

Learner Autonomy: Attitudes of Graduate Students in English Language Teaching Program in Thailand

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore the attitudes toward learner autonomy of graduate students in English Language Teaching (ELT) international program in Thailand. Attitudes toward definition and importance of learner autonomy, important persons in a learning process, and factors promoting and hindering autonomy development were explored. This study took a form of a qualitative research design using an open-response questionnaire to collect data from 23 participants from China, Myanmar and Thailand. The data were analyzed by thematic content analysis and four themes emerged: 1) Learner autonomy as technical, psychological, and political ability; 2) Perceived value of learner autonomy; 3) Importance of teacher and student in a learning process; and 4) Teachers as a major factor both promoting and hindering learner autonomy.

Keywords: learner autonomy, attitudes, graduate students, English language teaching

Introduction

It is strongly believed that learner autonomy is a prerequisite for learning effectiveness and success as it helps students develop more critical thinking and learning responsibility (Benson & Lor, 1998). Learner autonomy is therefore recognized worldwide as a significant and ultimate instructional goal (Wenden, 1987) for individual potential development (Sinclair, 1996). Confirmed by a recent research, autonomous learning process has positive effects on English public speaking ability of undergraduate students in Thailand (Boonma, 2018). To implement autonomous learning so as to develop autonomy of learners, teachers play a crucial role. However, existing research findings (Swatevacharkul, 2009) reveal that teachers can be a hindrance of a development of autonomy of their students owing to a lack of clear understanding of learner autonomy and how to implement it effectively. Supported by Duong and Seepho (2014), their research shows that English instructors from different countries in one Thai university have had difficulties in promoting and implementing learner autonomy. Corroborated with the recent research conducted with 30 English teachers in Indonesia regarding their perceptions on autonomous English learning, there is a misconception on the notion of autonomous learning. The Indonesian teachers mistakenly defined autonomous learning as the condition that students learn without assistance and support from a teacher. Such misconception may be caused by unfamiliarity of the concept as autonomous learning in English has not yet widely implemented in Indonesian educational system (Khotimah et al., 2019). Therefore, it is necessary that English teachers should know or understand what autonomy is in order to

successfully help their students develop learner autonomy. It is mandatory that teachers are autonomous and reflective if they want to foster learner autonomy. It is illogical to expect teachers to foster learner autonomy of their students if they themselves do not know what learner autonomy is (Little, 1995).

With regard to attitude, there are many terms used interchangeably namely belief, concept, construct and opinion (Baker, 1995). Attitude means “a mental or neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (Allport, 1935 cited in Baker, 1995, p. 11). Baker argues that attitude is important as knowing attitudes indicates current community thoughts and beliefs, preferences and desires. Particularly, survey of attitude also provides social indicator of changing beliefs and the opportunity of success in policy implementation. Clearly, attitudes relate to behaviors which then affect actions. Focusing on the relationship of attitudes to a variety of variables, it is possible to seek understanding on human functioning.

In terms of research, there are several studies conducted to explore in-service English teachers’ perspectives on or beliefs of learner autonomy (Chan, 2003; Swatevacharkul, 2009; Duong & Seepho, 2014; Arshiyani & Pishkar, 2015; Htaw, 2018; Wan, 2018; Khotimah et al., 2019). However, the research on autonomy attitudes of student teachers or pre-service teachers appears to be scarce. A research conducted in Germany by Martinez (2008) revealed that the undergraduate student teachers perceived autonomy as an alternative and innovative instructional methodology which could improve a classroom language learning process. Autonomy was also similar to individualization or differentiation. These two autonomy conceptualizations implied the important roles of teachers, and that learner autonomy strongly related to logic of instruction, rather than logic of learning. The conclusion was drawn that learner autonomy was perceived to be desirable but less practical.

Research carried out with graduate students who will become English teachers seems to be limited and is suggested for further research (Arshiyani & Pishkar, 2015). To fill this gap this paper aims to explore attitudes toward learner autonomy of graduate students in the English language teaching (ELT) program in Thailand by adopting qualitative research as it enables the researchers to probe into a wide range of thoughts and ideas about learner autonomy of the participants. In-depth information can be gained from the open-ended questions where quantitative research cannot.

As research shows, there is a strong relationship between teachers’ perceptions of learner autonomy and a degree of autonomy of the students. Teachers are therefore significant and need to be engaged in a learning process to promote learner autonomy (Arshiyani & Pishkar, 2015). Realizing the future teachers’ attitudes towards learner autonomy and autonomous learning process is thus beneficial to the teacher educational programs which advocate a development of learner autonomy. For instance, students’ misconceptions of learner autonomy can be rectified. Also, readiness for autonomous learning as a student in the ELT program could be indicative of autonomous teaching behaviors in the future. The program can train the students to be more effective learners by providing them with autonomy knowledge and autonomous learning experience. The students will then be equipped with capacity to apply pedagogies in ELT to promote learner autonomy once they are in service after graduation.

