not. Findings from the interview of the 20 undergraduate students have been explored and analyzed below:

The students were asked what differences they could figure out between a regular presentation and the newly adopted techniques of presentation. In response to this question majority of the students opined that as in a regular presentation they depend on PowerPoint, their main focus is to look for information from different sources and prepare the slides properly. On the other hand, in this presentation, the students focused more on demonstration and communication. Their main goal was to act like a teacher and make the topic understandable to the class, so this allowed them to enhance their communication skill more than a regular presentation does. They responded that they believed this presentation had a great impact on their communication skill as it compelled them to connect with all the students in the class like a teacher. However, in a regular presentation, they are not required to do this.

The students were asked how the lesson plans helped them in making strategies for their own. In response, the students said that they were able to better understand the management of time as they had to plan for it beforehand which eventually had a great impact on their final performance. They also said that it helped to improve their research skill. They also opined that creating lesson plans made their presentations more precise and organized and helped taking prepare in a better way. In the lesson plans, they mentioned all the topics they were going to cover in the class, what aid they were going to use, and how much time was allocated for each participant. According to the interviewees, this strategic planning helped them visualize the whole procedure beforehand which eventually had a positive impact on their final performance.

The students were asked whether the new method of oral presentation enhanced their motivation or not. They replied that, apart from using multimedia they also used whiteboard and marker to present their topics which made both the presenters and their classmates actively involved in the class. The students also said that, as they were free to choose their topics, this allowed them the freedom to explore new ideas. Therefore, this boosted their motivation and confidence. The positive feedback from the course teacher and the classmates also built a sense of belongingness and community in them which is one of the major key factors of SDT.

The students were asked whether it promoted learner autonomy or not. In response, the students answered that the newly adopted methods allowed them to explore the power of authority which created a great sense of confidence in them. While they were playing the role of the teacher they felt themselves as the center of attraction which compelled them to be more connected with the whole process. As the teacher limited his role in the whole process, all the participants could give their presentation confidently without any sense of anxiety. Nevertheless, some of the students said that as they worked in groups, it somehow hindered the process of practicing autonomy completely.

It has been asked to the students whether the newly adopted techniques helped them to improve their presentation skills. Most of them answered that, in a regular presentation as they mostly depend on the slides they tend to read out the information from the slides. Therefore, they have less eye contact with the class. On the other hand, this newly adopted method allowed them to take class as a teacher which in a way

compelled them to make eye contact with the whole class. Moreover, they said that they also worked on their voice when they were communicating with the whole class as a teacher. Therefore, all these factors had a positive impact on their presentation skills.

The reflection of SDT on students' performance

During the presentation, the researcher observed that all the presenters were equally motivated and focused which created a positive environment for all the classmates. The researcher also observed that as the students were taking a lot of interest in the whole process of presentation, they were communicating more, making fewer grammatical mistakes, and as a result, their performance got more organized. Hence, the reflection of SDT is traced here as it is an approach to human motivation and personality that emphasizes how crucial our evolved inner resources are to the formation of our personalities and self-regulatory actions (Ryan, Kuhl & Deci, 1997). It has been observed that a huge number of EFL students do not find satisfaction in oral presentations even though they have the ability to perform. Through a good number of researches conducted in different educational institutes, it was found that most of the students felt extremely anxious when they had to talk in front of the class which undoubtedly affected their oral performance and the result was very often unsatisfying (Hanifa & Yusra, 2018). Nevertheless, in this case, the researcher noticed a vital change in the behavior of the participants. As the teacher limited his role throughout the process, starting from choosing the topics, selecting materials executing the whole thing, and allowing the students to practice autonomy, it boosted the participants' confidence level and had a great impact on the development of their personality. These are the basic tenets of self-determination theory (SDT) which addresses such basic issues as personality development, self-regulation, universal psychological needs, life goals and aspirations, energy and vitality, nonconscious processes, the relations of culture to motivation, and the impact of social environments on motivation, affect, behavior, and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Some limitations have been traced while conducting the research. The researcher conducted the survey based on only one course where the students had to participate in oral presentations in all the courses of the semester. Therefore, to survey the impacts of learner autonomy on presentation skills, a bigger area of research is required where the data could be collected from different courses. Hence, the attitudes and approaches of different teachers in implementing learner autonomy in the classroom could be included in the research along with the students' performances. It also needs to be mentioned that, if educators want to promote learner autonomy in the classroom a wide-ranging change is required in some of the key areas, such as in the curriculum design, the assessment procedure, teaching methodologies, and most importantly the attitudes of teachers and learners towards the overall system.

CONCLUSION

From the observation, the researcher traced the students' reactions as well as their perceptions regarding the impacts of learner autonomy on their overall presentation skills. The majority of the participants expressed their views positively on the process. They believed that, as they were given the freedom to apply their autonomy in the oral presentation, starting from selecting their topics, deciding the partners, choosing appropriate strategies, taking responsibility for the choice, etc. they could perform better. Moreover, this process of self-learning, helped the learners to explore and express ideas of their own and made them actively involved and engaged in the overall process of oral presentation. Nevertheless, the teachers should also play a vital role in the process of self-learning by creating a positive environment for the students so that the students can apply learner autonomy in classrooms and experience an active learning process.

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