

Perceptions of Thai EFL teachers at public schools in Nonthaburi, Thailand: Teacher autonomy and constraints

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Abstract

One way to develop the quality of English teachers is to develop their autonomy. Teachers and their autonomy are key in the learning process and learners' development. This study aimed to explore 1) teacher autonomy of Thai EFL teachers at public schools in Nonthaburi, Thailand and 2) teacher autonomy constraints and ways to get around them. It took the form of a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design. The Teaching Autonomy Scale (TAS) consisting of two constructs, i.e., curriculum and general teaching autonomy and open-ended response questions were used to collect data from 31 Thai EFL school teachers. Three teachers were interviewed for insights. It was found that, on average, teacher autonomy was high in terms of both curriculum and general teaching autonomy. The thematic content analysis generated two themes which explained the high autonomy: 1) students as a center of learning and 2) teaching based on learning standards and indicators. For research objective 2, the findings showed 6 constraints and 5 relevant ways to overcome autonomy constraints: 1) learners vs. focus on learners, 2) lack of ELT materials vs. use of appropriate materials, 3) policies and demands vs. policy observance, 4) inadequate teaching time vs. selection of must-teach contents, 5) difficulties and excessive contents vs. exploitation of teaching experiences, 6) other constraints.

Keywords: Constraints to teacher autonomy, EFL teachers, Teacher autonomy, Thai basic education

1. Introduction

In Thailand, developing English proficiency of Thai people has been emphasized. According to the National Scheme of Education B.E. 2560-2579 (2017-2036), Strategy 3 of the national plan stipulates the proficiency development for people of all ages and the promotion of a lifelong learning society (Office of Education Council, 2017) which requires autonomous learners. To achieve those goals, teacher development is an essential plan. One of the necessities of preparation for the National Scheme of Education is the quality of teachers. As mentioned under Instructional Effectiveness,

Administration, and Management of Educational Budget, much of the budget is spent mainly on the development of learners and instruction, but little is spent on the development of teachers and this needs urgent resolution.

One way to develop the quality of English teachers is to develop their autonomy. According to Huang (2005), teacher autonomy development is a significant component of teacher development. In terms of pedagogy, teacher autonomy is crucial for learner-centered classroom environment which is the prerequisite for successful language classroom (Derakhshan & Taghizadeh, 2020). “Teachers need the freedom to select, plan, implement and evaluate their own ideas to ensure their classroom instruction in engaging, innovative, successful and sustainable, and that it meets students’ needs, wishes and wants” (Cirocki & Anam, 2021, p. 2). Clearly, teachers need to be autonomous in order to develop autonomous learners, which is the ultimate goal of every educational system, not only Thailand. To put simply, teachers need autonomy.

Although there is no consensus on the definition of teacher autonomy, teacher autonomy generally refers to a capacity and freedom to take control of teachers’ own teaching and learning (Benson & Huang, 2008; Huang, 2005; Little, 1995; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Smith & Erdogan, 2008; Wilches; 2007). Teachers and their autonomy are key in the learning process and learners’ development. Supported by Benson (2010), students perceive their teachers as immediate educational authorities who are able to solve classroom problems which signifies teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy is essential as it involves teacher professional discretion. Besides, teacher autonomy is beneficial for teachers themselves. Work stress diminishes if job satisfaction, perceived empowerment, and professionalism increases (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Dincer, 2019). With teacher autonomy, burnout of EFL school teachers can be avoided (Koçak, 2018) and job satisfaction, workload manageability perceptions and intention to stay in the teaching profession can be positively enhanced (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). For Girocki and Anam (2021), teacher autonomy should be acknowledged as a prominent educational goal worldwide.

In regard to teacher autonomy research in the field of language teaching, empirical studies are generally limited since teacher autonomy has been considered a primarily theoretical construct (Cirocki & Anam, 2021). Specifically, for the Thai context, research on teacher autonomy appears to be scarce especially at the basic education level. If the quality of teachers of English is interpreted as teacher autonomy as argued by Huang (2005), autonomy of the English teachers is worthwhile studying and researching. Teacher autonomy is a crucial factor for good instructional practice, teachers’ commitment and work satisfaction (Paulsrud & Wermke, 2020). More empirical studies are thus needed to understand better teacher autonomy in the Thai context. Besides, constraints to teacher autonomy development is another area worth attention and teachers should be able to inform such constraints. For Vieira (2003), attention to constraints to teacher and learner development is very important and contributive to widening research in this field.

