



Fostering Learner Autonomy of Thai Lower Secondary School Students in Project-Based English Instruction

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Received 16/08/2022	ABSTRACT Learner autonomy has caught the attention of educators and researchers as one of the educational goals of the 21st century and as a factor that can affect second language learning. Efforts to foster learner autonomy in English classrooms have been ongoing. The study aimed to enhance learner autonomy of lower secondary school students. Thirty-nine Thai students voluntarily signed up for the course. The development of their autonomy was examined using three instruments. First, a questionnaire adapted from Murase (2015) was employed before and after the instruction. During the course, the students were asked to keep learning logs. Lastly, based on the questionnaire results, six students were selected to be interviewed after the instruction. The data from the three sources were analyzed and used to triangulate with one another. The project-based English instruction showed positive effects on learner autonomy. The questionnaire showed an increase in students' level of autonomy overall and in each dimension: technical, psychological, political, and sociocultural. The learning logs and interviews also showed signs of learning independence over time. These findings confirm that learner autonomy can and should be fostered in English classrooms.
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Introduction

Learner autonomy is widely considered one of the major goals of education in the 21st century (Aggarwal, 2021). Moreover, it has also been found to affect success in second language learning (Benson, 2011; Melvina & Julia, 2021). Nunan (1988) emphasized that English learning should be continued outside of class. English learners must seek learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom (Chusanachoti, 2016). To “keep learning,” English learners need to have a certain level of learner autonomy (Benson, 2011; Nunan, 1988); therefore, how to foster learner autonomy in English language learners has received much attention (Benson, 2011; Daflizar, 2023). The standards for the foreign language learning area in the national curriculum of Thailand, Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (2008), also reflected this same line of thought.

Autonomous learners are described as learners who take responsibility for their learning, starting with identifying learning objectives, determining the content, choosing the learning means and materials, monitoring their learning, and evaluating what has been learned (Holec, 1981). Autonomous learners change their roles from being teacher-dependent to self-dependent (Wiraningsih & Dewi, 2020), while teachers shift to being facilitators, counselors, resource persons, or learning managers (Benson, 2011; Wiraningsih & Dewi, 2020), only to ensure that the learners can plan, follow the plans, and assess their learning. To gain independence, learners need meaningful choices in the learning process and opportunities to make decisions about their learning in collaborative and supportive settings (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). Studies have shown that teachers who give “space” for students’ individual and self-paced learning can enhance the students’ motivation better than those who take complete control over the class (Loima & Vibulphol, 2014, 2016; Vibulphol, 2016). In other words, autonomy and motivation are closely connected (Benson, 2011).

In the Thai context, previous studies have revealed factors that can hinder the development of learner autonomy, such as classroom culture regarding the roles of students and teachers (Tayjasanant & Suraratdecha, 2016). Consequently, in many classrooms, the students lack opportunities to have choices and make decisions in the learning process (Loima & Vibulphol, 2016; Tayjasanant & Suraratdecha, 2016; Vibulphol, 2016). Therefore, English teachers should explore the teaching methods that encourage students to shift from waiting to “be fed” to finding knowledge independently.

To foster learner autonomy, various approaches have been proposed (Benson, 2011; Daflizar, 2023; Holec, 1981). Benson (2011) described six different approaches to promoting autonomy, including resource-based approaches, technology-based approaches, learner-based approaches, classroom-based approaches, curriculum-based approaches, and teacher-based approaches. One of the classroom-based approaches to promoting autonomy is project-based learning (PBL) (Daflizar, 2023). In PBL lessons, students choose a meaningful theme for the project, then work in small groups to explore challenging problems related to the theme and try to find solutions together. Students decide how to collect the data, analyze it, produce their end product, improve it, and present the group product to the audience. During the PBL process, students have opportunities to make plans, set learning goals, employ a variety of learning strategies, monitor both individual and group work, do self-evaluations about learning performance, reflect on the learning journey, negotiate with peers and the teacher about the project work, and learn how to learn English through social interaction in groups (Larmer et al., 2015). These processes are essential to learner autonomy development (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). The process leading to the project’s end product in PBL allows students to develop confidence and independence through planning and making decisions about their learning (Fried-Booth, 2002).

