

Thai EFL Teachers and Learners' Beliefs and Readiness for Autonomous Learning

CHAMAIPAK TAYJASANANT

*Department of Linguistics
Kasetsart University, Thailand*

SUMITTRA SURARATDECHA

*Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia
Mahidol University, Thailand
lcsm@mahidol.ac.th.*

ABSTRACT

The emergence of the ASEAN Economic Community has spurred countries in the region to relook their English language teaching approaches to ensure it is in line with regional and global changes. This has resulted in Asian countries seeking to modernise their teaching and learning of the language to promote higher order thinking skills and pave the way for better learner autonomy. This paper examines Thai teacher and learner beliefs about autonomous learning within the Thai culture of learning to determine if both are ready for autonomous learning. Using a qualitative approach employing interviews with teacher and students data was created from 76 English language teachers and 116 lower secondary school students, subdivided into high performing and low performing groups from 41 schools in Bangkok. The overall results indicate that both teachers and students hold positive beliefs about autonomous learning. The findings further reveal that the teachers supported communicative language learning while the students emphasised their needs for mental support, that teachers from large schools have higher academic expectations than those from smaller schools, and that lower performing students struggle for more academic and psychological support than their higher performing peers. The exam system, students' dependence on teachers, and a lack of understanding from families and surrounding communities make it difficult for both teachers and students to achieve a high degree of autonomy. The study sheds some light on the challenges facing policy makers, particularly the Ministry of Education, with regard to what they can do to promote autonomy in the Thai school system.

Keywords: autonomy; culture of learning; English language teaching; learner-centeredness; teacher and learner beliefs

INTRODUCTION

English has continually been promoted as the main language of instruction in various Thai schools partly due to the need to internationalise Thai students in preparation for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), where English is used as the working language or a lingua franca, as indicated in Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter in 2009. Many ASEAN countries have shown concern or taken action to modernise their English language teaching approaches and even their overall learning culture, defined by Cortazzi and Jin (1996) as expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about creating good and appropriate learning by putting an emphasis on both teacher practices and learner learning. Isarangkura Na Ayudhaya (2013) observed such changes in the learning culture of Singapore and Malaysia. The former underlines the idea of teaching less and learning more, which requires updated and well-rounded teachers who use a variety of teaching methods that promote interactive practice, collaboration, differentiated instruction and multimodal learning. Malaysia has also revised its educational policy to focus on the holistic development of individual learners; the integration and balance of manner, intellect, and ethics; language expertise (in both English and Malaysian) for efficient communication; the ability to manage new knowledge and information; and the development of technological skills (Isarangkura Na Ayudhaya 2013).

This is in line with Campbell's (2009) view that the country has reformed the English language policy to meet the country's social, political, economic and educational challenges and to deal with factors influencing low English literacy achievement among Malaysian learners, as revealed by Musa et al. (2012). English language teaching and learning in ASEAN has to be in line with the changes and needs in regional and global contexts, requiring both teachers and learners to practice better autonomy and use higher order thinking skills like analytical and logical thinking and problem solving rather than relying on course books instead of designing their own materials and waiting for and responding to questions. English language users in ASEAN also need to be equipped with technological knowledge and skills, to interact or collaborate with others, to make decisions, and to be responsible for their own learning or being an autonomous learner (Suraratdecha & Tayjasant 2016).

Research into learner and teacher beliefs about autonomous learning in the Thai learning culture is rare especially at the school level even though the approach strongly encourages a learner-centered approach that can lead to lifelong learning. Most autonomous learning research in Thailand have concerned the tertiary level and focused on directly training teachers in the new approach, followed by surveying teachers' attitudes and evaluating the success of training programmes (Saengpakdeejit 2002, Wisaijorn 2003, Fukham 2004, Thepseenoo 2004, Sangsawang 2011, Limpriwatana 2011, Chatreepinyo 2012). Findings from these studies also reveal that EFL teachers and learners still lack support concerning appropriate training on how to change the mindset of teachers and learners before applying this approach into practice. Traditional teaching is therefore still predominant in English language teaching and learning despite the country's need for reform. This paper thus aims to examine secondary school teacher and learner beliefs about autonomous learning within the Thai culture of learning so as to identify their readiness for this pedagogical approach and to determine the extent to which autonomous learning suits Thai learning contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews well-recognised concepts and frameworks associated with learner-centeredness and autonomous learning, and the extent to which it could be adopted in the Thai educational context. It also indicates the need to examine the beliefs and readiness of teachers and learners with regard to the likelihood of success of adopting such a teaching and learning approach.

