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An Exploration of Strategies for Autonomous Learning in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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Abstract

Lifelong learning and its successful implementation are fundamentally tied to the principle of learner autonomy. This qualitative case study examined the varied pedagogical strategies implemented by three EFL (English as a Foreign Language) educators at a public university in Southern Thailand by using an individual semi-structured interview and thematic analysis as research tools. These strategies were aimed at bolstering students' autonomy in English learning, centered around four key themes: Fostering Interest, Reflective Practices, Facilitating, and Encouraging Autonomous Behaviors. The study reveals that lecturers function as motivators, reflective practitioners, facilitators, and consultants, thus crafting an atmosphere conducive to autonomous learning. Traditional authoritative roles are absent, enhancing students' independent learning journey. The knowledge obtained from this research added to a repertoire of effective strategies for EFL educators and was intended to foster environmental support of autonomous learning.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Learner Autonomy; Pedagogical Strategies; EFL Lecturers

Introduction

Autonomous learning can be interpreted as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. The autonomous learners are themselves able to hold and take responsibility in all these learning aspects, i.e.: designing the objective; deciding the contents and progression; choosing methods to be used; checking the procedure progression of the acquisition appropriately speaking (place, time, rhythm, etc.); and assessing what has been obtained (Holec, 1981). The National Education Standards 2018 of Thailand, issued by the Secretariat of the Education Council of Thailand, has set out the desired outcomes for learners in higher education. The skills mentioned first are lifelong learning skills (Education Council Secretariat, 2019). This shows that the Thai government expects educators to develop this skill in higher education students. The development of learners to have autonomy in learning is consistent with the policy of developing learners to have lifelong learning skills because the learners have an autonomous character, which will result in learners being able to develop learning to be lifelong learning even after graduating from higher education, which will coincide with Yurdakul (2017) conducted a study and concluded that there was a significant relationship between autonomous learning and lifelong learning.

The rapidly growing recognition of learner autonomy in education, and notably in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction underscores the urgency and relevance of this study. Autonomous learning interactions, known to significantly improve language proficiency, are crucial. Yet the understanding of how teachers process and encourage such autonomy in language learning remains limited (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Bui, 2019; Lamb, 2015).

Research since 2015 has underscored the pivotal role of EFL lecturers in fostering autonomy, particularly in the Asian context (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2016).



Yet, in practice, especially within the unique educational landscape of Thailand, teachers continue to grapple with the transition from traditional teaching methods to more learner-centered approaches (Darasawang, 2007; Phongsakonkun & Yutdhana, 2018).

Adding to the relevance of this study is the explicit call from the Thai government in the 2018 National Education Standards for the cultivation of lifelong learning skills, with a particular emphasis on autonomous learning (Education Council Secretariat, 2019). However, while the government has outlined these expectations, there is a lack of practical guidance for Thai EFL educators on effectively fostering autonomous learning in classrooms. This study, therefore, directly addressed the real-world issue faced by educators and policy-makers alike. By examining how Thai EFL educators promote autonomous learning, this study sought to bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom reality, thereby contributing to more effective teaching strategies in the EFL context in Thailand and potentially influencing future policy directions. Moreover, the insights gathered from this research can contribute to the broader discourse on autonomous learning, enrich pedagogical practices, and support the ultimate goal of cultivating lifelong learners.

The significance of autonomous learning in fostering lifelong learning abilities, in line with the Thai government's higher education policy, cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, a wealth of research underscores inconsistencies in its implementation within Thailand. Suraratdecha and Tayjasanant's (2020) work highlighted a deficiency in Thai teachers' capacity to construct activities that endorse autonomous learning. Duong and Seepho (2014) similarly identified challenges faced by English language instructors from various nations teaching in a Thai university in advocating and establishing learner autonomy. Scheb-Buenner (2018) concluded that understanding mainstream higher education practices in Thailand and teachers' culturally relevant behaviors towards autonomous learning contained noticeable gaps. In particular, how teachers perceive autonomous learning and their supportive role towards students is under-researched in the Thai context.

Indeed, the significance of learner autonomy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is recognized in contemporary research (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Bui, 2019; Lamb, 2015). However, particularly in the Thai context, a considerable understanding gap exists concerning strategies used by EFL educators to encourage autonomy (Phongsakonkun & Yutdhana, 2018). This challenge is exacerbated by Thailand's prevalently traditional, teacher-centered teaching methods which conflict with autonomous learning promotion (Darasawang, 2007). Therefore, when it comes to the concept of learner autonomy, the roles of teachers and learners must change. Teachers are expected to be facilitators by creating a learning environment that encourages students to be in control of their own learning and learners are expected to play a role in making decisions and taking control of their own learning (Intraboonsom et al., 2020).

