

An Investigation of Kachin Institutes Teachers' Beliefs about Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate Kachin institutes teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. The subjects were 92 Kachin institutes teachers from five different institutes such as Institute of Liberal Arts and Science (ILAS), Maija Yang College, Maija Yang Institute of Education (MIEd), Kachinland School of Arts and Sciences, Humanity Institute (KASS) and Naushawng Development Institute (NDI). The study took a form of an explanatory mixed methods design using a questionnaire to collect quantitative data, and semi-structured interview to gather qualitative data. The 40 5-points Likert scale statements questionnaire consists of 7 domains: "importance of learner autonomy", "teachers' responsibilities", "students' willingness", "students' self-confidence", "students' ability", "constraints to autonomy development", and "possibilities to fostering autonomy". The overall findings revealed that Kachin teachers are highly positive about learner autonomy with a mean of 3.66 (SD= 0.21). Investigation of each learner autonomy domain showed that every domain is at high level, except "students' willingness", "students' self-confidence" and "students' ability" which are at a moderate level. Discussions are presented, and recommendations are provided for further research.

Keywords: constraints, learner autonomy, Kachin institutes teachers, teachers' beliefs, ELT

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy in language education has gained great interest from researchers across the world. It was first originated from Europe (Dam, 1995; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). Then it has

been further developed by Asian researchers such as Hong Kong (Benson, 2001; Littlewood, 2007) and Japan (Aoki, 2001; Aoki & Smith, 1999).

Research on learner autonomy in language education recognizes the benefits and the possibility of fostering learner autonomy (Benson, 2007). In addition, several researchers reveal the positive results about learner autonomy in the teaching of English reading comprehension and academic writing (Ahmad, Yaakub, Rahim and Rohani, 2004; Ismail, Singh and Abu, 2013). Moreover, Dam and Legenhausen (1996) present that when compared with traditional learning approaches, an autonomous learning approach yields a very successful result especially in the vocabulary learning.

Although, the studies mentioned above provide great positive benefits of development learner autonomy development in educational contexts. There is also growing trend to explore learner autonomy in foreign language contexts, to the best of the researcher's knowledge there is no research on learner autonomy being conducted in language learning and teaching in Myanmar. This leads to an interest to conduct research on the field of learner autonomy in the Kachin educational context, Myanmar.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Learner Autonomy

The term autonomy refers to being independent from the rule or influence of others (Sheerin, 1991). In the perspective of educational context, the term 'learner autonomy' has been generally explained in many ways, it is therefore worthy to explore the definitions of learner autonomy. According to Holec's (1981, p.3), learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". He explains that being autonomous learner refers to the possession of ability to take responsibility of all the decision related to all aspects of this learning i.e;

- determining the objectives;
- defining the contents and progressions;
- selecting methods, and techniques to be used;

- monitoring the procedure of acquisition by properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);
- evaluating what has been learnt or acquired in and out of class.

However, there is controversy toward Holec’s descriptions of the decisions making abilities of a learner in autonomous learning. Benson argued that the descriptions do not make explicit about the cognitive capacities for effective self-management of learning (Benson, 2001). Therefore, Benson (2001:110) describes autonomy as ‘the capacity to control over one’s own learning’. autonomy involves many aspects; therefore, Benson (2000,25), also states that in language education circles, the term autonomy is basically used in three major versions, i.e.:

1. Autonomy as the act of learning on one’s own and the technical ability to do so;
2. Autonomy as the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one’s own learning;
3. Autonomy as the control over the content and processes of one’s own learning.

Bensons explains that the first definition and second definition indicate some type of change, whereas the third one relates to a political sense. Benson’s perspective on autonomy has a similar understanding with that of Little (1999) who defines that “learner autonomy is a psychological relation of the learner to the content and learning process.” This can be recognized from varying learning behaviors which are assumed as a capacity to detach, perform critical reflection, make decision, and act independently.

2.2 Beliefs of Teachers about Learner Autonomy

The terminology “teachers’ beliefs” are usually used to refer to as educational beliefs (Pajares, 1992) or “teachers’ pedagogic beliefs or those beliefs of relation to an individual’s teaching” (Borg, 2011, p. 187) cited in Nguyen (2014). Since the terminology of ‘teachers’ beliefs’ is broad, each researcher has to identify individually the field or scope of the beliefs that they want to investigate. The current research focuses on teachers’ beliefs about learner autonomy.