LEARNER-CENTERED LEARNING AND AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

Benson (2012) maintains that learner-centered learning and teaching has developed since the 1970s, as can be observed from frameworks on second language acquisition introduced by Ellis (1992), communicative language teaching, needs analysis, self-assessment and other ideas related to language learner psychology, e.g. motivation, attribution, learning styles and strategies, self-directed learning, and autonomy.

Autonomous learning varies and can be classified into five stages, according to Nunan (1997, p. 195): 1) *awareness*, which means being aware of one's own learning goals, resources and preferred learning style or strategies; 2) *involvement*, which means choosing one's own learning goals and processes; 3) *intervention*, which means taking part in adjusting one's own learning goals, contents, and processes; 4) *creation*, which means creating one's own learning goals, objectives and tasks; and 5) *transcendence*, which means being able to

link between classroom learning and the world outside and to act like a teacher or researcher rather than a learner.

According to Sinclair (2000), learner autonomy involves a number of important aspects of learning, exploring and decision making, which may be summarised as follows: autonomy is a construct of capacity; learners are responsible and aware of their own learning process; there are various and unstable degrees of autonomy; learners constantly reflect on their learning and make decisions; learners do not depend on teaching strategies alone; and sociocultural, individual and psychological dimensions affect the promotion of autonomy.

These aspects also correlate with Benson's (2003) five main qualities which promote autonomy: 1) learners being actively involved in their own learning; 2) learning options and resources being provided or available; 3) learners having opportunities to choose and make decisions; 4) support being provided for learners; and 5) teachers and learners being encouraged to reflect on their own practice or performance.

Learner autonomy, nevertheless, is strongly linked to teacher autonomy (Little 1995) in that the former depends on, and is supported by, the latter. In other words, autonomous learning can be facilitated by teachers who are highly responsible, regularly analyse and reflect on their methods, and are able to determine their teaching direction and control their teaching processes in terms of subject content and affective factors. Yet teacher autonomy is dependent on learners who are ready to cooperate and adopt autonomous learning. Smith (2000) noted that when teachers are able to be completely autonomous, they can develop skills, knowledge and attitudes appropriate for themselves and those around them. According to Shaw (2008), teacher autonomy also needs to be examined, as it is influenced by such factors as gender, age, school policies, stress, motivation and beliefs. Vasile (2013) found that Romanian female teachers were less autonomous than their male counterparts, tending to comply with their school heads and educational policies and not seeking to become leaders. Javadi (2014), also revealed a case of Iranian EFL teachers in which the more they lacked freedom to think and make autonomous decisions, the more failure and fatigue they perceived, which consequently further lowered their degree of autonomy.

It is evident that collectivist Asian countries have tried to adopt this pedagogical approach due to its global popularity to respond to individual learners' needs, encourage their learning responsibilities, promote equality in learning opportunities and democracy in education, and will, overall, lead to teaching and learning effectiveness and efficiency (Holec 1981, Tirataradol 2010). Nevertheless, the approach was originally developed in western individualist cultures; thus, the adaptation may not necessarily be successful in all Asian countries. Iemjinda (2005, p.104) found in Thailand with regard to the practice of a newly encouraged method in Thai schools that "many teachers feel insecure when confronting changes required by government policy". This may largely result from teachers' unfamiliarity with the new teaching approach, as well as a lack of effective training, educational development programmes and the time to prepare for new lessons, leading them to favour more traditional ways (Kwangsawad 2007, p. 275)

TEACHERS AND LEARNERS' BELIEFS ABOUT AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

Given that autonomous learning is currently accepted as one of the most appropriate pedagogical approaches in any educational context, whether teachers and learners can put autonomous learning into practice is another issue. Williams et al. (2015) argued, based on educational psychology research, that beliefs and their relationship with such factors as contexts, cultures, situations, interactions, emotion and time, affect classroom practice and performance. Thus, instead of focusing on promoting the approach, it is essential to explore three types of related beliefs held by teachers and learners, namely epistemological beliefs (those concerned with knowing, learning and acquisition), mindsets (those strongly

influencing practice), and attributions (those about one's own success and failure). Without awareness of different teacher and learner beliefs both about classroom practice and about each other, difficulties and conflicts in language learning may arise.

