ENHANCING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN RURAL YOUNG EFL LEARNERS THROUGH PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: AN ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract

Learner Autonomy (LA) is acknowledged as being beneficial to EFL education, particularly in rural areas where resources are scarce. However, LA enhancement should be implemented with careful consideration to the context. Based on our previous study (Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2015), young rural EFL learners are ready and willing to adopt LA, yet they are rather unfamiliar with its practices. The research described in this article aims to evaluate how Project-Based Learning (PBL) can enhance LA by utilizing existing resources. In this study, ten sixth graders from a rural school in Northeastern Thailand were sampled in a focus group for an in-depth qualitative study. Research strategies such as field notes, interviews, Focused Group Conversations (FGCs), diaries, observations and assignment analysis were used. The results showed that all students were receptive to PBL and LA enhancement. The national standardized achievement test, ONET 2015, showed higher average scores for all grade 6 students accustomed to PBL. The ten students in the focus group also showed higher scores. This was the first time in three years that the school's average ONET scores were higher than the national average. Therefore, it was concluded that through PBL, rural teachers could make the most of existing resources to gradually enhance LA in young EFL learners which leads to higher academic achievement.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Project-Based Learning, Qualitative Study, Action Research

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INTRODUCTION

Although learner autonomy (LA) is believed to have many benefits for EFL learners, LA enhancement cannot be successful without careful consideration of the context in which it is being taught. LA is defined as "the ability to take charge/responsibility of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981:3). It benefits language learners by increasing motivation (Dickinson, 1995), and effective learning (Benson, 2001), which leads to life-long learning. Considering the vast array of information available through technology and the academic pressures of 21st century society, LA could offer opportunities for more effective EFL teaching in Thailand. The goal of learner-centered communicative competence in EFL, which is being increasingly used in Thai schools, implies the necessity for LA development. In particular, Ordinary National Educational Tests (ONETs), a national English standardized test required for every sixth grader, revealed that the scores obtained in the rural school in which the research is based were consistently lower than the national averages for the past years (NIETS, 2012-2014). As a result, an alternative way for English teaching and learning in the school should be introduced and explored. This will help researchers to see whether or not a well-accredited method of Project-Based Learning (PBL) could help supplement the existing grammar-translation method already prevalent in rural areas.

According to the needs analysis described below (Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2015), PBL is a practical method, which utilizes the existing textbook *Projects: Play & Learn,* which is already provided for primary school children by the Ministry of Education. The PBL method in EFL learning aims to help develop the characteristics of LA. There is no one definition of PBL because it embodies many different teaching styles. McCarthy (2010) describes it as an approach that involves complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems that would involve students in problem-solving, decision-making, and metacognitive abilities. Specifically in this research, PBL was expected to provide young rural EFL learners with the opportunity to explore and experience tasks that would lead to enhanced learning. These tasks are suggested in the government provided textbook but rarely put into practice in class activities.

Description of the School Studied

The school from which this research is based is medium-sized and located in rural Northeastern Thailand. At the school, there are four classes of the sixth graders, each with approximately 35-40 students with mixed academic abilities. These abilities include basic knowledge, intellectual abilities, competence for independent learning, and basic skills. The students in each of the classes were divided into six groups. Each group consisted of 6-7 students: 2-3 strong to moderate students, and 3-4 weaker students. The hoped was that the stronger students would peer coach the weaker ones.

Less than 1% of the books in the school's library were in English. In addition, the library's hours of operation were very limited-one hour in the morning and half an hour at lunch time. The computer room consisted of 20 computers (one computer shared between two students). The room was also always occupied with a class during the whole school

day, and it was not open for use after class. Additionally the internet connection in the school was not consistent. There was neither an English laboratory nor a self-access center for the students to study on their own time, and the English room was always locked after lessons. According to the teachers, this was to prevent theft and misuse of technology. Students rarely possessed a dictionary before the researchers provided them with one. Hence, it was clear that the school and administrators did not place much importance on self-discovery, individual study, or accessibility of other academic resources.

The book *Projects: Play & Learn*, recommended by the Ministry of Education, was used as the main teaching textbook. This textbook was designed for Projects-Based Learning. However, the teacher would skip the suggested tasks because they felt like those tasks would not be testable. Unfortunately, most of the skipped activities contained exercises to enhance LA, such as self-discovery, self-assessment, reflection, critical thinking and technology use. The teacher tended to simplify the grammatical concepts, suggesting rote-learning and memorization of vocabulary.

