Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate the level of autonomy of learners of higher secondary level education in Nepal regarding their gender, nature of institution, medium of instruction and stream. The subject of this study comprises 552 learners from 22 higher secondary school of academic session 2015/6 whom a questionnaire with a 5-point likert scale was administered. The data obtained were analyzed using mean, Mann-Whitney U-test and Kruskal Wallis H-test of non-parametric test. In the result, the learners' level of autonomy in learning English was found moderate (M =3.1078). Regarding the gender, the female students were found statistically significantly highly less autonomous than male students. However, there was not statistically significantly different in the level of autonomy of the government and private ELT students in learning English. But, Nepali medium ELT students were found statistically significantly highly less autonomous than English medium ELT students. Similarly, the result showed the significant different of ELT students' level of autonomy between the different streams, x^2(3) = 11.476, p = .009) with a mean rank of 17.50 for science, 291.65 for management, 242.23 for humanities and 259.05 for education stream. Pedagogical implication was made while concluding the study.

Keywords: ELT students; Learner autonomy; higher secondary level

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Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal 222

1. Introduction

Autonomy refers to the "learners' capacity to make decision in their learning" (Smith, 2008, p. 396). In other words, it is a learners' ability to take action and make decision in their learning without the control of other and a successful learner is one who is highly autonomous. There is a substantaial body of literature carried out in learner autonomy in learing English for several decades. However, relatively few studies have attempted to show the learners' level of autonomy regarding the multiple variable like gender, medium of instruction, nature of institution where they read, faculties etc. No research has been carried out in revealing learners' autonomy in context of higher secondary level education of Nepal especially in the margnalized area of Bara district. Hence, the objective of this study is to accomplish the task of investigating the ELT learners' autonomy level in terms of aforementioned strata and to provide insights into language pedagogy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy refers to the "capacity of the learner as well as a pedagogical goal" (Schwienhorst, 2008, p. 9). It is the "students' taking more control over and having more responsibility for their own language learning process" (Yildirim, 2012, p. 19). Although it was traditionally associated with individualism, communicative point of view regards language learning as a process of interaction and hence autonomy is realized as the interdependence rather than individualism (Aoki, 1999). It is "a complex, socio-cognitive system manifested in different degrees of independence and control of one's own learning process involving capacities abilities, attitudes, willingness, decision making, choices planning, actions and assessment" (Chitashvili, 2007, p. 17). It is the learners' ability to take charge of learning holding all sort of responsibility for decision making concerning all aspects regarding their learning like "determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used monitoring the procedure of acquisitions properly and evaluation of what has been acquired" (Holec, as cited in Little, 2000, pp. 30-31). It involves all the management tasks concerned with

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal   223

learning regarding the learners' awareness of gaining own styles and strategies and their utilization in learning language (Benson, as cited in Farrell & Jacobs, 2010). The aforementioned definition "emphasizes the transfer of responsibility for learning to the learner from teacher to let learner gain a greater degree of active involvement and better learning" (Kocak, 2003, p. 19). Autonomy is of two types namely proactive referring to one's initiative in formulating directions and reflective which "enables learners to organize resources autonomously in order reach their goal" (Littlewood, as cited in Chan, 2015, p. 148).

2.2 Theoretical Background of Autonomy

Learner autonomy stems from the philosophical foundation of humanism, constructivism and experimental learning according to which learners are placed in centre in learning making them active engagement in the interactive learning encouraging them for the management of their learning taking all sort of responsibility (Kocak, 2003). Constructivism views that learners are capable of having "a more memorable and effective learning if they take control of it and if they can adapt it according to their needs and expectation" (Leon, 2010, p. 289). Autonomy is grounded on the principles of empowerment, reflection and appropriate target language use (Little, 2010). This means, autonomous learners take their own "responsibility for their learning and possess the capacity to reflect on the content and process of learning with a view to bringing them as far as possible under conscious control" (Little, as cited in Benson, 2013, p. 188). Reflection plays an important role in "allowing learners to feel responsibility for their own learning as well" (Tokunaga, 2009, p. 344). Autonomous language learners are "in control of important dimensions of their learning" (Benson, 2010, p. 79). Schmenk (2006) makes discussion on the principle of progression which is based on the belief that the process of autonomization, progresses "following the progressive line from dependence heteronomy to independence autonomy" (pp. 76-77). Learners in dependence heteronomy depend on their teacher but in independence autonomy direct their learning process themselves taking all sort of responsibility (ibid). An autonomous learner is supposed to require psychological capacities from internal constraints and meaningful options from external constraints (Macaro, 1997).