Objective of the Study

This study aimed to explore the attitudes toward learner autonomy of graduate students in an ELT program in Thailand.

Review of Literature

Learner Autonomy in Education

Originated in Europe, the concept of learner autonomy in different learning contexts is unavoidably debatable and culture gets involved in this debate (Palfreyman, 2003). Palfreyman remarks that 'culture' interpretation refers to national or ethnic cultures such as Chinese or Western culture. Promoting autonomy can be difficult owing to cultural differences. This raises the question whether the concept of autonomy is ethnocentric. For instance, Indonesia is facing similar challenges to implement learner autonomy (Ramadhiyah & Lengkanawati, 2019). However, research conducted in Thailand reveals that the concept of learner autonomy is universal. Autonomous learning is also a legitimate learning mode for Thai students with no extreme cultural incongruence of learner autonomy between Western countries and Thailand (Swatevacharkul, 2009).

In language education, learner autonomy is semantically different, and various terms are used to refer to learner autonomy. Some of the terms include learner independence, self-directed learning or autonomous learning, self-instruction, self-access learning, independent learning, and autonomous learning. However, Benson (2011) differentiates learner autonomy and autonomous learning. He clearly defines autonomy as a capacity to take charge of one's own learning and this is a natural product of self-directed learning practice. Also, the learners themselves determine learning objectives, monitor progress and evaluate their learning. Thus, autonomy is a learner attribute, while autonomous learning is a mode of learning. Benson (1997, p. 25) summarizes three basic definitions of autonomy in language learning as follows:

1. Autonomy as the act of learning on one's own and the technical ability to do so;
2. Autonomy as the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one's own learning; and
3. Autonomy as control over the content and processes of one's own learning.

A technical ability deals with skills and strategies such as cognitive, metacognitive, social and other strategies. This ability can be considered as a learning methodological dimension. A psychological capacity focuses on broader attitudes and cognitive abilities enabling learners to take their own learning responsibility. Control over the learning content and learning processes relates to a political perspective which emphasizes learner empowerment (Palfreyman, 2003).

There is a degree or level of learner autonomy which implies a progression of autonomy from a lower to higher level (Benson, 2011). To elaborate, the high level of learner autonomy signifies that learners have and make independent choices in their own learning. Learners can control the learning activity and determine its direction. On the other hand, the bottom level of autonomy means some control of specific performance of the activity. Thus, the latter contains less autonomy than the former (Littlewood, 1996).

In language learning, autonomy is exercised in at least five different ways (Benson & Voller, 1997). First, it is used in a situation in which learners learn independently. Second, it involves skills that learners can learn and apply in their own learning. Third, it is a capacity that can be developed through learning. Fourth, it is learning responsibility assumed by learners for their own learning. Last, it means a right to shape and direct their own learning. In line with the view of Little (1990), learner autonomy is a psychological relation of the learner to the learning

content and learning process which can be recognized from different learning behaviors. These behaviors are considered as a capacity to detach, reflect critically, make decisions, and act independently.

The concept of “proactive” and “reactive” autonomy was then proposed by Littlewood (1999) to distinguish the level of autonomy. Proactive autonomy means full autonomy with which learners have a capacity to take charge of their own learning, determining learning objectives, choosing learning methods and techniques, and evaluating what they acquired. While proactive autonomy creates its own direction, reactive autonomy does not. It enables learners to organize their resources autonomously to achieve their learning goal provided that a learning direction has been set for them. To develop learner autonomy either proactive or reactive, teachers are significant in the learning process.

Roles of Teachers in Autonomous Learning

In autonomous learning, roles of teachers are important as this mode of learning does not inhibit teachers from providing help, support and guidance to learners. Learners do not learn in isolation. Therefore, teachers' roles are more crucial and innovative compared with those of traditional mode. Teachers in the autonomous learning mode need to take on different roles from information provider, counselor, learning manager, resource and promoter of problem solving-oriented learning. A teacher is also viewed as emotional supporter particularly during the self-directed learning out of class. These roles demand a great deal of effort from the teachers (Little, 1990). Little (1995) also maintains that to have students assume their own learning responsibilities, it is necessary for a teacher to decide on what areas to be enhanced for autonomy development and to what extent.

