

Teachers' Readiness to Promote Learner Autonomy in Government Universities in the Northeast of Thailand

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Abstract

The objectives of this research were 1. To study the readiness of English teachers in teaching management to promote learner autonomy of the undergraduate English language students in the Northeastern region, Thailand. 2. To explore the different personal factors and how they contribute to the readiness of English teachers in teaching management to promote learner autonomy. 3. To analyze the external factors contributing to the readiness in teaching management to promote learner autonomy within classroom settings.

The tools used within this research were both paper-based and electronic questionnaires on learner autonomy through Google Form service. The population within this research were 124 university English teachers. The results from this research show that the personal factors that affect the readiness of teachers in supporting learner autonomy were their experience studying abroad and the number of years as university teachers. The external factors affecting the readiness of teachers in promoting learner autonomy is the teaching assessment and the mode of operation of the institutions. Teachers' educational experience abroad and amount of years as teachers caused teachers to have a lower level of readiness as opposed to that graduation within the country. As for the external factors, the teaching assessment affects the desirability of teachers while the mode of operation affects the feasibility of teachers in promoting learner autonomy of the students.

Keywords: Teachers' Readiness; Learner Autonomy; Autonomous Learner

Introduction

As Pointed Out By Brandl (2007) & Tan (2005), Through The Experiences Of Many EFL Teachers In Later Decades, Communicative Language Teaching Or (CLT) Has Always Been Their Only Teaching Approach. Under This Method Of Teaching, One Important Aspect Is An Effort To Build Learners To Go Beyond Possessing Specific Skills To Learners Who Are Autonomous; Learners With The Ability To Train Themselves Under Any Circumstances, Which Had Led To The Learner-Centered Approach In Education. This Kind Of Approach Put A Lot Of Emphasis On The Importance Of Learners Having The Sense Of Ownership Over Their Own Education. In Other Words, This Sense Of Ownership Is Also Known As Learner Autonomy.

Learner Autonomy Was First Introduced In Conjunction To The Foreign Language Teaching By Henry Holec (As Cited In Elizondo & Garita, 2013) In 1981. Holec (As Cited In Joshi, 2011) Defined The Term Learner Autonomy As "The Ability To Take Charge Of One's Learning". In Other Words, Autonomous Learners Are Learners With The Ability To Shape Their Own Learning Experience To Best Meet Their Needs In Order For Them To Be 'Self-Developed' And Satisfying Their Educational Needs. Similar To Dewey (1938) And Kolb (1984), Kohonen (2007) Sithsungnoen & Iganapathy (2018) Also Believes That For Learning To Take Place, Students' Experiences Of Language, Communication, Culture, And Personal Learning Processes Need To Be Consciously Processed. Students Need To Know What Needs To Be Learned And Why Is Such Learning Necessary To Them. In Any Case, There Still Seems To Be A Need To Further Understand Learners And The Nature Of Learning In Order To Provide More Meaningful Learning Experiences For Them In Their Learning Of English. (Phothongsunan, 2017)

From The Conference No. 1/2559 Of The Steering Committee Of The National Committee Developing The Core Curriculum Of Basic Education In January 2016 To Prepare For The 10-Year Cycle Improvement Of The Core Curriculum Of Basic Education, The Focus Of The Steering Committee Is To Make Sure That These Two Subjects Consist A Clear System Of Testing And Students Are Encouraged To Think More Critically. The Most Important Thing Is To Make Sure That Students "Can Learn The Contents According To Their Interests Or Aptitudes" (Kuptametanon & Walker, 2016). However, This Has Proven To Be More Difficult Said Than Done Due To The Centralize System Of Education Which Doesn't Leave Much Room For The Teachers To Make Decisive Decisions Within Their Own Classroom. In Addition, Thai Teachers Who Teach English Need To Be Trained To Use More Strategies In Helping Encourage Students To Be More Self-Directed And Develop More Passion To Learn (Noom-Ura, 2013). Many Types of research (Little, 2003) Indicated That

