

Research Article

Student Readiness for Learner Autonomy: Case Study at a University in Thailand

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Abstract

This study investigates the extent to which students at a university in Thailand were ready to exercise autonomy in their learning. The research examined three aspects related to learner autonomy: learner's perceptions of teacher's roles and of themselves, locus of control and strategies employed by learners in their learning process. The questionnaire was administered to 91 students enrolled in a writing course of the university used in this case study. The findings suggest that the majority of the students in this study were not yet ready for learner autonomy. However, although not yet fully prepared for learning autonomously, many of the students displayed the potential for being assisted to become more autonomous. However, to achieve this, the study suggests that changes in their beliefs regards learning and teaching, as well as changes in the educational system need to be taken into consideration.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, learner perception, teacher roles, learner roles, locus of control

Introduction

Recently, major reforms have been promulgated and implemented seen in Thailand's education system [1]. Much effort has been put into promoting new educational concepts and in introducing innovative teaching-learning methodology. Learner autonomy has become a new focus in the Thai educational sphere. The desired learner is portrayed as one who has autonomy in their learning, that is, one who can take charge of their own learning, do not rely heavily on teachers and play an active role in their learning process. Many educational institutes have tried their best to produce graduates with these desirable characteristics and a large financial investment has been made to provide facilities conducive to the creation of autonomy in learners. However, those phenomena seem prevalent in Bangkok and some of the larger cities, only. Many schools, colleges and universities located in particularly rural regions of Thailand are untouched by the concept. The idea of autonomy may be discussed in theory in some schools, but in practice this concept becomes very hard to realize. While the school administration makes learner autonomy a part of their policy, the school's practitioners –

teachers and learners - are not yet ready for the changes that come part and parcel with the introduction of this new teaching – learning philosophy.

Knowledge of the extent to which learners are ready for any new learning philosophy is critical to its success. This knowledge will help university administrators as well as teachers foresee difficulties that might occur when they attempt to promote that philosophy, or learner autonomy in this study, takes place in their university. It also gives an insight into aspects of learning and teaching that might influence the way in which learners practice learner autonomy. This study, therefore, seeks investigate the extent to which students are ready to exercise autonomy in their learning, as well as to explore possible aspects of learning and teaching that challenge student practice of learner autonomy.

Literature Review

Definition of learner autonomy

The term “learner autonomy” has countless definitions. Originally, the term derived from the concept of autonomy in the political context prevailing in ancient Greece [2]. It was used to refer to the property of a state to be self-ruling and self-governing. When applied to the individual, the autonomy signifies the capacity of the individual to act as an autonomous state; that is to be independent and not governed by others. According to Roger [3], an autonomous person is “a fully functioning person”. Western philosophies from the eighteenth century onwards have emphasized the responsibility of the individual as a social agent. Autonomy and independence have become keywords of twentieth-century liberal western thought in the field of philosophy, psychology and education [4]. In education, the development of autonomy and independence in the individual is the core element for democratic ideals. The idea of democracy in education, especially in the classroom, has been pioneered by Dreikurs [5]. He posits that children deserve democratic consideration in the classroom and the classroom should contain democratically-supported environments. This can be done by the teacher giving students autonomy in their decisions, by giving them ‘freedom of choice’ [5]. The notion that autonomy occurs when there is freedom in terms of choice and of choosing is also obvious in Holec’s point of view [6]. He states that autonomy occurs when the learner is willing to and capable of taking charge of his or her own learning.

Teacher’s Role in the Development of Learner Autonomy

Being an autonomous learner signifies neither ‘an abdication of the responsibility on the part of the teacher’ nor the learner working with absolute freedom and in isolation from the teacher and peers. According to Little [7],

“The various freedoms that autonomy implies are always conditional and constrained, never absolute. As social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence, our essential condition of interdependence; total detachment is a principle determining not of autonomy but of autism.”

The introduction of learner autonomy in class entails some changes in teacher roles. The teacher is no longer a transmitter of knowledge. *A transmission teacher*, according to Barnes believes it is his/her duty to transmit knowledge and to test whether the students have received it [8]. Students then play a passive role. An interpretative teacher, which is on the other end of the continuum, sees the students as an active part in the learning process. Barnes describes an interpretative teacher as the one who:

“1) believes knowledge to exist in the knower’s ability to organize thought and action, 2) values the learner’s commitment to interpreting reality, so that criteria arises as much from the learner as from the teacher, perceives the teacher’s task to be the setting up of a dialogue in which the learner can reshape his knowledge through interaction with others, 4) perceives the learner as possessing systematic and relevant knowledge and the means of reshaping that knowledge.”

