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ASSESSING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN EFL LEARNING: INSIGHTS FROM THAI SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract
Raising learners' awareness of the need to develop their capacity to learn autonomously has been one of the primary educational goals worldwide. Autonomy development is thus crucial for preparing high school students for higher education. However, only limited studies are available on assessing learner autonomy within English learning education for Thai senior high school students. Therefore, this study aimed to assess learner autonomy in English learning as perceived by Thai senior high school students in public schools in Thailand. Based on a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design, a convenience sampling technique was employed to select 187 participants, from three large schools in Bangkok and three schools outside Bangkok, who completed the Likert scale questionnaire. The semi-structured interview was conducted face-to-face at the second stage with six students from two schools. The quantitative findings revealed that their perceived learner autonomy was, on average, at a high level. The thematic content analysis of the interview data generated four themes to verify the quantitative results and to determine the factors for such high autonomy, i.e. the importance of English for future career goals, self-study of English beyond the classroom, preference for communicative learning, and the impacts of teachers and peers on autonomy development. Theoretical and pedagogical implications were discussed, and further research was recommended.

Keywords: English language, high school students, learner autonomy assessment, Thai EFL students

Introduction
Since learner autonomy is intricately connected to learning success, it has always been one of the ultimate educational goals, including learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Holec (1981, p. 3) defined learner autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning", which includes having the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning. Assessing learner autonomy, therefore, helps identify learners' readiness for autonomy. In this regard, learners must be capable of learning on their own to achieve learning outcomes and meet the demands of a modern knowledge-based society (Jimenez

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Raya et al., 2017). This emphasizes how important self-regulation and responsible learning behaviors are to achieving the lifelong learning goal. Thus, autonomous learning is a legitimate learning mode.

Although autonomy is promoted universally, its implementation in the Asian context can be problematic. Western pedagogy emphasizes individual autonomy, whereas Asian systems, Thailand included, are shaped by collectivist values and teacher-centered practices (Cirocki et al., 2019; Littlewood, 1999). This mismatch can hinder development of autonomy as learners may perceive independent learning as inconsistent with expectations of compliance and group cohesion (Intraboonsom et al. 2020; Lin & Reinders, 2019). To address this cultural mismatch, autonomy should be more appropriately understood through the lens of interdependence, allowing learners to develop autonomy within relational and culturally congruent environments that align with collectivist traditions.

The Thai National Scheme of Education advocates for cultivation of autonomy (Swatevacharkul, 2022), which positions active learning as a key pedagogical approach to enhance learner engagement and experiential learning. This national emphasis aligns with broader global educational goals that prioritize the development of autonomous learners. In the Thai basic education context, fostering learner autonomy is a strategic objective pursued by educators to prepare students for lifelong learning. As Jimenez Raya (2017) suggests, by the time students complete their schooling, they should be equipped with the ability to consciously and responsibly manage their own learning processes. This expectation is in line with Thailand's educational scheme, which stresses the need to train students in autonomous learning behaviors to ensure their success as language learners.

Research on learner autonomy in the Thai context has largely focused on higher education. Nevertheless, some studies have been undertaken with junior and senior high school students of a specific grade level. Tayjasanant and Suraratdecha (2016) found that both English language teachers and junior high school students in Bangkok hold positive beliefs about autonomous learning. This perspective reinforces the relevance of autonomy in Thai educational contexts and supports the present study's focus on promoting learner autonomy. Suwannaphim and Vibulphol (2023) recently discovered that project-based English instruction increased the autonomy level of Thai junior high school students, moving them from a low to high level. Regarding Thai high school students, it was revealed that grade 12 students perceived themselves as highly autonomous (Swatevacharkul, 2015). Moreover, the readiness for autonomous learning of Grade 12 high and low-proficiency students in the English program was significantly different. Grade point average and a deep learning approach significantly influenced learner autonomy, whereas gender shows no significant effect (Swatevacharkul, 2016). Furthermore, Chinpakdee's (2020) research found that strategy-based instruction was an effective way to increase grade 11 students' understanding of their learning process and support autonomous learning. These existing studies are predominantly small-scale and confined to single institutions. Such research often reflects localized practices that may not represent broader educational contexts. To address this gap, large-scale studies involving multiple schools are needed to capture diverse instructional approaches and learner experiences.

As autonomy enables students to set goals, monitor progress, and apply strategies that foster long-term proficiency, such skills are particularly vital in higher education, where students face heavy reading loads, independent research, and minimal supervision, alongside the need to manage time and sustain motivation (Tuan, 2021). However, recent research indicates that learner autonomy was only moderately fostered in Thai senior high schools, primarily due to factors such as inadequate teacher and student preparedness (Srijankaew, 2023). As Jiménez Raya (2017) notes, autonomy at the tertiary level depends on early development in secondary education, particularly in collectivist cultures where self-regulation may not be inherently emphasized. Without systematic assessment and support for autonomy in high school, new undergraduates may struggle with this transition. Assessing learner autonomy is a necessary first step to determine readiness and guide the implementation of appropriate pedagogical strategies. As autonomy evolves slowly, systematic assessment is essential to initiate and sustain its growth. The present study responds to this need by examining autonomy across six schools, offering a more comprehensive understanding of autonomy development among Thai high school students.

