Exploring Readiness for Language Learning Autonomy among Distance Learners in Sabah, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT :

Distance learners have a wide variety of reasons for pursuing learning at a distance ; constraints of time, distance, and finances, the opportunity to take courses or hear outside speakers who would otherwise be unavailable, and the ability to come into contact with other students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds. As a result, they gain not only new knowledge but also new social skills, including the ability to communicate and collaborate with widely dispersed colleagues and peers whom they may have never seen. The term 'distance learner' itself invites an assumption that a learner of this type is expected to have gained, to some extent, learner autonomy. In Malaysia, the notion of language learning autonomy may be alien to many learners of English-as-a-Second-Language, especially Malay students, since the pedagogical traditions in Malaysia are usually teacher-centred in nature. Moving from teacher-centred to learner-centred through language learning autonomy may do wonders to promote learning among Malay students. This paper investigated the readiness for language learning autonomy of the distance learners in one higher learning institution in Sabah, Malaysia. The degree of their readiness for language learning autonomy was examined through a set of three questionnaires, designed to investigate each learner's perceptions and beliefs in the three areas of perceptions on the teachers' roles, the learner's reliance on the teachers, and the learner's confidence or beliefs in his / her own language learning abilities. This study explored how the data derived from the questionnaires revealed the status of readiness of the learners for language learning autonomy.

1. INTRODUCTION :

1.1 Overview :

Distance learning and learner autonomy are two separate entities but to ensure the success of learning at a distance, these two units are interrelated and inseparable in nature. Distance learners have a wide variety of reasons for pursuing learning at a distance ; constraints of time, distance, and finances, the opportunity to take courses or hear outside speakers who would otherwise be unavailable, and the ability to come into contact with other students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds (Willis, 1993). Because of these constraints, distance learners need to take very much responsibility – or even full responsibility - for their own learning and therefore be autonomous so that they will be able to keep abreast with necessary and updated information and knowledge which are relevant to their success in learning. The present study has investigated how well prepared distance language learners are for autonomy, their perceptions on aspects of autonomy, and overall their readiness for language learning autonomy.

1.2 Previous Studies on Learner Autonomy :

Attempts to promote language learning autonomy (LLA) have geared many researchers and teachers to examine LLA

and its effectiveness and benefits among language learners. However, for the reason of brevity, only a few studies will be mentioned in the following discussion.

A study by Cotterall (2000) has looked into the promotion of learner autonomy through the curriculum of language courses. For the purpose of that study, a series of courses was designed for a group of 20 learners and it was run for a period of 12 weeks. The learners attended the classes for three hours every morning with their class teacher. Then they attended a course in an area of special interest (or need) for two hours for one afternoon each week for five weeks in each half of the course. The courses were drafted based on the following five principles ; (1) learner goals, (2) the language learning process, (3) tasks, (4) learner strategies, and (5) reflection on learning. That study revealed that in order to foster learner autonomy in a curriculum, the notion of learner autonomy must be made as an important and appropriate goal in the language course design. To achieve this, she proposed these five principles be incorporated into language course design.

Another investigation by Trinh (2005) aimed at exploring the significance of curriculum innovation in language classes in elevating learner autonomy. For the purpose of this study, an experimental curriculum was developed based on the theory of task-based language learning, and the curriculum was implemented in view of enhancing the quality of secondary school English teacher education at Can Tho University, Vietnam, through designing and implementing a curriculum that aims to enhance the students' autonomy and their communicative competence. The study revealed that irrespective of having a high or low degree of self-regulation, irrespective of their levels of intrinsic motivation, and irrespective of their reported attitudes to autonomous learning, the students generally gained benefit with improved language learning using the new curriculum. This was observed in the way they demonstrated awareness of the choices they had; how they adapted choices and how they created the learning tasks for themselves. They clearly showed use of self-regulated skills and language learning autonomy in their learning (Trinh, 2005).

Januin (2005) has argued that before any intervention occurs, it is essential to delve into the learners' readiness for autonomy. The present study reported here involves 45 Malay students learning English as a second language at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). To do so, the paper first discusses data derived from each learner's responses on his or her dependence on the teachers, perceptions towards the teachers' roles in learning, and own confidence in language learning ability. Next, the paper argues how these learner beliefs reflect on or represent the learner's readiness for LLA. Based on these findings, the learners appear to not show an adequate level of readiness for LLA. This discovery is significant since it impacts on ways to promote learner autonomy to be included in all English language syllabuses at UMS. From these findings, it is important that teachers are now trained to instil learner autonomy among language learners through careful interventions and well-planned activities.

