Using Learning Profiles to Inspire Effective Consultations

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Abstract

While self-directed learning is currently being introduced throughout Thailand in order to encourage students to become autonomous learners, consultations are also emphasized to provide support and give guidance. However, the practical problems of limited time and large numbers of students diminish the potential benefits of consultations. This paper suggests a way to make 5-minute consultations effective by requiring students to attempt peer and self-correction before the consultation and by encouraging the use of learner profiles to guide further learning after the consultation.

Introduction

Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981) so in becoming an autonomous learner, the learner is totally responsible for all decisions concerned with his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions (Dickinson, 1987). However, the fully autonomous learner is an ideal rather than reality. In fact, autonomous learners vary in terms of degrees of autonomy (Nunan, 1997) and one approach which assists learners to move from teacher dependence toward autonomy is self-directed learning which encourages learners to set and pursue their personal language learning goals (Gardner and Miller, 1999). Since most learners are not experienced in setting their own goals, they may need support, and a useful way to give this support is through consultations. A consultation provides an opportunity for learners to talk to someone about what they have learnt, their achievement or problems, how they can solve those problems and their goals and study plans to further their own studies. The teacher as a counselor acts as a good listener comprehensibly listening to all the elements and giving essential guidance. A learner profile serves the consultation as a written form of a contract or commitment that learners promise to implement their goals and study plans and record what they have learnt into the profile.

Learner Profiles

A learner profile is a collection of information which provides a picture of an individual learner's current development and future potential in terms which relate to self-access learning (Gardner and Miller, 1999). It will describe and record the learner's needs, wants and abilities. It is also composed of the

learner's goal with the commitment of the learner's time and his/her signature as the learner's contract between the learner and his/her teacher on self-access learning. Learner contracts are documents, which form an agreement between students and their teacher on the setting of goals and sometimes the commitment of learners' time. In learner contracts, students and sometimes their teacher are required to sign their names to reinforce the feeling of commitment between two people. Moreover, the learner's study plan is added to guide the implementation of the goal. Documents showing what the learner aims to fulfill in his/her study plan and learning outcomes are also added to the profile. In conclusion, a learner profile consists of four significant parts: a form for a learner to evaluate his/her abilities, needs and wants, a learner contract, a study plan and documents showing what the learner learns, and the learning outcomes which can be in the form of paper or audio/ video tapes. Besides, learner profiles may be paperless as digital profiles or even digital profiles with digitized audio or video files which learners send electronically.

How to Construct Learner Profiles

To construct a learner profile, learners are asked to work on the following instructions:

1. Consider their current abilities.

2. Identify their needs and wants.

3. Set learning goals which really reflect their current abilities, what they need and want.

4. Consider the time they have available.

5. Make a realistic study plan.

6. Implement the plan.

Gardner and Miller (1999) state that results of self-assessment and a counselor's comments should be added and since learner profiles are living documents, they need constant updating by adding data to the record of work done, learning outcomes and the reflection of learners' statements of needs and wants.

Advantages of Learner Profiles

The benefits of a learner profile can be considered not only from students' but also from the teacher's perspectives. From the learner's perspective, there are many advantages of using a learner profile. First, a learner profile can be used to motivate self-study in terms of responsibilities for learners' own learning especially in order to improve themselves. A learner profile encourages learners to be able to clearly identify their abilities, their needs and also what they want to improve. Accordingly, it will help learners to classify the priority of what they need and want. In turn, they can start their own self-directed learning with the most essential need first. Second, considering language abilities helps learners to be

realistic in setting their goals and study plans. This makes the learners go straight to the right track in dealing with their self-study. In addition, keeping a record of the work the learners do helps them constantly remind themselves of their goals and their commitments. Finally, the outcomes of their work enable them to see their achievement. This achievement inspires another circle of their self-study since it motivates learners to keep on taking responsibility for their own learning. In other words, learner profiles are useful records to remind learners of what they have achieved and what further goals they are working towards (Gardner and Miller, 1999). Having become familiar with the process of maintaining learner profiles enables learners to monitor their progress as independent language learners.