Regarding the first type, teachers and learners may have different *epistemological beliefs* about language learning and teaching, which may be based on the following approaches or methods: 1) the early positivist approach of behaviourism and the audiolingual method; 2) cognitivism and the constructivist method; 3) humanism and the affective-humanistic method; 4) sociocultural perspectives and communication or interaction-based methods; and 5) the most recent ecological and complexity perspectives. The last approach appears to be in line with the concept of learning autonomy as it argues that different learners may respond differently to materials or resources and that we should understand the complexity of the educational context holistically. For the second type of belief, individuals have both explicit beliefs and implicit beliefs, and tend to be fully aware of the former. Implicit beliefs, also referred to as *mindsets*, tend to have more powerful effects on behavior. Active learning approaches, including autonomy, can thus easily be promoted or facilitated if both learners and teachers have a growth mindset or a set of beliefs that individuals are “capable of developing their intelligence through focused practice and effort” (Williams et al. 2015, p. 70). It is also recommended that teachers understand that different learning or classroom behaviours may result from their students' *attributions*, which are their reasons for successful and unsuccessful learning outcomes. Factors or reasons for their success or failures may be perceived as within or beyond their control, internal or external to themselves, and stable or subject to change over time (Weiner 1986).

Recent investigations on learner and teacher beliefs about learning autonomy have revealed interesting outcomes. Cotterall (1995) explored learners' beliefs about the role of the teacher, the role of feedback, learner independence, learner confidence, their experience of learning and their approach of learning, which resulted in varied outcomes that reflected different degrees of readiness for autonomous learning. Nakata (2011) found that beliefs held by Japanese EFL teachers varied; yet they similarly believed that they were not ready to employ this approach due to various factors, particularly the exam-oriented education system and large classes. Joshi (2011) examined both learner perceptions and teachers beliefs about autonomy in language learning and found a positive orientation towards the approach in both. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) revealed that EFL teachers from various countries at a university's language center in Oman had positive beliefs and understood the concept of learning autonomy; nonetheless, there was a gap between their beliefs and practice due to factors related to learners, institutions, and teachers.

Considering the case of Thailand, previous research has revealed a rather negative association between beliefs and practices mainly due to contextual factors and constraints, e.g. a prescribed curriculum with a focus on grammar and exams, and insufficient resources, as stated by Basturkmen (2012). It can thus be assumed that the Thai educational context may also hinder the adoption of autonomous learning. Berendt and Mattsson (2013), pointed out that questioning could be problematic for students because they lack analytical and critical thinking skills, which are not encouraged in the rather teacher-centred Thai education system. Questions from students, who are obliged to respect their teachers, could be considered as threatening to the teacher's face and position. With insufficient understanding, and resistance to practice autonomous learning, research into both teacher and learner beliefs related to this approach at a more fundamental and school level is still needed.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Compared to ASEAN countries with a history of British or US colonisation, such as Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, Thailand is an EFL country which is still struggling with its attempts to promote western-style education and the use of English as the medium. A few years ago, the country planned to officially announce English the second medium of instruction at all educational levels, but this policy initiative was never realised. The official use of English as an instructional medium has thus been possible only in a limited number of institutions, namely private schools with bilingual or English programmes, or universities offering a small number of English as a Medium Instruction (EMI) courses.

This failure to remodel its EFL approach does little to comply with AEC guidelines whereby the learning of English with an awareness of its different varieties, and contemporary higher-order thinking skills are encouraged in learners for successful communication in the 21st century. Illes (2012, p. 506) argued that:

Given the demands of communication in English and the fact that learners cannot rely on fixed reference points such as the idealised norms of idealised native speakers that ELT still offers, students have to become competent language users and autonomous agents who are capable of independent thinking and action. The task of language education is then to help learners develop self-reliance and autonomy, which will enable them to communicate successfully in international settings. Learner autonomy is therefore one of the issues that needs to be addressed when the focus is on the learner in present day ELT.

The present study was carried out with two sets of participants purposively chosen from 41 public schools in Bangkok. The first set included 76 EFL teachers; the second set consisted of 116 lower secondary schools students, classified into two groups, higher-performing students and lower-performing students, as determined by their overall English language performance at school and evaluations by their teachers. The reason for the classification was to explore whether these two groups would express different beliefs about autonomous learning within the Thai cultural learning context. Public schools throughout the country generally do not have high budgets to provide EMI instruction, yet the selected schools are supervised and supported by the Secondary Educational Service Area Offices, which means they are considered to have better exposure to English compared to those in other cities. This is possibly because the setting of outer Bangkok still attracts more highly qualified teachers, and is still more resourceful for English language learning than other provinces. It is thus interesting to investigate how prepared the teachers and students in these schools are when it comes to accommodating the principle of autonomous learning in their current learning culture.

The study intends to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are teachers' beliefs about autonomous learning within the Thai culture of learning?
- 2) What are the beliefs of their students (both higher performing and lower performing ones) about autonomous learning within the Thai culture of learning?
- 3) To what extent do teachers' beliefs and learners' beliefs match or differ?

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Two major methods were employed to collect qualitative data: an audio-recorded public interview with the teachers and audio-recorded focus-group interviews with their students. In conducting the interviews, the researchers invited both groups of participants to attend a seminar workshop on how to create an English language learning culture with active

involvement from teachers and students at a well-known university in the Bangkok metropolitan region in August 2015.

