

# Research

## WHAT DO TEACHERS THINK ABOUT LEARNER AUTONOMY?: A VIEW OF THAI AND NON-THAI ENGLISH TEACHERS

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### Abstract

Learner autonomy development will not be successful if teachers themselves do not know what it is and how to implement it. Therefore, this study aimed to address the three research questions which were 1) What are teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy in terms of its definition?; 2) Do teachers believe learner autonomy is important?; and 3) What are possible constraints on the development of learner autonomy by Thai students? Open-response items questionnaires were distributed to 70 Thai and non-Thai teachers teaching English in five private universities in Bangkok. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that 1) There were six definitions of learner autonomy (learner's responsibility, independent learning with choice and freedom, self-study, motivation, independent learning with conditions, and mutual relationship between teacher and student); 2) Every teacher agreed that learner autonomy was important; and 3) There were three major constraints of learner autonomy development (students, Thai culture influencing the Thai education system, and teachers). Theoretical, pedagogical and administrative implications were discussed.

**Key words:** constraints, definitions, English learning, learner autonomy, teachers' perspectives

## Introduction

Learner autonomy is a crucial concept and is a major goal for any educational institution as it associates with learning effectiveness. However, as Dickinson (1987) points out, learners cannot become autonomous just by being told to. The developing of learner autonomy does not solely depend on the learners, especially in student-centred classrooms, the guidance of teachers is still to be needed. This, therefore, reinforces the role of teachers in assisting students to develop learner autonomy. Kohonen (2003) supports that developing learner autonomy is beneficial for both teachers and students although autonomy development in foreign language education is a complex process requiring time, commitment, expertise and explicit pedagogical guidance. Learner autonomy development will not be successful if teachers themselves do not know what it is and how to implement it. As Little (2007:27) argues, *it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner*. This provokes research on teachers' perspectives towards learner autonomy as it can shed light on the readiness of teachers for learner autonomy development and support or guidance they may need to successfully or effectively adopt this mode of learning. Therefore, this study aimed to address the three research questions which were:

- 1) What are teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy in terms of its definition?
- 2) Do teachers believe learner autonomy is important?
- 3) What are possible constraints on the development of learner autonomy by Thai students?

## Learner Autonomy: Terminology Overview

The term 'learner autonomy' has been differently defined by many scholars in the field. Holec (1981:3) defines 'autonomy' as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. He further elaborates that the *ability* is not an innate ability, but it can be obtained by formal learning in a systematic manner. Benson (2001:110) describes autonomy as 'the capacity to control over one's own learning', while Dickinson (1987:11) defines autonomy as 'the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all

of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions'. Noticeably, the term 'autonomy' is dealt with various definitions; therefore, autonomy is semantically various and complex (Little and Dam, 1998). According to Gardner and Miller (1999), there are three reasons. First, the term has been defined by different writers in different ways. Second, since its definitions are still debated, so there is no agreed definition. Third, the concepts of autonomy and independent learning have developed in a variety of geographical areas; consequently, different terminology although similar is used to define the concepts. This is the reason why the terms 'autonomy', 'self-directed learning', 'self-instruction', and 'self-access learning' are interchangeably used in the field. Consequences derived from these various definitions are possibly a variety of interpretations of the term and a variety of implementations.

## **Learner Autonomy and Role of Teacher**

In the view of its advocates, autonomy is a prerequisite for effective learning because autonomous learners are better language learners who develop more learning responsibility and critical thinking skills. These qualities require opportunities from teachers to allow learners to make choices for and make decisions about their learning (Benson, 2001). Clearly, to develop autonomous learners it concerns the whole learning process, and teachers have a crucial role to play. This suggests a shift from learner autonomy to the role of the teacher in helping a promotion of learner autonomy, and ways in which learner autonomy is bound up with teachers' own learning and teaching experiences and their beliefs about autonomy (Lamb, 2008). However before we consider how teachers can best assist their students to become autonomous learners, it is necessary to look at their awareness and understanding of this perspective. This leaves open the question of what will happen if the teacher does not know what learner autonomy is and how to deliver a method of teaching to foster and develop learner autonomy.