To foster learner autonomy, teachers need to change their role. According to Dornyei (2002), a non-traditional teaching style or facilitating style is essential. The teachers as facilitators do not teach traditionally, that is, to deliver or transmit knowledge to students but consider themselves as helpers and instructional designers who prompt students to discover knowledge by themselves. Heron (1989 cited in Dornyei, 2002) differentiates three different modes of facilitation which are hierarchical, cooperative and autonomous. Hierarchical mode facilitators use their power to direct the learning process for the group, being fully responsible and making all major decisions. In cooperative mode, the facilitators share the power and responsibilities with the group, assisting the group members for more self-direction in the different learning forms. Autonomous mode facilitation requires the autonomous facilitator to respect the total autonomy of the group to find their own way and make their own judgment. Effective facilitation needs to balance and sequence the three modes.

Practically, Zeng (2005) suggests that English teachers in an autonomous learning mode have these central roles to play. They include developing learning motivation and interest of students, establishing pleasant learning environment, providing learning guide, teaching metacognitive and learning strategies for students' independent learning, organizing learning activities that promote learner autonomy, and encouraging students to use other resources.

The research results (Swatevacharkul, 2009) in Asian context also suggest that teachers need to assist students to develop self-confidence and capacity to perform autonomous learning. Undergraduate students appreciate such teachers' support as it results in students' positive attitudes toward autonomous learning and their favorable learning experiences of English. It is important that teachers are well aware of their beneficial roles to help students pass the transition period from teacher-dependence to self-dependence. Autonomous learning does not mean

exclusion of teachers. Indeed, there is a strong and positive correlation between Iranian teachers' perceptions about learner autonomy and language learning success which reinforces the role of teachers in promoting autonomous learning behaviors of students. (Arshiyani & Pishkar, 2015),

Attitudes in Learning

Attitude is a hypothetical construct which is used for explanation of human behavior in terms of the direction and persistence (Baker, 1995). Bem (1968 cited in Baker, 1995) defines attitudes as self-descriptions or self-perceptions. Individuals can recognize their attitudes by observing their own behaviors. In addition, learning related attitudes can change through activity which is self-directed and purposefully planned. Attitudes can also change through the need for security and status within a group and through societal demands. Essentially, attitude change is a cognitive activity, but it is determined through social activity (Baker, 1995). According to Smith (1971), attitude is not something inborn, but it is "relatively enduring because it is learned. Because it is learned, it can be taught" (p. 82). This is the reason why attitude can be changed.

There are three components of attitudes which are cognition, affect and readiness for action (Baker, 1995). The cognitive component deals with thoughts and beliefs while the affective component concerns feelings of the attitude object such as a language. The feelings can be both positive and negative. The cognitive and affective components of attitude may not have to always be in harmony. A person may have favorable attitude toward something but negative feeling about it. Smith (1971) adds that the affective or feelings component occurs from the cognitive element, thus these feelings can be evaluated whether good or bad. Eventually, these feeling appraisals are turned into the behavioral component or the readiness for action as Baker maintains. The readiness for action component of attitudes concerns action which is a behavioral intention or plan of action under defined context and circumstances.

To link to learner autonomy, a particular student may hold favorable attitudes toward learner autonomy thinking or believing that learner autonomy is valuable, but this student may feel that it is hard or impossible to become autonomous in a teacher-centered teaching approach. However, with the favorable attitudes toward autonomy this student may be ready to become autonomous by taking responsibility for their own learning.

Empowering learners to be autonomous by promoting learner autonomy, the teachers need to hold new perspectives of learner autonomy. Firstly, they must have positive attitudes toward autonomy. Many scholars in the field strongly argue that teachers must believe and trust that every learner can be developed to become autonomous (Breen & Mann, 1997; Johnson et al., 1990; Little, 1990). Little (1990) firmly contends that either weak or strong learners are possibly able to develop their awareness of their own learning responsibility and practical knowledge of how to handle their learning which will be subsequently advantageous for other contexts besides their foreign language learning. Importantly, teachers should be clear about their attitudes and beliefs that underpin their views about autonomy and autonomous language learning. Having self-awareness of autonomy is considered as an essential characteristic of the teachers required for the implementation of autonomous learning (Breen & Mann, 1997).