The participating teachers and students were separated, yet both groups of participants were asked identical, semi-structured interview questions, covering components extracted from reliable frameworks, especially Nunan (1997), Sinclair (2000) and Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012). The teachers were subdivided into two groups, consisting of those from large schools and those from small/medium-sized schools. The students were subdivided into ten groups of 10-12; five groups were higher-performing students and five were lower-performing students.

The questions, aiming to explore their beliefs of various aspects of autonomous learning appropriate for the Thai culture of learning, covered five main themes emerging from the components reflected in the interview questions. These questions, derived from the aforementioned well-known frameworks, were validated by a mentor team appointed by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). They focused on the roles and characteristics of teachers, learners, peers, and parents/communities; the selection of content, materials and resources; classroom learning and learning outside the classroom; factors affecting real-life language learning; and the things that need to be changed.

All the interview data were transcribed and then subjected to two steps of coding. Open-coding was first applied to identify sections for the five main themes stated earlier. For the second coding step, the researchers compared and contrasted both teacher and student interview transcripts to identify patterns across the datasets, to conceptualise the main themes with reference to theoretical accounts on autonomous learning, and to select corresponding quotations.

FINDINGS

This section presents the beliefs of the teachers, the higher performing students and the lower performing students under the five themes. The responses from the teachers are divided into whether they were from large or small and medium schools while those of the learners were separated into high performing and low performing. The findings are then discussed to ascertain to what extent each group of participants was ready for autonomous learning.

BELIEFS ON ROLES/CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

TABLE 1. Teachers' beliefs about the roles/characteristics of good language teachers

Concepts	Large-school teachers	Small/medium-school teachers
• Motivating learners	✓	✓
• Facilitating learners	✓	✓
• Monitoring learners	✓	–

Teachers from both school types advocated a role for English language teachers as motivators and facilitators. A small/medium-school teacher stated 'An EFL teacher has to draw attention from students by motivating them to get involved in the lesson and facilitating them in doing activities'. Large-school teachers added the role of monitoring: 'Teachers are responsible for monitoring and assisting learners during the learning process while organizing activities that allow authentic communication'. It can be deduced from these three perceived roles that the participating teachers believed in communicative language teaching approaches, requiring learners to be able to learn autonomously without teachers playing a central role in the learning process.

The responses from the students were also divided into whether they were high or low performing students and discussed in relation to nine concepts (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Students' beliefs about the roles/characteristics of good language teachers

Concepts	High-performing students	Low-performing students
• Understanding and attentive	✓	✓
• Organizing activities based on students' interest	✓	✓
• Using a variety of teaching techniques	✓	✓
• Supportive and creative	✓	✓
• Pleasant and kind	✓	✓
• Speaking English in classroom	✓	✓
• Punctual and responsible	✓	–
• Able to control disruptive students	✓	–
• Facilitate online learning	✓	✓

The corresponding findings from the students indicate the students' belief in the humanistic approach to learning. Both high-performing and low-performing groups needed kind, supportive and understanding teachers. Interestingly, students from both groups prefer to have both native and Thai teachers in the classroom, where the native teacher speaks English leading fun and functional activities and the Thai teacher teaches English grammar and explains to the class in Thai when necessary, balancing their need to study for both exams and the functional use of the English language. This is evidenced in the following statements:

We prefer native teachers as they are more relaxed and fun. Learning English with the native teachers is fun because they have more games and fun activities in class. I can learn native-like pronunciation from the native teachers, too.

But it will be great if we have a Thai teacher in the classroom to explain to us when we do not understand what the native teacher says.

The native teacher can teach functional English while the Thai teacher teaches grammar for exams.

Both groups of students agreed that teachers should teach or design the course according to students' interests. Both are also interested in online digital learning.

The two groups of students differed in that the high-performing group expected teachers to be responsible, punctual, and able to deal with their disruptive peers, as described in the following quotes:

Teachers should prepare contents prior to the class time.

They should begin and dismiss the class on time

They should not assign substitute teachers to teach for them

They need to deal with students who don't pay attention and disrupt the class.

The answers from both groups showed that the students in the present study have certain perspectives not only on how their English classes should be taught, but also about the kind of roles the teacher should play and qualities they should have. Such perspectives show that regardless of their academic achievements, there is a sign of being autonomous among students, all of whom share a similar idea for a perfect learning environment for Thai

students in particular. It is apparent that the students still need major guidance from a kind, supportive, and understanding teacher. This is mentioned by all students during the interview.