Unlike Januin's 2005 study which investigated learner autonomy among students who study at UMS on a full-time basis, Murphy's (2005) study has explored the notion of learner autonomy among distance learners of German, French and Spanish at the UK Open University. The study was a pilot study and it discovered that their distance learners employed a substantial degree of functional control in their learning. She added that distance learners must be encouraged to enhance their capacities for reflection and self-study; and have a clear framework to guide their progress.

1.3 Distance Learning in General :

Many researchers have used the terms 'distance education' or 'distance learning' interchangeably depending on the way they are interpreted. In general, constraints in terms of finance, far distance between their workplace and the institutions they wish to enrol at, limited time allocated for lectures and tutorials due to the current work requirements, and so on have encouraged many working adults to opt for distance

education. The flexible times for studying and the online mode of learning that do not require the learner to meet regularly face-to-face with the lecturers are among the factors that invite working adults to participate in distance education.

To have a general view or understanding of distance education or distance learning, it is worthwhile to preview some definitions underpinning the issues of distance education. Sherry (1996, p.337) states that "Its hallmarks are the separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time (Perraton, 1988), the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distant instructor (Jonassen, 1992), and non-contiguous communication between student and teacher, mediated by print or some form of technology (Keegan, 1986 ; Garrison & Shale, 1987)".

Moore & Kearsley (1996) defines distance education as planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational administrative arrangements.

Another definition of distance education provided by the Learning Circuits Glossary states that it is an "educational situation in which the instructor and students are separated by time, location, or both. Education or training courses are delivered to remote locations via synchronous or asynchronous means of instruction, including written correspondence, text, graphics, audio- and video-tape, CD-ROM, online learning, audio- and video-conferencing, interactive TV, and facsimile. Distance education does not preclude the use of the traditional classroom. The definition of distance education is broader than and entails the definition of e-learning". Greenberg (1998, p.36) defines contemporary distance learning as "a planned teaching / learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning" (cited in Valentine, 2002).

There have been several definitions put forward previously. Based on these definitions, the present study has adopted the definition proposed by Moore & Kearsley (1996) that distance education or learning is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements. By employing this theoretical definition, the researcher is able to select the subjects carefully.

1.4 The Relationship between the Distance Learning and Learner Autonomy :

Distance learning and learner autonomy are two entities which are inseparable. Researchers have found that students that have done well with distance classes are highly motivated, independent, are active learners, possess good organizational and time management skills, have discipline to study without external reminders, and can adapt to new learning environments (http://academic.son.wisc.edu/cnp_orient/OnlineLearning/Characteristics.htm) Charp (1994) has noted that with greater learner autonomy, student characteristics such as active listening and the ability to work independently in the absence of a live instructor become crucial for success. White (2004) has argued that the issues of learner independence and learner autonomy occupy a central place in discussions of language learning in distance education. She adds that these issues are often linked to ideas and assumptions about what constitutes an ideal learning environment and quality learning experiences and about the roles and responsibilities of distance learners.

Distance learners are also surrounded with opportunities as long as they have acquired and understood the characteristics and environments needed to be successful in their learning. The needs to develop a more independent approach to learning a language, to be well prepared, and to foster effective self-management skills are keys to the development of learner autonomy – and

these are especially important to distance learners. In other words, the more autonomous the distance learners are, the more likely they will be successful in their learning.

1.5 The Objectives of the Study :

In order to investigate the readiness for language learning autonomy (LLA) among distance learners at UMS, the researcher prepared the four following research questions ; -

1. What are the learner's perceptions towards the teachers' roles in language learning ?
2. How reliant is the learner on the teachers ?
3. How confident is the student of his or her language learning ability ? and
4. Is the learner ready for language learning autonomy ?

2. METHODS :

2.1 The Survey Instrument :

Three sets of questionnaires were designed to ask each student about his or her perceptions on the teachers' roles, about the learner's reliance on the teachers, and about the learner's confidence and beliefs in his or her language learning ability. These three sets were combined together into one large questionnaire for ease in distributing to the students, and to hide the fact that three distinct areas were being investigated. The resulting questionnaire was then a mixture of a variety of different questions.

