English CEFR Proficiency with Online Autonomous Learning among Thai Tertiary Learners in a Provincial Public University

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Abstract

In the digital age, integrating autonomous learning with online English platforms presents significant opportunities for Thai learners in provincial areas. This approach empowers individuals to enhance English proficiency and achieve higher CEFR levels, aligning with Thai education policy goals using English level criteria of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This study aimed to 1) compare the CEFR levels of tertiary learners engaged in online autonomous English learning, and 2) investigate learners' autonomous English learning strategies that contribute to enhancing CEFR levels. A stratified random sample of 129 Thai tertiary learners participated in an online English development program designed to enhance CEFR levels. This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study collected data through *pre-tests* and *post-tests* via the Speexx online platform, along with a validated questionnaire demonstrating strong internal consistency. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The results showed that 45.75% of participants improved CEFR levels, 51.94% maintained the same level, and 2.33% experienced a decline. Most learners followed a similar pattern of autonomous English learning, including assessing deficiencies, setting personalized learning plans and goals, selecting appropriate online English learning platforms, troubleshooting challenges, and monitoring and evaluating progress. In conclusion, online autonomous learning strategies can effectively enhance learners' English proficiency beyond traditional classrooms. Further research was recommended to explore additional factors influencing learner success.

Keywords: autonomous learning, CEFR, English proficiency, online platforms, Thai tertiary learners

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Introduction

English plays a crucial role in contemporary global society, driven by the flourishing tourism industry, globalization of business, and the demands of higher education and international careers. Consequently, English language education is widely emphasized within the Thai education system. While many Thais study English throughout their educational journey, achieving fluency remains a challenge for some. This necessitates continuous efforts by the Thai government to enhance English proficiency across the population. In Thailand, educational policymakers have identified the issues with the English language development policy that has proven to be unsuccessful in previous years. Global reports revealed that over the past five years, Thai individuals exhibited very low English proficiency levels which ranked 74th among 100 in 2019, 89th among 99 in 2020, 100th among 112 in 2021, 97th among 111 in 2022, and 101st among 113 in 2023 respectively (Education First: English Proficiency Index). It is seen that the overall English ability of Thai people is still below the international standard level (Boyle, 2023; Santiwatthanasiri, 2018; Young, 2021). For this reason, the required average level of English proficiency for graduates at each level has been set higher by using criteria of testing with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (National Education Plan, 2017). The CEFR is also used as a benchmark for assessing English language learners' proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It categorizes learners into six levels: A1 and A2 for basic users, B1 and B2 for intermediate users, and C1 and C2 for proficient users. These levels are widely recognized as the criteria for comparing the language abilities of learners across different contexts (Council of Europe, 2001). In the same way, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI, 2023) has set the English proficiency level according to the CEFR at B2 (Upper intermediate level) as a graduation requirement for undergraduate learners (Yippikun & Sirisukeepradit, 2024).

Modern technology, particularly internet-based resources, emphasizes the significant impact of rapidly evolving communication technologies on global education. This highlights learners' unprecedented access to extensive authentic English content online, allowing them to choose media that aligns with the interests for self-learning (Liton, 2022; Mwanda, 2019; Theppanya, 2018). In the digital era, technological advancements have facilitated the acquisition of new skills, including language learning. Speexx is an online language learning program that is certified to meet the CEFR standards by Eaquals (Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality Language Services) in the UK. The Speexx, one of English online education services, was offered by the University for autonomous English learning. Furthermore, other online platforms can be supplemented for more learning such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, Tiktok, Duolingo, and so on. These technologies could support collaborative learning between learners and instructors, fostering 21st-century skills essential for thriving in a digital society. Additionally, the digital access is particularly advantageous for Thai learners in remote regions or suburban borders, who may have limited access to native English speakers or conventional English language learning resources (Chaisuriya, 2023; Khamratana & Adunyarittigun, 2021). This is especially crucial in areas far from major urban English learning centers.

Studies like the EF English Proficiency Index consistently show that Thailand's English proficiency has consistently lagged behind other ASEAN nations. This issue is particularly identified outside economic urban centers particularly in provincial areas, where learners have limited exposure to English in daily life. Likewise, Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) in upcountry campus (Lampang area) is located far from town and most of learner are not convenient to commute to English language tutoring centers in town. This presents opportunities for RMUTL learners to use technology and the internet to assist in learning, in order to improve English skills to become more proficient.