Project-based learning has therefore been promoted in many educational contexts in Thailand and elsewhere. In the Thai context, the project-based learning approach has been employed to foster the learner autonomy of primary school students (e.g., Phasuk et al., 2019; Pichailuck & Lucksaneeyanawin, 2017) and university students (e.g., Swatevacharkul & Boonma,

2021). Although positive effects were found, little research has been conducted on secondary school students. Therefore, the present study explored how the PBL approach could be employed in English lessons to foster the learner autonomy of lower secondary school students in Thailand. The research question was “How did project-based English instruction affect learner autonomy of lower secondary school students?”.

Literature Review

Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning

Being considered an essential factor for second language learning (Benson, 2011; Chusanachoti, 2016; Melvina & Julia, 2021), learner autonomy has received much attention from second language researchers and educators (Benson, 2011). It is generally known as one of the learner factors that promote learners' independent learning, which requires them to determine their own goals, contents, progression, learning methods, and assessment techniques. Holec (1981) defined autonomy as “an ability to take charge of one's own learning” (p. 3). Benson (2011) later proposed that learner autonomy indicates the learner's capacity to be responsible for learning. Autonomous learners are therefore described as those who can make decisions about their learning and can conduct their learning (Littlewood, 1996). However, autonomous learners must manage their learning independently and receive teacher support (Daflizar, 2023; Law, 2023).

Learner autonomy consists of multidimensional constructions. Benson (1997) proposed three dimensions: technical, psychological, and political. Benson described the technical dimension as the ability to use cognitive and metacognitive strategies to manage English learning. The psychological dimension was defined as the learner's ability to motivate oneself to learn and to use strategies to cope with anxiety when learning English. The political dimension refers to the ability to make decisions and negotiate with others, peers, and teachers about English learning. Oxford (2003) later added a sociocultural dimension to Benson's model. This fourth dimension was referred to as the ability to learn how to learn English from others through social interaction in different contexts. The four dimensions are now used as the construct of learner autonomy in several studies, including the present one.

Fostering Learner Autonomy in Language Learning

To foster learner autonomy, Benson (2011) proposed different approaches to foster learner autonomy in language learning, consisting of resource-based approaches, technology-based approaches, learner-based approaches, classroom-based approaches, curriculum-based approaches, and teacher-based approaches. Each approach was elaborated as follows: Resource-based approaches emphasize authentic and available learning materials that provide independent interaction. Technology-based approaches focus on using learning technologies to manage their learning independently. Learner-based approaches focus on learners' cognitive and affective development to take control over their learning. Classroom-based approaches refer to learners' classroom decisions about their planning and evaluation. Curriculum-based approaches focus on learners' opportunities to participate in managing the curriculum as a whole. Teacher-based approaches emphasize promoting teacher autonomy and fostering autonomy in teacher education.

In this study, the classroom-based approach was the focus. Students must make decisions about their English language learning in a collaborative and supportive atmosphere (Benson, 2011; Holec, 1981). Classroom-based approaches encourage students to participate in decision-making when planning and evaluating classroom learning to suit their learning styles and preferences (Benson, 2011). One of the classroom-based approaches is project-based learning (PBL) (Daflizar, 2023).

Assessment of Learner Autonomy

Researchers agree that measuring learner autonomy can be problematic because learner autonomy has multiple dimensions and is difficult to assess with just one instrument (Benson, 2011). Even though learning behaviors indicate how the learner manages the learning, there is inadequate empirical evidence to support that learner autonomy comprises certain behaviors (Benson, 2011; Murase, 2015). According to Little (1991), learner autonomy exhibits a wide range of forms depending on the learners' age, their progress in their learning, and how much they perceive their needs. Nevertheless, Nunan (1988) proposed that learners' performance in natural learning contexts can be used to gauge how autonomous they are in applied linguistics research if autonomy is defined in various aspects of control over learning. Consequently, previous studies have employed several measurement tools when examining learner autonomy, including questionnaires, interviews, and learning logs. In fact, most studies used more than one assessment method.

