

Autonomous Learning through an Online English Learning Program by Low Proficiency EFL Students

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ประเด็นสำคัญของการศึกษานี้คือ การตอบคำถามที่ว่า โปรแกรมการเรียนภาษาออนไลน์ที่จัดว่าเป็นหนึ่งใน กิจกรรมการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองนั้นสามารถส่งเสริมการรับรู้ในทางบวกของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศที่มีความสามารถทาง ภาษาอังกฤษต่ำหรือไม่ พร้อมกับการรับรู้การศึกษาที่ตั้งใจสำรวจอุปสรรคในการนำโปรแกรมภาษาออนไลน์ไปใช้เพื่อส่งเสริมความ เป็นอัตโนมัติ (autonomy) ของผู้เรียนเหล่านี้ การเก็บข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณจัดทำโดยใช้แบบสอบถามที่ใช้ลิเคิร์ทสเกล 5 ระดับ กลุ่มผู้เรียนที่เข้าร่วมในการศึกษาคั้งนี้คือกลุ่มตัวอย่างที่มีอยู่แล้วตามธรรมชาติ (intact group) ของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษา ต่างประเทศที่มีความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษต่ำที่ลงทะเบียนวิชาภาษาอังกฤษพื้นฐาน 1 ในมหาวิทยาลัยของรัฐในกรุงเทพฯ ประเทศไทย ผลการวิจัยหลักแสดงว่าผู้เรียนส่วนใหญ่มีการรับรู้เกี่ยวกับโปรแกรมภาษาออนไลน์ในทางบวก นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่าการ เรียนภาษาออนไลน์ช่วยให้ผู้เรียนสามารถควบคุมเวลาในการเรียนรู้ของตนเองได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ อย่างไรก็ตามมีผู้เรียน สองสามคนที่ประสบกับอุปสรรคในการปรับใช้การเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองผ่านโปรแกรมภาษาออนไลน์ อุปสรรคเหล่านั้นเกี่ยวข้องกับ ปัจจัยต่างๆ ได้แก่ การแทรกแซงทางวัฒนธรรม ความมีระเบียบวินัยในตัวเอง และทักษะการเรียนรู้ ผลการศึกษานี้สนับสนุนความ คิดที่ว่า ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศที่มีความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษต่ำสามารถพัฒนาการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองผ่าน การใช้โปรแกรมภาษาออนไลน์ได้เมื่อเขามีความเข้าใจที่ชัดเจนเกี่ยวกับการส่งผ่านอำนาจในการควบคุมและรับผิดชอบการเรียนรู้ ของตนเอง และได้รับการเตรียมความพร้อมด้านทักษะต่างๆ ด้านความรู้ และกลยุทธ์ที่จำเป็นต่อการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง

Abstract

The prime concern of this present study is to answer a question whether an online language program as one of autonomous learning activities can promote positive perceptions on autonomous language learning of low proficiency EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. Along with the perception, this study tends to explore the difficulties in implementing an online language program to promote autonomy among these students. The quantitative inquiry was conducted through the collection of a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. Participants were the intact group of low proficiency Thai EFL students enrolling in Foundation English I course at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand. The main findings show that the majority of the participants had positive perceptions on using an online language program. Moreover, the online language learning was found to be effective in allowing students to control their own learning pace, which is one of the attributes of autonomous learning. However, a few students had difficulty adapting to autonomous learning through the online language program. Such difficulties were related to the factors including cultural interferences, self-discipline, and learning skills. The results of the study support the idea that, through an online language program, low proficiency EFL students can develop their learning autonomy if they have clear understandings of the sense of learning authority that has been shifted, and are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and strategies necessary for autonomous learning.

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Introduction

Autonomous learning is considered an important factor in successful language learning (Gardner, 2011; Benson, 2000, 2001; Little, 1990; Dafei, 2007; and Vickers & Ene, 2006). Policy makers of Thai national education realize the necessity of instilling the autonomous learning in Thai students. Therefore, the National Education Act of Thailand B.E. 1999 has emphasized “the principle that all learners are capable of learning and self-development.” (Sangnapaboworn, 2003, p.1). This policy has been applied as a national agenda for higher education, resulting in Thai public universities’ revision of pedagogical policies to incorporate autonomous learning.

