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Research Paper

Learner Agency for Autonomous Learning in Higher Education of Nepal: Beliefs and Practices of English Language Learners

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Abstract

This Paper explores the role of learner agency in promoting autonomous learning within the English language classrooms of Far Western University, Nepal. The paper basically focuses on how university students perceive and exercise learner agency, the factors shaping its development, and its reflection in actual classroom practices. Employing a qualitative ethnographic research method, information was collected over a year from four selected campuses through focus group discussions and classroom observations. The recorded data were manually transcribed, translated, and coded for thematic interpretation. The paper highlights that learner agency is minimally exercised, with student engagement largely confined to teacher-dominated instructional structures. Despite the availability of resources such as internet access, digital tools, and libraries, their integration into autonomous learning practices was limited. Students displayed low confidence, strong dependence on teachers, and anxiety driven by exam-oriented education systems. These attitudes, shaped by entrenched cultural norms and institutional rigidity, restricted students' participation in goal-setting, material selection, and self-evaluation. While isolated instances of student initiative, such as informal use of smartphones, were observed, they did not translate into sustained autonomous learning behaviors. The findings suggest the need for a multidimensional reform agenda that includes pedagogical shifts toward learner-centered strategies, institutional support for flexible curricula and assessment systems, and capacity-building for both students and teachers. This research offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and curriculum designers aiming to enhance learner agency and support lifelong learning competencies in the context of Nepalese higher education.

Keywords: *Qualitative Research, Higher Education, English Language Teaching, Teacher-Centered Pedagogy, Self-Learning, Nepali Universities*

INTRODUCTION

In recent educational discourse, learner agency and autonomous learning have emerged as key elements of effective pedagogy and lifelong learning. The transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered education redefines the learner as an active, self-regulating participant rather than a passive recipient of knowledge (Dam & Scholtens, 2012; Ushioda, 2011). This shift is especially crucial in language education, where motivation, engagement, and self-regulation underpin successful learning outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Lamb, 2017). In South Asia, including Nepal, although student-centered approaches are promoted in educational policies, their implementation remains limited due to structural, cultural, and pedagogical barriers (Awasthi, 2007; Phyak, 2018). This study investigates how English language learners in Nepalese higher education perceive and exercise learner agency, while addressing the contextual factors that shape its enactment.

Learner agency refers to the learners' capacity to act intentionally and take responsibility for their learning through informed decision-making, self-reflection, and goal-oriented behavior (Bandura, 2001; Benson, 2011). In English language education, this means that learners do not merely absorb knowledge but actively participate in shaping their learning experiences. Agency is not a fixed trait; rather, it emerges through dynamic interactions with sociocultural and institutional contexts (Duff, 2014). In Nepal, however, student agency is frequently limited by dominant exam-oriented pedagogies and schooling traditions that emphasize rote learning and teacher authority (Phyak, 2018; Awasthi, 2007). As a result, students often depend heavily on teachers for direction, with limited involvement in deciding what or how to learn (Shrestha & Coffin, 2012). This conceptualization of agency naturally leads to a discussion of autonomous learning, which represents the practical expression of agency in learners' academic lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Autonomous learning, the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981), involves setting personal goals, selecting learning strategies, self-monitoring progress, and reflecting on outcomes. Globally, research has demonstrated that autonomy contributes significantly to learners' academic success and long-term motivation (Little, 2007; Benson, 2013). Yet in Nepal, despite policy emphasis on learner-centered education, autonomy remains underdeveloped. Studies by Giri (2010) and Sah (2022) point to persistent barriers such as rigid curricula, lack of technological integration, and minimal innovation in classroom practices. Learners often remain passive due to a lack of familiarity with independent learning strategies and insufficient institutional support. Although the availability of digital tools and English-language media is increasing, these resources are rarely used effectively for self-directed learning due to motivational and contextual constraints. These insights reveal the close conceptual and pedagogical links between agency and autonomy, which are further illustrated in how they function together in English language learning contexts.

While conceptually distinct, agency and autonomy are deeply interconnected in practice. Learners who possess a strong sense of agency are more likely to adopt self-regulated learning behaviors, engage in reflective practices, and demonstrate perseverance in the face of challenges (Lamb, 2017; Tassinari, 2012). This relationship is particularly significant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where regular exposure to language and active engagement are essential for proficiency development. In Nepal, however, this dynamic is often undermined by hierarchical teacher-student relationships and a lack of learner voice in the classroom. Studies by Bista (2011) and Poudel (2020) have shown that although many students recognize the value of learning independently, their educational experiences offer few opportunities to practice autonomy or agency. Institutional structures, social expectations, and classroom culture frequently discourage learners from exercising choice, asking questions, or experimenting with alternative learning strategies. To understand why this gap persists, it is essential to explore the structural and cultural challenges that inhibit the development of learner agency and autonomy in the Nepali context.

