



The Enhancements of Self-Directed Learning on Tertiary Level Students' English Reading Skills: A Thai Private University Context

Wen Zhao^a, Supinda Lertlit^{b,*}

^a qdbortome8818@gmail.com, Suryadhep Teachers College, Rangsit University, Thailand

^b supinda.l@rsu.ac.th, Suryadhep Teachers College, Rangsit University, Thailand

*Corresponding author, supinda.l@rsu.ac.th

APA Citation:

Zhao, W., & Lertlit, S. (2023). The enhancements of self-directed learning on tertiary level students' English reading skills: A Thai private university context. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 16(2), 588-602.

Received
28/03/2023

Received in
revised form
21/06/2023

Accepted
30/06/2023

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the enhancements of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) on tertiary-level students' English reading skills in a private university context and their perceptions towards it. Thirty-eight first-year English-major subjects participated in a 6-week experiment. A mixed method of quantitative and qualitative approaches was used for data collection with four instruments: 1) English reading texts; 2) pre- and post-tests to measure the enhancements of students' reading skills using SDL; 3) students' journals; and 4) a questionnaire. The quantitative data was analyzed by SPSS, while the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic content. The results showed that the mean of the post-test was higher than the pre-test, indicating that SDL significantly enhanced students' English reading skills. Students' journals revealed that these students lacked the skills needed to read effectively in English. The questionnaire discovered that most students had favorable opinions of SDL, though a few were negative about it. This confirms the relationship between SDL and improving the English language and approves the role of reading in SDL, thus providing a reference for future learners to learn other foreign languages. In addition, schools and teachers can also realize the help that SDL can bring to students and make corresponding improvements.

Keywords: self-directed learning, tertiary level students, English reading skills

Introduction

English is undoubtedly one of the most widely used languages in the twenty-first century among individuals from different nations and is regarded as an international language (Rao, 2019). Since students in Thailand begin their educational careers at a very young age, English is one of the fundamental subjects they must take from primary school through higher education (Prasongporn, 2016). Although the Thai government has long placed a high value on English education, the impact is still small (Kaur et al., 2016). According to the EF English Proficiency Index (2017–2022), Thailand has been rated very low for five years in a row, considerably behind Vietnam, Indonesia, and Cambodia.

According to the Ministry of Education, in order to graduate from tertiary level studies, students should have at least a B2 level of English proficiency (Office of the Education Council, 2017). However, according to the CEFR test findings, Thai university students' average English proficiency is only at the A1–A2 level (Waluyo, 2019). Here, CEFR is the benchmark provided by the European Commission for the European language assessment structure, teaching guidelines, examinations, and textbooks. It evaluates the achievements of language learners in the language they have learned and also gives educational assessment guidelines. The ability is divided into six levels, A1 to C2, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, continuous oral expression, and participation in dialogue (North & Piccardo, 2018). This examination is recognized by governments, enterprises, and academic institutions in many countries. Thai undergraduates' low English proficiency can be impacted by a number of factors, including a lack of qualified English teachers, the teaching method being teacher-centered and exam-oriented, etc. (Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021).

Today's students, however, broaden their knowledge in the classroom by using technology, which plays a significant role in English learning (Each & Suppasetserree, 2021). Numerous studies have shown that self-directed learning (SDL) has a significant impact on the effectiveness of English learning (Taladngoen et al., 2020). It enables learners to pursue knowledge, skills, or performance enhancements by using any material, method, or strategy flexibly, according to their needs (Herlo, 2017). This allows them to learn from teachers as well as from their peers, books, the Internet, or any other useful learning resources. It also allows learners to use technology to learn English anytime and anywhere without restrictions (Jenwiththayayot & Tepsuriwong, 2016).

For Thai undergraduates, SDL may help them improve their English learning due to the lack of English learning resources. As a manifestation of self-learning ability, SDL may be able to help students use self-learning ability to improve their English level when external resources are not sufficient. In addition, SDL is also related to reading level. SDL emphasizes learners' choice of learning content, formulation of learning methods, and management of the learning process. When it comes to reading, self-directed learners can independently choose books, articles, or materials they are interested in and formulate reading strategies and methods appropriate for them. They are able to choose reading materials that suit them according to their interests, needs, and learning goals. They may read various types of texts, including novels, newspapers, magazines, academic papers, etc. However, current research has not looked at the performance of Thai English-major undergraduates in autonomous English learning or the relationship between their reading ability and English proficiency. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the use of SDL by first-year liberal arts undergraduates at Rangsit University in the first semester of the 2021 academic year to enhance their English reading skills and their perceptions about it. The two research questions that need to be addressed in this study are as follows:

- 1) In this study, does SDL enhance the English reading skills of the tertiary-level students?
- 2) What are the opinions of the tertiary-level students towards self-directed learning for enhancing their English reading skills in this study?