TABLE 3. Teachers’ beliefs about the roles/characteristics of good language learners

Concepts	Large-school teachers	Small/medium-school teachers
• Self-confident and self-assertive	✓	–
• Believing in one’s own potential	–	✓
• Enthusiastic	–	✓

Overall, the teachers believed in learners who were self-assertive and enthusiastic, and who believed in their own potential, all of which describes autonomous learners. Examples include

I prefer assertive learners who are willing to ask questions and discuss whatever issue that comes up

I like those who believe that they can develop, as they will always have passion for learning

I like teaching enthusiastic learners who participate in the lesson and use active learning strategies.

TABLE 4. Students’ beliefs about the roles/characteristics of good language learners

Concepts	Higher-performing students	Lower-performing students
• Self-confident and self-assertive	✓	✓
• Enthusiastic	✓	✓
• Hard-working	✓	✓
• Responsible	✓	✓
• Disciplined	✓	✓
• Determined	✓	✓
• Helpful to classmates	✓	–
• Constantly willing to learn both inside and outside class time	✓	✓
• Use online resources	✓	✓

As shown in Table 4, most of the students shared common beliefs about the qualities that characterised good language learners, three of which were similar to those stated by the teachers –being self-confident, self-assertive and enthusiastic, as in

We should try to be brave by talking with teachers and friends in English and asking questions when we don’t understand

We should find out more of what we have learnt outside of class time for example from the Internet and YouTube.

Good language learners were characterised as being hard-working, responsible, disciplined, and determined, as illustrated by the following example quotes:

We believe that we can be better off by learning new words by heart and doing a lot of practice tests

If we love the language, we have to set goals and try to achieve them by being responsible and disciplined.

It should be noted that only higher-performing students gave importance to being helpful to classmates, as in

We shouldn't hold a negative attitude towards those with lower grades.

We shouldn't disrupt our friends' learning by chit-chatting with them while in class.

We can help our classmates.

BELIEFS ON ROLE OF PEERS

This section will examine the teachers and learners' beliefs on the role of peers.

TABLE 5. Teachers' beliefs about the role of peers

Concepts	Large-school teachers	Small/medium-school teachers
• Coaching/peer-tutoring	✓	✓
• Interacting with the teacher	✓	–

The findings displayed in Table 5 reveal that most teachers believed that coaching was a proper role for peers, as in

Higher-performing students should coach their lower-performing peers. Peers interact more due to a lack of power distance, and this would help with learning.

Also the group of large-school teachers added that higher-performing peers should always ask teachers content-related questions, believing that

Asking questions leads to new language knowledge; particularly for English which has a lot of exceptions, which mainly higher-performing peers can notice.

These beliefs largely support sociocultural perspectives and communication or interaction-based learning.

TABLE 6. Students' beliefs about the role of peers

Concepts	Higher-performing students	Lower-performing students
• Coaching/peer-tutoring	✓	✓
• Sharing	✓	✓
• Supporting	✓	✓

The learners' views were partly similar to those of their teachers' in that they also believed in the effectiveness of peer coaching or tutoring in the carrying out of such tasks as homework and group work. Both groups mentioned sharing knowledge and supporting each other; yet they differed in details. Some higher performing students defined 'supporting' as 'not disrupting' (Peers should not annoy one another, with too much chit-chatting.) while their lower-performing peers explained that 'supporting' meant 'not insulting', 'being sincere' and "not being arrogant" (They should not make fun of others who have made mistakes in their speaking or pronunciation).

BELIEFS ON ROLE OF PARENTS/COMMUNITIES

Parents and communities can have a big influence on teaching and learning and their roles are examined here.

TABLE 7. Teachers' beliefs about the role of parents/communities

Concepts	Large-school teachers	Small/medium-school teachers
• Motivating	✓	✓
• Supporting school activities	✓	–
• Cultivating good study habits	✓	–

Teachers from schools of all sizes believed that parents, caretakers, and local communities should play active roles in supporting students to learn outside the class. First, parents should motivate students to practice and learn from additional resources. A teacher from a small/medium school stated, 'Parents are able to help their children practice their language skills' while a large-school teacher made the point that, 'In helping their children, parents should speak English and help their children find learning resources, but they should not offer help in a wrong way, especially by doing homework for their children'.

As can be seen in Table 7, large-school teachers needed parental involvement in supporting school activities, like donating or raising money to support English camps, as well as in teaching their children good study habits, as in

Parents and caretakers should teach their children the value of discipline, together with the importance of thinking and being enthusiastic. This will prepare them to compete with students from other nations.