For the teacher, when learners work on learner profiles, the teacher can switch role from teacher to facilitator supporting a student-centred approach. They are better able to facilities the self-learning process. For example, they can help learners define their goals realistically. Without training, students may set their goals broadly; therefore, teachers can conduct a discussion between the teacher and his/her students to narrow down the students' goals so that they can plan their study. The teacher may also advise on ways to plan the students' study and monitor their progress. A learner profile also enables the teacher to access systematic documentation of self-access learning for each student, and to see how self-access facilities are being used and also what is being achieved. This information is very useful for future planning, budgeting and development of self-access materials and activities.

Consultations

The words " consult", "counsel", and "supervise" are defined in *Collins COBUILD Learner Dictionary* as follows:

If you *consult* an expert or someone senior to you or *consult with* them, you ask them for their opinion or advice and if a person or a group of people *consults with* others or *consults* them, they talk and exchange ideas and opinions about what they might decide to do. On the other hand, if you *counsel* people, you give them advice about their problems and if you *supervise* an activity or a person, you make sure that the activity is done correctly or that person is doing a task or behaving correctly. In short, to consult is to seek or ask for advice but to counsel is to advise and to supervise is to monitor. Consultation, counseling and supervision have one important thing in common, that is, a relationship between two people: one needing an opportunity for talking over problems and the other having the sensitivity and maturity to understand and having the necessary knowledge and skills to enable a solution.

King (1999) states that many students say that, more than anything, they want the other person, be it a teacher, a parent or a friend, just to listen and not to interrupt. In turn, a free floating attention or the ability to listen to all that is being communicated is needed for a counselor. The component behaviors of listening in King's idea are looking at the students and making eye contact, holding a relaxed posture and responding in a way that conveys listening, that is to say, listening to the words, the metaphors, the volume, pitch, accent, tone of voice as well as observing facial expression, bodily movement and eye contact. He believes that usually non-verbal behavior supports what is being said so listening is not a passive activity as some people regard but, actually, an active process. In addition, listening with the third ear is also needed, since listening to oneself is called listening with the third ear, and refers to the ability to use oneself to imagine how the other feels (Reik,1948 cited in King, 1999). Stimpson et al. (2000) suggest some effective ways of better supervision. Firstly, a supervisor should build genuine rapport or a good relationship in which two people can understand each other's ideas or feelings very well. Secondly, he should be sensitive to the feelings of students and avoid being in too much of a hurry. Therefore, the supervisor should consider giving students time to reflect on themselves before the discussion. Thirdly, getting students to talk is actually better than talking himself. So a supervisor needs to listen attentively and carefully to show that he is interested in what students have done and are saying because the most important person in a supervision is the student. Then the discussion should be based on what actually happened in the students' work. In addition, questions or requests that open and expand the discussion should be used because they may well affect what students then say and feel and help students explore possibilities. An alternative way is to separate the positive and negative questions by waiting for the students to respond with the positive points first before asking about negative points. Therefore, a supervisor should also find some good things to say or to praise first and then move on to the points for improvement. In fact, the opening question that gives real substance to the positive as well as the negative may have more effect e.g. What do you think about your work? Then a supervisor should raise questions rather than problems since if students feel they are in a process of solving a problem together, they can communicate better in discussing the solution. In addition to the use of questions, avoiding using a command tone, giving direct advice or suggestions and being too negative are also important, because a supervisor, a counselor or a consultant is not a person who tries to criticize students but who helps empower them.

Background

The new English curriculum at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi offers task-based courses, one of which is Fundamental English III in which students undertake an e-mail project as a

