CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

...The important thing is not so much that every child should be taught, as that every child should be given the wise to learn.

John Lubbock

Underlining the importance of learning how to learn, the saying above attaches importance to learners as ones who take responsibility for their own learning, which indicates the trend in current context of language education. For a few decades, literature in the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning has been shown to focus on learners in their own learning process. As can be observed, there has been an increasing amount of attention to the notion of learner autonomy which is considered a key condition for effective learning (Benson, 2001; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Deci and Ryan, 1985; Dickinson, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Wenden, 1991). It has been proposed that autonomy or the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981) could, to some extent, contribute to success in learning. Learners learn better when they take control over their own learning. That is; when they are involved in self-directed learning activities including determining their learning goals, choosing the contents, selecting learning materials and methods, and evaluating learning progress; learning becomes more purposive, meaningful, permanent, and effective. According to Deci and Ryan, 1985; Dickinson, 1995, autonomous learners who take control over their own learning are likely to feel more motivated in their learning, which in turn leads to success in learning. In particular, what makes the concept of learner autonomy appealing to educators is the matter of lifelong learning. As indicated by the saying above, it has been acknowledged that a general goal of education is to develop individuals to become life-long learners who are capable of making an inquiry into and pursuing their new knowledge after leaving the school. This is because knowledge is not static. Learners are expected to be able to deal with an increasing amount of newly emerging and exploding knowledge and an enormous

number of current theories. Due to its vital aspects, many attempts have been made to promote autonomous learning among learners. Like any other countries, Thailand has realized the benefits of autonomous learning. That is, in the current Thai educational reform, the great emphasis has been put on the role of learners (ONEC, n.d.), with the intention of producing independent and life-long learners (Thamraksa, 2003) who can carry on learning after formal education. However, in spite of its importance, few studies on learner autonomy have been conducted in Thai EFL education. Therefore, it seems reasonable for the present study to be carried out to investigate Thai students' readiness for autonomous English language learning. This is for providing a clearer picture of Thai students in terms of their English language learning autonomy.

Rationale of the Study

In Thai educational context, there has long been an attempt to promote autonomous learning among learners, with the aim to develop Thai people to become life-long learners. Thailand has now been in the process of educational reform (Chaythong, 2009). Regarding the reform of Thai education, autonomous learning was stipulated in the Constitution of 1997 and National Education Act of 1999 (Thamraksa, 2003 as cited in Rukthong, 2008), which states that the teaching-learning process shall aim at enabling the learners to develop themselves at their own pace and in accord with their potential (ONEC, n.d.). Attaching highest importance to the learners, this indicates that it is the learners themselves who are supposed to take major control over their own learning. The learners are expected to be able to learn autonomously according to their own preferences and capacity. Such concept is in harmony with the shift from the traditional approach "teacher-centered learning" to the new and innovative approach "student-centered learning" (Benson, 2001; Benson and Voller, 1997) in Thai education system. Student-centered learning or child-centered learning, as the names imply, is the approach which places an emphasis on the part of learners (Benson, 2001; Benson and Voller, 1997; Nunan, 1995; Yang, 1998). That is, having more active and participatory roles in the learning and teaching process than in the traditional approach, the learners take charge of and become responsible for their own learning (Tudor, 1993). Thus, autonomous learning or the aspect of learning that

learners are required to take main responsibility for their own learning seems to play a key role in Thai educational contexts, including the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) education.

In the field of language education, the concept of autonomous learning is considered very important due to the fact that language learning is a long-life endeavor which is not limited within the classroom contexts (Horwitz, 1987 as cited in Rukthong, 2008). This is because language acquisition is one of the most complex aspects of human development. Merely the teaching and learning process in the classroom is not sufficient and effective enough for learners to master the language they are learning. In order to acquire the target language, learners need to become self-sufficient and responsible for their own learning process. Thus, apart from learning inside classes, they should learn how to learn by themselves outside classes (Nowlan, 2008).

