

## **The Attributes of Successful Distance Language Learners**

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### **Abstract**

With the popularity of distance learning in the form of online learning throughout Thai education today, understanding the attributes of successful online learners has become very crucial because it can help course developers to prepare materials and help for learners. This study focuses on the attributes of learners who study language in a distance learning mode by aiming to investigate learners' attributes that may assist them to learn successfully in a Web-based distance writing setting. The study was conducted with distance learners who enrolled in an online English language writing course at one of the well-known English language tutorial schools in Bangkok. The research instruments included an online survey questionnaire (Self-Efficacy Scale) and telephone interviews. The questionnaire was used to determine the learners' entry-level confidence with necessary writing skills and computer skills for online learning in order to predict their success and select the highly self-efficacious learners as the subjects for more in-depth study. A content-analysis of interview data revealed unique characteristics that are possessed by the online language learners and how they dealt with the tasks.

**Keywords:** Online learners attributes, Self-efficacy, Distance language learning

### **Introduction**

Thai education nowadays uses online technologies to support teaching and learning. The technologies are being developed continuously to assist or supplant traditional classrooms. Due to the demand of students to learn more at their own time and pace, many institutions offer distance education. The institutions use various technologies to provide online learning courses. Those courses offer students educational opportunities and the flexibility of when and where they access their courses. Consequently, the students are able to study their selected learning courses at home. Thus, this learning mode is widely used in many disciplines including English language learning.

However, when engaging in distance learning, learners may encounter many problems with learning online. Learning a language in an online environment, the students must not only learn difficult course material but also the technology skills needed to participate in the class. They might feel less confident about enrolling and learning in online classes, especially at secondary school levels. Moreover, it is hard for online language learners who study productive skills especially writing skills because the skills are difficult to do through self-study and they also need feedback. As a result, the learners may find learning by this mode very difficult and are likely to drop out, especially for the ones who are used to total dependence on a teacher (Hurd, 2000). Therefore, more motivation and skills support are essential for learners to learn in a distance language learning environment effectively.

### **Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy is defined as self-assessment of ability to do a task or achieve a goal over a specific situation (Bandura, 1977). It is a crucial component of social cognitive theory and it determines how learners feel, think, motivate, and behave. Self-efficacy is assumed that there are four sources of students' self-efficacy: mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal. Self-efficacy is

important in learning because it affects academic motivation and learning achievement (Shunk, 1995; Pajares, 1996). In the field of language learning, Mills, Pajares, and Herron (2007) showed the significance of self-efficacy especially with writing skills. They pointed out that learners' self-efficacy beliefs powerfully affect their academic performance. It also helps learners adjust to and handle well an unfamiliar learning environment (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011). The self-efficacy construct is new relative to online learning context. Studies in distance learning show that self-efficacy is important to contribute to the success of the learners. Artino and Stephen (2007) found that when comparing higher with lower perceived self-efficacy, self-efficacious learners reported less negative success emotions and greater learning performance (Joo, Bong, & Choi, 2000; Wang & Newlin, 2002). Therefore, learners' self-efficacy beliefs might be important for the distance language learning context. More studies need to be conducted to investigate distance language learners' self-efficacy as well as it influences the learners' attributes.

### **Attributes of distance language learners**

Previously, many educators studied learners' attributes in the distance learning environment and found that learning in this mode requires proper qualities and learning styles (Buchanan, 1999). They were also interested in investigating factors influencing learners' success and they found motivation was the best predictor of learners' achievement in language learning in a distance learning context (Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito & Sumrall, 1993). Educators also found that accompanying the rise of the number of students using distance learning is the subsequent increase in students who stop learning before completion. They indicated that the dropout rates of online learners are high (The Corporate University Xchange 2000; Oblender 2002; Meister 2002). These studies indicated that students taking online courses tend to drop out from those courses. Additionally, the percentage of distance students' dropout is higher than those of students who study in the classroom learning mode (Hiltz, 1997). The student should be prepared before and while taking an online course.

A high dropout rate may possibly imply that online learning is not appropriate for all learners. It is demanding and challenging for students in ways different from what students face in the traditional classroom. The learners have to take full responsibility for their own learning in an online learning environment where teachers are at a distance and their support is limited. To be a successful online language learner, the learners need to possess a variety of skills and attributes in order to find success in the online courses. The learners who are familiar with classroom settings need support to help them achieve their learning goals. For that reason, understanding the attributes of successful online learners has become very crucial because it can help course developers and instructors to prepare materials and help for online learners.