To measure the degree of learner autonomy in this study, Murase's (2015) framework was employed. The 87-item questionnaire, developed based on Benson (1997) and Oxford (2003), was adapted and used along with two other tools—interviews and learning logs—to capture the complexity of learner autonomy, as suggested in the literature. The questionnaire covered four dimensions: technical, psychological, political, and sociocultural. The technical dimension was referred to as the ability to manage their learning with strategies (Benson, 1997, 2011). The psychological dimension was defined as the ability to motivate oneself to learn English and control over affective factors (Benson, 1997, 2011). The political dimension refers to the ability to make decisions and negotiate with others about English learning (Benson, 1997, 2011). The sociocultural dimension was referred to the ability to use social interaction to learn how to learn English from others in a group work environment (Benson, 1997; Oxford, 2003).

Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning is an approach that encourages learners to work collaboratively to produce a meaningful product to serve their needs and solve problems in the real world. Larmer et al. (2015) proposed conducting PBL instruction in four phases, including 1) launching the project; 2) building knowledge, understanding, and skills; 3) developing, critiquing, and revising products; and 4) presenting products. Each phase is elaborated on below.

Phase 1: Launching the project

To start the project, the students need to understand the concept of project-based learning. In the project, the students choose the theme they are interested in or find meaningful for them and then form small groups for the project. Next, each group needs to explore the current problems or situations related to the chosen theme to create the driving question and choose the final product.

Phase 2: Building knowledge, understanding, and skills

To complete the final product, the students must learn the necessary knowledge and skills for the project. The students can learn from teachers, various resources, and experts in the field. The teachers need to monitor the learning process to check their progress. Furthermore, the teachers should facilitate the students' learning, advise, and encourage them when needed.

Phase 3: Developing, critiquing, and revising products

After learning, the students are ready to apply what they have learned to make plans, collect the data, analyze it, create the final product, give feedback, revise it, and present it in groups. The students discuss in groups and choose what to do and how to do the main activities in the phase.

Phase 4: Presenting products

After revising the final products, each group needs to follow a well-organized plan to present the final products to the audience, not only the teacher and peers in class but also the real audience outside the class. After the students evaluate the final products, they must reflect on the learning process throughout the project.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a one-group pretest-posttest design that aimed to investigate the effects of project-based English instruction on the learner autonomy of lower secondary school students. A group of lower secondary school students attended a twelve-week project-based English course in the second semester of 2021. Questionnaires, learning logs, and interviews were used to examine the development of learner autonomy.

Population and Participants

The population was lower secondary school students in regular programs in Thai public schools. The participants were selected using the convenience sampling method. Thirty-nine students (20 males and 19 females) studying in Grades 7–9 at a medium-sized public school in one province in the eastern region of Thailand voluntarily participated in the study. The participants were informed about the study, their rights to participate and withdraw, and data protection and confidentiality. A consent form was then collected from each student before carrying out the study.

Project-Based English Instruction

The project-based English instruction was designed using Larmer et al.'s (2015) framework and was implemented as an elective English course, "Learning English Through Project." The course consisted of twelve 90-minute lessons and was conducted once a week. Since the course was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, each lesson was designed to be conducted remotely with a combination of the pre-class activity, in which the students were assigned to study some materials and complete some tasks on their own outside of class time and the in-class activity, in which the teacher facilitated the learning process online. To monitor each group's progress, online meetings with the teacher were scheduled with each group.

In this course, the students worked in groups of six to seven, as suggested by Chen and Yang (2019). The students formed groups freely based on their willingness to work together. After exploring the topics in groups, the class chose "School" as the theme and identified the difficulty in understanding the difficult content in the subjects they studied as the problem they wanted to explore in the project. The driving question was formulated: "How can we understand the difficult content in the subjects we study?" To find answers to this question, an online survey was used to collect responses from the students in their school and the two to four neighboring schools. The findings were then used to create the final product, a poster.

The long-range plan and four sample lesson plans of this PBL instruction were reviewed by three university instructors with more than five years of teaching experience in teaching English

as a foreign language. One of the experts also has employed project-based learning in his classes for over five years. Their feedback was used to revise the four lesson plans and guide the design of the rest of the lesson plans. The revised four lesson plans were later tried out with a class of ten students that were not part of the participants in the present study. After piloting, minor revisions were made.

Details of the activities in each phase are in the following section.