This study aims to provide a greater understanding of the levels of learner autonomy, which reflects readiness for language learning autonomy. Likewise, insights can be obtained on how learner autonomy develops as well as supporting or undermining factors in the setting of Thai senior high schools which is a collectivist culture where teacher-dependent learning style is dominant (Intraboonsom et al. 2020; Tayjasanant & Suraratdecha, 2016). Thus, the development of effective interventions and strategies to promote autonomy in and beyond the classroom can be provided. English language teachers can develop the professional knowledge and skills necessary to effectively support the development of language learner autonomy. Furthermore, appropriate pedagogical and administrative policies can be set to assist both students' learning and teachers' teaching. Additionally, the study will pave the path for additional research in this area within the Thai basic education framework. Therefore, the research question for the study is "What is the level of learner autonomy in English language learning among Thai senior high school students?

Literature Review

Learner autonomy: Terminology overview

The concept of learner autonomy has evolved considerably over the past few decades since Holec's (1981) foundational definition. Scholars further defined and explored the multifaceted dimensions of learner autonomy within the context of language education. For Benson (1997), learner autonomy in language learning is defined by the three components. First, learner autonomy pertains to self-directed learning, necessitating technical ability or language acquisition strategies such as cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies. Second, learner autonomy is an internal psychological capacity for self-directed learning emphasizing attitudes and cognitive skills that enable learners to assume their learning responsibility. Third, autonomy deals with the control over the content and processes of one's own learning. Palfreyman (2003) noted that Benson's (1997) third aspect of autonomy indeed involves a political view centered on the empowerment of learners.

Building on Benson's foundational framework, Little (2022) further emphasizes the use of learning strategies. Little (2022) defined language learner autonomy as a teaching and learning dynamic in which learners employ metacognitive strategies to plan, implement, monitor, and assess their own learning. Metacognition is emphasized, and these learning strategies should be implemented as extensively as possible in the target language, which serves as a medium for fostering both individual and collaborative agency. Proficiency develops progressively when learners exercise their agency in the target language. Consequently, it is evident that using the target language during learning is critical to developing language learner autonomy.

A deeper understanding of learner autonomy also demands attention to teacher involvement. As stated by Benson and Lamb (2021, p. 75), "learner autonomy implies that the learner (and teacher) constructs their knowledge and shapes their own learning". More importantly, autonomy can be differentiated into proactive and reactive forms (Littlewood, 1999). While proactive autonomy involves learners initiating and managing their own learning, reactive autonomy refers to learners responding to teacher guidance. In Asian contexts, where hierarchical structures prevail, reactive autonomy is more common, as learners gradually assume responsibility within teacher-directed environments. Clarifying these conceptual distinctions is essential for establishing a holistic theoretical framework and for designing context-sensitive approaches to autonomy development in EFL education.

Based on prevailing definitions of learner autonomy, it is essential to recognize that autonomous learners must not only employ appropriate learning strategies but also maintain a positive effect toward EFL learning, as both capacities are integral to sustaining autonomy in language education. Additionally, teachers are required to adopt expanded roles and responsibilities. Their functions as facilitators, mentors, coordinators, resources (Benson, 2011), counselors, learning managers, emotional supporters, and problem-solving advocates (Little, 1990) are essential for autonomous learning. These expanded roles reflect a pedagogical shift toward fostering autonomy through structured interdependence, particularly in collectivist educational settings.

Assessment of learner autonomy in language learning: The four dimensions

With the evolving understanding of learner autonomy, scholars have developed more comprehensive frameworks to assess its diverse dimensions. Notably, drawing on Benson's (1997) and Oxford's (2003) models, Murase (2015) proposed a revised framework for assessing language learner autonomy that encompasses four dimensions: technical, psychological, political-philosophical, and socio-cultural autonomy. Building on Murase's framework, each dimension is closely examined to clarify its theoretical scope and pedagogical implications.

Learner autonomy is a multidimensional construct that demands conceptual differentiation. Technical autonomy concerns learning strategies, which are conscious acts taken by learners to facilitate learning or utilizing a language (Williams et al., 2016). This dimension comprises behavioral and situational autonomy as sub-dimensions. Behavioral autonomy denotes the capacity to employ cognitive strategies, including memorizing, retention, and information analysis, alongside metacognitive strategies such as goal setting, planning, and monitoring,

to assume control over one's learning process. Situational autonomy, in contrast, is the ability to take control of one's own learning in an independent learning situation. These sub-dimensions provide a strategic view of autonomy but are insufficient for explaining the internal capacity required to sustain it.

Psychological autonomy addresses this gap by focusing on learners' mental and emotional traits. Central to this dimension are motivational, metacognitive, and affective components (Benson, 1997). Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, drives learners' engagement for English learning while metacognition enables their awareness of the needs, preferences, strengths, and limitations. Ushioda's (1996) assertation that autonomous learners are motivated learners indeed reinforces that autonomy is not only behavioral but also deeply psychological. Emotional traits such as anxiety and self-esteem can pose complications in language learning. As such, affective dimension encompasses learners' attitudes toward language learning and their capacity to regulate and manage their emotional states. As argued by Williams et al. (2016), emotions mediate not only learning behaviors but also learners' perceptions of themselves and their learning environments. Positive emotions can foster openness to new experiences and enhance language learning. These insights establish that psychological readiness is imperative to autonomy development.