Literature Review

This section reviews the existing literature on SDL and reading skills to provide a theoretical foundation for further study. It begins with a brief description of SDL before delving into relevant reading theories.

Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

SDL has always been a critical concept in adult education, and its definition has grown and altered throughout the years (Brockett & Hiemstra, 2018). Adult educator Knowles (1975) notes that as individuals grow older, they desire to take responsibility for their own learning and behavior by making their own choices. He initially defined SDL as a process in which individuals actively assess their learning needs, develop learning objectives, identify human and material resources for learning, select and apply appropriate learning techniques, and evaluate learning outcomes with or without the assistance of others (Knowles, 1975).

SDL provides students with great autonomy. Students can plan their studies according to their own needs and at their own pace without limitations (Karatas & Arpaci, 2021). They have control over what they learn, how much they learn, and whether they learn effectively (Brookfield, 2013). Learning stress is inevitably reduced in the absence of instructor monitoring and peer competition (Zhu, 2021). Additionally, the online environment has significantly increased SDL's ability to connect learners from around the world (Bonk & Lee, 2017). They can interact with a variety of like-minded learning partners on the Internet and even join learning groups (Sappapan, 2022). This promotes independent and responsible learning as well as dialogue and collaboration in the learning community (Platt, Amber & Yu, 2014). As it is a component of lifelong learning skills, anyone can benefit from SDL to aid in their learning.

SDL is also a very useful method for English learning, as learners can help themselves identify problems that are more convenient and efficient in SDL by developing clear learning plans and finding appropriate learning resources (Phungsuk et al., 2017). Learners can improve their listening comprehension by listening to English news, music, movies, podcasts, etc. At the same time, actively participating in oral language exercises can improve their oral expression skills by allowing them to communicate with others, participate in language exchange activities, or find language partners (Lee, 2007). They can use technical tools to assist learning, such as an online dictionary, grammar checker, speech recognition software, etc. These tools can help them correct mistakes, expand their vocabulary, and improve language accuracy.

Reading Skills

Reading is one of the most important skills for people who are learning English as a second language. It gives them greater access to written English and compensates for the lack of opportunities to use English in real life, making learning easier (Akopyan & Saks, 2022). There are two reading techniques: intensive reading and extensive reading. Intensive reading involves learners focusing on the semantic or linguistic details of a paragraph. It is used by learners to deal with challenging texts with various unknown words and sentence structures (Khazaal, 2019). On the other hand, extensive reading is referred to as rapid reading, aimed at general understanding, and not focusing on every detail of the text for the purpose of enjoying the text (Nunan, 2003; Pongsatornpiat, 2021). It is used by readers when they read widely and deal with long texts. ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching methodology specialist Harmer (2007) pointed out that in order to get the most benefit from reading, students need to participate in both extensive and intensive reading. Learners who engage in extensive reading tend to miss many details in the text, especially when acquiring a new language. Intensive reading may be a good way to learn the knowledge of the language, but when the learners have mastered a certain level of language

knowledge, they can take advantage of extensive reading to read more and further increase their language skills (Brown, 2007).

SDL plays a significant role in English language teaching and learning, especially in reading skills. SDL encourages learners to choose English reading materials that suit their level and interests. By choosing topics of interest and articles appropriate to their level, learners are better engaged and motivated to read. SDL encourages learners to formulate learning strategies independently, such as previewing, coming up with questions, inferring, and summarizing. Learners can select and apply different reading strategies based on their needs to improve comprehension and speculation. SDL prompts learners to assess their own reading comprehension and skills and progress through reflection. Learners might use notes, summaries, discussion, or review questions to assess their understanding of the reading material and identify areas that need strengthening (Zhu et al., 2022).

Methodology

Research Design

This research was designed as a mixed methods study using a variant of the embedded experimental model (Ray, 2007). The priority of the model was determined by the quantitative experimental method, while the qualitative data was set aside as a supplementary role in order to assist the quantitative method in collecting more in-depth and detailed data. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the extent of the effects of SDL on English reading skills by adopting pre- and post-tests. The second purpose was to explore the participants' opinions towards SDL, which was done using a questionnaire that combined both quantitative and qualitative data.

