Promoting learner autonomy: A qualitative study on EFL teachers' perceptions and their teaching practices

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has gradually played a fundamental role in educational research and teaching practice in the 21st century. In order to promote learner autonomy in a language classroom, a teacher needs to be considered one who creates and maintains learning community. Accordingly, the focus of this study was to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of promoting learner autonomy and their teaching practices. Thirty participants answered an open-ended questionnaire and eight participants then took part in semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis. The findings showed the positive attitude of the participants toward the promotion of learner autonomy in language learning. The roles of teachers were identified as a facilitator, a counselor, and a resource in promoting learner autonomy. In practice, however, some mismatches between their perceptions and teaching practices were revealed.

1. Introduction

The rapid technological development somehow leads to changes in the society, particularly in education. Today's technology with a variety of tools provides learners with opportunities to completely or partially get involved in their learning wherever they are, e.g. at home, through computers, or via a phone (Kurtz, 2012). It can be inferred that learners should be given some freedom to assume their own learning. As Littlemore (2001) points out, new technologies (e.g. computers, the Internet, multimedia, etc.) and some not-so-new technologies (e.g. language laboratories and video) can help develop learner autonomy. Within the changing landscape of English teaching in the 21st century, the concept of learner autonomy is believed to be important since it is seen as the goal of all developmental learning (Little, 1999, 2001).

In a Thai university in which this study was carried out, several types of technologies like computers, the internet, language laboratories, etc. have been equipped for learning efficiency. To increase students' motivation, besides the textbook, *Four Corners*, the digital teaching tool, *Classware*, has been used. It presents the full Student's book, plays audios, and shows videos. These extra exercises are designed for students to practice on their own. However, students seem not to take advantage of these benefits. In language lab sessions, for example, instead of finding out answers for questions or doing exercises online as the teacher requires, they tend to access their favorite websites such as Facebook, game pages, or Youtube. For teachers, they are likely to focus on teacher-centered activities rather than the promotion of learner autonomy. Such situations seem to be commonly found in universities today (Ho & Crookall, 1995; Balçıkanlı, 2010; Sanprasert, 2010). Therefore, the researcher would like to explore (1) EFL teachers' understanding of learner autonomy, (2) the teachers' perceptions of their roles in promoting learner autonomy, and (3) the teachers' teaching practices in a Thai EFL context.

2. Literature review
2.1 Definitions of learner autonomy

There has been a debate on the definitions of learner autonomy in language learning with different perspectives. Holec's (1981) definition (as cited in Nunan, 1997) which states that learner autonomy is an "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 193) has been seen as one of the most widespread definitions. It refers to learners' self-management of learning (Benson, 2001).

On the other hand, learner autonomy is defined as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11). That is, learner autonomy is understood as learner responsibility. Ten years later, Macaro (1997) also proposes a definition of learner autonomy involving learner responsibility as follows.

> It is an ability to take charge of one's own language learning and an ability to recognize
> the value of taking responsibility for one's own objectives, content, progress, method and
> techniques of learning. It is also an ability to be responsible for the pace and rhythm of
> learning and the evaluation of the learning process. (p. 168)

However, Benson (2001) argues that it is insufficient to view learner autonomy as self-management of learning or learner responsibility as he asserts that the nature of autonomy consists of three clearly interdependent aspects: learning management, cognitive process, and learning content. According to Benson (2001), learner autonomy is "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (p. 47). This means that an autonomous learner is assumed that s/he can take control over their learning management, cognitive process, and learning content. Control over learning management involves self-management of learning in which learners are assumed to plan, organize, and evaluate their learning with learning strategies. Control over cognitive process consists of attention or awareness, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge. Learning content means learning situations in which learners have the right to make decisions about their learning. It is included in the definition as a third aspect of learner autonomy because as Benson (2001) explains, a learner cannot become fully autonomous unless they are able to negotiate for the right to make decisions about and take responsibility for their learning.

In short, an autonomous learner is identified one who has the ability to self-manage their learning, the ability to take responsibility for their own learning, and the ability to take control of learning content.

