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## Learner Autonomy: Perception and Challenges for Thai University Students

**Phitsinee Koad**

*Walailak University, Thailand*

### Introduction

For decades, learner autonomy or autonomous learning (AL) has been in high demand among academics in various fields of studies. The concept presents the process of learning for which learners recognize and become responsible by taking into account their needs and limitations (Cotterall, 2000; Dickenson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Smith, 2007).

The positive relationship between AL and English language learning achievement has been identified by a number of empirical studies. It is observed that the successful students have higher autonomy compared to those who are less successful (Orawiwatnakul & Wichadee, 2017; Sakai & Takagi, 2009). Thus, it is crucial to develop and enhance the less proficient English learners' autonomy.

In light of the above descriptions, the current study focuses on investigating the perception, readiness, and challenges for autonomy in learning English as a foreign language of the university students in Thailand. The students in this study were enrolled in general English courses at Walailak University. This study uses an online questionnaire to measure the students' perception and analyze their readiness and challenges.

### Literature Review

The concept of learner autonomy has been an ongoing issue in the area of language education for decades. The terms are conceptualized as learners' ability to take control of their own learning: planning and managing the learning process, self-monitoring and assessment, and decision making and adjusting without interventions from teachers (Cotterall, 2000; Dickenson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Smith, 2007). Several academics believe that assistance from teachers would interfere with the process of learner autonomy (proactive autonomy) while some scholars allowed guidance from teachers in some degrees (reactive autonomy). Nonetheless, both types of autonomy shed light on learners and learning practice.

Cultures and education context play important roles over perception and type of autonomy adopted. A number of students were familiar with the 'spoon-feeding' method and all depend on teachers (Littlewood, 2000; Tayjasanant & Suraratdecha, 2016; Üstünlüoğlu, 2009). According to Yamalee (2019), teachers are also held noteworthy in AL in terms of stimulating and providing suggestions to learners. The key failure in autonomy is that learners and teachers are still clinging to the traditional practice.



Autonomy is extremely important to language learning. Most successful language learners have effective self-study skills. Alghamdi (2016) found that the more successful learners tend to have better autonomy than less successful learners who lack confidence and often said that others make themselves not as successful as they should. In 2017, Orawiwatnakul and Wichadee found that learners who were less proficient in English expected their lecturers to control and guide their learning paths, the analysis was also consistent with Mineishi's research (2010) which reported that less successful learners expected teachers to monitor their progress and evaluate their grades.

Although learner autonomy is an effective approach to the foreign language learning, attitude and motivation are also important factors which affect the direction of one's autonomy (Knowles 1975; Lucas, 2020; Mercer & Williams, 2014). Attitudes affect individuals' learning behavior and motivation drives learner autonomy.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study include 343 students from 3,132 students who registered for general English subjects for at least one year in the university. The sample size was acquired using Krejcie and Morgan's formula (1970). The participants were categorized into two groups: the less successful (LS) group (235 students who are in A1 and A2 CEFR levels) and the more successful (MS) group (108 students who are in B1 and B2 CEFR levels).

### **Instrument**

An online questionnaire was used to examine learners' perception and challenges on AL. The questionnaire was adapted from the study entitled "Examining Learner Autonomy Dimensions: Students' Perceptions of their Responsibility and Ability" of Gamble et al. in 2012. The researcher translated the questionnaire into Thai and added open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire. This adapted version comprised 4 parts. The first part asked about the year of their study; level of English preference; and CEFR level. The second part consisted of 10 items investigating perception of AL. The third part explored the decision making ability concerning AL. The last part included summary questions and asked about problems and the obstacles regarding AL.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection was conducted in April 2020. The data were analyzed via the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize general information of the participants. Independent *t*-test was used to analyze the differences in terms of the perceptions and decision making abilities concerning AL of the participants. Content analysis was used to explore the obstacles and limitations of the students.

## **Results**

### **Students' Perceptions of English Learning Responsibilities**

Table 1 revealed that most participants perceived both their teachers and themselves to hold equal responsibilities in terms of the learning progress during class (item 1), stimulating interest in learning

English (item 3), identifying learners' weaknesses in English (item 4), deciding what should be learnt next (item 6), how long the lesson should take (item 8), and what materials are to be used (item 9).