Population and Samples

The study was conducted at Rangsit University in Thailand. The population of the study consisted of 278 first-year Thai undergraduates majoring in English who were enrolled in RELI (Rangsit English Language Institute), a compulsory English course of ENL126, during the first semester of the 2021 academic year at the College of Liberal Arts. A random sample technique was used to draw 38 samples, of which 31 were female and seven were male, with ages ranging from 17 to 21. Rangsit University is a private university located in the northern part of Bangkok, Thailand. The university was founded in 1986 and is known for providing a variety of disciplines and majors. It is recognized for its international educational environment, excellent academic facilities, and teaching quality. Students at this school have the opportunity to receive English teaching and can develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

Instruments

In this study, four instruments were used to collect data: a pre-test and post-test, English reading texts, students' journals, and a questionnaire. The entire data collection was done online due to the prolonged shutdown of schools during COVID. With only six weeks left when the semester resumed, all classes were transferred online. To ensure the accuracy of the research data, the researcher provided participants with identical reading materials for the SDL treatment as the materials for the test due to the restricted conditions. The details are as follows:

English Reading Texts

This instrument was used as an SDL intervention for each participant to read by themselves outside the classroom without the teacher's instruction. The text materials were the reading comprehension part of the previous Chinese official college English CET4 exam. There were corresponding reading comprehension exercises at the end of each article for them to complete. The participants had to read the article first and then do the comprehension exercises to help them better understand the article they were reading. Each article contained five questions, and the participants read two articles each week, so every participant submitted ten questions weekly. Its validity was tested in a pilot study by 12 first-year undergraduates who also came from the College of Liberal Arts at Rangsit University and were enrolled in the course ENL 126. The result was 0.91, which means the texts were valid.

English Reading Test

It was used as a pre- and post-test to measure the extent of enhancements to the participants' English reading skills by using SDL. The test materials were identical to the reading texts but contained distinct content, so they were also valid. A total of twenty multiple-choice questions were included in four reading passages, each with one correct answer out of four options. Each answer is worth two points, for a total of forty.

Students' Journals

In the fifth week, participants used this instrument to record their SDL reading experiences. Its purpose was to assist the researcher in better understanding how the participants in this experiment used the SDL to improve their English reading skills. In their fifth-week SDL reading process, participants were required to write down in English the difficulties they encountered as well as the strategies they came up with based on their actual reading experiences.

Questionnaire

After the treatment, it was used to gather participants' opinions of SDL. It came in the form of a Google Form-generated electronic file. The questionnaire had three sections with a total of eighteen questions. A demographic question made up the first section. In the second unit, a five-point Likert scale with fifteen closed-ended questions was used to collect participants' perceptions of SDL. For each question on a scale of one to five, scores of one meant strongly disagree, two meant disagree, three meant neutral, four meant agree, and five meant strongly agree. In the final section, two open-ended questions were asked to elicit the participants' true opinions in a more thorough and detailed manner. All the questions were written in English, as were the students' responses. The two open-ended questions are:

1) Can you briefly explain why and why not self-directed learning helped you enhance your English reading skills during this experiment?

2) If you think self-directed learning helped enhance your English reading skills in this experiment, can you briefly explain how it helped you?

The questionnaire was sent to three English teaching experts to confirm its validity. Index-Objective Congruence (IOC) was used to evaluate the items based on a range of scores from -1 to +1. The IOC result was 0.83. The reliability was examined together with the reading texts in the pilot study. Its value of 0.84 was calculated using the Cronbach's alpha (α) formula, indicating that all the questions were valid and reliable.

The Procedure of Data Collection

Week 1: Prior to conducting the research, the researcher explained the purpose of the research, the ethical clearance, the steps of the research procedures, and the reading resources to the participants, ensuring that they understood everything clearly. The participants then took a 45-minute pre-test. Following the test, the researcher coached the participants on English reading strategies such as guessing the unknown word contextually, searching for the subject, verb, and object, and then looking for the branches one by one to analyze long and difficult sentences. The researcher recommended that they write down unknown words and use the English-English dictionary to look up the meaning of each word while reading. Participants with poor English proficiency were advised to adopt an intensive reading strategy, attempting to understand every word and sentence structure of the article to increase their vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Participants with better English proficiency who felt the materials were easy for them were advised to use extensive reading to improve their reading speed, increase their sense of language, and acquire more background knowledge. Finally, the researcher joined their LINE-class group, which included their English lecturer, the researcher, and all participants. Participants could ask the researcher or their English lecturer any questions they had about the experiment or their reading during the experiment at any time via the LINE group.

Weeks 2–5: Each Monday, the researcher distributed two new English reading texts in Microsoft Word format via the LINE-class group for the participants to read outside the classroom and to do the reading exercises. The researcher encouraged them to do the reading exercises based on their understanding of the full texts. They were required to submit their work every Sunday afternoon. To give participants some time to practice the strategies the researchers taught them, the researcher did not collect journal data in the first few weeks. As a result, along with completing reading assignments, participants wrote journals based on their readings during the fifth week.

