Teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy in EFL classrooms in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The concept of learner autonomy is relatively new to the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EL) in Thailand. Research studies in regard to learner autonomy especially in secondary school context and how the concept was viewed from the teacher's perspective were lacking. This research report has attempted to fill in this gap by examining how Thai EFL teachers view the concept of learner autonomy and how they promote it in their classrooms.

The study employed mix research method. The quantitative questionnaires were used to determine the extent to which the EFL teachers promoted learner autonomy in their classrooms. The qualitative interview study was used to explore the teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy. Challenges of promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms were also investigated.

The results from the questionnaire revealed that Thai EFL teachers promoted learner autonomy in their classrooms from moderate to great extent. It was also revealed that although they regarded learner autonomy as a vitally important concept, they did not promote it in their classroom as much as they supported it. The interviews also revealed three aspects of the challenges for promoting autonomous learning: teacher's readiness to promote learner autonomy; learner's readiness to be autonomous in learning; and the lack of learning resources in school. The results suggested that professional development programmes for teachers and improvement of educational technology in school are essential to the successful implementation of learner autonomy in EFL classrooms in Thailand.

KEYWORDS: learner autonomy, teacher's perception, EFL classrooms

1. Introduction. The concept of learner autonomy has been the centre of attention within the field of language teaching and learning for more than three decades (Holec, 2008). This is the result of the development of new trends in language teaching and learning that have shifted from the teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches, from product to process orientations, as well as from the traditional grammar translation to the communicative approaches. These innovative approaches have shared principles that the focus of learning should be placed on learners, and that learners should be able to take responsibility for their own learning (Balçikanli, 2008; Lennon, 2012). In addition, the rapid advancement of the Internet and other communication technology has made learning outside of the classroom become more engaging and accessible. As a result, the concept such as autonomous learning has a vital role in language teaching and learning in this new era.

Since the learner-centred approach was extensively promoted in all classrooms in Thailand, the concept of learner autonomy began to gain more recognition. In 1999, the Ministry of Education of Thailand began to acknowledge the significance of learner autonomy. The new National Education Act was launched, which includes the notion that all learners are capable of learning, and that life-long learning should be promoted (Ministry of Education, 2008). Alongside this educational reform, technology-based instruction aiming at enhancing teaching and learning through the use of information and communications technology (ICT) was widely promoted. Since then, teacher roles have changed from being an authoritative figure to being a facilitator. Also, common practices in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning in Thailand have moved towards individualised learning and communicative language approaches. Students have been encouraged to take an active role in learning. Technology has been considerably integrated into teaching and learning. More independent learning is expected. As a result, autonomy in language learning has widely been encouraged in many EFL classrooms.

However, learner autonomy is considered "a culturally biased idea", which was originated in individualist societies such as in Western countries (Sonaiya, 2002). As a result, a number of scholars (Lennon, 2012; Schmenk, 2005) cautioned that the concept of learner autonomy might not be applicable to all contexts. It is suggested that learner autonomy has to be adapted according to the culture and value of the society it is distributed to. In this regard, because Thailand is regarded as a significantly low individualist country according to Hofstede (2015), applying learner autonomy in Thai educational context can be a great challenge.

Furthermore, like other innovative approaches to language learning, applying learner autonomy has a significant impact on the role of language teachers who were in the past more used to practicing traditional teacher-centred approaches. Thus changing the role from an authoritative figure in the classroom to a facilitator or a learning counsellor may be considerably challenging for many teachers in Thailand. While in theory the concept of learner autonomy is exceptionally beneficial to students' learning, the practice of promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms in Thailand still needs to be investigated.

As a result, this research aimed to explore how Thai EFL teachers in a secondary school in Thailand view the concept of learner autonomy and how it is promoted in the classrooms. The focus of

the study is also placed on the challenges that the EFL teachers face when promoting autonomous learning. The findings of the research are expected to shed some light on how the teachers can be assisted in order to successfully implement learner autonomy in the classrooms. This will hopefully benefit school leaders and educators to identify the form of support that teachers need.

2. Literature Review.

2.1 Learner autonomy: Definition and theoretical background. Learner autonomy is a well-known concept, which prominently emerged from second language literature (Benson, 2008). However, there is also a considerable amount of literature on autonomy in several other fields, for example, moral and political philosophy, the philosophy of education, legal philosophy, feminist studies, moral psychology, the psychology of learning and bioethics. In educational contexts, the term 'learner autonomy' was originally adopted by Holec in the early 1970s and was initially used within adult language learning domains (Lennon, 2012). According to Holec (1981), 'learner autonomy' refers to "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3). This definition has been frequently cited and considered the most recognised meaning by many researchers. However in recent years, the term has been given more different meanings. Smith (2003) stated that 'learner autonomy' could be viewed as a situation in which learning is free from a teacher's instructions. Little (2022) argued that 'language learner autonomy' signifies a teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning.

An inclusive collection of the definitions of learner autonomy in language education was presented by Benson and Voller (1997). Learner autonomy, according to Benson and Voller, can be used in at least five different ways:

1) for *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
2) for a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3) for an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
4) for the exercise of *learners' responsibility* for their own learning; and,
5) for learners' *rights* to determine the direction of their own learning.

In summary, learner autonomy focuses on the learning mode and the role of learner. It is crucial that the learner is capable of taking responsibility for all of the decisions regarding his/her learning and implementing those decisions efficiently. In a complete autonomous learning, learner is free from instruction and can be seen as independent learning (Lamb, 2003).