In this study, six individual attributes of distance language learner are posited. The distinctive attributes are: goals, attributions, resilience, self-confidence, strategies, and persistence.

- *Goal* is a desired education result that learners want to accomplish while doing distance learning.
- *Attribution* refers to the reasons that the learners give for their successes or failures while they are engaging in distance language learning or tasks.
- *Resilience* is defined as the ability to stay positive and effective in difficult or challenging learning situations and feel positive about online learning.
- *Self-confidence* is seen as a realistic belief of achieving success in a distance learning situation.
- *Strategy* includes the particular behaviors or thought processes that learners use to accomplish their distance language learning.

- *Persistence* is when the learners continue to learn until they complete the distance language learning course.

The six posited attributes stated are considered because of their significance as well as their influence on learners who take control of their learning in a distance language learning environment. This study has been conducted to examine the unique attributes that are possessed by successful online language learners and how they perform their writing tasks. This study is qualitative in nature as telephone interviews were employed to collect data to answer the research question: What are the successful distance language learners' attributes?

### **Context of the study**

The study was carried out at a popular English language tutorial school in Thailand. The selected learning course was a writing course. The course used the Internet and a variety of web-based technologies to provide a distance language learning environment. The course is a self-paced online course. It is taught entirely online and provided for students who want to voluntarily learn writing outside of their regular school. The students had to manage their own learning in terms of time and place to study, and select the tasks they wanted to do in order to complete the 6-month course from June to December 2012. The main objective of the course was to instruct students to acquire proper writing and formatting skills to enhance effective communication. Sentence structure, paragraph structure, essay format, grammar and punctuation were reviewed in the course. There were 9 tasks and 2 tests to be completed, and the students had to decide when they would complete them. They could complete all the tasks or skip some tasks. To complete the tasks, students were assigned various types of essays to write using language functions learned from the material provided. In this course, the instructors give learners feedback to follow up on students' efforts and performance. They provided feedback on students' work in the form of correction symbols and written commentary.

### **Subjects of the study**

The subjects for this study were learners who enrolled in the writing course. They were selected based on the result of the self-efficacy questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to determine the learners' entry-level of confidence in necessary writing skills and computer skills for online learning in order to predict their success and select the high level confident learners as subjects for more in-depth study. There were 114 students who responded to the online survey on their self-efficacy to study at a distance learning course. Then, 6 subjects representing highly efficacious learners who believed they could finish the course within the expected time were purposefully selected. The six subjects were asked to suggest a pseudonym for themselves that the researchers could use. They are Jim, Pam, Ann, Bell, June, and Kim. After that, they were interviewed via telephone about their learning in the course.

### **Instrumentation**

In this study, semi-structured telephone interviews were used for data collection. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate students' attributes and how they dealt with the online writing tasks. The students were interviewed at the beginning, during, and the end of the course. At the beginning of the study, the students were interviewed in order to elicit students' learning goal and study plan, such as *"What are your goals for the future? What goals do you have in learning this course? How do you plan to achieve those goals?"* During the course, the interviews were conducted and then analyzed to find out students' attributes in terms of self-confidence, resilience, and strategies, for example *"What major challenges and problems did you face in learning this course? How did you handle them?"* At the end of the course, the subjects were asked to answer questions about their learning persistence and attributions, such as *"Did you accomplish your learning goal or succeed? Why do you think you were successful?"*

*What were the possible causes of your success?"* All the interviews were conducted in Thai. Each lasted around twenty minutes. They were recorded and transcribed afterwards.

## **Result and discussion**

Based on the data, when evaluated by the questionnaire responses before learning, the six subjects showed a high level of self-efficacy ( $\bar{X} = 2.41-4.00$ ). It means they believed that they could be successful in completing the course. At the end of the course, the students who completed the writing course within the time provided by the course were regarded as successful learners. Among the six chosen participants, Jim, Ann, June, and Kim were successful whereas Pam and Bell were unsuccessful students because they dropped out in the middle of the course. Therefore, it is obvious that all six students in this study reported that they were highly efficacious learners; however, while engaging in the online learning mode, some students were not able to learn successfully because they needed some attributes.

The main findings of this study highlight the importance of six attributes for successful distance language learners. These attributes consist of goals, attributions, resilience, self-confidence, strategies, and persistence. It is important to emphasize that all four successful students possess each one of the success attributes. Each of these attributes is discussed in the following sections. Extracts from participants' interviews are used to help explain each attribute.