Adapting Barnes theory, Benson [9] describes the teacher as “facilitator, helper, coordinator, counselor, consultant, advisor, knower and resource.” Voller classifies these in three categories: teacher as a facilitator, teacher as a counselor and teacher as a resource [10]. When the teacher functions as a *facilitator*, he/she is seen as providing support for learning. The support is characterized into two categories; technical and psycho-social support. As a technical provider, the teacher helps learners 1) to plan and carry out their independent language learning by such means as needs analysis, objectives setting and material selection, 2) to evaluate themselves, and 3) to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to implement the above. Psycho-social support refers to 1) being caring, supportive, patient, empathic, open and non-judgmental, 2) motivating learners, and 3) raising learner awareness of autonomous learning [10].

Teacher as a counselor is another role which places an emphasis on one-to-one interaction. A counselor generally is a person who provides advice to those who need it. Teacher as a counselor reflects one role of interpretation teachers [11]. When the teacher acts as a counselor, he/she becomes a good listener carefully attentive to his/her students and providing assistance. In moving learners from teacher dependence, consultation with or guidance from the teacher is supportive as most learners are inexperienced in setting their own direction and taking charge of their own learning. A consultation with the teacher allows the learner to talk to someone about what they encounter and achieve as well as how to solve problems [12]. Riley contrasts roles of teachers in teaching and counseling [13]:

Table 1. Roles in Teaching and Counseling.

Teaching	Counseling
1. Setting objectives	1. Eliciting information about aims, needs and wishes
2. Determining course content	2. Why, what for, how, how long: giving information, clarifying
3. Selecting materials	3. Suggesting materials, suggesting other sources
4. Deciding on time, place and pace	4. Suggesting organization procedures
5. Deciding on learning tasks	5. Suggesting methodology
6. Managing classroom interaction, initiating	6. Listening, responding
7. Monitoring the learning situation	7. Interpreting information
8. Keeping records, setting homework	8. Suggesting record-keeping and planning procedures
9. Presenting vocabulary and grammar	9. Presenting materials
10. Explaining	10. Analyzing techniques
11. Answering questions	11. Offering alternative procedures
12. Marking, grading	12. Suggesting self-assessment tools and techniques
13. Testing	13. Giving feedback on self-assessment
14. Motivating	14. Being positive
15. Rewarding, punishing	15. Supporting

When the teacher acts as a *resource*, the teacher is seen as “a source of knowledge and expertise” [11]. Also the teacher is able to optimize learning conditions conducive to learner autonomy by helping learners be aware of a wide range of knowledge resources and learning

strategies. Compared to roles of facilitator and counselor, that of teacher as resource is much less investigated [14].

Learner-centeredness and Learner Autonomy

Dissatisfaction with ‘traditional’ language teaching practice and a widespread desire for more autonomous learners, those who have a more active involvement in their learning, lead to the development of the learner-centered practice. The learner-centeredness implies the shifting of focus from teaching to learning, which requires a reconsideration of the roles of the teacher and the learner in the learning process [15].

In learner-centered classroom, learners will be placed at the centre of learning and endowed with decision-making power. Two points need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, language learning will occur if the learning is structured in response to learners in respect of their characteristics, needs and expectations and if the learners are enabled to play an “active role in the shaping of their program” [16]. The other point involves, like the term autonomy, the uncertainty amongst the teacher and the learner as to the definition and implementation of the learner-centered approach. This results from the implication that the concept involves shifting the locus of control from the teacher to the learner.

Research Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate whether students are ready for learner autonomy. To answer this question, the study investigated three aspects of learning/teaching which can be used as indicators of autonomy. The objectives of this study can be clarified by the following research questions:

1. How do learners perceive their own and their teachers’ roles in their language learning?
2. With whom is the locus of control – teacher or learner?
3. How do learners contribute to their language learning?

Research Instrument

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used for the collection of data used in this research. The questionnaire was comprised of three parts. Part I contains items designed to elicit answers to the research question 1 above; items in Part II provides data for research question 2; and Part III was designed to explore the learner’s strategies, which was the aim of research question 3. The remaining research questions are designed to assist in the analysis overall of the responses to questions 1, 2 and 3.