Week 6: Participants took a post-test. The duration was also 45 minutes. Finally, each participant completed the questionnaire based on their SDL experiences in the experiment.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative data. The details are provided in the sections below.

Quantitative Analysis

All quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. The scores for the pre-test and post-test were first calculated by SPSS, which gave the t-test, mean, and standard deviation. Then, the means of the pre-test and the post-test were compared. The demographic and closed-ended questions of the questionnaire adopted a simple statistical method to determine the frequency and percentage of each item.

Qualitative Analysis

Students' journals and the open-ended questions of the questionnaire were analyzed using thematic content approach. Firstly, the original content was read line by line, highlighting the relevant sentences or keywords. Then, the same meanings were put into one category and summarized as the central concept. Finally, the theme based on each category's fundamental idea was extracted.

Findings

The pre- and post-tests were used to answer the first research question, and the questionnaire was used to address the second. The students' journals were used to examine how they applied the reading techniques that the researcher had taught them. The findings of the data analysis are shown below:

The Findings of the Pre-Test and Post-Test

Table 1 shows the outcomes.

Table 1

Paired Samples Test

	Mean	Std . Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95 %Confidence Interval of the Difference		T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	10.05		0.42	10.92	9.21	24.14	37	0.01
Pretest	22.11	5.34						
Posttest	32.16	5.17						

There appears to be a substantial difference between before and after the study, as indicated by Table 1's significant difference of 0.01 (<0.05). The post-test mean (32.16) was 10.05 greater than the pre-test (22.11). This shows that the students' English reading skills have improved after the treatment. S.D. (5.34) in the pre-test was higher than S.D. (5.17) in the post-test, indicating that not only were students' scores higher on the post-test but also that the gap between students narrowed following the study.

The Findings of Students' Journals

Table 2 summarizes the reading difficulties that the participants faced and the reading techniques they used to overcome them.

Table 2

The Summaries of Students' Journals

Difficulties	Strategies	Sample Narratives
Unfamiliar vocabulary and phrase words	Looking up dictionary Reading more times Guessing word meanings Asking people Skipping Critical thinking	The problem that I encountered was vocabulary and grammar, but I could figure out from the Internet or dictionary. When I was reading, I always encountered some words that I didn't know the meanings of, but I could understand them by finding the keywords in every sentence. The problems I encountered while reading were many unfamiliar vocabularies. Too often, I skipped words or read slowly. When I sound out a word, I take my time and am patient. I don't know some words and phrases, so I search Google for their meanings and try to understand them in each paragraph. I also use context to guess their meanings.

		My big problem is that I don't know much vocabulary, so I think this makes things hard. However, my technique is to read the entire paragraph in this article and then read the question below. If I still don't understand, I will read it again and use critical thinking to focus on what the question wants me to ask.
Unfamiliar grammar	Searching the Internet Analyzing sentences	Some words I don't know and grammar. I went to translate and searched on Google. I had some trouble understanding the meanings due to the writing style, but I was able to overcome it by analyzing the grammar structure and piecing together the meaning.
Unfamiliar article structure	Reading slowly	I had a bit of trouble understanding the terms "child's play" and "striking it lucky," because I hadn't heard of them before. The reading strategy I used was reading slowly and identifying the structure of the sentences, then their meaning.
Cannot find answers	Reading the question first, then the article.	The first problem for me is not knowing the meaning of words and being unable to spell certain words. The strategy I use is to read the questions and answers first, then go read the article, but only read it roughly once.

Table 2 shows that the most challenging problems for the participants were unfamiliar vocabulary and phrase words. The strategies they used to overcome them were looking up the dictionary, reading more times, guessing word meanings, asking people, skipping, and critical thinking. The second challenging problem was unfamiliar grammar. The strategies for this were searching the Internet and analyzing sentences. The third one was an unfamiliar article structure, and the corresponding strategy for it was reading slowly. The final one was cannot find answers, and the strategy they used was reading the question first, then the article. However, the findings illustrated that when participants encountered difficulties during the reading process, they were able to employ appropriate reading strategies to aid them in SDL.

The Findings of the Questionnaire

The gender ratio of the participants is presented in Table 3. Table 4 exhibits the results of the closed-ended questions, while Tables 5 and 6 display the findings of the open-ended questions.

Table 3

Participants' Gender Ratio

Genders	Frequency	Percentage
Female	31	81.6%
Male	7	18.4%
Total	38	100%

A total of 38 participants in the experiment responded to the questionnaire. As shown in Table 3, 31 were female and 7 were male.