According to Borg and Al-Busaidi 2011, teachers’ beliefs mean what teachers think about, know, and believe in. He further explains that teachers’ beliefs can strongly impact on both what

teachers do and, subsequently, the learning outcomes learners achieved. It is essential to understand teachers' beliefs about autonomy because it is one of the vital components in designing professional development activities. Therefore, the extent to which learner is developed to be autonomous in language learning classrooms is affected by teachers' beliefs on the concept of autonomy

However, research shows that although teachers have positive attitude toward the idea of autonomy, they often complain by saying that it is difficult or sometimes even not possible to implement autonomy in their classroom because of a number of constraints. Benson (2000: 116) (cited in Huang 2006) describes four types of constraints which teachers face in promoting learner autonomy:

1. Policy constraints: broad policies on language in education.
2. Institutional constraints: rules and regulations, examinations, curriculums, the physical and social organization of the school and classroom practices.
3. Conceptions of language: dominant conceptions of what the target language is, and the ways in which it is organized and correct usage.
4. Language teaching methodologies: assumptions about how languages are learned, and relevant learning resources and activities.”

Encountered those constraints on autonomy, Benson suggests that the teacher shall take the role to mediate between the learners' right to autonomy. To promote learners to have control over their own learning decisions, teacher should play 'the key role of explaining and justifying these constraints to his or her learners (Benson, 2000:116). He remarks that if the teacher can help accomplish this, within constraints, there are much possibilities for learners to exercise autonomy.

However, it should be noted that according to Little (1995), even in a situation where a government department has strong structure related to academic aims and learning targets and the

learning materials are also strongly designed, teachers still have possibilities to use process of negotiation as a tool to develop learner autonomy. Therefore, some researchers (Balcikanli, 2010; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Chan, 2003) have explained that when teachers have positive beliefs and perceptions in promoting learner autonomy, they can still accomplish developing autonomous learning regardless of various constraints.

2.3 Context of the Study

This study was carried in two cities of Kachin State in Myanmar. Kachin state is the northernmost state of Myanmar. The capital city of the state is Myitkyina where the study was conducted from two institutes namely Kachinland School of Arts and Sciences, Humanity Institute (KSAS) and Naushawng Development Institute (NDI). Another city where the study conducted is Maija Yang where three institutes: Institute of Liberal Arts and Science (ILAS), Maija Yang College and Maija Yang Institute of Education (MIEd), Kachinland School of Arts.

These are all Institutes located in Kachin state which are community based and purposed for nations (Kachin ethnic) only. These all five institutes which are run by Kachin community and they are the important necessary institutes in Kachin state.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the beliefs of Kachin Institutes Teachers about learner autonomy?

4. Methodology

The sample size of this study consisted of 92 Kachin institutes teachers who were randomly selected by using the stratified random sampling from the 5 different Institutes in Kachin State, Myanmar to investigate Kachin institutes teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. Among them, 38 were male lecturers and 54 female lecturers with the years of employment varies from 1 year to over 20 years. The survey respondents were composed lecturers whose ages between 20-25 years old and 26-30 years old had the similar number (N 25 or 27%), followed by those with 31 to 35 years of age (N = 24 or 26%). Respondents who were between 50 and 59 years old were (N = 12 or 13%). Interestingly, 6 (7%) respondents were at the age of between 41 – 45 years old. In

term of education, 43 respondents gain Bachelors Degree and respondents those with the degree of Master Degree were 37. Respondents who were possessed Diploma were 10. Besides, 2 respondents were the holders of Certificate.

The two important research tools to collect the data are a questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

Questionnaire

The 5-point Likert scale with 7 domains of totally 40 statements questionnaire consisting of “importance of learner autonomy” (5 statements), “teachers’ responsibilities” (5 statements), “students’ willingness” (5 statements), “students’ self-confidence” (5 statements), “students’ ability” (7 statements), “constraints to autonomy development” (5 statements), and “possibilities to fostering autonomy” (8 statements). The questionnaire finds its content validity 0.94 and its reliability was 0.86. The evaluation criteria of the questionnaire were as follows: 0.00 – 1.50 means beliefs about learner autonomy is ‘very low’, 1.51 – 2.50 ‘low’, 2.51 – 3.50 ‘moderate’, 3.51 – 4.50 ‘high’, and 4.51 – 5.00 ‘ very high’.

Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted with 5 female and 5 male teachers. They were randomly selected for semi-structured interview.

5. Data Analysis and Results

The findings are presented in the following order.