To fill the gaps, this study will explore teacher autonomy and its constraints perceived by Thai EFL teachers and how they get around such constraints. It is hoped that findings will be advantageous for the educational strategic policy planners and makers at a national level to effectively plan for better qualities of English language teachers and English teaching. For education administration and language pedagogies, school administrators can also exploit the results for teacher autonomy promotion and teacher professional development. Besides, this study can pave the way for further research in the field

of teacher autonomy in the Thai context. As an exploratory study, public schools in Nonthaburi were contacted as participants through personal connection.

2. Research Objectives

2.1. To explore teacher autonomy of Thai EFL teachers at public schools in Nonthaburi, Thailand

2.2. To investigate constraints of teacher autonomy and ways to get around them of Thai EFL teachers at public schools in Nonthaburi, Thailand

3. Research Questions

3.1. What is the degree of teacher autonomy perceived by Thai EFL teachers at public schools in Nonthaburi, Thailand?

3.2. What are the constraints of teacher autonomy and ways to get around them of Thai EFL teachers at public schools in Nonthaburi, Thailand?

4. Literature Review

4.1. Teacher autonomy concept

Teacher autonomy is a multifaceted concept and little attempt has been paid on clarifying its meanings and definitions (Huang, 2005). Although there is no clear definition of teacher autonomy and scholars in the field hold different views, this section attempts to explore some meanings and dimensions of teacher autonomy.

In the field of second language instruction, teacher autonomy is defined as “Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers” (Little, 1995, p. 179). Huang (2005) proposes that teacher autonomy refers to willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of teachers’ own teaching and learning which corresponds to social-motivational, technical-psychological, and critical-political dimension respectively. Teachers’ teaching and learning constitutes the concept of teacher autonomy.

Similarly, Smith (Smith & Erdogan, 2008) states that teacher autonomy has several dimensions and proposes two dimensions of teacher autonomy in relation to learner autonomy. The first one is professional action or teaching domain. Teachers perform self-directed teaching as a professional action, have capacity for self-directed professional action, and have freedom for control over professional action or teaching. The second dimension is professional development or teacher-learning domain. Teachers perform self-directed professional development or teacher-learning, have capacity for self-directed professional development or to self-direct their own learning as a teacher, and have freedom from control over professional development or to self-direct their learning as a teacher. This framework of teacher autonomy thus includes both teaching and learning, which strongly emphasizes the concept of “teacher-learner autonomy”. It is the self-directed teaching and learning of teacher autonomy. For Benson and Huang (2008), teacher autonomy is conceptualized as a professional attribute which is cultivated through teacher education processes and self-directed professional development processes.

Teacher autonomy has been defined as teachers' feelings of whether they control themselves and their work environments (Pearson & Hall, 1993). For Pearson and Moomaw (2005), teacher autonomy refers to teachers' planning, implementing their professional activities within certain restrictions, making preferences in terms of the organization of the working environment and participating in administrative processes. Increasing teacher autonomy enhances teachers' sense of empowerment and professionalism when they are trusted and given some powers in the decisions made with the development and implementation of educational reforms.

Based on the definitions of teacher autonomy discussed previously, teacher autonomy in this present study concerns a capacity and freedom to take control of teachers' own teaching. It comprises two constructs, that is curriculum autonomy and general or teaching autonomy (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Curriculum autonomy involves a selection of activities, materials and instructional planning and sequencing. General teaching autonomy deals with classroom standards of conduct and personal on-the-job decision making.

There are some related studies on teacher autonomy. In Japan, Marshall (2019) explored teacher autonomy perceived by 17 English teachers in terms of their own freedom for decision making about the teaching and learning inside their classroom using the teacher autonomy scale (TAS). It was found that teachers' self-perceptions of both general and curricular autonomy were high. Likewise, in Indonesia, teacher autonomy of 185 EFL secondary school teachers was reported high, but their disappointment was on the exclusion of school curriculum decision making process (Cirocki & Anam, 2021). In the Turkish context, Dincer (2019) found that there needs to be more control over curricular autonomy. In addition, external factors, such as curriculum, classroom environment, and salary, and internal factors, such as self-evaluation, the joy of teaching, and student motivation, were linked to the levels of teacher autonomy and job satisfaction. In Iran, it was found that both professional identity and teacher autonomy could predict positively and significantly teacher success (Derakhsan & Taghizadeh, 2020).

In the Thai educational context, research on teacher autonomy is very limited. A small-scale study conducted by Jeh-Awae and Wiriyakarun (2021) revealed that self-efficacy and teacher autonomy of 7 Thai pre-service teachers was moderate and low respectively. This was because of their limited experience in online teaching practices and contextual constraints that controlled their online teaching practices. Another study was carried out by Khemavamsa (2022) and it was found that teacher autonomy of international EFL teachers in an international university in Thailand reported a moderate level of teacher autonomy. These teachers believed that they were autonomous teachers and were aware that teacher autonomy was important. They viewed that teacher autonomy related to teachers' freedom, capacity and control over teaching.