TABLE 8. Students' beliefs about the role of parents/communities

Concepts	High-performing students	Low-performing students
• Supportive	✓	✓
• Tutoring	✓	✓
• Encouraging	✓	✓
• Understanding	✓	✓
• Giving learning advice	✓	✓
• No comparing no pressuring	✓	✓

The learners' views reflected more positivist and humanistic views of learning, as shown in Table 8. Both high and low performing students felt that parents or caretakers could take part in tutoring, giving advice, being supportive and understanding ('My parents can give me advice and explanations as their English is quite good') and to encourage them ('I need them to understand me and not to ignore or force me'). Both groups also want their parents to understand and not compare them with other students ('I want my parents to let me make choices and not to set expectations too high or compare me with others').

BELIEFS ON THE SELECTION OF CONTENT, MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

TABLE 9. Teachers' beliefs about the selection of contents, materials and resources

Concepts	Large-school teachers	Small/medium-school teachers
• Mainly by students	✓	–
• Partly by students	–	✓

The two groups of teachers held different beliefs about who should determine learning content, materials and resources, as seen in Table 9. The small/medium-school group was convinced that teachers could only determine some elements of the content and material:

We need to use the content determined by the Ministry of Education to ensure the same standards throughout the country. Nonetheless, we can add supplementary lessons based on the school's environment. For instance, our school is surrounded by orchid farms, so this can be our topic. Sometimes students come up with various things they want to learn, and we need to vote.

Large-school teachers believed the opposite and were more inclined towards autonomous learning in that learners should select learning content, materials and resources for themselves, as evidenced by ‘Teachers can let students think and discuss with them about what to learn. This also makes students proud’. One teacher also stated:

Students can take an active role in finding learning materials and resources to do with their current interest, particularly from the Internet. Learning materials can be TV series, sports or current issues. Students can also tell their teachers their preferred background color of slides. Learning materials should not be in black and white.

TABLE 10. Students’ beliefs about the selection of contents, materials and resources

Concepts	High-performing students	Low-performing students
• Mainly by teachers	✓	✓

Given the social-cultural context of Thai education, it was not surprising that both groups of students were happy with teachers making decisions on what they should learn and finding learning materials and resources for them. Their main concern was not about who selected them, but rather about whether the content was boring or interesting, repetitive or well-designed, as well as whether or not it was grammar-based or communication-based. They also asked for more games and activities applicable to their real-life language use. For example, students mentioned

Textbooks are boring as the content is not up-to-date

Resources should be more varied, for example, e-books, audio MP3, tablets, applications and other Internet-based materials with fast Wi-Fi

There should be links between what we have learnt and what we’re learning, as now it seems we’re not learning anything new

Students should be exposed to more conversation and less grammar

I don’t like being forced to study too hard before exams

BELIEFS ON CLASSROOM LEARNING AND LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

TABLE 11. Teachers’ beliefs about language classrooms

Concepts	Large-school teachers	Small/medium-school teachers
Well-equipped	✓	✓
Permanent	✓	–
Group-seating	–	✓

The two groups of teachers believed in well-equipped and properly arranged classrooms for interactive learning, as shown in Table 11. They similarly required better-equipped classrooms, which are rarely available in most public schools in the country. Those from large schools said their students suffered from having no permanent classroom for their class; they regularly had to move from one classroom to another:

We need classrooms equipped with a computer and multimedia, a projector, a DVD player and tablets. Each class should have a permanent classroom, as preparing our lessons to suit different classroom conditions is very frustrating. Some rooms are equipped while some aren’t.

Small/medium-school teachers also complained that most classrooms were traditionally arranged and not equipped for language learning:

We prefer group-seating arrangement to allow active participation in learning tasks.

TABLE 12. Students' beliefs about language classrooms

Concepts	High-performing students	Low-performing students
• Air-conditioned	✓	✓
• Well-equipped	✓	✓
• Group-seating	✓	✓
• Spacious, smaller-sized	✓	✓
• Well-decorated	✓	✓
• English-speaking	✓	✓
• Self-study lab	-	✓

Table 12 presents the students' preferred language classrooms, which were somewhat similar to those specified by their teachers. Both groups asked for air-conditioning, well-equipped rooms, group-seating, and smaller classes. One high-performing student claimed, 'The hot weather greatly affects our concentration' while another said, 'We need computers and the Internet to search for information right in our classrooms'. A lower-performing student thought, 'If we sit in groups, there won't be much disruption from students at the back of the class', and 'The number of students per class should be 20-30 max'. Lower-performing students mentioned having a lab for self-study would be good to improve their English language skills.

Both groups of students share similar humanistic needs.

We prefer beautifully decorated classrooms like in western countries. We could have a theme each week for classroom decoration as well as exhibition boards.

New vocabulary words should be colourfully displayed on the board.

We also need extra space for classroom exhibitions.

Social-interactional beliefs were also expressed as in: 'The English-speaking only environment should be encouraged'.