5.1 Results of Quantitative

Kachin Institutes Teachers’ Beliefs about Learner Autonomy

Table 1: Kachin Institutes Teachers Beliefs about Learner Autonomy

Domain	N	Mean	SD	Meaning
Importance of learner autonomy	92	4.14	0.56	High
Teachers’ responsibilities	92	3.80	0.34	High

Students' willingness	92	2.75	0.45	Moderate
Students' self-confidence	92	3.06	0.32	Moderate
Students' ability	92	2.80	0.48	Moderate
Constrains to autonomy development	92	3.71	0.43	High
Possibilities to fostering autonomy	92	4.03	0.46	High

Table 1 demonstrates that teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy were positively high in the domains of learner autonomy and teachers' responsibilities with the means of 4.14 (SD = 0.56) and 3.80 (SD = 0.34) respectively. In addition, teachers also have high positive beliefs in the domain of constrains to autonomy development and possibilities to fostering autonomy with the means of 3.71 (SD = 0.43) and 4.03 (SD = 0.46) respectively. However, students' willingness, students' self-confidence and students' ability to perform autonomous learning were perceived at the moderate level (M = 2.75 (SD = 0.4), M = 3.06 (SD = 0.33) and M = 2.80 (SD = 0.48) respectively.

5.2. Results of Qualitative Data

Table 2: Importance of Learner Autonomy

Importance	Frequency count	Percentage
Yes	10	100%
1. Leading to life-long learner 2. Promoting extended learning outside class		
No	0	0%

It is undeniable agreed that learner autonomy is important. The given reasons were analyzed and categorized into two areas as follows.

1. Learner autonomy leading to life-long learning

It was consistently agreed that learner autonomy is important in developing students' learning and effective learning achievement. Being autonomous, students take charge of their own learning, and this help them take learning responsibilities which lead student to become more self-reliant.

Learner autonomy is important for learner because it helps them make their own decisions to improve their language skills and it leads students to their self-discipline and life-long learning.

2. Learner autonomy as extended learning outside class

It is true that learning cannot be done only in classroom with teaching standing in front of the class. Therefore, learner autonomy is regarded as an important basics of successful language learning because it promotes learning outside classroom.

Students should not rely on teachers all the time. They should read newspapers, other magazines outside classroom.

Table 3: The Most Important Roles as a Teacher

Important Roles as a teacher	Frequency Count	Percentage
1. Helper, consultant, encourager, supporter, guide, facilitator, promoter	4	40%
2. Provider of effective teaching	3	30%
3. Being a role-model	2	20%
4. Knowledge transmitter	1	10%

1) The role as helper, consultant, encourager, supporter, guide, facilitator and promoter

Many teachers, in fact, realized that teachers play many important roles to help students develop both cognitive and affective. Most respondents reported that their most important roles as helper, consultant, encourager, supporter, guide, facilitator and promoter (40%). Some excerpts were shown below.

In my view, the most important roles as a teacher are to give learning guidelines so that students can improve their learning, recommending appropriate sources and let them choice their own interests.

(Female Teacher)

Mostly, I perform as a facilitator in the class to implement the designed lesson plan. However, teachers should change different roles depending on the level and condition of the class.

(Male Teacher)

2) The role as provider of effective teaching

30% of respondents believed that their roles as to provide effective teaching.

In my view the most important roles as a teacher are to encourage students to get involved in their learning process and to train learners in developing learning methods and strategies how to learn effectively.

(Female Teacher)

The important roles as a teacher for me is to be able to teach how to learn and to develop the students to know about self-study and self-learning strategies.

(Interview Male Teacher 10)

3) The role as being a role model

Being a role model of the students was mentioned by 20% of respondents.

Teachers must be a faithful, scarified patient and knowledgeable person. On the other hands, they should not show bad behavior in front of their students.

(Female Teacher)

Teachers are not only teachers but also role model for learners as behavior and in ways of speaking.

(Female Teacher)

4) The role as knowledge transmitter

The most important role as knowledge transmitter was reported by 10% of teachers.

I think some students would like me to provide them a lot information so teachers should be acting as knowledge provider.

(Female interview teacher)

In my opinion, teachers have to base teaching on helping their students' knowledge to solve problem with their own thinking. Therefore, teachers are required to be equipped with the necessary knowledge to provide their learners.

(Male interview teacher)

Table 4: Constraints to autonomy development

Constraints	Frequency Count	Percentage
1. Students - Lack of ability - Lack of self-confidence - Lack of willingness	3	30%
2. Educational Culture Influence-related constraints	4	40%
3. Teachers lack of knowledge	3	30%

1) Students

The first source of hindrances of learner autonomy development is students. Students were perceived as lack of ability to learn, lack of self-confidence that they need teachers to be their supporter all the time and lack of willingness to take responsibility for their own learning.