According to the CEFR framework under the MHESI criteria for undergraduate graduation, RMUTL (Lampang campus) encourages learners to achieve at least a B1 (intermediate) level in English and progress to a higher level of competency. However, data from past years on RMUTL learners' CEFR results indicates that a significant number of learners remain at the beginner level (A1), with few reaching the desired B1 level proficiency. To address this issue, an online English development project was assigned to near-graduate tertiary learners. This out-of-class learning initiative aimed to improve English proficiency by leveraging the online Speexx program and supplementing learning with other online platforms. The availability of authentic English content across various digital platforms provided an opportunity to integrate autonomous learning, potentially enhancing English proficiency to CEFR level standards. This raises the question of whether online autonomous English learning, utilizing the Speexx program provided by the University and other digital platforms as supplementary resources, could effectively contribute to improving learners' English proficiency, increasing the CEFR levels, and promoting English learning. While numerous studies have explored autonomous learning, research from educators has primarily focused on learners' perceptions and influencing factors. It would be interesting to conduct research on the specific scope of online autonomous English learning methods in enhancing the CEFR levels among tertiary learners in a provincial area, specifically at RMUTL Lampang, prior to the learner's graduation.

Research Objectives
1. To compare the CEFR levels of tertiary learners engaged in online autonomous English learning
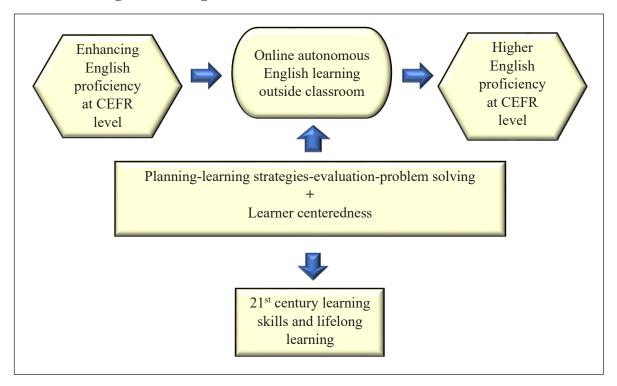2. To investigate learner's autonomous English learning strategies that contribute to enhancing CEFR levels

Research Hypotheses
1. Tertiary learners who engage in online autonomous English learning will demonstrate significant differences in CEFR levels.
2. Tertiary learners who adopt autonomous English learning strategies will improve CEFR levels more effectively than those who do not.

Research Questions
1. Have learners' CEFR levels raised after employing online autonomous English learning?
2. What strategies do learners use to enhance English proficiency of the CEFR levels?

Figure 1

Autonomous English Learning Framework

Literature Review

As Thai education policy emphasizes the CEFR standard for English proficiency, English language skills are increasingly crucial for Thai higher education learners. This literature review explores the potential of autonomous English language learning within the Thai context, linking it to 21st-century lifelong learning to support the development of essential life skills, as demonstrated by various empirical studies.

1. Autonomous Learning

The concept of autonomous learning has been explored by many educators over a period of time. The term of autonomy, as defined by Holec (1981), refers to 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning', while learning concerns to the responsibility all aspects. Dickinson (1995) proposed that this type of learning involves the learning management process which the individual use of both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This implies that independent learners recognize the usefulness of learning and are committed to its implementation. To develop learner autonomy, learner empowerment is essential, which is one of the focuses in the learner-centered approach. Additionally, Benson (2001) supports the idea that autonomous learners are suitable for language learners aiming to develop critical thinking and self-learning responsibilities (Andriani et al., 2018; Genc, 2015). Referring to the learning scope, educators can facilitate by initiating guidance and stimulating language learners' interest to develop language skills and motivation to practice autonomous learning (Saidalvi & Samad, 2019). This involves providing learners with opportunities to set own goals, manage time effectively, and take responsibility for learning outcomes. For language proficiency at international

benchmarks such as the CEFR levels, self-assessment is also crucial for autonomous learning, supporting learners to take responsibility in evaluating English level to meet the required standard. This aligns with Piamsai (2023), who found that using a CEFR-level self-assessment grid had a significant impact on Thai university learners at higher-level.

One online autonomous learning approach to improving English ability involves implementing online multimedia, such as interactive exercises and video lessons, to enhance language acquisition (Pratiwi et al., 2021). Studies in various university contexts have demonstrated that technology tools effectively encourage learner autonomy (Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023; Sadaghian & Marandi, 2021; Yusnimar, 2019) in listening, structure, and reading skills. This autonomy encompasses self-reliance, information literacy, linguistic confidence, and learning strategies. Nonetheless, Begum (2019) mentioned that challenges during autonomous learning might arise due to several factors, including a lack of teacher preparation in facilitating autonomous learning, learners' reluctant attitude, and class timing.