In this present study, attitudes refer to thoughts and feelings of the ELT graduate students regarding learner autonomy in terms of its definition, importance, significant persons in the learning process, and factors contributing and hindering learner autonomy development. It aimed to explore the two aspects of learner autonomy attitudes: cognition or thoughts and affect or feelings.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 23 graduate students in the Master of Arts in English Language Teaching (MA ELT) which is an international program in an international university in Bangkok, Thailand. Among them there were 19 Chinese, 3 Burmese and 1 Thai. There were 7 male and 16 female students. Their ages range from 21 to 40. In terms of teaching experiences, only three Chinese male students had some teaching experiences but all quitted the job. One student used to work as a full-time high school teacher for 7 years whereas the other two worked as a tutor. Most of the participants recently graduated with a bachelor's degree with different majors from their home countries. Twenty students, the majority, were in their first semester of academic year 2019; only three were in their second semester. Most of them were rather new to the ELT field of study. In the first semester, apart from taking language teaching methodology course taught by one of the researchers during this research project implementation, the students also took research methodology, foundation to language study, and language testing and evaluation.

Considering the ELT program is a graduate level education and students are adult learners who are by nature independent and enjoy freedom in learning, the program applies the learning-centered approach by implementing inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, collaborative and task-based learning. These instructional methods applied by native and non-native English lecturers from different nationalities require self-directed and independent learning out-of-class. Examination is used for evaluation of some courses only. Most of the courses employ alternative assessment such as term papers and project work. It can be said that students have autonomous learning experience although there is no course offered on learner autonomy. The program attempts to train students to become independent and responsible learners despite of their different nationalities and past learning experiences.

Research Design

Taking the form of a qualitative research design, this study utilized an open-response questionnaire to collect data. The participants were required to answer four open-response questionnaire items appropriate for exploratory research. Respondents can express their ideas fully and elaborate or explain their responses regarding attitudes toward learner autonomy. Importantly, using broad open questions provides a chance for deeper exploration of the issue, and more expansive and unpredicted answers can be generated (Brown, 2009). The questions were adapted from Chan (2001) and taken from Krarupetch (2017) with reported acceptable content validity.

1. What do you *understand* by “learner autonomy”? (To explore how they think of or understand the concept of learner autonomy; in relation to the cognitive attitude aspect.)
2. Do you *think* that learner autonomy is *important* for your learning? Why? Why not? (To explore the perceived value of learner autonomy in their view; in relation to the cognitive and affective attitude aspect.)
3. Who do you *think* is the most *important* person for your learning, a teacher, yourself, or both? Please explain. (To explore their view of teacher authority in the learning process of the ELT program, not English skills learning; in relation to the cognitive and affective attitude aspect.)

4. What are the factors that help or hinder learner autonomy? (To determine who or what can contribute to or prevent autonomy development; in relation to the cognitive attitude aspect.)

Data Collection Procedures

Regarding data collection procedures, upon their approval to take part in the research project by signing the consent form, the participants were requested to complete the open-response items questionnaire in early September 2019 or during week 3 of the first semester outside class time. In this manner, they had sufficient time to complete the questionnaires. Most of them provided detailed answers for each question. Some participants were further contacted to discuss with one researcher to clarify or elaborate on unclear meanings of the written answers.

To analyze the data, thematic content analysis was performed in terms of frequency by identifying coding units and defining coding categories. To ensure reliability of the qualitative data analysis, Pearson correlation indicated the intra-coder reliability of 0.97. The second data analysis was done three months later. Then, emerging themes were generated with agreement by both researchers.

Results

For the first question which addressed how the participants understood learner autonomy, the findings suggested that learner autonomy comprised the three abilities which are technical, psychological, and political. The theme generated with three sub-themes is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Learner autonomy as technical, psychological, and political ability

Theme 1: Learner autonomy as technical, psychological and political ability	Frequency	%
Sub-theme 1: Technical ability	(33)	(62.26)
1.1 Learning management	14	
1.2 Learning by themselves	8	
1.3 Learning by themselves with teacher's help	5	
1.4 Self-discipline and responsibility	4	
1.5 Self-initiative in learning	2	
Sub-theme 2: Psychological ability	(17)	(32.07)
2.1 Freedom to learn	9	
2.2 Learning motivation	6	
2.3 Willingness to learn	2	
Sub-theme 3: Political ability	(3)	(5.66)
3.1 Collaborative learning	1	
3.2 Learning reflection	1	
3.3 Relationship between teacher and student	1	

Table 1 displays that the participants thought that learner autonomy strongly relates to the technical ability (62.26%); it is a matter of each learner to responsibly manage their own learning with or without help of the teacher. Theme 1: *Learner autonomy as technical, psychological and political ability* emerged as a result.

“To be initiative to learn something without pressure or persuasion from outside. Having self-discipline, learning plans, learning motivation, ability to arrange a learning process. For long-term, being persisted and having clear learning objectives”. (S#1, Female)

Learner autonomy also involves the affect or psychological ability (32.07%). Learners should have freedom, motivation, and willingness to learn.