TABLE 13. Teachers' beliefs about learning outside the classroom

Concepts	Large-school teachers	Small/medium-school teachers
• Extra tutoring	✓	-
• Doing extra-curricular activities	✓	-
• Practicing thinking skills	✓	-
• Real-life practice with native speakers	-	✓
• Online practice or exposure to English	-	✓

It can be seen in Table 13 that the two groups of teachers supported different kinds of activities outside of class time. Large-school teachers held both positivist and cognitive beliefs: they wanted their students to go to tutoring schools after class, do extra-curricular activities, and develop thinking skills, as in

Apart from learning with outside tutors, students should join such activities as the English Day at school or any English camp, or they can go to centers for English language learning like TK Park in town

I like to ask my students, 'What do you think...?' I wish they asked themselves the same question at home to develop their evaluative and critical thinking skills.

Small/medium-school teachers by contrast believed in social interactional activities, i.e. both practice with native speakers and exposure to the English language online:

Students should go out and talk to native speakers, especially if their schools are near touristic places

They can practice through English language teaching courses on the Internet, as well as films and songs on YouTube.

TABLE 14. Students' beliefs about learning outside the classroom

Concepts	High-performing students	Low-performing students
• Doing extra-curricular activities	✓	✓
• Real-life practice with native speakers	✓	✓
• Online practice or exposure to English	✓	✓
• School's English-speaking atmosphere	✓	✓

Similar to their teachers, Table 14 shows that the students believed that out-of-class learning should include doing extra-curricular activities such as English camps both in Thailand and abroad, talking with native speakers by volunteering as tourist guides, and exposing themselves to the language from library or online resources. The two groups also agreed in that they wished their school had an English-speaking atmosphere - 'I would like the school to set up an English club or to put up English-language signs and notices'. However, more low-performing students preferred a more functional/real-life way of learning outside the classroom 'I wish the teacher could take us out to learn English in a fresh market'.

BELIEFS ON FACTORS AFFECTING REAL-LIFE LANGUAGE LEARNING

TABLE 15. Teachers' beliefs about factors affecting real-life language learning

Concepts	Large-school teachers	Small/medium-school teachers
• The traditional education system	✓	✓
• A lack of professional development	✓	✓
• A lack of social understanding	✓	✓
• A lack of English-speaking environment	✓	-
• A lack of parental understanding	-	✓

Five main factors affected real-life language learning in the view of both large-school and small/medium-school teachers (see Table 15). Firstly, the traditional education system is outmoded, as in

The problem lies in the education system that doesn't underline autonomous learning at pre-school and elementary levels. So it's hard to train them to be autonomous at the secondary-school level

Teachers are more worried about teaching grammar in-depth.

There is almost no professional development available for in-service teachers as they mention not being 'properly trained in newer or more active pedagogical approaches'. There is also a lack of social understanding of unfamiliar approaches as while people are aware of newer approaches but there is no real understanding of the principles. It is common to hear statements like 'What are teachers for?'

In addition, small/medium-school teachers point out:

Parents have never been formally informed of the importance of active or learner-centred approaches by the Ministry of Education.

Overall, large-school teachers felt that the lack of an English-speaking environment in schools or even among English-teaching colleagues was another cause of failure:

Activities that encourage students to speak English have never worked because English language teachers don't speak English to each other. It's not the school's policy.

TABLE 16. Students' beliefs about factors affecting real-life language learning

Concepts	High-performing students	Low-performing students
• Balance between study for exams and practical use of language	✓	✓
• Teachers' pronunciation and class activities	✓	✓
• Teacher and parental support	✓	✓
• Fun and stress-free environment	✓	✓
• Peer-tutoring	✓	✓
• Taking exam tips and techniques	✓	✓
• Online digital learning	✓	✓
• ASEAN environment	✓	-

Table 16 displays a variety of student beliefs concerning factors affecting everyday teaching, which were similar for both groups. The factors involved issues related to the Thai education system such as:

Unfortunately memorization and tests are our main activities

Teachers and friends should share with us their tips or techniques for doing well in exams

Too much homework and too many heavy textbooks discourage us.

Also teachers' pronunciation skills ('I prefer my US teacher's pronunciation'), and power distance and teachers' unfriendliness ('We're afraid of some unfriendly teachers') were of concern. As a matter of fact, teacher, parental, and peer support is needed by both groups. The students prefer a fun and stress-free learning environment with a practical guide to online language learning. Higher-performing students mentioned the ASEAN environment as a good context for encouraging and supporting practical English language learning and teaching in their schools.