Needs Analysis

In order to construct a PBL course to enhance LA, a needs analysis was conducted according to an ethnographical approach. This approach took into account the culture of LA as related to the readiness and characteristics of the learners in their cultural context. According to various well-established definitions (Benson, 2001; Holec, 1981; Little, 1990, 1991, and Littlewood, 1999), LA can be described according to four categories: awareness and readiness of LA, willingness and motivation for LA, cognitive and metacognitive abilities, and social dimensions and interdependence of LA. When Pichailuck and Luksaneeyanawin (2015) conducted an ethnographic study of fifth graders at the school in 2014, they found that young rural learners displayed LA as reported below.

Concerning the first category, awareness and readiness of LA, most student defined LA as the responsibility to do what teachers assigned them to do. Although they were not aware of the concept, they were ready and willing to try whatever the teachers introduced. Most of them were shy, self-conscious, and fearful of acting out in front of the class because they would be embarrassed if they did not perform well. In regards to the second category, willingness and motivation for LA, the students were intrinsically motivated by fun and entertaining lessons. They were also motivated by negative reinforcement such as verbal or physical punishment by the teacher. All of the students highly respected the teachers and usually followed their instructions. The aspect of LA that was found most lacking in the young rural EFL learners were cognitive and metacognitive abilities, the third category of LA. In saying this, rote-learning and vocabulary memorization were the traditional methods for teaching and learning English in the school.

As a result of the ethnographic study, Pichailuck and Luksaneeyanawin (2015) concluded that rural Thai educators should cultivate autonomous learning culture in students by using a process-based approach, such as Project-Based Learning (PBL). This PBL should also be sensitized to the cultural context in which it is being taught. Teachers need to take into account the developmental

needs and characteristics of the students, as well as the limitations and resources of the educational context (Zohrabi, 2011). Crabbe (1993:443) suggested that LA could improve overall academic performance in rural areas. Once learners become goal-oriented and self-regulated, they can take advantage of their available, yet scarce resources. If the contextual composition of the rural area is considered, LA-enhanced PBL intervention could be practical, realistic, and sustainable in the long run.

In our research, the skills of goal-setting, planning, problem-solving, learning strategies, self-monitoring, self-assessment, critical thinking, and reflection were introduced. These skills were introduced using those activities given in the textbook which were formerly neglected by teachers. Lastly, regarding the fourth category, social dimensions and interdependence of LA, the young EFL learners were assigned to work in groups. In these groups, they found affiliation with their group mates and the comfort of not having to display language skills by themselves. Additionally, the tasks were designed to expose students to native speakers' culture, which was previously not done. As a result, this study sought to answer the research question: How do PBL interventions based on existing resources assist in enhancing LA amongst young rural EFL learners?

A Project-Based Learning (PBL) Course to Enhance LA from Existing Resources

Implementing PBL

First and foremost, PBL was already suggested and prepared in the Grade 6 textbook used at the school, so it was not in conflict with the school and the Ministry of Education (MOE). According to the needs analysis (Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2015), the development of cognitive and metacognitive abilities was most needed. PBL is relevant to this because it would allow the young EFL learners to explore and experience English first-hand. It also motivated learners to engage in language use for the purpose of achieving communicative competence, as stipulated by the MOE. Lastly, it emphasized collaboration, negotiation, interaction, and creativity, which was already well-imbued in the young learners.

The needs analysis (Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2015) indicated that the young EFL learners were motivated and moderately ready for 'reactive autonomy'. This indicates that which the direction of learning is set for them by the teacher, and students are required to follow these instructions (Littlewood, 1999). This type of autonomy is prevalent in collectivist cultures as opposed to the "proactive autonomy" practiced in individualist cultures, such as in the West (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). In particular, teachers play a vital role in collectivist cultures. As Magaldi (2010: 79, cited in Zuhal-Guven & Hecht-Valais, 2014) states: "*Students cannot accept responsibility for their own learning or take any initiation in the process if they do not know how they learn and how to learn. Teachers are the key mediators between what the students know and what they need to learn.*" For beginner EFL learners, it may be necessary to include more direct instruction in order to fulfill both immediate and delayed needs (Dudley-Evans & St John, 2000: 146, cited in Zuhal-Guven & Hecht-Valais, 2014).

Tobias (2009) also found that teacher-centeredness in explicit instruction is not always bad because it usually results in higher achievement, especially for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, a combination of "learning-centered" (what young EFL learners would benefit from knowing) and "learner-centered" (what they enjoy and need in learning) should and would be incorporated in a PBL class in order to enhance LA according to the rural context.