4.2. Teacher autonomy constraints

Several factors possibly constrain teacher autonomy development. First, teachers' work conditions and other administrative pressure indeed hamper the capacity to take charge of their own teaching (Benson, 2010). There are factors relating to work conditions that strictly constrain the teachers' exercise of control, namely educational policy, institutional rules and regulations (Benson & Huang, 2008) as well as stress from state mandated testing (Ramos, 2006). The impact is also on the students as the conditions can obstruct classroom teaching and learning. Therefore, teacher autonomy should be described as working conditions conducive for teachers' professional discretion as well as

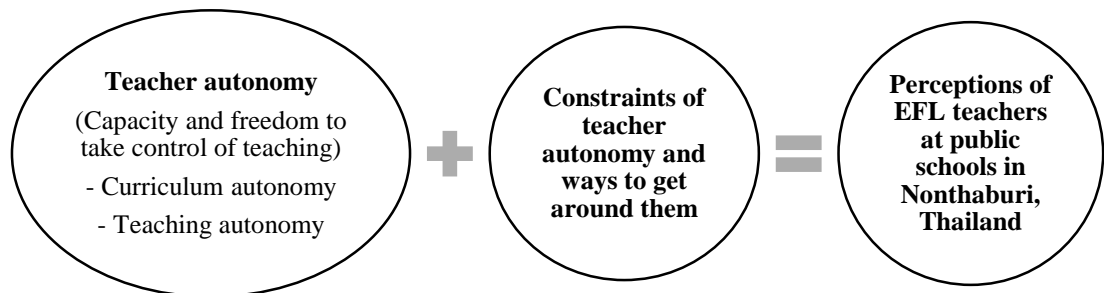
teachers' capacity to create such conditions despite the concurrent limits (Benson, 2010). Teachers' willingness to resist the existing educational systems and fight for their students' greater autonomy in such working conditions is another crucial aspect of teacher autonomy (Benson & Huang, 2008). The second constraint is fear of change which is powerful since it is safer to do things in a familiar way. The third one concerns fear to give control to students. Many teachers are not familiar with and not used to empowering students. The last constraint of teacher autonomy is a reluctance to try new things which is the internal factor. Teachers tend to resist investing time, effort and money in their personal and professional development and growth (Ramos, 2006).

Vieira (2003) points out a conception of teaching as a moral and political activity which requires that "teachers are both willing and able to exert some control over educational settings by mediating between constraints and ideals, while this requires a collaborative culture of schooling" (p. 222). For Benson (2010), teacher autonomy can be understood "both as a working condition that allows room for teachers' professional discretion and as the teacher's capacity to create these working conditions within prevailing constraints" (p. 263). The former concerns structure constraints while the latter deals with the internal capacity of the teachers or agency. Structure accounts for systems of constraints and agency accounts for the ways that teachers find room for exercising their control. Benson (2010) argues that teachers have to acquire some degrees of freedom from both structural and internal constraints on their autonomy if they would like to continue working effectively.

In terms of research on teacher autonomy constraints, Benson (2010) found that schemes of work were a major determination of day-to-day decisions regarding instruction of schoolteachers teaching English in Hong Kong. Supervision and surveillance systems were also another main constraint on teacher autonomy with regard to their capacity for own learning and teaching decisions. Another research shows that curriculum was the constraint in the Indonesian school context. Although willing to participate in the curriculum development discussion, the teachers were rarely engaged (Cirocki & Anam, 2021).

Based on the above literature review, the conceptual framework of this present study is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



5. Research Methodology

5.1. Research design

This study took the form of the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design which consists of quantitative phase followed by qualitative (Creswell et al., 2003). For this study the subsequent qualitative interview data collection explained or elaborated on the quantitative findings obtained from a questionnaire. As a mixed-methods study, the results from both quantitative and qualitative strand were reported separately and then mixed to determine their convergence, augmentation, or divergence.

5.2. Context of the study and participants

Education at all levels (formal, non-formal and informal education) in Thailand is provisioned by the Ministry of Education or MOE (2017). Basic education comprises six years of primary education, and six years of secondary education. Under the MOE, the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) is in charge of proposing policies, development plans and the Basic Education Core Curriculum in line with the National Economic and Social Development Plan and the National Scheme of Education. Based on the core curriculum, each school then designs its own institutional curriculum.