Littlewood (1996) proposed that learner autonomy, or the capacity to take charge of one's own learning, is comprised of two major components: *ability* and *willingness*. He argued that a learner might have the ability for autonomous learning but have no willingness to do so. On the contrary, a learner may have willingness to learn independently but may not possess the essential ability to do so. He explained further that ability and willingness are also comprised of two components. Ability relies on both *knowledge* about which learning strategies have to be used and the *skills* for applying those strategies to the learning. Willingness depends on possessing both the *motivation* and the *confidence* to take

responsibility for learning. Consequently, in order for a learner to be fully autonomous, the four components, *motivation, confidence, knowledge*, and *skills* are needed to be present.

Littlewood (1996) also presented a framework for developing learner autonomy. He explained that there are three broad domains of autonomy that can be developed in and through language learning (p. 431):

1. *Autonomy as a communicator,* which depends on (a) the ability to use the language creatively and (b) the ability to use appropriate strategies for communicating meanings in specific situations;

2. *Autonomy as a learner,* which depends on (a) the ability to engage in independent work (e.g. self-directed learning); and (b) the ability to use appropriate learning strategies, both inside and outside the classroom;

3. *Autonomy as a person,* which depends on (a) the ability to express personal meanings; and (b) the ability to create personal learning context, e.g. through interacting outside the classroom.

In line with Littlewood's framework of developing learner autonomy, Benson (2008) claimed that autonomy in language learning is interrelated with autonomy in life. He stated, "the idea of autonomy in learning, which takes a subject specific form in the idea of autonomy in language learning, is essentially a construal of the relevance of broader ideas of autonomy in life to issues of teaching and learning" (p. 16). The concept of autonomy in life or *personal autonomy*, he argued further, is based on the notion of liberal philosophy that we are capable of acting for reasons. We are also capable of reflecting upon the reasons for our actions, so we bear the "value to the free choice of goals and relations as an essential ingredient of individual well-being" (p. 17). The concept of personal autonomy, he concluded, constitutes the fundamental ground for the idea of autonomy in learning.

However, not all learners possess all four components of learner autonomy nor were born with personal autonomy. In fact, very few learners come to the task of language learning as autonomous learners (Nunan, 1997). Therefore, developing autonomy is crucial if learners are to become a successful language user. Nunan (1997) claimed further that there are degrees of autonomy, which can be developed through the use of appropriately designed materials and strategies. He then proposed five levels of implementing learner autonomy (p. 194-195), which are, he added, considerably overlapping and required learners to move back and forth between levels:

➢ Level 1: Awareness – Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals, content and strategies underlying the materials;

➢ Level 2: Involvement – Learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer;

➢ Level 3: Intervention – Learners intervene in modifying and adapting the goals, content and tasks of the learning programme;

➢ Level 4: Creation – Learners create their own goals, develop their own content, and create their own learning tasks;

> ➢ Level 5: Transcendence – Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond. At this stage, learners become teachers and researchers.

During these processes of encouraging learner autonomy, it is unarguable that teachers have a crucial role to play. Although the term "learner autonomy" implies independent learning, learners still need professional guidance of a teacher so that they can develop autonomy in the right direction and acquire the language in the most effective approach.

2.2 Teacher's role in promoting learner autonomy. Literature on autonomy in language learning mainly pays more attention to the role of learner than to the role of teacher (Dam, 2003; Lamb, 2008). This is probably due to the preconceived notion that learner autonomy is inevitably the responsibility of the learners themselves. Many teachers also view the development of learner autonomy as a change that will primarily take place within their learner (Dam, 2003). Consequently, studies of teaching methodologies in learner autonomy have not had much attention. However, as Dam (2003) suggested, if autonomy in learning is expected to be successful particularly in classroom context, definitions of learner autonomy have to specify the responsibilities of the teacher as well as the learner.

In line with the suggestion above, Little (1991, p. 3) emphasises the importance of the teacher's role and responsibility in his negative version of the definition of learner autonomy as follows:

- Autonomy is not synonym for self-instruction; in other words, autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher.

- In the classroom context, autonomy does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher; it is not a matter of letting the learners get on with things as they best can.

- On the other hand, autonomy is not something that teachers do to learners; that is, it is not a teaching method.

The concept of the teacher role in autonomous learning is well captured by McGrath (2000) and Smith and Erdogan (2008). The concept is usually referred to as 'teacher autonomy', which is generally understood as "the capacity to promote learner autonomy" (p. 85). However, Smith and Erdogan defined the term 'teacher autonomy' as "the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others" (p. 83). Teacher autonomy, according to McGrath (2000), can be viewed from two perspectives: a) teacher autonomy as self-directed professional development, and b) autonomy as freedom from control by others. The former is the *capacity* to self-direct one's teaching, while the latter refers to the *freedom* to self-direct one's teaching. Smith and Erdogan (2008) also added more perspectives on teacher autonomy by suggesting that teacher autonomy as a self-directed professional development can also refer to "the capacity to self-direct one's learning as a teacher" (p. 85), which they termed "teacher-learner autonomy". To promote learner autonomy, Smith and Erdogan concluded, teachers need to have:

- Teacher autonomy as a *capacity* to self-direct one's teaching;

- Teacher autonomy as *freedom* to self-direct one's teaching; and

- Teacher-learner autonomy as a capacity to self-direct one's *learning as a teacher*.

In addition, Breen and Mann (1997) also proposed three characteristics for teacher who seeks to promote learner autonomy in the classroom:

- Self-awareness as learner;

- Belief and trust in learners' capacity to act autonomously; and

- Genuine desire to foster autonomous development.

In regard to these three characteristics, the teacher has to act correspondingly in six ways (McGrath, 2000, p. 102-103):

- Being a resource, for example, being willing to be responsive, and being able to balance the roles of resource person and guide;

- Decision sharing;

- Facilitating collaborative evaluation;

- Managing the risks, including being able to tolerate the disorienting but developmental phase during which teacher and learners are uncertain and purposes and procedures are seemingly fragmented;

- Being a patient opportunist; and

- Getting support, for example, by enlisting the help of colleagues.