“Learners enjoy the right to choose teaching materials, teaching methods, and teaching activities since those three factors best facilitate students’ self-reflection and skills, ability development for learners themselves”. (S#12, Male)

“Learners want to gain knowledge independently. They enjoy their learning by themselves. Their learning is never forced by outside factors”. (S#17, Male)

Besides, the political ability was understood as part of learner autonomy (5.66%). Collaborative learning and learning reflection as well as a relationship between a teacher and student is central.

“Learners themselves learn a language without depending on the teachers. Learners do group work, collaboration with each other and discuss and share their opinions with each other”. (S#21, Female)

“... It is also I think understanding between students and teachers’ relationship”. (S#14, Female)

The second question concerns whether the participants thought that learner autonomy is important. The results indicated that all of them perceived learner autonomy is important or very important. The reasons were various but could be synthesized under the theme 2: *Perceived value of learner autonomy*. Table 2 displays the emerged theme and its four categories.

Table 2 Perceived value of learner autonomy

Theme 2: Perceived value of learner autonomy	Frequency	%
1. Motivation for independent learning	16	57.14
2. Formation of self-development principles	5	17.86
3. Enhancement of learning responsibilities outside class	4	14.29
4. Awareness of own strengths and weaknesses	3	10.71

According to Table 2, learner autonomy was highly or very highly valued as it motivates them to learn independently (57.14%) as the first and striking reason.

“Yes, for sure. ... without autonomy most of the learners would give up on the half way before success. Autonomy comes from motivation, and motivation is essential for any learning”. (S#1, Female)

The second reason is forming self-development principles (17.86%).

“Exactly, ... Normally, autonomous learners know what they want, they can clearly set a goal that is easy for them to make a learning plan. Through that, learners will be ongoing with it until they get a satisfied result”. (S#9, Female)

Learning responsibilities outside class enhancement (14.29%) and awareness of own strengths and weaknesses (10.71%) were reported next.

“... students have to do lots of practices after class. Also, autonomous learning is a skill that everyone must have. ... Nobody will teach everything to you. We must learn everything autonomously”. (S#6, Female)

“... I have more opportunities to learn by myself. After that, clearly I know my weaknesses and strengths. Broaden horizon I enjoy the feeling that I learn and teach by myself”. (S#2, Female)

The third question focused on the most important person in a learning process. The findings showed that the majority (83.33%) perceived that both teacher and student were important, while few students (16.67%) said it was the students themselves, but teacher's guide was needed. None mentioned only teachers were the most important for learning. Theme 3: Importance of teacher and student in a learning process was therefore generated. Table 3 illustrates the findings and reasons as the third theme.

Table 3: Importance of teacher and student in a learning process

Theme 3: Importance of teacher and student in a learning process					
Sub-theme 1: Both teacher and student are important	Frequency	%	Sub-theme 2: Students themselves are important	Frequency	%
1. Teacher as direction provider	10	50.00	1. Self-initiative, but need guide from teacher	3	75.00
2. Teacher as facilitator and resource	8	40.00	2. Self-responsibility	1	25.00
3. Teacher as stimulator for independent learning	2	10.00			

It can be seen from Table 3 that in fact the participants thought that both teacher and student are important in the learning process, but they take on different roles. Students need direction, help and support from their teacher who is a facilitator for their independent learning. They understood their role as active and responsible learners relying on themselves based on necessary support from the teachers.

“I think they are both important in the learning process. Teachers can provide good direction and useful advice in the learning process because they are more knowledgeable and well-trained as a teacher. And students should have their own study plan or schedule about their study. They can’t get impressive progress if they only rely on teachers to force for classroom tasks”. (S#4, Male)

The fourth question explored factors that could help or hinder learner autonomy. Thus, the fourth theme concerns *Teachers as major factor promoting and hindering learner autonomy* based on the factors results. Tables 4 and 5 depict the similar categories of contributive factors and hindrance of learner autonomy development. Clearly, teachers and motivation were reported as the first and second factor to promote and hinder learner autonomy. The third contributive factor related to learners in terms of self-responsibility and consistent learning goals while indolence was revealed as the hindrance. Parents and their support were also viewed as the factor to support or block learner autonomy. The factor on technology was reported as the last supportive factor for learner autonomy development.