There are 18 public schools located in Nonthaburi Province, which is near Bangkok, Thailand as of academic year 2020. Among the total number of 207 teachers teaching English, there were 98 Thai teachers. Based on a convenient sampling technique owing to a personal contact to these schools, all the 98 Thai teachers were selected for data collection. Altogether, 31 Thai teachers teaching English at high school levels completed the online questionnaire. Two teachers declared their unwillingness to participate in this study and the rest did not respond. This made a response rate of 33.67%. Table 1 displays demographics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographics of the Participants

		Number	%
Gender	Male	5	16.10
	Female	26	83.90
Age	26-30	8	25.80
	31-40	5	16.20
	41-50	6	19.30
	51-59	12	38.80
Teaching experiences	4-10	12	39.00
	11-20	6	19.00
	21-30	9	29.00
Education	31-36	4	13.00
	Bachelors	23	74.20
	Master's	8	25.80
Teaching level	Junior high school	11	35.50
	Junior and senior high school	8	25.80
	Senior high school	12	38.70

5.3. Research instruments

The Teaching Autonomy Scale (TAS)

The most widely used scale to measure teacher autonomy to date is Teaching Autonomy Scale (TAS) developed by Pearson and Hall (1993). The scale, however, comprises two constructs which are curriculum autonomy (6 statements) and general or teaching autonomy (12 statements). The TAS appears to include professional freedom and self-direction within the process of learning how to teach as suggested by Benson and Huang (2008). Therefore, the TAS with 4 scales (from definitely agree to

definitely disagree) was considered appropriate for data collection. The interpretation of the perceived autonomy is as follows: 3.26-4.00 means very high, 2.51-3.25 means high, 1.76-2.50 means low, and 1.00-1.75 means very low. The range of 0.75 is based on this formula: the maximum value of the Likert scale (4) minus its minimum value (1) and divided by the scale's value (4). (Todd, 2011). There are 7 negative-meaning statements, i.e., no. 2, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, and 18. Their scores were reversed and an asterisk was used to indicate this when the findings were reported in Table 2.

In terms of its quality, the two factors of TAS were analyzed with confirmatory factor analysis and the results confirmed the internal consistency reliability of the scores ($r = 0.83$) according to Pearson and Moomaw (2005). It is noted that the TAS aims to measure teacher autonomy in a general education sense. Thus, to intentionally reflect teacher autonomy in English language education, the word English was included in some questionnaire statements when deemed appropriate. The questionnaire included both English and Thai to avoid a language barrier problem. Back translation was performed to ensure translation accuracy.

For qualitative data to triangulate with the questionnaire findings, the question: How do you make day-to-day decisions about your teaching and learning processes? was asked to explore how they make decisions about classroom practices. To collect data on teacher autonomy constraints and solutions (research objective two), the two open-ended response items were adapted from Benson (2010).

1. What constrain your capacity to make your own decisions about teaching? (To explore teacher autonomy constraints)
2. Based on the constraints you mentioned, how do you exercise your teaching professional discretion? (To explore how they get around the constraints)

A pilot test of the questionnaire statements and open-ended questions was executed with three teachers by having them read the statements and questions. Their comments and suggestions for clearer and unambiguous questions were considered.

The semi-structured interview

At the second stage to gain insight, the semi-structured interview using the same three open response questions followed the quantitative study phase.

5.4. Data collection

The online questionnaire was sent to the participants by each school's deputy director. The first item of the questionnaire required them to show their willingness to participate in this research project by clicking on "Willing to participate". Then they proceeded to complete the questionnaire. Subsequently, three out of eight participants (37.50%) who were willing for the interview were randomly selected. Each interview over the phone lasted about half an hour. Their written responses were read by the researcher and then they elaborated on their answers and added more information.

5.5. Data analysis

For research objective 1, an overall mean and standard deviation (S.D.) of the TAS were calculated, as well as for each of the constructs. According to Todd (2011, p. 72), “for a questionnaire with many questions, listing the mean ratings for each question provides a clearer picture of responses (especially if we also give the standard deviation to show how widely spread out the responses are)”.

For the second research purpose, a thematic content analysis was carried out. Frequency counts were done by identifying coding units and defining coding categories after repeated reading of the responses to generate themes as per the objective of each question. Emerging themes were generated upon discussion until the agreement was reached between the two coders.