Moreover, the roles of EFL educators as motivators, facilitators, and consultants have been suggested in the literature (Freeman et al., 2014; Keller, 2016; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Still, there is a dearth of empirical studies investigating these roles in practice, notably within the Asian EFL setting (Nguyen & Walkinshaw, 2016).



Therefore, this research aims to explore the techniques Thai EFL educators employ to encourage autonomous learning among their students. By bridging the highlighted gaps and addressing the identified challenges, this study hopes to provide crucial insights into effective pedagogical strategies for promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms, with particular emphasis on the Thai setting.

Objective

The objective of this research is to explore the practices and strategies Thai EFL lecturers utilize to foster students' autonomy in learning English.

Methodology

Population and Sampling:

This study draws its participants from a public university situated in the southern region of Thailand. Utilizing a purposive sampling strategy, three lecturers were selected based on their in-depth knowledge and experience in the subject area through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a widely adopted technique in qualitative research, as it enables the deliberate selection of individuals who are rich sources of information pertinent to the phenomenon being investigated (Lawrence, 2015).

To qualify for participation, all selected individuals must meet certain criteria. They were mandated to possess at least a master's degree in English or a related field, thereby ensuring that they have substantial theoretical knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. Further, they were required to have a minimum of two years of teaching experience at the tertiary level, thereby providing practical insights and experiences in teaching and facilitating English language learning. This combination of theoretical understanding and practical experience is instrumental in achieving the research objectives.

In this research study, three professors from one public university, in Thailand, were purposefully selected to participate. They were chosen because their teaching philosophy aligns with the university's mission to produce graduates who possess critical thinking skills and the capacity to take responsibility for all aspects of their learning. This mission is in line with the concept of learner autonomy (Benson & Lor, 1998; Holec, 1981) Consequently, the findings from this case study can serve as illustrative examples of pedagogical activities employed by Thai EFL lecturers to foster learner autonomy in the context of English learning.

Research Tools:

In this research, a qualitative case study methodology served as the foundation which aimed to offer an in-depth examination of the research question at hand. This methodological approach is particularly useful when a holistic and in-depth exploration of specific aspects of a wider field is required. Case studies can be particularly informative in providing a real-world context for examining the relevance and applicability of particular theories or models (Yin, 2009).



In this case, semi-structured interviews form the primary mode of data collection. The research interview questions borrow from Grow(1991) model of staged self-directed learning, in combination with the notions of autonomous learning as proposed by Holec (1981) and further developed by Nunan (1997), while data analysis relied on the comprehensive review and interpretation of the resulting interview transcripts.

Methods of Data Collection:

For this study, each participant partook in an individual semi-structured interview. The interview was conducted online by taking notes of the interview and took approximately 20 to 30 minutes. These interviews featured open-ended questions, providing a conducive environment for an exploratory and flexible discourse. This strategy allows for a deep-seated understanding of the research subjects and paves the way for the generation of insightful and relevant data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Specifically, the research interview questions borrow from Grow's (1991) model of staged self-directed learning, in combination with the notions of autonomous learning as proposed by Holec (1981) and further developed by Nunan (1997)

It should be noted that, for the purpose of maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, their identities and specific affiliations are not disclosed in this study. Instead, focus was placed on qualifications and experiences as related to the subject of this research.

Methods of Data Analysis:

The primary approach adopted for data analysis and interpretation in this research is thematic analysis, a widely utilized method in qualitative research. Thematic analysis offers a robust framework for identifying, examining, and interpreting patterns of meaning, or 'themes,' across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This technique is particularly effective when handling text-based data such as interview transcripts or survey responses, where the objective is to unearth underlying themes or recurring patterns.

The analytical procedure for this study is rooted in an inductive process. In this context, thematic analysis was not preconceived; rather, this approach emerged organically from the data itself. The researcher meticulously reviewed the raw, detailed data to discern significant themes and categories (Creswell, 2013). Such an approach allows for a holistic understanding of the data, facilitating the identification of key patterns and insights into English language teaching approaches that promote autonomous learning for students.



Findings

The data analysis is in the form of a thematic analysis, focusing on the identified themes and their implications for promoting autonomy in English language learning among **Thai students**.