Leaver, Ehrman and Shekhtman (2005) also emphasised that teachers play multiple roles in promoting autonomous learning. For example, teacher has to be a guide, a cheerleader, a role model, and a motivator. However, the most important role is a provider of scaffolding. Leaver et al. stated, "a good teacher provides support as it is needed and lets go when the student is ready to fly solo" (p. 210). In this regard, teachers have to provide enough but not too much support to learners and when learners are well equipped with the capacity to learn autonomously, teachers should be able to give full freedom of learning to their learners.

2.3 Learner autonomy in Thailand. The Ministry of Education of Thailand by the 1999 National Education Act outlined new principals of teaching, which included the three notions that 1) each individual learner is different, 2) all learners have capacity to learn, and 3) learning is a life-long process. In line with these notions, learner-centred approaches, learner autonomy, and life-long learning have considerably been promoted in all classrooms in Thailand. Since then, the focus of teaching and learning has moved from the teacher to the learner domains. Both teachers and learners have new roles to play. Teachers have to shift from an authoritative knowledge transmitter to a learning facilitator. Learners are expected to take more responsibility of their own learning. This change may be difficult to implement in the Thai educational context because Thai culture, like many other Asian cultures, places a high value on

the authority of the teacher, on rote learning, on imitation and on closely guided practice (Schmenk, 2005). In addition, characteristics of Thai learners may be obstacles to autonomy development because they are "obedient, uncritical and unwilling to challenge the authority of teachers" (Sanprasert, 2010). In this regard, promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms in Thailand can be a great challenge.

Also, the concept of learner autonomy requires learners to take charge of their own learning by independently a) choosing particular aims and purposes; b) choosing materials, methods and tasks; c) exercising choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the tasks; and d) choosing and applying criteria for evaluation (Holec, 1981). These requirements seem almost impossible to apply in the formal school system because in the Thai public schools, for instance, need to follow the curriculum, syllabus, learning areas and objectives, and even evaluation criteria designated by the Basic Education Core Curriculum.

However, to help understand how the concept of learner autonomy can be applicable in the non-individualist cultures such as in Thailand and other Asian countries, Littlewood (1999) proposed that learner autonomy can exist in two distinctive forms: *proactive* and *reactive* autonomy. Proactive autonomy, which is usually the autonomy of the West, refers to autonomy in which learners establish a personal agenda for their own learning, for example, by determining objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been learned. On the other hand, reactive autonomy, which is considered more applicable to Asian cultures (Littlewood, 1999; Sanprasert, 2009), refers to autonomy in which learners do not establish their own directions, but once a direction has been initiated (e.g. by their teachers), learners are able to organise their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal.

In Thailand, there are a small number of research studies in the area of autonomy in language learning. Sanprasert (2010), for example, investigated the extent to which learner autonomy could be fostered in a blended learning situation involving the integration of a course management system into a traditional face-to-face English class. The study involved 55 Year 1 and Year 2 university students who enrolled on an English foundation course. Questionnaires and student learning journals were the data collection tools, so both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. According to the results, it is suggested that the course management system enhances development of learner autonomy in four aspects: autonomous perception; autonomous behaviour; autonomous strategy; and interdependence. This study helps confirm that learner autonomy can be fostered by applying a systematic intervention in tertiary level in the context of Thailand.

Boonma and Swatevacharkul (2020) examined the effect of autonomous learning process (ALP) on learner autonomy of undergraduate students in English public speaking class. The results showed that learning strategies are fundamentals for learner autonomy. Students' capacity to reflect and their formation of reflective behaviours is linked with the improvement of learner autonomy. Also, it was found that student's positive affect towards learning as well as their construction of identity can lead to the development of learner autonomy.

Another recent study in regards to learner autonomy and language learning strategies among Thai EFL learners was carried out by Iamudom and Tangkiengsirisin (2020). The researchers

investigated the learner autonomy level and observed language learning strategies use of Thai EFL learners comparing international students and Thai public-school students in a tutorial school in Bangkok. The findings revealed that Thai public-school students have higher level of learner autonomy and employed language learning strategies more than the international school students.

In regards to teacher's perspective, Rungwaraphong (2012) carried out a study that investigated the promotion of learner autonomy in Thailand from the perspectives and practices of university language lecturers. The study was conducted in two phases: a quantitative survey followed by qualitative cases studies. The survey questionnaire of the first phase revealed that university language lecturers (297 participants in total) reported strong beliefs in learner autonomy but moderate practices. The lecturers also reported low levels of confidence in their students' ability to be autonomous. In the second phase, five lecturers from the questionnaire responders were interviewed. Data from class observations, follow-up discussions and document analysis were also collected. The results showed that the lecturers promoted learner autonomy in their class through communication strategies, teaching pedagogy and the learning atmosphere.

The inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and practices are also found across other Asian learning contexts. Nakata (2011), for example, explored EFL high school teachers' readiness for promoting learner autonomy in Japan by employing a closed questionnaire and focus group interview. The results show that many Japanese EFL high school teachers perceive learner autonomy to be very important but "are not as yet fully ready for promoting it in their learners and have not achieved the full characteristics of language teacher autonomy to a high degree" (p. 908). It is also revealed that although they recognised the importance of the strategies for promoting learner autonomy, they did not use them as much as they supported.

All research studies exploring learner autonomy in Thai educational context involved mostly adult learners in tertiary level. Also, very few studies looks at the perceptions and practices from the perspectives of teachers in secondary education levels or makes an attempt to investigate contextual factors that influence the challenges of promoting learner autonomy in the EFL classrooms. As a result, the purpose of this study is to explore teachers' perceptions and practices of promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms in a secondary school in Thailand. The study will try to address the following questions:

1. How do Thai EFL teachers view the concept of learner autonomy?
2. To what extent do Thai EFL teachers promote learner autonomy in their classrooms?
3. What are the challenges of promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms in Thailand?
4. How do teachers need to be supported for the promotion of learner autonomy?