The questionnaire was adapted and modified from that of Cotterall (1995). Cotterall's questionnaire investigated students' beliefs and prior experience in language learning, and consisted of fifty questions including both multiple-choice-answer questions to open-ended questions. The present study used a questionnaire consisting of only 30 multiple-choice-answer questions. There are two grounds for this modification in Cotterall's questionnaire which are explained in turn.

The first rationale for the change in the questionnaire design derives from feedback

from a group of UMS students who were involved in a pilot study of this research.

At first the researcher intended to utilise the original version of Cotterall's questionnaire However, the students in Cotterall's study included both native and non-native speakers of English, and their learning proficiency in English in New Zealand, and those students likely understood the questions well. It is important to take into consideration whether or not the original Cotterall questionnaire is valid to be distributed to the present students at UMS who all study English as a second language and whose English proficiency ranges from low-intermediate to intermediate level. To validate whether the original questionnaires is suitable for the current subjects, a pilot study was conducted using the original Cotterall questionnaire to a group of 10 students at UMS.

The students were given one hour to complete the questionnaire. During their completing the questionnaire, almost all of the students each asked for clarifications because they found the questions confusing and overlapping. The confusion arose not due to the nature of the questions but more to the difficulties faced by the subjects in understanding the concepts and structures of the sentences.

To illustrate this point, question 9 in the Cotterall questionnaire has four statements asking about learner beliefs ; - 9a) *I believe I know how to explain what I need English for* ; 9b) *I am confident I know how to explain what I need English for* ; 9c) *I am willing to explain what I need English for* ; and 9d) *I accept responsibility for explaining what I need English for*. To the UMS sample students, these questions are very similar to each other. Due to this factor, modifications were made to some of the questions, and consequently the number of questions was reduced to a total of only 30 questions, to be used in the present study. Moreover since the present study seeks to investigate the thinking of the UMS students, translations of the modified questions into Malay were placed after each question in English. For example question 10 and question 30 were given as follows.

S1.10. I believe the teacher's preparation is very important in successful language learning. *(Saya percaya persediaan guru amat penting dalam pembelajaran bahasa saya),* and

S3.10. My own effort plays the most important role in successful language learning. *(Usaha saya sendiri yang memainkan peranan yang paling utama dalam mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris)*

The second reason for the modification is that the objectives of the present study involves only the three areas of **the learner's perceptions on the teachers' roles, the learner's reliance on the teachers, and the learner's confidence and beliefs in his or her own language learning ability.**

Questions discarded from Cotterall's questionnaire involved those concerned with the learner's tactics and efforts in learning a language. Those areas are not covered in the present study. The revised questionnaire consisted of 30 items with a 5-point Likert-type rating scale from *strong agreement* to *strong disagreement*. The items were given in three sections. Section 1 consists of 10 items to explore the learner's reliance on the teachers in language learning. Section 2 consists of 10 items about the learner's perceptions towards the teacher roles in language learning. And Section 3 consists of 10 items about the learner's confidence in his or her own language learning ability (Table 1).

Table 1 : The Questionnaire Items

Section - Item	The Item Statement in English
S1-1	*I am willing to find my own way of practising if I get help from the teacher*
S1-2	*I believe feedback on my language learning from the teacher helps me most*
S1-3	*I believe that opportunities to use the language should be provided by the teacher*
S1-4	*I believe the teacher can teach me the best way to learn a language*
S1.5	*I believe the teacher can teach me the best way to learn a language*
S1.6	*I believe the teacher should be an expert at learning languages*
S1.7	*I believe the teacher should be an expert at showing students how to learn*
S1.8	*I believe my language learning success depends on what the teacher does in the classroom*
S1.9	*Positive praises from the teacher are among most important rewards in successful language learning*
S1.10	*I believe the teacher's preparation is very important in successful language learning*
S2.1	*I believe that the role of the teacher is to tell me what to do*
S2.2	*I believe that the role of the teacher is to help me to learn effectively*
S2.3	*I believe that the role of the teacher is to tell me what progress I am making*
S2.4	*I believe that the role of a teacher is to say what my difficulties are*
S2.5	*I believe that the role of the teacher is to create opportunities for me to practice*
S2.6	*I believe that the role of the teacher is to decide how long I spend on activities*
S2.7	*I believe that the role of the teacher is to explain why we are doing an activity*
S2.8	*I believe that the role of teacher is to set my learning goals*
S2.9	*I believe that the role of the teacher is to give me regular tests*
S2.10	*I believe that the role of the teacher is to offer help to me*
S3.1	*I am confident about finding my own ways of practicing*
S3.2	*I believe that I can communicate in English without knowing the rules*
S3.3	*I am confident about checking my work for mistakes*
S3.4	*I am confident about explaining what I need English for*
S3.5	*I am confident about setting my own learning goals*
S3.6	*I am confident about planning my own learning*
S3.7	*I believe I know best how well I am learning*
S3.8	*I believe feedback on my language learning that I give myself helps me most*
S3.9	*I believe that I should find my own opportunities to use the language*
S3.10	*My own effort plays an important role in successful language learning*