2. English Learning in Thailand Context

English instruction in Thailand aims to improve learners' communication ability by providing them useful learning processes and strategies to enhance the use of English for social and academic purposes in regional and international places (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Since 2014, then Thai education policymakers have used CEFR to conceptualize English teaching and learning at all levels and for all purposes (Anantapol, Chobphon & Keeratikorntanayod, 2018; Charttrakul & Damnet, 2021; Waluyo, 2019). The framework provides practical interpretations of language proficiency in real-world scenarios and is adaptable in a variety of educational contexts. The CEFR framework has broad applications in English language education, guiding curriculum development (Hiranburana et al., 2017), proficiency testing, evaluation, and teacher development. This aligns with Peerachaipawong (2023), who demonstrated the positive impact of teacher training using a CEFR-based instructional manual. Thai educational institutions are encouraged to benchmark learners' English proficiency using the CEFR, aligning with Bunching et al.'s (2021) recommendations for English language development projects at the tertiary level, and learners also perceive the CEFR as a nationwide measure of English proficiency.

Although English is crucial in today's globalized world, it appears, consequently, Thai learners' English proficiency mostly remains below international standards. Considering the context of Thai learners' English proficiency, a number of years Thai learners spend on English learning in classroom until reaching the higher education, many Thai learners still struggle with the language and the performance in English is generally unsatisfactory (Akkakoson, 2019; Apridayani, 2022; Hiranburana, 2017). This may be due to Thai learners' lack of opportunity to apply English in real-life situations, particularly in upcountry areas. Learners are able to communicate some English in the classroom because the communicative situations are structured and controlled. But in the real-life setting, they hardly have a chance to use English in spontaneous environments beyond the classroom. Additionally, many Thai learners lack self-confidence in using English, fear making mistakes, and have low motivation to learn

English. (Dechsubha, 2020; Oktavia et al., 2022; Poonpon et al., 2016; Wongsothorn et al., 2002). This may lead to many Thai learners feel insecure about English proficiency and lose confidence because they believe that they may be at a disadvantage in the global workforce market (Choomthong, 2014). To address these challenges, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. Possible solutions include increasing real-life applications of English through communicative activities, fostering a supportive classroom environment to build self-confidence, enhancing motivation by connecting English learning to students' interests and goals, and providing intercultural training for teachers to improve language instruction (Beckett & Slater, 2020; Creely et al., 2021; Hendrajaya, 2023; Wongsa, 2020).

3. The 21st Century Skills of Autonomous English Learning through Online Technology

The proliferation of online technology has revolutionized English language learning. In the 21st century, English learners must cultivate a range of competencies, including digital literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication. Panich (2011) posits that 21st-century learning necessitates a shift in pedagogical roles, with learners assuming a more autonomous position in acquiring and exploring knowledge. Duncan's (2002) sequential model of media exposure aligns with online education, as learners progress through similar stages. Initially, they are introduced to various online platforms and become aware of the educational content available. This is followed by a stage of attention and interest, during which learners explore course materials by reading descriptions, watching introductory videos, or attending trial sessions. As they move toward comprehension and engagement, active participation occurs through multimedia content, discussions, and quizzes. The next stage, retention and application, reinforces knowledge through assignments, practice exercises, and real-world applications, ultimately leading to deeper learning and mastery.

With the widespread accessibility of information technology, both teachers and learners can adopt innovative instructional approaches to develop essential 21st-century skills. These approaches include the productive use of social media platforms such as Wikis, YouTube, and other online communication tools. Sermsap (2017) highlights the importance of extending technology-based learning beyond the traditional classroom, emphasizing the internet's vast potential for improving English language skills, particularly in reading and writing. Similarly, Wankhong (2016) asserts that technology plays a crucial role in fostering lifelong learning. Additionally, technology has become an integral tool for communication within communities and for facilitating distance education via online platforms, marking a departure from conventional classroom instruction (Ponsamak & Sukying, 2024; Sathientharadol et al., 2021; Sonthirak et al., 2022).

Carroll et al. (2019) argue that online technology fosters autonomous learning and enhances motivation, ultimately improving learner engagement. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2023) examined the acceptance of the "Reading Progress" tool – an online feature within Microsoft Teams— through the lens of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Their study found that Reading Progress was positively perceived as an effective tool for personalized teaching and learning, particularly in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Furthermore, perceived enjoyment emerged as a significant factor influencing technology acceptance, highlighting its

role in increasing learner engagement and usability. Likewise, Alharthi et al. (2020) reviewed studies from 2014 to 2018 and found that social media platforms (SMPs) effectively enhance vocabulary acquisition in new languages, highlighting learners' potential as valuable learning tools. Similarly, Irzawati (2021) found that EFL learners perceive digital platforms as having a positive impact on online learning, providing opportunities for a dynamic and engaging learning environment that enhances language skills and motivation.

