Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences 41 (2020) 46–52

Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences

journal homepage: http://kjss.kasetsart.org

Thai teachers' self-assessment and student perceptions on the practice of autonomy

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Article Info

Article history:
Received 13 February 2018
Revised 10 July 2018
Accepted 22 August 2018
Available online 7 September 2018

Keywords:
classroom autonomy,
English language teaching,
reflective teaching,
self-evaluation,
student perception

Abstract

This paper aims to share the classroom observation findings from a study that previously revealed positive beliefs of secondary school teachers and learners in Bangkok regarding various aspects of autonomous learning in the Thai culture of learning. The earlier findings disclosed their beliefs in support of an autonomous learning approach regarding the roles of language teachers and learners, willingness to engage in activities and decision-making relevant to language classroom arrangements both in- and outside the classroom. It is thus worth seeing how these beliefs are translated into practice. This study investigates how teachers self-evaluated their application of autonomous learning in classrooms based on the reflective teaching concept, compared to their students' perception. The sample included 19 teachers and 632 students from 19 secondary schools in Bangkok, who volunteered to complete an evaluation form at the end of the observed lessons. The findings suggest an inconsistency between the teachers' beliefs and practices. Additionally, they rated their implementation relatively higher than their students. The study sheds light on how teacher educators and policy makers can further assist in reducing barriers so that the practice of autonomous learning in secondary education in Bangkok and in Thailand may become achievable.

Introduction

The role of English as a lingua franca after ASEAN's transformation into ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has spurred interest among educators and researchers worldwide, particularly in finding an appropriate pedagogical approach to teaching and learning it. Thailand has always been a monolingual country, which Kachru (1985) has positioned in the Expanding Circle, where English has not gained official status. Thus it still needs to find an approach to English language teaching and learning that fits with its own culture and learning environment.

Authentic exposure to English and the adaptation of learner-centered approaches are essential for Thai people in 21st century education; yet English is considered just another subject taught a few hours a week in the majority of Thai schools. English medium instruction (EMI) tends to be available only to those who can afford to send their children to international or bilingual schools, and not to the majority of Thai students.

Most English language teachers and learners in Thai schools are still struggling with balancing between the intensively exam-based education system and newer learning concepts, including autonomous learning. Nonetheless, most of the studies in this area in Thailand have so far dealt with promoting learner autonomy; not much work on how teachers or learners evaluate their degree of autonomy in classrooms and outside classrooms has been

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Peer review under responsibility of Kasetsart University.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.kjss.2018.08.003
2452-3151/

carried out. The previous phase of our work (Tayjasanant & Suraratdecha, 2016) has revealed the mainly supportive beliefs of 76 teachers and 116 lower secondary students from 41 public schools in Bangkok with regard to interactive learning, peer coaching activities, and learner involvement as well as decision making throughout the language learning process. This paper therefore aims to further examine some of these teachers' self-assessment of their application of autonomous learning principles and compare with how their learners have evaluated it. This will reveal the extent to which Thai teachers can conduct classroom practice to help condition their students to be autonomous both inside and outside classrooms.

Literature Review

Holec (1981) first used the term "learner autonomy" to refer to a learner's abilities to be responsible for their own learning by making decisions related to their learning. Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander, and Trebbi (1990) believed that autonomy can be developed in a general classroom context without self-access facilities or a need to specially train learners. Teachers can promote learners to be capable and willing to learn independently in their socio-cultural contexts through appropriate classroom or pedagogical conversations that lead to establishing shared ideas of what to learn and how to learn it. Despite its western origin, Little (1991) noted this learning concept serves as a set of guidelines to help learners from diversified cultures to achieve their educational goals through pedagogical methods that suit their cultural norms. Yet this may seem easier said than done, as Ho and Crookall (1995), for example, found that attempts to introduce autonomy to students with a strong Chinese cultural background would succeed or not largely depending on the students' willingness to try the new approach, and that this was the influence of hierarchy and face protecting traits.

Learner autonomy has later expanded to cover lifelong learning of any individual learners inside and outside the classroom. Crabbe (1993) observed a gap between promoting autonomy in the classroom and out of the classroom, and revealed that it is much easier for learners to become autonomous outside the classroom, as they are in their *private domain*, which allows them to independently make decisions on their learning choices. Classroom autonomy, on the other hand, is considered less natural and more difficult to promote, as it takes place in the *public domain*, largely controlled by teachers, who tend to follow quite fixed procedures possibly determined by a specific curriculum or institution. Thus, to minimize the gap, teachers should encourage learners to establish shared purposes of tasks, design learning activities that match the shared learning purpose, develop their related pedagogical skills and have autonomy or freedom to choose teaching methods, tasks and ways to evaluate learning outcomes (Benson, 2000; Crabbe, 1993).