2.2 The Survey Sample :

Initially, questionnaires were going to be distributed to selected students at three higher learning institutions in Sabah ; - namely the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), the Open University Malaysia (OUM), and the Mara University of Technology (UITM). However, based on the several definitions of distance education discussed earlier (Moore, 1995 ; Greenberg, 1998 ; Keegan, 1995 in Valentine, 2002 ; & Learning Circuits Glossary), the students at UMS are not ideally appropriate to be in the sample. The UMS off-campus students have always been labelled as distance learners. However, the off-campus classes at UMS are conducted during seven weekends consecutively to fulfil 14 weeks of meetings with lecturers to follow the on-campus programmes. Each meeting consists of 6 contact hours. In other words, the lecturers and the students meet very regularly compared to other distance programmes in other institutions. The off-campus UMS students are assessed fully based on face-to-face interaction with lecturers. There is very minimal involvement of technologies like synchronous communications (online chat, video conferencing, or instant messaging) or asynchronous communications (e-mail, or online bulletin board) when it comes to interactions between the teachers and the students. Even if they are used, they happen by choice between the teacher and the students, and are not compulsory components in assessing the student's performance. Due to this factor, the researcher was concerned about including students from UMS, and resolved to include only distance-education students at UITM and distance-education students at OUM.

In acquiring data from OUM students, the researcher was assisted by a UMS colleague lecturing part-time at OUM. The lecturer taught the course English for Workplace Communication (OUM H2203) to 2 classes – one consisting of 24 students and the other of 23 students. According to the schedule of the class, they only meet 3 times a semester with each meeting involving 3 contact hours of face-to-face tutorial. The other mode of learning is by communicating with their lecturing online

through what is called a Leaner Management System (LMS). The LMS is a basic technology for distance learning as it provides avenues for learners to keep abreast with the latest information with regard to their courses. An LMS provides the course description, announcements from the lecturers and administrators, course materials, past years' examination papers, current assignments, and text-based references online. Apart from these, in the LMS, the students have the opportunities to communicate with their respective lecturers through an online forum with chat and, email. The students are required to communicate online with their lecturers, and this communication can be monitored by university administrators and by the lecturers. The students are also assessed by their online participation between their lecturers and among their peers.

Like OUM distance learners, the distance learners at UITM meet 3 to 4 times per semester. Nevertheless the contact hours differ from OUM as each meeting between a lecturer and the students is conducted for 2 hours. Apart from the 3 or 4 face-to-face tutorials with their lecturer, the students are expected to study on their own and to take responsibility to be independent learners since 80 percent of their learning is online. The students are expected to form study groups and communicate among themselves through the use of both synchronous and asynchronous internet communication technologies such as Yahoo Messenger and Yahoo Group. Because of the nature of their mode of learning that expects and stresses students not to depend on the lecturers alone but to gain information through online journals, books, study materials, and chat among their peers, the questionnaires was distributed to 25 UMS students who were taking the course English for Occupational Purposes II (BEL 320) taught by the author on a part-time basis. This sample of 25 students comprised the full cohort of those students taking this subject in the distance mode during that semester. The course contents between BEL 320 and H2203 were compared, and were found to share many similarities in their focus on English in specific and formal job-related situations,

involving the collection of data and the presentation of job-related information. Therefore, the survey sample consisted of a total of 72 students.