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal 224

2.3 Dimensions of Learners' Autonomy

Autonomy possesses five level namely action, awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence according to which learners can be made autonomous encouraging them to take action in learning taking active involvement and encouraging them to modify the pedagogical goals or choose the contents in intervention (Nunan, as cited in Wang, Spencer & Wang, 2012). In the level of creation, they are encouraged to create their own pedagogical goals and in transcendence, they are made autonomous in encouraging to use the English language beyond the classroom according to their needs (ibid).

Macaro (1997) identifies three levels or dimensions of autonomy namely autonomy of language competence, autonomy of language learning competence and autonomy of choice and action. The former is concerned with the learners' mastery over the target language; the second dimension is related to the development of learners' ability to implement the learning skills of target language to other situations and the final is concerned with "providing opportunity to develop autonomy of choice if the required skills are to be developed" (ibid, p. 168).

Benson (as cited in Carter, 2006) identifies three version of autonomy namely technical version referring to learners' skills and techniques to learn language; psychological version referring to learners' mental ability or emotional attitudes in learning language and political version of autonomy is concerned with empowering them to take all responsibility for their learning. Le (2013) adds social cultural version of autonomy stemmed from the theoretical ground of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory which asserts that learning is the product of social relationship and interaction rejecting the sense of individualism. It can also be studied in terms of strong and weak version of pedagogy for learner autonomy. The second version of autonomy is considered to be "appropriate in non-western contexts since in such version students are assumed to be already autonomous and are ready to exercise this capacity" (Richard, as cited in Takagi, 2009, p. 325)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal
225

2.4 Fostering Learners' Autonomy

Learners are placed at the centre of learning process in learner centered learning (O'Leary, 2014); however, placing them at the centre is not sufficient in promoting learner autonomy for the enhancement of which it is suggested to focus on learner choice, reflection and peer for it (Takagi, 2009). Management of group work activities, motivation for self-assessment, encouragement to be cooperative rather than competitive and individualist, exposure of authentic texts are the classroom provision to promote learners' autonomy (Little, 2013; Farrell & Jacobs, 2010). Teachers play a crucial role in promoting "the psychological attributes and practical abilities" (Smith, 2008, p. 396). Therefore, Holec (2009) suggests teachers to play the role of developing the learners' learning competence training them to define learning objectives, to select appropriate learning resources to adopt relevant learning scenarios, to evaluate his progress and to manage his learning program etc and providing adequate resources for self-directed language learning.

Learners should be intrinsically motivated as intrinsic motivation is considered to be significant for the learners' engagement in learning which provides foundation for autonomous language learning (Farrell & Jacobs, 2010; Hausen, 2009). Little (2000) shows the significance of learners directed group work in the development of learner autonomy since "the learners with mixed ability and experience support each other in their respective zones of proximal development, maintain a shared understanding of the task they are engaged on and learn through negotiation and discourse" (pp. 30-31). Ganza (2008) shows the need of collaboration between learners and teachers for promoting learner autonomy because it is "an inter-relational achievement, made possible by a teacher-learner interrelationship characterized at the same time by the teacher's and learner's restraint and concern autonomy" (p. 71).

Teachers can technically support learners encouraging them to use the metacognitive strategies in learning process and psycho-socially by being supportive, patient, open, non-judgmental, motivating and raising their awareness (Benson, 2013). Trebbi (2008) advocates the structured framework for the promotion of learners' autonomy that supports "awareness-raising about the nature of languages, cultures and language learning; reflective experience-based

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal 226

learning; learner initiatives and exploration of the target language; relevant choices of learning activities and learning to learn activities" (p. 37). The attention is also to be paid in designing course that reflects learners' goals in its language, tasks and strategies linking tasks explicitly to a simplified model of the language learning process so as to foster autonomy (Cotterall, as cited in Benson, 2013).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

Research questions to facilitate the objective of study are as follows:

1.What is the level of learenrs' autonomy in learning English of higher secondary level students in Nepal?