## **Research Design and Subjects**

It was survey research carried out with 70 Thai and non-Thai teachers teaching English in the five private universities in the Bangkok Metropolis. Among them, 49 (70%) were Thai and 21 (30%) were non-Thai teachers from 8 countries: U.S.A., UK, Canada, Australia, New

Zealand, South Africa, Burma, and the Philippines. 21 (30%) were male teachers, and 46 (46%) were females, while 3 (4%) were unidentified-gender teachers. On average, these teachers were in their 30s. The youngest was 20 and the oldest was 72.

The Instrument

Data were collected by an *open-response items* questionnaire which took the form of *broad open-ended questions* which enabled a deeper exploration of the issues of investigation. In addition, this type of question establishes more expansive and often unpredicted responses (Brown, 2009).

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data. The answers were read several times with an attempt to find key words or key concepts. Then, the data which showed the same concepts were categorized into the same group, and the percentages were computed to obtain frequencies of each answer category.

Results and Discussions

The findings and discussions are presented according to the research questions.

I. Definitions of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy was categorized into 6 definitions as shown in Table I.

Table I: Definitions of Learner Autonomy

What is Learner Autonomy?	Frequency count	Percentage
Learners' responsibility	37	53%
Independent learning with choice or freedom	12	17%
Self-study	11	16%
Learning motivation	4	6%
Independent learning with conditions	3	4%
Mutual relationship between teacher and student	3	4%

### **I) Learners' responsibility**

The most saliently agreed definition is 'learners' responsibility' (53%) by taking into account the key words such as *responsibility, responsible, control of learning, set learning goals or objectives, choose materials, monitor or evaluate learning, learn or know how to learn, and take charge of own learning*. This is very close to the definition provided by Holec (1981:3). The following are the quotes of some definitions.

*The ability to know how to learn and the willingness to take responsibility for their own learning.*

*Learner autonomy, as the term suggested, is that learners can learn anything by themselves, with or without any guidance given by teachers. In this regard, the roles of teachers are as helpers, facilitators, not just teach everything. Learner can set goals and objectives of their learning, including pathways to success in the course, and evaluation process.*

It should be noted that although it is the learners' responsibility, teachers are not free from this mode of learning, but they need to take on new roles which concentrate on helping students learn to learn, not on their teaching.

### **2) Independent learning with choice or freedom**

Independent learning which comes with choice, freedom or right to perform their own learning is the second definition (17%). The words such as *learning independently, freedom, and rights* were considered for this category.

*It's a kind of freedom to act or do as one pleases.*

*Learners should have rights to choose what they like to learn.*

The definitions of learner autonomy under this category somewhat reflect full autonomy. Learners are empowered to perform their independent learning by making their own decisions on what and how to learn, and this includes using their own learning strategies without teacher's presence or interference.

### 3) Self-study

Learner autonomy as self-study especially outside class was defined as the third rank (16%). The words such as *self-study*, *self-learning*, *search for own materials*, and *find more knowledge* were paid attention.

*Learning by themselves outside of class.*

*Learning autonomy is one of the teaching techniques promoting students to learn by themselves. Students can search for their own appropriate materials, such as internet, media through television.*

Obviously, the words like *outside class*, and *Internet* including other types of media for autonomous learning, were frequently mentioned. What can be concluded is that out of class learning is regarded as an important factor to enhance learner autonomy especially through the Internet and other media as sources of knowledge. Understandably, the digital era no longer limits knowledge to be only in a classroom and at a teacher.

### 4) Learning motivation

Learning motivation as a key factor for learner autonomy was defined with 6% response rate and is the fourth rank.

*Self-motivating learning method, the students' enthusiasm is a key of self-learning. And what they want to learn is based on their personal interest.*

*'Learner autonomy' is inner power students have and use for motivating themselves to learn and acquire knowledge and what they are interested in.*

It is obvious that self-motivation or motivation from inside the learners is considered essential. Students need to have self-motivation to pursue their autonomous learning on what they have personal interest in. This is in support of Ushioda's (1996) argument that by definition autonomous learners are motivated learners; and intrinsic motivation is more preferable for this mode of learning.

### 5) Independent learning with conditions

Independent learning with some conditions was defined by 4% respondents. Such conditions are related to course lessons and curriculum.