Despite growing emphasis on learner-centered pedagogy in national education policies, classroom practices in Nepalese higher education remain dominated by traditional, teacher-led instruction, outdated textbooks, centralized examinations, and insufficient teacher training in student-centered approaches (Phyak, 2018; Sah & Li, 2022). Cultural expectations that emphasize obedience and discourage critical inquiry further constrain learner autonomy. In English language classrooms, these challenges are intensified by exam-oriented instruction, limited authentic language use, and scarce opportunities for experiential or collaborative learning. As Shrestha (2020) observes, many students lack the confidence and strategies necessary for independent learning. These systemic and cultural barriers highlight a persistent gap between the envisioned

goals of learner agency and autonomous learning and the actual educational experiences of students, warranting critical investigation.

Despite global shifts toward learner-centered pedagogy, the effective utilization of learner agency to foster autonomous learning remains underexplored in Nepalese higher education, particularly in institutions like Far Western University. Although learner agency is fundamental to developing autonomy, its realization is hindered by entrenched pedagogical, institutional, cognitive, and socio-cultural barriers.

Students in Nepalese universities are often products of teacher-centered systems that emphasize rote learning and examination performance, leaving them passive and dependent on teacher instructions (Sah, 2019; Sharma, 2013). This educational conditioning stifles initiative, reflective engagement, and decision-making, key elements of learner autonomy (Littlewood, 2013). Compounding this issue, institutional practices favor rigid curricula and textbook-based instruction, offering limited scope for student choice, inquiry, or self-direction (Phyak, 2016).

Many students, particularly in rural areas such as Kailali and Kanchanpur, often lack essential self-regulation skills, including goal-setting, time management, and reflective thinking, which are critical for autonomous learning (Zimmerman, 2002; Caruana & Spurling, 2007). The current academic structure often fails to support the development of such metacognitive abilities. Additionally, socioeconomic challenges and limited access to digital resources further hinder learners' capacity for independent engagement (Gao & Zhang, 2011; Phyak, 2018). These limitations underscore the need to explore how learner agency is understood and enacted in English language classrooms, which constitutes the core investigation of this study.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of learner agency in fostering autonomous learning in Nepalese higher education, with a particular focus on Far Western University. It aims to investigate students' understanding and enactment of agency and to explore the pedagogical, institutional, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors shaping its development. The research further aims to identify the challenges impeding the transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered education. By analyzing students' beliefs, self-regulation practices, and socio-economic contexts, the study offers grounded insights to inform educational policy, curriculum reform, and pedagogy aimed at enhancing learner autonomy. The study is guided by the following research questions.

1. To what extent do students at Far Western University perceive and exercise learner agency in their learning processes?
2. What pedagogical, institutional, and cognitive factors influence the development of learner agency among university students?
3. How do students' beliefs and practices regarding learner agency reflect their engagement in autonomous learning?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach grounded in the interpretative paradigm to investigate how university-level English language learners perceive and enact learner agency in fostering autonomous learning. Adapting an ethnographic research design, the campuses and the students for FGD were selected purposively and based on convenience. The students selected for FGDs were from undergraduate (ranging from 1st to 8th semester) level who were studying English Education. The research was conducted across four selected campuses affiliated with Far Western University, Nepal, anonymized as Campus 1, Campus 2, Campus 3, and Campus 4 to ensure institutional confidentiality.

Data collection occurred over twelve months, from December 2023 to November 2024, utilizing two primary methods: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and classroom observations. One FGD was conducted at each campus, resulting in four group discussions, coded as TKP, DHI, MNR,

and ATR groups to preserve participant anonymity. These discussions yielded in-depth reflections on students' beliefs, experiences, and obstacles regarding learner agency and autonomy. Complementary classroom observations were conducted to provide contextual support and to understand how agency is demonstrated in real teaching and learning settings.

The FGDs were conducted in the Nepali language to minimize the hesitation and difficulty of the participants in expressing themselves. Then, the data were recorded on audio tape, translated into English, and manually coded for further interpretation. Similarly, the observations were written note pads, and the observation notes were coded and presented under the themes that emerged from both FGDs and observations. Based on the data analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Creswell (2013), data analysis followed a thematic approach aligned with the research questions, focusing on identifying patterns, perspectives, and recurring themes. This enabled a nuanced understanding of how learner agency operates within institutional, cultural, and pedagogical contexts.