2. What is the difference between the learners' level of autonomy in terms of gender?

3. What is the difference between the learners' level of autonomy in terms of nature of institution?

4. What is the difference between the learners' level of autonomy in terms of medium of instruction?

5. What is the difference between the learners' level of autonomy in terms of faculty?

3.2 Participants

The study comprises 552 ELT students of grade 12 from 22 higher secondary school of Bara district of Nepal. The research participants were sampled using multi-stage cluster sampling and the schools that of fish bowl procedure. Among the participants, 348 (63%) were female and 204 (37%) were male; 515 (93.3%) were from Nepali and 37 (6.7%) were from English medium; 513 (92.9%) from government and 39 (7.1%) were from private higher secondary school. Similarly, 318 (57.6%) were from management, 217 (39.3%) were from education, 15 (2.7%) were from humanities and 2 (0.4%) respondents were selected from science stream.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal 227

3.3 Instrument

The instrument used for this study was a questionnaire with 6 items coping major area of learners' autonomy in learning English consisting of 5-point Likert scale with their specific value ranging from always = 1; often= 2; sometimes = 3; rarely = 4 and never = 5. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha model, and Cronbach's alpha in Table 1 showed internal consistency of .721 which indicated a high level of reliability. The instrument was dully designed to cover the content of autonomy to establish content validity and expert was consulted for maintaining face validity.

Table 1. Reliability of the Instruments

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.721	6

4. Results

4.1 Indicator of Determining Learners' Autonomy in Learning English

Table 2 shows the indicator of determining the level of learners' autonomy in learning English. The mean score of learners' autonomy that lies between 1.00 -2.33 is regarded as high; 2.34-3.66 as average or moderate and 3.67-5.00 as low.

Table 2. Indicator of Determining Learners' Autonomy in Learning English

Learners' Autonomy	Mean
High	1.00-2.33
Moderate	2.34-3.66
Low	3.67-5.00

4.2 Learners' Level of Autonomy in Learning English

The mean resulted in Table 3 showed that the level of learners autonomy in learning English was moderate in all of the items that (Q1a/MDSG) in making decisions and setting goals of their own learning (M =2.9348); (Q1b/DETR) in doing their own efforts in learning English (M = 2.6594); (Q1c/PABC) in performing activities beyond the classroom (M = 3.3170); (Q1d/INSW) in improving English noting their strengths and weakness (M = 3.0598);

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal
228

(Q1e/CDRM) in consulting different reference materials (M = 3.0344) and (Q1f/UCI) using computer and internet for learning English (M = 3.6413). In overall, the level of learners' autonomy in learning English was found moderate (M =3.1078).

Table 3. Learners' Autonomy in Learning English

	N	Mean
Q1a.Decisions making and setting goals (MDSG)	552	2.9348
Q1b.Doing effort and taking responsibility (DETR)	552	2.6594
Q1c.Performing activities beyond the class (PABC)	552	3.3170
Q1d.Improving English noting strength and weakness (INSW)	552	3.0598
Q1e.Consulting different reference materials(CDRM)	552	3.0344
Q1f. Using Computer and internet (UCI)	552	3.6413
Grand Total	552	3.1078

4.3 Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Terms of Gender

The mean in Table 4 showed that female students were found less autonomous than male students in learning English in all of the items that female (M =3.0805) and male (M = 2.6863) in making decisions and setting goals of their own learning (Q1a/MDSG); female (M =2.7845) and male (M =2.4461) in doing their own efforts and taking responsibility in learning English(Q1b/DETR); female (M =3.4282) and male (M = 3.1275) in performing activities beyond the classroom(Q1c/PABC); female (M =3.1121) and male (M = 2.9706) in improving English noting their strengths and weakness(Q1d/INSW); female (M =3.1092) and male (M = 2.9069) in consulting different reference materials (Q1e/CDRM) and female (M =3.8879) and male (M = 3.2206) in using computer and internet for learning English (Q1f/UCI) . In overall, female students (M =3.2337) were found to be less autonomous than male students (M =2.8930) in learning English.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal 229