Table 4: Contributive factors of learner autonomy

Theme 4: Teachers as a major factor both promoting and hindering learner autonomy		
Factors promoting learner autonomy	Frequency	%
Sub-theme 1: Teachers	(21)	(48.84)
1.1 Pleasant learning atmosphere/environment	10	
1.2 Direction from teachers	5	
1.3 Teaching methods and educational policy	4	
1.4 Teaching of learning strategies	2	
Sub-theme 2: Motivation	(9)	(20.93)
2.1 Interest or ambition in learning	9	
Sub-theme 3: Learners	(8)	(18.60)
3.1 Self-control/learning responsibility	4	
3.2 Consistent learning goals or objectives	4	
Sub-theme 4: Parents	(3)	(6.98)
4.1 Parents’ support	3	
Sub-theme 5: Technology	(2)	(4.65)
5.1 Self-access learning	1	
5.2 Computer, library access	1	

From Table 4, the first factor contributing to the development of learner autonomy is teachers (48.84%), followed by motivation to learn (20.93%).

“I think three factors help learner autonomy. 1. Good learning atmosphere: people are always influenced by others around them so is the students. 2. Teachers’ encouragement: students always need to be encouraged. This will help them to build up their confidence to study. 3. Cognitive strategies: Students need to have ability to repeat, finish matching, organizing the knowledge they learned. Teachers need to guide and train students’ cognitive strategies”. (S#6, Female)

“Interest is always first. A great and rational plan. I think interaction is also important. The resources that learners can collect. The recognition from friends, teachers and family”. (S#11, Female)

The third contributive factor related to the learners who have to perform self-control or own learning responsibility and be consistent with their learning goals (18.60%).

“Students who can manage themselves as strictly as they can. ... ”. (S#9, Male)

Table 5: Hindrance of learner autonomy

Theme 4: Teachers as a major factor both promoting and hindering learner autonomy		Frequency	%
Factors hindering learner autonomy			
Sub-theme 1: Teachers		(7)	(46.67)
1.1 Attitudes of teachers toward education		4	
1.2 Teaching methods		1	
1.3 Difficult learning materials		1	
1.4 Heavy workload		1	
Sub-theme 2: Lack of motivation		(3)	(20.00)
2.1 Lack of self-esteem		1	
2.2 Unsatisfied grade		1	
2.3 Failure phobia		1	
Sub-theme 3: Indolence		(2)	(13.33)
3.1 Laziness		2	
Sub-theme 4: Lack of support		(2)	(13.33)
4.1 Lack of support from teachers and family		1	
4.2 Lack of access to technology and resources		1	
Sub-theme 5: Parents dependence		(1)	(6.67)
5.1 Reliance on parents		1	

Table 5 shows that a teacher is also the first factor (46.67%) to hinder learner autonomy development.

“The education concept and teaching methods will help or hinder learner autonomy. I mean, good education concept and teaching style is the key to cultivate students to become a master of the study”. (S#3, Male)

Lack of motivation (20.00%) is the second reported factor, equally followed by indolence (13.33%), lack of support (13.33%), and lastly parents' dependence (6.67%).

“Hinder: Teachers who are not open and understanding. Lack of access to technology and library. Lack of student motivation. Low self-esteem. Lack of support from family and teacher”. (S#13, Male)

“Indolence can hinder learner autonomy”. (S# 20, Female)

Discussion

Discussion is presented as per each individual theme emerged from the findings with an attempt to consider theoretical and pedagogical implications.

Learner Autonomy as Ability to Perform Self-Directed Learning

According to theme 1, the participants thought that learner autonomy comprises the technical, psychological, and political dimensions as defined by Benson (1997). This appears to suggest that they well understood the concept of learner autonomy. Most obviously, the sub-theme 1 or the technical ability indicated that they understood that learner autonomy is the ability to perform self-directed learning. Learning is seen as a matter of individual learners who are able to manage their own learning and learn by themselves with or without help of teachers. It is important that they take responsibility for their own learning. The present findings clearly indicate that learner autonomy primarily concerns with metacognitive strategies to take charge of their self-directed learning.

For self-directed learning, freedom and motivation to learn is mandatory as shown by sub-theme 2. Learning must be enjoyable, and motivation should derive from within, which will create willingness to learn independently. Lynch (2001, p. 390-391), in fact, describes autonomy as freedom; “*... learners' degree of freedom to select, praise and act within the confines of the language teaching instruction, ...*”. Little and Dam (1998) assert that freedom has a strong learning implication as it can be freedom from the teacher's control, the curriculum's constraints, or from being forced to learn. Freedom to learn can maintain and enhance motivation as well as create willingness to learn. As Ushioda (1996) argues, it is central that learners develop their own potential as they experience it. A sense of doing tasks in an intrinsically satisfying manner can be established from a sense of competence and mastery, enjoyment, satisfaction, and pride. This is learning that is autonomous by definition.