To maintain trustworthiness in the research, the data obtained from FGDs and class observation were triangulated. Similarly, to maintain credibility, transferability, and dependability in the research, I shared the paper with my colleagues and experts for feedback and discussion. I gave a thick description of data, participants, and the study area, and I engaged with the participants for more than a year. To maintain ethical consideration, I anonymized the study area, context, and participants. I did not disclose any personal information of the participants and institutions in this research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Students' Beliefs and Practices on Learner Agency and Autonomous Learning

Understanding Students' beliefs about learner agency is vital for assessing interventions that support autonomous learning. Understanding their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences helps identify factors shaping agency. These insights can guide pedagogical strategies that foster self-directed learning, enabling students to confidently manage their educational journeys across varied learning contexts. Regarding their beliefs and understanding of the role of learner agency for promoting learner autonomy, students from different FGDS reflected their diverse opinions and perceptions. In a theme of discussion, how they describe learner agency and autonomous learning, Rajan from the TKP group reflected, "It means we get to decide what we want to learn and how we want to learn it, instead of always depending on the teacher. Autonomous learning means studying on our own without always relying on the teacher or classmates". This participant demonstrates a basic yet limited understanding of learner agency and autonomous learning, primarily equating agency with independence from the teacher. He views autonomy as the freedom to choose what and how to learn, emphasizing individual effort and reduced reliance on teachers or peers. However, this perspective is simplistic and externalized, focusing more on freedom from control than on developing internal capacities for self-directed learning. The lack of references to self-regulation, strategic thinking, or metacognition indicates that their conception of autonomy is shaped more by opposition to teacher dependence than by genuine engagement in autonomous learning practices.

Building on this basic conceptualization, Bikash from the DHI group presents a more intrinsic and motivationally grounded understanding of learner agency:

> *"Agency is about having the freedom to choose the topics we are interested in, the methods we use to study, and the pace that works best for us. Autonomous learning is about being motivated to learn something even when there's no exam or teacher pressure; it comes from within".*

The participant perceives agency as the freedom to select personally meaningful topics, learning methods, and pace, reflecting a deliberate and self-aware engagement in learning. His emphasis on studying "even without exams or teacher pressure" highlights a shift from external motivators to intrinsic motivation. This perspective emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key to effective learning. Unlike the participants from the TKP group, the DHI group views learner agency as encompassing self-motivation and personal investment, suggesting that true agency arises not only from choice but also from internalizing learning goals and values.

While the DHI group's views advance the discussion toward internal motivation, the MNR group highlights a more practical and resource-based dimension of autonomous learning. Laxmi from the MNR group shared, "For us, being an autonomous learner means knowing how to find the right books, websites, or videos and using them to understand a topic better." She understands autonomy primarily as the ability to locate and utilize learning materials like books, websites, or videos to enhance their understanding, reflecting a task-oriented and resourceful approach to learning. While this practical focus is valuable in today's digital context, it tends to neglect the deeper aspects of autonomy, such as self-reflection and goal-setting. Unlike the participants of the DHI group, which associates autonomy with motivation and interest, the participant from the MNR group emphasizes skillful information-seeking. This functional perspective highlights the need for integrating metacognitive opportunities, enabling learners to evaluate resource effectiveness and align strategies with their learning goals.

Extending this discussion toward a more holistic understanding, the ATR group offers the most comprehensive and theoretically informed perspective on learner agency and autonomous learning:

> "We think learner agency means setting personal goals, trying to reach them, and reflecting on what worked and what didn't. (Binita)"

> "Autonomous learning means we can adapt lessons to suit our interests and needs, so the learning becomes more meaningful to us. (Ravi)"

Their focus on setting personal goals, pursuing them, and reflecting on outcomes demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of self-regulation and metacognition. They view autonomy as the ability to adapt lessons to their individual interests and needs, embodying core principles of learner-centered pedagogy. Unlike earlier groups, they adopt an active, dynamic approach where students shape, evaluate, and personalize their learning experiences. This perspective aligns with constructivist and experiential learning theories, emphasizing meaningful learning through co-construction and critical reflection. The ATR group thus exemplifies agency as both a right and a responsibility to manage one's learning meaningfully.

The varying beliefs of the students on learner agency and autonomous learning reveal a continuum of understanding about learner agency and autonomy, ranging from basic independence and resource use to complex forms of intrinsic motivation, metacognitive reflection, and goal-setting. This diversity suggests that students' conceptualizations are shaped by their prior learning contexts, access to learner-centered opportunities, and levels of academic maturity. The progression from the TKP group's simplistic view to the ATR group's comprehensive approach underscores the developmental nature of learner autonomy; it is not an innate quality but a set of skills and dispositions that evolve through structured support, reflective practice, and opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Students' Practices of Learner Agency for Autonomous Learning.