*Learner autonomy is independent learning. It means what students would like to know or to learn, can search information by themselves, but everything should be in line with lessons that they learn.*

*Learner autonomy is the changes of the curriculum towards a more learner-centered and more independent process of learning.*

Learner autonomy was reflected with a close relation with syllabus boundness. This signifies reactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999) which needs to take into account constraints from a course syllabus or curriculum in a mainstream educational system.

### 6) Mutual relationship between teacher and student

The definition which deals with a mutual relationship between teacher and student was equally rated with 4% as the aforementioned definition.

*I think it's a mutual relationship between teacher and students. Both sides need to take active part. Teachers should not blame students for their not being involved.*

Learner autonomy development cannot solely rely on either a teacher or a student; however, it takes two to go tango. Therefore, both parties need to take and share responsibility. This suggests a collaborative instruction paradigm which requires both teacher and student engagement as active and interactive agents in the pro-active learning processes.

## 2. Importance of Learner Autonomy

The findings on the teachers' perspectives on importance of learner autonomy are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Importance of Learner Autonomy**

Importance	Frequency count	Percentage
<b>Yes</b> - Leading to life-long learning - Promoting extended learning outside class - Contributing to society development - Being important, but with some variables	70	100%
<b>No</b>	0	0%

It was unanimously agreed that learner autonomy is important. The given reasons were analyzed and categorized into four main areas as follows.

### **I) Learner autonomy leading to life-long learning**

It was extensively agreed that learner autonomy has a contribution in developing students' learning and learning achievement. Learner autonomy is considered as an effective learning approach. Being autonomous, students take charge of their own learning, and this help make them mature and responsible. Learning management skills will give rise to life-long learning. In addition, learner autonomy can effectively fulfill each individual student's learning style. Without learner autonomy, learning achievement is hard to happen even in any physically-modernized classroom.

*Learner autonomy is important for learners because it trains them to be able to make their own decisions in various ways to improve their language skills and it will finally lead to their self-reliance and self-discipline in their future career and life-long learning.*

*Yes. Autonomous learners are those who can manage their learning, seeking opportunities of learning and employing proper learning strategies. Autonomous learners are also able to set their learning goals, reflect on them and assess whether or not the progress is being made.*

### **2) Learner autonomy as extended learning outside class**

It was accepted that learning is not limited to a square room with knowledge delivered by a teacher especially in this digital era. Therefore, learner autonomy is regarded as an important element of successful language learning because it promotes learning outside a



classroom, and learners can obtain knowledge from various sources. Knowledge is no longer limited to the teacher as the only resource person. This clearly reflects the teachers' belief in the value of autonomous learning and the role of learners, which requires them to be an active agent in the learning processes. Meanwhile, realization of their teaching which is moved away from the transmission of knowledge towards language learning as the active production of knowledge (Benson and Voller, 1997) is clearly noted.

*Yes. Students cannot depend on the teacher all the time in the world where learning is limitless and knowledge is not just in the classroom.*

*Yes, very important. Especially in EFL one cannot learn, improve, or retain what they learned by studying once or twice per week. This is true though in any subject and it goes beyond the Thai method of just memorization. Unfortunately, most students only memorize and do not learn to think.*

### 3) Learner autonomy as a contribution to societal development

It was pointed out that for some teachers, learner autonomy is not only important for learning context, but also as a contribution to societal development. This is beyond the school context. Autonomous learners are life-long learners who know how to learn effectively and who possess critical thinking skills. This is the essential characteristics of people in a knowledge-based society, which is emphasized in the Thai national education agenda. Learner autonomy which empowers learners with critical thinking skills and a sense of responsibility can contribute to better society.

*Yes, it will support the idea of being a life-long learning and eventually to a knowledge-base society, a national agenda, isn't it?*

*Definitely! Cannot be spoon-fed or being spoon-fed by others. Be independent, courageous and powerful enough to make right decisions. Seek and apply creativity.*

#### 4) Learner autonomy and variables for its effectiveness

Even though the teachers agreed that learner autonomy is important, some variables were mentioned in regard to learner autonomy development. The first one is related to a co-operation of both teachers and students. Teachers need to take responsibility for developing learner autonomy by putting in their effort to do so. One way is to train students and support them to be autonomous. At the same time, students also need to take their learning responsibility in order to become autonomous, which will result in learning achievement. Learner autonomy is therefore a consequence of a mutual co-operation between teachers and students.