Another reason highlighting the importance of autonomous learning is the matter of individual differences. Learners usually differ in their motivation, attitudes, beliefs, intellectual abilities, personality, preferences, learning aptitude, and learning styles (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Individual learners will react to different learning conditions in different ways (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Therefore, the aspect of autonomous learning, which learners are usually required to take charge of their own learning and allowed to learn independently according to their own interests and in accord with their potential, can best serve individual differences.

Given the importance of autonomous learning, there have to date been several attempts to empower autonomous learning for learners. However, to help learners become more autonomous in their learning is not a simple matter since several factors exert influence on the development of learners' autonomy. In addition, autonomous learning ability, according to Victori and Lockhart (1995), is not innate. Therefore, it should not be assumed from the start that learners are fully independent (Chu, 1998) and ready to accept responsibility for their own learning. Victori and Lockhart (1995) argued that if little consideration is given to students' metacognitive knowledge, or belief, to learn autonomously, they will encounter some difficulties when exposed to independent learning. Victori and Lockhart (1995, p. 224) maintained:

...since students are not usually prepared to assume ponsibility for their own learning (Holec, 1981; Wenden, 1987; Dickinson, 1987), when they come to the self-access centre, they are faced with an unusual situation, with which they cannot cope. Consequently, not being able to handle this new and autonomous learning "model", after a trial period they eventually withdraw from the self-access centre

Thus, it has been suggested that in order to prepare an appropriate plan to foster autonomous learning in educational contexts, learners' readiness for autonomous learning needs to be explored first.

Many researchers (Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Spratt, Humphreys and Chan, 2002; Koçak, 2003; Rukthong, 2008; Yıldırım, 2005, 2008) point out the necessity to investigate learners' readiness for autonomous learning before any implementation for fostering autonomy in classroom contexts. They further proposed that certain key factors such as learners' beliefs, motivation, confidence, responsibility attitudes, use of metacognitive strategies, and performance of outside class activities in learning a language must be taken into consideration in order to examine learners' readiness for autonomous learning.

Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) conducted a study to gauge students' readiness for learner autonomy in language learning. The results revealed that motivation had a strong impact on learners' readiness for learner autonomy. Additionally, in an investigation of the role of learners' beliefs in reflecting learners' readiness for learner autonomy, Cotterall (1995) found that learners who agreed to share the responsibility with their teachers were more ready for autonomous learning than those who gave learning responsibility to their teachers. The results also revealed that the learners who had more confidence in ability to learn language on their own appeared to use more self-directed learning skills than those who had less confidence. In addition, with the intention to assess readiness of Thai University students for autonomous English language learning, Rukthong (2008) conducted a study focusing on students' beliefs and their use of learning strategies. The results revealed that the students believed that teachers should take responsibility for their learning. They also believed that they did not have adequate knowledge about English subject matters and

concept of autonomous learning to learn on their own. Regarding the use of learning strategies, it was found that some metacognitive strategies especially for planning, motoring, and evaluating were rarely used by the students. The researcher concluded that the students were not fully ready to learn autonomously.

Although several factors have been recognized and accepted to condition learners' readiness for autonomous language learning, the current study was designed to focus only on three psychological factors including students' perceptions of their own responsibilities, motivation, and confidence in their ability to learn English autonomously. The rationale behind this selection was that these variables have been widely acknowledged to have strong influences on autonomous language learning behaviors.

To sum up, before encouraging learners to approach their own English language learning autonomy, it is important to investigate their readiness for autonomous English language learning. In doing so, the intrinsic factors relating learners' responsibility perceptions, motivation, and confidence in English learning need to be studied.