continuous task or adjunct project throughout the semester. In the e-mail project, students have to express and share their ideas in writing on their preferred topics: one message for a bulletin board and the other two messages for discussion lists in any international web site (see Ngonkum and Omathikul, 2001 for details). After handing each message to the teacher, a 5-minute consultation session was provided for each student to discuss his/her work with the teacher in English. Since my students were a big group of 53 students from tool, printing, and environment engineering, the first consultation seemed to lack many of the characteristics of effective consultations. For example, I only focussed on grammar points without any interest in the ideas the students wanted to convey to their readers. This made me feel unhappy and realize that something might be wrong. I also considered that some of my students felt unhappy. Therefore, I surveyed the students' opinions towards the first consultation. I found that 23% of my students did not like the consultations. This is a high proportion because, normally Thai students are reluctant to express negative feelings. Moreover, one of them asked not to attend the consultation because he was afraid of it. In addition, 30% of them had never written any English of paragraph length when studying in a high school.
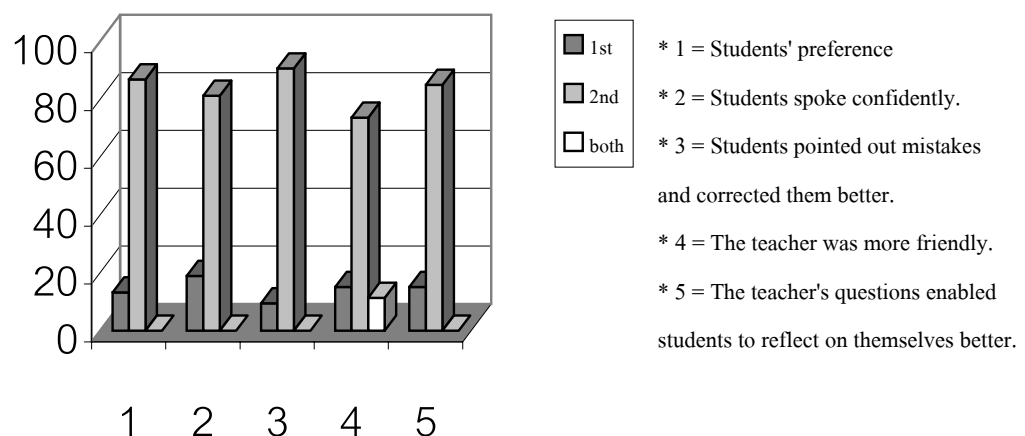
Methodology

To solve the problem, three stages of consultation were organized. The first stage, which was divided into two steps, was conducted before the consultation. In the first of these steps, the teacher demonstrated how to work on a learner profile: analyzing the students' current abilities and problems in writing, and helping students in setting their goals and completing study plans in the form of learner contracts. To enable the students to realistically analyze their current abilities, what they need and want to improve, I diagnosed the students' grammar problems by checking their first e-mail task (a message for a bulletin board) and marking this with symbols showing what the errors were. After I explained what each symbol represented, the students were asked to analyze their work in terms of their abilities, their needs and wants by checking and filling in forms provided which were based on all students' grammatical problems. Then they set their goals, time and their study plans accordingly before they implemented the plans. The second step was analyzing the second e-mail task (a message to a discussion list). In this step, I asked my students to do self-correction before sending their messages via e-mail and consulting me by editing their work using *Microsoft Word*, a dictionary, a grammar book, an English usage book, and a concordance. They were also asked to do peer correction by asking their friends to check their work and give suggestions. Then, they had to analyze their written work themselves to find their current abilities, needs and wants. Prior to consulting the teacher, the students set their goals, time and their study plans for the second e-mail assignment. The second stage is the