3. Methodology. The purpose of this research study is to investigate how EFL teachers in a secondary school in Thailand perceive the concept of learner autonomy and how they promote it in the classrooms. The study focuses on beliefs and practices that are unique to a certain educational context. As a result, the study employed a case study design, which is "an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a 'real

life' context" (Simons, 2009, p. 21). The data was collected through quantitative questionnaire and qualitative interview methods. Although the study used mixed-method approach, the emphasis is placed on the qualitative interview data.

3.1 Context of the study. A governmental secondary school on the outskirts of Bangkok is the context of this study. The school was classified as an extra-large school with over 3,200 students and 23 EFL teachers who were of both Thai as well as other nationalities. The school was selected because it could represent a diverse context of EFL teaching in Thailand, i.e. having a large number of students and teaching staff, who came from a variety of social backgrounds. The school provided secondary education to students aged between 13 and 18 years old. English courses taught in this school followed the National Core Curriculum issued by Basic Education Commission, Ministry of Education in 2008. The curriculum designates learning areas for foreign languages, which include four strands: language for communication, language and culture, language and relationship with other learning areas, and language and relationship with community and the world (Ministry of Education, 2008). For each strand, learners' quality and grade level indicators are also specified. EFL teaching in this school also followed these indicators but somehow could adapt to the context. English courses that were taught in this school include Basic English, Listening and Speaking, and Reading and Writing.

3.2 Participants. The participants are four Thai teachers (all female) who were at the time teaching English as a foreign language to upper secondary level students (age between 16 and 18 years old). All teachers had a bachelor degree in English language as well as teaching qualifications. Each of them had more than 22 years of EFL teaching experience. All four teachers were responsible for Reading and Writing classes. Two teachers also taught Basic English and one taught Listening and Speaking. All teachers determined their students' English proficiency as between elementary and pre-intermediate levels. Teaching load of the teachers is between 14 and 25 hours per week. In terms of the teaching approaches, grammar-translation and communicative language teaching were the common approaches used by all four teachers. One teacher also used task-based learning and another used content-based learning approach.

3.3 Data gathering techniques. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used as data-collecting tools. First, the questionnaires were sent out to the teachers and then were returned by email. The results of the questionnaires were also used as a basis of the interviews. This helped obtain a clear and inclusive set of data.

3.3.1 Questionnaire. The questionnaire was aimed at acquiring factual information about the participants as well as their practices on promoting learner autonomy in their classrooms. It is comprised of two parts: a) their background as an EFL teacher and b) their practices for promoting learner autonomy. The first part was aimed at gaining information about the participants' highest degree, teaching experience, level of students' English proficiency, teaching approaches, for instance. The second part is comprised of a list of ten practices for promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms, which is based on Chang's (2007) strategies for promoting learner autonomy, for example, helping students identify their own strengths and weaknesses, giving students chances to offer opinions in their learning,

etc. The participants were asked to rate on the five scales from *Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often,* to *Always* with regard to how they actually promote learner autonomy in their classrooms (see Appendix A).

3.3.2 Semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted mainly in Thai language through voice calls using application software called Skype. Each interview was sound recorded, which took for about 30-40 minutes. A list of twenty questions, which is in line with the research questions, was used as an outline for the interview (see Appendix C). Each question was presented in English first, and then they were explained in Thai. The interviews then were transcribed and translated into English for the analysis.

3.4 Data collection procedures. After contacting the Head of Foreign Language Department and asking for the permission from the School Director to conduct the research project, the teachers' names and email addresses were obtained. The data was then collected from two stages. At the first stage, the questionnaires, along with invitation letters, the Information Sheets and consent forms, were sent out to all the teachers in the department by email. Five teachers of all 14 teachers responded to the invitation. The completed questionnaires were then returned via email. After that, the data from the questionnaires was analysed and the interviews were scheduled.

The second stage involved the semi-structured interviews with the teachers through Skype. However, one teacher dropped out of the interview schedule. As a result there were four teachers formally taking part in this study. Prior to the interviews, the written consent forms were obtained from all the participants. The consent form indicated that the participants had read the Information Sheet, that they had volunteered for the interview, and that they had agreed to the interview being sound recorded. The participants were also advised that they had the right to skip any question or stop the interview at anytime, that their identities would not be revealed, that the data would be confidential and be used for the research purposes only. It was very crucial at this stage to respect the "guarantees of confidentiality and to handle data which the interview provides in a way which is consistent with an ethical research framework" (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, p. 86). Also it was to create a risk-free environment and gain truthful data from the interviewees. Semi-structured interviews also allowed the data collection process to be flexible and to capture a wide range of insightful information that arose.

This research project was peer reviewed and judged to be low risk. All ethical considerations were discussed with the supervisors before the research was conducted. No issues arose.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Teachers' views on learner autonomy

Teachers' views on the meaning of learner autonomy. To understand how teachers view the concept of learner autonomy, it is worthwhile to explore how they understand the term "learner autonomy". In this case study, the teachers gave various definitions for the term. One of the teachers defined it as "a situation in which students study on their own". For example, "students research about a topic that is assigned by their teacher". Another teacher defined it as "a learner's ability to manage his

or her own learning". Other participants defined it as "an independent learning or as a freedom of learning". For example, "learners are able choose what they want to learn in class".