Political-philosophical autonomy introduces a broader perspective on freedom and control. Benson's (1997) differentiation of positive and negative freedom reveals the tension between institutional structures and learner agency. While positive freedom allows learners to direct their learning within the teacher's boundary, negative freedom implies unrestricted choice. This dimension also encompasses group and individual autonomy. Group autonomy reflects the influence of external stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and policymakers, on the learning process. In contrast, individual autonomy centers on the learner's capacity to decide on objectives, learning goals and select resources of their learning. Ryan and Deci (2020) argued that such freedom fosters intrinsic motivation, which in turn enhances learning engagement and accountability (Cirocki & Anan, 2021). This dimension of autonomy poses a challenge in collectivist cultures as teachers need to reconsider a balance of their expectations with learners' degree of autonomy.

Socio-cultural autonomy further complements autonomy construct by connecting with relational and cultural contexts. Learners' views on learning with and from others reveal varying degrees of dependence, including teacher dependence. Benson (2011) conceptualized autonomy as a continuum, progressing from lower to higher levels. Littlewood's (1999) distinction between proactive and reactive autonomy is particularly relevant in Asian settings. Proactive autonomy indicates full control over learning decisions, while reactive autonomy allows learners to accomplish their learning goals within predetermined learning directions. In hierarchical classrooms, reactive autonomy seems more dominant, reflecting cultural norms of respect and guided participation. Both types of autonomy are vital in fostering autonomous learning and must be acknowledged in pedagogical design.

Social interactions and the views towards learning with other students also play a significant role in this regard. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory positions learning as a mediated process. This gave rise to the ideas of scaffolding

and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which holds that students can develop their skills by working with more experienced classmates. Simply stated, language acquisition is seen as a social mediation process in which a learner and a more experienced individual engage in conversation to create meaning and understanding. In other words, a mediation process takes place. This view reinforces the importance of collaborative learning environment in fostering autonomy.

Cultural autonomy introduces yet another layer of complexity (Murase, 2015). Two distinct cultures are collectivist and individualist (Hofstede et al., 2010). East Asian collectivist culture emphasizes group goals and values which is a cooperative and community-oriented culture. On the other hand, the individualist culture of Western Europe and the USA focus on personal goals and independence, a sense of competition, and self-orientation. These cultures influence the behaviors of both teachers and students (Williams et al., 2016). Learner autonomy, with its origins in individualist cultures, may not be fully aligned with the teacher-dependent learning styles often found in collectivist societies (Littlewood, 1999). As Palfreyman (2003) pointed out, culture comprises both national and ethnic dimensions, and cultural disparities can hinder the advancement of learner autonomy. In Indonesia, a study's findings indicated that grade 12 students were unprepared for autonomous learning, a phenomenon attributed to the collectivist culture (Cirocki et al., 2019) while another study's findings on second-year students demonstrated moderate level of autonomy (Melvina et al., 2021). Nonetheless, a study carried out with graduate students in Thailand shows that learner autonomy is a universal idea that may be fostered in collectivist societies (Swatevacharkul & Boonma, 2020). These conflicting findings point to a critical gap in literature. A comprehensive investigation that integrates multiple dimensions of autonomy is needed to clarify how cultural and contextual factors shape learner autonomy.

In short, assessing learner autonomy from a holistic perspective is crucial, as it indicates learners' readiness for autonomous learning. More importantly, such assessment should aim to foster autonomy by enabling teachers to identify learners' needs more effectively and provide targeted support across all dimensions. As Oxford (2003) argued, research should integrate diverse perspectives and employ multiple approaches to deepen the understanding of learner autonomy. Accordingly, this study will assess all four dimensions of autonomy.

Conceptual framework

This present study defines learner autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own English learning (Benson, 2011), both in and out of class. Learner autonomy incorporates four dimensions as proposed by Murase (2015) to holistically assess learner autonomy (Oxford, 2003) of high school students in grades 10-12. The literature review therefore formed the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

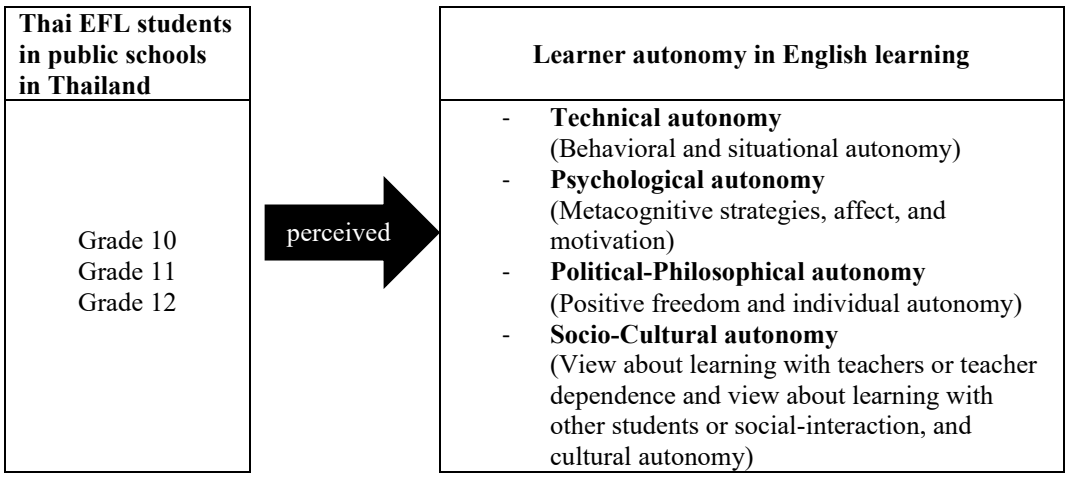


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

The multidimensional framework of learner autonomy, which comprises technical, psychological, political-philosophical, and socio-cultural dimensions, necessitates a methodological approach capable of capturing both breadth and depth. The following section describes the research methodology namely research design, participants, research instruments, data collection, and data analysis.