The Sample Group

The PBL interventions to enhance LA were implemented in the first semester of the 2015 academic year and applied to all 148 sixth graders among the four classes. All the sixth graders were to experience the PBL interventions, but only ten students were selected for a focus group. These students were purposely sampled to be investigated as in-depth case studies. The focus group consisted of four males and six females, and these students had mixed English academic abilities. There were four strong students, three moderate students and three weak students, and they were all in Grade 5. Strong students obtained a GPA of 4, moderate students obtained GPAs of 3-3.5, and weak students obtained GPAs of 2-3.. In addition to their proficiency scores, and ONET 2014 pretest score, the English teachers' opinions were solicited via interviews, and school records were consulted to find appropriate students which could generally represent the strong, moderate, and weak young rural EFL learners.

Project-Based Learning Course

The goal of PBL interventions is to raise the awareness and level of experience of LA amongst young rural EFL learners. Of the three chapters in the textbook, three projects were designed for each chapter. The content was suggested by the main English teacher. To enhance LA with PBL, one hour per week for each class was allocated to PBL activities. However, there were certain constraints. First, young rural EFL learners did not have a computer or internet at home, so the school's computer room had to be negotiated for use. Second, the researcher was faced with the scope of content to cover. Due to the family backgrounds of the students, most EFL learning opportunities only occurred in the school. Nevertheless, the researcher was able to introduce the three projects to the young learners within the 13 weeks of the first semester of the 2015 academic year.

The three projects consisted of: 1) Aesop's Fables Role Play, 2) The Survey Project, and 3) The Cooking Project. The three projects are described below.

Project 1: Role Play of Aesop's Fables.

Each student searched for an Aesop's Fable of their liking on the internet. Then, they worked as a group to decide and plan their group's play. The following week was used as their dress rehearsal, and during this week they obtained the teacher's feedback and learned self-monitoring. The fourth week consisted of the actual performances, in which they learned to overcome shyness in acting. In the final week, students set their own criteria for evaluation and assessed themselves and their peer groups. Lastly, students learned the strategy of how to learn vocabulary through acting.

Table 1: Project 1: Role Play of Aesop's Fables

Project 1: Role Play of Aesop's Fables	
Activities	**Objectives for LA**
W1: Used the Internet to search for an Aesop's Fable that they liked individually.	Learning skills of searching for knowledge of their choice.
W2: Group discussion on why they chose the fable to act out and begin planning for the play.	Decision-making, negotiation, goal-setting, and planning.
W3: Dress rehearsal.	Self-monitoring and obtaining feedback from teacher.
W4: Actual performance.	Confidence in presentation
W5: Teacher & peer assessment based on criteria set by students themselves. Project evaluation and dictation of vocab in the play.	Self-assessment and cognitive abilities through learning vocab in the contexts of the play.

Project 2: The Survey Project: Food & Health.

The aim of this project was to answer the question "How often do you eat fruit?" In order to do that, students needed to learn the question, "How often do you…?" Secondly, they needed to learn adverbs of frequency in order to answer the question. In the third week, they practiced a self-survey of how healthily they eat. In the final week, they needed to assess themselves by acknowledging how often they eat fruit and to also guess the other students' habits. They then surveyed their peers to verify their assumptions, and finally they came to a conclusion based on their own learning. Students had an opportunity to experience first-hand what it would be like in an autonomous learning environment conducive to a lifelong learning process.

Table 2: Project 2: Survey Project

Project 2: Survey: Food & Health	
Activities	**Objectives for LA**
W1: Play a matching game to learn and construct a question word, "How often do you…?" Teacher gave feedback on their question.	Intrinsic motivation with fun of playing the game and learn from Teacher's feedback.
W2: Play a game to learn adverbs of frequency and strategies to remember their meaning.	Intrinsic motivation using fun activities and strategies for memorizing new words.
W3: Learn grammar by deduction and self-survey of how healthy they are via questionnaire in the textbook.	Strategies of learning grammar and self-awareness and self-assessment.
W4: Survey, "How often do you eat fruit?" First, reflect on oneself, guess others', habits survey, and conclude if their assumption is right.	Self-knowledge, self-assessment, speaking and listening interaction to gain self-confidence. Learning to learn how to derive knowledge through making assumptions.

Project 3: Cooking Project: Ham and Cheese Sandwich and Fruit Punch.

The aim of this project was to provide exposure to a foreign culture and to have fun with learning to cook in English. Most young rural EFL learners did some cooking at home, and three students in the focus group wanted to be a chef when they grew up. In the first two weeks, students played games based on the ingredients and other relevant vocabulary, (i.e., 'first', 'second', 'then', 'after that', and 'finally'). Students experienced hands-on peer-correction, as well as conducted self-correction. Then, students drew and painted the foods and the processes involved in making the sandwiches. Finally, they had to cite the processes, learn the history of the foods, say a prayer, and hold a dinner party.