As the nature of adult learning, the participants who are graduate students are reasonably autonomous and preferred learning activities that engage or involve them. This can increase their motivation, interest, and desire to learn more and to become more autonomous. Therefore, adult pedagogies must specially emphasize learner empowerment and fully engage them in a learning process.

The results on the political ability as displayed in sub-theme 3, although obtained a low percentage of 5.66, should receive attention. Interaction among learners from collaborative learning and interaction with themselves from reflection and interaction with a teacher which creates good rapport was also thought as the meaning of autonomy. The findings imply that learner autonomy is not the ability to learn in isolation; rather learning is interactive and requires interaction among persons involved in the learning process, especially peer interaction or group dynamics as pointed out by Dornyei (2001). Group dynamics is related to autonomy in that “the group's internal development and growing maturity go hand in hand with the members taking on increasing responsibility and control over their own functioning. From the point of group dynamics, involved students are increasingly autonomous students” (Dornyei, 2001, p. 103). This calls for a promotion of classroom interaction to develop more learner autonomy.

Learner Autonomy as Motivation to Learn

As the findings emerged from theme 2 showed, the students perceived the value or importance of learner autonomy. Such perceived value distinctly reflects the positive attitude of the participants toward learner autonomy. Such attitude appears to confirm the belief that learner autonomy is a foundation for successful learning and it deserves to be treated as the ultimate instructional goal

of every educational institute (Wenden, 1998; Sinclair, 1996). There is also no cultural incompatibility of the perception on the value of learner autonomy of students from different cultural backgrounds. Learner autonomy seems to be universally accepted as the educational concept leading to learning achievement. This present study confirmed that autonomous learning is a legitimate mode of learning.

The first and most important reason of the perceived value of learner autonomy was that autonomy is a motivation for independent learning. Autonomy is, additionally, considered as enhancement of self-development principles as the second reason. It helps learning persistence. As the research evidence shows, there is a relationship between learner autonomy and motivation. In line with the existing research findings, Thai graduate students performing self-directed learning perceived that they are the key agent in such learning process which helps increase their motivation for autonomous English learning outside a classroom (Swatevacharkul, 2017).

The findings on the relevance of motivation and learner autonomy support what Ushioda (1996) argues, that is, by definition autonomous learners are motivated learners. Therefore, motivation to learn is clearly important. As Dornyei (2005) maintains the second language (L2) motivation is decidedly a primary incentive force for a long-term L2 learning process, and motivation is paramount for success or failure in any learning situation (Dornyei, 2002). Learning motivation can change a person's behavior in order to achieve a particular goal set. People who lack motivation to learn are likely to fail than those who are motivated. Motivation is a reason why people act, respond, need and desire (Elliot & Covington, 2001). As learning is an on-going process and requires effort on the part of learners, especially to carry out autonomous learning, motivation is essentially an impetus to learn independently. The pedagogical implication lies on the teacher to employ motivational instructional strategies to develop, increase or maintain the motivation of the learners in the autonomous learning mode. Making them curious to explore new information by themselves is one way to increase their learning motivation which in turn enhances learner autonomy. Learning motivation should promote logic of learning, rather than logic of instruction.

From Nurture to Nature of Autonomy

The results emerged from theme 3: *Importance of teacher and student in a learning process* seem to clearly reveal preferred reactive autonomy of the Asian students in this Thai educational context and the teacher authority is considered legitimately valid during the autonomy development period. The participants viewed that it is not possible for them who are absolutely new to the field of ELT to control over the contents. They need guideline and expect academic support from their teachers on the necessary contents so that they can have a direction for their study. As Little (1999) points out, reactive autonomy does not create a direction but enables learners to organize their resources autonomously once a learning direction has been established for them. Little (1990) advocates that autonomy does not free the teachers in the formal instruction from responsibility. This reflects the role of facilitator especially during the beginning of the students in the professional field such as ELT when all the subject matters are brand-new to them. It implies that for the students just entering the ELT program, nurture of the teachers is needed to set a learning direction for them. Subsequently, the teachers can gradually withdraw themselves from the learning process and create more proactive learner autonomy. Nurture in forms of teachers' guide and direction is primarily indispensable to cultivate the development of autonomous nature.

The findings call for the roles of teachers as cooperative and autonomous facilitators (Heron, 1989 cited in Dornyei, 2002). Being the cooperative facilitator at the early stage of the learning process, the teacher shares their power and responsibility with the students and encourage them to become more self-directing. Being the autonomous facilitator at a subsequent stage, the teacher promotes full autonomy of the students allowing them to seek their own way of learning and empowers them to make necessary decisions regarding their learning. As Benson (2008) argues, perspectives of learners on autonomy are always contextualized within particular learning and life experiences.

