

ຄວາມຄໍາມາຮຄໃນກາຮເຮືບນຮັດວະຍຕນເອບ
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Learner Autonomy
: Teachers' Perspectives and Implications¹

ຮສສຸຄນ໌ ເສວະເວົາກຸລ²

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ຜູ້ຂ່າຍສາສດຖາຈາຈົບ, ສຖານພັນການພາ, ມາຮວິທີພາລັຍຄູກົງຈົບຜູ້ທິດຍົງ

บทคัดย่อ

แนวการศึกษาด้านการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองของผู้เรียนเน้นการให้ความสำคัญต่อผู้เรียนและการสอนที่เน้นให้ผู้เรียนเรียนเป็น ดังนั้นผู้สอนจึงมีบทบาทสำคัญในการพัฒนาความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองของผู้เรียน การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อตรวจสอบมุ่งมองของผู้สอนที่มีต่อความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองของนักศึกษา ซึ่งมุ่งมองดังกล่าวสามารถแสดงให้เห็นถึงความพร้อมของผู้สอนในการพัฒนาความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองของผู้เรียน รูปแบบงานวิจัยคือการวิจัยเชิงการสำรวจโดยใช้แบบสอบถามและการสัมภาษณ์ในการเก็บข้อมูลกับอาจารย์จำนวน 155 คน ในมหาวิทยาลัยเอกชน 5 แห่งในเขตกรุงเทพมหานคร แบบสอบถามประกอบด้วย 4 ด้าน คือ ความสำคัญของความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง ความรับผิดชอบของผู้สอน ความมั่นใจในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองของนักศึกษาไทย และความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองของนักศึกษาไทย คะแนนจากแบบสอบถามแบบ 5 ระดับ (Likert Scale) ถูกนำมาคำนวณหาค่าเฉลี่ย (M) และค่าเบี่ยงเบนมาตรฐาน (SD) จากผลการวิจัยพบว่า โดยเฉลี่ยผู้สอนมีมุ่งมองที่ดีต่อการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองในระดับสูง ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.33$) นอกจากนี้ผลการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลในแต่ละด้านแสดงให้เห็นว่าค่าเฉลี่ยด้านความสำคัญของความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองอยู่ในระดับสูงมาก ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.45$) ค่าเฉลี่ยด้านความรับผิดชอบของผู้สอนอยู่ในระดับสูง ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.45$) ค่าเฉลี่ยด้านความมั่นใจในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองของนักศึกษาไทยอยู่ในระดับปานกลาง ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.81$) และค่าเฉลี่ยด้านความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองของนักศึกษาไทยอยู่ในระดับปานกลาง ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.56$) บทความนำเสนอการอภิปรายผลไปพร้อมกับการนำผลการวิจัยไปใช้ทั้งในเชิงทฤษฎีและปฏิบัติ

คำสำคัญ : มุ่งมองของผู้สอน ความสามารถในการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง การเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ บทบาทของผู้สอน

Abstract

In the area of learner autonomy, the emphasis has been put on learners and teaching them how to learn; therefore, teachers have a vital role to play in developing learner autonomy. The objective of this study was to investigate the teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy. Their perspectives could shed light on their readiness for learner autonomy development. This study took the form of survey research using a questionnaire and interviews to collect data from 155 teachers teaching English in five private universities in the Bangkok Metropolis. The questionnaire consisted of 4 domains which are of importance to learner autonomy, teacher's responsibilities, self-confidence of Thai students, and capacity of Thai students. Scores of the 5-point Likert Scale questionnaires were computed to find mean score and standard deviation (SD). The findings revealed that on average, teachers highly hold positive perspectives of learner autonomy ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.33$). Further analysis of each domain showed that the mean of the importance of learner autonomy was very high ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.45$). The mean of the teacher's responsibilities domain was high ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.45$). The mean of the self-confidence of Thai students domain was moderate ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.81$) and the capacity domain was moderate ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.56$). Discussions were done along with implications of both theoretical and pedagogical dimensions.

Keywords : teachers' perspectives, learner autonomy, English learning, teacher role

Background and Literature Review

Autonomy is broadly defined as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning and is a prerequisite of effective learning (Benson, 2001). Autonomy is thus recognized as an ultimate pedagogical goal for every educational institute to aim for and realization of individual potential (Wenden, 1987). Although learners have to be responsible for their learning, autonomous learning is not based on an assumption that learners need to learn individually and in isolation. Autonomous learning does not free the teacher from any responsibility nor provide a less important role to the teacher having fewer things to do in the autonomous learning mode (Waterhouse, 1990). Rather, the teacher's role is more crucial and innovative compared with the role in the traditional teaching approach.