These definitions are closely parallel to the definitions presented by Benson and Voller (1997), who claimed that the term "learner autonomy" could be used in at least five different ways: for situations in which learners study entirely on their own; for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning; for an inborn capacity; for an exercise of learners' responsibility, and for a learner's right to determine the direction of their learning. The difference between the definitions given by the teachers and by Benson and Voller, however, is that the teachers regarded learner autonomy as a practice that is not free from teacher's assistance. As one participant stated: *Learner autonomy occurs when students know how to learn and that is to be taught by their teachers.*

Teachers' views on their roles in leaner's autonomous learning. The role of teacher in students' development of learner autonomy is very crucial in the teachers' opinions. All teachers agreed that learner autonomy could be developed through learning and practicing with the support from teachers. The role of teacher in this circumstance is consequently more of a facilitator of learning rather than an instructor. This concept is in line with the current teaching practices such as learner-centred and communicative approaches because the focus of teaching and learning is placed on the learner's part as well as individualised learning (Lennon, 2012). In the same vein, Holec (1981) argued that as a facilitator for learning, the teacher has two major roles: one is to help learners acquire the language, and another is to help them become autonomous in language learning. The teachers were well aware of these two roles as one reported:

> *Learning in the classroom is not enough. We [teachers] have to make them learn
> in our class and we have to make them learn outside of the class on their own too.*

Teachers' view on the significance of learner autonomy. The teachers perceived learner autonomy as a very crucial component to the success of their students' academic and career life. It has been more important in present days due to the advancement of the Internet and other communication technology. The teachers made a link between learner autonomy and the Internet by explaining that learning nowadays was far more accessible and engaging than in the past. One teacher clarified:

> *The main learning resource in the past was teachers, but now there are numerous
> ways to learn and especially to practice English without teachers. Learners can learn
> more outside the classroom. They can learn almost anything on the Internet, so
> they have to make the most of this learning opportunity.*

Learner autonomy is also important to their students due to the need to be ready for the more autonomous learning in tertiary level. The teacher explained that teaching and learning in university level requires learners to study independently and to be able to take responsibility for their own learning. Thus, it is crucial that learners are prepared for such learning situations:

> *When they [students] get into the university, they have to study on their own a lot
> more. Lecturers in university don't discipline their students' learning like teachers in
> primary or secondary schools. So, students have to learn to manage their own learning
> before going to university.*

4.2. The extent to which teachers promote learner autonomy

Questionnaire results. The data from the questionnaires was used to address the research question 2: To which extent do teachers promote learner autonomy in their EFL classrooms? The questionnaire results (see Table 1) show that the mean scores of each teacher on the extent to which they promote learner autonomy range from 3.1 to 4.8. This means that the teachers promote learner autonomy from moderate to great extent. Also, the mean score of all teachers on the promotion of learner autonomy is 3.775 (M=3.775), which can be interpreted that, generally speaking, the teachers *often* promote learner autonomy in the classrooms.

Research question 2: To what extent do teachers promote learner autonomy in the classrooms?

Rating scales: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always

Table 1. *Questionnaire results*

Respondents	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D	Mean $(\bar{x})$
Mean scores on the extent to which teachers promote learner autonomy in the classrooms	3.1	3.6	3.6	4.8	3.775

In more detail, there are three practices for promoting learner autonomy that were *often* used: helping students stimulate their own interest in learning English; helping students set up their own learning goals; and helping students discover knowledge in English on their own. Other practices, which are helping student to identify their own strengths and weakness; helping students learn from peers; helping students become more self-directed in learning; giving students chances to offer opinions in their learning; and giving students chances to offer opinions on what to learn in the classroom, were moderately used. The least applied practice, helping students evaluate their own learning and progress, was *sometimes* used.

Interview results. The most common strategy for promoting learner autonomy practiced by the teachers is to help students stimulate their own interest in learning English. According to the interviews, the teachers often discussed the importance of English language with their students. One teacher reported that she often talked about the economic cooperation among the South East Asian countries or ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in which there will be extensive exchanges of careers and trades and as a result English will be widely used in the region. Other teachers also raised the awareness of the importance of English and independent learning by pointing out the benefits of the Internet as a useful resource for seeking knowledge and experiencing English in an effective and entertaining way.

The teachers also helped their students stimulate their interest in learning English by assigning a variety of topics that are interesting to the students and allow them to choose what they want to learn best. One teacher explained:

I offer many topics to the students to choose from, for example, music, TV shows, sports or something they may be interested in and then I give assignments according to chosen topic. In this way, the students are more likely to complete the task well. Because if students just learn from the hand-outs, they will feel bored and demotivated to learning.

Another strategy that the teachers frequently used is to help students set up their own learning goals. According to the interview, the teachers reported that they often discussed about the students' future career or assigned a task that required them to know which career path they can pursue. For example, one teacher had her students researching about occupations that the students were interested in. Another teacher helped her students set up goals for their further education.

I give them advice about which major in the university they should choose according to their potentials so that they have clear study plan for their future.

In these respects, the teachers were more likely to help their students set up their general learning goals or career goals rather than giving them an opportunity to create their own learning objectives or learning areas for the lessons. Therefore, the degree to which the teachers can let the students take part in lesson planning can be fairly low. This is because the teachers had to design the course syllabuses that are in line with the national core curriculum.

To help students discover knowledge in English on their own rather than waiting for knowledge from the teacher was also often practiced. The teachers often suggested other learning resources such as the Internet and newspapers to their students for researching a topic or completing a task. One teacher often provided links to websites that explain more about the topic she was teaching. Another teacher gave a task that required the students to interview native speakers of English both in and outside school to help students get used to talking with and gaining from speakers of English rather just learning from teachers. Students were also given a task to collect articles and quotes from websites and magazines to create their own magazines.

To help students identify their own strengths and weaknesses is another strategy used by one of the teachers. The teacher reported that she used pre-test and post-test to help students recognise which skill they needed to improve. The teacher would talk with her students about the results of the tests and asked the students to do more on a particular exercise on their own:

Test scores are useful in a way that they can help the students be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Some students are very poor in writing. Some students need to study more on English verb tenses. I ask the students to reflect on their test results and help them identify what they need to improve.

