

LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN THAILAND: THEORY, CHALLENGES, AND PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Learner Autonomy (LA) in English language learning. Theoretical perspectives are used to discuss how LA has been conceptualized and defined at various levels and dimensions. These definitions are considered in terms of their applicability to the Thai higher education context. The article further discusses the role of technology and pedagogical practices in promoting autonomous language learning while recognizing issues related to learners, cultures, and technology. Ultimately, the article indicates that LA needs to be encouraged within the context of Thai higher education through a gradual process with structured support, and that developing teacher autonomy is critical to supporting the long-term development of LA in Thai higher education.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, English Language Learning, Tertiary Level, Thailand.

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INTRODUCTION

Thailand's National Education Plan (2017-2036) positions self-directed and lifelong learning as essential competencies in the 21st century (National Statistical Office, Online, 2024). This raises an important question: how prepared are Thai university students to assume responsibility for their lifelong learning?

The issue is particularly concerning in English language education, as English serves as the working language of the ASEAN community (Nithideechaiwarachok, Maneekanon & Bubphada, 2022, pp. 273-290). Yet Thai students still possess very low levels of English proficiency (Education First, Online, 2025), especially among university students (Walayo, 2019, pp. 51-71). Writing and speaking were the weakest skills (Pearson, 2021, pp. 31-48). Previous research attributes these challenges to limited opportunities for using English in daily life (Ruanklai & Yodmongkol, 2017, pp. 7275-283), exam-oriented instruction (Rudd & Honkiss, 2020, pp. 122-138), and psychological factors (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022, pp. 485-498; Nithideechaiwarachok, Maneekanon & Bubphada, 2022, pp. 273-290).

In this context, learner autonomy (LA) has been widely proposed as a pathway to sustainable language development. However, much of the theoretical discussion on LA comes from individualist cultures. This raises a critical issue on how LA can be effectively conceptualized and implemented within Thai tertiary classrooms, where cultural expectations, institutional structures, learner beliefs, and learning experiences may differ. This article, thus, examines LA through this contextual lens, with particular attention to English language learning in Thai higher education.

OBJECTIVES

This article explores definitions of LA, including its different levels and dimensions. It also looks at how these concepts apply to the context of higher education in Thailand. In addition, the paper discusses how technology can support the development of LA, along with the challenges teachers and students may face in promoting it in Thai universities. Finally, it highlights some teaching approaches that can help encourage LA in English language classrooms.

DEFINITIONS OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

LA has evolved from a narrow perspective on independent study to a broader concept of learner agency within structured learning environments. Holec's (1981, p. 3) first defined

autonomy as the ability that learners take charge of their own learning, including setting goals, selecting methods, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. However, later perspectives have expanded this view by emphasizing that autonomy is not limited to technical skills but also involves psychological and contextual dimensions. Little (1991, pp. 15-22) highlighted the role of cognitive and emotional factors in shaping learners' capacity for autonomy, while Littlewood (1996, pp. 427-435) argued that motivation and confidence are equally important for learners to assume responsibility. Similarly, Benson (2011, p. 61) articulated autonomy as a multidimensional construct encompassing control over learning behavior, mental processes, and the learning context itself. From this perspective, LA is not a fixed trait but a dynamic and context-dependent process, in which the teacher continues to play a supportive role (Benson, 2011, p. 15; Little, 1991, p. 5). In short, autonomy can be understood as a negotiated form of agency shaped by learners' internal capacities and the opportunities available within their learning environment (Benson, 2011, p. 116; Lai, 2017, p. 7).

In the Thai tertiary context, this distinction is pivotal. Thai undergraduate students may hold the ability to learn independently; however, institutional norms, longstanding teacher-centered practices, and language skills may limit opportunities to exercise that ability. Therefore, the notion of LA in Thailand may need to be reconceptualized as structured and scaffolded responsibility rather than complete independence. Swatevacharkul and Boonma (2020, pp. 176-193) pointed out that teacher guidance plays a vital role in nurturing LA among Asian learners. Within Thailand's collectivist cultural framework, LA is more appropriately understood as interdependence rooted in group harmony rather than individual isolation (Boonma & Swatevacharkul, 2025, pp. 920-941).

LEVELS AND DIMENSIONS OF LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Learner autonomy (LA) can be understood as both a developmental process and a multidimensional construct shaped by individual and contextual factors. In terms of development, LA develops gradually as learners move from teacher-dependent to more self-directed forms of learning (Benson, 2011, pp. 58-59; Nunan, 1997, pp. 192-203). At early stages, learners develop awareness of learning goals, content, and strategies, while teachers continue to guide most decisions (Nunan, 1997, pp. 192-203). As learners gain confidence, they begin to participate more actively by expressing meanings, applying strategies, and contributing to classroom

decisions (Littlewood, 1996, p. 429). This reflects a shift toward shared responsibility. At more advanced levels, learners are able to set their own goals, select appropriate strategies, and engage in complex communicative tasks, such as discussions, problem-solving, or project-based work (Littlewood, 1996, p. 430; Nunan, 1997, pp. 192-203). At the highest level, learners eventually use English independently beyond the classroom (Littlewood, 1996, p. 430). This progression aligns with the distinction between reactive autonomy, where learners operate within teacher-defined frameworks, and proactive autonomy, where they take full control of their learning (Littlewood, 1999, pp. 71-94). In Thai tertiary contexts, learners demonstrate the reactive level (Koad, 2022, pp. 364-372) due to strong reliance on teacher guidance and limited opportunities for independent decision-making (Treesattayanmune & Baharudin, 2024, pp. 393-415).