*Yes, I feel it's the teacher's responsibility to guide the students, but then the students need to take what they can from the teachers and further their own learning.*

*Yes, I do because student's academic achievement cannot happen from the teachers' effort alone. It takes two to tango.*

Another variable that should receive attention as far as the importance of learner autonomy and learning achievement is concerned is a concrete definition of learner autonomy.

*In some cases yes it is important depending on the subject matter, and if it has been well defined.*

*Yes – in theory.*

Some teachers mentioned that learner autonomy was just theoretically important. This may reflect that autonomy is impossible in practice. Besides that, its definition needs to be clearly defined first, and then practice can be made on the well-defined definition of autonomy. This corresponds to the current issue that the notion 'learner autonomy' is semantically confusing and still debating. The impact is therefore a confusion of the teachers who attempt to promote a practice of autonomous learning.

### 3. Constraints of Learner Autonomy Development

The three main possible constraints of learner autonomy development of Thai private university students were derived, and they are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Constraints of Learner Autonomy Development**

Constraints	Frequency count	Percentage
<b>Students</b> - lack of self-confidence - laziness, irresponsibility - learning inability - lack of motivation	36 (11) (11) (9) (8)	51.5%
<b>Thai culture influence</b> - spoon-feeding - rote-learning - exam orientation	22	31.5%
<b>Teachers</b> - lack of knowledge on learner autonomy - spoon-feeding and memorization	12 (5) (7)	17.0%

#### I) Students

The first source of hindrances of learner autonomy development is students. Some of their unfavorable characteristics were perceived such as lack of self-confidence, laziness, irresponsibility and lack of discipline, learning and English learning inability, and lack of motivation.

*In my opinion, Thai students lack self-confidence and self-awareness. They need teachers to dictate them and think that learning and teaching are teachers' responsibilities.*

*Thai students are introverted, lack of self-esteem and self-confidence which leads to negative attitudes towards their own capability.*

Lack of learning ability in terms of both learning how to learn effectively and language barrier was also mentioned.

*I would say, it is probably the lack of the knowledge or the process of how to do it. The students should be guided to understanding the learning process or how autonomy actually is brought about. Another possible problem is perhaps laziness.*

Lack of learning motivation to learn English was noted. Students felt that they did not need English for their future career or for whatever purposes. They needed to learn English in order to pass the course only.

*Students do not have motivation in learning a language. They just want to pass the exam.*

## **2) Influence of Thai culture**

It was pointed out that the Thai educational system which puts emphasis on spoon-feeding and rote learning as well as examination has been influenced by the Thai culture. Thailand is a collectivist society where independence is not encouraged. Independent decision-making skills are not taught from early stages, for instance. Therefore, cultural mentality is a serious problem for autonomous learning endeavor. The educational system that emphasizes spoon-feeding definitely hinders critical thinking skills. Students hardly have to seek out new information for themselves but wait for knowledge transmission from their teachers. This kind of learning experience results in inactive and less self-centered learners, or it can even cause laziness and leaning motivation. The following quotes clearly show the influence of Thai culture on the Thai educational system and generalization of the characteristics of Thai students.

*I guess the critical problem is the learning and teaching system in Thailand from the past to present restrict Thai teachers to conform to traditional teaching styles that do not help encouraging students to play a major and active role in the learning process.*

*Having been spoon-fed during their entire studies for decades that make students become lazy, less self-centered due to such situations.*

Rote learning which is an integral aspect of the traditional Thai education system does not make any contribution to the development of students' active learning, and thus there is no point to mention autonomous learning.