2.2 Teachers' roles in promoting learner autonomy

Learner autonomy can help learners achieve high degrees of responsibility and independence (Macaro, 1997; Scharle & Szabó, 2000; Benson, 2001); however, that is not to say that teachers no longer play any roles in learning process. According to Ganza (2008), "[l]earner autonomy is an achievement, attained interrelationally between the learner and the teacher" (p. 65), i.e. without teachers' counsel and guides, "the whole process will result in low efficiency or even fall into disorder" (Yan, 2012, p. 559). In addition, teachers have been viewed as managers of resource in the lifelong learning establishment (Longworth, 2003). More specifically, three teacher roles are indentified in promoting learner autonomy, consisting of a facilitator, a counselor, and a resource (Voller, 1997; Little, 2004). As a facilitator, the teacher can help learners plan and carry out their own learning such as setting objectives, selecting materials, evaluating their learning, etc. The teacher can also help them acquire skills and knowledge to implement the above things. As a counselor, the teacher gives advice so that they can achieve

learning efficiency. As a resource, the teacher provides learners with information when necessary. In brief, three teacher roles of a facilitator, a counselor, and a resource should be applied at different stages to serve different needs of individual students.

2.3 Previous studies

There have been a number of studies conducting on learner autonomy (Aoki & Smith, 1999; Little, 2001; Benson, 2008; Bakar, 2007), yet there may be a few studies discussing teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy. Balçıkanlı (2010) attempted to identify 112 student teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy in the Turkish educational context by a questionnaire and interviews. The findings showed that the participants were positive toward learner autonomy and students' involvement in learning process. Swatevacharkul (2011) investigated 155 teachers' perspectives of learner autonomy. The data were collected from teachers in five private universities in the Bangkok Metropolis via a questionnaire. All the participants thought that learner autonomy was important for life-long learning. However, when asked about roles of teachers in classroom, the answers were "teacher-centered" or "lecturer". The third study was conducted by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). They aimed to explore beliefs and teaching practices of 61 teachers of English at a university language centre in Oman through a questionnaire and interviews. The results showed the teacher participants' positive attitude toward learner autonomy, yet they encountered some difficulties in promoting learner autonomy in practice such as students' lack of motivation, students' limited experienced of independent learning, and fixed curriculum.

In sum, the questionnaire was used as the main data collection method in all these articles and two of them were triangulated with the interviews. In addition, the samples were quite big because most of them were of quantitative or mixed methods research. The findings generally indicated that the positive attitude toward learner autonomy was held by the participants; nevertheless, there remained some obstacles in promoting learner autonomy in practice.

3. Methodology
3.1 Research questions

The aim of the study is to explore teachers' perceptions of promoting learner autonomy and their teaching practices; thus, three research questions were formulated as follows:
1. How do EFL teachers perceive learner autonomy?
2. What are the teachers' perceptions of their roles in promoting learner autonomy?
3. What are the teachers' attitudes toward the promotion of learner autonomy in their classes?

3.2 Setting of the study

This study was conducted in a Thai university which is an autonomous university under the supervision of Royal Thai Government. School of Foreign Languages, belonging to Institute of Social Sciences, has been responsible for teaching English to all students who are required to take general English courses (English 1-5) as an obligatory part in their curriculum. Each course lasts thirteen weeks.

3.3 Participants

The participants of the study consisted of thirty EFL teachers who have been teaching English at the university where the current study was conducted. There were twenty-one females

(70%) and nine males (30%) from four countries: China (6), Thailand (15), Vietnam (6), and USA (3). Then eight out of thirty teachers were purposively selected for the semi-structured interviews.

3.4 Data collection and data analysis

Qualitative data were collected by an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix A) and semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). All the interviews were conducted in English. The participants were labeled from R1 to R30 for the open-ended questionnaire and "IE1" to "IE8" for the interviews. Of the thirty participants, eight interviewees were purposively selected for the semi-structured interviews based on the results of the open-questionnaire, including four interviewees who tended to advocate the promotion of learner autonomy in this context and other four interviewees who found it difficult to promote learner autonomy in this context.