6. Findings

6.1. Degree of teacher autonomy

For the first research objective, it was found that, on average, teacher autonomy of both constructs was high with a mean of 3.09 (SD = 0.80). Further analysis showed that curriculum autonomy was high with a mean of 2.85 (SD = 0.90) and general or teaching autonomy was also high with a mean of 3.21 (SD = 0.75). Means of individual statements were displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean of Each Statement

Curriculum Autonomy		Mean	SD	Interpretation
		2.85	0.90	High
1	In my English teaching, I use my own guidelines and procedures.	3.03	0.84	High
2*	In my situation, I have little say over the English content and skills that are selected for teaching.	3.06	1.12	High
3	My teaching of English focuses on those goals and objectives I select myself.	2.55	1.09	High
4	What I teach in my English class is determined for the most part by myself.	2.32	0.83	Low
5	The materials I use in my English class are chosen for the most part by me.	3.35	0.61	Very high
6	The content and skills taught in my English class are those I select.	2.77	0.88	High
General Autonomy		Mean	SD	Interpretation
		3.21	0.75	High
7	I am free to be creative in my English teaching approach.	3.61	0.50	Very high
8	The selection of student-learning activities in my English class is under my control.	3.48	0.68	Very high
9	Standards of behavior in my English classroom are set primarily by me.	3.42	0.56	Very high
10*	My job does not allow for much discretion on my part.	2.68	0.79	High
11	The scheduling of use of time in my English classroom is under my control.	3.58	0.72	Very high
12*	I seldom use alternative procedures in my teaching of English.	3.10	0.91	High
13	I follow my own guidelines on English instruction.	2.87	0.72	High
14*	In my situation, I have only limited latitude in how major problems are solved.	2.74	0.89	High
15*	In my English class, I have little control over how classroom space is used.	2.77	0.92	High

16*	The evaluation and assessment activities used in my English class are selected by others.	3.23	0.92	High
17	I select the English teaching methods and strategies I use with my students.	3.55	0.51	Very high
18*	I have little say over the scheduling of use of time in my English classroom.	3.45	0.85	Very high

According to Table 2, statement 4 of curriculum autonomy: *What I teach in my English class is determined for the most part by myself* was reported “low”. Statement 5: The materials I use in my English class are chosen for the most part by me was rated “very high”. The rest were reported “high”. General autonomy was rated “high” and “very high” only. Strikingly, statement 7: *I am free to be creative in my English teaching approach* was rated the highest.

The qualitative data analysis in response to the first open-ended question asking how the teachers made day-to-day decisions about their teaching and learning processes emerged two themes as follows. It is noted that excerpts were from the questionnaire, followed by the interview.

Table 3. Day-To-Day Decisions About Teaching and Learning Processes

Themes	Frequency	%
1. Students as a center of learning - Teaching techniques - Materials and learning activities as per students’ ability - Students’ needs and wants	22	68.75
2. Teaching based on learning standards and indicators	10	31.25

Theme 1: Students as a center of learning

The majority teachers viewed students as a major determination of their day-to-day instructional decisions.

“Organize instruction as per the indicators but change it to suit a classroom context and students, depending on situations. A variety of activities are prepared.”

“Considering what occurs in each session as students in each class are different in terms of their readiness to learn, background knowledge, IT devices for learning online, home Internet system stability, necessity to help their family earn money, etc. These makes teachers to think positively about the problems of the students and try to find ways and be flexible to fully facilitate their learning. For example, teachers search for VDO clips and send them to the Line application group so that students can learn all the time. Also, live worksheets are provided to the students so that they can practice in an interactive manner and get prompt feedback, etc.” (Interview, Teacher#3)

Theme 2: Teaching based on learning standards and indicators

Learning standards and indicators prescribed in the national core curricular was the second factor exterminating their daily instructional operations.

“Organizing learning according to the indicators.”

“I make it (teaching and learning processes) but follow the guidelines and syllabus.”

The findings from the qualitative data, especially theme 1, converged with the quantitative findings on high teacher autonomy as putting an emphasis on a student-centered learning approach reflects teacher autonomy. Moreover, the interview revealed that the teachers accepted that they had a very high freedom to organize learning. The teachers were expected to design and create their own materials rather than following a course book provided. However, this excessive freedom raised a concern to this teacher on teachers' qualities to organize their own teaching.

"I can design my lessons freely. Just make them correspond to the indicators or learning outcomes prescribed in the core curriculum and students' needs. ... We are given a lot of freedom, a lot. The core curriculum provides a broad framework of contents and learning outcomes. Each teacher needs to interpret, analyze, and synthesize what are required by the core curriculum and prepare for teaching accordingly. So this depends on each individual teacher's competence and teaching skills. ... I think it's necessary to develop teachers. They have to be confident and able to improve themselves. This will make the freedom they have contribute to students' learning and fulfil the students' needs. Also, the teacher colleges can't produce teachers with appropriate qualities for school context." (Interview, Teacher#1)

The interview findings converged with the questionnaire results on the high level of teacher autonomy. However, the issues of too much freedom and teacher development were augmented from the interview.

6.2. Constraints of teacher autonomy and ways to get around them

In response to the second research objective, it was found that there were 6 teacher autonomy constraints as shown in Table 4. Side by side, the findings of ways to get around those constraints were presented in the same table.