The Aesop's Fables role play, the Survey, and the Cooking activities were tasks that were already suggested in the textbook but often overlooked by classroom English teachers. It is essential in LA development that the teachers understand and are aware of the full advantages of existing resources for engaging with students.

Research Instruments for Data Collection

Besides the PBL course, other instruments used for data collection included field notes, interviews, Focused Group Conversations (FGCs), student diaries, teacher observations, assignment analysis, and ONET results. Since LA is an abstract and multidimensional construct, therefore its assessment can be complex, and capturing a snapshot of what has been achieved by the PBL interventions can be complicated. It follows that a numerical summative assessment would not be adequate or appropriate. Consequently, qualitative methods were used for the main findings and a quantitative form of evaluation was used only as a supplement. Many instruments, such as…., were employed to ensure the reliability of the research.

Table 3: Project 3: Cooking Project

Project 3: Cooking Project: Ham (and) Cheese Sandwich & Fruit Punch	
Activities	**Objectives for LA**
W1: Play a game with ingredients of the foods. Peer-assessment of correctness	Intrinsic motivation, cognitive ability in learning new words, and peer assessment.
W2: Learn discourse connectors, "First, second, then, after that, and finally," via a game. Peer-assessment of correctness of usage.	Problem-solving, learning strategies to remember discourse connectors, and peer assessment.
W3: Plan for the cooking. Drawing and painting of the foods.	Planning, decision-making, creativity, and problem-solving.
W4: Cite the processes of making the foods. Learn the history of the foods, say a prayer, and have a dinner party!	Cultural awareness and cross-cultural comparison, learning by doing, teamwork, and enjoyment.

Table 4: Data Collection Instruments

Qualitative	Ongoing throughout the Semester
Materials recorded by the researcher	Field notes, observations, document & task assignment analyses
Material analyses of the ten-person focus group	Students' diary writing, interviews, FGCs, task assignment development

As stated by the qualitative data collection instruments, the researcher kept field notes observed the informants both inside and outside of the classroom, and conducted analyses of the students' documents and task assignments. The level of LA of the ten selected sixth graders who comprised the focus group were closely investigated. The characteristics of LA development were observed by means of students' diary writing, interviews, FGCs, and task assignment development. Then, the ONET 2015, which the students officially had to take at the end of the second semester of the 2015 School year (one semester after the PBL course was implemented), was compared with the ONET 2014 pretest and post-test.

Data Analysis

The researcher's field notes and observations, together with the students' diaries and interviews, were the main sources of data analysis, while the score results from the ONET were used to observe the students' development after the PBL interventions. Furthermore, content analysis was utilized to analyze the qualitative data. The students were observed and their interviews were audio recorded. The researcher attempted to detect the key words and key concepts of LA in the students, then the data that showed the same concepts were categorized and described in the findings of the study. Next the data collected from the Similar concepts that emerged from the characteristics of LA that

were enhanced were then grouped. The research's trustworthiness was ensured by recording continuous evidence by using a variety of data instruments, namely audio-taped interviews and verbatim transcription, day-to-day observations, reflective accounts, and skills shown in diaries and task assignments. Notes from consultations and meetings with other Grade 6 teachers were also used. Lastly, the results of the 2014 and 2015 ONETs, the standardized national tests constructed by the Ministry of Education, were used to examine the students' English performance before and after the PBL interventions.

Findings

1) The development of the four categories of LA among the ten students in the focus group is illustrated in Table 5. The occurrences of the four categories of LA in each student in the three English ability groups (strong (S1-S4), moderate (M5-M7) and weak students (W8-W10)) are provided in the table. Numbers 1, 2, and 3 represent Projects 1, 2 and 3, respectively. When a student showed an occurrence of each categories, a tick (") was marked; if not, a cross (x) was marked. The numbers of x's were counted and totaled in the last column, while the minus (-) number in the last column demonstrates the lack of each category in the ten students. The minus number provided in the last row shows the lack of the LA categories in each student.