Learning Cannot Happen without the Connectedness and the Interaction between the Learners. Learners Under The Hierarchical Nature Classroom Lacks The Ability To Be Empowered And Therefore Fail To Maximize Their Ability To Direct The Way They Learn And The Ability To Determine What They Had Learn And What They Can Do With The Things That They Had to Learn. Non-Autonomous Learners Therefore Lack The Main Elements Of Active Learner Such As The Motivation, The Awareness, And The Interaction Which Could Greatly Improve Their Learning Ability. These Are All The Elements That The Learners Possess Within Themselves But Will Not Be Able To Use Them Without Proper Support And Assistant From The Teachers (Kohonen, 2007; Little, 2004; Reinders, 2010). Dam (2012) Supports This In Her Research, In Order For These Elements To Be Present Within The Classroom, The Teachers Must Encourage Students To Be More Involve Within Their Own Learning; In Other Words, Students Need To Take Be Allowed To Take Part In Making Decisions About Their Own Learning.

Suraratdecha And Tayjasannant (2016) Concluded In Their Research That “The Major Cause Of The Problem Largely Concerns A Passive Exam-Based Education System And A Lack Of Mutual Understanding Between All Stakeholders On What It Means To Become An Autonomous Learner And A Life-Long Learner”.

This Research Was Aimed At Finding Out The Level Of Readiness Of Teachers In Promoting Learner Autonomy And Pinpointing Both Personal And External Factors That Affect The Readiness Of Teachers In Promoting Learner Autonomy To Lay Out The Foundation For What Future Researchers Can Do To Help Increase The Level Of Readiness For Teachers.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To study the readiness of English teachers in teaching management to promote learner autonomy of the undergraduate English language students in the Northeastern region, Thailand.
2. To explore the different personal factors and how they contribute to the readiness of English teachers in teaching management to promote learner autonomy.
3. To analyze the external factors contributing to the readiness in teaching management to promote learner autonomy within classroom settings.

Methods

Participants of this research

The population for this research was teachers from different government universities in the northeastern region of Thailand. The first step was splitting up the universities in the Northeast into 3 different groups: government universities, institutions that provide English language teaching, and private universities. The second step was using the Two-Stage Random Sampling method for each of the group; stratified random sampling was used to partition the universities using its governmental and private status. The third step was using simple random sampling to select the sampling group which will be all the teachers at the government universities in the northeast region. The size of the sampling group was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) Table for determining sample size from a given population which totaled to 124 participants.

Instruments used for this research

The instrument chosen for this research was a set of questionnaires to investigate the readiness towards learner autonomy amongst the Thai teachers teaching EFL classes in the Northeast region of Thailand.

This research looked at the following factors that might contribute to the promotion of learner autonomy within the EFL classrooms in Thailand: 1) The perceptions of teachers on the idea of Learner Autonomy 2) The readiness of teachers in supporting Learner Autonomy 3) The external factors that contribute to the support of Learner Autonomy and 4) School Assessment and Testing.

The questionnaires consist of the five following parts:

Questionnaire part 1: Basic information

The first part of the questionnaire was personal information of the participants which included the names of the universities they are teaching, their age, educational background (level of education, domestic and/or abroad), and the number of years they have been teaching.

Questionnaire Part 2: Perception of learner autonomy

The first part was based on the questionnaire developed by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) from a book by the British Council called “Learner autonomy: English Language Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices”.

The questionnaire consists of statements covering the following points on learner autonomy: 1) Technical perspectives on learner autonomy 2) Psychological perspectives on learner autonomy 3) Social perspectives on learner autonomy 4) Political perspectives on learner autonomy 5) Role of the teacher in promoting learner autonomy 6) The relevance of learner autonomy to

diverse cultural contexts 7) Age and learner autonomy 8) Proficiency and learner autonomy 9) The implications of learner autonomy for teaching methodology 10) The relationship of learner autonomy to effective language learning

The second part of the questionnaire focuses on the feeling of the teachers towards the abilities of the learners and the feasibility in promoting learner autonomy.