In contrast, most participants agreed that they have more responsibility for their outside classroom learning progress (item 2). The participants think that it is the teachers' responsibility to set learning objectives (item 5), choose learning activities for lessons (item 7), and evaluate learning (item 10).

However, these 3 items have similar percentages compared to the teachers' and both parties' responsibilities. This means that even if the students perceived that they were the teachers' major concerns, the students themselves were also required to be involved in those learning processes.

Most students from the LS and MS groups tend to have similar perspectives of language learning responsibility. However, the majority of MS students (52.78%) think that both students and teachers should be responsible for what they should learn (item 6) compared to the LS students who agreed that it should be the teachers' (48.09%) or both parties' (42.55%) concerns. For the learning evaluation (item 10), 51.49% of the LS students perceived that it was the teachers' responsibility while 51.85% of the MS learners think that it was both parties' responsibility.

TABLE 1  
*Students' Perceptions of English Learning Responsibilities*

Statement	Responsibility	Groups of Learners		
		LS (N = 235)	MS (N = 108)	All (N = 343)
1. Ensuring you make progress during English lessons	Yours	4.68%	4.63%	4.66%
	Teacher's	19.57%	22.22%	20.41%
	Both	75.74%	73.15%	74.93%
2. Ensuring you make progress outside class	Yours	49.36%	45.37%	48.10%
	Teacher's	6.38%	7.41%	6.71%
	Both	44.26%	47.22%	45.19%
3. Stimulating your interest in learning English	Yours	14.04%	8.33%	12.24%
	Teacher's	30.64%	28.70%	30.03%
	Both	55.32%	62.96%	57.73%
4. Identifying your weaknesses in English	Yours	25.96%	22.22%	24.78%
	Teacher's	25.53%	22.22%	24.49%
	Both	48.51%	55.56%	50.73%
5. Deciding the objectives of your English course	Yours	8.09%	10.19%	8.75%
	Teacher's	48.09%	46.30%	47.52%
	Both	43.83%	43.52%	43.73%
6. Deciding what you should learn next in your English lessons	Yours	9.36%	9.26%	9.33%
	Teacher's	48.09%	37.96%	44.90%
	Both	42.55%	52.78%	45.77%
7. Choosing what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons	Yours	6.38%	3.70%	5.54%
	Teacher's	46.81%	49.07%	47.52%
	Both	46.81%	47.22%	46.94%
8. Deciding how long to spend on each activity	Yours	10.64%	7.41%	9.62%
	Teacher's	42.13%	41.67%	41.98%
	Both	47.23%	50.93%	48.40%
9. Choosing what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons	Yours	9.36%	7.41%	8.75%
	Teacher's	40.85%	42.59%	41.40%
	Both	49.79%	50.00%	49.85%
10. Evaluating your learning	Yours	4.68%	3.70%	4.37%
	Teacher's	51.49%	44.44%	49.27%
	Both	43.83%	51.85%	46.36%

## Students' Autonomous Learning Ability

The levels of scale used to interpret the AL ability data achieved from the questionnaire (items 11-20) were adapted from Vagias (2006). The ranges and corresponding levels were 1.00-1.49 = not at all capable, 1.50-2.49 = slightly capable, 2.50-3.49 = moderately capable, 3.50-4.49 = quite capable, 4.50-5.00 = very capable.

The students demonstrated similar levels of capability concerning AL. The MS students had a higher level of AL abilities on all items labeled as ‘quite capable’. The LS students reported as ‘moderately capable’ except for choosing learning materials inside ( $M = 3.67$ ) and outside classroom ( $M = 3.60$ ), deciding how long to spend on each learning activity ( $M = 3.56$ ), and identifying their weakness in learning English ( $M = 3.53$ ) where they fell under the level ‘quite capable’.