Table 5: Occurrence of the four categories of LA in the three projects among different groups of learners

Characteristics of LA	S1 Rita			S2 Wilawan			S3 Athit			S4 Thunya			M5 Theerah			M6 Jenny			M7 Cholakarn			W8 Non			W9 Nat			W10 Roong			
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	
1.Awareness & Readiness	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	-3
2.Willingness & Motivation	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	-1
3.Cognitive & Metacognitive Abilities	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	√	X	X	√	√	X	√	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	X	X	X	X	X	X	-11
4.Social Dimensions & Independence of LA	√	√	X	X	√	√	√	√	√	X	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	-4
Lacking of LA	-1			-1			-2			-4			-1			-2			-2			0			-3			-3			-19

The horizontal axis in Table 5 displays the four categories of LA in each of the members of the focus group. The last column of the table shows the number of LA categories that are lacking among the students in the focus group. The category of characteristics of LA most lacking was the cognitive and metacognitive abilities (-11). Strikingly, the weak students, except W8, did not develop cognitive and metacognitive abilities throughout the three projects. This is presumably due to their limited intellectual capacities and the delay in their English language development. However, W8 was able to develop a transfer of knowledge, and he even reported initiating a conversation with a foreigner while he traveled to school by train. He also tried to make a sandwich by himself at home. All of the moderate students were lacking in the cognitive and metacognitive abilities in Project 1, but they were able to develop these abilities later in the other two projects. In Project 1, they were not group leaders, so they did not have much say in the planning and organization of their role plays. Among the strong group, S3 and S4 were found lacking in these abilities in Project 3. Observational data showed a decline in S3's attention as the end of the semester approached. Interviews with his other teachers indicated a belief that he may have experienced family problems during the time that Project 3 was implemented. In addition, S4 displayed over-confidence in her self-assessment, yet was not able to apply the ordering of discourse connectors in another context.

The second most lacking category of characteristics of LA among the ten students in the focus group was the social dimensions and interdependence of LA (-4). Interestingly, only the strong students were found lacking in this category. They were the leaders of their group, but they tended to do all of the work independently and without discussing or distributing the work among other members of the group. All of the moderate and weak students did not show any sign of lacking the social dimensions and interdependence of LA. The moderate students were mostly good-natured and responsible followers, while the

weak students just enjoyed being with friends. Nevertheless, the strong students, except S1, developed enhanced social skills by the time of the last project. S1 reflected, "My group members told me off while I trained them for the [cooking] demonstration. I learned that if I practiced reading well enough, I would not have to lose confidence in leading the group." Additionally, the Cooking Project gave young rural EFL learners exposure to Western culture and first-hand experience with foreign food. Some of them had never experienced ham, cheese, or fruit punch before.

The third most lacking category of characteristics of LA was the awareness of and readiness for LA (-3). S3, M6, and M7 did not possess any awareness of or readiness for LA in the first project, yet they later developed these characteristics in the latter two projects. S3 said, "I don't like to learn by myself because I think I cannot do well." Nevertheless, his group performed the most innovative role play and was the only group that performed their role play completely in English. After Project 1, he said, "I think LA is fun and enjoyable." M6 was shy and unconfident, but she was a good follower and willing to explore the new learning style. She said, "I don't like learning by myself. I don't think I can do it because we still don't have enough knowledge." Similarly, M7 said, "I don't like LA because I don't understand it. I don't know every word. I need teachers." Hence, students may be hesitant and apprehensive of LA at first, but later they were able to adjust well to the new learning style.

Finally, the least lacking, or the most developed category of characteristics of LA was willingness and motivation (-1). Only S4 was not willing or motivated for LA in Project 2. She was an introvert, quiet, and is a rather

serious learner. She was also not very sociable or playful. While other students were busy going around the class and surveying their classmates for answers, she sat in her place and remained quiet. Her grandmother said S4 has aggressive tendencies, which is usual for a child who did not know who her parents are or where they live. The rest of the informants displayed a willingness and motivation to pay attention to the introduction of the new concept of LA. Observational data and FGCs showed students' intrinsic motivation and engagement were further developed and after the implementation of LA.

The vertical axis in Table 5 exhibits the category of characteristics of LA that each member of the focus group did not acquire. Only W8 showed that he acquired all the characteristics after the three projects, and he was a good and sophisticated student. However, he had not been very academically successful in terms of test scores before the start of the project, so previous school records placed him into the weak group. He had other commitments outside class and was engaged in many school activities, such as singing. At home, he had to do all the household chores and took care of his frail grandmother, the only family member with whom he lived. These activities may have taken away from his study time. However, the results show that an academically weak student could still develop LA if a proper opportunity was given in a class, and allowed for the right mindset to develop. On the other hand, S4 obtained the lowest score in the LA categories, yet she was a strong student. She could easily follow steps laid out by teachers, but she was not accustomed to the self-directed learning style of PBL.