The importance of cultivating information, media, and technology skills as integral components of 21st-century learning is emphasized by several scholars. These skills empower learners to critically evaluate and select appropriate tools for improving English proficiency (Lee & Park, 2016; Liu & Zhao, 2018). Kalimanzila and Reswari (2021) further stressed that autonomous learning is a viable strategy for effective online education. The expansion of digital services and online learning platforms has also stimulated the rise of self-directed learning systems, enabling learners to take charge of their own education. Kabigting et al. (2021) emphasized the significance of selective media consumption in the learning process. Learners should critically evaluate and engage with information that aligns with their educational objectives. Moreover, promoting learner autonomy not only improves academic performance but also nurtures essential 21st-century skills, including adaptability, resilience, and a lifelong passion for learning (Swatevacharangkul, 2014). The shift to online learning in education, particularly in provincial areas of Thailand, has highlighted both opportunities and challenges in developing 21st-century skills for English language learning. For instance, Assalihee and Boonsuk (2023) explored teaching approach in the digital era within southern provinces of Thailand, and identifying obstacles hindering the development of these crucial skills. Conversely, Thampi (2023) highlighted the importance of critical thinking (a key 21st-century skill) among undergraduates in provincial areas, demonstrating its relevance to standardized test scores and emphasizing its broader significance in academic and professional success.

In an era of abundant information, the ability to critically evaluate and selectively engage with media is crucial for effective learning. By fostering learner autonomy, educators empower students to take control of their education, enhancing both academic success and essential 21st-century skills. This approach not only prepares individuals for the demands of the modern world but also nurtures a lifelong desire for knowledge and self-improvement.

Methodology

Autonomous learning was conceptualized as the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning, including all aspects of the learning management process. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach to gather comprehensive data, integrating both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Quantitatively, the study examined learners' CEFR results to assess the progress. Qualitatively, it explored the outcomes of learners' autonomous English learning processes aimed at enhancing CEFR levels. This integrated approach provided a holistic understanding of the learners' overall language development. The research was approved by the relevant ethics committee, and the personal information of the research participants was kept confidential and not disclosed to the public individually.

1. Population and Samples

The target population for this study consisted of 190 Thai tertiary learners enrolled in an online English development project outside of regular classes during four-month internship at the Lampang campus of RMUTL. This University-provided project aimed to encourage and support learners in enhancing CEFR levels before graduation. The sample size, determined using the Taro Yamane formula (Yamane, 1970), was 129 learners. Stratified sampling ensured representation from different academic disciplines, including 96 learners from Accounting Program, 10 from Engineering Program, and 23 from Agriculture Program. The sample comprised 20 males and 109 females, all aged between 20 and 23 years. Pre-testing conducted before the project's commencement revealed a diverse range of English proficiency levels among learners, with most at the beginner level and a small number demonstrating B1-level proficiency according to the CEFR scale. All participants fully understood the research objectives, processes, and their roles in the project. The participants willingly signed a consent form before participating.

2. Instruments and Procedures

The instruments and procedures used in this study were as follows:
1. The online Speexx program was an international standard online English program which was well known among many international institutions including other Thai universities. The Speexx provides the online lessons and assessing learners. The Speexx was offered by RMUTL to learners in English learning out of class and in evaluating learner's English proficiency. The program provides a CEFR-based English test that assesses conversation, reading, listening, and vocabulary and phrase usage for general daily communication. The test includes various question formats, such as multiple-choice, true or false, and complete-in-the-blank. Furthermore, participants were afforded the opportunity to access online English lessons through the Speexx to facilitate independent study out of classroom or after work. The validity of content and construct, reliability of internal consistency of the tests to measure various skills, and the reporting system of the program were in accordance with the CEFR. The criteria of English test results were divided into six levels of CEFR rank as follows: A1 stands for beginner, A2 stands for elementary, B1 stands for intermediate, B2 stands for upper intermediate, C1 stands for effective operational proficiency and C2 stand for mastery.

2. Online autonomous English learning refers to the learner's ability to take responsibility for own process of English learning using digital platforms and internet resources. It involves learners independently choosing what, when, and how to learn English, while utilizing online tools, materials, and technologies to achieve individuals' language learning goals. This includes setting goals, choosing learning strategies, monitoring progress, and evaluating problems and outcomes (Benson, 2001). The autonomous English learning assessment used a 5 – point Likert scale questionnaire, ranging from 1 for 'least frequent use' to 5 for 'most frequent use'. The content validity of the questionnaire was evaluated by three related professionals with an *Item-Object Congruence* (IOC) value of 0.80. Using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1970), the dependability coefficient was determined to be 0.81. The two main components of the questionnaire were 1) general information, and 2) the use of autonomous

learning to enhance English ability. The second part was further divided into five main items: 1) learning plans, 2) learning strategies, 3) evaluation, 4) problems and solving, and 5) open-ended comment section for learners to share additional thoughts.