Also recently, investigations into the possibility of classroom autonomy in EFL countries have highlighted uncertainties or various degrees of achievement due to factors related to teachers and learners, as well as specific cultural and socio-political characteristics (e.g. Akbarpour-Tehrani & Wan Mansor, 2012; Bajrami, 2015; Balçıkanlı, 2010; Cristina, 2015; Ertürk, 2016; Javadi, 2014; Vasile, 2013). Given the complex conceptualization of teacher autonomy and intricate contextual influences, it is essential that teachers have a chance to reflect upon or evaluate their practice (Little, 1995) in order to maintain or increase their level of autonomy.

Methods

Participants

Two groups of purposively selected participants took part in the study. The first group included 19 EFL teachers from the 76 teachers who had participated in the first phase of study reported in Tayjasanant and Suraratdecha (2016). These teachers, teaching compulsory English courses covering language skills and grammar at lower-secondary levels (Years 1–3), volunteered to participate in a non-participant observation and reflect upon their teaching afterwards. The second group of participants comprised 632 students in the 19 classes observed. The number of students per class ranged from 18 to 51, depending on the school size (small, medium, large and extra-large schools). Yet it is worth noting that this study did not deal with exploring the influence of school sizes on the teachers' and learners' evaluation of classroom autonomy as the school sizes were varied and unequal. In terms of qualifications, the teachers participating in this study shared more or less the same educational background; the interview in the first phase of study revealed that most of the teachers obtained a bachelor's degree in English or a related filed.

Data Collection

The main method of data collection was the teachers and students' classroom observation worksheets on the implementation of classroom autonomy in August 2015. Promptly after the observed lessons, the teachers were requested to rate the degree of their autonomy practice in the observed classes. A self-evaluation sheet used for this consisted of 12 four-point-scale items covering different aspects of autonomous learning, largely based on Smith (2008), who has argued that learners should be involved in deciding their learning objective, contents, material, stages, methods, techniques, pace, time, place, and evaluation procedures. The design of the evaluation sheet also took into consideration out-of-class learning, as Benson (2006, p. 26) observed that "students tend to engage in out-of-class learning activities more frequently than their teachers realize.

The four points represented degrees of classroom autonomy practice, including:

Scale	Degrees of classroom autonomy practice
4	= Active implementation
3	= Implementation with some barriers
2	= Some attempt at implementation
1	= No implementation

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed mainly quantitatively. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation, were used to enable the researchers to ascertain trends on how the teachers evaluated their practice compared with the views of their students.

The analysis was based on the following criterion of standard mean ranges in interpreting the results:

Mean range	Meaning
3.26–4.00	= Significantly implemented
2.51–3.25	= Moderately implemented
1.76–2.50	= Slightly implemented
1.0–1.75	= Not implemented

The analysis was based on the following criterion of standard mean ranges in interpreting the results: 1.0 –1.75 = not implemented; 1.76–2.50 = slightly implemented; 2.51–3.25 = moderately implemented; and 3.26 –4.00 = significantly implemented.

Results

This section presents the overall findings on the teachers' self-evaluation of their degree of classroom autonomy practice, compared with the appraisal of their students based on the 12 evaluation items under five themes: 1) decision-making on the aim/objective and topic/content; 2) decision-making on learning resources, methods/techniques and activities; 3) student involvement in asking and answering questions and helping their peers; 4) decision-making on task deadlines and assessment; and 5) selection of out-of-class learning activities. The findings are then discussed in terms of the match or mismatch between the teachers' self-evaluation and their students' perceptions.

Theme 1. Decision-making on the aim/objective and topic/content

At the initial stage of involving students in determining the aim/objective of the observed lesson, the results in Table 1 show that, overall, the teachers considered themselves to have significantly done so ($\bar{x} = 3.53$). Nevertheless, on average the students felt that their teachers involved them only moderately at this first stage ($\bar{x} = 2.74$).

At the next stage of choosing what to learn, as shown in Table 2, the overall results show that the teachers evaluated themselves as moderately involving their students in determining the topic or content of the lesson ($\bar{x} = 3.00$). The students' overall perception was consistent with the teachers', namely, that their teachers had involved them only moderately at this stage ($\bar{x} = 2.89$).