consultation session. As a counselor, I tried to encourage the students to talk about the ideas they wanted to share with readers before discussing about their grammar points. Questions used during the consultations to ask about ideas are, for example, what is the topic?, what did you write about?, which sentence shows your interesting idea? and other questions probing deeper into some details of the content. The subsequent questions about grammar points include which sentence is correct?, which sentence is wrong? and how can you correct it? After that, the students reported on their work and showed what they did to implement the goals and study plans for the first e-mail task (bulletin board). Then, they described their current abilities, their needs and wants based on the second e-mail task (discussion list) and they also discussed with the counselor about the next goals and study plans. At the last stage, each student furthered their work on the learner profiles by implementing what they had planned in the consultation. In order to see how effective the consultations and learner profiles were, a questionnaire was distributed to the students and their learner profiles were analyzed. These are included in the appendix.
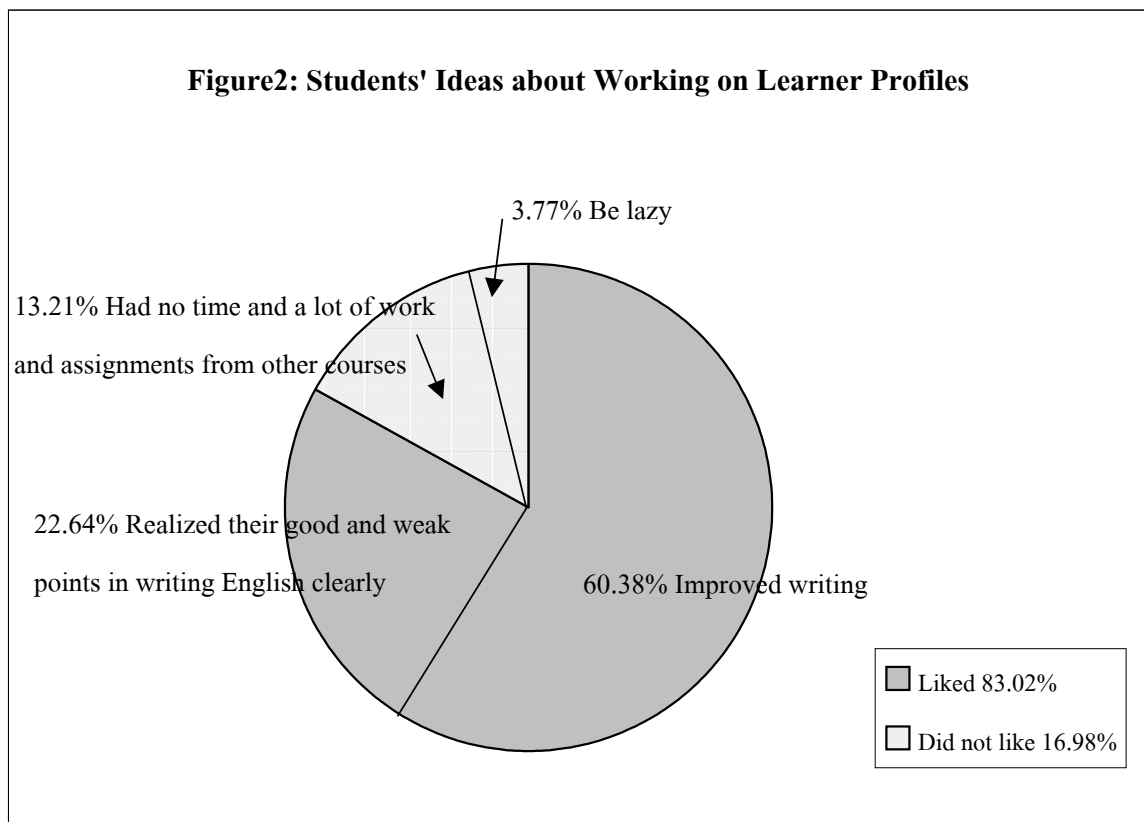
Results and Discussion

For the consultations, 86.79% of the students stated that they liked the second consultation more than the first one because they felt that they could reflect on themselves confidently and they could point out their mistakes and correct them better. Furthermore, 84.9% of them agreed that the teacher's questions enabled them to reflect on themselves better (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Comparison between the 1st consultation and