Drawing on data from four focus group discussions (FGDs) with student groups from TKP, MNR, DHI, and ATR campuses, this analysis examines common patterns, differences, and contextual factors influencing students' enactment of learner agency. Recognizing learner agency as a crucial component for fostering autonomy in higher education, the study investigates how students engage in autonomous learning within their academic and institutional contexts. The FGD responses offer valuable insights into students' experiences, behaviors, and perceptions of agency in learning, shedding light on the extent and nature of autonomous learning practices in these settings. The findings reveal that learner agency is practiced to a limited degree, particularly in key areas such as deciding learning goals, selecting content and materials, self-evaluation, and employing strategies for autonomous learning. A critical analysis highlights that the prevailing classroom culture remains predominantly teacher-centered, restricting students' opportunities for meaningful participation and decision-making. For instance, students from the MNR group expressed:

> *"We do not decide the time of the subjects to study; it happens according to the timetable of the campus. We also do not decide the topic; teachers tell us what to study today."* (Lokesh)

> *"Sometimes, we ask the teacher to teach something different from the sequence of the syllabus.* (Biraj)"

This response reflects the reality that learners follow a schedule and topic sequence determined by institutional norms and teacher discretion. While the mention of occasionally requesting a different topic from the prescribed sequence signals a rare and limited form of agency, it is clear that such actions occur within a tightly controlled framework. The overall pattern suggests that students are primarily positioned as followers of decisions made by others rather than active decision-makers in their own learning journey.

In relation to content selection and learning materials, the data suggests that even when some autonomy is permitted, it is confined within the boundaries of the existing syllabus. Binita from the TKP group expressed, "In the class, teachers decide which particular topic to study. We are free to choose the topic, but it should be from the syllabus; no matter what the sequence or series is." This statement reveals a superficial form of autonomy where students can exercise choice only within narrow and predetermined curricular boundaries. Although the ability to select topics irrespective of sequence appears to offer some flexibility, it does not reflect genuine learner agency, as students are not involved in broader decisions about content relevance, learning goals, or alternative resources. This lack of empowerment is even more evident in the perspective of Kajal from DHI group: "Everything is guided by the teachers. Teachers tell us what to study when, how to study, *and* what materials should be used." This response highlights a deeply entrenched teacher-led approach, where all aspects of the learning process, including timing, content, method, and materials, are under the teacher's control. Such practices hinder students from developing the confidence and capacity to manage their own learning.

The situation becomes even more restrictive when considering students' involvement in evaluating their own learning. Responses from different groups reflect a clear absence of self-assessment practices, with assessment responsibilities resting solely on the teacher. The MNR group commented:

> *"We have no experience of evaluating our own learning; neither do we evaluate the work of*

our friends. (Lalita)*"*

"Teachers check all our activities and give us feedback on what is wrong and what is right; they also suggest that we correct by ourselves; they give ideas for correction too. (Binod)"

Although this shows that teachers may sometimes encourage students to self-correct, such actions occur after teacher evaluation and within the limits of teacher guidance. The students' role remains passive, lacking engagement in reflective or critical thinking processes that are central to learner autonomy. Furthermore, Ruby from the ATR group provided an even more revealing account of the problem, stating, "We do not have many ideas about self-evaluation. We don't even know how to evaluate our own work; teachers don't teach how self-evaluation can be done." This comment indicates not only the absence of practice but also a lack of foundational knowledge about self-assessment. The fact that teachers do not introduce or model self-evaluation techniques suggests a significant pedagogical gap that limits learners' capacity to monitor and improve their own learning independently.

Classroom observations in higher education English language classrooms reveal a pronounced limitation in the exercise of learner agency, aligning closely with students' reported perceptions. Teachers predominantly retain control over essential components such as setting learning goals, selecting instructional materials, and conducting evaluations. Students are rarely invited to participate in these critical decision-making processes, which indicates a predominantly teacher-centered pedagogical environment. This limited involvement undermines students' opportunities to develop autonomy, as they are not encouraged to take ownership of their learning trajectories. Moreover, the absence of self-evaluation and peer-assessment practices across observed settings further highlights a lack of emphasis on equipping learners with strategies to independently monitor and regulate their progress, which are fundamental to autonomous learning.