Questionnaire part 3: Readiness of teacher

This part of the questionnaire was adapted from Ürün, Demir, and Akar (2014) questionnaire used to study the practice of ELT high school teachers in fostering learner autonomy.

Questionnaire Part 4: Contributing to external factors

This set of questionnaires was developed by Strong (2012) to investigate four factors concerning the autonomy amongst the teacher: Teaching and assessment, mode of operation, and curriculum development.

Questionnaire part 5: Open-ended

This part of the questionnaire was used to gain more detail about the participants on their understanding of learner autonomy. The answer from this part of the questionnaire was used to accompany the score gotten from the other parts of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire will be administered both by hard copies and online method through the service of Google Form. Part 1 of the questionnaire was analyzed using standard descriptive analysis to find the population, mean, standard deviation, and percentage of the different characteristics of the participants. This is to provide the general information about the teachers that participated in the research. After that, the F-Test will be used followed by Scheffé's post hoc test to find the correlation between the independent variables (personal factors) and the dependent variable (readiness towards learner autonomy). Finally, Multiple Regression was used to predict the dependent variables in the external factors section from questionnaire part 2, 3 and 4.

The open-ended part of the questionnaire was analyzed in accordance to the score from questionnaire part 1-4 as a qualitative data to explain more about each of the independent variable and their effect to the readiness of teachers on learner autonomy.

Results

Results from the questionnaire on the perceptions of learner autonomy among

Thai university teachers

Two of the qualities came up more often than others; educational level and teaching experience. The different educational levels of the teachers contribute to the differences in their agreement levels on the following categories:

Table 1: Significances between the education of teachers and various aspects of learner autonomy.

Items	Low \bar{x}		High \bar{x}	
	Ed. Level	\bar{x}	Ed. Level	\bar{x}
Teachers' educational level on learners' age	BA	3.87	Ph.D.	4.65
Teachers' educational level on learners' decision making	MA	4.05	BA	4.05
Teachers' educational level on individual learning (2 statements with significance)	BA	3.68	MA	4.25
	BA	3.68	Ph.D.	4.47
Teachers' educational level on group work	MA	3.93	BA	4.56
Teachers' Educational Level on the Dependency of Teachers	MA	3.00	BA	3.89
Teachers' educational level on self-monitoring	MA	3.98	BA	4.44

As can be observed from Table 1, the level of education does have an impact on the agreement attitude of the teachers towards learner autonomy. From the results, the significances are mostly between the teachers with a bachelor's degree and a master's degree.

Table 2: Significances between teacher's teaching experience and various aspects of learner autonomy.

Items	Low \bar{x}		High \bar{x}	
	Teaching Experience	\bar{x}	Teaching Experience	\bar{x}
Teachers' teaching experience on learners' motivation	3-5 yrs.	3.84	10-15 yrs.	4.58
Teachers' teaching experience in individual learning (3 statements)	5-10 yrs.	2.95	3-5 yrs.	3.87
	10-15 yrs.	1.58	5-10 yrs.	2.21
	3-5 yrs.	3.62	5-10 yrs.	4.47

Teachers' teaching experience in group work.	3-5 yrs.	3.80	5-10 yrs.	4.37
Teachers' teaching experience on self-monitoring (2 statements)	3-5 yrs.	3.67	10-15 yrs	4.35
	3-5 yrs.	4.07	15-10 yrs	5.00
Teachers' teaching experience on cultural context	5-10 yrs.	3.95	10-15 yrs.	4.42

From the result, teachers' teaching experience is also another factor that impacts teachers' agreement attitude towards learner autonomy.