3. Data Collection

Learners were informed of the research objectives and guided to initiate an independent, introductory autonomous English learning process. Before starting the autonomous English learning, a *pre-test* was completed to assess learners' CEFR levels using the Speexx within one hour. Subsequently, each learner's specific English problems were evaluated to identify areas for improvement and to reach a higher CEFR level. Then, learners started to study English individually out of class room or after intern working off time through the Speexx or other digital online platforms. During studying time, the channel of assisting and following up for learners also was provided via online contact for any learning problems. After completing four months of the autonomous English learning period, a *post-test* was administered to assess learners' CEFR English proficiency again using the same online Speexx program in one hour. Lastly, to explore learner's autonomous learning methods in English improvement, the questionnaire of autonomous learning was assessed for thirty minutes. After collecting CEFR scores and questionnaire data, statistical analysis was conducted using computer program.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using computer program to calculate descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviations), *t*-tests, significance values, and confident intervals, providing a comprehensive understanding of the English learning outcomes and an examination of the use of autonomous English learning strategies. A 5-point Likert scale was employed to interpret the average frequency of learning method usage. Scores between 1.00 and 1.50 indicate very infrequent use, while those between 1.51 and 2.50 signify infrequent use. An average score ranging from 2.51 to 3.50 reflects fair frequent use, whereas scores between 3.51 and 4.50 represent very frequent use. Finally, an average score between 4.51 and 5.00 denotes the most frequent use.

Results

Regarding two objectives of this research, the findings were showed below:

1. The first objective was to compare the CEFR levels of tertiary learners engaged in online autonomous English learning. The *pre-test* and *post-test* English assessment of CEFR levels was compared as described in the tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1

Comparing the Overall Scores of Pre-test and Post-test in CEFR Level

CEFR Scores	Pre-test		Post-test		*t*	*Sig*	*Confident Intervals*
	Mean	*SD.*	*Mean*	*SD.*			
	26.15	7.66	32.87	8.57	-9.38	*.00**	95%

*p ≤ .05

From the table 1 showed the comparing of CEFR scores of the *pre-test* and *post-test*, the scores were found to have significantly higher level (*t = -9.38, p = .00; p < .05),* which the statistically significant difference was set at .05. The 95% confidence intervals for the *pre-test* and *post-test* scores are [24.8, 27.5] and [31.32, 34.42], respectively. These intervals do not overlap, suggesting a statistically significant difference between the *pre-test* and *post-test* means.

Table 2

Performing the Amounts of Learners Getting the CEFR Level

Level-Changed after *Post-test*		
Changing CEFR Level	Amount (Participants)	Percent (%)
A1 to A1	41	31.78
A1 to A2	30	23.26
A1 to B1	17	13.18
A2 to A1	2	1.55
A2 to A2	23	17.83
A2 to B1	12	9.30
B1 to A1	1	0.78
B1 to A2	0	0.00
B1 to B1	3	2.33

According to the table 2, the learners who pretested and got A1 of CEFR level, the result showed that 17 learners or around 13.18% posted and got a higher level of B1. Later, 30 learners or approximately 23.26% got an A2 level, and last, 41 learners or almost 31.78% got the same A1 level.

Learners who pretested and were at A2 level, after the *post-test*, it was found that 12 learners or approximately 9.30% increased learners' level to B1 level. Later, 23 learners or approximately 17.83% received the same level as A2 and two learners or almost 1.55% decreased learners' level to A1.

Learners who pretested and were at B1 level, after the *post-test*, it was found that there were three learners or 2.33% who still got B1 level, while one learner or 0.78% got level reduced to A1.

Overall, the results indicated that after the *post-test*, 59 learners (45.75%) achieved a higher CEFR level, 67 learners (51.94%) maintained CEFR level, and three learners (2.33%) experienced a decrease in CEFR level.

2. The second objective was to investigate learner's autonomous English learning strategies that contribute to enhancing CEFR levels.

Regarding the general demographic information, the sample consisted of 129 final-year learners. Of these, 20 were male (15.50%) and 109 were female (84.50%), with ages ranging from 20 to 23 years. Participants were drawn from three faculties: Business Administration and Liberal Arts (n = 96, 74.42%), Science and Agricultural Technology (n = 23, 17.78%), and Engineering (n = 10, 7.75%). Prior to autonomous English learning, the distribution of learner's CEFR levels was as follows: 88 learners (68.22%) at A1, 37 learners (28.68%) at A2, and four learners (3.10%) at B1.

In part of application of autonomous learning for improving English proficiency, as described in the table 3 below:

Table 3
Ways of Autonomous English Learning

Statements	N	Use (%)	*Mean of Opting Use*	SD.
Learning Plans				
1. Assessing English deficiencies	129	100	3.09	0.78
2. Setting plans and goals	129	100	3.31	0.64
3. Scheduling English learning time	129	100	3.40	0.83
4. Finding convenient online English learning channels	129	100	4.93	0.25
5. Checking progress after learning based on goals	129	38.80	3.54	0.49
Total	129	87.76	3.65	0.60
Learning Strategies				
1. Learning English through online Speexx program provided only	129	24.80	5.00	0.00
2. Learning English by choosing from other online platforms additionally such as Facebook, Google, Tiktok, Youtube, British Council, etc.	129	75.20	4.36	0.43
3. Learning to improve reading from online news or articles	129	9.30	2.58	0.49
4. Finding foreigners to practice English communication through speaking or texting via online applications	129	6.20	3.38	0.48