Next, S1, S2 and M5 performed their best in the three projects, and they all managed to develop the four categories of characteristics of LA reasonably well. The research findings show their score for LA equaled only -1 across all three projects. The confident and articulate S1 said, "I'm the narrator [in the role play]. I'm very satisfied because my group mates were very collaborative and obedient in practicing their parts. We learned to solve problems, like when one person did not have a part and how to make an oak tree. I also learned new vocabulary. Our group should improve in the use of vocabulary." By contrast, S2 was a quiet and thoughtful child who liked art. She realized she did not like acting, so she opted to prepare all of the art work for the group. As a group leader, she was wise in assigning the right roles to the right people. The most vocal student in the group was assigned the role of a narrator, while weaker students played roles that required less speaking and acting. In addition to this, M5's diaries showed off her practical common sense. She was motivated by the importance and benefits of the English language. Although she was not familiar with the concept of LA, she dutifully gave her best effort in all of the projects and cooperated with all the data collection procedures. She showed improvement in cognitive and metacognitive

abilities of LA in the later projects in partly because of the repeated practice. Moreover, S3, M6 and M7 displayed a moderate development of LA (-2). All of them said they were prepared for LA at first, but later they developed an awareness of and readiness for LA. Also, they were lacking in cognitive and metacognitive abilities at different times throughout the duration of the study. S3 experienced a decline in abilities in Project 3, while the other two, M6 and M7, developed cognitive and metacognitive abilities later, after Project 1. Lastly, W9 and W10 scored -3 and had a deficiency only in cognitive and metacognitive abilities.

2) The Analysis of the ONET scores

Table 6 below illustrates the ONET scores, namely the ONET 2014 pretest, the ONET 2014 post-test, and the ONET 2015. The last column is the mean score of each test result. The most important score was the ONET 2015 score obtained at the end of the 2015 academic year, one semester after the PBL interventions. There are many factors that could have come into play during the one semester after the interventions, such as intense tutoring during the two months before the test. The results can be analyzed as follows.

Table 6: The ONET scores for each learner

ONET Scores	S1	S2	S3	S4	M5	M6	M7	W8	W9	W10	Mean Scores
ONET 2014 Pretest	40.0	40.0	42.5	45.0	42.5	27.5	35.0	22.5	22.5	32.5	**35.0**
ONET 2014 Posttest	45.0	40.0	52.5	40.0	35.0	37.5	32.5	17.5	32.5	27.5	**36.0**
ONET 2015	42.5	65.0	50.0	62.5	32.5	37.5	60.0	62.5	47.5	32.5	**49.3**

The mean score of ONET 2015 in the English for the whole country was 40.3, whereas the whole school's average score increased to 42.5, higher than the national average. The mean score of the focus group rose to 49.3. W8's ONET 2015 score dramatically increased to 62.5 from 17.5, and was almost as high as S2, the highest in the focus group (Max= 65.0). He was the only student who fully developed the four categories of characteristics of LA from the three projects. W9, a weak but sociable and sophisticated student, was able to obtain a score of 47.5, only slightly lower than the focus group average, but higher than the school average. His outgoing personality in social situations, as well as his willingness and motivation during the PBL interventions, may have contributed to this increase.

The strong group still maintained higher scores than the moderate and weak groups. It seems that the strong students have acquired the test taking skills that allowed them to achieve higher standards in comparison to the other students. However, S1 merely obtained the score of 42.5, the same as the whole school average, even when she seemed to have significantly developed the four characteristics of LA. S2 was able to obtain the highest score, 65.0, among the ten other focus group students. S4, who was the least developed in the LA categories, managed to obtain a high score of 62.5. She was a serious English learner with a high intellectual capacity and aspired to be an English teacher in the future. It would be interesting to conduct a follow up study to investigate whether LA further contributed the strong group's development, leading them to maintain and nourish their learning abilities in every other aspect of academic achievement. M7 was among the four highest-scoring students, obtaining a score of 60.0%. Only the two moderate students, M5 and M6, together with one of the weaker students, W10, obtained low scores. Respectively, they scored 32.5, 37.5, and 32.5, which were lower than the national average, while the rest of the focus group scored above the national average. This affirms the claim that, as a whole, autonomous learners are better language learners.