To successfully promote learner autonomy, teachers need to share and take responsibility with their learners (Johnson et al., 1990). Awareness of their vital roles in the autonomous learning process is fundamental and necessarily deals with their belief and trust that learners can be developed to be autonomous (Johnson et al., ibid.; Little, 1990; Breen and Mann, 1997). This clearly reflects perspectives of learner autonomy of teachers as the first and foremost variable underpinning a successful learner

autonomy development as their perspectives have a causal link to their readiness to adopt pedagogical methodologies enhancing learner autonomy of their students. As Chan (2003) points out, research on teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy sheds light on how ready teachers appear to take on the autonomous learning conditions and opportunities. Therefore, this study aimed at investigating teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy. This was to understand their readiness for learner autonomy development. Meanwhile, theoretical and pedagogical implications were hoped to be derived from their perspectives. Definition of Key Terms Learner autonomy refers to the sense of responsibility, willingness and perceived capacity of each student for all the decisions concerning all aspects of his/her learning, i.e. determine objectives, define the contents and progressions, select methods and techniques to be used, monitor the procedure of acquisition properly, and evaluate what has been acquired in and out of class. It was measured by a questionnaire.

Teachers refers to the Thai and non-Thai instructors teaching English subjects at five private universities in the Bangkok Metropolis.

Perspectives refers to teachers' belief of or attitudes towards values of

learner autonomy, teachers' responsibility, self-confidence and capacity of students to perform autonomous learning, which were measured by the questionnaire.

Research Design

Subjects

This study took the form of survey research, and its subjects were 155 teachers selected from 260 teachers in the five private universities in Bangkok by a stratified random sampling technique. Among them, 70% were Thai, while 30% were non-Thai comprising 8 nationalities: American, British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealander, South African, Burmese, and Filipina. Regarding their ages, 8.5% were in their 20s, 34% in their 30s, 29% in their 40s, and 16% in their 50s. 4% were in their 60s and up. The youngest was 20, and the oldest was 72.

The Instruments

This study employed a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire which was developed by adapting from the questionnaire on Readiness for Learner Autonomy consisting of the components of learner autonomy (Swatevacharkul,2010) used to collect data from students. The teachers' perspectives questionnaire was adapted in terms of wordings to be used to reflect teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy. The questionnaire composed of four main

domains with 26 items, that is, 1) learner autonomy, 2) responsibility, 3) self-confidence of students to learn autonomously, and 4) capacity of students for autonomous learning. The content validity (The Index of Item Objective Congruence or IOC) was 0.84, and the reliability (the Cronbach's alpha) was 0.71.

The evaluation criteria of the questionnaire were as follows: 0.00 - 1.50 means positive perspective of learner autonomy was 'very low', 1.51 - 2.50 was 'low', 2.51 - 3.50 was 'moderate', 3.51 - 4.50 was 'high', and 4.51 - 5.00 was 'very high'.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 10 teachers to gain insights.

Results

Scores of the 5-point Likert Scale questionnaires were computed to find mean score (M) and standard deviation (SD). The data analysis showed that the mean was 3.53 (SD = 0.33). This means that on average teachers' positive perspectives of learner autonomy were at a high level.

A further descriptive statistical analysis of each domain in the questionnaire was conducted in order to note interesting findings, and the results are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 : Mean of Teachers' Perspectives of Learner Autonomy

Domain	n	M	SD	Meaning
Importance of learner autonomy	155	4.46	0.45	High
Teacher's responsibilities	155	3.78	0.45	High
Self-confidence of Thai students	155	2.83	0.81	Moderate
Capacity of Thai students	155	3.14	0.56	Moderate

Table 1 shows that teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy were positively high in the domains of importance of learner autonomy and teacher's responsibilities with the means of 4.46 ($SD = 0.45$) and 3.78 ($SD = 0.45$) respectively. Self-confidence and capacity of Thai students for autonomous learning were perceived at the moderate level ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.81$ and $M = 3.14$ and $SD = 0.56$ respectively).

Analysis of each statement in each domain was performed to explore teachers' perspectives in more details. The results are shown in Tables 2-5.