Statement of Problems

During the period the present study was conducted, the researcher worked as an English teacher assistant at Naresuan University, Phitsanulok, Thailand. As observed informally by the researcher, the majority of undergraduate students at Naresuan University, paying attention only to what the teacher taught and assigned in class, rarely learned English on their own outside class. Additionally, unless it was the requirement of the course they were taking, the students neither did English exercises nor went to self-access learning center to improve their English skills. However, some students did well in class and be able to make the most of learning resources available for them. For this reason, the researcher wondered whether the students were prepared to accept responsibility for their own English language learning or whether they were ready to learn English language autonomously. The researcher reviewed some previous studies on learners' readiness for autonomous English language learning conducted in various learning contexts (Koçak, 2003; Rukthong, 2008; Rungwaraphong, 2012; Yıldırım, 2005, 2008). It was found that

different groups of students showed different readiness levels to exercise autonomy in their English language learning. Besides, certain set of factors, as mentioned earlier, reflects learners' readiness for autonomous learning. In order to find out the extent to which learners are ready to learn English language autonomously, it is important to study their perceptions of learning responsibilities, motivation, and confidence in their ability to direct their own learning. However, from the review of previous studies, it was found that few studies in Thai EFL context have focused on these psychological factors in relation to learners' readiness for autonomous English language learning.

Regarding the importance of autonomous learning in current Thai EFL education, the present study aimed at investigating students' readiness for autonomous English language learning. To do so, the study was designed to focus on the psychological variables including students' perceptions of their own responsibilities, motivation and confidence in their ability to perform autonomously in English learning.

Purposes of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the readiness for autonomous English language learning of the undergraduate English major students at Naresuan University. In addition, it intended to examine whether there were any differences between high and low proficient students in terms of readiness for autonomous English language learning.

Research Questions

The present study was conducted to answer two research questions as follows:

1. To what extent are English major students at Naresuan University ready to learn English language autonomously?

2. Are there any differences in readiness for autonomous English language learning between students with high and low English proficiency levels?

Significance of the Study

The findings from this study are expected to reveal the readiness for autonomous English language learning of the undergraduate English major students at Naresuan University. The understanding of students' readiness for English language learning autonomy would serve as a basic knowledge for English teachers to make decision on how to prepare an appropriate plan to help their students to engage a greater degree of autonomy in the learning and teaching process, which in turn contributes to the development of curriculum that aims to promote autonomous English language learning. Also, the study is anticipated to be a useful resource for future studies in the areas of autonomous language learning.

Scope of the Study

The present study intended to examine the readiness for autonomous English language learning of Naresuan University students whose major subject was English, during the 2012 academic year. The instruments employed to assess students' involvement in autonomous learning were limited to a set of questionnaire and a semi-structured individual interview, which was designed to focus only on three areas: students' perceptions of their own responsibilities, motivation, and confidence in their ability to act autonomously in learning English. Thus, within the scope of the study, generalizations might be made only for the undergraduate English major students in Naresuan University.

Definitions of Terms

1. **Autonomy** refers to the ability to take charge of one's own learning where to take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning (Holec, 1981). Autonomy also refers to the attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning (Dickinson, 1995).

2. **Autonomous learning** refers to the learning that learners take responsibilities for their own learning. To engage in autonomous learning, learners need to have the capacity of autonomous learning. This capacity is composed of learners' ability,

motivation, confidence, and positive views of learning responsibility to direct their own learning. (Adapted from Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1995; Littlewood, 1996)

3. **Learners' readiness for autonomous learning** refers to the state that learners are ready or prepared to take charge of their own learning. In this study, learners who are regarded as being ready for autonomous language learning must have positive views of learning responsibility, motivation, and confidence in their ability to learn independently in English learning (Adapted from Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1995; Littlewood, 1996)

4. **Learning responsibilities** refer to responsibilities in the learning process which involve five aspects of learning including setting learning goals, defining the contents and learning progress, selecting methods and techniques used for learning, monitoring learning process, and evaluating what has been acquired. (Adapted from Holec, 1981; Cotterall, 1995)

5. **Motivation** refers to an arousal which influences learners to decide to do something and sustain or persist their effort in order to achieve their goals (William and Burden, 1997 as cited in Chaythong, 2009).

6. **Confidence** refers to learners' feelings or beliefs about their own ability to accomplish the tasks (Brown, 2000 as cited in Chaythong, 2009).

7. **Language proficiency** refers to the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 1992). In this study, students' English proficiency levels can be measured by their average grade of the five English courses: Fundamental English, Developmental English, Reading practice, Basic writing, and Basic oral skills.