In my point of view, Kachin students' lack of self-confidence that they need to be their supporter all the time as they are not confident in their learning as well as they lack responsibility to take charge of their learning out of class.

Students' lack of willingness to take seek additional knowledge in and outside class because they just focus on passing the course only.

2) Educational Culture Influence-related constraints Culture Influence

Teachers reported that in Kachin educational contexts, spoon-feeding and examination has been influenced.

The main problem is the learning and teaching system in Kachin which restrict Kachin teachers to conform to traditional teaching styles that do not develop students to play a major and active role in the learning process. It finally leads students become more passive rather than active learners. In addition, our education system is based on memorization learning which limits students to be creative in their learning as well as no not familiar with learning independent decision-making skills since early stages of learning.

(Female Interview Teacher)

3) Teachers' lack of knowledge on learner autonomy

Teachers themselves were reported as a constraint to autonomy development because some teachers have a tendency to traditional teaching method which emphasize on memorization and spoon-feeding.

For me, teachers might be the main obstacle to the development of learner autonomy since this is a very new concept and I even do not know how to apply this concepts in and outside classroom.

To be honest, I don't know how to promote this idea to the students and cannot help students learn autonomously as I do not understand the clear concepts of it.

6. Discussions

It was found that on average the teachers have positive beliefs about learner autonomy. They knew the importance of learner autonomy and they perceived that it is their roles as a responsible person for learner to become autonomous learners. However, the teachers perceived that students' willingness, self-confidence and ability to learn autonomously are at the moderate level. Besides, the teachers believe that they are some constraints to learner autonomy development, yet they believe that it is possible to fostering learner autonomy, which are at the high level. The reasons that might explain these findings are as follows:

1. Values of Learner Autonomy and Teachers' Responsibility to Enhance Learner Autonomy

The teachers have a high positive beliefs on learner autonomy because they know and understand the important value of learner autonomy. The findings were similar to the finding of the research conducted by Swatevacharkul (2011) with 155 Thai and non-Thai instructors in Bangkok. Here are a few reasons why teachers think learner autonomy is important.

First, the respondents agreed that learner autonomy is important since its lead learners to become life-long learning.

Second, learner autonomy promotes students' extended learning outside class where they can freely determine their learning objectives, materials. It is hardly possible that their English language learning can be improved or mastered from twice or three times inside classroom of learning in a week.

Third, learner autonomy develops students' critical thinking skills which are the essential intellect to the study of itself and the necessary features of people to co-operate with the environment or the society. Learner autonomy, therefore, can make great changes to society.

Since teachers believed that learner autonomy is important, they perceived that it is their responsibility to enhance learner autonomy. It means there is interrelation between learner autonomy development and teacher autonomy which teachers have highly positive beliefs in this study since learner autonomy development will not be successful unless the teachers themselves are autonomous.

In addition, teachers perceived that learning and teaching is not the sole responsibility of teachers. This strongly reflects that both teachers and learners have different important roles to enhance learner autonomy. This finding supports the argument of Waterhouse in which he stated that students and teacher are interdepending on each other for the development of learner autonomy. For this reason, both parties play the same role throughout the process of autonomous learning mode and none of them are less important or more important in doing particular tasks.

Next, the research findings show the most important roles of teachers and it is found out that they play different roles as teachers. Many teachers testified that they have to take parts in many different roles in order to support their students learning approaches. Their important roles are facilitator, helper, supporter, guide, counsellor and encourager, promoter of autonomous learning.

To conclude, even though teachers knew the values of learner autonomy and their roles to enhance students become autonomous learners, it is not only the teachers who have to take responsibility for their teaching to enhance learner autonomy but also the students who should take responsibilities for their learning.

2. Teachers' Moderate Beliefs on Students' willingness, Self-confidence and Ability to learn Autonomously

Although, it is clear that both students and teachers have their roles and responsibilities in autonomous mode of learning, teachers assumed that their students are inability to take their

learning responsibilities. Students' self-confidence and ability are one the main factors, that the teachers perceived as a hindrance of learner autonomy development as the findings from the semi-structured interviews reported as following:

In my point of view, there are a few reasons that students' self-confidence and ability are at the moderate level to learn autonomously. Lets' say, the first foremost reason is their past learning experience since learners did not have enough practice in English language skills both in and outside the classrooms because they just focus on to pass the tests. Next, we (the teachers), teach the lessons according to the fix curriculum, no extra activities to motivate students to participate in learning actively. I, therefore, suggests the curriculum have to be changed in order to reduce students' inability to improve the capacity to perform autonomous learning successfully.