The readiness of teachers in promoting learner autonomy

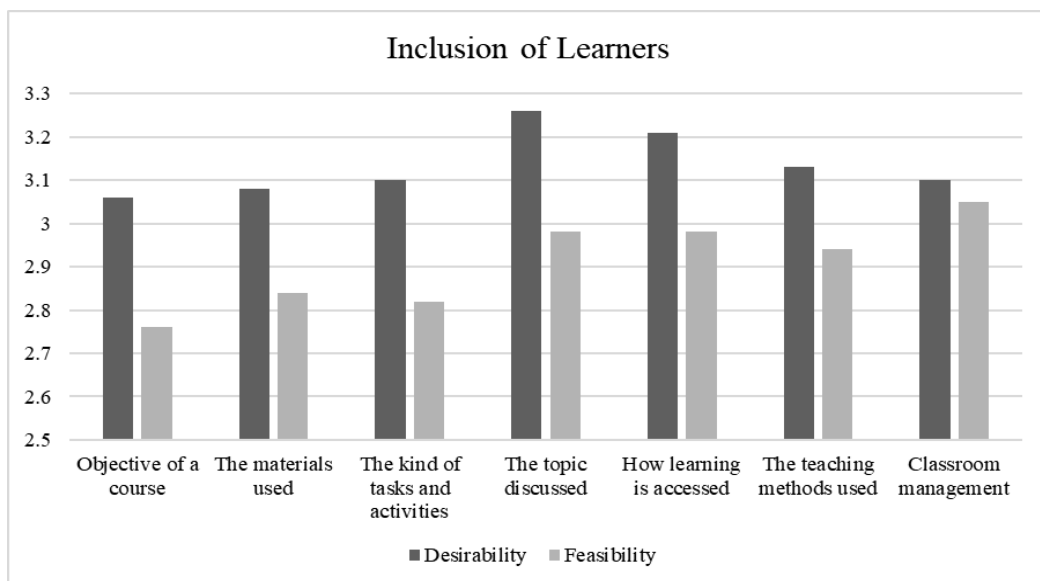
Under the Activity-Based practice, the results from this category of this section of the questionnaire showed that out of the eleven statements, nine statements received the mean of $\bar{x} > 4.00$ which means the respondent strongly agree with the statements.

Under the Material-Based practice, the results from the participants under this category showed that all teachers strongly agree that teaching materials do play an important role in promoting learner autonomy amongst learners with all the mean of $\bar{x} > 4.00$.

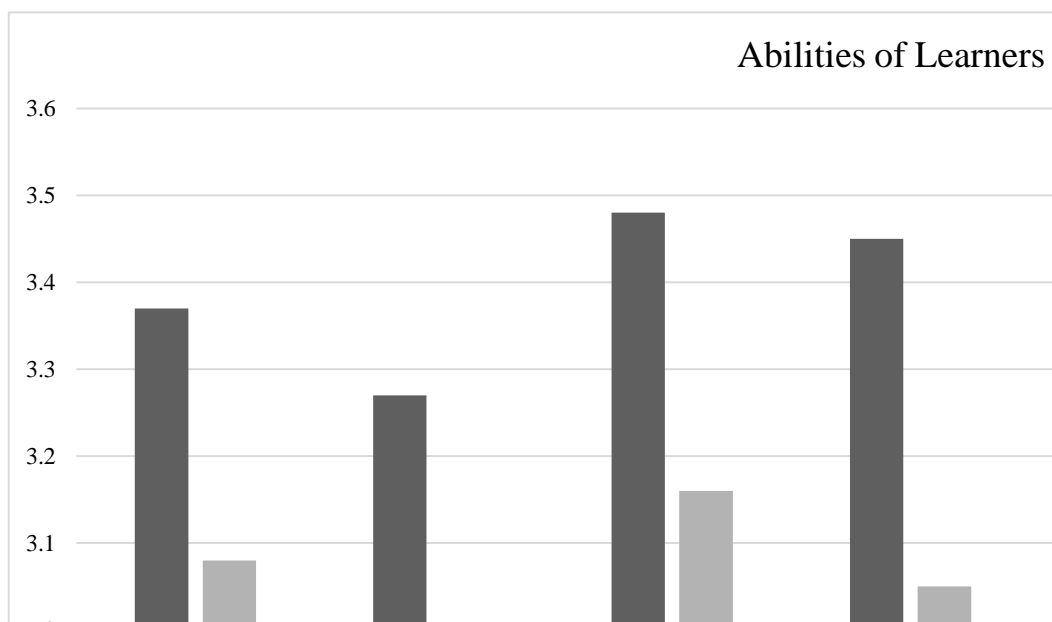
Under the Student-Centered Based practice, all the other results from the test received the mean score of $\bar{x} > 4.00$ which reflects the high level of readiness amongst the teachers to adapt the student-centered style of teaching within their classes.