### **Goals**

Goal setting is a powerful process for distance language learning, and for motivating the learners to learn by themselves. There are two types of goals: performance and learning (Locke & Latham, 2002). They are different in that performance goals focus on how well the students perform the tasks at a particular time whereas learning goals focus on how well they eventually learn or master the materials regardless of how long it may take. Goals affect a student's choice and effort. In this study, the successful learners set more learning goals which focused on the discovery of effective strategies to attain and sustain expected results, while the unsuccessful learners set only performance goals which focused on the end result. Jim, who was a successful learner, set a long-term performance goal, which provided direction and meaning to his learning. His goal was studying abroad and he said, *"My goal is studying abroad. To achieve this goal, I need to have some certificates as IELTS."* The goal affected his choice because he made careful decisions about the lesson to study. Consequently, he set short-term learning goals by identifying what he wanted to learn that was relevant to his long-term goal. He stated, *"I will study making a report this week because it is similar to the Academic IELTS Test Writing Task 1."* The finding also shows that a goal affects a student's effort because the successful learners developed a plan to counter expected learning problems such as Internet and server delays in order to achieve their goals.

While successful distance language learners set learning goals, the unsuccessful ones set performance goals to pass the course and to get high scores to prove that they have writing ability. Pam set short-term performance goals and she expressed *"My goal in learning writing online is to get the best score and get a certificate from the school."* She did not plan out her study, so she followed the course outline.

Based on the data, goal-setting affected the learners' choice on what to focus on, i.e. which lessons are goal relevant and which are not. While successful distance language learners set both types of goals to gain knowledge and develop writing skills, the unsuccessful ones set only performance goals to get the highest scores. Therefore, it might have had a negative impact on their performance because they could not finish the course.

### Attributions

The perceptions of success or failure from previous learning experiences can motivate or demotivate students to perform upcoming tasks. These beliefs play a major role in distance language learning motivation as they determine the amount of effort students will expend on learning activities. The most commonly inferred causes of success and failure are ability, effort, luck and task difficulty (Weiner, 1992; 1994). Among these causes, ability and effort have been identified as the most influential perceived causes (Dörnyei, 2003). In this study, successful learners' attributions are not the same as those of unsuccessful learners. The successful distance language learners attributed their success to internal factors, their own efforts, while unsuccessful learners attributed failure to ability. Ann, a successful learner, believes effort is the key to her success. She says *"I succeeded and completed the course on time because I studied hard enough. I did all exercises and assignments. It made me pass the tests. I always spend my time on reading texts, watching videos and practicing writing. If I do not study hard, I will never be good at writing."* In contrast, students consider themselves as unsuccessful online language learners because they did not complete the course. They blamed themselves for their lack of English ability as the cause of failure more than anything else. Bell was regarded as an unsuccessful learner and had done poorly on writing assignments, and attributed the bad scores to an inability to learn writing. She expressed *"I knew myself that I would probably not succeed because I did not understand the course content clearly. I am not able to study writing and do assignments well. I am also weak in English grammar and writing."* Ability is a stable, uncontrollable factor. Therefore, those who attribute their failure to their ability are expected to be unsuccessful in the future because they cannot change their ability to do a task.

According to the data, successful distance language learners perceived that they put enough effort to the course. They put their English writing knowledge into practice. The results suggest that effort is a sign for improvement because the students attribute their success to effort which is an internal, controllable and changeable attribute. The perception of effort as a cause of success implies that the students realize that they will be successful if they try harder and it is possible to expect future success (Weiner, 1994). Therefore, blaming their inability for their failure may cause students to give up or drop out. This perception seems to be critical for their distance language learning.

### Resilience

To be successful in studying online writing by themselves, the learners may experience various difficulties and resilience is a key to help them succeed. Resilience can be defined as behaviors which people use when faced with stresses or setbacks, life events, and external commitments (Kemp, 2002). Resilience is not one specific thing, but a combination of skills and positive views that the students gain from their online learning experiences. In this study, successful students demonstrated great resilience because they tolerated problems. As Pam explained, *"At first I had problems in submitting the course assignments ... As I got used to the computer program and the course website, I felt that I could be a much more competent distance learner."* With that competence, she says, *"I became an online learner and I know how to learn."* They also had the ability to bounce back from failures. After repeated failures, they were able to see and pursue alternative strategies for reaching their goals, and know when a goal had to be modified. Ann states, *"I have failed many times at the beginning of the course, but I am not a failure. I have learned to succeed from my failures."* Furthermore, by the end of the course, these students demonstrated that they had developed skills in troubleshooting their own problems. As Kim reflected, *"I learn a lot about how to solve learning problems ...now, I'm just comfortable with my mistakes and I think difficult situations are necessary for learning."*

In contrast, Pam, who is regarded as an unsuccessful learner, did not show resilience in her learning; she avoided learning and gave up quickly when difficulties arose as seen from her extract *"for me the major*

*challenge was to organize myself because it was the first time I was taking course online. All of my lessons and tasks online was a mess, and with a little bit of language ability, I decided to stop learning.*” In the middle of the course, unsuccessful students believed that essay writing was impossible for them, and that whatever they wrote would get a bad score because they lacked and could never develop the ability to write.