Table 3 (Continued)

Statements	N	Use (%)	Mean of Opting Use	SD.
5. Finding examples of online CEFR test and try to practice the tests.	129	49.60	2.67	0.61
6. Finding a comfortable place for learning (quiet, privacy, technology tools)	129	67.40	3.95	0.50
7. Reviewing and practice the English exercises many times	129	59.70	3.95	0.78
8. Practicing listening and speaking skills from online English music or movies	129	98.40	4.50	0.57
9. Remembering tactic for the unseen English words from learning through various online media platforms	129	91.50	4.00	0.62
Total	129	53.57	3.82	0.50
Evaluation				
1. Monitoring the progress by English testing	129	51.9	3.37	0.58
2. Checking progress with friends	129	65.1	3.76	0.53
3. Marking the mistake parts to review those more closely	129	22.5	3.79	0.76
Total	129	46.5	3.64	0.62
Problems and Solving				
1. Asking friends or teachers when facing English learning problems	129	52.7	3.25	0.68
2. If time setting for learning unavailable due to many reasons, try to keep track on other times	129	41.9	3.83	0.55
3. Health problems (accidents or sickness) requiring a temporary pause in learning	129	5.4	4.86	0.32
4. Finding answers from the internet	129	81.4	4.50	0.60
5. Limited English knowledge background, take more time to learn	129	50.4	3.43	0.61
Total	129	46.36	3.97	0.55
Overall Total	129	58.55	3.77	0.57

The table 3 illustrated the learning plan strategies used to improve English proficiency, revealing a high degree of similarity among learners (100%). The strategies, ranked in order of usage, were as follows:

1. Assessing English deficiencies was used by all learners (100%; *M* of opting use = 3.09), indicating that learners prioritize identifying the weaknesses before starting their improvement process.

2. Setting plans and goals was also adopted by all learners (100%; *M* of opting use = 3.31).

3. Scheduling English learning time was another commonly used strategy (100%; *M* of opting use = 3.40).

4. Finding convenient online English learning channels was the most highly rated strategy in terms of frequency (*M* of opting use = 4.93), highlighting the significant role of online learning platforms.

5. Checking progress after learning based on goals was the least utilized strategy (38.80%; *M* of opting use = 3.54). The low usage of this strategy indicates a potential area for improvement.

Regarding learning strategies, the results indicated that practicing listening and speaking skills through online English music or movies was the most popular learning strategy (98.40%, *M* of opting use = 4.50). Conversely, finding foreigners to practice English communication through speaking or texting via online applications was the least selected (6.20%, *M* of opting use = 3.38).

For evaluation strategies, the results showed that the most common method was checking progress with friends, accounting for 65.10% of responses (*M* of opting use = 3.76). The least common method was marking the mistake part for closer review, with 22.50% of learners using this approach (*M* of opting use = 3.79).

Finally, in terms of problem-solving methods, the results showed that the most preferred approach was finding answers from the internet (81.40%; *M* of opting use = 4.50). Conversely, pausing learning due to health issues (e.g., accidents or illness) was the least preferred method, with only 5.40% of learners opting for pausing (*M* of opting use = 4.86).

In addition, the learners made the following comments about independent learning to enhance learners' English proficiency. The content selected by learners to study independently comes from numerous online media platforms, apart from the online Speexx program. This was due to the convenience and accessibility of technology, allowing learners to choose content that addresses learners' English language improvement needs. For instance,

"I joined the free English course offered by Kru Whan on Facebook and TikTok live streams, which provided more knowledge and various techniques about English, as well as *pre-tests* and *post-tests*."

"I chose to listened to short English video clips on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and especially movies on Netflix. I practiced English listening for about 15 minutes every day."

"I had a big problem with vocabulary, so I have to practiced spelling and meaning. I learned vocabulary from Google and clip videos from Instagram or Facebook."

"When I encountered unfamiliar English words, I immediately searched their meanings on Google."

"I am studying to extend my vocabulary in English for daily communication based on the CEFR framework from the PEACH 11 channel on YouTube. I am also trying to communicate with foreigners."

In some cases, when encountering difficulties while learning English online through the Speexx program, learners actively seek additional resources to enhance learners' comprehension of new concepts. These resources may include consulting with friends, lecturers, or tutors, or utilizing alternative online English learning platforms.

"I downloaded the English application to assist learning on some English problems such as using sentences in speaking and writing."

"When I learned English independently, I usually formulate questions about word usage and sentence structure. If I cannot find the answers, I have to consult with my English-proficient friends or search on Google."