Results from the questionnaire on the desirability and feasibility of teachers in promoting learner autonomy

Under the section on the Inclusion of Learners, the desirability level of the teachers exceeds that level of feasibility is shown in the following figure.



As for the Abilities of Learners, the result also showed the same pattern where the desirability exceeds the feasibility level as shown in the next figure.



Results from the questionnaire on the contributing external factors to the promotion of learner autonomy

Effect of external factors on the desirability on learners' ability

A significant regression equation was found for Teaching Assessment. Participants' predicted desirability of inclusion is equal to $2.648 + .295$ (Teaching Assessment). The desirability on learners' ability increased .295 for each point.

$$p < .05 [(F3, 120) = .243, p = .001], R^2 \text{ of } .993$$

Effect of external factors on the feasibility of learners' ability

A significant regression equation was found for Mode of Operation. Participants' predicted the feasibility of ability is equal to $2.805 - .135$ (Mode of Operation). The feasibility on learners' ability increased .135 for each point. Mode of operation was significant predictors of the desirability on learners' ability.

$$p < .05 [(F3, 120) = 2.743, p = .046], R^2 \text{ of } .064$$

Discussion of the Results

Teachers' perception of learner autonomy

Two of the qualities that came up in many of the findings were teachers' level of education and teachers' teaching experience. The results suggest that the more experience and exposure teachers have within the classroom environment whether as teachers or students do have an impact in their belief system on the abilities of learners and how language should be taught in classes.

The readiness of teachers to promote learner autonomy

Activity-based practices: All participants strongly agree with most of the statements with the mean score of four and above. However, only two statements receive the mean score of three which is at the *agreed* level, with the mean score between three and four. These two statements concern individual activities and classroom activities. The results suggest that teachers do agree that making changes to the activities done in the classrooms can actually help promote learner autonomy.

Material-based practices: This section only has two statements which both got the average mean score of $\bar{x} > 4$ which shows the strong agreement level from the participants. The statements focus on the adjustment of the materials according to the learners' needs and background. Arguments for this had already been mentioned by Kolb (1984) in a sense that no learners come to class with blank minds. Learners came to class with their needs based on both previous experience and the current situations that revolve around them. The current materials that are being used contain the content from contexts that are

unfamiliar with the students which tend to draw less attention from learners since they cannot see how the content that they are learning can be adapted within their usual context. Readjusting the materials are therefore need to encourage learners to become autonomous.

Student-centered practices: This section of the questionnaire also shows a strong level of agreement with the average mean of $\bar{x} > 4$. Rukthong (2008) stated that although the idea of learner or student-centered education had been promoted by the government for almost 2 decades, it was difficult to implement the ideology in the actual classroom. Most teachers had the experience of the traditional way of teaching; where teachers are the center of the knowledge and tend to carry that on to their classes once they too, take on the role of teachers. The statements are about teachers getting to know their students more on both the personal level and how their students learn. This could prove to be difficult due to the fact that classes in Thailand are very large and might be preventing the closeness between the teachers and learners. However, in theory, teachers tend to agree with the fact that this kind of teaching need to happen.

Desirability and Feasibility in promoting learner autonomy

For the *desirability*, the statements concerning the classroom management and the ability of learners gave the results that all response fell within the “*very desirable*” spectrum, $M > 3$. However, the *readiness* itself doesn’t determine the possibility, or the feasibility, for those changes to concretely occur.

For the *feasibility*, from all the statements, half were on the *very feasible* range while another half were in the *quiet feasible* range.

Comparing the mean from the two categories, the mean for the feasibility are all lower than the mean for the desirability which suggests some obstacles to the promotion of learner autonomy.