(Female Teacher)

In addition, teachers reported that students need the teachers to tell them clearly what they should learn and what to do in and out of class and this statement was rated the high mean scores. This clearly reflects a characteristic of teacher-dependence of the students for their learning. According to the interviews on the challenges or hindrances, the teachers are mentioned that students may be viewed as one the hindrances to the development of learner autonomy. These findings were similar with the studies conducted by Balcikanli, 2010, Benson, 2011; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Phipps and Brog, 2009).

Students' willingness, self-confidence and ability to learn autonomously were fundamental basic need to learning achievement. Students lack confidence about their learning because they lack cognitive skill. Some interviewees mentioned that Kachin students' English skills are very low and are not strong enough, so this might be an obstacle for autonomous learning. Therefore, this challenges the teachers how to help developing students' self-confidence to learn autonomously. According to Dornyei (2001) suggestions, teachers should protect students' self-esteem which increase their self-confidence in order to success students' learning.

In addition, as Ushiodo (1996) suggested that when students have developed their own capacity such as capability and self-confidence in learning, they will be motivated and eager to learn. Teachers, therefore, should not blame for students for being lack of ability to learn autonomously. In return, students also should not blame teachers for their inability to improve the capacity to learner autonomously.

3. Possible Challenges for Promoting Learner Autonomy

Kachin institutes teachers rated their beliefs about both challenges and possibilities to develop learner autonomy are at the high level. There are some reasons that can explain this phenomenon.

There are three main hindrances. Firstly, the first source of hindrances of learner autonomy development is learner-related challenges. The main learner-related problems include: students' dependence of the teachers, lack of motivation or willingness, learner' lack of previous experience of autonomous learning and lack of needed resources.

Second, the impact of traditional Kachin educational system which emphasize on memorization, rote learning, spoon-feeding and examination has been influenced which is believed by many teachers that obstacles a development of autonomy. The educational that emphasize on spoon-feeding definitely hinders critical thinking skills so that students hardly extend new information for themselves but just listening to the teachers inside classroom. As a direct consequence, students become inactive, laziness and less self-centered learners which lead to low motivation in learning. In addition, the role of learners is also ignored since teachers always follow on fixed guidelines and objectives of the courses.

Last but not the least, teachers themselves were reported as a constraint to autonomy development because some teachers have a tendency to traditional teaching method which emphasis on memorization and spoon-feeding. In addition, teachers themselves do not clearly know the concept of learner autonomy and lack of teacher autonomy so that they fear of losing authority.

Even though there are limitations to develop learner autonomy, the teachers still believe that learner autonomy can be fostering in Kachin educational system by a number of reasons.

According to the quantitative findings teachers believed that learner autonomy can be developed when teachers have opportunities to get professional training workshop on learner autonomy to gain updated information and knowledge how to implement it since teachers reported that they do not fully understand the concept of learner autonomy and how to implement it during the interview.

In addition, the teachers also mentioned that learner autonomy can be fostered when there is a mutual understanding as well as work cooperatively between learners and teachers since learner autonomy is interdependence between teachers and students. Besides, learners should be provided more variety of learning activities which means teachers should give more time for creating various activities which encourage students to become autonomous.

In conclusion, Little (1995) suggested that there is still room for the teacher to exploit possibilities for developing learner autonomy through a process of negotiation by teachers between learning context, learner goals, learning content and classroom methodologies, even in a context where aims and learning targets are prescribed by a government department, and learning materials are highly structured.

7. Recommendations and Conclusion

Teachers perceived that Learner autonomy is important for successful language learning for life-long learning and they have a very important role in helping develop learner autonomy. In addition, teachers revealed that teachers need to empower themselves by exercising their autonomy to make decisions on how to increase learner autonomy. Moreover, teachers need to be supported and allowed to have some authority to go beyond the course requirements. It means teachers should have freedom for their teaching responsibility. Learner autonomy can be fostered if the teachers know how to do it so that school administrators and policies makers should share power and

provide teachers training in the relation of the knowledge of learner autonomy and equip teachers with practices to enhance learner autonomy.

In the study, the variables of teachers' age, gender, degree as well as teaching experience which might make a change in the findings were not controlled. The further researcher recommended to replicate the same study viewing mentioned variables. Investigating the relationship between students' readiness and teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy is also suggested.

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