Table 1: Themes emerged from the research data

Theme	Description	Examples from the data
Theme 1: Fostering Interest	Lecturers act as motivators or those who guide, and inspire students' interest in autonomous learning.	" I provide examples from my personal experiences, senior students, and other well-known individuals who have utilized autonomous learning to achieve successful personal development."
		"I engage in conversations. Also, I provide advice, and offer examples which help students recognize that autonomous learning is a crucial skill that everyone should possess."
		" By setting goals and practicing with self-monitoring, students can effectively develop themselves."
Theme 2: Reflective Practices	Lecturers encourage students to reflect on their learning outcomes and self-assess their progress.	" Following the completion of teaching and learning activities, a post-test is conducted to measure the learning outcomes. I promptly share the pre-test and post-test scores with my students. They are then required to engage in self-assessment, evaluating their level of knowledge after learning and identifying areas for improvement."
		" I provide a self-assessment form for students to complete after each assignment. For instance, in the translation course, I offer a checklist of 9-10 common errors in translation as part of the assignment."
		"I foster reflective practices and promote autonomous learning among my students by providing opportunities for self-reflection and sharing their insights with the class."
Theme 3: Facilitating	Lecturers act as facilitators, enabling students to actively participate in classroom activities and decision-making.	"I initiate my teaching activities by posing questions to the students and encouraging them to search for answers using the Internet independently."
		"The activities I employ to enhance student learning encompass task-based learning, project-based learning, communicative learning, and creativity-based learning. These approaches are tailored to the student's scientific interests and emphasize effective communication, creative application, group collaboration, technological utilization, and the cultivation of individual aptitudes."



Theme	Description	Examples from the data
Theme 4: Encouraging Autonomous Behaviors	Lecturers act as consultants or delegators, encouraging learners to engage in autonomous behaviors outside the classroom.	“I implement self-study activities that span the entire semester, allowing students to continuously engage in learning outside the classroom.”
		“I encourage students to utilize social media for self-learning English. Nowadays, learners have a strong preference for constantly using social media platforms. They can employ the internet to search for information while studying and download apps that facilitate English improvement, which can be done conveniently at any time and any place, such as the English Score app.”
		“In the English for Aviation Business course, I assign students to work in pairs or groups to create videos based on specific scenarios related to the subject. These videos are then presented in front of the class as part of their learning experience.”

In this thematic analysis, four key themes emerged from the data: Fostering Interest, Reflective Practices, Facilitating Classroom Activities, and Encouraging Autonomous Behaviors. Each theme is supported by relevant examples from the data that demonstrate how Thai lecturers promote autonomy in English language learning among their students.

Discussions

From the activities interviewed by the informants, it was found that none of the activities in which the lecturers took on the role of an authority or coach in which the students were dependent on the lecturer to know who they were, and what they wanted or need to learn. Even in making students appreciate the autonomy in learning English, none of the activities were based on an authoritative or coaching style, but most activities aimed at valuing autonomy in students were conducted in a way of lecturer-motivated or guided manner to make students feel interested. Based on these findings, it can be assumed that since the informants in this study were lecturers teaching adult students at the higher education level, therefore, the activities that lecturers used to promote autonomous learning were activities in which the student did not have a dependency on the lecturer because adult learners at the university level are equipped to learn independently. As Suwanarak (2015) presented, student educators should be aware of the learning strategies preferred by adult learners, which are characterized by helping learners become more independent and cognizant of their learning behavior. Consequently, informants in this study did not use activities in which students played dependent roles and instructors played roles of authority or coaches because they were promoting autonomous learning to adult students who wanted participatory learning to join in activities.



The study found that when lecturers want to promote autonomous learning to students by showing them the value of autonomy, it turned out that lecturers use activities in which lecturers play the role of inspiration or guides. Students had the role of being interested. This corresponds to stage 2 in the Grow (1991) model, where the teachers bring enthusiasm and inspiration to the class, bringing learners with the excitement of learning. Teachers like this will be very persuasive, explain, and support to reinforce the intention and enthusiasm of students. In this step of instruction, explain clearly why skills are important and how assignments help achieve goals. Showing concrete results in what is taught will help inspire and encourage students to continue learning by themselves (Grow, 1991).

According to the research findings, lecturers played a role as facilitators in promoting autonomous learning, and the student role was involved when the lecturer wanted the students to reflect on their own learning and the activities carried out in the classroom. The roles of the lecturer and the student corresponded to stage 3 in the model of Glow (1991) where the lecturer was a facilitator. At this stage, the lecturer came very close to being a participant in the learning experience. Lecturers and students were involved in decision-making, with students taking an increased role in decision. Lecturers focused on facilitating communication and supporting students to use the skills they have. Students were assigned to work as a group on open-ended projects, written criteria, learning contracts, and evaluation checklists to help students check their progress. As they had more ability to set goals and steps, students could be more independent and able to receive harder assignments. The teacher's goal was to make sure that students learned both the necessary topics and learn how to learn (Grow, 1991).