However, helping students evaluate their own learning and progress is the least popular practice for promoting autonomy among the teachers. One teacher in particular rarely used this strategy:

I think this strategy is not very effective. The students don't have the capacity to accurately evaluate their learning. They don't take self-assessment seriously.

This finding is in line with Prapphal's (2008) report on Thai students and self-assessment. The author is concerned that "some students may not be mature enough to self-assess their own learning, especially at the lower levels" (p. 139). Bullock's (2011) study on Ukrainian teachers' attitudes to

students' self-assessment also revealed that teachers agreed with the idea and principles or self-assessment but found it hard to put it into practice.

The extent to which a course book promotes autonomous learning also has an impact on how teachers help their students become autonomous. For example, the teacher who taught reading and writing courses explained that the textbook she was using for the course had a lot of activities that fostered autonomous learning. As a result, she often advised her students to do the activities outside the classroom. On the other hand, the textbook for listening and speaking courses had very few activities that help promote autonomous learning. Consequently, she did not give many tasks that encouraged autonomous learning in her listening and speaking class.

Apart from teaching materials, teaching approaches and levels of students also have an impact on teacher's practices for promoting learner autonomy. According to the interviews, the teacher who identified one of her teaching approaches as 'content-based learning' allowed her students to choose the content or topics that the students wanted to learn in class. Task-based learning is another approach that can promote autonomous learning because, according to Murphy (2003), tasks "involve learners in reflecting on the way in which they carried them out, as well as on the language they used, thereby helping to develop learner autonomy" (p. 354). The teachers also reported that they tended to assign more tasks to older students.

The extent to which the teachers promote learner autonomy can be examined together with the five levels for encouraging learner autonomy proposed by Nunan (1997). According to the questionnaire and the interview results, the teachers mainly encouraged Level 1 of learner autonomy, by making "learners aware of goals, content and strategies underlying the materials they are using" (p. 194), and Level 2, "learners making choices from a range of content and procedural options" (p. 194). The other higher levels, learners modifying and adapting tasks, creating their own tasks, and fostering learners to become teachers and researcher, which are Level 3, 4, and 5 of implementing autonomy respectively, were not regularly encouraged. This is because, according to the teachers, some learners lacked critical skills for effectively adapting or creating a task. Learners need supervision in every process of the task, so having them creating their own tasks might not meet the goals that have been outlined by the curriculum planner. The learner autonomy that the teachers promoted, however, can be regarded as "reactive autonomy" (Littlewood, 1999), which is the kind of learner autonomy where learners go through a task independently after the learning goals have been set. Proactive autonomy, which is when learners create their own learning goals and exercise the tasks entirely independently, was not fostered in the classrooms.

In the present context, which is a formal education in a government school, most of learning areas and goals have to follow the curriculum that has been designed by the National Core Curriculum. Therefore, it can be difficult to implement high levels of learner autonomy in a formal EFL classroom setting or to encourage proactive autonomy where learners have the complete freedom to decide what and how they want to learn.

The effectiveness of the strategies that the teachers used to help their students become autonomous is, according to the interviews, satisfactory to some degree. The main factor that contributes to the success of the strategies is the proficiency levels of the students. Students of high proficiency usually show great development of autonomy while low-level students still struggle with independent learning tasks.

However, the extent to which the students had become autonomous was never formally evaluated. The teachers reported that they did not often help students evaluate their learning and progress. Although many scholars (e.g. Holec, 1980; Oscarson, 2009; Brown, Dewey and Cox, 2014) claim that self-assessment is crucial for the development of learner autonomy because it fosters learners to make a judgment on their learning strategies, some teachers still find it difficult to put it into practice. According to the teachers, self-assessment is not suitable in the Thai context because learners fail to make a truthful judgment about their learning due to fear and shame of obtaining bad grades, which greatly matters for the Thai students.

4.3. The challenges of promoting learner autonomy in the EFL classrooms. All four teachers agreed that learner autonomy is greatly beneficial to language learning and it is applicable to the Thai context to some extent. However, there are a number of challenges of promoting learner autonomy in their EFL classrooms. There are three major challenges revealed in this study: the readiness of teachers to promote learner autonomy, the readiness of learners to develop learner autonomy, and the readiness of school to support autonomous classrooms.

The readiness of teachers to promote autonomy. All the teachers regarded themselves as an autonomous learner. According to them, being a teacher means they have to be autonomous in learning. One teacher stated,

> Teachers must act as the role model of autonomy for their students. Students look up to their teachers. So, whatever we teach, we have to be able to practice accordingly.

This statement implies teacher autonomy as well. McGrath (2000) maintained that teacher autonomy, or self-directed professional development, is inevitably important to the promotion of learner autonomy. However, Nakata (2011) added that not all teachers who are autonomous in learning can teach their students to become autonomous. In this regard, the teachers still need to be equipped with strategies and skills for promoting autonomous classroom.

However, it is not simple to explicitly train the students to become autonomous. The teachers stated that they still lacked practical approaches to create an autonomous classroom. As a consequence, they could only motivate and give some guidance to learners for their autonomous learning. Also, they claimed that learners should be the ones who take responsibility for their own learning. So, after giving some guidance about how they should learn independently, the learners will have to take control of their learning. Likewise, there was no follow-up activity in which the progress of how the learners could learn independently was assessed.

The readiness of learners to develop autonomy. To understand what can be the challenges of promoting learner autonomy in terms of the readiness of learners, the teachers were asked to give the description of autonomous learners' characteristics. According to the teachers, there are three

common characteristics that every autonomous learner should have; first and foremost, learners need to be able to regulate their own learning and responsibilities. The teachers explained that learners have to recognise their main responsibility, which is to study and to learn:

> The most important quality for learner autonomy is that learners have to know what they should be doing. They should be able to prioritise their responsibilities. And of course, learning has to be their priority.