Method

Research design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design, in which the initial quantitative phase was followed by a qualitative phase (Creswell et al., 2003). This research design is appropriate for assessing the level of learner autonomy as the quantitative data can indicate the degree of autonomy across a large sample, while the integration of both phases at the interpretation stage allows for deeper exploration of contextual factors and learner perspectives than either method alone.

Participants

This study included senior high school students from three public schools in Bangkok as well as three schools outside of Bangkok. They studied mainstream education under formal education system of Thailand. The upper secondary education or senior high school consists of three years (grades 10-12). Presently, instructional activities of basic education follow the Thai Basic Education Core Curriculum (grades 1-12) with a balanced intellectual, moral, and social development. The Curriculum categorized the knowledge and abilities into eight subject areas which are Thai language, mathematics, science, social studies, profession and technology, art, foreign languages, and health and physical education. Thai students study English for at least 5 hours per week in their classroom. Additionally, the Curriculum includes activities aimed at catering to individual learners. Furthermore, the Curriculum includes career- and technology-related education, which provides primary and secondary school students with job experience and basic knowledge required for future career growth and technology applications (Office of the Education Council, 2017).

Due to challenges in accessing schools' information, a convenient sampling technique was utilized for school selection. This non-probability sampling technique poses a restriction in the generalizability of the findings. Altogether, three large schools located in Bangkok, and another three outside Bangkok granted consent for data collection. These were urban schools. A total of 187 students completed the questionnaire. Table 1 displays their demographics.

Table 1. Participants' demographics

Demographics	Number of students	Percent
Schools	187	100
3 in Bangkok	67	35.80
3 outside Bangkok	120	64.20
Grades	187	100
10	78	41.70
11	54	28.90
12	55	29.40
Gender	187	100
Female	116	62.00
Male	63	33.70
Not given	8	4.30

Research instruments

An online questionnaire was administered to obtain quantitative data, followed by semi-structured interviews to triangulate or expand on the quantitative results and contribute to the discussion of the findings. The Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning Questionnaire was adapted and modified from Murase (2015) whose original instrument was developed based on a robust theoretical framework and validated through factor analysis. For this study, to ensure its content validity and appropriateness for the Thai basic education context, three experts in English language education assessed item-objective congruence (IOC). One item was unacceptable and deleted. The total items were 36 and the IOC index was 0.98, which confirmed the content validity. There were 8 items for the technical dimension, 10 for the psychological dimension, 7 for the political-philosophical dimension, and 11 for the socio-cultural dimension. Subsequently, the questionnaire was piloted with 35 students from a private school and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.90. Three statements (26, 27, and 28) carry a negative meaning, and the scores were reversed for data analysis. The questionnaire included English and Thai to facilitate understanding. A back translation was used to verify the translation accuracy.

The five-point Likert scale questionnaire prompted participants to rate their level of agreement with each item on a scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. Their agreement showed the degree of learner autonomy. An interpretation of the rating scores is as follows. The range of 4.21-5.00 represents very high learner autonomy, 3.41-4.20 indicates high, 2.61-3.40 means moderate, 1.81-2.60 means low, and 1.00-1.80 means very low. The 0.80 range for each Likert scale is calculated using this formula: the highest value (5) - the lowest value (1) / the highest value (5). By using equal ranges, the interpretation of scores maintains

internal validity and facilitates clear comparisons of learner autonomy levels across participants.

Following the quantitative data analysis, the second stage involved conducting semi-structured interviews in Thai, each lasting approximately 30 minutes and guided by two main questions and corresponding follow-up prompts aligned with the multidimensional framework of learner autonomy. The questions were:

1. Do you think you are an autonomous learner of English learning? At what level? (To verify the quantitative findings).
2. What makes you the autonomous learner of English learning? Follow up questions were: Do you use learning strategies? Are you motivated to learn English? Do you have the freedom to control your English learning in terms of content, goals, or objectives? Do you think that teachers and other learners can help you learn English? (To explore factors enhancing or hindering autonomy in English language learning).

Data collection

The online Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning questionnaire was given to the six school administrators to be distributed to students in a randomly selected section of grades 10, 11, and 12. Later, the semi-structured interview was carried out in person. One school in Bangkok and one school outside of Bangkok agreed to have half-hour on-site interviews with 3 students each (a total of 6 students). Noted that the questionnaire was anonymous, so the students could not be selected for the interviews based on their level of autonomy. Instead, the students were purposively chosen by their school administrators based on their English proficiency (high, moderate, and low) as a high level of English proficiency has a significantly positive correlation with high autonomy (Dafei, 2007). This allows for obtaining perspectives on autonomy from students of varying levels of proficiency. The participants were provided with a copy of the questionnaire to review each statement, facilitating their recollection of the questionnaire's contents and allowing them to indicate their level of learner autonomy prior to the joint interview conducted by the two researchers. Table 2 illustrates the demographics of the informants.