To effectively put such policy into practice, there lies a need to study the way to promote autonomy in Thai classrooms. This is exactly the essence of this study, which focuses on autonomy in English language learning. There are many studies (Mohamadpour, 2013; Dafei, 2007; Lo, 2010; Kim, 2014) that explore the issue in several EFL contexts. For example, Mohamadpour (2013) researched the realization of autonomy and English language proficiency in Iranian high school students and Dafei (2007) explored the relationship between learner autonomy and English proficiency. These studies suggested a link between students’ English proficiencies and their perception of learner autonomy. Dafei (2007, p. 15) states, “[t]he more autonomous a learner becomes, the more likely he/she achieves high language proficiency.” Based on this premise, the learners that most need help in developing their language ability are likely to be those with low proficiency. As these learners are perceived as lacking motivation, it is necessary to gain an understanding of the students themselves, including their perceptions and their readiness for autonomy. Additionally, since learning, especially autonomous learning, is not a simple process and is related to many factors such as individual style of learning and cultural factors (Sanprasert, 2010), promoting autonomous learning among those students may encounter the difficulties;

therefore, it could be interesting to explore whether they can adopt the concept of autonomy and become more motivated learners.

Unfortunately, very few studies have been found to address the practice of autonomy on low proficiency EFL students, particularly in Thai context. Therefore, the present study aimed to fill in this gap by exploring the perceptions of low proficiency EFL students on autonomous learning and the difficulties found when implementing an online language program. It answers the following research questions:

1. What were the perceptions of the low proficiency EFL university students towards an online language program? and,
2. What, if any, were the difficulties found in implementing an online language program to promote autonomy among these students?

Literature Review

Autonomous learning has been variously defined by many scholars. The most often quoted definition is that of Holec (1979), who explained autonomy as one’s taking the responsibility for one’s own learning. Similarly, Scharle and Szabó (2000) stated that autonomous learning occurs when learners are able to take responsibility for and make decisions about their own learning. In addition to self-management and self-responsibility, Benson (2001) asserted that students should have the freedom to take control of the learning content too. Yet, Jones (1995) argued that learner autonomy remains a Western idea and may conflict with national cultures at a deep level. Little (1999) disagreed with this argument as he believed that learner autonomy is a universal human capacity. He points out that learner autonomy does not mean that students would have to learn without a teacher or that a teacher would have to give up all initiative and control in the classroom.

It is believed that autonomy can be fostered even in low proficiency learners. Low English proficiency learners are considered unsuccessful language learners, and characterized as dependent and passive

learners with low motivation and low self-sufficiency. Since autonomy and language proficiency are positively related (Mohamadhour, 2013), autonomous learning that is provided alongside teacher support could be a key in helping those students become more successful language learners and pave them a path to lifelong learning (Little, 1999; Sanprasert, 2010). In other words, helping low English proficiency learners become more successful language learners can be done through the process of autonomy (Mahdavinia & Ahmadi, 2011; Umeda, 2000 cited in Onazava, 2010, p.128).

Nonetheless, the implementation of autonomous learning is not as simple as it may look. There is a need for students, particularly in the case of low English proficiency students, to gradually develop this ability. Sanprasert (2010) suggests modifications are necessary to suit each individual situation. Any cultural factors on learner autonomy training should be taken into account before implementation (Duong and Seepho, 2014). Hence, it can be concluded that it might take a long time for autonomous learning to become functional for those low English proficiency learners. For a Thai EFL classroom, enhancing autonomous learning is very challenging. The obstacles include cultural influences and educational practices in Thailand that result in passive Thai learners (Sanprasert, 2010). Her observation is that Thai students have been taught in a traditional classroom that is teacher-centered, so students are used to teachers' transferring knowledge, and not being responsible for their own learning. Moreover, once the learning authority is transferred to the students, they developed negative perception as they are neglected (Bunnag, 2000, cited in Tapinta, 2016) Therefore, it becomes clear that the development of autonomy in Thai context would largely depend on the initiative taken by teachers. *Recent Related Studies Regarding Autonomous Language Learning in Thai Context*

Over the past five years, many researchers have conducted studies regarding autonomy in

language learning in Thailand. Their specific areas of study may have differed, but there has been agreement on the fundamental principle of learner autonomy: learners take charge of and become responsible for their own learning.

In 2010, Sanprasert conducted a study based on the use of blended learning (BL) where traditional instructor-led learning and technology-based learning were combined. The results of her study showed that Thai learners became more independent and more confident as they developed some types of autonomous behavior, such as setting their own learning goals and developing skills to monitor and evaluate the progress of their learning. This type of blended learning might be a way to overcome such difficulties in the Thai context.