Secondly, learners must be self-motivated and enthusiastic in learning. The teachers emphasised the intrinsic motivation, which is a self-desire to learn new things and take up new challenge (Ryan & Deci, 2000), as a crucial characteristic for an autonomous learner:

> Autonomous learners should have a lot of questions in their head. They are curious about various issues and they are eager to know the answers. And so, they always want to know more about what they just learned.

In line with the statement, a number of research studies have confirmed that motivation is crucial to learners' autonomous learning (Gao & Lamp, 2011; Reinders & Lazaro, 2011). In fact, self-motivation needs to be developed alongside learner autonomy (Ushioda, 1997). Also, Porto's (2007) study suggested that in order to keep autonomous learners motivated, learners have to perceive their tasks as achievable otherwise they are likely to feel demotivated.

The third characteristic for an autonomous learner is self-discipline. According to the teachers, learning can be very challenging and it requires a lot of hard work. As a result, autonomous learners need to have the ability to manage their learning and make themselves learn in various negative circumstances:

> Learning isn't always easy and fun. Some tasks are difficult and boring, but learners need to be able to make themselves learn even though they feel bored or feel like they want to do something else. Therefore, autonomous learners must have self-discipline.

Apart from self-regulation, self-motivation, and self-discipline, the teachers also pointed out that cognitive abilities are vital to the development of learner autonomy as well:

> Autonomous learners have critical thinking skills. They have good memory as well as a problem-solving skill. I think they need to be trained to have these skills. They can't just memorise what they learn but they have to analyse and apply their knowledge in real life.

This result is in line with Lennon's (2012) argument in which he highlighted the significance of cognitive strategies in autonomy-based approaches to language teaching. He argues that students need to develop appropriate cognitive strategies to become a successful autonomous learner. Learners need to incorporate their existing knowledge with the new language features they are learning. In addition, they are required to develop metacognitive strategies to enable them to select from available cognitive strategies according to specific task.

In this study, the teachers reported that some of their students were lacking these necessary qualities for developing autonomy in learning. Some students could not regulate their learning. Some were not hard working and gave up easily on challenging tasks. One teacher claimed,

Some students don't take learning seriously, whether in English or in any subject at all. After school or when there is no class, they just want to hang around and play games or chat on their phones.

Most of the teachers also reported on the lack of motivation for learning English. Some learners were more interested in learning other subjects. Some learners thought that learning in the classroom was sufficient to become a good language user. Some learners also thought of themselves as a weak language learner and as a consequence they lacked self-confidence to improve or independently learn English. One teacher made a distinction between how boys and girls are motivated in language learning. She reported that boys were normally less interested in language learning than girls.

Most boys aren't very fond of learning a language. They are more interested in maths and PE.

Another significant factor for the challenge of promoting learning autonomy reported by the teachers is the lack of study skills necessary for being an autonomous learner. Some learners do not know adequate learning strategies and then fail at learning effectively. The teachers in present context view this issue as a result of the lack of autonomous learning habits since learners were young. Therefore, it is very difficult to promote learner autonomy when in higher levels.

I don't think the students were given enough support for learning strategies and autonomous learning when they were in primary schools. This makes them depend on teachers too much.

Also, most Thai learners seem to have misleading attitudes to language learning. This is very likely a result from the education system that encourages learners to pay attention to the test-taking skills rather than communicative skills:

The Thai education regards students with good grades as smart students, so everyone focuses on the test scores rather than what they can actually learn.

In the same vein, the teachers also reported that most learners prefer going to after school tuition schools rather than to study on their own. They seem not to be aware that they can also learn English independently.

They spend so much time and money on tuition hoping to be proficient in the language and all they do is just sitting there listen to how to best select the right answer in the multiple-choice test.

Interestingly, one teacher reported on a downside of the use of technology. She claimed that technology could make learners use fewer cognitive skills for learning and less critical thinking for problem-solving development. She explained further that, with the help from the Internet, learners did not have to try hard to think about the solutions:

When they wanted to get an answer for something, they don't have to think. They can just type a few words on Google and they copy everything from there.

The readiness of school to promote learner autonomy. The readiness of the school to promote learner autonomy is another significant challenge. Although the school was aware of the importance of learner autonomy, there are many factors that prevent autonomous learning become achievable. First, the resources that the school has were not always available to autonomous learning. There were reading materials in the libraries but they are not always accessible to every student due to

some school policies. For example, some English books were restricted and not allowed to be borrowed. Not every school computer was for independent use. School Wi-Fi was limited to only two hours per each student per day. One teacher reported,

> The school has enough learning resources but they seem to be wasting because both students and teachers do not take the most of the available resources.

The study timetable is not contributing to autonomous learning also. The teachers reported that students had to study many subjects and take many tests as well as do many assignments in a week. Consequently, the students had very little free time to learn what they really want to learn.

> The students have to study too many subjects in a week. And the science teachers always give a lot of assignments and projects that the students barely have time to study anything else. Maths teachers give a lot of tests too.

4.4. How teachers need to be supported for the promotion of learner autonomy. The teachers were asked to suggest the kind of support that they considered necessary for the promotion of learner autonomy in their context. From the interviews, all teachers agreed that professional development programmes aiming at enhancing a deeper understanding of the concept and principles of learner autonomy could be very useful.

> Learner autonomy is a good concept but I need to understand more. There may be other varieties of autonomy. I'd like to know more strategies to promote it too.

A clearer understanding of the National Core Curriculum and the extent to which the teachers have freedom to design course syllabuses and materials to promote learner autonomy in the classrooms is a worthwhile topic for teacher conferences or seminar:

> Honestly, I still have to look more at the Core Curriculum to see how teachers can foster an autonomous classroom according to the curriculum.
>
> We can have a seminar for this kind of issues.