Table 2. Students' demographics (based on semi-structured interviews)

Student	Gender	Grade	Perceived autonomy	English proficiency	Program	School
1	Male	12	High	High	Mathematics	#1
2	Male	11	Moderate	Moderate	Japanese	#1
3	Female	10	Moderate	Low	Chinese	#1
4	Female	10	Moderate	High	Mathematics	#2
5	Female	12	Moderate	Moderate	Mathematics	#2
6	Male	11	Low	Low	Thai Language-Social Studies	#2

Ethical considerations

Prior to data collection, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained (Certification No. 32/2023). All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study, as verified by the directors of the six participating schools. Subsequently, the school directors selected six students for the interview phase of the study. School staff were also present as observers during the interviews to ensure students' comfort.

Data analysis

Scores derived from the Learner Autonomy in English Language Learning questionnaire were calculated for mean and standard deviation (SD). The interview transcript in Thai was translated into English by the researchers, both of whom are bilingual experts with over 10 years of teaching English at an international university in Thailand. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, a thematic content analysis was conducted. First, the transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Second, the data were inductively coded line by line to generate initial codes. For example, the statement "*I want to be a lawyer in an international law firm… so English is essential…,"* was coded under initial units such as "future career goals" and "importance of English." Third, the initial codes were grouped into potential themes. Fourth, these themes were reviewed collaboratively by the two researchers/coders. Fifth, each theme was defined and named such as "the importance of English for future career goals." Finally, the themes were presented with descriptions and participant excerpts. In case of disagreement during the analysis, the researchers discussed until consensus was reached.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Learner autonomy perceived by Thai senior high school students was found at a high level with a mean of 3.52 (SD = 0.57). This suggests that, on average, the subjects perceived that they were highly autonomous in learning English. Further analysis of each dimension of learner autonomy was shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Level of perceived learner autonomy of all dimensions

Learner autonomy	n	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Interpretation
All dimensions	187	2.12	4.67	3.52	0.57	High
Technical	187	1.88	5.00	3.66	0.72	High
Behavioral autonomy	187	1.00	5.00	3.87	0.82	High
Situational autonomy	187	1.50	5.00	3.46	0.75	High
Psychological	187	1.84	5.00	3.57	0.68	High
Metacognitive strategies	187	1.50	5.00	3.62	0.88	High
Affect	187	1.33	5.00	3.62	0.84	High
Motivation	187	2.00	5.00	3.46	0.67	High
Political	187	1.00	5.00	3.63	0.86	High
Individual autonomy	187	1.00	5.00	3.70	0.85	High
Positive freedom	187	1.00	5.00	3.55	0.99	High
Socio-Cultural	187	2.20	4.38	3.23	0.43	Moderate

Learner autonomy	n	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Interpretation
View of learning with/from teachers (Teacher dependence)	187	1.00	5.00	2.34	0.87	Low*
View of learning with/from other students (Social interaction)	187	1.40	5.00	3.82	0.86	High
Cultural sub-dimension	187	1.00	5.00	3.55	0.93	High

*A low score in the teacher dependence sub-dimension indicates a high degree of dependence on teachers.

According to Table 3, all dimensions of learner autonomy were scored highly, except for the socio-cultural dimension, which was rated moderately. One notable finding was the view of learning with and from teachers, reflecting the degree of teacher dependence. The low-level means that senior high school students in the study highly depended on their teachers for their English language learning. They highly wanted their English teachers to explain content, tell them how to learn and select materials for them.

As for the interviews, four themes emerged from the content analysis which helped to triangulate the quantitative findings to demonstrate augmentation, convergence, or divergence of the data set.

Theme 1: The importance of English for future career goals

Theme 1 highlights the role of English language proficiency as a strategic tool for achieving long-term career aspirations, as expressed by five out of six students who had already envisioned future professions requiring English competence. A long-term goal with a use of the English language was established. One of the students said:

> *My goal of learning English is to become an instructor teaching English literature in a university. This happened when I was in grades 7 and 8. There was a teacher who enjoyed talking about literature.* (Student 1)

Another student made evident use of metacognitive strategies to enhance his English proficiency in preparation for his future career by saying that:

> *Career goal? I have wanted to study law since I was young. I like politics and I want to study in Stanford, USA. I want to be a lawyer working for an international law firm, so English is essential. I talk in English with a mirror. That's the way to practice as I'm not good at English yet.* (Student 2)

The quantitative results of technical autonomy were found to be augmented by Theme 1. A future professional goal that necessitates language proficiency was set in addition to the study goal.

Theme 2: Self-study of English beyond the classroom

Theme 2 underlines learners' autonomous engagement with English beyond the classroom, often through activities such as reading novels and listening to music.

Digital tools and platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and online dictionaries were commonly used to support language development. Two students noted:

> *I think I am highly autonomous. I use English as a tool to search for more knowledge. I love reading novels and documentaries in English to gain new perspectives. So, outside class, I read from online data sources.* (Student 1)

> *I love listening to the songs of Taylor Swift. I am also into watching movies with subtitles as I can learn accents and pronunciation and then I imitate it. Netflix helps me improve English pronunciation … TikTok also helps me learn grammar and good techniques to remember grammatical rules.* (Student 2)

Converged with the quantitative findings, the second theme seems to align with psychological autonomy, which addresses motivation and emotion in language acquisition. Self-study activities which are enjoyable and relevant to an individual's interests increase motivation to learn outside of the classroom.