TABLE 2  
*Students’ Autonomous Learning Ability*

Autonomous Learning Ability	Groups of Learner	Mean	SD	t	p
11. Choosing learning activities in class	LS	3.49	0.83	-4.212*	0.000
	MS	3.81	0.88		
12. Choosing learning activities outside class	LS	3.42	0.91	-3.940*	0.000
	MS	3.73	0.97		
13. Choosing learning objectives in class	LS	3.42	1.00	-4.240*	0.000
	MS	3.80	1.09		
14. Choosing learning objectives outside class	LS	3.40	1.04	-3.989*	0.000
	MS	3.76	1.17		
15. Choosing learning materials in class	LS	3.67	1.04	-2.844*	0.005
	MS	3.94	1.21		
16. Choosing learning materials outside class	LS	3.60	1.09	-2.469	0.014
	MS	3.86	1.36		
17. Deciding what you should learn next in your class	LS	3.47	1.19	-4.777*	0.000
	MS	3.92	1.41		
18. Deciding how long to spend on each activity	LS	3.56	1.22	-3.642*	0.000
	MS	3.91	1.49		
19. Identifying your weaknesses in English	LS	3.53	1.30	-3.252*	0.001
	MS	3.88	1.61		
20. Evaluating your learning	LS	3.45	1.37	-4.066*	0.000
	MS	3.87	1.69		

\* Statistical significance at level 0.05

The independent sample t-test was conducted to examine the students’ attitudes towards AL ability (items 11-20). The results showed that the success of language learning was affected by the students’ abilities to learn autonomously.

There was a significant difference between the LS ( $M = 3.49$ ) and MS learners ( $M = 3.81$ ) in terms of how they chose learning activities inside a classroom ( $t = -4.212$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), as well as choosing activities outside a classroom (LS:  $M = 3.42$ ; MS:  $M = 3.78$ ;  $t = -3.940$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

The analysis reported the significant differences in terms of choosing learning objectives in class ( $t = -4.240$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and outside class ( $t = -3.989$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) for both groups. The LS learners were reported with a mean score of 3.42 and 3.40 for choosing learning objectives in and outside the lesson respectively while the MS learner reported higher results ( $M = 3.08$  for choosing in-class learning objectives, and  $M = 3.76$  for the outside class).

Choosing learning materials showed different results. Selecting learning materials for the in-class lesson was significantly different between the two groups (LS:  $M = 3.67$ ; MS:  $M = 3.94$ ;  $t = -2.844$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). However, there were no significant differences in choosing learning materials for the outside classroom lesson for both groups (LS:  $M = 3.60$ ; MS:  $M = 3.86$ ;  $t = -2.469$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ).

A significant difference was noted ( $t = -4.777$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) in terms of deciding what should be learned next in a class between the LS ( $M = 3.47$ ) and the MS group ( $M = 3.92$ ). Similar results were obtained in deciding how long to spend on each learning activity (LS:  $M = 3.56$ ; MS:  $M = 3.91$ ;  $t = -3.642$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

There were significant differences in terms of identifying weaknesses ( $t = -3.252$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and self-evaluation ( $t = -4.066$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) in both groups as well. For identifying their own weaknesses, the LS group had a mean score of 3.53 while the other group seemed to be better ( $M = 3.83$ ). The results were similar to how well they evaluate themselves. The LS group showed a mean score of 3.45 while the MS group reported with a higher score ( $M = 3.87$ ).

From the results, we can see that the MS students reported themselves with higher mean scores on the AL ability than the LS students. The independent t-test results confirmed that there were significant differences between them. However, both groups' ability to select their own learning materials for the outside classroom lessons showed no significant difference.

### Students' AL Experiences and Challenges

Among 343 participants, 78.13% claimed they had experienced learning autonomy before, 1.75% had never learnt autonomously yet, 20.12% were not sure. In terms of success, 90.74% of the MS learners had experienced self-directed learning before, 8.33% claimed that they were not sure. Only 0.93% reported with no experience in AL. A smaller percentage of the LS learners (72.34%) claimed they had experience with AL, 25.33% reported as 'unsure' and 2.13% were sure that they never conducted AL before.