Table 2: Mean of each Statement of Importance of Learner Autonomy

Domain	M	SD	Meaning
1. I think that autonomous learning is essential to improve students' English skills.	4.51	0.66	Very high
2. I think that learning how to learn successfully is essential for every student.	4.56	0.70	Very high
3. Promoting learner autonomy is a goal of my teaching.	4.22	0.68	High
4. I believe learning success has resulted from students' efforts.	4.55	0.63	Very high
5. I think learner autonomy is important to effective English learning.	4.43	0.64	High

Table 2 shows that teachers had very highly positive perspectives of importance of learner autonomy. Every statement was rated highly or very highly.

Table 3: Mean of each Statement of Teacher's Responsibilities

Domain	M	SD	Meaning
6. I think learning is students' own responsibility.	3.57	1.14	High
7. I think learning and teaching are the sole responsibility of the teacher.	2.49	1.31	Low
8. Students should take part in evaluating their learning whether it is good or bad.	4.28	0.64	High
9. Teachers must select appropriate learning methods for students.	4.10	0.94	High
10. Teachers must determine the contents.	3.54	1.02	High
11. It is the teacher's responsibility to stimulate students' interest in learning English.	4.03	0.88	High
12. It is the teacher's responsibility to set learning objectives.	3.72	0.92	High

Table 3 shows that Item 8 was rated the highest ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.64$), followed by Item 9 ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.94$). Teachers rated Item 7 the lowest ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.31$).

Table 4 : Mean of each Statement of Self-Confidence of Thai students

Domain	M	SD	Meaning
13. Students need the teacher to be their supporter all the time because they are not confident in their learning.	3.54	1.08	High
14. Students need the teacher to tell them clearly what they should learn and what to do in class and out of class.	3.62	1.00	High
15. Students are confident to take responsibility for their learning in and out of class.	3.12	0.98	Moderate

According to Table 4, Items 13 and 14 were highly rated ($M_s = 3.54$ and 3.62 respectively).

Table 5: Mean of each Statement of Learning Capacity of Thai students

Domain	M	SD	Meaning
16. Students have the ability to set their own learning objectives in class.	2.96	0.86	Moderate
17. Students can tell whether or not they are making learning progress.	3.24	0.98	Moderate
18. Students know their learning weak points.	3.58	0.86	High
19. Students try to improve on their learning weak points.	3.05	0.88	Moderate
20. Students usually are not able to tell about what they have learned.	3.24	0.87	Moderate
21. Students have the ability to find appropriate learning methods and techniques for themselves.	2.89	0.92	Moderate
22. Students are able to choose their own learning objective outside class.	2.88	0.90	Moderate
23. Students are able to choose learning materials outside class.	3.22	0.99	Moderate
24. Students know where they can seek knowledge.	3.57	0.87	High
25. Students can evaluate whether their learning is good or bad.	3.36	0.84	Moderate
26. Students are capable of being totally responsible for their own learning.	2.93	0.96	Moderate

Table 5 shows that teachers rated highly on Item 18 expressing that students know their learning weak points ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.86$), and Item 24 showing that students know where they can seek knowledge ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.87$). Besides these two statements, teachers moderately rated other statements. The lowest rated item was Item 22 ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.90$), very closely followed by Item 21 ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.92$).

Discussions and Implications

Discussions will be done based on the two important findings, that is, highly positive attitudes towards learner autonomy, and moderate self-confidence and capacity to learn. Implications will be drawn after the discussions.

1. Highly Positive Attitudes towards Autonomy

The empirical findings that in general teachers hold highly positive

attitudes towards learner autonomy may suggest that they are ready to take on the autonomous learning opportunity. This can be explained by the following reasons:

1.1 Self-Value of Learner Autonomy

The highly positive perspective of learner autonomy is likely to result from the value of learner autonomy perceived by the teachers. They strongly believe that learner autonomy which is a capacity and effort of students to perform their learning and learn how to learn successfully is essential to improve students' English learning. There are a few reasons why the teachers think learner autonomy is important.