Theme 2. Decision-making on learning resources, methods/techniques and activities

Concerning the selection of learning resources, e.g. texts, other printed media, or digital media, the overall findings in Table 3 reveal that the teachers evaluated themselves as moderately involving their students in decision-making ($\bar{x} = 2.95$). The students' overall view agreed with their teachers' self-evaluation in that they also thought that their teachers moderately involved them at this stage ($\bar{x} = 3.11$).

With regard to allowing students to choose how they want to learn, which is another central aspect of autonomous learning, the findings in Table 4 show that, on average, the teachers evaluated themselves as moderately involving their students in decision-making ($\bar{x} = 2.84$). The students' overall perception was also consistent with their teachers' self-evaluation; i.e. they also thought that their teachers moderately involved them at this stage ($\bar{x} = 2.74$).

The results in the following table (Table 5) show that the teachers generally considered themselves as having significantly involved students in determining learning activities of the observed lesson ($\bar{x} = 3.42$). The students

Table 1
Involving students in determining the aim/objective of the observed lesson

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	0	0	3.53	.612	0	0	2.74	.806
2	1	5.3			299	47.4		
3	7	36.8			200	31.6		
4	11	57.9			133	21.1		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Table 2
Involving students in determining the topic/content of the observed lesson

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	0	0	3.00	.577	33	5.3	2.89	.809
2	3	15.8			133	21.1		
3	13	68.4			333	52.6		
4	3	15.8			133	21.1		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Table 3
Involving students in determining the learning resources for the observed lesson

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	1	5.3	2.95	.705	0	0	3.11	.658
2	2	10.5			100	15.8		
3	13	68.4			366	57.9		
4	3	15.8			166	26.3		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Table 4
Involving students in determining the learning methods for the observed lesson

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	1	5.3	2.84	.688	33	5.3	2.74	.806
2	3	15.8			200	31.6		
3	13	68.4			299	47.4		
4	2	10.5			100	15.8		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Table 5
Involving students in determining the learning activities for the observed lesson

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	0	0	3.42	.607	0	0	3.05	.621
2	1	5.3			100	15.8		
3	9	47.4			399	63.2		
4	9	47.4			133	21.1		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Table 6
Encouraging students to ask questions

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	0	0	3.84	.501	0	0	3.00	.602
2	1	5.3			67	10.5		
3	1	5.3			399	63.2		
4	17	89.5			166	26.3		
Total	19	100			632	100		

themselves evaluated their teachers a little lower, however, and on average they felt that their teachers had involved them at this stage only moderately ($\bar{x} = 3.05$).

Theme 3. Student involvement in asking and answering questions and helping their peers

On the aspect of encouraging students to share in the lesson by asking questions, the findings in Table 6 reveal that the teachers mostly considered themselves as having significantly encouraged students to ask questions in the observed lesson ($\bar{x} = 3.84$). The students judged differently however and overall felt that their teachers had given them opportunities to ask questions at a moderate level ($\bar{x} = 3.00$).

As for encouraging their students to answer questions, the results in Table 7, show that, overall, the teachers evaluated themselves as having significantly involved their students in answering questions ($\bar{x} = 3.95$). The students' overall perception however did not correspond with the results of the teachers' self-evaluation. On average, the students believed that their teachers involved them only moderately at this stage ($\bar{x} = 3.16$).

Regarding peer learning, another key component to support greater autonomy in language learning, the findings in Table 8 reveal that the teachers evaluated themselves as having significantly encouraged their students to help one another or having promoted peer-learning during the observed lesson ($\bar{x} = 3.53$). The students, though, did not quite agree with their teachers and evaluated their teachers a little lower. On average they felt that their teachers moderately promoted peer learning in the lesson ($\bar{x} = 3.11$).

Table 7
Encouraging students to answer questions

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	0	0	3.95	.229	0	0	3.16	.501
2	0	0			33	5.3		
3	1	5.3			466	73.7		
4	18	94.7			133	21.1		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Table 8
Encouraging peer learning

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	0	0	3.53	.513	0	0	3.11	.567
2	0	0			67	10.5		
3	9	47.4			432	68.4		
4	10	52.6			133	21.1		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Theme 4. Decision-making on task deadlines and assessment

The results in Table 9 show that, by and large, the teachers evaluated their degree of implementation the lowest among all aspects related to their practice of classroom autonomy. In other words, they felt that they had only slightly involved their students in setting task deadlines ($\bar{x} = 2.26$) possibly because it was considered an administrative issue. Yet the students evaluated their teachers somewhat higher; on average they felt that their teachers moderately involved them in setting task deadlines ($\bar{x} = 2.68$).