Theme 3: Preference for communicative learning

Theme 3 reflects learners' strong preference for communicative approaches to English learning, with an emphasis on speaking, interaction, and flexible learning experiences rather than grammar-focused instruction. All of them preferred learning English for communication, rather than grammar. One mentioned:

> *Now, I want to speak with foreigners, my teachers, who are from South Africa and the Philippines. At my school, grammar is too focused. I prefer to learn how to speak English to learning grammar.* (Student 5)

Communicative learning, which integrates all language skills, was found to promote peer teaching, thereby enhancing learner autonomy. As one student put it:

> *School promotes learner autonomy more. Teachers assign us to read a book, summarize it, and write an essay. Peer feedback is implemented. We check if messages can convey intended meanings. (Student 1)*

Additionally, students reported that when they studied with foreign teachers, they had more flexibility to think and understand, and communicative learning was employed rather than grammatical study. Three students shared:

> *If it's a foreign teacher, we will get open-ended questions. We can think about the answers ourselves. For Thai teachers, we learn only grammar.* (Student 5)

> *We have freedom to learn, I think. The teacher allows us to choose the topic of an oral presentation. She asked: Are you comfortable with this?* (Student 4)

> *If I could choose, I would want to practice speaking more. Currently, it's such a rare opportunity for us to speak English. Thai teachers*

> *require us to take notes while foreign teachers will ask us to speak more. I want the teachers to emphasize speaking and practice more.* (Student 6)

Theme 3 was congruent with the quantitative findings of high political-philosophical autonomy. The students reported having freedom to learn, particularly with foreign teachers. In addition, the findings augmented as it was found that they could decide on what they wanted to learn if freedom was given to them. It was clear that they enjoyed learning English for communication.

Theme 4: The impacts of teachers and peers on autonomy development

Theme 4 reveals that both teachers and peers play a significant role in shaping learner autonomy. All six students acknowledged their contributions to English learning, with three students specifically emphasizing the pivotal role of teachers.

> *Teachers must have a positive relationship with students and motivate students to learn by using fun activities as these will promote a desire to seek more knowledge based on their interests by themselves.* (Student 2)

> *If I must choose, I would choose 'teachers' as they are knowledgeable and know better than peers.* (Student 3)

> *Teachers play a significant role, really. Good teachers understand us, and they are not too strict. Peers too can help. I normally ask my friends about grammar.* (Student 5)

One student mentioned peer assistance for English language skills improvement as follows:

> *Peers help me a lot. They help with translation and everything that I don't know. I prefer group work to individual work. But it's okay too to do individual work.* (Student 6)

The interview findings aligned with the quantitative findings, reinforcing the view that learning with and from teachers reflects a high degree of teacher dependence. Thus, both teachers and peers had an impact on autonomy development process as indicated by Theme 4.

In brief, the quantitative data on the perceived high level of learner autonomy in English learning were verified by the four emerging themes. In other words, Theme 1, the importance of English for future career goals, was found to augment the quantitative findings on the technical dimension. Theme 2, self-study of English beyond the classroom, was congruent with the psychological dimension. Likewise, Theme 3, preference for communicative learning, was aligned with political-philosophical autonomy, and the augmentation was that students could decide on what they wanted to learn. Communicative English learning was clearly reported. Theme 4, the impacts of teachers and peers on autonomy development, was also consistent with the socio-cultural dimension.

Discussion

The findings of the perceived high level of language learner autonomy indicate that Thai senior high school students were ready for autonomy in English language education. The findings contrast with the study of Cirocki et al. (2019) which stated that Indonesian high school students were not ready for autonomy as they overly depended upon their teachers. This contrast may be attributed to Thai students' reported enjoyment of learning beyond the classroom, whereas Indonesian students lacked planning in both in-class and out-of-class contexts. Nonetheless, the result was comparable to the research of Chinpakdee (2020) and Swatevacharkul (2015, 2016). The following are possible explanations of factors that could enhance their language learner autonomy. The factors include career-oriented awareness of English use, internal drive for autonomy development, use of L2, and the supportive roles of teachers and peers.

Awareness of the necessity to use English in envisioning future careers

The findings on high level of autonomy and the importance of English for future career goals highlights the significance of English for future career aspirations, reflecting students' understanding of their learning needs and long-term professional goals which may foster a high level of autonomy. This is amplified in EFL settings where students recognize that English is a gateway to international employment and career advancement. According to Little (1991), learners' awareness of their own educational requirements is a fundamental aspect that fosters the growth of learner autonomy. The necessity to use English in envisioning future careers is a drive for students to expose themselves to the English language outside of class to gain more knowledge required for their future professions. Interestingly, for some students, English was the tool to seek career-related knowledge to achieve their professional goals.

Aligned with the study's findings which indicate that Thai senior high school students were driven by their future-oriented motivation, Swatevacharkul (2021) asserted that future professional goals that culminate in mastery of the language are effective in igniting ideal L2 self-motivation, or the desire to be a proficient L2 user (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009). This is crucial for students to invest, maintain, or sustain their language learning efforts. As Oxford (2015) argued, one trait of autonomous learners is that they are invested learners who believe they will benefit from language acquisition. In other words, investing in language learning, students will gain resources that will improve cultural capital, identity, and future aspirations. As per the evidence from high and moderate English proficiency students, they routinely practice outside of class by reading and trying to pronounce words correctly to improve their English. Learning strategies are thus employed. For Williams et al. (2016), this illustrates how their sense of agency is shaped by their belief that their behaviors can affect their learning. In short, being aware of the necessity to use English in future jobs enhances invested efforts to become autonomous learners.