Part I

The first part of the questionnaire aims to explore the learners perception of their own and their teachers roles in their language learning. It contains 8 items; 3 out of 8 (Items 3, 7 and 8) reflects the promotion of learner autonomy while the remaining questions (Items 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6) implies notions against the formation of learner autonomy. The Likert scale (comprising 5 for “Strongly agree”, 4 for “Agree”, 3 for “Neutral”, 2 for “Strongly disagree” and 1 for “Agree”) was used to score the items.

Part II

This part looks into the classroom to explore who is in control – the teacher or the learner. Items in Part II involve 8 activities commonly taking place in the classroom so as to examine who takes charge of these activities. Each activity contains two situations; one of which is the situation where the learner undertakes those activities on their own, while the other situation reflects that the teacher carries out the activities. The participants were asked to identify in which situation they felt they most belonged.

Part III

Like those in Part II, items in this part were designed to determine whether or not learners are able to manage themselves regarding their own learning. The participants were asked to identify strategies they employed in their learning. Strategies examined in this part include things related to “self” such as self-motivation, self-learning, responsibility and patience, etc.

The questionnaire was designed in Thai to avoid the participant’s failure to understand and respond appropriately due to difficulty in English language.

Pilot Study

The main aim of conducting a pilot study was to make sure that the instrument of the study, the questionnaire, was understandable and contained no difficulties for the participants to complete. The first draft of the questionnaire was piloted with five students. These students had enrolled in the English Writing for Business Communication program in the previous year and, therefore, were not included in the sample of the study. The entire process, including the administration, the collection and the analysis of results, took one week. As the participants displayed no difficulty in understanding and completing, the first draft of the questionnaire was then finalized so that it was ready to be employed in the actual study.

Participants

The participants in the study included 91 students from a university in Thailand. The participants were selected randomly from two sections of an English Writing class. Their English proficiency levels and English background were not varied, as most of them were regarded as low-level English users and had a very limited experience in using English as a foreign language. The characteristics of the participants of this study were as follows: out of 91 undergraduate students, 11 were males (12.1%) and 80 were females (87.9%) as shown in Figure 1.

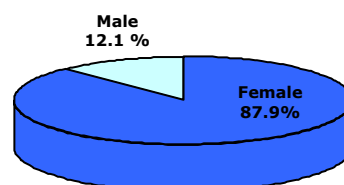


Figure 1. Gender of the Participants.

Out of these 91 students, 35 of them majored in Accounting Information Systems or AIS (38.5%); 54 were from Accounting or ACC (59.3%) and the other 2 were from Insurance or INS (2.2%) as shown in Figure 2.

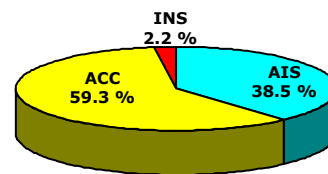


Figure 2. Major Field of the Participants.

The students participating in this study were second and third year students only, as these courses were for second and third year students only. Out of these 91 students, 53 of them (58.2%) were in second-year while the other 38 (41.8%) were in third year (Figure 3).

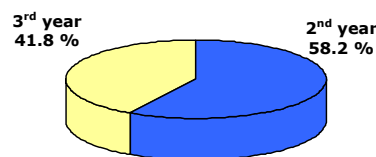


Figure 3. Study Year of the Participants.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to the participants during their writing class. The participants were allowed to take the questionnaires home and return them during the next English writing lesson (which was two days later). It took one week for the administration and collection of the questionnaire.

Results

Finding 1: Learners Perception of Roles

The first research question aimed to explore how students perceive the roles of teachers and of themselves in their own teaching-learning process. Data for this research question were collected from Part I of the questionnaire, which contained 8 items on five-point Likert scale.

Table 2 presents the percentages, frequencies and means of the participant responses to the perceptions of roles.

Table 2 Participants Perception of Teachers and of Their Own Roles in Learning.

Items	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree		Mean
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
1.1 Teachers should explain everything to students.	0	0	2	2.2	11	12.1	57	62.6	21	23.1	4.06
1.2 Teachers' role is to transmit knowledge to students.	0	0	1	1.1	4	4.4	41	45.1	45	49.4	3.98
1.3 Students should be given opportunities to study on their own.	0	0	4	4.4	30	33.0	52	57.1	5	5.5	3.64
1.4 Goals and directions in students' learning should be set by teachers.	2	2.2	22	24.2	36	39.6	28	30.7	3	3.3	3.09
1.5 Activities in classroom should be initiated and directed by teachers.	0	0	15	16.4	36	39.6	38	41.8	2	2.2	3.30
1.6 Students' achievement depends largely on their teacher, not students.	4	4.4	28	30.8	25	27.4	31	34.1	3	3.3	3.01
1.7 Teachers should allow students to select the units they like to learn.	4	4.4	23	25.3	43	47.3	19	20.8	2	2.2	2.91
1.8 Students should be given opportunities to learn in their own learning styles and don't have to follow teachers' style.	1	1.1	25	27.4	40	44	24	26.4	1	1.1	2.99