TABLE 3  
*Students' Previous Autonomous Learning Experience*

Previous Autonomous Learning Experience	Yes	No	Unsure
LS Learners	72.34%	2.13%	25.53%
MS Learners	90.74%	0.93%	8.33%
All Learners	78.13%	1.75%	20.12%

In terms of advantages and disadvantages of AL, the majority of the participants agreed that it is equally advantageous and disadvantageous to their learning (LS: 65.96%, MS: 64.81%, All: 65.60%). The obvious conflict between the two groups was that the LS considered AL more disadvantageous (LS: 10.21%, MS: 3.70%, All: 8.16%). Likewise, the MS learners considered AL as more advantageous (LS: 23.83%, MS: 31.48%, All: 26.24%).

TABLE 4  
*Students' Points of View of the Overall Advantages and Disadvantages of Autonomous Learning*

Overall Advantages and Disadvantages of Autonomous Learning	More Advantageous	More Disadvantageous	Equal Proportion
LS Learners	23.83%	10.21%	65.96%
MS Learners	31.48%	3.70%	64.81%
All Learners	26.24%	8.16%	65.60%

The researcher further investigated the students' challenges and obstacles concerning AL through the open-ended questions.

TABLE 5  
*Frequency, Percentage, and Emerging Themes of the Students' AL Challenges*

Students' Autonomous Learning Challenges	Groups of Learners		
	LS	MS	All
Content Understanding	122	62	184
Confusing/Unclear/Misunderstood/Difficult Help Needed	(29.19%)	(14.83%)	(44.02%)
No Guidelines/Suggestions	70	36	106
Responsibility	(16.75%)	(8.61%)	(25.36%)
Discipline/Distracton/Time Management	43	21	64
Negative Feelings	(10.29%)	(5.02%)	(15.31%)
Fear/Unconfident/Worry/Discouragement	41	14	55
Learning Resources	(9.81%)	(3.38%)	(13.16%)
Tools/Materials	6	3	9
	(1.44%)	(0.72%)	(2.15%)

\* Each participant may include more than one theme in his/her answers.

The 184 participants (44.02%) were concerned with the understanding of the lesson's content which fell under the theme labeled as 'Content Understanding'. They claimed that they were not sure whether they would understand the content incorrectly.

*I don't understand difficult content.* (Student 61)

*In AL, we'll understand the content on our own. Sometimes, we might understand it incorrectly and this is disadvantageous to us to understand things incorrectly.* (Student 145)

Another major theme was identified as 'Help Needed' which was mentioned by 25.36% (106 responses) of the participants. The theme elaborated the feeling of the participants who seek help from more experienced persons in terms of English language learning.

*I don't know where to start.* (Student 49)

*When there is a problem, it's difficult to find the solution.* (Student 24)

*I have no one to ask. The internet doesn't tell everything.* (Student 26)

*I don't learn new things except what I'm interested in.* (Student 189)

The next emerging theme was labeled as 'Responsibility' which concerned the participants' discipline, distraction, and time management. There were 15.31% (64 participants) who claimed that this was their struggle when it comes to AL.

*There's less motivation or enthusiasm compared with when studying with friends.* (Student 110)

*Laziness. When we study autonomously, we don't have motivation as much as studying in class.* (Student 179)

*Short span of attention. Especially with the subject I dislike, I wouldn't likely to pay attention.* (Student 129)

There were 13.16% (55 responses) categorized as 'Negative Feelings' as the participants mentioned that they felt afraid, unsure, unconfident when it came to learning English by themselves.

*I'm afraid that I wouldn't understand.* (Student 58)

*I'm afraid that I couldn't make it and I'm not sure about the vocabulary.* (Student 134)

*I'm not confident to try or use English with surrounding people.* (Student 156)

The last category was 'Learning Resources' which concerned English learning resources, tools, or materials the participants would use for their self-learning. There were only nine participants (2.15%) who were concerned about this issue.

*Some topics aren't available in Thai language or have less information in Thai.* (Student 80)

*Access to media/technology that students have is limited. Not able to access 100% of certain learning materials.* (Student 326)

## Discussion

### Perceptions

The students' perceptions of English language learning responsibilities in this research seemed to be slightly different from other studies as the participants place importance on their own role in both the MS and LS groups in various areas. These findings are inconsistent with the results of Üstünlüoğlu (2009), and Anwar (2014), where the participants tended to rely on teachers more. However, this phenomenon might occur due to the changes in information access such as the availability of the learning resources and materials, or more advanced technologies which could assist learners in their self-learning.