Phase 1: Launching the Project

This first phase covered four lessons. The students were first introduced to the project-based learning approach in the orientation session. In the pre-class activity, they were asked to watch a video clip that explained PBL instruction, course expectations, and their roles in the project. After that, they had to complete one task to check their understanding of the clip. During class time, they exchanged what they had learned in groups. They were also asked to discuss any challenges they foresaw in PBL lessons and ways to tackle them.

In the second session, the students were asked to select a theme for the project. They were presented with ten topics that lower secondary school students are expected to learn, such as family, school, and environment, through a video before class. Each student then voted for the theme individually on Google Forms and then discussed it with their peers in the class. Finally, “School” was chosen as the theme. Then, the students formed small groups in the project.

Before the third session, the students were asked to study a list of expressions that they could use to describe the problems from a handout and worked on a worksheet independently. For the group assignment, each group had to explore what problems were related to the theme. In the class, each group shared their ideas with the class. Subsequently, the class chose the problem, “The students did not understand the difficult content in the school subjects” as the problem they wanted to explore.

Lastly, the students learned how to create a driving question and choose the project's product in the pre-class activity. In the class, each group made a driving question together and presented it to the class. Then, the whole class voted on one of the presented driving questions. The driving question that received the most votes was, “How can we understand the difficult content in the school subjects?”. After that, the students chose to create “a poster” as the final product.

Phase 2: Building Knowledge, Understanding, and Skills

The second phase covered three lessons. In the first session, the students learned about different types of surveys and their pros and cons through the handout and completed the tasks in the pre-class activity. In class, the students discussed in groups the surveys they thought should be employed to collect the data and shared their ideas with the class. After class discussion, the online survey was chosen as the method to investigate the problem.

For the second session, the students read a handout on how to create survey questions and completed a worksheet independently outside class. In class, they checked with their group members their understanding about the topic they had learned. Then, each group was asked to identify the subject that they viewed as having difficult content, which may differ from the other groups. After that, they created survey questions and shared them with the class on Padlet.

In the last session of Phase 2, the students read a handout about creating an online survey using Google Forms and did the worksheet outside of class. In the class, each group worked with their members to create a Google form and presented it to the class to receive feedback from the other groups and the teacher. The survey forms were then revised accordingly.

Phase 3: Developing, Critiquing, and Revising Products

This phase covered three lessons. First, the students learned how to plan to collect the data through a video and completed a worksheet in the pre-class activity. In class, each group planned how to collect the data: all the activities they needed to do, the task assignment for each member, the time and deadline for each task, and the monitoring process. Each group received feedback after the presentation. After that, each group used the online survey they created to collect the data from the lower secondary school students who were in their school and two to four neighboring schools. The data collection was conducted outside of class time.

Once the data collection was complete, the class continued learning about data analysis. A pre-class video viewing on how data can be analyzed and a comprehension check were assigned. In class, each group analyzed the collected data by looking for the common meaning units, grouping them to form codes, and forming the categories by grouping the relevant codes on Google Docs. Then, each group shared their analysis with the class.

In the last session, in the pre-class activity, the students were asked to watch a video about how to create a poster using CANVA. During class, each group chose and organized the content, created the first draft of their poster, and presented it to the class. The groups then used the feedback from the class to revise their poster outside of class time.

Phase 4: Presenting Products

This phase was the shortest and covered two lessons.

To critique the poster in the pre-class activity, the students were asked to learn how to critique a poster through the video and complete the tasks to check their comprehension. In the Zoom class, each group showed the revised poster to the class. The audience groups gave constructive feedback about the following aspects: title, content, grammar, graphics, text, layout, and color selection. Another revision was made before the posters were posted on the school's Facebook. Then, each group was asked to evaluate each poster using a poster rubric on Google Sheets. Peer evaluation and teacher evaluation were conducted.

In the final lesson of the pre-class activity, the students were asked to watch the video about how to give a critical reflection and complete the worksheet. During the class period, the students shared what they had learned, how they felt during the learning process, what problems they encountered, how they tackled the problems, and their future plans to have better learning in groups.