First, every teacher agrees that learner autonomy is important or very important since it leads to life-long learning. Autonomous learners are the ones who know how to learn effectively according to their own learning styles. Besides that, learner autonomy which can be promoted by having students perform tasks outside class increases students' engagement in their learning. Only once or twice a week in class learning is not adequate for students to improve or master their English. They need more practice on their own outside class, and this leaves room for students to exercise their autonomy for extended tasks. Moreover, learner autonomy contains the value as a contribution to society

development. Some teachers value learner autonomy beyond the school context. Learner autonomy develops students' critical thinking skill which is the essential characteristic of people in a current knowledge-based society. Traditional instruction does not empower students to make right decisions for themselves and definitely not for others. In contrast, learner autonomy can make a great contribution to social and political change.

Implications are therefore as follows. First, it deals with the teachers' awareness to develop learner autonomy. Clearly, teachers viewed learner autonomy important as it leads to life-long learning and contributes to a development of society. Besides, teachers perceived that it is their responsibility to promote learner autonomy. This is the first and a theoretical foundation step for learner autonomy development. Teachers' perspective of or belief in the value of learner autonomy has an effect in students' learning and beliefs, and it will be reflected in the teachers' teaching. Meanwhile, this will become a learning experience for the students. Importantly, teaching needs to have a favourable impact on learning.

Second, over emphasis must not be over put on theoretical value than pedagogical value. The teachers' perspective of the value of learner autonomy and their awareness to promote

it must be concretely reflected. In other words, it must not be because of the theory that drives the teachers to positively perceive the value of learner autonomy, but their pedagogies have to reflect their belief. Some teachers mentioned that they valued learner autonomy due to its benefits to effective learning. However, when asked about their roles, they said 'teacher-centred' and 'lecturer' as their responses to learner autonomy development. This shows that belief and practice do not harmoniously go hand in hand. Teachers must not only fashionably pay attention to the value of learner autonomy as the end to effective learning, but they need to seriously believe in the means, and their pedagogies must gear students towards learner autonomy. As Shaw (2008: 188) points out the problem, most language teachers nowadays would argue that they believe in learner autonomy in language learning – the issue is actually one about means rather ends, and whens rather than ifs.

1.2 Integral Relationship between Learner Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy

The existing relationship between learner autonomy development and teacher autonomy which supports the conceptualization of teacher autonomy in terms of teachers' responsibility is the second reason that may explain the highly positive perspective of learner autonomy

of the teachers in this study. In other words, teachers have and exercise teacher autonomy to develop autonomy of their students.

The following is the evidence supporting the fact that theoretically and practically, learner and teacher autonomy are closely related and interdependent. First, the finding on the high responsibility of teachers to help students develop their learner autonomy well supports what Little (1995:179) points out regarding teacher autonomy:

Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers.

Second, the qualitative findings on the most important role as a teacher showed different roles in the view of the teachers in the autonomous learning mode, namely, facilitator, helper, supporter, guide, and counsellor, promoter of autonomous learning and builder of learning motivation. Many teachers

reported that they needed to play many different roles in order to assist their students in terms of both cognitive and affective domains. In addition, they tried to encourage students to think, which is one of the characteristics of autonomous learners. These roles clearly reflect the teachers' perspectives of their responsibility to help students become autonomous. This perspective strongly supports what Little (1990) argues that "autonomy does not result in a lack of responsibility on the teacher side in the formal instruction.".

The implication is called on shared responsibilities between teachers and students. It is not only the students who have to take responsibility for their learning but also the teachers who have to take responsibility for their teaching to enhance learner autonomy. The mutual relationship between students and teachers, or learner autonomy and teacher autonomy is made clear. Both parties need to take an active part in the learning process. It should not be only the students to be blamed for their inability to improve their capacity to learn autonomously.

2. Moderate Self-Confidence and Capacity to Learn Autonomously

The findings on the teachers' perspectives of students' self-confidence and capacity to learn autonomously, which were at the moderate levels, can be explained as follows:

2.1 Low Language Skills and Ability

The first reason may be owing to ineffective English skills and ability that are not at the level to perform autonomous learning effectively. Students' self-confidence is one of the main factors, which was reported by the teachers as a hindrance of learner autonomy development. The interviews revealed some insights.

I think students have moderate self-confidence for their autonomous learning. This is due to a few reasons. First, it's because of their English background which is not satisfactory. Their family background and their past learning experience are the next two reasons.

It should be noted that the subject students in this present study did not pass the national entrance examination which includes an English proficiency test and which screens better learning ability students for state universities. Consequently, it might be possible to make a generalisation that the students in the Thai private universities are of less academic capability when compared to their counterparts in the state universities; therefore, their low language skills and learning abilities are pointed out.