In this study, successful students showed great resilience to work through difficult situations with self-confidence. The data reveals that resilience helps the students solve problems, cope with challenges and bounce back from disappointments. It means that successful students learn from their hardships. The successful students demonstrated an optimistic attitude and a mindset that was open to distance language learning. Conversely, the unsuccessful students had feelings of failure, and incapability reinforced through their online learning experiences. Thus, they could not cope with learning problems and could not complete the course.

### **Self-confidence**

How distance language learners feel about themselves is a crucial issue in achieving learning goals in this mode. Self-confidence is an attitude which allows a learner to have a positive attitude and realistic views of himself and his own learning. A self-confident online language learner has a high belief in herself. Having self-confidence, the learners will be able to achieve their goals, take advantage of opportunities that come their way, and also have the strength to overcome any obstacle. In this study, successful learners were more confident than unsuccessful ones. Kim, a successful learner, had high self-confidence to complete this course. She says, *“I have the confidence in learning myself and study until I finish the course.”* She used the support provided in the program to maintain her confidence in learning, *“I had more self-confidence because I could do the all the task by myself. When I made mistakes I can check my own work with the answer keys.”* She used the feedback as a way to develop her self-confidence. *“I could learn and solve my problems I faced by myself without the teacher’s help all the time. Learning online help me to gain a high level of self-confidence on my learning and gave me more real experience of studying writing outside class.”* On the other hand, while engaging in the online independent learning mode, some students were not able to do it because their confidence level decreased. Bell confessed that she was not confident to do the task, *“I am not confident that I will do as well on this task as I would like.”* She also added that *“I cannot send my task on time as I planned because I had a lot of works in my normal class. I had to take some time to do my other works.”* And, *“I cannot complete my tasks because it was nearly the time I had to take the examination. I had to prepare myself for the school examination.”* Furthermore, *“I am not sure I can do well on this task, no matter how much I practice.”* Based on the data, Bell did not have self-regulated strategies, and she couldn’t maintain self-confidence.

In this study, the data revealed that learners’ confidence in their capabilities had affected their success in the online course. The successful learners trusted themselves to study, and complete the task and the course. They also could maintain their confidence level all throughout the course by using the learning environment provided effectively. As Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) stated, in addition to being able to learn by themselves, self-regulated or successful students are able to learn from peers, and seek help and support from peers and instructors.

### **Strategies**

Online courses delivered through the Web require students to be responsible for their own learning. The students have to decide how and when learning takes place in order to achieve their goals. In other words, they need learning strategies to help them become more effective and independent learners. In this study, strategy refers to the particular behaviors or thought processes that students use to develop their distance

language learning. Successful learners are able to implement multiple learning strategies across tasks and adjust those strategies as needed to facilitate their progress towards their desired goals (Paris & Paris, 2001).

In this study, both successful and unsuccessful students reported that they employed many classroom learning strategies to learn and accomplish online writing tasks such as note taking, making charts, and using dictionaries to understand the lessons, but the successful learners used a variety of self-regulated learning strategies to control their own learning in order to achieve their goals, for instance, they used organizing and transforming information strategies to compose their assignments. Kim and June reported that they composed and edited their essays off-line and then cut and pasted them into the course website to submit their tasks. They always used strategies such as structuring the learning environment by setting up quiet areas in their homes for learning. To enhance her online learning environment, Kim used music to sustain attention to read and relax while writing her essay and Jim searched for a fast computer and Internet connection. They also used social assistance seeking strategies to complete their course assignments. Jim, Ann, and Kim sought help to clarify expectations on assignments and get feedback on writing drafts. All successful students reported that they asked friends and distance learning institute staff for help on technical problems. Moreover, they used self-monitoring and record-keeping strategies to monitor their leaning progress and evaluate their own learning and strategies for adapting future methods based on what they had learned. Ann reported that *“I used my calendar application on my smartphone for creating my personal calendar to see my progress for learning this course.”*

In contrast, unsuccessful students mentioned more memory strategies; however, those could not assist them to learn successfully. For example, they just searched for bolded words and memorized their definitions, because they thought this strategy worked well the last time. They had to answer questions when they read the course materials in their regular class but it did not help them to complete their works in this learning context. Bell also added that *“I had to write assignment this week. I couldn’t organize it at all. I couldn’t get any organization flow going. I kept jumping from point to point. So I got frustrated with it.”* Then, she tended to stop writing.