Measuring Instrument Language Learner Autonomy

Questionnaire (MILLA)

The first instrument used to examine the participants' learner autonomy before and after the instruction was the learner autonomy questionnaire, adapted from the Measuring Instrument for Language Learner Autonomy (MILLA) (Murase, 2015). The adapted questionnaire consisted of 50 items with five Likert scale options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. To make the questionnaire suitable for the context of this study, 37 items were taken out of the original questionnaire, and the word "Japanese students" in Item 50 was changed to "Thai students."

The questionnaire included demographic information and sections on learner autonomy. The demographic information section elicited personal data such as name, age, and gender. The participants' names were collected to match the questionnaire data with the other sources. The learner autonomy section consisted of fifty items under four dimensions of learner autonomy, as follows: technical dimension (15 items), psychological dimension (16 items), political dimension (12 items), and sociocultural dimension (7 items).

The questionnaire was translated into Thai to reduce any language barriers. The back translation method was used to validate the translation of the items. The translated questionnaire was tested on students with similar characteristics to the study participants to check its reliability. The questionnaire had a reliability of 0.98 (Cronbach's Alpha coefficient).

Semi-Structured Interview

A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data after the instruction. Six participants were selected to participate in the interviews. They were selected based on their level of learner autonomy, which was determined by the mean scores of the post-questionnaire. Two participants from each group—low, moderate, and high levels of learner autonomy—were interviewed.

The interview questions were constructed in alignment with the four dimensions of learner autonomy. Six main interview questions and three follow-up questions were employed. Three professionals with backgrounds in learner autonomy research validated the questions. The interview questions were revised according to the feedback and then piloted with five lower secondary school participants. The interviews were conducted in Thai to prevent any language-related misunderstandings. A sample interview question is: “What methods did students use in their English learning during this project?”

Learning Logs

Learning logs were used to keep track of the development of learner autonomy during instruction. The participants were asked to write a learning log after each lesson, and each participant filled out twelve logs on the researcher's Padlet. The following three questions were used to obtain the data in the learning log:

- How did you learn English independently outside the classroom during the project this week?
- How did you tackle problems when learning English independently outside the classroom during the project this week?
- How did you motivate yourself to learn English independently outside the classroom during the project this week?

The guided questions in the learning log were constructed to align with the dimensions of learner autonomy in the questionnaire and validated by the same three experts who validated the interview questions. The questions were revised and piloted before being used.

Data Collection

The project-based instruction was implemented as a synchronous online course in 2021. As a result, of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in Thailand were required to operate in remote teaching mode during that time. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Before the first and last lessons, the participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire. After each lesson, a learning log was collected from each participant. Lastly, six participants with different levels of learner autonomy (low, moderate, and high) were interviewed.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a paired-sample t-test to compare the mean scores before and after the instruction. The qualitative data from the learning logs and the learners' interviews were analyzed using coding. The coding

process included opening coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Two raters analyzed the data separately by reading and re-reading the data to ensure the trustworthiness of the coding. The themes that emerged from the coding process of the two raters were discussed, and an agreement was reached.

Findings

The data from three sources—questionnaires, interviews, and learning logs—were triangulated to comprehensively understand the effects of project-based learning instruction on learner autonomy. The instruction was found to help enhance the participants' learner autonomy overall and in each dimension.

As shown in Table 1, the overall learner autonomy level, measured by the questionnaire before and after instruction, increased from a “low” level ($M = 2.34, SD = 0.65$) to a “high” level ($M = 3.81, SD = 0.59$). The paired-sample t -test also revealed that the difference between the two mean scores was significantly different ($t = 13.09, p = .000$). The same trend was found when analyzing the four dimensions of learner autonomy separately. There was a significant increase in the scores in all dimensions of learner autonomy, though varying degrees. The mean difference between the pre-and post-scores of the sociocultural dimension was the highest ($M = 4.45, SD = 0.54, MD = 1.92, t = 15.86, p < .05$), followed by that of the technical dimension, psychological dimension, and political dimension.