2.3 The Survey Procedure :

This study originally intended to utilise Cotterall's (1995) questionnaire. However, a pilot study involving 10 students revealed that the Cotterall questionnaire was not suitable. It was discovered that the students in Sabah were confused by the English used by Cotterall for students in New Zealand. Therefore, the original questions were modified to improve comprehension. This included additional Malay translation to each of the modified questions.

The survey procedure then involved distributing the modified instrument to the 72 sample students, where these 72 students were in each case the complete cohort of the classes being surveyed. The questionnaire was administered face-to-face in a classroom under the teacher's supervision. The questionnaires were administered during the first tutorial of the course, in each case.

Figure 1 indicates the averaged ratings given by the 72 students to each item from *strong agreement* to *strong disagreement*

for the 10 items in Section 1 (S1.1 ~ S1.10). The first tutorial was important to be chosen, since the objectives of this study were to investigate the readiness of new students for language learning autonomy. The students spent around 35-45 minutes answering the questionnaire. The questionnaire was anonymous, and full responses to each item was assured by the teacher at the time of collecting the questionnaire from each student. The survey response data were tabulated using Microsoft Excel Version 2003. The survey was given to the 72 students in April at the start of the course, and data analyses were completed by June 2006.

3. RESULTS :

The results of the analyses on the information is presented here about learner readiness for language learning autonomy (LLA) in the three areas of the learner's perceptions on the teachers' roles, the learner's reliance on the teachers, and the learner's confidence and beliefs in his or her own language learning ability. Each area was analysed in turn using the data from the questionnaire (Figures 1, 2, & 3).
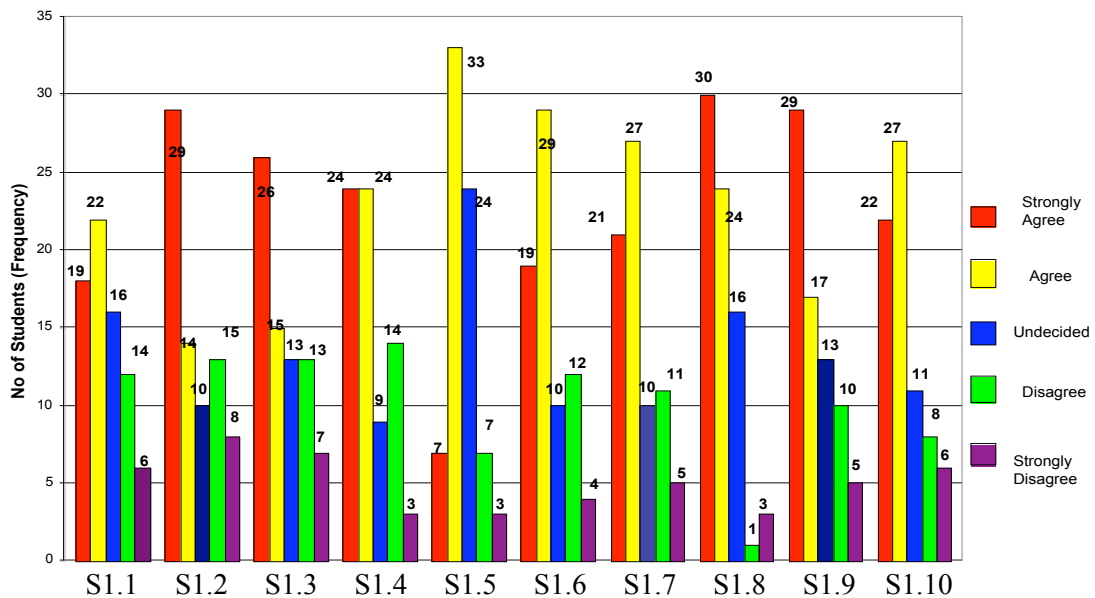