Despite the presence of supportive learning infrastructure, including internet connectivity, library facilities, and digital learning tools, these resources remain significantly underutilized in practice. This underuse is primarily attributable to the prevailing instructional culture that prioritizes teacher authority and fosters student dependency. Observational data documented minimal engagement in collaborative learning activities, limited student initiative in making learning-related decisions, and an overall scarcity of reflective practices within classrooms. While some positive indicators were noted, such as students' informal use of smartphones for learning purposes and teachers' generally approachable demeanor, these isolated factors have limited impact in challenging the entrenched teacher-centered paradigm that constrains learner autonomy.

The combined findings from classroom observations and student feedback underscore a pressing need for pedagogical reforms aimed at cultivating learner-centered practices that promote critical awareness and self-directed learning. Transforming classroom dynamics to foster greater learner agency is crucial not only for enhancing students' motivation and active engagement but also for equipping them with the skills necessary for lifelong learning. Such reforms are particularly vital in preparing students to navigate an increasingly autonomous and knowledge-driven global context, where independent learning competencies are essential for academic success and meaningful participation in society.

Factors Influencing Exercise of Learner Agency

Analysis of student perspectives from selected campuses indicates that learner agency in higher education is heavily restricted by entrenched structural and pedagogical practices. Predominant lecture-based teaching, limited autonomy, resource constraints, exam-focused

culture, and students' prior dependence on teachers collectively inhibit the development of independent learning skills in classroom contexts. The information reveals that a predominant factor limiting learner agency in higher education is the pervasive teacher-centered pedagogical approach. Bikash from the TKP group explicitly states, "teachers mostly lecture, and we just follow. There's little room to ask or decide," highlighting the limited opportunities for student participation in learning decisions. Similarly, Lalit from DHI group reports that "everything in class is teacher-led," with students being told "what, when, and how to study." Such a dynamic significantly restricts students' ability to engage actively with the learning material or to develop a sense of ownership over their educational journey. This teacher-dominant approach results in students focusing primarily on exam performance rather than fostering deeper understanding or critical thinking. As Bikash from the TKP group further notes, "we think more about exams than real learning," which suggests that the learning environment is oriented towards performance metrics rather than meaningful cognitive engagement. Consequently, the instructional methods employed not only limit active learning but also discourage students from taking initiative, thereby stifling the development of learner autonomy and critical inquiry skills.

Moreover, institutional and resource constraints exacerbate these pedagogical limitations, creating an environment where learner agency is further diminished. Bishnu from the MNR group underscores the rigid control that teachers exert over all aspects of learning, stating, "teachers decide everything-topics, time, materials. We rarely choose anything ourselves." This control leaves students with minimal opportunities to make choices about their own learning process, which is essential for developing autonomy. Additionally, this issue is compounded by inadequate institutional support, as Binaya from the same group observes, "the campus doesn't provide resources, and many of us lack confidence to study on our own." This points to both structural and psychological barriers: the scarcity of learning resources limits students' ability to explore beyond the syllabus, while a lack of self-confidence hinders their willingness to attempt independent study. Suraj from the ATR group also reflects on these constraints by explaining that "teachers rush to finish the syllabus," which leaves "no time for discussions or student choice." The urgency to complete the syllabus reflects systemic pressures that prioritize coverage over comprehension and interaction, thereby restricting opportunities for student engagement, reflection, and decision-making. Together, these factors highlight how institutional policies and resource limitations create a learning environment that discourages learner agency and critical participation.

The findings also reveal a significant gap in students' metacognitive skills and prior educational experiences, which reinforces dependency on teacher direction and limits autonomous learning. Laxmi from DHI group explicitly states, "We haven't been taught how to learn independently or assess ourselves, so we depend on teachers for everything, even to know if we're learning well or not." This admission points to a lack of development in essential self-regulatory skills such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and self-assessment, which are critical components of learner autonomy. Similarly, Ajay from the ATR group notes that students "don't know how to plan or evaluate our learning" and have been "used to doing what the teachers say" since their earlier schooling. This suggests that the educational culture and system have consistently conditioned students to rely on external guidance rather than internal motivation or critical reflection. Such ingrained dependency creates a cycle where students are ill-prepared to assume responsibility for their own learning, thereby perpetuating passive learning behaviors. This reveals the need for educational interventions not only at the university level but also at earlier stages to cultivate learners' independent learning skills and confidence.