Rungwaraphong (2012) and Dound & Seepho (2014) explore the perception of Thai lecturers' and practices related to learner autonomy. The findings indicate that learner autonomy is highly valued by Thai lecturers. The roles of teachers were identified as a facilitator, a counselor, and a resource in promoting learner autonomy. Some mismatches between their perceptions and teaching practices were revealed, however. Thai teachers are not very confident in their students' ability to act as autonomous learners. As a result, many Thai teachers fail to bring the concept of autonomy to their actual teaching practices. Their findings are also in line with those of Tapinta (2016) who investigated Thai university teachers' beliefs in developing learner autonomy through questionnaires, online interviews, and focus group discussions. Moreover, Tapinta (2016) found that, in practicum, the teachers were concerned about some local obstacles such as the conventional Thai classroom culture, students' passive characteristics, and students' negative perceptions and mythical understandings of autonomy. They also raised some observations about the learners in terms of their insufficient learning skills, knowledge, and strategies needed for autonomy.

In summary, even though teachers value the concept of autonomous learning, they still hesitate

to adopt it in their actual classroom practices due to the students' personal factors. However, today, students are surrounded with learning opportunities from many sources. In this modern era where creativity and self-reliance are valued, students must adopt modern autonomous learning practices. In our view, Thai college students, in particular, need to be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning because they are mature enough to do so and ready to learn outside of the classroom. Nonetheless, what actually happens is that many Thai college students, especially those with low English proficiency, depend mainly on their teachers because collective culture reinforces passiveness in the students. This type of traditional classroom reflects the hesitation of those teachers. This situation led to the current study, which aimed to explore whether autonomous learning can be encouraged among Thai EFL students whose English proficiency is at a low level.

Methodology

This study adopted quantitative research design to investigate students' perceptions towards using an English language program at Foundation English I course provided for students whose English entrance scores on O-NET (Ordinary National Educational Test) ranged between 0-20. The course met three hours a week for a total of 45 hours in the semester. In each section, the number of students could vary from 25 to 50 students, depending on the number of students who needed to take the course each year and the number of teachers available to teach it. The course components were designed to comprise in-class lessons and online lessons through SPEEXX, an online language program. In order to be eligible to take the final exams, the university required that students attended at least 80% of the classroom lessons and completed a minimum of 60 hours of online lessons.

The participants included 37 intact students enrolling in the course during the summer semester of 2014. The English proficiency of these students was

homogeneously at the beginner level, or A1 based on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). All participants were repeated students due to their withdrawal and/or failure from the previous semesters. Nonetheless, none of the participants had been enrolled in this course in the second semester of academic year 2013 when the pilot study was done.

The data collection instrument was the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire constructed to capture students' perceptions on using an online language program (SPEEXX). It was divided into four parts: (1) personal information, (2) the 5-point Likert scale questions concerning students' perceptions and attitudes of learning through the online learning program, (3) semi-open-ended questions asking about any learning difficulties that they experienced during the use of the online program, and (4) open-ended questions on any other perceptions the students had towards the online learning. Before an actual test, a pilot study was run and the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.82.

The data collection process was as followed. On the first day of class, all of the participants were informed about the study and asked to voluntarily participate. After that, they attended an introductory session of SPEEXX, which would serve as their self-learning tool for the entire semester. On the second day of class, the pre-test was given to the participants so as to assess their English language ability before studying the course. During the semester, the participants would perform their online study through the online language program, SPEEXX. The program itself offered a wide range of online lessons, activities, and practices, which included various language skills such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, listening, and reading comprehension. The participants were required to study all the A1-level units within the semester, while they also attended in-class lessons to learn and revise grammatical features as well as join the activities designed in corresponding to the contents from the online

program. In the last teaching week, students had their post-test and were given the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire to evaluate their perceptions on the online language program. The data collected were quantitatively analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and interpreted by the researchers.

Results and Discussion

1. Based on the results of the questionnaires, the majority of the students tended to have a positive perception and attitude toward using the online program.

Statements	Mean
1. Level of difficulty of the online program's content is suitable with this course	3.88
2. The amount of the online program's content is suitable for one semester	3.60
3. There is a variety of exercises in the online program	4.16
4. The use of additional functions such as HELP, GRAMMAR, INFORMATION help promote autonomous learning and practice online lesson.	3.71
5. The online lesson explanations are clear and easy to understand	3.80
6. The various kinds of additional online exercises are interesting and enjoyable.	3.33
7. I regularly study online lessons.	3.32
8. Studying online lessons before class helps me better understand the lessons in class.	3.12
9. Studying online lessons after class is a better way to review the lessons learnt in class.	3.48
*10. Studying online lessons waste my time	2.92
14. The Development Test in the online program motivates me to study online lessons.	3.28
15. The Development Test helps me do self-evaluation properly.	3.44
17. The online lessons help me get a better score on the course achievement test.	3.28
18. My English skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, improved.	3.60
19. I learned more vocabulary from the online lessons.	3.68
20. I can apply the knowledge from the online lessons to my classroom learning and daily life.	3.60
21. Online lessons help me improve my English skills whenever I want to.	3.56
*Negative statement	
**Items 11-13, 16 were about in-class lessons	

Table 1: The Students' Perception on Online Language Program

As shown in Table 1, the students agreed that the variety of exercises and content features provided with the online program helped promote their motivation in learning English in this course. This could be because the program was equipped with clear explanations of how they could navigate through the program and enjoy their learning activities.