Table 2 indicates that more than 90% of the participants viewed their teachers as a knowledge transmitter (Item 2). Similarly, teachers were described as a teller by 85% of the participants. These two findings indicate that the majority of the participants were likely to be familiar with traditional roles of the teacher. Another area which showed the inclination of the students to depend on the teacher was the setting of goals and directions in classroom. Almost half of the participants expected the teacher to initiate and set the direction of the classroom, while only 16.4% of them did not agree. However, when asked about the opportunities to study on their own, only 4% of the participants expressed their disagreement with this form of learning while a relatively higher number of the students indicated their preference for this form of learning.

With regards to academic success, an interesting finding was that there was no clear answer whether the teacher or the learner played a more crucial role in the learner's academic success. As shown in Table 2, 35.2% of the participants did not believe that their own academic success depended largely on the teacher, while 37.4% indicated whether or not they would be successful in their learning depended on the teacher. The remaining participant expressed their indecision on this matter.

The last two items in this part of the questionnaire revealed the same situation with the area of academic success. That is to say, almost half of the participants had no idea about whose duty it was with regard to content or lesson selection and style setting. Almost 50% indicated that they did not mind who was responsible to select their lessons. Less than 30% of the participants reported it had to be their own duty in deciding what to learn. Almost the same number of students expected this duty to be that of the teacher. Similar to content selection, less than 30% of the participants believed that they had to be the person to shape their own learning style. Almost the same number of the participants, on the other hand, left the task with the teacher, while almost half of the participants did not mind who undertook this task.

Discussion on Finding 1

The first two results with respect to perception of roles are very interesting as the perception of teachers as the “knowledge transmitter” and as the “teller” reflect roles of teachers in traditional formal education. As Barnes suggests, the introduction of learner autonomy in classroom requires changes in teacher roles [8]. Knowledge is no longer transmitted from the teacher to the learner because it already exists in the learner and the teacher’s duty is to help the learner reshape his/her knowledge. Also, in the reconstruction of that knowledge, the learner plays an active role. The learner is not there in the classroom to be told and, likewise, the teacher is not there in the classroom to tell. Instead, the teacher is there in the class to facilitate and to counsel [11]. Almost all the participants in this study perceived the teacher in a traditional way, in which the teacher is expected to teach. Explaining, selecting materials and determining course content are described by Riley as roles in teaching [13]. However, if the goal of education is to form learner autonomy, teachers must be play a counseling role, rather than a teaching role.

With regards to learner roles, the findings imply the participants were not very sure about what roles they should play in their learning, as in many items the number of those who agreed and those who disagreed were not significantly different. It is also interesting that in many items more than half of the participants did respond with neither agree nor disagree. The high number of responses to neutrality reflects the uncertainty on the part of the participants. They seemed passive and unconcerned about what took place in their own learning. The neutrality of the responses might indicate the participants lack of care in their learning. Unfortunately, a lack of care can be regarded as one of many characteristics of the learner that will impair the development of learner autonomy.

Finding 2: Locus of Control in Classroom

This part examined where the locus of control was centered – with the teacher or with the learner. Eight activities involved in the teaching-learning process were used for this examination including goal setting, material selection, activities management, task initiation, class interaction, task evaluation, grammar and vocabulary procedure and question solving. The participants were asked to identify which party – either the participant themselves (which represented the learner) or the teacher - played a major role in each of these activities.

Responses to the questionnaire indicate that the majority of activities examined (6 out of 8) were under the control of the teacher (Figure 4).