However, a few learners reported difficulty in keeping track of their English development plans and goals due to various challenges, such as illness, part-time work, a heavy workload of assignments, and participation in special university activities.

"I have an accident and broke my arm, so I have to stop learning for a month."

"I have to worked in the evening and worked out late every night. I am so tired and need to rest very much."

"During my internship, I have to focus on my assignments. I need to take extra time to study English by myself, but it's so difficult to manage and feel so constrained."

Discussion

1. The Results of CEFR Level English Proficiency of Tertiary Learners after Engaging the Online Autonomous English Learning

The data from the CEFR test results revealed a dichotomy among tertiary learners engaged in online autonomous English learning, with two distinct subgroups. The first subgroup demonstrated significant improvements in the CEFR levels, with an average increase of one or more levels, highlighting the substantial language development potential of autonomous English learning. In contrast, another subgroup of learners exhibited either stagnation or a decline in proficiency, highlighting the multifaceted challenges in the process of autonomous English learning.

2. The Learner's Autonomous English Learning Strategies to Enhance CEFR Level English Proficiency

In part of employing autonomous English learning strategies to enhance CEFR level English proficiency, the questionnaire was distributed after implementation of the project. According to Benson (2001), the process of autonomous learning encompasses goal setting and

planning, learning strategy selection, problem-solving during the learning process, and evaluating progress and outcomes.

Concerning autonomous English learning strategies, the first group, which significantly improved the CEFR levels, demonstrated remarkable learning approaches. The results reveal that it could be most learners employed cognitive process of autonomous English learning method, encompassing in learning plans and goals, learning strategies, problem-solving, and evaluation. Consequently, reflecting on the weaknesses or problems encountered, evaluating progress, and making decision on how to address learning challenges to improve English proficiency, along with self-regulation of English study, can be considered effective ways of employing metacognitive strategies (Alsaleh, 2020; Boonma & Swatevacharkul, 2020; Flavel, 1976; Fitrianti & Susanti, 2021) to enhance learner's CEFR levels. To illustrate, practicing listening skills through online platforms for about 15 minutes daily, studying new English words daily and employing effective memorization techniques, creating a dedicated study space, reviewing and practicing exercises from free English tutoring courses, and so on. When encountering English challenges, learners could address them through various means. These included searching for answers on the internet (like Google), seeking assistance from friends proficient in English, consulting with English lecturers, dedicating more time to reviewing English content on the Speexx for better comprehension, and other relevant strategies. Furthermore, self-assessment strategies were implemented to monitor learners' English progress. This involved strategies such as conducting self-progress checks within friend groups or taking tests after completing learning units.

Regarding to Garrison (1997), an online environment should be offered to learners in order to foster self-monitoring. Consequently, available online platforms such as the Speexx, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Google can be considered effective tools for learning, monitoring, and improving English proficiency. Besides, the results indicated that learners primarily utilized the Speexx as their fundamental learning source, likely due to the program's structured and consistent lesson format. However, learners also supplemented learning with other platforms like TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram, recognizing specific benefits for skills such as listening or vocabulary acquisition, which may not be as effectively addressed by Speexx. For instance, learners could find online samples of CEFR test to monitor progress in English proficiency, or even solve encountered English learning problems by searching corrected answers through online platforms, especially Google. This finding aligns with Theppanya (2018), who demonstrated that learners actively think to identify learners' own needs and select appropriate online resources from the wealth of available information. For instance, planning to study English besides the Speexx serviced by the University with finding other convenient online English learning channels – Kru-Whan English tutoring on TikTok and Facebook, downloading the English application, short English video clips on Instagram, PEACH 11 channels on YouTube, etc. Online platforms empower learners to independently choose and implement suitable learning strategies, aligning with the concept of learner-centeredness. This point is further supported by the study of Kongthai and Saywonpia (2018).

Conversely, learners whose CEFR levels remained stagnant or declined expressed the belief that autonomous English learning through online programs could be more effective in enhancing their English proficiency, although it might require more time than the duration of this project. The results of this study showed that several factors impacted the enhancement of CEFR levels through autonomous learning, even though these learners employed various learning strategies such as goal setting, creating learning plans, utilizing diverse learning methods, conducting self-evaluations, and problem-solving through platforms like Speexx and other online resources. These factors included accessing online content resources – some individuals chose to enhance English proficiency by selecting online academic English content that was too simplistic and unsuitable for advancing the CEFR levels. For instance, practicing fundamental listening skills through children's English channels on YouTube or from online Spotify Music, similar to edutainment, suggested that these learners did not recognize the potential prioritization of academic rigor. Entertaining content was favored and easier to access and comprehend than the academically rigorous Speexx. This observation aligns with the findings of Sriwichai (2019) and Wongsopha et al. (2015), which indicated that most Thai learners primarily use internet media for leisure and relaxation rather than in-depth learning, leading to a lack of concentration and productivity in learner's academic study and work.