*From grade one to university, Thai students are taught to be 'sheep'. They are taught to memorize lists and be passive learners. They are not taught to question the teachers or their world. They are not taught the history or geography of the world, they have then, no desire to learn 'outside the box'. They are put in groups and study in groups, never learning individually as in Western schools. Here, they study the same subjects as a group. They can't do anything alone, including thinking alone, so there is no initiative.*

It should be noted that the subcategories of this category under the influence of Thai culture on the Thai educational system as the hindrance of learner autonomy development are not reported in terms of percentages. This is due to the fact that all of the subcategories namely spoon-feeding, rote-learning and exam orientation are interdependent. In other words, they have a causal relationship. Because of the collectivist Thai culture, the Thai educational system emphasizes spoon-feeding, memorization, and examination, which produces Thai learners who are familiar with spoon-feeding teaching styles, which makes them passive learners lacking self-initiative, critical thinking skills and courage to question teachers as authorities in the learning context. All of these characteristics hinder the development of learner autonomy by Thai students.

### 3) Teachers

Teachers themselves were reported as a constraint of learner autonomy development because some teachers tend to still apply a traditional teaching method with an overemphasis on memorization and spoon-feeding.

*Teachers' spoon-feeding practice discourages learners' own initiatives.*

*Lack of teachers who know the significance of learner autonomy*

In addition, some teachers lack knowledge on what learner autonomy is; therefore, they have no direction of how to promote and implement learner autonomy.

*I believe “teachers” might be the main obstacle to the development of this learner autonomy concept. The reasons are twofold. Number one is the teacher’s lack of knowledge and experience in the implementation of this concept. ...*

*I think it is about the teachers’ perceptions or beliefs towards autonomous learning. Some teachers might not understand the clear concepts of it. So, they can’t promote such ideas to the students and can’t manage to help students learn autonomously.*

## Conclusion and Implications

Learner autonomy is perceived important for successful language learning due to its values in various aspects especially for life-long learning. To be autonomous learners, students should possess an ability to take responsibility for their own learning, which requires choice and a certain degree of freedom to make a decision on what they want to learn. Also, teachers have a vital role to play in helping develop learner autonomy. As Dam (2003) argues, learner autonomy development will be successful if teachers are aware of their vital role which facilitates a learning process, not teaching.

The findings provide theoretical, pedagogical and administrative implications. First, the theoretical implication is drawn on a framework of learner autonomy definitions in an Asian context of which a learning setting is typical in its own cultural context. Appropriate pedagogies to promote learner autonomy should take into account the students’ sociocultural background, learning experience, and learning context. Besides, further research to investigate teachers’ perspectives towards learner autonomy using other research methods namely interview and questionnaire which can obtain data from a wider range of samples is suggested in order to gain further corroboration of the results and generalized findings to a wider scope.

Second, the findings revealed learning responsibility and a provision of choice and freedom for students’ autonomous learning; however, mainstream curricular or pre-determined course syllabi are considered as one of the constraints. This calls for teachers to empower themselves by exercising their autonomy to make decisions on how to increase learner

autonomy within compulsory lesson plans and curriculum which normally include formal testing and assessments. As pointed out, examinations which are very likely to promote exam-oriented learning and surface learning is also the constraint of learner autonomy development. In a nut shell, teachers need to be an active and autonomy-oriented change agent in the formal educational system.

Third, in order for teachers to be the change agents for learner autonomy development, they need to be supported and allowed to have some authority to go beyond the course requirements. That is to say, teachers should have freedom for their teaching responsibility. This therefore calls for teacher participation or involvement in decision making relating to curriculum and instruction (Ryan, 2006). This is in fact a potential area for teachers' professional development that should trigger an awareness of both administrators and teachers.

Fourth, the administrative implication is drawn on the finding that teachers themselves are considered as the constraint of learner autonomy development, and this calls on administrators to be aware that some teachers are not equipped with both theoretical and practical knowledge of autonomy. Every attempt should be made to provide these teachers with all knowledge related to both dimensions. Learner autonomy can be fostered if teachers know how to do it. Once the teachers who have appreciated the values of learner autonomy are armed with both types of learner autonomy knowledge, they should rely less on spoon-feeding and rote learning practice, and this will provoke a gradual change of students' learning habits. Reactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999) comes into play, and students are thus gradually trained to be autonomous. With a constant exposure to a new learning experience which builds a pro-active and meaningful learning habits, it is promising that psychologically and methodologically students and their learning approach which are somewhat influenced by the teachers, culture, or traditional education system will be improved or favorably changed.

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