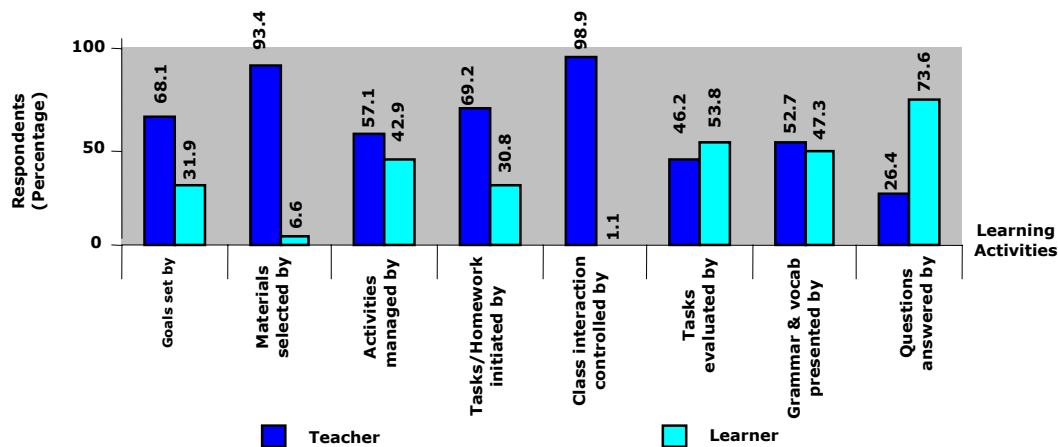


Figure 4. Locus of Control in Classroom.

As shown in Figure 4, 68.1% of the participants reported that it was the teacher who set the goals in their learning. Nearly the same number of participants (69.2%) stated that they did tasks or homework following the teacher's direction. Only 30.8% of the participants initiated or designed their own exercises for reviewing after class.

The most interesting finding here concerns interactions in classroom. Nearly 100% of the participants (90 out of 91 participants) agreed that it was under the control of the teacher: they preferred to listen and follow instead of talking or speaking. Only 1 of the 91 participants (1.1%) preferred speaking to listening. This finding indicates that receptive skills tend to be preferred among learners in the language classroom. With respect to materials selection, more than 90% of the participants indicated that materials used in the class had already been selected for them by the teacher.

Task evaluation and answering to questions were two activities regarded as under the control of the learners. However, the number of participants revealing that they evaluated tasks by themselves was not a lot higher than those reporting the evaluation was done by the teacher (53.8% and 46.2%, respectively). On the contrary, answering questions seemed to be the only activity that was reported to be under the control of almost 75% of the participants.

Discussion on Finding 2

The findings regarding the locus of control suggest that the majority of activities involved in the teaching-learning process had the teacher, not the learner, at the centre. In other words, most of the activities taking place in the teaching-learning process were under the control of the teacher. Learning in which objectives and content are fixed and defined by the teacher reflects the traditional notion of teachers [6]. The teacher functioning as the controller implies passivity on the part of the learner: the learner does not have to do much as things are set and prepared for them by the teacher. Learner passivity implies that learners are more willing to listen, to

follow and to receive (knowledge) than to speak, to lead and to produce. This further reflects the belief that knowledge is something that can be transmitted from one person to the other. To believe in this way is regarded as an obstacle for the development of learner autonomy. According to Barnes, the teacher must be an “interpretation teacher”, who perceives students as an active part in the learning process [8]. With an interpretative teacher, instead of being transmitted, knowledge can be reshaped by the learner themselves through the interactions with others. And the teacher is there to facilitate environments conducive to those interactions.

The fact that the teacher played the role of a transmitter confirms the findings on learner perception, in which the majority of the participants expressed strong agreement with the statements: “Teachers should explain everything to students” and “Teachers role is to transmit knowledge to students” (means: 4.06 and 3.98, respectively).

Finding 3: Learner Strategies

Items in the last part of the questionnaire were used to discover how learners contributed to their language learning. The participants were asked to state whether or not they had done the following: 1) motivating themselves in learning (self-motivation); 2) learning by themselves through activities outside class (outside activities); 3) asking for learning resources from teachers (learning resources); 4) asking for learning techniques from teachers (learning techniques); 5) managing and planning their own learning (self-management); 6) being responsible for their own learning (responsibility); and 7) being patient and persistent in their learning. Figure 5 presents the percentage of participant responses to the strategies employed as termed in the parenthesis.