An implication is firstly on boosting students' self-confidence to learn autono-

uously. Their English language skills and ability, which affect learning confidence, reflect a causal relationship between cognitive ability and affective dimension, another important learner factor that influences students' effective learning. Students feel unconfident about their learning because they lack cognitive skills. Their English knowledge foundations are not strong enough, and this is considered as an obstacle for autonomous learning. This supports the view of Cotterall (1995) that learner confidence possibly deriving from their perception of their previous learning experience correlates with a belief in study, which has an effect on learning outcome. Therefore, this invites the teachers to consider how to help boost students' learning confidence.

According to Dornyei (2001), the notion of 'confidence' is closely related to concepts like 'self-confidence', 'self-esteem', 'self-efficiency', and 'anxiety'. He suggests that teachers should protect students' self-esteem and increase their self-confidence, which are the foundation of students' learning success. One way that teachers can do this is by providing strategy training of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. As pointed out by Cotterall (1995: 202),

... learners need to be aware of the role of cognitive and affective variables in language learning, of how language works and how strategies influence learning. Such awareness can enhance the quality of thinking and task engagement.

The second implication is on maintaining intrinsic learning motivation. With learning strategy awareness that increases students' learning and task engagement, learning motivation can be maintained. The engagement of students in autonomous learning, which requires them to exercise learning strategies, will gradually provide students a positive learning experience. A sense of learning achievement will be perceived as a result of their own effort. Once the positive learning feeling and a sense of learning success are created, students will willingly continue their learning engagement, or they will have the desire to learn (Breen and Mann, 1997), and this is the effective way to maintain learning motivation especially intrinsic motivation. According to Ushioda (1996), it is important for students to develop their own potential as they experience it. A sense of competence and mastery, enjoyment, satisfaction, and pride, etc. will build a sense of doing tasks in an intrinsically satisfying manner. Such learning is by definition autonomous.

2.2 The Impact of Thai Educational System

The traditional Thai educational system that is claimed to emphasise memorisation and rote learning as well as the authority of the teachers is believed by many teachers that it hinders a development of learner autonomy. One teacher pointed this out:

... In the past – about 15 years ago the Thai educational system was not effective. It did not train students to think critically and focused on memorization. However, I think the trend is very promising. A development of learner autonomy should be better and better because the curricular put emphasis on thinking more and more. Since teachers teach according to the curricular, the curricular have to be changed.

One characteristic of autonomous learners is self-confidence to perform their own autonomous learning. The Thai educational system which is influenced by Thai culture as a collectivist society where independence is not encouraged therefore contributes to students' self-confidence and capacity to perform autonomous learning. In the collectivist societies students expect to learn how to do rather than how to learn like in the individualist

societies. Besides that, the large power distance makes students accept inequality in power and respect teacher's authority (Hofstede, 1986).

The implication is therefore drawn for teacher professional development. Dam (2003) argues that learner autonomy development will be successful if teachers are aware of their vital role in the autonomous learning process. However, it cannot be denied that the negative impact of the Thai educational system is not only on students, but also on teachers. This is the reason why a teacher him/herself is one of the hindrances of leaner autonomy development, according to the finding from the interview. Apparently, some teachers appear to be the products of the traditional Thai educational system, and this may hamper teachers' knowledge on learner autonomy and how to implement it.

I think it is about the teachers' perceptions or believes towards autonomous learning. Some teachers might not understand the clear concepts of it. So, they can't promote such ideas to the students and can't manage to help students learn autonomously.

Teachers must not be a follower of the educational system. Rather, they must be an active agent in their own professional development and act as a reflective practitioner aiming at learner autonomy in their teaching process. Teachers need to empower themselves by equipping themselves with pedagogical knowledge and expertise to enhance learner autonomy. Therefore, teacher education on learner autonomy and how to implement it successfully are essential. The teacher education programme needs to produce sophisticated teachers who have knowledge, skills and expertise to help students exercise their autonomy and to handle all possible constraints.

Conclusion

The highly positive attitudes towards learner autonomy of the teachers seem to suggest their readiness to adopt an autonomous learning approach, which is a very promising trend. However, their appreciation of the value of learner autonomy should be reflected in their teaching practice. This therefore requires further research on investigating how teachers turn their attitudes towards and beliefs of the value of learner autonomy into pedagogical practice. By so doing, it is possible to see whether and how learner autonomy has a place in an actual classroom.

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