Table 4

The Findings of Closed-Ended Questions

Items	5	4	3	2	1
2.I have found that self-directed learning is very helpful to enhance my English reading skills.	23.7%	57.9%	18.4%		

3. I would use self-directed learning to further enhance my English reading skills.	18.4%	55.3%	26.3%		
4. I think self-directed learning is a very useful learning method for English learning.	39.5%	42.1%	15.8%	2.6%	
5. I have found that I have learned things through self-directed learning that I couldn't have learned from formal classes.	15.8%	36.8%	39.5%	7.9%	
6. I would recommend self-directed learning to my friends or other classmates.	23.7%	50%	18.4%	5.3%	2.6%
7. I believe that self-directed learning is a highly adaptable learning approach that anyone can adopt to enhance their learning.	36.8%	50%	13.2%		
8. I believe that self-directed learning is one of the most important learning methods for tertiary-level students.	36.8%	52.6%	10.5%		
9. Self-directed learning can systematically connect in-class and off-class learning together. For instance, any unclear knowledge in class can be enhanced by self-directed learning after class.	39.5%	52.6%	7.9%		
10. Self-directed learning allows students to arrange their learning according to their own needs. For instance, we can make up for where we are not good enough by freely choosing our own learning methods or materials according to our own needs.	31.6%	57.9%	10.5%		
11. Self-directed learning is a flexible learning method that allows students to arrange their learning according to their own schedule and choose anywhere to learn without limitations.	21.1%	65.8%	13.2%		
12. Self-directed learning can be used not only for English learning but also for learning any other subject.	44.7%	44.7%	10.5%		
13. Self-directed learning is different from traditional classroom learning, as it allows learners to have more freedom. This can improve students' learning interests.	31.6%	50%	18.4%		
14. Since self-directed learning requires learners to be responsible for their own learning, it can not only improve students' learning independence but also make them active learners.	28.9%	50%	18.4%	2.6%	
15. Students need to think independently and find answers to many questions in the learning process, so self-directed learning can improve students' problem solving and critical thinking.	23.7%	55.3%	21.1%		
16. Self-directed learning can turn learners into lifelong learners, enabling them to pursue further education without limitations in both formal and informal education.	15.8%	65.8%	15.8%	2.6%	

Table 4 shows that although item 6 has a percentage of 2.6% for score 1, which means strongly disagree, a few participants rated score 2 as disagree. Score 4, which represents agree, had the most frequency, indicating that most students believed SDL was helpful to their learning by giving learners more freedoms, though several thought there were some limitations in SDL.

Table 5

Why and How SDL Help Learners Learn

Themes	Sub-Themes	Sample Responses
Positive Opinions		
Gives learners freedom	Easy to manage learning time No time limitation Freedom in SDL	Self-directed learning, without the supervision of teachers, reduces the pressure of learning.

	Learn at own pace Allows self-controlled learning Reduces learning pressure No place restriction Goes beyond classroom learning Easily find free learning resources Can start learning immediately Allows to focus on weaknesses and learn according to their own interests Allows to focus on needed subjects Self-determined learnings Self-evaluating learnings	In my opinion, I think self-directed learning can help me because I can manage my schedule and make free time if it's too much. Free learning content and schedule. I think self-directed learning is very helpful for everyone because everyone can balance their time. It's a very convenient to learn. As long as there is an Internet, I can learn anywhere. The learning content and the difficulty level can be determined by myself, so that the knowledge can be better understood. Can avoid ineffective practice and be targeted on the subject of what I need to learn. Self-directed learning allows us to learn about things around us. If we want to learn, it is better than being forced.
Builds SDL awareness	Fosters learning initiatives Improves learning interest	I think self-directed learning can improve my interest in learning.
Promotes personal growth	Increases self-responsibility Improves learning independence	Self-directed learning allows me to develop good habits of self-discipline and active learning.
Enhances thinking ability		Self-directed learning can increase critical thinking and creativity.
Applies to life-long learning	Supports continuous learning	This learning method can be applied in real life. This will allow us to have the skills in hand and ready to use at all times.
Negative Opinions		
It is difficult without guidance	No teacher's guidance or class explanation can be difficult	For me, English is a subject that requires a lot of understanding. Sometimes I need someone who can explain and answer my questions immediately, but it's hard to do it through self-directed learning.
With course limitations	Some lessons are unsuitable for SDL	I think some lessons are too hard to learn by ourselves.
Requires a time investment	No time for SDL	Self-directed learning is hard for me because I don't have much time for it.

Table 5 shows that while some students held negative opinions about SDL, most learners believed that SDL was a more flexible learning method that helped students learn at their own pace, self-control their own learning, and reduce learning pressure. SDL improves their independent learning ability and interest in learning. These effects are of great help to the participants' English reading skills.