The principle of autonomous learning also urges teachers to let their students get involved in setting assessment methods. The findings, shown in the following table (Table 10), indicate that the teachers evaluated themselves as involving their students moderately in this part ($\bar{x} = 2.63$). The students' overall perception was also in line with the teachers' self-evaluation; i.e. their teachers moderately involved them at this stage ($\bar{x} = 2.63$). This again was probably due to the fact that setting the assessment method is considered another administrative issue that is decided by the teacher or school in the Thai context of classroom management.

Theme 5. Selection of out-of-class learning activities

Teachers are encouraged to support out-of-class learning, the actual origin of the autonomous learning

Table 9
Involving students in setting task deadlines

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	3	15.8	2.26	.806	33 (n/a)	5.3	2.68	1.057
					33	5.3		
2	9	47.4			166	26.3		
3	6	31.6			267	42.1		
4	1	5.3			133	21.1		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Table 10
Involving students in setting assessment methods

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	1	5.3	2.63	.895	33	5.3	2.63	.761
2	6	31.6			233	36.8		
3	10	52.6			299	47.4		
4	2	10.5			67	10.5		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Table 11
Student involvement in selecting out–of–class activities

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	0	0	3.16	.501	33	5.3	3.05	.780
2	1	5.3			67	10.5		
3	14	73.7			366	57.9		
4	4	21.1			166	26.3		
Total	19	100			632	100		

Table 12
Student involvement in selecting extra-curricular activities

Degree of Implementation	Teachers' Self-evaluation				Students' Perceptions			
	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD	Number	%	$\bar{x}$	SD
1	0	0	3.42	.507	33	5.3	2.89	.944
2	0	0			133	21.1		
3	11	57.9			300	47.4		
4	8	42.1			166	26.3		
Total	19	100			632	100		

concept. Table 11 reveals that on average the teachers rated themselves as moderately involving their students in the selection of out-of-class learning activities ($\bar{x} = 3.16$). The students' overall perception was the same in that they felt that their teachers had moderately involved them in selecting what to learn outside of class time ($\bar{x} = 3.05$).

As for the selection of extra-curricular activities available in their schools, Table 12 shows that on the whole the teachers considered themselves as having significantly involved their students in selecting extra-curricular learning activities related to English language learning ($\bar{x} = 3.42$). The students, however, did not quite agree; they felt that their teachers only moderately involved them in selecting extra-curricular learning activities ($\bar{x} = 2.89$).

Discussion

In conclusion, the results reveal two main research findings. First, the teachers felt successful in promoting learner autonomy with their students in their observed classes; they rated their autonomy practice as mostly *significant* for six aspects (three aspects in Theme 3, and one aspect each in Themes 1, 2 and 5). They rated their lesson as *moderately* autonomous for five aspects (two aspects in Theme 2, and one aspect each in Themes 1, 4 and 5) and *slightly* autonomous for only one aspect in Theme 4. (See results for details of each theme.)

Second, overall students considered that their teachers had achieved only *moderate* degree of autonomy in all the 12 aspects rated. The mismatches in their evaluations could stem from a lack of full understanding of the principles, or more complex factors concerning familiarization with the Asian-style teaching and learning culture as discussed in Chan, Spratt, and Humphreys (2002). These factors may have caused the teachers to overestimate their own abilities or the students to underrate their teachers' practice, also found by Ho and Crookall (1995). The Thai educational context and expectations regarding classroom management can also be viewed as factors hindering the development of learner autonomy.

Despite the limited sample, the present study sheds light on how secondary-school EFL teachers and learners in Bangkok and in Thailand should be further educated on how they can promote more autonomous learning both inside and outside classrooms through appropriate training/coaching. Policy makers should take into account relevant factors when developing education policies regarding content and objectives, teaching materials, and assessment methods. It is hoped that the overall findings will help raise the awareness of senior management at school and ministerial levels regarding reducing impediments EFL teachers inevitably face when trying to promote autonomous learning, be they large classes, an exam-oriented schooling system, or even the hierarchy oriented school culture and society.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) for the generous research grant.

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