Table 1

Paired-sample t-test of the learner autonomy questionnaire (n = 39)

Dimensions of Learner Autonomy	Before instruction			After instruction			$M.$ $D.$	t	p
	M	SD	Level	M	SD	Level			
1. Technical	2.15	0.69	Low	3.66	0.60	High	1.51	11.88	.000*
2. Psychological	2.30	0.72	Low	3.75	0.70	High	1.45	10.08	.000*
3. Political	2.52	0.74	Low	3.73	0.65	High	1.21	10.46	.000*
4. Sociocultural	2.53	0.73	Low	4.45	0.54	Very high	1.92	15.86	.000*
Overall	2.34	0.65	Low	3.81	0.59	High	1.47	13.09	.000*

Note: * $p < .05$

The reflections on the learning logs and interviews also reveal the same trend. After the instruction, two themes emerged in the data, indicating an improvement in the participants' learner autonomy after attending the project-based learning instruction. The first theme, “using various learning strategies to learn English,” appeared to manifest the development of learner autonomy. The learning logs and interviews showed that the participants employed a greater variety of learning strategies over time. At the beginning of the instruction, the learning logs did not show much use of learning strategies.

In contrast, the data in the later logs and post-instruction interviews revealed many instances of the participants' use of learning strategies when performing the learning tasks in the project. Excerpts 1 to 4 (translated version) show how the students set a specific goal and learning plan for themselves when working on some tasks. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the confidentiality of the participants.

Excerpt 1:

Pat: *I set a goal to watch the video 2–3 times and then memorize it. Then work on the worksheet.* (Learning Log 4 Moderate, Lines 12)

Excerpt 2:

Thida: *This week, I set my goal to learn some new words in the video that the teacher shared. I will start by listening to the words, writing them down in the notebook, and looking up the meaning of the words in the evening after dinner.* (Learning Log 5 High, Lines 21–22)

Excerpt 3:

Sitthi: *In fact, in the past, when I studied English, I only copied from my friends because I thought it was difficult. I could not understand what I read. But when working with the group, there were some friends to help. And they shared with me how they learned. They told me that they set a goal for learning English for themselves, so they learned English well. I got it right away. Setting goals and planning my learning is very important. Then, I tried it. I tried to plan and set goals for learning English for myself.* (Interview 2 Low, Lines 20–24)

Excerpt 4:

Wor: *After attending the project, I began to make plans and set goals about what to learn each week and how to learn each day or week to help me reach the goal I set.* (Interview 1 Low, Lines 15–17)

The second theme, “motivation to learn English,” was found in the learning logs and the interviews. After engaging in the project, the participants showed increased motivation to learn English, which pushed them to carry out some learning tasks independently. Excerpt 5 showed how Kunya felt challenged by the project and wanted to comprehend the video the teacher assigned him to complete the task. In Excerpt 6, Sitthi wanted to do more in learning English to create the “best” project after his opinions were accepted when working with the group.

Excerpt 5:

Kunya: *The project challenged me to work harder. I need to understand the task better than I used to. It is fun. I want to listen to the English video that the teacher assigned more to be able to comprehend it and complete the task.* (Learning Log 4 Moderate, Lines 23–24)

Excerpt 6:

Sitthi: *When I shared my opinions in the group, and the group members listened to me and used my ideas in the project, it made me want to practice English more to make our project the best.* (Learning Log 4 Low, Lines 15–16)

Similarly, Excerpts 7 and 8 showed how the project motivated Wor and Pat to work harder on their English learning. When asked how they coped with anxiety during the project, they said they would do more to overcome the challenges in their learning.

Excerpt 7:

Wor: *In the past, I just let go of it. I did not even get close to it (English learning). However, learning English with my peers in this project is fun and challenging. It made me want to learn English.* (Interview 1 Low, Lines 63–65)

Excerpt 8:

Pat: *This project mainly used English, so I had to pay close attention when studying. I'd like to understand English. I'd like to be able to speak English. I'd like to read and write more so I can be good at it as other people. So, I use this as the motivation for learning English in this project. If I could complete this project, it might help me to be good at English.* (Interview 3 Moderate, Lines 21–25)

Discussion

Based on the findings, three key ideas are essential to be discussed. First, project-based English instruction enhanced secondary school students’ learner autonomy in English classes. This finding aligns with previous studies (e.g., Nguyen, 2017; Yuliani & Lengkanawati, 2017), which suggested that project-based instruction could be employed in English classes to enhance the autonomy of lower secondary school learners. Based on the activities that the participants

conducted in the instruction, the participants had opportunities to exercise the necessary skills for independent learning, as proposed by Benson (2011), such as setting learning goals, making learning plans, monitoring their own learning pace, evaluating learning, motivating themselves to learn English, choosing the learning topics, choosing learning materials, and learning how to learn English.