Table 4. Learners' Language Autonomy in Terms of Gender

Gender		Q1a/MDSG	Q1b/DETR	Q1c/PABC	Q1d/INSW	Q1e/CDRM	Q1f/UCI	Grand Mean
Female	Mean	3.0805	2.7845	3.4282	3.1121	3.1092	3.8879	3.2337
	N	348	348	348	348	348	348	348
Male	Mean	2.6863	2.4461	3.1275	2.9706	2.9069	3.2206	2.8930
	N	204	204	204	204	204	204	204
Grand Mean	Mean	2.9348	2.6594	3.3170	3.0598	3.0344	3.6413	3.1078
	N	552	552	552	552	552	552	552

Note: MDSG here stands for making decisions and setting goals; DETR for doing effort and taking responsibility; PABC for performing activities beyond the class; INSW for improving English noting strength and weakness; CDRM for consulting different reference materials and UCI for using computer and internet.

The statistics test in Table 6 also showed that the female students were statistically significantly highly less autonomous than male students ($U = 26986.500$, $p < .001$) with their mean rank (Table 5) of 300.95 for female and 234.79 for male students.

Table 5. Mean Rank of Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Gender

Variable Gender		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Gender	Female	348	300.95	104731.50
	Male	204	234.79	47896.50
	Total	552		

Table 6. Statistic Test for Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Gender

	Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Gender
Mann-Whitney U	26986.500
Wilcoxon W	47896.500
Z	-4.714
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal 230

4.4 Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Terms of Nature of Institution

The mean in Table 7 showed that the students of government institutions were found to be less autonomous than that of private institutions in the items that government students (*M* =2.9415) and private students (*M* =2.8462) in making decisions and setting goals of their own learning (Q1a/MDSG); government students (*M* =2.6725) and private students (*M* =2.4872) in doing their efforts in learning English (Q1b/DETR) and government students (*M* =3.3353) and private students (*M* = 3.0769) in performing activities beyond the classroom (Q1c/PABC). However, the students of private institutions were found less autonomous than the students of government institutions in the items that private students (*M* =3.0769) and government students (*M* = 3.0585) in improving English noting their strengths and weakness (Q1d/INSW); private students (*M* = 3.1282) and government students (*M* =3.0273) in consulting different reference materials (Q1e/CDRM) but government students (*M* = 3.6706) were found less autonomous than private students (*M* = 3.2564) in using computer and internet for learning English (Q1f/UCI). In overall, government students (*M* =3.1176) were found to be less autonomous than private students (*M* =2.9786) in learning English.

Table 7. Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Nature of Institution

Nature of Institution		Q1a/MDSG	Q1b/DETR	Q1c/PABC	Q1d/INSW	Q1e/CDRM	Q1f/UCI	Grand Mean
Government	Mean	2.9415	2.6725	3.3353	3.0585	3.0273	3.6706	3.1176
	N	513	513	513	513	513	513	513
Private	Mean	2.8462	2.4872	3.0769	3.0769	3.1282	3.2564	2.9786
	N	39	39	39	39	39	39	39
Grand Mean	Mean	2.9348	2.6594	3.3170	3.0598	3.0344	3.6413	3.1078
	N	552	552	552	552	552	552	552

However, the statistic test in Table 9 showed that there was not statistically significantly different in the autonomy of the government and private ELT students in learning English (*U* = 8850.500, *p* = .229) with their mean rank (Table 8) of 278.75 for government students and 246.94 for private students.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal   231

Table 8. Mean Rank of Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Nature of Institution

Variable		Nature Institution	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Learners'		Government	513	278.75	142997.50
Autonomy	in	Private	39	246.94	9630.50
Terms	of	Total	552		
Institution					

Table 9. Statistic Test for Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Nature of Institution

	Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Institution
Mann-Whitney U	8850.500
Wilcoxon W	9630.500
Z	-1.203
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.229

a. Grouping Variable: Nature of Institution

4.5 Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Terms of Medium of Instruction

The mean in Table 10 showed that Nepali medium students were found to be less autonomous than English medium students in learning English in all of the items that Nepali medium (M =2.9553) and English medium students (M = 2.6486) in making decisions and setting goals of their own learning (Q1a/MDSG); Nepali medium students (M =2.6757) and English medium students (M =2.4324) in doing their efforts in learning English(Q1b/DETR); Nepali medium students (M =3.3262) and English medium students (M = 3.1892) in performing activities beyond the classroom (Q1c/PABC); Nepali medium students (M =3.0757) and English medium students (M = 2.8378) in improving English noting their strengths and weakness (Q1d/INSW); Nepali medium students (M =3.0388) and English medium students (M = 2.9730) in consulting different reference materials (Q1e/CDRM) and Nepali medium students (M =3.6893) and English medium students (M = 2.9730) in using computer and internet for learning English (Q1f/UCI). In overall, Nepali medium students (M =3.1269) were found to be less autonomous than English medium students (M =2.8423) in learning English.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal
232

Table 10. ELT Students' Language Autonomy in Terms of Medium of Instruction

Medium		Q1a/MDSG	Q1b/DETR	Q1c/PABC	Q1d/INSW	Q1e/CDRM	Q1f/UCI	Grand Mean
Nepali	Mean	2.9553	2.6757	3.3262	3.0757	3.0388	3.6893	3.1269
	N	515	515	515	515	515	515	515
English	Mean	2.6486	2.4324	3.1892	2.8378	2.9730	2.9730	2.8423
	N	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
Grand Mean	Mean	2.9348	2.6594	3.3170	3.0598	3.0344	3.6413	3.1078
	N	552	552	552	552	552	552	552

The statistic test in Table 12 also showed that Nepali medium ELT students were found to be statistically significantly highly less autonomous than English medium ELT students ($U = 7486.000$, $p = .029$) with their mean rank (Table 11) of 280.46 for Nepali medium and 221.32 for English medium students.

Table 11. Mean Rank of Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Medium of Instruction

	Medium	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Medium	Nepali	515	280.46	144439.00
	English	37	221.32	8189.00
	Total	552		

Table 12. Statistic Test for Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Medium of Instruction

	Learners' autonomy in Terms of Medium
Mann-Whitney U	7486.000
Wilcoxon W	8189.000
Z	-2.183
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.029

a. Grouping Variable: Medium

4.6 Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Terms of Different Stream

The mean in Table 13 showed that in making decisions and setting goals of their own learning (Q1a/MDSG), the ELT students from management ($M = 3.0220$) ranked the least autonomous followed by ELT students from education ($M = 2.8618$); humanities ($M = 2.2667$) and science ($M = 2.0000$). In doing their own efforts in learning English (Q1b/DETR), the ELT

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal
233

students from humanities (M =2.7333) ranked the least autonomous followed by ELT students from management (M =2.7044); education (M =2.5945) and science (M =2.0000). In performing activities beyond the classroom (Q1c/PABC), the ELT students from management (M =3.5440) ranked the least autonomous followed by ELT students from humanities (M =3.4000); education (M =2.9954) and science (M =1.5000). In improving English noting their strengths and weakness (Q1d/INSW), the ELT students from management (M =3.1352) ranked the least autonomous followed by ELT students from education (M =3.0184); humanities (M =2.2667) and science (M =1.5000). In consulting different reference materials (Q1e/CDRM), the ELT students from management (M =3.1006) ranked the least autonomous followed by ELT students from humanities (M =3.0667); education (M =2.9493) and science (M =1.5000). In using computer and internet for learning English (Q1f/UCI), the ELT students from humanities (M =3.7333) ranked the least autonomous followed by ELT students from education (M =3.6774); management (M =3.6289) and science (M =1.0000). In overall, the ELT students from management (M =3.1892) ranked the least autonomous followed by ELT students from education (M =3.0161); humanities (M =2.9111) and science (M =1.5833).