Complementing this developmental view, LA also consists of several interrelated dimensions, including technical, psychological, political-philosophical, and sociocultural (Murase, 2015, pp. 43-48). The technical dimension involves the use of learning strategies (Benson, 1997, pp. 18-34; Murase, 2015, pp. 35-63), while the psychological dimension encompasses motivation, confidence, and self-efficacy (Littlewood, 1996, p. 428). Moreover, the political-philosophical dimension reflects the influence of institutional structures and classroom power relations (Murase, 2015, pp. 35-63), and the sociocultural dimension highlights the role of interaction, collaboration, negotiation, and cultural context (Benson, 2011, pp. 14-16; Murase, 2015, pp. 35-63). In particular, sociocultural and institutional factors play a significant role in shaping how autonomy is expressed in contexts such as Thailand, where traditional teacher-centered practices and respect for authority may constrain learners' willingness to take initiative (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022, pp. 485-498). Overall, these perspectives suggest that LA is not a fixed ability but a dynamic process that develops through the interaction of learners' capacities, learning environments, and cultural influences.

TECHNOLOGY AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

Access to online platforms enables university students to engage with English beyond classroom boundaries (Channuan, Sriwantaneeyakul & Pratumtong, 2024, pp. 1644-1653). While technology offers flexible access to authentic resources and supports learning beyond formal instruction (Reinders, 2018, pp. 1-5), access alone does not necessarily promote LA. As Lai (2017, pp. 22-23) argued, technology-mediated learning requires learners to make informed decisions, manage resources, and regulate their engagement, which presupposes a level of metacognitive

awareness that many undergraduate students may not yet possess. Without these capacities, learners may engage with digital content passively rather than strategically and actively.

Evidence from the Thai tertiary context reflects this concern, as Thai undergraduate students tend to focus on receptive activities, such as watching programmes or listening to music (Channuan, Sriwantaneeyakul & Pratumtong, 2024, pp. 1644-1653). These tasks for out-of-class learning are often reinforced by teachers (Upara & Chusanachoti, 2023, pp. 572-587). Although such practices increase exposure, they do not necessarily foster productive skills or deeper engagement with language. Therefore, technology-mediated learning needs to be carefully structured. Providing learners with greater flexibility should be accompanied by clear pedagogical guidance, alignment with learners' needs, and ongoing support to ensure that technology meaningfully contributes to the development of LA in English language learning (Reinders, 2018, pp. 1-5).

CHALLENGES IN FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN THAI TERTIARY CONTEXTS

Although LA aligns with Thailand's national education agenda, its implementation in universities remains constrained by longstanding cultural and structural factors. The challenges that hinder Thai learners' ability to take control of their own learning are discussed based on three aspects, including learner-related, cultural, and technological challenges.

First of all, many Thai students are still not fully ready to take responsibility for their own learning. Studies show that Thai college students with lower English proficiency tend to rely heavily on teachers as the main source of knowledge and prefer clear instructions about learning goals, materials, and assessment (Koad, 2022, pp. 364-372). Even though they may agree with the idea of LA, they often struggle to set goals or manage their learning independently (Koad, 2022, pp. 364-372; Treesattayanmunee & Baharudin, 2024, pp. 393-415). Furthermore, students are reluctant to speak up in class due to low confidence, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes or losing face (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022, pp. 485-498).

Additionally, cultural values in Thai education also contribute to these difficulties. Thai education has traditionally emphasized examination performance (Rudd & Honkiss, 2020, p. 122-138), respect for authority (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022, pp. 485-498), and knowledge transmission (Treesattayanmunee & Baharudin, 2024, pp. 393-415). These factors influence Thai students to become familiar with passive learning and harmony. Consequently, students

may avoid questioning teachers or expressing their opinions, which can limit the development of autonomous learning behaviors.

Lastly, technology offers opportunities for developing LA, such as supporting self-directed learning, enhancing motivation, and fostering metacognitive skills and self-confidence in out-of-class English learning (Melvina, Lengkanawati & Wirza, 2021, pp. 315-321; Noorwali & Sabir, 2025, pp. 126-143). However, it also presents certain limitations. While some studies suggest that Thai university students demonstrate moderate levels of LA, especially in using learning strategies and engaging in activities outside the classroom (Channuan, Sriwantaneeyakul & Pratumtong, 2024, pp. 1644-1653), this autonomy is not consistent. Students often focus more on receptive activities, such as watching or listening online, rather than engaging in productive language use (Channuan, Sriwantaneeyakul & Pratumtong, 2024, pp. 1644-1653). This imbalance may limit the effectiveness of technology in fostering deeper autonomy.