Table 6

The Findings of the Second Open-ended Question

Themes	Sub-Themes	Sample Responses
Enhancements to English reading skills	Increased vocabulary, reading strategies, and grammar.	Self-directed learning helped me learn some words that I didn't know before, which greatly improved my vocabulary. Self-directed learning can improve my English reading skills. By reading English books, I can gain more knowledge and learn new words.
Knowledge reinforcement	Enhanced understanding of knowledge.	In self-directed learning, I can learn slowly by myself, and there is no time limit. Therefore, my grasp of knowledge will be firmer.
Enhancing enthusiasm for learning English	Enhanced English reading and learning habits, interests, and initiatives.	Self-directed learning helps me develop a good habit of reading in English and improve my vocabulary.

Personal enhancements	Enhanced learning confidence, responsibility, and independence.	I don't have to worry about making mistakes in self-directed learning. It can enhance my confidence and improve my interest in learning.
Enhancing thinking ability	Increased critical thinking and creativity	Helps to practice reading comprehension and improve reading skills as well as independent thinking ability.

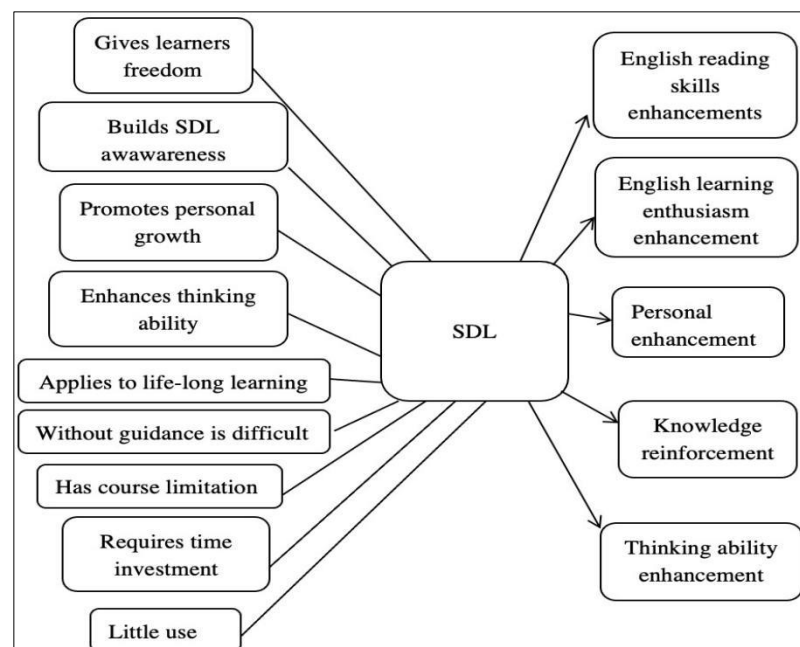
Table 6 illustrates that participants believed that in this experiment, SDL mainly helped them improve English reading skills, such as reading strategies and vocabulary. In the process, their reading interests, learning independence, and critical thinking have also grown.

Conclusion and Discussion

When comparing the pre-test and post-test, it was evident that the mean score of the post-test was 10.05 points higher than the pre-test. The paired t-test revealed a significant difference of 0.0, indicating that SDL helped participants improve their English reading skills. The effect size was 1.91, showing that the participants' English reading skills were significantly enhanced after using the SDL learning method in this experiment. This differs from the studies of Wichadee (2011) and Swatevacharkul (2017), possibly because the participants in this study were English majors with stronger English foundations, so their progress was likely to be faster. Another reason why participants improved so dramatically in such a short amount of time may be that the reading material was practically identical in difficulty and manner to the tests. The data in the questionnaire was divided into two parts: closed-ended and open-ended questions. The results of blending their findings are presented as follows:

Figure 1

Blended Findings of Questionnaire



The combination of the findings from closed-ended and open-ended questions shows that most participants believed SDL offered them greater freedom, as demonstrated by Swatevacharkul (2017)'s study. The results properly articulate this. SDL is a flexible learning approach. There are no time or place constraints, so students can begin studying at any time and from any location. They may access a range of free learning materials and choose any learning method based on their

own interests, not only saving money but also increasing learners' learning enthusiasm. Because there is no teacher oversight or peer competition, students can learn at their own pace and have full control over their learning. When students have complete control, they are motivated and willing to put in the effort to learn (Swatevacharkul, 2017). This encourages them to take initiative and be willing to be accountable for their own learning, which advances students' learning independence, self-responsibility, and learning confidence. Those who take the initiative to participate in SDL may be inspired to develop positive learning habits, which, once established, can greatly assist students. They established a more careful study plan through the SDL method and were able to identify their problems in the process, which is consistent with the results found by (Phungsuk et al., 2017).