the 2nd consultation

Legend:
- 1st
- 2nd
- both

* 1 = Students' preference
* 2 = Students spoke confidently.
* 3 = Students pointed out mistakes and corrected them better.
* 4 = The teacher was more friendly.
* 5 = The teacher's questions enabled students to reflect on themselves better.
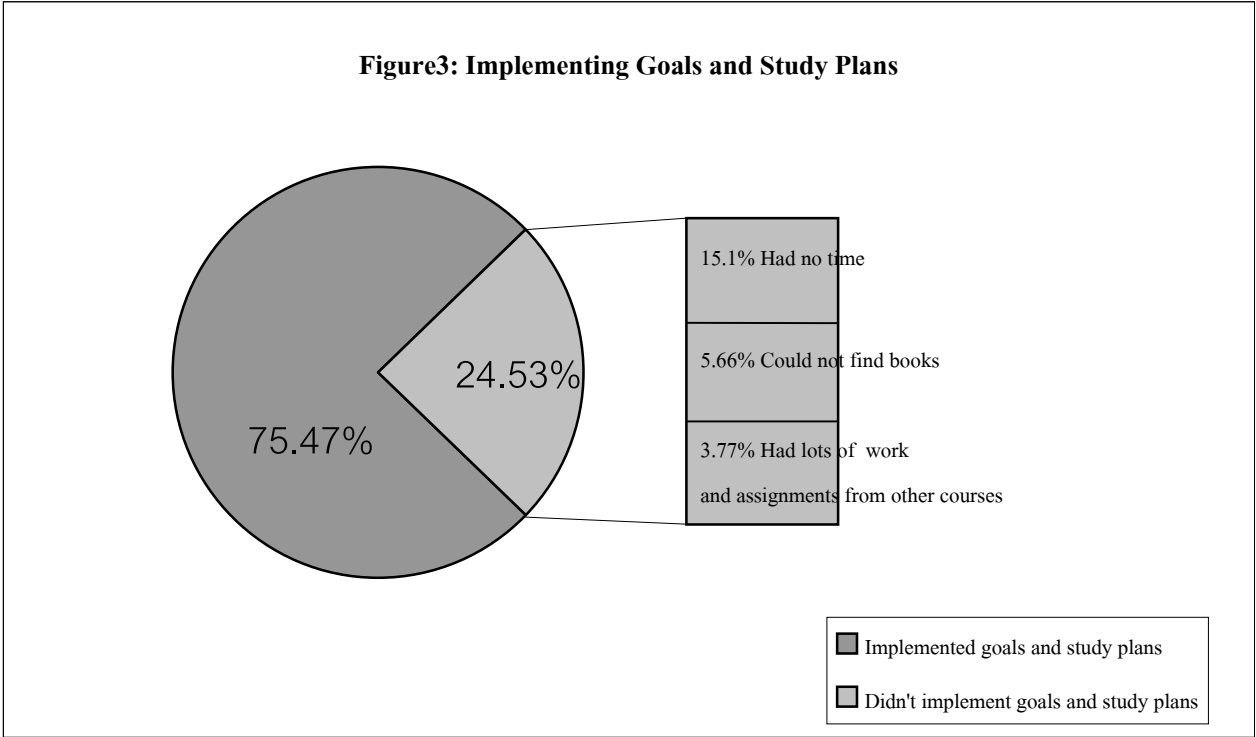
For the learner profiles, 83.02% of the students stated that they liked working on learner profiles. 22.64% of the students explained that learner profiles made them realize their good points and weak points in writing English clearly. They actually knew what and where they should start improving themselves. Moreover, 60.38% of the students liked working on learner profiles because they improved their writing through learner profiles. The most important point was that the improvement resulted from their self-study. They were happy to use that freedom. Even though most of the students liked working on learner profiles and knew that they were useful, 16.98% of the students did not like them. 13.21% of the students stated that they did not have time to implement their study plans and moreover, they had lots of work and assignments from other courses. Surprisingly, 3.77% of all the students revealed that they were lazy (see Figure 2).

Figure2: Students' Ideas about Working on Learner Profiles

For implementing the study plans, although 75.47% of the students furthered their study based on their goals and study plans, 24.53% did not do anything. Most of this group of students claimed that they did not have time and had a lot of work from other courses whereas some argued that they could not find books to work on. In my opinion, these problems obstructed the students' learning and needed to be

solved immediately. Unfortunately, according to the students' learner profiles, I found that English was always the last priority for engineering students; therefore, they sometimes changed the goals and plans they had made in their contracts with the teacher by working on easier grammar points or completing short work instead. In addition, they saved the time which could be taken finding a resource book in the Self-Access Learning Centre by using their high school grammar books which were published in Thai. Eventually, some students got tired of changing their Thai style written work into the English style because it was difficult to improve and it also took time. They could not see an improvement within a day or even a semester. However, 10 out of 53 students wholeheartedly worked on their learner profiles. Moreover, one of them became a good reader enjoying reading short stories and collecting sentences to analyze for her own written work (see Figure 3).

Figure3: Implementing Goals and Study Plans

15.1% Had no time

5.66% Could not find books

3.77% Had lots of work
and assignments from other courses

24.53%

75.47%

Implemented goals and study plans

Didn't implement goals and study plans

Directions for the Future

Though most of the students preferred the second consultation to the first one and liked working on a learner profile, some of them did not like working on the learner profile. Moreover, some of them including those who stated that they liked working on it did not implement their goals and plans. Even when some of them did this, they sometimes changed their goals and plans to work on easier grammar points or completed short work or even used their high school grammar books which were published in

Thai. Their important reasons for not working as had been hoped were they did not have time and had a lot of work and assignments from other courses. Besides, laziness was another reason a few students gave. Apparently, all the problems did not concern the learner profiles themselves but rather were about the time management of the students. Therefore, to encourage students to continue working on learner profiles, students need to be trained to manage their time available effectively. Teachers may also encourage their students to realize that English is a skill-based activity they cannot acquire without practising. In order to avoid changing goals and study plans, teachers can ask students to copy the sentences they want to correct onto the learner contract sheet next to their goals and study plans to help the teachers check whether the students actually implement their plans according to their real problems or not. A Self-Access Learning Centre can also help the students by providing more grammar books, English usage books and interesting self-access learning materials for them to borrow or study more conveniently.