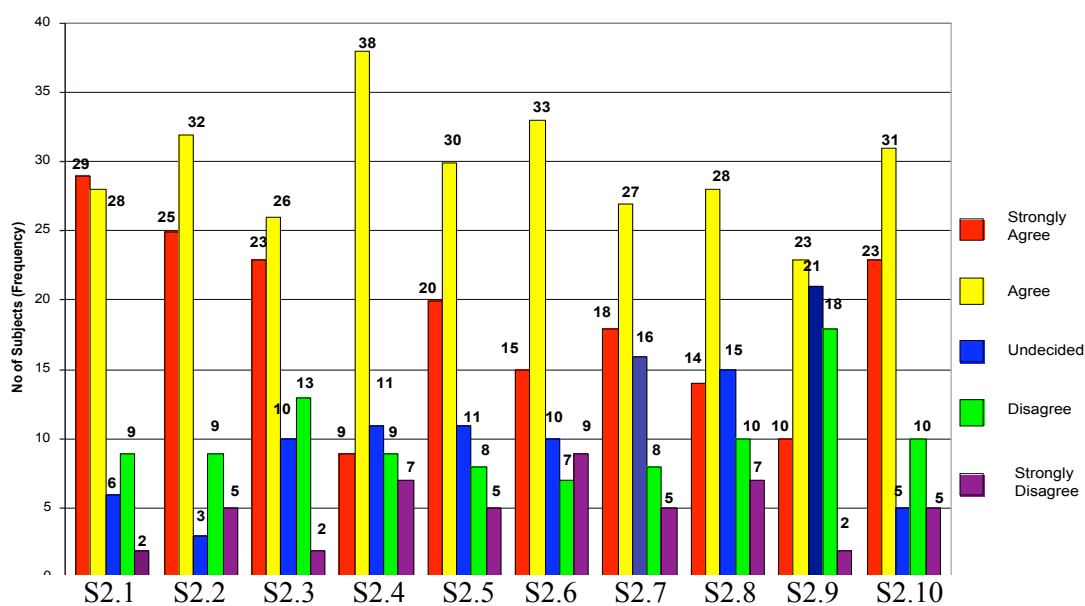Figure 1 : The learners' perceptions on the teachers' roles S1.1 ~ S1.10

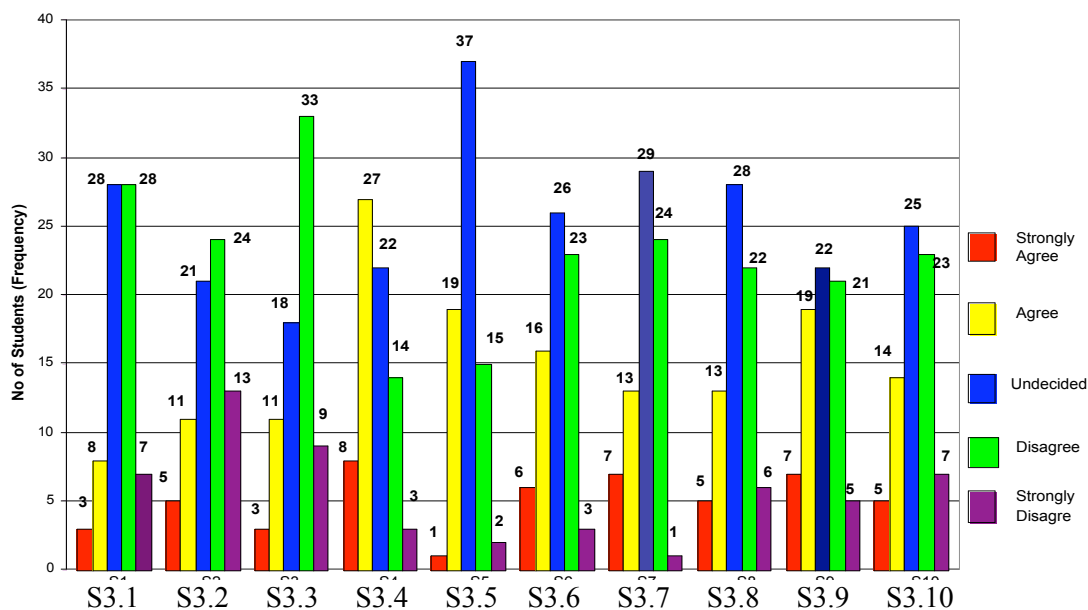Figure 2 : The learners' reliance on the teachers S2.1 ~ S2.10

Figure 3 : The learners' confidence and beliefs in own language learning ability S3.1 ~ S3.10

4. DISCUSSION :

The above findings are discussed here in terms of their providing potential answers to the four research questions given as the objectives of this study.

Research Question 2 was
1. What are the learner's perceptions towards the teachers' roles in language learning ?