Interestingly, the ONET 2014 post-test scores did not dramatically increase from the ONET 2014 pre-test and were inconsistent across the 10 members of the focus group. Some members of the group obtained increased scores, while the other students' scores decreased from the pre-test to the post-test regardless of the students' intellectual capabilities. This suggests that LA may manifest itself as a means to an end, with the development of the categories of LA, being beneficial in the long run. Additionally, the development of LA categories could take time before beginning to enhance test scores.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This classroom action research investigated whether learner autonomy (LA) could be enhanced through a Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach employed with young rural EFL learners. The existing situation and characteristics of young EFL learners in a rural school in Northeastern Thailand were taken well into consideration. The existing English textbook used for Grade 6 at the school already suggested the utilization of PBL in the classroom, yet this was often overlooked by English teachers in actual practice. This could have resulted from teachers' lack of familiarity with the communicative language

teaching (CLT) approach, which the Ministry of Education has been trying to promote in Thai Schools. The MOE also tries to use this approach to evaluate every Thai sixth grader through the ONET, the national standardized test

The findings of this study confirmed those of a previous ethnographic study (Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2015) that demonstrated most young rural EFL learners were already very willing and motivated to be introduced to the new concept of LA, but that cognitive and metacognitive abilities were the most lacking. This was the case even after the three projects, particularly in the weak group, except for W8. The other two weak students, W9 and W10, were not at all able to develop these abilities during or after the interventions. Apart from these cognitive and metacognitive abilities, the weak group displayed all the other three categories of LA, namely awareness and readiness, willingness and motivation, and the social dimensions of LA. It can be concluded that the PBL interventions worked well with this group and that the weak group was receptive to the training, except in terms of metacognitive development, which may take more time to develop in those with less intellectual capacity. It also shows that a weak student, like W8, when given a chance to develop LA, could greatly improve his level of student engagement, and enhance his ability to transfer knowledge inside and outside of the classroom.

Also, it is evident that the strong group was most lacking the social dimensions of LA. S2 lacked social dimensions at the beginning and developed the skills in the later projects. In addition, S4 managed to develop social dimensions by the end of Project 3. Apart from their higher intellectual capabilities, the highest

(S2) and second highest (S4) scores likely resulted from their ability to learn from their peers and from other social situations. On the other hand, S1, who showed a decline in social dimensions in the last project, could only obtained an average score. This affirms the social-constructivism theory assumption (Vygotsky, 1978) that social dimensions play an important role in learning a language. Despite their weakness in social dimensions, as expected, the strong group as a whole managed to obtain high results in their ONET 2015 scores. However, it was surprising that the confident and articulate S1 obtained the lowest score in the strong group. There may have been factors other than academic ability that may have contributed to this result. Additionally, S3 and S4 experienced a decline in their cognitive and metacognitive abilities. This could be due to the fact that S3 was possibly having personal problems, while S4 was trying to make sense of the new style of learning.

Moreover, there is a debate regarding whether LA is an end goal in itself, or a means for students to become autonomous learners, or whether it is a means to the end for students to be successful language learners. The research results suggest that there is no conflict between the two paradigms and that LA-enhanced learners did achieve higher scores than the national average for the first time in three consecutive years. For instance, M7 was able to shine with a high score of 60.0% after she developed awareness and readiness and cognitive and metacognitive abilities in the latter two projects. In addition, W8, who developed all four categories of characteristics of LA in all three of the projects, dramatically improved his ONET score to 62.5%. Therefore, not only were the young EFL learners equipped with

learning skills and strategies for lifelong learning, but they were also able to obtain satisfactory scores in the national standardized achievement test in the 2015 academic year.

In the ONET 2015, taken one semester after the PBL interventions, the 148 sixth graders obtained an average English score of 42.5 and the focus group scored 49.3, while the mean score for the whole country was 40.3. Although many other factors could contribute to the increase in these 2015 ONET results, the main English teacher at the school stated that the three projects introduced during the first semester contributed to the increase. She stated, "The LA-enhanced interventions have laid out a logical construction for learning in the children's minds. When I came to do the tutoring for the test after the PBL interventions, the young learners were really receptive to the learning. Before, when students did not know a word, they would turn to me to ask for its meaning. Now, they look it up in the dictionary themselves."

LA is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. It is also both natural (Benson, 2001; Thomson, 1996) and a learned ability (Holec, 1981:3). Conclusively, the research findings showed that intellectual capacities or personalities, i.e., nature, did play a great role in LA development. Though, there were some exceptions of the characteristics of LA developed and learned through the PBL interventions, i.e., nurture. In the same PBL course, most strong students were readily able to benefit from this style of teaching, but S4, who is naturally introverted, was not fully able to reap the benefits of the LA-enhanced PBL course. In contrast, W8, a weak student, was the only weak student who fully benefited from the PBL interventions. He was the most developed in terms of LA characteristics, and

developed a sense of exploration and experimentation after the intervention projects. He demonstrated motivation, keenness, and happiness in learning. Also, even though W9 could not at all develop cognitive and metacognitive abilities during the three projects, his leadership and outgoing nature enabled him to dramatically increase his ONET 2015 score from 22.5% to 47.5% in 2014 pre-test. His ONET post-test score also increased to 32.5% in 2014. Thus, both nature, such as intellectual capacity and personality, and nurture, such as abilities learned from the PBL interventions, are attributable to LA enhancement.