This study showed that successful students were active in their learning process. They used different learning strategies that were systematically directed towards the achievement of their learning goals. They also use strategies to manage other sources of learning such as adaptation of certain aspects of the physical environment and the organization of time to learn so that they could become most efficient, and did their work carefully. In contrast, the data revealed that even though unsuccessful learners tried to transfer learned strategy that worked well in a classroom context to distance learning, they failed. This strategy needed to be evaluated before using it in the new context.

### **Persistence**

In general, the broad definition of persistence in online learning is students staying in a course for as long as they can to engage in self-directed study (Comings, Parella, & Soricone, 1999). For this study, persistence is essential in terms of intensity and the ability to complete tasks required and the course successfully. The findings of this study exhibited that successful and unsuccessful learners persisted differently in two main aspects of persistence. The first persistence aspect included instructional hours. The successful learners spent between 6 to 15 hours studying (watching and reviewing videos, completing course assignments, and reading threaded discussions) each week.

In contrast, unsuccessful learners reported spending approximately 4 hours to study. For another aspect, intention to study, successful learners continued learning the course until they reached their goals. They worked daily on the course, and completed the course assignments based on their own goals. They stayed

long enough to complete the course and also took the mid-term and final tests. They completed all assignments and did well. Thus, they were successful in completing the course. By the end of the course, all successful learners said they experienced success in this learning environment and they would consider taking another Web-based course, while unsuccessful learners decided to drop out in the middle of the course.

The findings show that the successful learners had more persistence because they completed course requirements in an appropriate time and spent more time engaging in distance language learning.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to investigate learners' attributes that may assist them to learn successfully in a Web-based distance writing setting. A successful learner in this study was defined as a student who completed course requirements in a timely manner.

This qualitative study revealed some attribution differences between successful and unsuccessful learners even though they were identified as highly efficacious learners prior to actual learning. The successful learners set better learning goals, especially self-regulated learning strategies, attributed their success to effort, had more self-confidence for learning by themselves, and exerted more resilience and persistence.

Based on the finding of this study, some major recommendations can be offered for distance language course developers and instructors to incorporate support in an online language learning environment in several ways. Firstly, the instructor should help learners set goals which focus more on mastering tasks and less on performance or scores because unsuccessful learners, according to this study, cannot set effective goals. They set only performance goals that might demotivate them when they cannot achieve the goals. The instructor should provide explicit and clear instructions regarding the objectives that can be learnt with each task, so the learners can establish each as a goal. Secondly, the data reveals that unsuccessful learners thought that their failures were because of lack of ability, their efficacies were lower after learning for some time, and they did not attempt to do the future tasks and complete the course. Thus, instructors should provide learners with feedback linking learning result with effort because this attribution is under the learner's control that can help them develop self-efficacy beliefs and enhance performance. Finally, this study found that the learning strategies that the unsuccessful learners possessed and employed in their learning were not sufficient for them to learn by themselves and deal with the writing tasks because they did not have any online language learning experiences. This might have led to the decrease in their resilience. Therefore, online learners need to be supported and trained in necessary learning strategies for successfully engaging in an online learning context. The online learners can be trained in these learning strategies before learning by asking them to identify their learning goals, and then plan how to complete the tasks and the course. They may be provided tools and feedback to monitor goal progress and evaluate their learning strategies used, learning results, and what they have learnt. The teacher may give them informative feedback to help them see their errors and learn how to correct them when returning their work. Moreover, the findings from this research study also suggest that instructors should be aware of learner confidence. If instructors want to help learners have more learning success, they should pay attention to confidence as well as competence. The instructors may give learners psychological support and encouragement to facilitate successful results of their efforts. In doing this, it would help learners to maintain and have more self-confidence for learning languages by themselves, and utilize more resilience and persistence.

The results of this study may have benefits for distance language instructors, as well as learners. Both of these groups will gain information regarding learners' self-efficacy, and how it influences the learners'



attributes may allow the instructors to instruct or train in a way that will accommodate those attributes, and enable them to design and implement better teaching. For the learners, the findings may help students to better understand crucial attributes that assist them to learn, especially by themselves, in a distance language learning context.

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