BELIEFS ON THINGS THAT NEED TO BE CHANGED

TABLE 17. Teachers' beliefs about the things that need to be changed

Concepts	Large-school teachers	Small/medium-school teachers
• The hiring of native English-speaking teachers	✓	✓
• Punishment for poorly-performing students	✓	-

The teachers suggested two matters that impeded English-language teaching in Thailand. The first issue concerned the hiring of native English-speaking teachers, which the two groups considered differently. Large-school teachers were concerned about the screening system for hiring foreign teachers which results in 'low-quality teachers who don't really know how to teach'. Small/medium-school teachers on the other hand commented,

It is too late for students to start learning English with native speakers at the lower-secondary level. Primary-school students should have opportunities to learn with native teachers too.

Large-school teachers thought that a lack of penalty codes for poorly-performing students made students perform worse:

They can progress to the next class regardless of how poorly they do and how unruly they are.

TABLE 18. Students' beliefs about the things that need to be changed

Concepts	High-performing students	Low-performing students
• Classrooms	✓	✓
• Learning hours	✓	✓
• Teachers	✓	✓
• Peers	✓	✓
• Parents	-	✓
• The learners themselves	✓	✓
• School administrators	✓	-
• Content and resources	✓	✓

The last part of the findings shows that the students would like to see numerous changes in their English classes. Table 18 shows that both groups preferred bigger and better classrooms, fewer learning hours ('I don't want to study till late'), and friendlier and younger teachers to reduce the teacher-student gap ('I want to learn with younger teachers'). A high-performing student mentioned that school administrators also play a role in the management of language classrooms. 'I think school administrators should hold no bias or discrimination against any student'. Both groups expressed their opinions on the selection of content and resources to be more interesting, functional, and up-to-date.

Poor-performing students further demanded more understanding from their parents and wanted their parents to 'change their attitudes and force us less'. Both groups wanted to see some changes in their peers and wished 'friends would gossip or insult less and help others more'. Some even wanted to change themselves to be more disciplined, and to not be addicted to their mobile phones or 'I think I should try harder as English is really important'.

DISCUSSION

To sum up, the findings reveal the following. The teachers' beliefs about autonomous learning within the Thai culture of learning were largely inclined towards autonomy. There were slight differences between the two groups of teachers in that larger-school teachers paid more attention to monitoring and appeared to have higher expectations of students and their outcomes than those from smaller schools, who seemed to have lower expectations of students' academic achievement. Generally both high and low performing students agreed with autonomous learning approach within the Thai culture of learning. They did how differ in that the high-performing group put more emphasis on discipline and ethical aspects, while their low-performing counterparts wanted more academic and psychological support in learning and exams. Another key finding is that all the students hold a more humanistic desire not only in that they long for understanding, support and encouragement from those around them, but they also wish for a relaxing and harmonious collaborative atmosphere involving all stakeholders. Concerning the last research objective to explore the similarities and differences between teachers' beliefs and learners' beliefs, a few mismatches between the teachers' and the students' beliefs have emerged. The overall findings were similar to Joshi (2011), who also found that both learner perceptions and teacher beliefs were inclined towards autonomy. The general ideas tend to support a learner-centered approach and communicative methods promoting autonomous learning, as reflected in their beliefs in various areas, namely the role of good language learners, teachers, student-peers, parents and communities, students' opportunities to choose what to learn, classroom arrangements, and learning activities outside the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this study will help raise awareness at the Ministry of Education concerning the reasons why EFL teachers and learners in Bangkok and presumably in Thailand, as a whole, remain unable to be autonomous and how policymakers can investigate each cause of the problem. Similar to Cotterall (1995) and Nakata (2011), the outcomes of this research indicate the rarity in promoting a high degree of autonomous learning among Thai students at present. The major cause of the problem largely concerns a passive exam-based education system and a lack of mutual understanding between all stakeholders on what it means to become an autonomous learner and a life-long learner. Perhaps it should all start with a small step to promote mutual understanding between stakeholders on what it means to be a successful learner. The exam-based education system has caused parents and teachers alike, or even the wider society, to care more about students' achievements in exams and less about how autonomous they are or whether they obtain any functional professional skills. For this reason, as Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) reveal a socio-cultural gap exists between teachers' beliefs in learning autonomy and how they put it into practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was fully supported by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). We thank *Associate Professor Arunee Wiriyachitra*, a member of the board committee of the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment, Thailand, who provided insight and expertise that greatly assisted the research. We would also like to show our gratitude to Associate Professor Dr. *Roger Barnard* from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, for assistance with our methodology. We sincerely thank all the teachers and students who took time off their busy schedules to participate in this research project. We are also immensely grateful to Mr. Richard Hiam and Mr. Stephen John Cannell for their comments and assistance in editing earlier versions of this manuscript.

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