Despite these problems, I would like to emphasize that most students preferred the second consultation and liked working on the learner profile because they improved their writing through it. They also realized that their improvement resulted from self-directed learning and they were happy to use that freedom. This means that it is relatively easy to encourage those students to keep on starting new circles of self-directed learning until it becomes their habit for life-long learning. In conclusion, a learner profile can promote self-directed learning which helps learners move from teacher dependence to autonomy. Using learner profiles can inspire effective consultations and is also a stepping stone to autonomous learning.

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Appendix

Survey on Consultation

(conducted prior to this study)

Put a tick ✔ in the box provided according to your opinion and then write your reasons and suggestions.

1.What do you think about the first consultation?

☐ I like it because ………………………………………………………………......

☐ I do not like it because ……………………………………………………….......

☐ I hate it because ……………………………………………………….…….......

☐ I do not have any idea about it because ……………………………………………

 2. How often did you write in paragraph length in a high school?   ……… per semester

My suggestions

……

………………………………………………...

Learner Profile

For: …………………………Code…………Group………

Commencement Date: …………………………………

To learners

The contents of this profile are all about you. The purpose of the profile is to give an accurate picture of what you are able to do well and what you need to improve. You can add whatever you like to this profile.

What to put into this profile

The profile is divided into the following sections:

1. Your abilities/ What you need and want to improve

2. Your contracts/ Your study plans

3. Your records of learning achievement/ learning outcome

4. Your reflection

Writing Ability (Your ability/ What you need and want to improve)

Instructions: The following items are the main areas of grammatical points and paragraph writing skills.

        Consider your own abilities from your written work (e-mail project) and use the keys provided to

        express your writing ability.

KEY:

I can do this well.   ✔

I need to practise this more.   𝒳

I want to practise this more even though it may be or may not be necessary for me. **+**

☐ Appropriate words	☐ Tense (verb form)
☐ Word order	☐ Active/ Passive Voice
☐ Adjective/ Adverb	☐ Sentence Structure (S+ V + O)
☐ Special Verb (help , make,)	☐ Combining sentences (because, if, although, but, when, which ,who, etc.)
☐ Singular/ Plural	☐ English language style (not Thai language style)
☐ Article (a, an, the)	☐ Topic sentence
☐ Comparative/ Superlative	☐ Major supporting details
☐ Preposition	☐ Minor supporting details
☐ Spelling	☐ Conclusion
☐ Capital letter	☐ Interesting Ideas
☐ Subject/ verb agreement	☐ Organizing a paragraph

Learner Contracts & Study Plans

Instructions: According to your writing ability, make a selection of what you would like

              to work on.

Time I have available to work on self-access each week = _____ hours

I plan to do self-access work during the following times each week:

Date/ Time (from-to)	My Goal(s) : What I would like to work on	How I will work on my goal(s)

Your records of learning achievement/ learning outcome

After you have finished your work, put your finished work into this profile and give it to the teacher.

Reflection

After you have finished your work, tick (✔) how well you did it.

☐ I am very happy with my performance this week.

☐ My performance this week was OK.

☐ I think I can do better soon.

My reflection_____

_____

My signature_____   Date_____   My teacher's signature_____

Questionnaire on Consultations

(conducted after the use of learner profiles)

I. Learner Profile

Put a tick (✔) in the boxes provided according to your opinion.

        1 = the least   4 = more

        2 = less   5 = the most

        3 = fair

1	2	3	4	5

1. How much do you know about your writing ability?

2. How much do you know about the grammatical points

    and writing skills you need to improve?

3. How confident are you in writing?

4. How much do you like working on your learner profile?

Instructions: Put a tick(✔) in the boxes provided according to your opinion.

You can tick more than one item.

1. What is the obstacle of working on your learner profile?

☐ I have little time.