Although most students were enthusiastic about SDL, some were negative about it. Closed-ended questions revealed that participants did not agree that SDL could ensure that learners learn more than in formal lectures and that it was useful to everyone. One of the reasons they may have given in open-ended questions was that they considered some courses might not fit SDL since they rely heavily on the teacher's guidance and class explanations. This is consistent with the findings of the research (Wichadee, 2011). Because there is no teacher instruction, students can only learn and understand new knowledge based on their own current knowledge reserves, so knowledge coverage is often not as broad as that taught by professional teachers, and it takes learners more time and energy to achieve the same success as in formal education. As a result, students who lack tenacity or underlying knowledge of a subject may struggle with SDL. From this perspective, SDL is more suitable for people who have a clear assessment of their learning goals and abilities, as mentioned in the previous chapters. Although SDL can provide greater freedom of choice, from the opposite perspective, it may not be closely related to what the teacher is teaching. Another explanation might be that most Thai students are accustomed to teacher-centered teaching techniques. Once they are out of this context, they may be unable to learn. Other factors that may restrict how SDL supports students include those who are too busy or unable to devote time to SDL, as well as those who are reluctant to use SDL or are not interested in learning at all.

The results of the students' journals showed that unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar were the most common problems they had while reading. These are common problems that English learners face when reading. The strategies they used to overcome them involved looking up words in dictionaries and on the Internet. However, only a few of them adopted the strategies coached by the researcher. This suggests that these students lack the skills needed to read effectively in English, which may relate to the Thai English education system. While many schools have adopted a student-centered approach to education, English teaching in Thailand still focuses on the explanation of words and grammar and lacks the teaching of practical skills such as reading methods.

Recommendations for the Use of the Findings

To address the challenge of not having a teacher's guidance in SDL, teachers should strengthen their guidance of students' SDL ability in their daily teachings; create more activities for students to practise SDL in the classroom context; and leave certain assignments for students to further exercise their SDL skills independently after class.

To address the issue of students relying on dictionaries and the Internet while reading, English teachers should incorporate instruction in English reading strategies and methods into their daily teaching practice. To enhance students' English language thinking and listening skills, teachers should speak English throughout the instructional process. Furthermore, teachers should assign English reading assignments to students, such as summarizing an article or paraphrasing a paragraph. As students' reading volume grows, they will use the English reading strategies acquired

in class more frequently. In this way, not only will students' English reading skills increase, but their writing skills will also improve.

Students who want to enhance their English reading skills should combine intensive and extensive reading. Intensive reading is for students who desire to acquire new vocabulary and grammar, such as from textbooks, whereas extensive reading is for students who prefer to read for leisure, building their English language sense and speed through massive reading. As a result, readers may choose any materials that appeal to them for extensive reading, but the level of the materials should be equivalent to or slightly higher than their actual English levels.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could employ a comparable subject group with a more even gender distribution or a different subject group with a longer period to confirm the impact of SDL on English reading skills. Future researchers could also choose to use interviews or journals to gather detailed insights into how participants utilize SDL to support their learning.

Connecting in-class and out-of-class education

SDL is undeniably an effective approach to learning, but it does have some restrictions that can cause difficulties for students. To overcome these obstacles and genuinely put SDL at the service of learners, it is necessary to link learning in and out of the classroom. Since online teaching has grown so quickly in the past few years, out-of-class education should focus on building a complete online education system.

Policymakers in education should push schools to blend online and offline education, incorporating SDL and traditional classroom instruction. Every institution should develop its own online course system and thoroughly classify various majors and grades. Teachers should prepare electronic lecture notes for each lesson, upload the key knowledge online in a timely manner after class, and encourage students to actively log in for review. All the students at the school should have a username so they can log in and study whenever and wherever they want. This would make the most of the combination of online and offline classes.

By creating online study groups with their students, teachers could deepen their connection with them. The designated student, teacher assistant, or teachers themselves may manage it. Teachers should encourage students to actively participate in group discussions on learning-related topics.

About the Authors

Wen Zhao: A full-time postgraduate student at Suryadhep Teachers College, Rangsit University in Thailand, studying Bilingual Education. She is interested in language acquisition and the self-direction of tertiary-level students.

Supinda Lertlit: A full-time assistant professor who works as an Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Director of Doctoral Program in Educational Studies at Suryadhep Teachers College of Rangsit University. Her interests include instructional technology in education, teachers' development, as well as ICT Adaptability in Flexible Instruction.

References

- Akopyan, A., & Saks, K. (2022). Effects of the Reading Practice Platform (Readvise) in Developing Self-Regulated Reading Skills of Tertiary Students in L2 Learning. *Education Sciences*, 12(4), 238.