Table 13. ELT Learners' Language Autonomy in Terms of Different Stream

Faculty		Q1a/MDSG	Q1b/DETR	Q1c/PABC	Q1d/INSW	Q1e/CDRM	Q1f/UCI	Grand Mean
Science	Mean	2.0000	2.0000	1.5000	1.5000	1.5000	1.0000	1.5833
	N	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Management	Mean	3.0220	2.7044	3.5440	3.1352	3.1006	3.6289	3.1892
	N	318	318	318	318	318	318	318
Humanities	Mean	2.2667	2.7333	3.4000	2.2667	3.0667	3.7333	2.9111
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
Education	Mean	2.8618	2.5945	2.9954	3.0184	2.9493	3.6774	3.0161
	N	217	217	217	217	217	217	217
Grand Mean	Mean	2.9348	2.6594	3.3170	3.0598	3.0344	3.6413	3.1078
	N	552	552	552	552	552	552	552

The result of statistic test in Table 15 also showed that there was a statistically significantly different in ELT students' level of autonomy between the different streams, x^2(3) = 11.476, p = .009) with a mean rank (Table 14) of 17.50 for science, 291.65 for management, 242.23 for humanities and 259.05 for education stream.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal 234

Table 14. Mean Rank of ELT Learners' Language Autonomy in Terms of Different Stream

	Faculty	N	Mean Rank
Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Streams	Science	2	17.50
	Management	318	291.65
	Humanities	15	242.23
	Education	217	259.05
	Total	552	

Table 15. Statistic Test for ELT Learners' Language Autonomy in Terms of Different Stream

	Learners' Autonomy in Terms of Faculty
Chi-Square	11.476
Df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.009

a. Kruskal Wallis Test
b. Grouping Variable: Faculty

5. Discussion

On the basis of result, discussion can be made that the higher secondary level ELT students in the marginalized area of Bara district of Nepal were found average autonomous (M =3.1078) in learning English. Regarding the gender, female students (M =3.2337) were found less autonomous than male students (M =2.8930) in learning English. The significant test also showed that the female students were found to be statistically significantly highly less autonomous than male students ($U = 26986.500$, $p < .001$) with their mean rank of 300.95 for female and 234.79 for male students which is inconsistent with the result of Varol & Yilmaz (2010) since they didn't show any significant difference in the level of autonomy in terms of gender. Regarding the nature of institution, the students of government institutions (M =3.1176) were found less autonomous than that of private institutions (M =2.9786) in learning English. However, the statistic test showed that there was not statistically significantly different in the autonomy of the government and private ELT students in learning English ($U = 8850.500$, $p = .229$) with their mean rank of 278.75 for government students and 246.94 for private students. But, regarding the medium of instruction, Nepali medium students (M =3.1269) were found less autonomous than English medium students (M =2.8423) in learning English. The significant test

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:5 May 2016**
Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal
235

also showed that Nepali medium ELT students were statistically significantly highly less autonomous than English medium ELT students (U = 7486.000, p = .029) with their mean rank of 280.46 for Nepali medium and 221.32 for English medium students. Similarly, there was a significant different in the level of learners' autonomy in terms of faculty that the ELT students from management (M =3.1892) ranked the least autonomous followed by ELT students from education (M =3.0161); humanities (M =2.9111) and science (M =1.5833). The significant test also showed that there was a statistically significantly different in ELT students' level of autonomy between the different streams, x^2(3) = 11.476, p = .009) with a mean rank of 17.50 for science, 291.65 for management, 242.23 for humanities and 259.05 for education stream.

6. Conclusion

Discussion made on the basis of results showed that the higher secondary level ELT students in the marginalized area of Bara district of Nepal were found with moderate level of autonomy in learning English which is still a problem since learners learn best if they are highly autonomous. Therefore, ELT teachers who are engaged in teaching higher secondary level education are suggested to pay their due attention in fostering their autonomy so as to make them successful learners in learning English.

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Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in Nepal   238

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Keshab Kumar Sijali, Ph.D. Scholar and Prof. Dr. R. N. Khanal, Ph.D.
Learners' Autonomy in Learning English in Context of Higher Secondary Level Education in
Nepal   239