Traditionally, in Thailand, students are familiar with the teacher-centered approach where a teacher is an operator and a controller of events happening in a classroom combined with a culture of obedience to elders. It makes a learner quite familiar with the spoon-feeding teaching style. So when it comes to managing their own learning, learners would face an awkward moment.

However, the participants in this study showed more self-reliance but still required some types of aid from their teachers such as setting learning objectives, choosing activities and deciding on practice duration, and tracking learning progress. The percentage of the students who agreed that it was the major responsibility of both parties and of their teacher was about 10% difference in these categories, while other studies (e.g., Anwar, 2014; Chen & Pan, 2015; Üstünlüoğlu, 2009) were about 20% difference between the two groups (teachers, and both parties).

Among the mentioned issues related to designing and managing the autonomous lesson, there are also different responses among the MS and LS learners. In terms of tracking the learning process, the MS learners relied on both themselves and teachers while the LS learners preferred to observe themselves rather than ask for help from teachers. In terms of designing the next lessons, the MS learners sought suggestions from the teacher together with designing their own lessons while the LS learners placed it on the teachers' shoulders. Most importantly, the MS learners view that it was their own responsibility to evaluate their learning while the LS learners say it was the teacher's duty. Such findings were similar to Mineishi (2010) and Orawiwatnakul and Wichadee (2017)'s analysis which claimed that the LS learners tend to have their teachers lead their learning.

### Readiness

The results of the investigation showed that the learners' perception affected their readiness for learning autonomously. When the learners perceive that they are also a key part of their own learning in the reactive way, it affects their attitudes towards the learners and the teachers' roles and triggers their learning motivation which further influences their AL abilities.

In this study, the group of the MS learners' abilities to learn autonomously are labeled as 'quite capable' as well as the LS learners. However, the latter group was a little weak ('moderately capable') in certain categories, namely choosing learning objectives, activities, planning the next lesson, and evaluating their own learning. The findings were similar to Alghamdi's study in 2016 which stated that the MS learners had better AL skills compared to the LS group. In this case, the course of this phenomenon is due to the learning experience and motivation.

### Challenges and Obstacles

The learners reported various challenges and obstacles related to AL. The majority claimed that they had experience learning autonomously and it had equal advantages and disadvantages.

The LS group reported more concern (at least 50% different) about autonomy compared to the MS group. The highest concerns were about understanding the content. They were 'afraid' that they would misunderstand or get confused. Both groups reconfirm that they need help from the teachers because they

were ‘unsure’ of where they should start, and what to do next. They still need suggestions from more experienced subjects. The most important factor that can be considered “the root” of the problems is their negative feelings such as being afraid, unsure, worried, unconfident, and discouraged which was caused by the unfamiliar action of learning since they were more familiar with the learning that was led by the teacher (Yamalee, 2019).

Besides, learners also reported difficulties managing time, being distracted, and negative mental status such as laziness and tiredness which concerned their daily tasks and mental health. Very few students claimed that they had problems with learning resources and tools to access information.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the Thai university students’ perception, readiness, and challenges for autonomy in English language learning. The findings showed that the learners perceived themselves as a part of their own learning as much as the teachers. Most of them were capable of managing their own learning. However, supports such as guidance or suggestions from the teachers are still needed due to lack of experiences in self-learning and lack of confidence in some cases. They are ready for the reactive type of autonomy.

To promote AL, the results of the study suggested that universities should provide more independent learning practice or integrate it into the curriculum. Teachers also need to be in all learning processes but change their role from a learning director to a facilitator: observe, provide suggestions, but not interfere.

## The Author

*Phitsinee Koad* is a faculty member at the Department of Languages, School of Languages and General Education, Walailak University. She completed an M.A. TEFL from Walailak University, Thailand.

Languages Department  
School of Languages and General Education  
Walailak University  
222, Thaiburi, Thasala District, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand, 80160  
Mobile: + 66 846303802  
Email: honey.koad@gmail.com

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