In answering the issue of the learner's perceptions towards the teacher roles, the

student was asked to rate each of 10 items in this area. In order to succeed in distance language learning, learners are expected to view the roles of teachers not as class authority but as facilitator and advisor. However, the findings from this survey show that the new students perceive the teachers' roles as an authority; as goal-setter; planner; test-giver; progress-indicator; and opportunity and help-provider, and so in these ways therefore vital in their language learning. Of the 10 items, 67% rated item S1.3 (*I believe that the role of the teacher is to tell me what progress I am making*) as 'undecided', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'. More than 50% rated items S1.1, S1.2 and S1.4~ S1.10 as 'agree' and 'strongly agree'.

These students who agreed or strongly agreed with these nine items (S1.1, S1.2, and S1.4 ~ S1.10) evidently recognised the teacher as a dominant figure in their learning. In other words, the learners' perception conforms to the traditional authoritarian view of a teacher's role. From these findings, the learners can be described as not having a high degree of readiness for language learning autonomy, and therefore do not correspond to the profile of the autonomous learner. The roles they have assigned to the teachers – including the roles of creating learning opportunities, helping learning effectively, explaining the purpose of activities, and so on – are among the general detractions of autonomous learning.

Research Question 2 was

5. How reliant is the learner on the teachers ?

The findings related to research question 2 indicate that the new students rely on their teachers. About 58 ~ 70% of the students rated all items, except item S2.9, as 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.

Only 45% rated item S2.9 (*I believe that I should find my own opportunities to use the language) as 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.*

These findings indicate that learners rely on teachers greatly in many aspects of learning English despite being distance learners. It seems that the learners hardly see learning independently as among the main contributions to success in language learning. Another worrying finding is that most of the new distance students believe that learning mostly takes place in the classroom. Activities conducted out of the classroom are seen as less significant to their language learning. In brief, the pattern of the data establishes the premise that the learners rely on teachers greatly.

Research Question 3 was

3   How confident is the student of his or her language learning ability ?

In general, the new students were undecided as to their confidence in their ability and route for language learning. The most frequent rating was 'undecided' for the eight items S3.1, S3.2, and S3.5~S3.10.

A question arises here: Is 'undecided' closer to the concept of 'agree' or to 'disagree'? At this juncture, it is difficult to reach a consensus on an answer to this, and further investigation or interviews may be warranted. However, a sense of learner 'unautonomy' can be observed here. To illustrate, many learners rated these eight items as 'undecided'. This shows that they are unsure of many things with regard to their confidence in language learning. When they are uncertain about displaying confidence in their response to these items, it reflects their anxiety in their learning ability, and this does not conform to the profile of an autonomous learner.

learners rely on teachers greatly.

Research Question 4 was

4   Is the learner ready for language learning autonomy ?

In answering the last research question, we must look into the concluded responses to the previous three research questions. In response to Research Question 1, the subjects believed in the traditional authoritarian view of the teachers' role. In response to Research Question 2, the students showed that they held a high degree of reliance on their teachers. In response to Research Question 3, many of the students were undecided when asked about their confidence and beliefs in their own language learning ability.

Therefore, the responses to the first three Research Questions indicate that the new students are not ready for language learning autonomy.

5. CONCLUSION :

This study is not comprehensive or extensive, and it has covered only three dimensions – the learner's reliance on the teachers, the learner's perceptions towards the teachers' roles, and the learner's confidence in his or her own language learning ability, in order to elucidate the distance learner's readiness for language learning autonomy. There are many more dimensions and pieces yet to be explored here. These other dimensions include the factors such as the role of feedback, the student's prior language learning experience and the learner's approaches to studying.

The concept of autonomy is within the Western cultural tradition and is to a large extent alien and exotic to non-Western learners (Jones, 1995 - in Little & Dam, 1998). Nevertheless, its origin should not be a hindrance to inculcate learner autonomy among our Asian learners. Although learner autonomy originates from Western cultural practice, it ought to be universally accepted if it bears profits and success in learning.

A thought provoking question arises here - What could lead to learners being unprepared for autonomous learning ? This is an important issue that future research might address. Could it be the practice of spoon-feeding learners that has been prevalent in our Asian education system ? Or could be it due to the fact that the absence of or lack in emphasis on learner autonomy in our language education syllabus at primary and secondary schools, and at the tertiary levels ? Or could it be due to our Eastern cultural constraint that the teacher is a symbol of classroom feudalism? Such questions need to be addressed in further research on learner autonomy.

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