While some students express a desire to transcend these limitations, systemic and cultural factors significantly curtail their ability to exercise agency. Arjun from the TKP group reflects, "Some students want to learn more, but the system doesn't help. There's a lack of resources, and

exams control everything." This statement highlights that although learner agency may exist as an aspiration among students, the prevailing academic system, with its emphasis on high-stakes examinations and resource constraints, limits the realization of that agency. The dominant exam-oriented culture encourages rote memorization and conformity rather than exploration and critical thinking. Consequently, most students still rely on lectures and notes because they've never learned how to study independently. This indicates that the students' dependency is reinforced by both structural factors and their lack of exposure to autonomous learning practices. Furthermore, the observation that "only a few teachers encourage independence" suggests that the promotion of learner autonomy is not yet widespread or institutionalized within the teaching culture.

The exercise of learner agency in English language classrooms is shaped by a complex interplay of individual, relational, and contextual factors, as reflected in both student perceptions and classroom observations. At the individual level, students often demonstrate low self-efficacy, limited confidence, and unclear learning goals. These traits contribute to passive classroom behavior and a strong reliance on teachers for direction and validation. This diminished personal agency is largely influenced by students' prior educational experiences within an examination-oriented system that prioritizes rote learning over critical thinking and self-initiative. Such an environment restricts learners' development of autonomy and self-regulation, essential components of effective language learning.

Relational factors, particularly the dynamics between teachers and students, further constrain learner agency. Observations indicate that teacher-centered pedagogies dominate the classroom, with instructors controlling most interactions and offering limited opportunities for students to express their ideas or make meaningful decisions about their learning. This hierarchical structure reduces students' chances to negotiate participation or take ownership of their educational processes. Contextual influences, including rigid curricula, standardized assessment methods, and institutional policies, also restrict the scope for autonomous learning. Although resources such as digital tools and library facilities are available, they remain underutilized due to a lack of encouragement and inadequate integration into teaching practices. These individual, relational, and contextual constraints create a cycle of dependency that undermines students' motivation and ability to engage in self-directed learning, posing significant challenges to the development of learner agency in Nepalese university English classrooms.

Reflection of Learner Agency in Autonomous Learning

Despite emphasis on learner-centered education, many Nepalese university students still view learning as teacher-directed, shaped by a traditional system favoring rote memorization and exams. This limits learner agency, leading to dependency, low confidence, and minimal self-directed engagement, hindering meaningful participation in autonomous learning practices. The information collected from TKP Group reflects a perception of learning deeply rooted in teacher-dependency and exam-oriented practices, which directly limits students' engagement in autonomous learning. As the group states:

> *"Most of us believe that learning means following what teachers say. We rarely question or go beyond the notes. Even if we want to try something new, we worry about exams.* (Suraj)"

> *"We just wait for teachers to guide us, and we focus on what will be asked in tests. Only a few of us try to study independently, but there's no support or encouragement for that.* (Kiran)"

This response illustrates how students conceptualize learning as an act of compliance rather than exploration. The dominance of summative assessments shapes their behaviors,

discouraging risk-taking or self-initiated learning. Even those inclined toward independent study find themselves constrained by an unsupportive institutional context. Thus, their beliefs and practices reflect a limited exercise of learner agency, undermining their capacity to engage in autonomous learning.

Similarly, the MNR Group articulates a belief system centered on the authority of the teacher, which further reinforces passive learning behaviors. The group explains:

> *"We think teachers are the main source of knowledge, so we depend on them for everything, from deciding what to study to how to study it. Even when we have ideas or want to learn something more, we usually keep quiet because it's not what the teacher has planned.* (Binod)"

> *"We don't feel confident to take charge, and the campus doesn't give us enough materials or an environment to do so.* (Rita)"

This data underscores the perception of the teacher as the exclusive gatekeeper of knowledge and authority. Such a belief not only disempowers learners but also suppresses their intrinsic motivation to engage in exploratory or self-directed activities. The lack of confidence expressed by the students, coupled with inadequate institutional resources, further diminishes the possibilities for learner autonomy. Their practices mirror their beliefs, indicating that without systemic and psychological support, learner agency remains largely dormant.

Similarly, Ashok from DHI Group adds another layer to this discussion by highlighting how the lack of training in independent study and self-assessment further constrains learner agency. According to the group:

> *"We believe that learning means doing what we are told. We haven't learned how to study by ourselves or evaluate our progress. That's why we always ask teachers if we are doing things right. We think we need permission or instruction to learn something. So, our practice is mostly about following directions rather than exploring on our own."*

Here, the participants emphasize that their learning behaviors are driven by external validation and permission-seeking. The absence of prior exposure to strategies for independent learning has resulted in a highly dependent learning culture. Their reliance on teacher guidance for validation reflects a diminished sense of self-regulation, an essential component of autonomous learning. Consequently, their limited beliefs about the nature of learning translate into highly conformist practices, leaving little room for learner initiative or self-directed progress.