Moreover, the students' perceptions on the online lessons were positive. Studying the online lessons after class was an effective way to review the lessons learnt in class, which resulted in their better learning. This can be supported by the increase of the participants' scores on the post-test (mean = 10.54, SD = 5.606), which was found to significantly higher

than the pre-test (mean = 8.35, SD = 4.367) at t-value of -2.133, p-value at 0.40. That is to say, the more they studied the online program, the better they understood in-class lessons. However, it should be noted here that these positive outcomes could be restricted only for students who studied the online lessons on a regular basis. Lastly, the participants were shown to develop their self-improvement and self-evaluation. They were able to learn vocabulary from the online lessons, which helped them improve their English skills regardless of place and time.

2. From the open-ended questions from the questionnaire, there were some difficulties regarding learning via the online program, which can be grouped into two main categories: online program related and learner related. The first difficulty was online program-related included the technical problems, the program support requirement, and the complicated features of the program. The main reason was that many students lacked adequate technological knowledge. They could not solve the technical problems themselves as they had very limited understanding of how the program worked. Another problem concerned the JAVA program that the students were not familiar with. Additionally, the students were not able to solve all computer problems, especially when some error messages appeared. The students often asked for a technician's support.

The other difficulty centered around the students' lack of discipline. Although the students did not mention that they lacked self-discipline, they noted that the online program took a great deal of their time. Nine students said the number of online hours assigned was too much for them to manage in a semester. They spent many hours in a condensed period of time to fulfill the requirement while dealing with technical problems. Compared to the complaining students, the ones who regularly used the online lessons did not complain about such technical problems, nor the number of hours required. The evidence in the pilot study led to a revision of the

design of the course syllabus for the summer semester 2014 to help the students manage their time for self-study. That is why the students in the study did not feel that they lacked self-discipline.

In summary, the results from the questionnaire revealed that autonomy can be promoted among low English proficiency EFL students with an online language program and raised the students' awareness of how important it was to have the ability to adjust their pace of study to the point they felt comfortable. However, factors that should be carefully taken into consideration in regard to the development of learning autonomy were the cultural norms, which had formed their characteristics and learning behaviors, and class management. These findings support those found in Sanprasert (2010) and Tapinta (2016). Based on collectivism, Thai students are formed to become passive learners depending on their teachers. For autonomous learning, Thai students, especially low English proficiency students, need time to develop individuality as learners. Due to some difficulties they encountered, the teacher's assistance was needed along the way in the process of gaining autonomy. Therefore, autonomous learning could not be fully implemented. Instead, a combination of learner-based and teacher-based approaches was more promising to help the students move from dependent to independent learners.

In addition, appropriate classroom management is also important. In other words, to help the low English proficiency students like those EFL students in this study become self-disciplined, time management should be imposed by the teachers. The teachers are required to allow students some time to adjust and embrace the concept of autonomous learning. This could be accomplished through a little collaborative activity and class discussion in order to raise their awareness of how necessary it is to adopt self-study habits. With this combination, teachers who lack confidence in their students' ability to be autonomous learners (Rungwaraphong, 2012) will feel more comfortable to apply autonomous learning in

their classrooms.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

Regardless of the technical problems, the perceptions and attitudes of the low proficiency students towards the online learning program were positive. As the findings support, there is the possibility to foster autonomous learning in low English proficiency EFL learners as a means to enhance their language proficiency. Meanwhile, the teachers need to keep in mind that such students require more attention in order to motivate them to become lifelong learners.

The findings of this study lead to various ELT implications to promote learners' autonomy. First, there is a need to prepare students in advance if autonomous learning is implemented. That is, the concept of autonomous learning needs to be explained to the students in advance to help them fully understand and ultimately achieve autonomy. Additionally, basic autonomous learning skills are of importance too. The students should be equipped with computer skills, searching techniques, self-management, as well as self-evaluation. These strategies will help them perform appropriately and get the most out of their autonomous learning. Second, collaborative activities, along with the teacher acting as a facilitator, are required to assist these low proficiency EFL students in their learning.

Recommendations for further studies are discussed as follows. First, the students' voices should be explored through an interview in order to gain more in-depth data regarding the students' perceptions and attitudes. Second, further studies could explore the approaches, classroom management, and cultural factors that bring the most out of autonomous learning behaviors among low proficiency EFL students. Finally, the correlation between low learners' autonomy and their improvement in English proficiency should be more thoroughly investigated.

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