Table 4. Teacher Autonomy Constraints and Ways to Get Around Such Constraints

Teacher autonomy constraints themes	Frequency	%	Ways to get around the constraints themes	Frequency	%
1. Learners	13	37.14	1. Focus on learners	9	33.33
- Learning abilities	(9)	(25.71)	- Apply child-centered teaching	(4)	(14.81)
			- Provide pre-sessional English	(2)	(7.41)
- Readiness to learn	(4)	(11.43)	- Exploit appropriate materials	(2)	(7.41)
			- try to understand students	(1)	(3.70)
2. Lack of ELT materials	6	17.14	2. Use of appropriate materials	4	14.81
			- Procure with personal budget	(3)	(11.11)
			- Use free online materials	(1)	(3.70)
3. Policies and demands	4	11.43	3. Policy observance	4	14.81
4. Inadequate teaching time	4	11.43	4. Selection of must-teach contents	2	4.41

5. Difficult and excessive contents	3	8.57	5. Exploitation of teaching experiences	3	11.11
6. Others	5	14.29	-	-	-
- Number of students	(1)	(2.86)			
- Not any and no response	(1)	(2.86)			
- No response	(3)	(8.57)			

Theme 1. Learners vs. Focus on learners

The learners in terms of learning abilities and readiness to learn were mentioned as the major factor influencing the daily decision making especially during the pandemic. This learner factor made teachers mainly concentrate on the learners by applying a learner-centered approach to respond to the students' learning behaviors.

“The learning ability of the learners and the Covid 19 outbreak situation.”

“In this current situation the factor that impacts learning is class attendance and interactions of the students.”

The interview provided more details about how the teacher tried to increase online class attendance, which converged with the questionnaire data.

“Student’ background knowledge as their English abilities are different. Sometimes, this particular teaching technique works well for good students only. So I need to find other techniques that will work for less able students. I make sure that the teaching techniques will work for every student. ... During the Covid 19 pandemic, we go online and this makes teaching more difficult. I can’t control student attendance. But I have tried several ways to solve this problem. I contacted their parents and counsellors to help.” (Interview, Teacher#2)

Theme 2. Lack of ELT materials vs. Use of appropriate materials

A lack of ELT materials was mentioned as the second constraint. The solution was to use appropriate learning materials by purchasing them with the teachers' own budget or using free online materials.

“No support of effective and modern materials and media such as no use of school or educational emails. Sometimes, teachers have to use their own budget to download good programs to teach students.”

The interview confirmed the lack of sufficiently effective materials and using teachers' own budget for the learning quality of both students and teachers themselves. Data convergence was clear.

“Try to have materials by using my own budget for convenient instructional organization and to develop myself in different aspects for a better quality of learning organization.” (Interview, Teacher#3)

Theme 3. Policies and demands vs. Policy observance

The school policies were reported as the third factor and the teachers followed the policies with little or no resistance.

“The school policies”.

“Somethings are uncontrolled such as meetings and other works.”

“I try to look at the policies that will be ultimately beneficial for the students.”

The interviews revealed that some policies include demands for other non-teaching works affecting their teaching. The teachers then tried to be selective to comply with demands which would not impact learning. This displayed data convergence.

“Some policies don’t allow teachers to go back to a classroom. We have many other kinds of work to do, such as school evaluation. This definitely impacts teaching time. I feel so sorry for the students. The policies have the effect on us, like employment. But I try to look at the policies that will be ultimately beneficial for the students.” (Interview, Teacher#1)

“Oh, besides learner difference, I would like to add other non-teaching workload that affect my teaching planning. It’s the first factor actually. If teachers have time to prepare for the lessons and have good materials, students will be motivated to attend class more.” (Interview, Teacher#2)

Theme 4. Inadequate teaching time vs. Selection of must-teach contents

The insufficient teaching time during the pandemic was also the third factor which caused the teachers to be selective in teaching only essential subject matters. Resources for self-study were also suggested.

“Time frame impacts both students and teachers. Students rush through their learning, and teachers rush to complete the assessment so that the learning outcomes are reported on time.”

The interview revealed the solution discretion by teaching only necessary contents within teaching time which was limited during the pandemic.

“It’s necessary to create a balance by selecting only the essential contents to teach within a limited time which will be useful for further study of the students. This helps better learning organization. Moreover, I try to guide students to get an access to free learning resources for their self-study. Application of various measurement and assessment at a suitable time is important too so as not to create too much pressure to students and they will have bad attitudes toward English learning.” (Interview, Teacher#3)

Another interview showed the inadequate teaching time was due to other non-teaching work demands, which was an augmentation of the findings.