- Bonk, C. J., & Lee, M. M. (2017). Motivations, achievements, and challenges of self-directed informal learners in open educational environments and MOOCs. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 4(1), 36-57.
- Brockett, R. G., & Hiemstra, R. (2018). *Self-direction in adult learning: Perspectives on theory, research, and practice*. Routledge.
- Brookfield, S. D. (2013). *Powerful techniques for teaching adults*. Jossey-Bass.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by principles. An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (3rd ed.). Pearson-Longman.
- Each, N., & Suppasetseree, S. (2021). The effects of mobile-blended cooperative learning on EFL students' listening comprehension in Cambodian context. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 14(2), 143-170.
- EF Education First. (2017-2022). *The world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills*. <https://www.ef.com/assetscdn/WIBIwq6RdJvcD9bc8RMd/cefcom-epi-site/reports/2022/ef-epi-2022-english.pdf>.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching* (4th ed.). Pearson-Longman.
- Herlo, D. (2017). Self-directed learning on teacher training studies programs. *Educția Plus*, 18(2), 7-17.
- Jenwitthayayot, W., & Tepsuriwong, S. (2016). Students' perceptions about their self-study experience. *rEFLECTIONS*, 21, 55-75.
- Karatas, K., & Arpaci, I. (2021). The role of self-directed learning, metacognition, and 21st century skills predicting the readiness for online learning. *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 13(3), 1-13.
- Kaur, A., Young, D., & Kirkpatrick, R. (2016). English education policy in Thailand: Why the poor results? In R., Kirkpatrick (Eds.), *English Language Education Policy in Asia*. (pp. 345-361). Springer International Publishing.
- Khazaal, E. N. (2019). Impact of intensive reading strategy on English for specific purposes college students' in developing vocabulary. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 10(2), 181-195.
- Knowles, M.S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Association Press.
- Lee, L. (2007). Fostering second language oral communication through constructivist interaction in desktop videoconferencing. *Foreign language annals*, 40(4), 635-649.
- Likert, R. (1932). A technique for the measurement of attitudes. *Archives of Psychology*, 140, 1-55.
- North, B., & Piccardo, E. (2018). *Aligning the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) to the Common European Framework of References (CERF)*. Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks.
- Nunan, D. (2003). *Practical English language teaching*. McGraw Hill.
- Office of the Education Council. (2017). *The National Education Plan A.C. 2017-2036 (B.E. 2560-2579)*. OEC Bangkok, Thailand.
- Phungsuk, R., Viriyavejakul, C., & Ratanaolarn, T. (2017). Development of a problem-based learning model via a virtual learning environment. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, 38(3), 297-306.
- Platt, C. A., Amber, N. W., & Yu, N. (2014). Virtually the same?: Student perceptions of the equivalence of online classes to face-to-face classes. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(3), 489.
- Pongsatornpiat, W. (2021). Interactive group in extensive reading to enhance reading ability of Thai undergraduate students. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 14(2), 342-371.
- Prasongporn, P. (2016). English education at primary level in Thailand. *National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER)*, 111-115.
- Rao, P. S. (2019). The role of English as a global language. *Research Journal of English*, 4(1), 65-79.
- Ray, R. (2007). Designing and conducting mixed methods research. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 7(2), 90-92.

- Sappapan, P. (2022). Promoting EFL first-year students' autonomy through consultation services. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 15(1), 654–681.
- Swatevacharkul, R. (2017). The effects of self-directed learning on the English reading comprehension ability of MBA students. *The New English Teacher*, 11(1), 96–119.
- Taladngoen, U., Palawatwichai, N., Estaban, R. H., & Phuphawan, N. (2020). A study of factors affecting EFL tertiary students' reading comprehension ability. *Rangsit Journal of Educational Studies*, 7(1), 12–21.
- Tantiwich, K., & Sinwongsuwat, K. (2021). Thai university students' problems of language use in English conversation. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 14(2), 598-626.
- Waluyo, B. (2019). Examining Thai first-year university students' English proficiency on CEFR levels. *The New English Teacher*, 13(2), 51–71.
- Wichadee, S. (2011). Developing the self-directed learning instructional model to enhance English reading ability and self-directed learning of undergraduate students. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning (TLC)*, 8(12), 43-52.
- Zhu, M. (2021). Enhancing MOOC learners' skills for self-directed learning. *Distance Education*, 42(3), 441-460.
- Zhu, M., Bonk, C. J., & Berri, S. (2022). Fostering Self-Directed Learning in MOOCs: Motivation, Learning Strategies, and Instruction. *Online Learning*, 26(1), 153-173.