In the first phase of the instruction, the participants had the opportunity to choose a theme they were interested in. Then, the learners formed small groups to complete the project. During the group work, the learners had opportunities to set goals and make plans for their English learning to develop their English skills and complete both individual and group work. In addition, the participants had opportunities to ask for advice about learning English and completing tasks when working in groups. Stein (1995) argued that the participants encountered the processes of solving unforeseen problems, negotiating actively with others, and performing interpersonal skills, which are considered fundamental components of the development of learner autonomy (Benson, 2011).

In the present study, the participants often asked their peers and teacher for advice about learning English and completing the tasks to achieve individual and group work. For instance, the participants often asked their peers and teacher for advice when they struggled with the content about how to create a survey from Google Forms. Also, the participants made negotiations related to English learning goals in groups when they needed to present their work in class. To achieve the common goals, the weaker learners were helped to complete their work and divided into groups by learning how to learn English from the stronger learners in groups.

Additionally, project-based instruction helps learners develop cognitive and metacognitive skills such as initiating questions, making a plan, and implementing the plan, which consists of collecting, analyzing, and reporting data orally or in writing (Beckett, 2002). For example, the participants in the present study had opportunities to create questions about how to create a survey from Google Forms and attempt to investigate the answers from the various learning resources proposed by the teacher or the other learning resources they could conveniently access. Each group needed to make a plan to collect, analyze, and report the data when the survey was finished. After that, each group conducted their survey according to their plan.

Second, the sociocultural dimension was reported as having the highest development. The learning logs and interview data revealed that the participants often asked their peers and teacher for advice about learning English and achieving difficult tasks. According to Díaz Ramírez (2014), social interaction skills could be enhanced when the project was conducted since the students had opportunities to help each other finish group tasks and individual work. Interdependence and group responsibility seemed to be fostered through making the final product since the activity required active collaboration from group members (Fried-Booth, 2002; Larmer et al., 2015).

Lastly, the self-rating scores of the learner autonomy development in the political dimension were changed the least. The participants showed they had opportunities to negotiate plans for their English learning with the teacher and peers. However, the participants reported that although they had opportunities to make decisions about their learning, some hesitated to make such decisions during the project in the present study.

The participants reported that they were reluctant to express ideas or choices, although they had opportunities to express ideas and make decisions about their learning. The participants may not be accustomed to playing an active role in learning independently, as they were assigned in the instruction. Therefore, the participants may need more time to develop learner autonomy in this dimension. Candy (1991) explained that learners require more time to change their old ways of thinking into new ways of thinking.

Pedagogical Implications

Several classroom implications can be drawn from the key findings:

First, the present study showed how project-based learning can be conducted in English classes for secondary school students. Therefore, English teachers are recommended to consider PBL as one of the teaching approaches that can promote learner autonomy and, at the same time, enhance their communicative competence in all four language skills since the tasks in the project can be designed to engage the students in various kinds of language tasks.

Second, this study showed that some participants might not feel comfortable sharing their ideas or opinions with others. Three measures could be conducted to prevent this. First, training or orientation sessions should be performed before launching the project to build students' confidence to express their ideas. Second, a supportive and safe classroom environment needs to be created. Finally, the students should be provided with options for how to express ideas without feeling they are put on the spot.

Limitations

Two factors should be considered when reading the findings of this study. First, a convenient sampling technique was used to select the participants. Any students from the school where the participants were recruited could join the study, so the entry levels of learner autonomy of the participants could not be predetermined. Second, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was conducted remotely. The participants' behaviors in the online classes might have been affected because of the unfamiliarity, especially at the beginning of the instruction.

Recommendations for Further Research

To further our understanding of how to employ a project-based learning approach in enhancing learner autonomy in English classrooms, further research should be conducted as follows:

First, considering the highest gain in the sociocultural dimension found in online learning in this study, further studies should explore these effects in face-to-face classrooms.

Second, since the increase of learner autonomy in the political dimension was the lowest in this study, further research should be conducted to explore the reasons and how to better enhance autonomy in this dimension.

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