“As I am an administrator, I have to do many kinds of work that are not relevant to teaching. Sometimes the director assigns me to do somethings that affect my teaching. I will ask another teacher to teach for me. I don’t want to cancel class.” (Interview, Teacher#1)

Theme 5. Difficult and excessive contents vs. Exploit teaching experiences

The fifth factor dealt with demanding contents within a limited teaching time. Teachers reported exploiting their teaching experiences to cope with this situation.

“The difficulty level of the contents”.

“Use the teaching experiences to solve this problem.”

“You must be quick-witted, make use of materials and be self-confident.”

The interviews displayed the learner differences in terms of their English proficiency and inappropriate contents. The focus on students was reinforced again.

“Some contents in the course book is too difficult for students. So I select other contents more appropriate to teach. I need to consider students. Weak students don’t learn from some particular contents.” (Interview, Teacher#2)

Theme 6. Others

This theme incorporated responses of ‘the large number of students’, ‘no any constraints’ and ‘no responses’. There was no information on how the teachers dealt with these constraints.

To sum up, the interview findings converged with the themes or results obtained from the open-ended question.

7. Discussion

For research objective 1, the findings of perceived high level of teacher autonomy in terms of both curriculum and teaching autonomy of the Thai teachers in the basic education system is similar to the findings of Cirocki and Anam (2021) and Marshall (2019). There are two possible explanations for the high level of teacher autonomy in this study.

Conception of student-centeredness as a drive for teacher autonomy

The qualitative results showed that the teachers made day-to-day decisions regarding their instructional processes by seriously taking students and learner differences into consideration. The student-centered approach is clearly emphasized which is strongly supported by item 17 which was rated very high: *I select the English teaching methods and strategies I use with my students*. Teaching techniques and materials are chosen according to students’ needs and wants. The interview revealed that the teachers tried to facilitate students’ learning by using materials deemed appropriate to cater for students’ needs and to support their learning especially the online learning during the Covid 19 pandemic. This clearly shows a strong sense of responsibility for their teaching (Little, 1995). Teacher autonomy may positively correlate with teaching responsibility.

This personal view of students as a learning center influences how the teachers teach and helps promote teacher autonomy. As Little (2000 cited in Lamb, 2008) argues, teacher autonomy can be fostered by the determination of the initiatives the teachers take in the classroom. Teachers must be able to employ their professional skills autonomously. For Derakhsam and Taghizadeh (2020), teacher autonomy is essential for a student-centered classroom. In this Thai context, the teachers have freedom and are willing to design and plan lessons for the students’ utmost learning benefits. The student-centered teaching approach empowers teachers for teaching and supports teachers for their own autonomy development. According to Lamb (2008, p. 275), “the freedom to be able to teach in the way that one wants to teach is also a manifestation of teacher autonomy.” Statement 7: *I am free to be creative in my English teaching approach* was rated the highest. This clearly reveals the freedom and creativity the teachers have and enjoy. The implication lies on promoting the student-centered approach

by school administration as it helps the teachers to create their professional attributes, that is, willingness to take control of and responsibility for their own teaching. Besides, such approach helps to promote a capacity to control the teaching processes and the teacher's own development as a teacher (Benson & Huang, 2008).

The significant role of reactive teacher autonomy

Reactive teacher autonomy may contribute to the high level of teacher autonomy in the basic educational context of Thailand. Applying the concept of reactive learner autonomy offered by Littlewood (1999), it appears that the school teachers in this study exercise their reactive autonomy. The Basic Education Commission creates the national core curricular as the guidelines. The learning standards are set which provide a direction for the teachers to follow. However, the teachers have freedom to organize their own teaching autonomously to attain the learning outcomes or the indicators as prescribed by the core curricular. The results revealed that the teachers were satisfied with this reactive autonomy. They do not have to develop the curriculum which is quite demanding for them but they can modify the content or adapt materials to make it appropriate for their classroom context and students. This implies that, pedagogically, reactive autonomy appears to be appropriately powerful in fostering teacher autonomy in the basic education context. Restrictions over curriculum do not seem to limit these teachers' ability to make decision in the classroom. They feel they are still empowered to develop their own institution curriculum and organize learning for their students based on their learning context with the reactive autonomy that they are conferred.

Based on research objective 2, it was found that learner is the focal factor influencing decision about teaching of the school teachers which is different from the findings of Chiangmai (2016) who found that the curriculum was the main constraint in Thai Universities. There are some explanations as follows.