As the findings reflected students' active engagement beyond the classroom and their sense of control over learning, the awareness of the necessity to use English for future employment goals theoretically fosters technical autonomy. Behavioral and situational autonomy are enhanced through the application of learning strategies that enable students to take control of their own learning in

autonomous environments outside the classroom. Moreover, this supports the notion of negative freedom under political-philosophical autonomy, which refers to learners' freedom to pursue personal learning interests without external constraints. This finding augmented the quantitative results revealing that negative freedom in the context of formal education can be fostered by learning beyond the classroom. Individual autonomy is also enhanced as individual learners feel that they can make decisions about and take control of the content, goals, and purposes of learning English.

To develop a high or higher degree of learner autonomy, the first pedagogical implication is to assist students to firmly identify a plausible long-term career objective requiring the use of the target language in the future. As future career-oriented education is incorporated into the Thai basic Core Curriculum, professions requiring English proficiency should be explicitly identified and linked to prospective careers. This can lead to more autonomy for language learners. Secondly, beyond-classroom learning is crucial for autonomy enhancement. Thus, extramural English (EE), which takes place outside of the classroom walls (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016), is beneficial for both teachers and students to foster greater learner autonomy. In-class training should be combined with out-of-class learning according to the needs and interests of each individual student. To maximize their potential for language learning both in and out of class, learning strategies are powerful tools. Thus, teachers of English should be trained on how to instruct learning strategies effectively. These implications are supported by the present findings, which revealed that students demonstrated high level of autonomy, particularly through career-driven motivation and active engagement with English beyond the classroom.

Desire for independent learner autonomy development

Self-study beyond the classroom based on the students' own interests and future professional goals was clearly reported as Theme 2, self-study of English beyond the classroom, which supported the positive attitudes toward autonomous learning. This finding was parallel to the study of Tayjasanant and Suraratdecha (2016) These outside class learning activities are personalized and correspond to each student's needs which demonstrates their desire for English learning improvement and self-development. Motivation for learning is evidently intrinsic. This inner drive contributes to the development of each learner's own pedagogy for autonomy, which can be understood as a sustained passion for foreign language learning that fosters the ability to learn autonomously. Moreover, the desire for autonomous learning promotes metacognitive and affective dimensions of language learning. This results in effective foreign language learning which fulfills their personal learning (Nguyen & Habok, 2021) and goal-related needs. The desire for self-development can thus foster psychological autonomy. This differs from Cirocki et al. (2019), where learners demonstrated low autonomy and relied heavily on teacher-led activities. The present findings, therefore, reaffirm that inner drive is a pivotal condition for cultivating meaningful learner autonomy.

As a result, pedagogical implications should focus on ways to support each learner in fostering and sustaining learner autonomy. The current findings demonstrate the potential features of social media platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and TikTok in facilitating autonomous learning outside of the classroom.

These online activities are enjoyable and effective in aiding both cognitive and affective dimensions of foreign language learning. These practices help foster a sense of ownership over one's own learning and have the potential to promote proactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999). Indeed, technology is important to encourage autonomy (Tran & Vuong, 2023). Therefore, technology resources should be made accessible to support Thai learners, particularly those in the rural areas, in fostering their autonomy which in turn enhances language acquisition.

Use of the language as a basis for English learning and teaching

Theme 3, preference for communicative learning, suggests that classroom management practices that emphasize communication and speaking skills are desirable for senior high school students who value the ability to communicate in English. The finding aligned with the research results of Tayjasanant and Suraratdecha (2016) and Swatevacharkul (2021). Students understand that they need to use English language in the future and thus need opportunities from their teachers to practice and use the language being learned. According to Williams et al. (2016), use of the language indicates their engagement in the language learning process fostering passion and enthusiasm for their language acquisition. L2 learners progress by utilizing and practicing the language. Likewise, the use of language is essential for the development of learner autonomy (Little, 2022). Thus, their preference to learn the language for communication indicates their readiness to be autonomous learners. It is noteworthy that, within the Thai context, English is not consistently used as the medium of instruction, which may limit students' opportunities for communicative engagement and the development of learner autonomy.

For these reasons, every teacher of English, particularly Thai teachers, must be aware of the communicative demands of their students and respect their voice. Every attempt should be made to transform a classroom into a social learning space where students and teachers can interact and practice the language. According to Williams et al. (2016), teachers have an important responsibility to fulfill a student's need for relatedness, a fundamental psychological need to feel connected to other people. Therefore, effective communicative pedagogies should be seriously considered as an institutional policy to fulfill their needs to learn English for communication, rather than a heavy emphasis on teaching or memorizing grammatical rules which could limit their autonomy. The communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Richards, 2006) and further evolution of CLT such as task- and project-based learning, and strategy-based instruction are effective to establish social interactions between a teacher and student-student. According to a study, teacher-student interactions can help students become more proficient in the language (Yulia et al., 2023). CLT thus has a strong potential to develop group and learning dynamics which emphasize interdependence essential for learner autonomy development and successful language learning.

The role of teachers as motivators and peers as cognitive supporters

Unlike other dimensions, the quantitative findings revealed a moderate level of socio-cultural autonomy. Notably, teacher dependence was high, which warrants attention as it indicates low autonomy. Supported by the qualitative findings, the informants viewed that teachers are significant contributors to their language

learning. Collectivist culture might play a role, and teacher involvement in the language learning process to foster learner autonomy (Benson & Lamb, 2021) is thus validated. Beyond having a positive relationship and interactions with their teachers, learners want their teachers to serve as their motivators for learning or improving their English proficiency. They need mental and cognitive support from their teachers. As Williams et al. (2016) argued, teachers play a crucial role in creating the conditions necessary for learning, even though they are not the sole determinant of learning success. In line with Tayjasanant and Suraratdecha's (2016) findings, Thai junior high school students also needed mental support from their teachers. Notably, there appears to be little empirical evidence that contradicts the emerging role of teachers as motivators in supporting learner autonomy. It is therefore essential that teachers recognize both their impact and the role of peer supporter in fostering learner autonomy.