Expanding on the patterns evident in the previous groups, the ATR Group situates their beliefs and practices within the continuity of their past schooling experiences. They state:

> *"We've been trained to follow teachers since school. Now, even at the university, we believe that's the way learning works. We don't really think of learning as something we can control."* (Ruby)

> *"There's no habit of planning or assessing our learning, and everything is rushed to complete the syllabus. So, we rarely engage in autonomous learning, even though some of us want to"* (Ajay)

This response indicates that early educational conditioning continues to shape students' conceptualizations of learning well into higher education. The lack of habituation in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning processes further prevents them from exercising autonomy. Time constraints and the institutional pressure to complete the syllabus exacerbate this situation, creating an environment that prioritizes coverage over comprehension. Although a desire for autonomous learning exists among some students, systemic limitations and ingrained habits inhibit the realization of that desire.

Classroom observations indicate that learner agency in autonomous learning is notably limited by prevailing teacher-centered and syllabus-driven pedagogical approaches. Despite the availability of supportive resources such as technology and well-equipped learning environments, students rarely exercise substantive control over their own learning processes. Their involvement in activities such as setting personalized learning goals, selecting appropriate learning methods, or choosing instructional materials is minimal, with decision-making authority predominantly retained by instructors. Teachers consistently govern lesson planning, task allocation, and feedback mechanisms, thereby limiting opportunities for students to cultivate essential self-directed learning skills, including goal-setting, self-assessment, and collaborative problem-solving. While digital tools are occasionally utilized by students, this usage is restricted to narrowly defined, teacher-directed tasks rather than fostering comprehensive autonomous learning behaviors.

Furthermore, both student perceptions and classroom observations reveal a persistent pattern of constrained learner autonomy shaped by entrenched cultural and contextual influences. Students demonstrate a marked dependence on teachers and exhibit exam-related anxiety, which undermines their confidence and motivation to assume greater responsibility for their learning. Instructors' strict control over curricular content, goal setting, and evaluation processes further restricts students' active engagement in decision-making. Although access to learning resources is available, students' use of these remains largely confined within teacher-directed frameworks. This interplay between traditional pedagogical practices and student passivity underscores how institutional structures and socio-cultural norms continue to impede the development of critical self-regulatory competencies such as personalized goal-setting, critical reflection, and collaborative problem-solving.

Discussion

Learner agency, as conceptualized within social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), refers to the capacity of learners to act intentionally, make informed choices, and assume control over their learning processes. It involves the ability to set personal goals, select appropriate learning strategies, monitor progress, and critically reflect on outcomes (Holec, 1981; Little, 2007). Agency, therefore, is central to the idea of autonomous learning, where learners are not passive recipients but active participants. However, autonomy does not function in isolation; it is socially situated and contextually mediated (van Lier, 2008). Findings from the present study indicate that students' beliefs and learning behaviors are still largely shaped by a teacher-dominated culture and a rigid curricular framework. Despite having access to digital tools and academic libraries, students rarely demonstrate initiative in selecting or personalizing learning tasks. Decision-making remains primarily in the hands of teachers, reflecting a performative rather than transformative understanding of agency. This is consistent with research from Nepal (Ghimire, 2017; Khanal, 2021) and other Asian contexts, where hierarchical educational traditions discourage learner independence (Lai, 2015; Nguyen, 2012). Understanding the social and institutional constraints on learner agency is crucial before examining the individual psychological factors that influence learners' capacity for autonomous learning.

While the structural limitations are evident, learner agency is also shaped by individual

psychological dispositions. Theories of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2013) highlight the interrelationship between autonomy, competence, and motivation. Yet, students in this study report low confidence, unclear learning goals, and heavy reliance on teacher direction, symptoms of weak self-regulation. Even when resources are available, students seldom engage with them meaningfully, which points to both skill deficiencies and motivational barriers. These tendencies are rooted in Nepal's long-standing examination-driven educational model, which prioritizes rote learning and grades over critical thinking and reflective practice (Thapa, 2022; Karki, 2020). Similar patterns have been identified across South Asia and the Middle East, where rigid syllabi and authoritative teaching styles inhibit learners' sense of ownership (Littlewood, 2000; Cross, 2013). Therefore, providing students with learning materials alone is insufficient, without deliberate training in autonomy-supportive strategies and a willingness from educators to share control, learner agency will remain aspirational. Beyond individual psychological factors, it is equally important to consider how broader sociocultural contexts mediate learners' opportunities and capacities for agency.