From the research findings, it was found that the lecturer used the activity to promote autonomous learning in which the lecturer played the role of a consultant or delegator in the activities that encouraged learners to participate in autonomous behaviors and activities that were carried out outside the classroom. The roles of lecturer and student correspond to Stage 4 in the model of Glow (1991), in which the lecturer plays the role of a consultant or delegator and the student plays a self-directed role. The role of the lecturer in stage 4 is not to teach, but to practice the ability of students to learn by empowering the personal power of the learner as an adult creator and knowledge assessor or as a practitioner who has a high level of skill (Grow, 1991). Lecturers use methods to encourage students to use social media for self-learning because nowadays students like to use social media all the time, such as using the Internet to search for information while studying and the teacher has assigned students to download apps to improve their English that can be done anywhere, anytime, such as using the English Score app. In addition, the lecturer has also integrated courses that need to be studied continuously in order to extend knowledge from one subject to another, which will help learning repeat continuously all the time. This was one of the ways to promote autonomous behavior. Other activities that encourage autonomous behavior, where the lecturer plays a consultant or delegator role and the student plays a self-directed role, are activities where the lecturer assigns the student a research task that requires research skills that must be learned from various media, such as searching for information



on the Internet, print media, books or other related media. These activities resulted in students practicing autonomous learning. In addition, there were also activities that the lecturer had assigned tasks in the reading class that had been assigned to the students to read the news and then share it in the class as an activity that must be done regularly, which encouraged autonomous behavior.

In summary, this research set out to explore the practices and strategies employed by Thai EFL lecturers to foster students' autonomy in learning English. Through a comprehensive analysis of data, the study sheds light on the various activities, roles, and implications associated with promoting autonomous learning in the EFL context. This research examined the activities employed by Thai EFL lecturers to cultivate students' autonomy in English language learning. The thematic analysis revealed a range of approaches, including inspiring interest through real-life examples, encouraging reflective practices, facilitating classroom activities that promote collaboration and decision-making, and encouraging students to engage in autonomous learning outside the classroom. These activities collectively contribute to empower students to take charge of their language-learning journey. The findings demonstrated that these activities play a pivotal role in fostering students' autonomy in learning. By emphasizing the relevance of autonomous learning in today's interconnected and competitive world, lecturers motivate students to actively participate in their language acquisition process. Through self-assessment and goal-setting, students begin to value the sense of ownership and control of their learning outcomes. The study uncovered that Thai EFL lecturers served as motivators, facilitators, and consultants in promoting autonomous learning. The study revealed that lecturers took on these roles at different stages of students' autonomy. They act as motivators and guides to spark students' interest, facilitators to provide support and encourage collaboration, and consultants to empower students to engage in self-directed learning. This versatile approach enables lecturers to cater the diverse needs and abilities of their students.

The research highlighted how fostering autonomy in learning influences the dynamics between lecturers and students in the EFL context. Instead of employing some traditional authority, lecturers emphasize on empowering students to take charge of their learning and consequently, a more participatory and collaborative learning environment emerges. This shift in dynamics fosters a sense of trust and mutual respect between lecturers and students leading to a more enriching and empowering educational experience.

Suggestions

The implications of these practices for other EFL instructors seeking to enhance autonomous learning among their students are significant. The findings of this research provide valuable insights and a framework for educators to promote autonomy in language learning. By adopting the identified practices and strategies, EFL instructors worldwide can create a learner-centered and empowered classroom environment. Moreover, understanding the transformative



role of the lecturer in this process helps educators to adapt their roles and approaches to support their students' autonomy better.

This research underscores the significance of autonomy in English language learning and highlights the crucial role of Thai EFL lecturers in fostering students' autonomy. The activities, roles, and implications identified in this study contribute to the growing body of knowledge on learner autonomy in the EFL context and provide valuable guidance for educators who seek to enhance their students' self-directed learning abilities. By empowering students to be active agents in their education, EFL teachers should use teaching methods that promote motivation, confidence, and mastery in their language learning journey. Therefore, a method that emphasizes allowing learners to learn in autonomous learning, will result in learners becoming lifelong learners.

Limitations of the study

The limitation of this research related to the participants because they were instructors from one university in southern Thailand and not from the entire country. This is because this research is a case study. A case study is an in-depth study of a particular research problem and it is often used to narrow down a very broad field of research into one or a few easily researchable examples. The case study research design is also useful for testing whether a specific theory and model actually applies to phenomena in the real world (Shuttleworth, 2012). This study chose to study from 3 lecturers from one public university in Thailand to take part in this research as purposive sampling because part of the identity of this university is to produce graduates who are thinkers and practitioners, which is consistent with the concept of learner autonomy that helps learners to develop critical thinking (Benson & Lor, 1998) and be able to hold and take responsibility in all learning aspects (Holec, 1981). Therefore, the results of this case study can serve as examples of pedagogical activities by Thai EFL lecturers to promote student autonomy in learning English.

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