This study utilizes qualitative action research, therefore, the researchers had to carefully take into account several data sources in order to assure the reliability of the study's research. Another important aspect is that students from low socio-economic statuses may not be articulate enough to fully explain themselves or to accurately reveal their beliefs and attitudes. Also in Thai culture, students usually defer to teachers and want to please them, so they may only say what they think the teachers or researchers would like to hear. Thus, the researchers had to pay careful attention, especially in matters related to students' directness and any reserved behavior. Consequently, the researchers were well aware of the potential limitations of the study and attempted to minimize them in order to conduct reliable research.

To conclude, the PBL interventions implemented in this study could illustrate how local teachers could make the best use of existing resources, which still being optimistic about their students' potential and the school system in rural areas. The PBL introduced above helped to raise awareness and

familiarity with LA and could provide young EFL learners with additional learning resources. It also exposes students to what their future educational experience might look like. Moreover, not only does LA have a direct impact on improving test scores, but it also has socio-political and psychological effects. The empowerment of young rural EFL learners via LA enhancement could greatly reduce redundancies and the wasting of already scarce resources in impoverished environments. Obtaining learning skills in an atmosphere imbued with freedom and fulfillment could motivate young rural EFL learners to embrace life-long learning.

Pedagogical Implications

The National Education Act (1999) and the National Education Plan (2002-2016) (OBEC, 2009) view LA as an important gateway to learner-centered Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in English. Learner-centeredness assumes two perspectives. The first is acceptance of learners as complex and varied individuals. Second, its ultimate goal is to empower learners by enabling them to take charge of their own language learning as related to their life goals (Tudor, 1996). In order to pursue learner-centered communicative language teaching and learning, on must apply the concept of LA. Therefore, EFL educators should recognize, utilize, and explore LA, possibly through PBL, in their usual day-to-day EFL teaching and learning.

The PBL interventions have shown that to enhance LA, teachers should play a crucial role in guiding, mentoring, coaching, and counseling, while also gradually allowing for young EFL learners to take charge of their own learning. Thus, English teachers' development

of and familiarity with CLT and LA should be a prerequisite to successful teaching. The process of interventions should not overlook this issue of adjustment and the decline of the four categories, but should lead to consistent and persistent LA-enhanced interventions. Also, teachers should be patient in providing the necessary support for this new style of learning. According to social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), EFL teachers should encourage the development of social skills in strong students because they are often the leaders of their groups, and teachers should convince them to work collaboratively with their weaker classmates. All of these interventions could be done with less expense by taking advantage of existing resources already available in the community. These resources include the textbooks, which were distributed for free as part of the government's free education policy, and the Computer Room, for information searches. More importantly, existing resources, as scarce as they may be in rural areas, should be efficiently and effectively exploited, while environmental factors should be developed more in the long run by all the stakeholders in the school and in the community.

Nunan (1997:195) asserts that different learners may be ready for different degrees of LA, ranging from low to high degrees, such as awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence. The LA-enhanced PBL interventions in this study were not a full-fledged PBL for the development of LA characteristics. The teachers had to hold students' hands during the PBL interventions to help make them feel secure and to provide support to boost their confidence. Knowles (1976) suggested that experience of a traditional education system may train learners

to adopt dependent behavior. Beliefs are likely to be strongly held and difficult to modify because they are influenced by culture and educational background. Victori (1992:72) affirms that the more experience in language learning the students have, the less likely they are to rely on teachers during the task of language learning. The PBL interventions demonstrated to students and teachers the ways in which coming out of their comfort zones, gaining exposure, and exploring the world outside their immediate environment could create more effective language learning.

According to Pinter (2006), young EFL learners should be encouraged and taught to learn as early as possible. The impact of LA on young learners can be seen when they begin to take an active role in their individual study and lives, such as in self-awareness of individual learning styles and personality (Ellis, 2001). The willingness and ability to adopt LA could greatly assist care givers in being informed of their wards' individual needs and interests. In turn, it could reduce redundancies and the wasting of resources already scarce in rural areas (Crabbe, 1993: 443). Ultimately, Pearson and Gallagher (1983) coined the phrase "gradual release of responsibility" to describe the process that leads students to become independent learners under the guidance and support of their teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could be conducted to investigate the development of cognitive and metacognitive abilities, the most lacking category of characteristics of LA. Not only do they take time to take effect, but they should also be developed intensively. Furthermore, future studies should be

developed to enhance the social dimensions of the strongest group of students because they are likely to be potential leaders not only in school, but also in the future.

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