☐ I have a lot of work in other courses.

☐ I do not have a member card for SALC so I can't borrow a book from SALC.

☐ Others (write in Thai) …………………………………………………………...

2. How can you solve your problems? (Write in Thai.)

………………………………………………………………………………….......

Instructions: Put a tick (✔) in the box provided according to your opinion and then

give your reasons. You can write in Thai.

☐ I like working on my learner profile because …………………………………...............

………………………………………………………………………………….......................

☐ I don't like working on my learner profile because ……………………………...............

………………………………………………………………………………….....................

My impression concerning working on my learner profile is………………………...............

………………………………………………………………………………….....................

Suggestions/ Comments for Learner Profile ……………………………………...............

Consultation

Before Consultation

Instructions: Put a tick (✔) in the boxes provided according to your opinion. You may

tick more than one item. Then give your reasons (write in Thai).

1. Did you check your work before sending it via the Internet? Yes ☐ No ☐

1.1 If Yes ⇨ How?

☐ Dictionary   ☐ Grammar books

☐ Concordance   ☐ English usage books

☐ Microsoft Word   ☐ Friends

☐ Others …………………………………………...

1.2 If   No ⟹ Why ? …………………………………………………………….......

………………………………………………………………………………………….........

2. Did you check your work before the consultation?   Yes ☐   No ☐

2.1 If   Yes ⟹ How?

☐ Dictionary   ☐ Grammar books

☐ Concordance   ☐ English usage books

☐ Microsoft Word   ☐ Friends

☐ Others ……………………………………………………

2.2 If No ⟹ Why? ………………………………………………………………….......

While Consultation

I. Instructions: Put a tick (✔) in the boxes provided.

1. Which place do you prefer to consult the teacher?

☐ in class   ☐ in the teacher's office   ☐ other place …………………….

2. How much time do you like to spend consulting the teacher?

☐ 5 minutes   ☐ 10 minutes   ☐ other ………………

Instructions: Put a tick (✔) in the boxes provided according to your opinion.

1 = the least   4 = more

2 = less   5 = the most

3 = fair

	1	2	3	4	5
1. How do you like the teacher's questions?					
1.1 What is your topic?					
1.2 What did you write about?					
1.3 Questions that the teacher asked about some details in your written work.					
1.4 Which sentence shows your interesting idea?					
1.5 Which sentence is correct?					
1.6 Which sentence is wrong?					
1.7 How can you correct it?					
2. You could tell the teacher about things you wrote about.					
3. You could point out the correct sentence.					
4. You could point out the wrong sentence.					

5. You could correct it.

6. You like working with the teacher in correcting your work.

7. You could set your goal.

8. You could plan your study.

9. You like setting the goal and planning your work with

   the teacher.

10. Your confidence in speaking English to the teacher

Post Consultation

Instructions: Put a tick (✔) in the box provided.

Did you work as you planned with the teacher during the consultation?

☐ Yes   ☐ No ⇨ Why? ……………………………………………………

Comparison between 1st Consultation and 2nd Consultation

Instructions: Put a tick (✔) in the boxes provided according to your opinion.

1	2

1. Which consultation do you prefer?

2. Which consultation did you speak more confidently?

3. Which consultation did you point out your mistakes

   and the way to correct them better?

4. Which consultation was the teacher more

    friendly?

5. Which consultation did the teacher's questions

    enable you to reflect on yourself better?

Instructions : Put a tick (✔) in the boxes provided if you did better in 2nd Consultation

You may tick more than one item.

1. What factors helped you increase your confidence in reflecting on yourself?

   ☐ Self correction before consultation

   ☐ Peer correction before consultation

   ☐ The teacher's questions

   ☐ Your learner profile

   ☐ Others (write in Thai) ……………………………………………………………...........

2. What factors helped you make decisions for your goal and your study plan?

☐ Yourself   ☐ The teacher's questions

☐ Your friends

☐ Others (write in Thai)…………………………………………………….....................

Instructions: Put a tick(✔) in the box provided to choose one consultation you prefer and then write your reasons (write in Thai).

☐ I prefer 1st consultation because …………………………………………………..................

☐ I prefer 2nd consultation because …………………………………………………..............

Suggestions/ Comments…..…………………………………………………………...............

……………………………………………………………………………….....................................

Name……………………………Code…………Group….

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