Learning strategies – the effectiveness of autonomous English learning strategies varied among learners. Some strategies, such as goal setting and regular practice, would be more effective than others. The importance of consistent self-discipline is further emphasized by the study of Swatevacharkul (2009). The results of learners' comments revealed that inconsistent progress monitoring, often due to unforeseen circumstances like accidents, illnesses, part-time jobs, or internship commitments, was a common challenge. As a consequence, these learners may require more time than initially planned to achieve each desired CEFR level. The results suggest also that learners' insufficient self-regulation of English learning can further delay progress. Therefore, English learning courses should explicitly incorporate training in autonomous learning and consistent self-discipline to effectively improve the English proficiency of less proficient learners.

Time management – consistent and dedicated time spent on autonomous learning was crucial for achieving noticeable improvements in CEFR levels, involving learners actively controlling how they allocate time to achieve academic goals (Wolters & Brady, 2021). However, the study findings highlight on various factors, including part-time jobs, internship tasks, accidents, and illnesses, can significantly limit the time available for autonomous English learning, posing a particular challenge for learners engaged in after-work learning. The learners may require more time than initially anticipated to complete learning and monitor English progress. Therefore, to achieve tangible results, careful planning of study time and consistent, self-learning of in-depth English language skills are essential (Swatevacharkul, 2014).

Motivation, according to Swatevacharkul and Boonma (2021), refers to a learner's capacity to take control of own learning by understanding the strategies to motivate oneself, and accepting responsibility for success or failure in learning English. The results of this study align with findings related to the lack of motivation for English progress. One factor contributing to less

motivation could be the learning environment, which may be characterized by distractions and unsupportive conditions for focused study. This can include learning while simultaneously holding a part-time job or internship assignments, or studying in spaces that are not quiet. Additionally, while engaged in part-time work or internships, learners may not consistently engage in self-assessment of English learning progress. This lack of responsibility or neglect in regular self-assessment can contribute to decreased motivation and enjoyment of English learning, ultimately hindering the acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary for improving English proficiency. Therefore, learners' motivation should be stimulated through positive extrinsic motivators, such as promising career paths or job opportunities, recognition and praise, or tangible rewards like certificates or bonuses. This extrinsic motivation should then become internalized, leading learners to perceive English learning as an essential and personal need.

Conclusion

It can be observed that autonomous online learning outside of the classroom can promote and develop learners' *critical thinking* abilities within both cognitive strategy and metacognitive processes. This learning approach empowers learner-centeredness by allowing learners to tailor their learning styles, enabling them to plan, organize, determine, and choose the most effective way to learn English from a range of internet resources. Additionally, problem-solving is a crucial skill in this learning process. Learners can reflect on their weaknesses and identify problems independently, then devise solutions. Throughout this process, making logical and concise decisions about learning is advantageous for learners who aim to enhance their English CEFR proficiency through autonomous online learning. Anyway, amount of learner who can adopt autonomous learning strategies to enhance English proficiency were not much. In case half of participants were not known of own learning process as autonomous learning. Consequently, it is essential to provide guidance in autonomous online English learning methods for less proficient learners before they fully engage in this approach and follow up them regularly. In case, time limitation of learning, learners should emphasize more self-discipline to extend regular engagement with academic English content for optimal effectiveness. However, educators should be resourceful when learners encounter challenges in some steps of autonomous learning, so they should be able to suggest some good advice when learners have problems. Ultimately, this autonomous learning concept could be advantageous in the digital age for strengthening and promoting English learning abilities further.

Recommendations

1. Implications

The findings of this study highlight the effectiveness of online autonomous learning in enhancing CEFR English proficiency among Thai tertiary learners, particularly in provincial areas. A key implication is the crucial role of autonomous learning strategies such as goal setting, self-monitoring, and effort regulation in improving English proficiency, especially in environments with limited language practice opportunities. To cultivate these skills, educators should integrate autonomous learning into language education policies, ensuring learners have

access to adaptive and engaging online resources that promote continuous language development beyond traditional classrooms. Additionally, guiding learners in autonomous learning strategies can foster autonomous learning habits, critical thinking, and problem-solving, ultimately empowering learners to take ownership of independent language learning journey.

2. Recommendation for Future Research

Since this study focuses on a specific group of tertiary learners from a single area in Northern Thailand, its findings may have limited generalizability to broader populations. Future research could enhance its applicability by employing more advanced statistical techniques, such as regression analysis, structural equation modeling, or comparative analysis, to explore causal relationships between autonomous learning strategies and various factors influencing English proficiency. Additionally, studying learners across different age groups, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds would provide deeper insights into how these variables interact with autonomous learning. Further research should also examine the effectiveness of different online learning platforms including social media, language learning apps, and virtual learning environments, particularly those integrating advanced digital technologies, to identify the most impactful tools for enhancing English proficiency.

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