Teachers as Two-Edged Sword of Learner Autonomy Development

The findings suggested that teachers are considered as both a contributor and hindrance of learner autonomy development as per themes 4 and 5. The findings on teachers as a major contributive factor of autonomy development from the view of the student participants are similar to the work of Swatevacharkul (2017). The results on teachers as a hindrance from the viewpoints of teachers themselves are in line with Seepho (2014) and Khotimah et al. (2019). However, Swatevacharkul (2009) found that only 17% of 155 multinational and Thai teachers teaching in Thai universities perceived the teachers as autonomy obstacle whereas 51.50% of the teachers viewed that student was the main factor owing to their lack of self-confidence, laziness and irresponsibility for learning. These findings request the teachers to develop strategies for learner autonomy enhancement. Supported by Pennycook (1997), autonomy in language learning has become increasingly concerned with techniques, strategies, and materials, which are required from the teachers. Meanwhile, autonomy develops as learners become more critically aware of the social context of their learning and the constraints it implies (Benson, 1997). Clearly, the learning experiences of the students organized by the teachers somewhat determine a level of learner autonomy.

As the findings showed, the sub-theme 1: *Teachers*, the sub-theme 2: *Motivation*, and the sub-theme 3: *Learners* are in fact interrelated for learner autonomy. It is important that teachers establish pleasant learning environment so that learners feel interested or motivated to learn which in turn helps maintaining learning responsibility. Creating favorable class atmosphere, building, and sustaining learning motivation should prevent indolence and help preserve learning responsibility. In line with Dornyei (2002), creating the basic motivational conditions for learning is one of the motivational teaching practices. The relevance between motivation and learner autonomy is highlighted once again here, but the emphasis is put on the teachers to create pleasant class atmosphere conducive to autonomy development. The findings imply that the participants well understood that learner autonomy can be promoted in class, not merely out-of-class which contrasted with the findings of Khotimah et al. (2019) which revealed that the teachers in senior high schools in Indonesia perceived that learner autonomy mostly occurred outside the classroom. The findings call for teachers wishing to promote learner autonomy to be aware of their behaviors and roles in the autonomous learning process.

As the evidence of this present study showed, learners can be autonomous, and they preferred learning activities that engage or involve them and allow for interactions. This can increase their motivation and desire to learn more and to become more autonomous. It is mandatory that teachers and educational administrators understand these needs of students as one Chinese participant (S#3) mentioned it as a “good education concept”. A traditional teaching method relying on examination should be seriously reconsidered for the benefits of students. Education policy must facilitate the teachers so that they are able to support the students’ learning and cultivate them to become autonomous. Teacher empowerment is as equally crucial

as learner empowerment in the autonomous learning mode. To do so, caution is advised for teachers in gradually reducing their important role by transferring authority and empowering students more in due course.

Conclusion

According to the findings, the participants appeared to hold positive attitudes toward the concept of learner autonomy. They understood that learner autonomy is the ability for successful self-directed learning. They thought that learner autonomy involved self-related, affective, and interaction aspects which correspond to the three technical, psychological, and political abilities. They also perceived the importance of learner autonomy as motivation to learn independently. The relationship between autonomy and motivation is made clear. Both teacher and student were considered as crucial to develop learner autonomy by taking on the facilitator and active learner roles respectively. Teachers' guide and direction are indispensable especially for the very early stage of the study in the ELT program so that students are subsequently able to perform independent learning. In South East Asian educational system, nurture is essential to become a full autonomous learner which manifests that autonomous learning behaviors are determined by learning context. Last, it was thus found that teachers can be a favorable and unfavorable factor for autonomy development. If teachers can create pleasant learning environment and employ effective teaching methods, students' interest and ambition to learn are triggered. This should develop a potential to help students to put more effort and continue firmly on their learning responsibility. Laziness to learn can then be prevented.

Recommendations

For further research, it is suggested to employ interview to gain insightful information and triangulate the data. Assessing learner autonomy of MA ELT students is also recommended taking into account the findings of their perspective of learner autonomy as such perspective can reflect their capacity for autonomy. To explore behavioral aspect of attitude, observation is suggested. For educational intuitions, administrators should have policies to promote learner autonomy and implement autonomous learning in order to support teachers who value the importance of learner autonomy. Without the support from the administrative, the teachers' effort to do so may not be paid-off. Parents should be engaged in the autonomy development process as their support is also needed. For teachers of English, it is essential that they are aware of their roles in the autonomy development process. Always bear in mind that they can hinder learner autonomy, it is recommended that teachers keep themselves updated with current trends and issues of ELT pedagogies to promote learner autonomy.

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