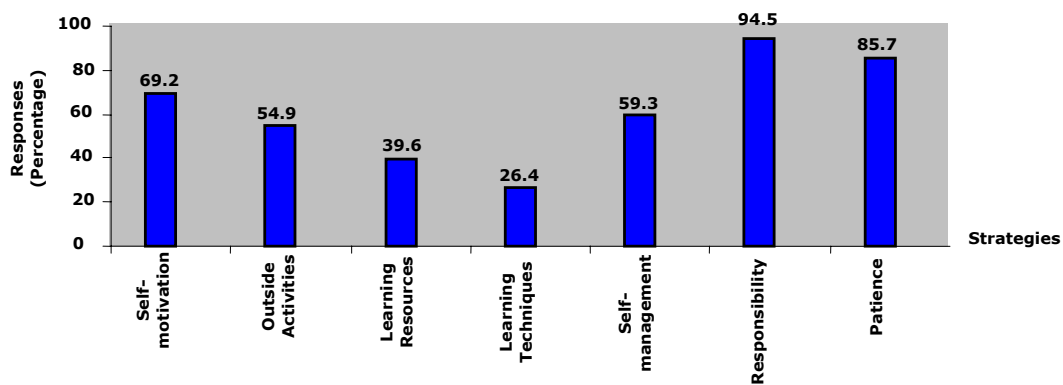


Figure 5. Learner Strategies in Learning Process.

Figure 5 shows that 5 out of 7 strategies were employed by more than half of the participants. Interestingly, almost all participants (94.5%) regarded themselves as being a responsible learner, reflecting that the most common strategy learners contributed to their learning was by being responsible. Similarly, being patient and persistent became the second most favoured strategy. It was claimed by 85.6% of the participants as beneficial to their learning. The third strategy employed by the participants was to motivate themselves in terms of their own learning (69.2%). Learning on one’s own through outside activities and managing and planning one’s own learning shared a similar percentage of responses (54.9% and 59.3%, respectively).

Asking for learning techniques from teachers was the strategy employed by only 26.4% of the participants. The similar strategy, to ask for learning resources from teachers, was employed by less than half of the participants (39.6%).

Discussion on Learner Strategies

Being responsible was regarded by more than 90% of the participants as a way of contributing to their learning. This might suggest that the participants likelihood to be autonomous as learners are described as ones who are willing to take responsibility for their own learning [17]. However, being responsible is not an absolute indicator of an autonomous learner. Learners take responsibility for their learning not only because they are intrinsically responsible, but they may be forced by some other external factors. Grading systems, performance scores and class rules are some of the external factors that force the learners to be responsible in their learning.

Low responses to asking the teacher for learning techniques indicate the lack of emphasis on learning how to learn. Wenden posits that to be autonomous, learners should have knowledge about learning [18]. Learners acquire this knowledge by being trained or by consulting with the teacher. Knowledge about learning includes knowledge not only about learning techniques but learning resources. The formation of learner autonomy requires the opportunity to learn beyond the boundaries of the formal classroom. As Wright points out, learner autonomy is to be developed in the settings where such innovative resources as videos, computers and listening booths are present [19]. Knowledge about learning resources beyond the 'traditional' classroom, therefore, is very crucial for learners who want to become autonomous.

Discussion

The readiness for learner autonomy is determined through in light of the responses to the three research questions. The answer to each research question can be summed up as follows:

- ❖ Students perceive their teachers in a traditional way and believe teachers to be the person who directs their learning.
- ❖ Students are not the centre of the classroom and the locus of control remains with teachers. Additionally, they do not take on an active part in the learning process.
- ❖ Students do not sufficiently employ learning strategies crucial for autonomous learning.

It can be concluded from these findings that the majority of students from the university in this case study were not yet ready for learner autonomy.

Limitations of the Study

Two limitations need to be addressed in this study. The first limitation concerns the extent to which the results can be generalized. The sample population of this study was small, therefore the generalization of the findings to different groups of students in other educational settings may be limited. The second limitation concerns the validity and reliability of the questionnaire utilized. The questionnaire was designed based on theories posited in the literature review. Then the questionnaire was translated into Thai and a pilot study was carried out with five students. The results from this pilot study revealed no difficulties on the part of students in understanding questions in the questionnaire. As a result, the first draft of the questionnaire was finalized and utilized in the present study without evaluation on the validity and reliability of the questionnaire from relevant experts.

Conclusion

This study has provided evidence that the majority of the participants were not yet ready for learner autonomy. However, this does not mean the development of learner autonomy is impossible. As discussed earlier, some participants revealed potential for becoming more autonomous given that the way they perceive roles of teachers and themselves has been changed. The idea that the teacher is a knowledge transmitter and that the teacher, not the learner, plays a more crucial role in the learning process must be changed. In addition, the locus of control needs to shift from the teacher to the learner; activities involved in the learning process must allow the learner to be at the centre. Furthermore, the learners have to possess knowledge of how to learn. That is, they must be given the opportunity to learn how and where to learn, especially beyond the classroom. All of this cannot be achieved without active assistance from teachers, as well as school administrations and policy makers.

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