Regarding data analysis, the open-ended questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews were basically transcribed and qualitatively analyzed through content analysis. In particular, the data were analyzed through three steps: familiarizing and organizing, coding and recoding, and summarizing and interpreting. To begin with, the transcripts were put into a form. Then the researcher read and reread them to familiarize herself with the data and finally made a list of different types of information. After the completion of the first step, the second step, coding and recoding, was conducted. According to Lankshear and Knobel (2004), coding data refers to "the process of applying codes to collected information that 'flag' or remind the researcher about which data belongs in which categories" (p. 271). The data obtained from the open questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews were analyzed by open coding, i.e. the researcher read and labeled or numbered all the information to form initial coding which led to the development of tentative categories of information about the phenomenon being studied. After that, all the codes were put in word or excel files. The researcher then grouped codes with the same features to form larger categories. Finally, themes were identified by discovering relationships or patterns of categories. The emphasis of the last step, summarizing and interpreting, was on making meaning of the categories and themes by using charts, graphs, tables, etc. to show the relationships or connections. After the summarization of the data, the researcher interpreted them by stating the significance of what the researcher had found in the previous steps and what could be learned from that.

4. Results and discussion
4.1 EFL teachers' understanding of learner autonomy

In relation to the knowledge of learner autonomy, the majority of respondents thought that learner autonomy was associated with learner independence, but not entirely independent of the teacher. It means that they did not believe that entire independence could help promote learner autonomy. This result is quite similar to Aoki and Smith's (1999) viewpoint that "autonomy does not entail total independence" (p. 22). In contrast, Benson (2001) argues that the term "full autonomy" is to "describe the situation in which the learner is entirely independent of teachers, institutions or specially prepared materials" (p. 13). The results were confirmed by those obtained from the interviews. As IE5 reported, learner autonomy means "being able to work independently, learn independently". In fact, some researchers (Littlewood, 1997; Benson, 2001) also view the term independence as a synonym for autonomy. Furthermore, learner autonomy was understood as an ability to take charge of their learning by three interviewees

(IE3, IE6, & IE7). According to IE7, learner autonomy means that "learners can find their ways for learning". IE3 added:

> …[learners] can plan, they have to monitor what they have learned, and they evaluate their learning…

In addition, some respondents related learner autonomy to decision-making process regarding learning methods, kinds of activities, and learning materials in promoting learner autonomy. The results are in line with some previous studies (Balçıkanlı, 2010; Yıldırım, 2012; Al Asmari, 2013) indicating that autonomous learners, according to teachers, should take part in decision-making process in language learning.

In terms of characteristics of autonomous learners, the majority of participants reported that autonomous learners need to find their own way and take charge of their learning. That is to say, they can set goals, organize their study, monitor the progress, determine what they learn and assess their learning by themselves. Furthermore, according to some participants, autonomous learners need to make opportunities for practising inside and outside of the classroom. They have to actively take part in classroom activities and also do some extra practice on their own (e.g. joining English speaking clubs, watching movies, listening to radio, learning online, etc.). Meanwhile, other participants thought that autonomous learners need to be active and self-motivated, i.e. they are confident and willing to ask questions to clarify their problems or they push themselves to achieve what they set out.

4.2 EFL teachers' perceptions of teachers' roles in promoting learner autonomy

In terms of teachers' roles, most of the respondents (70%) and the majority of interviewees (87.5%) reported that the teacher should take a role as a facilitator in helping students to become autonomous learners. One interviewee explained, "the teacher should make the learning easier so that students become more motivated". Moreover, 62.5 % of the interviewees and 56.7% of the respondents revealed that the teacher should play a role as a counselor and a few of them reported that the teacher should provide students with information when necessary, i.e. the teacher was probably seen as a resource.

From the results obtained from the open-ended questionnaire and the interviews, three roles of teachers, namely a facilitator, a counselor and a resource were identified in promoting learner autonomy. These roles are also explored by many researchers (Voller, 1997; Little, 2004; Joshi, 2011; Yan, 2012).

4.3 Teachers' attitudes toward promoting learner autonomy in teaching practice

When asked about the feasibility of promoting learner autonomy in this context, the participants proposed two ideas: (1) either difficult or easy to promote learner autonomy and (2) completely difficult to do so.

The respondents (66.7%) who advocated the promotion of learner autonomy stated that they attempted to give students opportunities to work on their own because most of them believed that learner autonomy can lead to life-long learning. This result has been also revealed in some studies (e.g. Swatevacharkul, 2011, Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012, Najeeb, 2013). The specific activities they reported included asking students to access different sources by themselves, requiring students to reflect or evaluate their progress, giving assignments for more practice, providing them with freedom to make decisions about the topic, materials, and learning strategies, or encouraging them to go to self-access center (FLRU) to practice English autonomously.