In addition to psychological and pedagogical factors, sociocultural dimensions profoundly influence the enactment of learner agency. From a sociocultural perspective (Mercer, 2018; van Lier, 2008), agency is viewed as a relational construct that emerges within specific institutional and classroom interactions. Although students may have the potential to act agentively, this study finds that classroom practices and institutional norms systematically suppress such opportunities. Even in classrooms where technology is available and teachers appear approachable, instruction remains largely teacher-directed. Students complete tasks reactively rather than proactively shaping their learning paths. This aligns with Ahearn's (2001) notion of symbolic agency, where learners are included in form but excluded in function. In Nepal, Ghimire (2017) notes that autonomy is often misconstrued as mere freedom from the teacher, rather than as guided self-direction. Similarly, Murray (2025) argues that technological abundance alone does not foster agency unless supported by institutional reforms that align with learner-centered pedagogies. Taken together, these findings suggest that fostering genuine learner agency requires systemic shifts that address entrenched power dynamics and cultural assumptions in education. These findings underscore that the realization of learner agency requires more than isolated classroom interventions; it demands a systemic transformation of pedagogical beliefs, institutional structures, and cultural assumptions about teaching and learning.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how learner agency is perceived and exercised by students at Far Western University, the factors influencing its development, and how it is reflected in autonomous learning practices within English language classrooms. In response to the first research question, to what extent do students at Far Western University perceive and exercise learner agency in their learning processes? The study shows that students' perception and enactment of agency remain very limited. Their learning experiences are strongly shaped by teacher-centered traditions and rigid institutional structures, which restrict opportunities for decision-making, self-regulation, and personalized goal-setting. Although infrastructural resources such as libraries, internet access, and digital tools are available, these are underutilized due to the dominance of examination-driven and compliance-oriented practices. Consequently, student participation in shaping their own learning is minimal, and agency is largely confined within traditional classroom expectations.

Addressing the second research question, what pedagogical, institutional, and cognitive factors influence the development of learner agency among university students, the findings highlight several interrelated constraints. Teacher-dominated pedagogies and assessment systems that reward memorization limit the use of autonomy-supportive strategies, while the absence of

institutional policies that encourage independent learning reinforces student dependency. On the cognitive side, students often show low confidence and lack the skills required for self-directed learning, which further hinders the exercise of agency. Even when some initiative is evident, such as through smartphone-based learning, these efforts remain narrow, unstructured, and disconnected from a broader framework of autonomous learning.

Finally, in relation to the third research question, how do students' beliefs and practices regarding learner agency reflect their engagement in autonomous learning, the study reveals a consistent gap between rhetorical acknowledgment of agency and its actual enactment in classrooms. Students' beliefs and behaviors show dependency on teachers, limited confidence, and the absence of structured approaches to self-learning, all of which reduce their capacity to engage meaningfully with autonomous learning. Although agency is often recognized in principle, it is rarely realized in practice, leaving students unprepared to develop the reflective and critical capacities that autonomous learning requires. These findings underline the urgency of reimagining pedagogical and institutional practices so that students are genuinely empowered to take greater responsibility for their learning and to develop the lifelong learning skills demanded by contemporary education and global contexts.

The findings of this study indicate some implications for promoting learner agency and the necessity of a comprehensive approach encompassing pedagogical innovation, institutional restructuring, and sustained academic inquiry. Pedagogically, educators can equip themselves to implement learner-centered strategies such as collaborative learning, project-based tasks, and formative self-assessment. Institutionally, policies can support flexible curricula, diversified assessment practices, and active student participation in decision-making. Furthermore, this research can be essential to evaluate the long-term impact of autonomy-oriented interventions, teacher readiness for pedagogical reform, and the contextual dynamics that influence the development of learner agency in higher education.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

The study is limited in scope to English language classrooms at selected campuses of Far Western University. The findings may not fully represent the broader experiences of students across other universities in Nepal. The reliance on qualitative data, while providing depth and contextual insights, also limits the generalizability of the results. Moreover, the study focused primarily on students' perspectives within institutional boundaries, leaving out other stakeholders such as administrators, policymakers, or parents, whose roles may also shape the development of learner agency.

Future research can expand this study by including a more diverse range of higher institutions, allowing for comparative analysis across different educational settings. Longitudinal studies can be particularly valuable to examine how learner agency develops over time and how interventions aimed at promoting autonomy influence student outcomes. Further investigation into the perspectives of institutional leaders, policymakers, and even employers can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic factors that either promote or hinder learner agency. Additionally, mixed-methods research combining qualitative insights with quantitative measures of autonomy and learning outcomes could strengthen the evidence base and guide more effective policies and pedagogical practices.

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