All in all, these findings suggest that fostering LA in Thai higher education is not about making students suddenly independent. It involves gradually reshaping their beliefs about English learning, adjusting classroom interaction patterns, and encouraging productive activities both inside and outside the classroom. LA in this context is less about promoting independence and more about scaffolding responsibility within existing educational norms.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES FOR FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH EDUCATION

LA needs to be fostered through appropriate teaching practices that allow students to use the language in meaningful, real-life contexts. Rahmasari, Munir and Nugroho (2025) accentuated that LA does not grow out of a single instructional technique, but it develops from the integration of multiple approaches. As a result, this section reviews key pedagogical practices that promote LA in English classrooms.

Strategy training approaches focus on helping students understand how they learn and manage their learning through effective language learning strategies. Learners need explicit support in developing socio-affective strategies that help them regulate emotions and interpersonal relationships and build confidence in communication (Sinaga, Eriyanti, Asih, In'am, Masduki, Hartanto & Tumacde, 2025, pp. 258-268). Cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies form the core areas of training (Awinindia, 2023, pp. 157-168; Benson, 2011, pp. 96-99). Benson (2011, pp. 154-155) categorized strategy training into six types, including

providing direct advice on language-learning strategies, offering research-based training of good language learner, encouraging learners to experiment and identify suitable strategies, drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives in synthetic models, embedding strategy development within regular language learning activities, and promoting self-directed reflection in which learners gradually train themselves to manage their own learning. In practice, strategy training can be embedded in coursework through Strategies-Based Instruction (Rahmasari, Munir & Nugroho, 2025) or delivered through workshops, peer tutoring, and textbook integration (Wang, 2016, pp. 276-281). Moreover, the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) model provides a structured framework by integrating academic content, language development, and explicit strategy instruction across preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion stages (Rahmasari, Munir & Nugroho, 2025; Wang, 2016, pp. 276-281). Reflection tools such as logbooks and learning diaries further support self-monitoring and metacognitive awareness (Little, Dam & Legenhausen, 2017, pp. 83-93).

Classroom-based approaches emphasize classroom practice, curriculum design, and teacher autonomy (Benson, 2011, p. 163). Little (2020, pp. 64-73) described the autonomy in the classroom as a learning community where students use English to set goals, select materials, and evaluate their progress through negotiation within a shared syllabus. According to him, teachers are still in control of the class through facilitation, as well as sustaining target language use and encouraging participation, collaboration, and self-expression. Suggested activities include peer interviews, discussions, project-based and problem-based tasks, role-plays, peer assessment, portfolios, and reflective journals (Pan, 2023, pp. 74-80).

Technology-integrated approaches extend learner agency beyond the classroom. Teachers assume roles of curation, structuring, scaffolding, and monitoring in order to gradually increase learner choices while maintaining pedagogical coherence (Reinders, 2018, pp. 1-5). Digital tools embedded in project-based learning (Al-Abdullatif & Gameil 2021, pp. 189-201), technology-mediated task-based instruction (Chong & Reinders, 2020, pp. 70-86), e-portfolios (Ngui, Pang & Hiew, 2020, pp. 362-366), and blended and flipped learning models provide more opportunities for independent language use. According to Lai (2017, pp. 99-100), training students in metacognitive and cognitive strategies for selecting and using appropriate online resources is more critical than merely supplying online materials.

To sum up, these teaching approaches put forward the idea that fostering LA requires a balance between structure and space for practice. While strategy training helps language

learners develop the skills to manage their learning. Classroom-based approaches create a supportive environment for shared responsibility. Technology-integrated practices, however, extend English learning beyond the classroom. Consequently, these approaches show that students take time and need support to gradually take responsible for their own English learning both inside and outside the classroom. Instead of relying on a single method, these approaches should be integrated to create classroom autonomy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, LA in English language learning in Thai context cannot be understood as simple independence from teachers. It is a multidimensional and developmental process shaped by learners' strategic abilities, psychological readiness, sociocultural context, and institutional structures. In the Thai tertiary context, LA occurs as negotiated and scaffolded responsibility within culturally grounded classroom practices. While national policies advocate lifelong and self-directed learning, longstanding teacher-centered traditions, exam-oriented systems, and learners' affective constraints continue to influence how LA is interpreted and enacted. Technology and pedagogical innovations offer meaningful opportunities to extend learning beyond the classroom; however, access alone does not ensure autonomous engagement. Without structured guidance and effective approaches, learners may remain passive consumers of language input. Therefore, fostering learner autonomy in Thai higher education requires a careful balance between freedom and support, gradual shifts in learners' roles, and sensitivity to local cultural expectations. LA, in this sense, is not a fixed endpoint but an evolving capacity developed through guided participation and shared responsibility.

RECOMMENDATION

To promote LA more effectively in Thai tertiary English education, attention should be given to teacher autonomy in higher education. Since LA develops within structured environments, teachers need the professional freedom and capacity to design context-sensitive practices instead of merely implementing prescribed curricula. Future studies should therefore explore how teacher autonomy in Thai tertiary context can be developed in the conventional English classrooms, particularly with the use of technology to strengthen teachers' professional capacity and foster LA.

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