Contributing external factors to promoting learner autonomy

The following are the factors that yield significance from the research.

External factors on the desirability of teachers on learners’ ability

The result from this section of the questionnaire was significant between the teaching assessment and the desirability of ability at $p = .001$. The results clearly suggest that the system for assessing students learning to contribute to the change in the desirability level of teachers on the ability of learners.

External factors on the feasibility of teachers on learners’ ability

The result from this section of the questionnaire on the relationship between the external factors and the feasibility of the learners to develop their abilities shows a difference at $p = .46$.

This result suggests that if teachers felt limited by the mode of operation of the institutions.

In conclusion, teaching assessment and the mode of operation were identified as the two predictors for both the desirability and the feasibility for learners to develop their learning abilities.

The understanding of learner autonomy amongst Thai teachers from the open-ended section

The result from the section *The Perception of Learner Autonomy* shows that teachers believe that both individual work and group work all contribute to the promotion of learner autonomy. However, the answers from the open-ended section of the questionnaire show that 38.46% of the teachers who responded to the question still believe that learner autonomy is all about individual learning. On the other hand, 32.05% of the teachers do understanding that autonomous learners need to be able to come up with their own objectives in learning and determining the learning topics to the ones that relate more to them instead of random topics that are less meaningful. Interestingly, 15.38% of the participants believe that learner autonomy is out-of-classroom learning. In other words, learning that happens outside of the classroom. This suggests that some teachers still believe that despite the belief that learner autonomy can be foster within the classroom, it can only be achieved outside of classroom settings. This is prevalent when considering the section within this questionnaire on whether the traditional way of teaching is an obstacle to fostering learner autonomy. The result from that section revealed the uncertainty level of the teachers when mentioning the traditional way of teaching or what it means. Furthermore, teachers may have an understanding of what it means to be autonomous learners, but the reality with the management of the classroom might tell a different story.

Obstacles to promote learner autonomy

The answers from this from the participants go in line with what Farrell & Bennis (2013) stated in their research that "...teachers hold a complex set of beliefs about students and pedagogical practices; these beliefs have been shown to influence the instructional judgments and decisions made in the classroom" (p. 163). The results from this section show that 40.28% of the teachers believe that the major obstacles towards the promotion of learner autonomy are the attitude of the learners themselves.

It should also be noted that 12.50% of the participants believe that teacher-centered classroom is one of the obstacles towards promoting learner autonomy which goes back to the question of how much teachers are willing to give away their role as the provider of knowledge and for students to step up and fill in this role.

How learner autonomy can be improved

The answers from the participants for this section coincide with the understanding of teachers and the relationship between learner autonomy and individual learning. 32.86% of the teachers believe that learner autonomy can be improved through individual learning. This raises new question on the definition of individual learning; the definition of individual learning from the Thai teachers' perspectives which could shed some light on whether the individual learning itself encompass individual learning within the classroom settings or only possible outside of classroom settings since 21.43% answers pointed in the direction that out-of-classroom learning is another way to help improve learner autonomy. Interestingly, 17.14% of the teachers believe that cooperative learning is how learner autonomy can be improved. This raises the contradictory points between teachers who believe in individual learning and those who value cooperative learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study should be able to provide a glimpse into the mind of the teachers on the idea of learner autonomy. Thailand is still a country with very large power distance; emphasizing on the top-down structure in almost every aspect. Implementing learner autonomy would mean that teachers will need to swim against the tide. The tide mentioned here isn't only the teachers' "traditional" perspective on teaching, but also the learners' "traditional" perspective on learning. The results from the research also suggest that teachers understand the benefit of learners becoming autonomous and are ready to make changes in their teaching style despite some of the limitations both internally and externally. In order for changes to happen, there might have to be a push from the upper level of administration. Similar to the idea of learners feeling the ownership of their education, teachers should also be able to develop the same feeling of ownership on their own teaching. Involving learners in their own learning is just the first step, another step is for teachers to be more involved in determining how they should teach. This research should have built a groundwork for future researchers who want to look deeper into the issue of learner autonomy.

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