Furthermore, a half of the interviewees thought that students needed to prepare lessons before the class time, e.g. preparing the vocabulary, reading information about grammar rules, or searching for information relating to a lesson. IE5 and IE7 promoted their students' motivation inside classroom through games or videos. IE7 reported, "I ask my students to include grammatical points, vocabulary and expressions they had learned when they play games" while IE5 showed videos to "draw [his] students' attention to an activity".

Outside classroom, homework or assignments might be the first choice of most participants. Some participants (IEs 2, 4, 8 & R26) recommended books or websites and let their students practice by themselves.

In contrast, a number of the respondents (33.3%) who gave students no chance or little chance to develop learner autonomy in their classes revealed that time constraint was one of their biggest problems. R25 explained:

...I have to control many things to meet the objectives of the course in a limited time...

Another problem a few respondents (15.4%) mentioned was students' characteristics. It is noteworthy that 50% of the interviewees admitted that they sometimes needed to force students to do exercises and check their homework. Some of the respondents (IEs 1, 6 & R29) even designed and supplied supplementary tasks for their students. It was because their students appeared to be unmotivated and passive. This may be inferred that the teacher played a role as an authoritarian.

...[T]he students seem to like teacher-directed teaching rather than independent learning... (R23)

Besides students' characteristics and time constraint, the interviewees attributed the reason why they did not provide students with opportunities to develop learner autonomy to students' motivation, students' English proficiency and learning environment.

...[Students] have not much motivation to do whatever to achieve the goal .... (IE6)

...I think it is not easy because some Thai students here are not very good at English....
(IE2)

...Here, they step out, Thai, step in, Thai, so study English for what? But I think if they step out and sometimes meet foreigners but they can't speak English, maybe such kind of things will motivate them to learn English more.... (IE8)

Noticeably, there were some contradictions between participants' perceptions and their teaching practices. The first was students' selection of learning materials. 83.3% of the participants thought that students could choose their own learning materials. Yet, up to 63.3% of them never or sometimes let students make choice of learning materials. They revealed that students sometimes did not know which materials were appropriate for their learning; thus, teachers recommended different sources to students or even provided them with materials. The second was students' evaluation of their learning. Several respondents (56.6%) agreed that students could decide the way to assess their learning. However, 63.3% of the participants never or sometimes provided opportunities for students to evaluate their own learning. They justified that they did not believe in students' ability concerning self-assessment. The third was teachers' roles. According to the participants, the teacher should take three roles such as a facilitator, a counselor, and a resource, whereas in their teaching practices, apart from the earlier-mentioned roles, the participants tended to take one more role namely an authoritarian because teachers directed almost all activities students were required to complete both inside and outside classroom, which was likely to contradict the concept of learner autonomy.

5. Conclusion and recommendations
5.1 Conclusion

Although there are some limitations, e.g. the limited time for conducting the study and the quite small number of the participants, this study yields considerable findings. It can be noticed that the participants generally understand the concept of learner autonomy. Learner autonomy, according to them, means students can decide how and what they learn, learn independently and self-assess their learning. In order to promote learner autonomy, teachers' roles are identified as a facilitator, a counselor, and a resource. In their teaching practices, a variety of tasks are catered to students both inside and outside classroom to help them to learn independently. However, the participants have encountered difficulties in promoting learner autonomy, which leads to some contradictions between their perceptions and teaching practices. It can be concluded that the participants theoretically acknowledge the concept of learner autonomy, yet it is quite hard for them to implement these issues in practice. These findings may help raise teachers' awareness of the development of learner autonomy in this context.

5.2 Recommendations
5.2.1 For teachers

EFL teachers should be aware of the importance of leaner autonomy so that they can help students gradually become independent learners. Teachers should also get better understanding of the levels of learner autonomy so that they can determine what degree students can possibly assume and then help them develop their autonomy. In addition, lessons in which learner autonomy is integrated in teaching should be designed and explored.

5.2.2 For administrators

Not only students and teachers but also administrators should understand learner autonomy. Hence, seminars or training sessions of learner autonomy should be provided for both teachers and students. How to integrate learner autonomy in teaching not only English but also other subjects should be widely discussed among teaching staff.

5.2.3 For further research

Further research should consider how to design a lesson that gradually develops learner autonomy in a real class and comparison of teachers' and students' perceptions of promoting learner autonomy. Beyond the classroom context, effect of cultural aspects on learner autonomy training should be taken into account.

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