Learner constraint and learner-centeredness to mediate learning

As per theme 1, learner is the first factor that influences decision making about learning processes. Learners are different in terms of their English ability and readiness to learn. This is due to a heterogeneous class arrangement. The teachers thus felt constrained the most by learners. Particularly during the pandemic learners become a greater challenge for the teachers who conduct classes online as the interview disclosed. Students' attention and class attendance are the major problems for the teachers. However, this learner constraint is mediated by the belief that learners are the center of learning which can promote life-long learning society as per the national plan of the MOE of Thailand. Therefore, the student-centered approach which is viewed beneficial for language learning is applied, and this contributes to the development of teacher autonomy as previously discussed. The finding is in line with Benson's (2010) research with the school teachers in Hong Kong. Understanding student's conditions and problems is also crucial. This reflects the significance of cognitive and affective control of the teaching process (Little, 1995). It can be said that the learner constraint can develop the capacity and willingness to manage their teaching situation and increase teachers' effort for professional teaching practices. According to Sinclair (2008, p. 256), "the greater the challenge, the greater the reward!" For the Thai basic educational context, the application of student-centered learning approach should be emphasized to a greater extent to help develop teacher autonomy.

Working conditions constraints mediated through teacher agency

Themes 2 to 5 dealing with ‘lack of ELT materials’, ‘policies and demands’, ‘inadequate teaching time’, and ‘difficult and excessive contents’ display working conditions that influence teaching and learning. These structural impacts indicate the deskilling of EFL teachers, argued by Crookes (1997 cited in Benson, 2010). To mediate these working constraints, the teachers exercised their agency or the ways which they find room for implementation (Benson, 2010). The findings suggested that the teachers did not feel discouraged from such constraints but struggled against them. Most teachers in this study have long teaching experiences which may help them cope with the constraints. Argued by Lepine (2007 cited in Prichard & Moore, 2016), experience is one variable affecting the degree of teacher autonomy.

To get around the constraint of materials availability, the teachers used their own budgets to purchase necessary materials to maintain or improve learning and teaching quality. According to the research by Murray et al. (2020), a lack of investment in resources impacts teachers’ ability for teaching innovation. To handle the constraints of inadequate teaching time due to the online learning, excessive contents, or the policies that require the teachers to do non-teaching works which hamper teaching time, the teachers created a balance between teaching essential contents and limited teaching time. One teacher said using her teaching experiences to overcome the content-related constraint. These reflect the teachers’ own agency or internal capacity for autonomy. The working constraints allow room for their professional discretion (Benson, 2010) and push them to be an agent in their own teaching situations. For Kumaravadivelu (2003), autonomous language teachers know “not only how to teach but also how to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula, and textbooks” (p. 33). Support from the schools is thus called for to create working conditions that will facilitate effective teaching and learning and assist teachers to mediate the constraints they encounter.

8. Conclusion

The findings revealed the perceived high degree of teacher autonomy in terms of teaching and curriculum autonomy of the public schoolteachers in Thailand. Conception of student-centeredness helps explain this high autonomy. Employing the student-centered approach is the drive for their autonomy and has the influence on how they teach. Reactive teacher autonomy appears to be beneficial to help develop teacher autonomy in the basic education context of Thailand. The teachers showed their satisfaction toward having the national core curriculum for the country-wide uniformity as this serves as the guidelines for them to design and plan for their own teaching. They enjoyed the freedom in this aspect.

Regarding autonomy constraints, the learner is the first constraint affecting decisions about teaching. Learner-centeredness is the personal view of these teachers to mediate this constraint. Another is the working constraints including insufficient materials and teaching time, policies and demands that deviate them from teaching, and too demanding contents. To overcome these structural constraints, the teachers exercised their agency for the quality of learning and their professionalism by using appropriate materials available for free use or purchase, following the policies that will benefit students, teaching only necessary contents and making use of their teaching experiences. To cultivate autonomy of the schoolteachers, support from the administration is required to send the teachers back to their classrooms, reduce non-teaching works and provide budget for quality materials especially the digital materials for online teaching.

There are some recommendations for further research. Due to limitations on the small sample size and data collected from a particular representative area, a replication of this study is recommended with a larger number of subjects from several school areas to verify the results of this study. Next, teachers and their autonomy play a crucial role in the process of learner autonomy development (Swatevacharkul & Boonma, 2021), so investigating a relationship between teacher and learner autonomy is worthwhile in order to know how they relate to each other, and pedagogy for autonomy will be better understood (Vieira et al., 2008). Then, exploration of how teacher autonomy impacts on learning outcomes, teacher motivation and professional satisfaction and a relationship between teacher autonomy and professionalism or identity are suggested. Researching how pre-service EFL teacher education can foster teacher autonomy and assist for autonomy pedagogy development is of interest and value. A development of a research tool to quantitatively explore teacher autonomy in the EFL field will be beneficial.

9. References

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