Fostering socio-cultural autonomy, the role of teachers as motivators might represent a certain degree of teacher dependence as revealed by the findings on high teacher dependence (Table 3). However, mainstream language education inevitably involves this kind of dependence, especially for high school students who must get ready for their independent postsecondary education (Jimenez Raya, 2017). It is important to acknowledge constructive reliance that has a positive effect on learning (Hunter & Cooke, 2007). Likewise, Benson and Lamb (2021) asserted that together, students and teachers should shape learning to promote learner autonomy. Generally, these high school students may possess reactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999), necessitating the learning path that their teachers have set for them.

The finding urges on all English teachers to adopt the role of motivators, recognizing their powerful ability to inspire students to learn and develop a drive for autonomous learning, especially weak students who require greater cognitive and emotional support. Argued by Dornyei (2002), one of the motivational teaching practices that teachers need to implement is to establish fundamental motivational conditions for language learning. Therefore, teacher-student dynamics in terms of positive rapport, favorable classroom environment and communication styles are also important to develop a language growth mindset which is associated with language learning motivation (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2021). This, in turn, can predict English achievements (Liu & Du, 2024). Gradually, teachers can recede from the instructional process, granting students increased freedom to foster their autonomy.

The results from both quantitative and qualitative data underscore the important impact of peers as cognitive facilitators, especially for low-achieving English learning students. A study by Treesattayanmunee and Baharudin (2024) revealed that low autonomous students interact less than moderate and high autonomous ones. Such findings are consistent with this present study confirming the vital role of social interactions in mediating language learner autonomy development. Peer teaching may promote interactions among peers while decreasing teacher dependence. This can foster independent learning leading to learning accomplishment. In a study of Dewantono and Murtisari (2023), peer teaching can potentially improve grammar learning. Similarly, a study by Yunita et al. (2025) found that interactive and collaborative grammar activities can improve grammar learning of Indonesian undergraduate students. These discoveries can be applied in the Thai basic education system.

In the context of Thai high schools, it is implied that peer scaffolding is both appropriate and beneficial for the development of autonomy. To become facilitators and motivators in student-centered classrooms, teachers should systematically integrate peer teaching into both in-class and extracurricular activities.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Thai EFL high school students in public schools in Thailand perceived themselves as highly autonomous, except for their moderate socio-cultural autonomy where teacher dependence was found to be high. The four emerging themes confirmed the quantitative findings and can be treated as factors contributing to the overall high degree of autonomy.

First, the importance of English for future career goals can be explained by the awareness of the necessity to use English in envisioning future careers which sustains invested autonomous learning efforts. Professional goals, driven by the need to use the target language, play a vital role in enhancing behavioral and situational autonomy in technical autonomy. Second, self-study of English beyond the classroom was driven by the desire for independent learner autonomy development. Such desire creates individual learners' own pedagogy for autonomy which develops passion and increases learning perseverance. Psychological autonomy is thus fostered. Third, the inclination towards communicative learning distinctly exemplifies the trait of autonomous learners who acquire a foreign language primarily for professional purposes, as demonstrated by the first theme. Therefore, pedagogical emphasis should be paid to the CLT approach, task-, strategy-, and project-based learning that encourage language use. By promoting interactions and providing students with the freedom to decide on their own learning, these contemporary pedagogical approaches help enhance political-philosophical autonomy. Lastly, the impact of teachers and peers on autonomy development contributed to the perceived moderate degree of autonomy. The high degree of teacher dependence indicates reactive autonomy and requires teachers to serve as motivators to facilitate autonomy development. Peers are viewed as crucial cognitive supporters. These findings highlight the significant role of both teachers and peers in the learner autonomy development process in the Thai basic educational context. Socio-cultural autonomy is thus nurtured.

The findings provide valuable insights which demonstrate the potential applicability and adaptability of learner autonomy as a universal concept. Learner autonomy can be glocalized since it is not a one-size-fits-all idea. Rather, it takes adaptation to the local culture, traditions, and educational context. In the Thai high school context, shaped by a collectivist culture, cognitive and emotional support remains essential for the development of learner autonomy. Finally, it is underlined that developing learner autonomy should encompass all four dimensions, as they are inextricably linked.

This study is not without limitations. Since non-probability sampling can limit the generalizability of the findings, caution should be exercised when interpreting and extrapolating the results. Future research should employ a larger scale to confirm the results. Students in rural area schools and factors promoting or hindering their autonomy are worth researching, employing probability sampling techniques and inferential statistics. Analyzing curriculum guidelines, teacher training programs, and school policies to identify areas for improvement in

supporting autonomy development is recommended. It is also beneficial to conduct research on the creation of successful treatments and strategies to encourage autonomy both within and outside of the classroom. A relationship between learner and teacher autonomy should be explored as teachers play a crucial role in developing learner autonomy. Furthermore, there is a dearth of studies on junior high school students' learner autonomy, which is why it is highly recommended. Thus, it is feasible to investigate how learner autonomy develops early in language learning. All these additional research insights can potentially help to improve our understanding of learner autonomy in English education as part of Thailand's basic educational system.

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