These demands for teacher professional development and concerns about how teachers are allowed to create an autonomous classroom are in line with the framework put forward by Smith and & Erdoğan (2008). According to Smith and Erdoğan, "in order to promote learner autonomy, teachers may need to have: *teacher autonomy* as capacity to self-direct one's teaching; *teacher autonomy* as freedom to self-direct one's teaching; and *teacher-learner autonomy* as capacity to self-direct one's learning as a teacher" (p. 85).

Students need to be provided with more opportunities to exercise autonomous learning in various situations. The teachers suggested extra-curricular activities that require students to seek for knowledge from multiple sources:

> There can be field trips to a museum, local tourist centre, for instance. They should get a chance to learn outside, not just from their teachers.

Extra-curricular activities that focus on helping students become self-motivated or self-regulated in learning English can be very beneficial:

> English camp, skits, sing contests, ... can motivate autonomous learning.

For the learning resources in school, there should be more reading materials in English for students. Most of the books in the library were in Thai. The teacher suggested having more magazines and graded readers for students in various corners in the buildings too.

Also, computer rooms and libraries should be more available to students. School Wi-Fi should be more stable and should not be limited.

Students need to be able to use computers and Wi-Fi during lunchtime. The libraries should give friendly environment to students.

The interviews also revealed an interesting finding about parental roles in students' learner autonomy. The teachers claimed that autonomous learning begins at home. For example,

Children look up to their parents: how they behave, how they learn. Reading habits are usually fostered by the parents.

As a result, parents play an important part in students' autonomy. Teachers suggested that parents needed to encourage autonomous learning from home by offering guidance and motivation to their children.

5. Conclusion. This research project has identified four issues concerning teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy in EFL classrooms in Thailand. First, the research addressed teachers' views on the concept of learner autonomy. The interview results reveal that teachers perceive learner autonomy as an effective practice for language learning and teaching due to the need to make use of the accessibility of the technological learning resources such the Internet, which makes independent learning become more engaging and achievable. Learner autonomy is also crucial because learners need to be prepared for higher degree of autonomy if they are to succeed in tertiary education.

The questionnaire results as well as the interviews show that teachers promote learner autonomy in the classrooms from moderate to great extent. However, by comparing the findings with Nunan's (1997) five levels of implementing learner autonomy, it has revealed that teachers mainly foster low levels of autonomous learning, which are Level 1, "learners are made aware of the goals, content and strategies underlying the materials they are using" (p. 194), and Level 2, learners are involved in their learning "by making choices from a range of content and procedural options" (p. 194). Higher levels of autonomy, for example, "learners create their own tasks", "learners become teachers and researchers" (p 195), were not frequently fostered. The findings are in line with research studies in other learning contexts (Feryok, 2013; Nakata, 2011; Smith et al, 2018), which reveal that although most teachers recognised the significance of the strategies for promoting learner autonomy, they did not use them as much as they supported them. The results also show that teachers did not regularly use students' self-evaluation as a strategy for promoting autonomous learning and considered it unsuitable to their context.

The third research question seeks to identify the challenges of promoting learning autonomy in EFL classrooms. According to the interviewees, there are three major challenges: first, teachers were not fully ready for the promotion of learner autonomy due to the lack of clear understanding of its concept as well as its practical strategies; second, some learners lacked essential qualities to develop autonomy,

which are self-regulation, self-motivation, self-discipline, and metacognitive skills; and third, learning resources in school were not constantly available or sufficient to all learners.

The results of the final research question suggest a number of supports for the promotion of learner autonomy in the present context. First, the teachers demanded professional development programmes to help them develop "teacher autonomy" and/or "teacher-learner autonomy" (Smith & Erdoǧan, 2008). Teachers need to have clear understanding of the theory and principles as well as to realise a variety of practices for promoting autonomous learning in their EFL classrooms. Swatevacharkul and Boonma's (2020) agree that teachers' guide and direction related to learner autonomy are necessary especially for the very early stage of language teacher education. Training teachers to promote language learning strategies are essential to learner autonomy too. Shi and Han (2019) also agree that learner autonomy is intricately intertwined with the language teacher's professional understanding of his/her role and task. Second, learners need support for their autonomy development in various contexts, not just from the teachers in the classrooms. Teachers suggested extra curricular activities and training that help learners recognise necessary learning strategies for their autonomous learning development. Schools can provide a variety of learning experiences to students, for example, field trips to a museum, local tourist centre, etc. This can help students recognise the learning resources outside the classroom, which contribute to their autonomous learning. Learning resources in school also need to be constantly available to all learners. Sufficient computers and the Internet, as well as more reading materials in English are needed. Finally, autonomous learning begins at home. Therefore parents need to encourage autonomous learning by providing motivation and guidance, for instance, to their children too.

This research project has made an attempt to understand the teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy as well as how they promote it in the EFL classrooms. The results have provided some useful insights and guidance of how the promotion of learner autonomy can be achieved in the context of a secondary school in Thailand. However, this research project has a number of limitations. First, the quantitative questionnaire results are not generalisable due to the small number of participants. Second, the qualitative interview process by using Skype may fail to capture some elements such as body language or facial expressions, which can be useful for the negotiation for meanings and the interpretation of data (Atkins & Wallace, 2012).

Consequently, there are a number of implications for future research directions. For the quantitative data collecting process, a larger number of participants are suggested. This will provide more distributed data and more generalisable results. Therefore, the results of the questionnaire can represent wider population. For the qualitative data collecting process, data should be collected from different perspectives. Classroom observations, student interviews, document analysis such as textbooks, worksheets, for instance, can give more complete and clearer understanding of the case. So, for the future research, more data collecting tools are required. Accordingly, longer time frame is also needed. The data collecting process may take one or two school terms. In addition, in parallel with this research project, it is worthwhile to explore how autonomous learning of secondary school students can be

developed. This can provide more perspectives as well as practical considerations to how learner autonomy can be promoted.

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