

## Creating an English Learning Culture for Agro-Tourism by Autonomous Learning through Community Participation in Khao Kho, Phetchabun

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### Abstract

This research aims to study the role of English in agro-tourism and explore how to improve the English proficiency of agro-tourism stakeholders in Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province by creating a learning culture of English through autonomous learning. The data were collected through an in-depth interview, a focus group discussion, and participatory observation with twenty key informants selected by purposive sampling from government agencies, agritourism entrepreneurs, and students in the community. The data were analyzed by content and thematic analyses. The findings revealed that most participants strongly agreed on the importance of English, especially in tourism. They needed to improve their English skills as local tour guides for international visitors. In terms of fostering a learning culture for English in agricultural tourism, the findings showed that participants were keen to create an English learning environment. This would involve turning their fruit orchards into learning hubs to promote local tour guides' English skills through autonomous learning and community participation. Consequently, this approach would help these guides become proficient in both Thai and English. Moreover, the results also indicated that both the community and policymakers in the agro-tourism development sector were committed to actively promoting English language learning by establishing educational hubs, particularly for children who would represent the local area.

**Keywords:** Agro-Tourism, Autonomous Learning, English Learning Culture,

### Introduction

Agro-tourism can be seen as the convergence of tourism and agriculture which combines agricultural production and processing with tourism. Its purpose is to attract visitors to a farm or other agricultural business to provide entertainment and education, while also generating income for the owner (The National Agricultural Law Center, n.d.).

In several parts of Thailand, agro-tourism tends to be another alternative destination for tourists, especially, in community-based tourism in the second-tier province. For instance, in Tumbon Khlongkhuean, Chachoengsao Province, agro-tourism has been developed as a learning route. It was found that it became interesting places for tourists, for example, Royal

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Initiative Projects, fruit orchards, integrated farming, and agricultural and wisdom learning centers (Maraphot, 2016). Moreover, the study by Phakdiburut (2020) indicated that the potential of agricultural resources such as agricultural learning centers, Good Agriculture Practices, and agricultural community products has affected community-based agro-tourism management.

Similar to Khao Kho District, Phetchabun Province, agro-tourism plays a crucial role in community-based tourism. It has become famous for its rolling landscape resembling a vast mountain range. The environment remains consistently cool and frosty year-round, with an average temperature of around 21.93 degrees Celsius. Additionally, it has also served as a hub for the anti-government faction due to political ideological conflicts since the year 1965. This district is located at the border of three provinces, namely Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, and Loei, due to its geographical characteristics. Every year, a large number of tourists travel to admire the beautiful natural scenery and engage in agricultural tourism activities. They visit agricultural learning centers and farms to observe agricultural practices and purchase agricultural products. Visitors have the opportunity to directly encounter and experience agricultural practices, as well as observe and learn about farming methods. This leads to an exchange of knowledge and learning between farmers and tourists. Moreover, the tourism potential and opportunities were found that the local government in Khao Kho District has increasingly participated in tourism development, for example, public relations, providing tourism information to the tourists, and developing tourist attractions (Pradit & Pampasit, 2014). This can be assumed that Khao Kho is going to be the destination for international visitors who would like to experience rural nature and tradition in Thailand.

Nevertheless, stakeholders involved in agricultural tourism, such as proprietors of tourism businesses, small-scale farmers, or specialists in tourism communication, continue to encounter difficulties when it comes to utilizing the English language for communicating with international tourists. The absence of skill in this area limits opportunities and creates barriers in effectively communicating or promoting tourism information to foreign tourists. Consequently, there is a persistent requirement for the continual enhancement of English language proficiency.

From the above information, it can be observed that the development and enhancement of human resources is a crucial factor in driving the economy and fostering competitiveness, particularly in the context of using the English language for tourism, whether it be Thai tourists or foreigners. Agricultural tourism is a form of tourism that can generate income for entrepreneurs if it receives support and promotion. Communication in both Thai and English is essential for the success of such initiatives. The involvement and participation of the community and stakeholders are crucial in achieving the desired goals, aligning with the national tourism strategy for the years 2018-2037.

Autonomous learning is a method that supports learners in acquiring knowledge by actively constructing it themselves, particularly in language learning. Several strategies can facilitate learners in achieving autonomous learning, such as leveraging technologies to access information or creating portfolios. Both teachers and learners must accept their roles in fostering environments that promote autonomous learning. Autonomous learning can be facilitated by four specific aspects, including cultural factors, strategic training with learning factors, learning settings, and instructors' roles (Yamalee, 2019). Curiously, instructors typically limit independent learning to a specific and focused extent. Furthermore, some teachers are still unable to allow students to engage in autonomous learning. This is because numerous instructors are still acquainted with conventional methods of instruction (Yamalee, 2019).

The objectives of this research, thus, are to study the role of the English language in agricultural tourism and improve the English proficiency of agro-tourism stakeholders in Khao Kho District, Phetchabun Province by creating a learning culture of English through autonomous learning. The research findings can be used to develop an English language curriculum for agricultural tourism and enhance teaching and learning practices at all levels. Furthermore, the results can be extended to other communities and relevant organizations for academic, policy, and societal benefits.

## Literature Review

### 1. Learning Culture

A learning culture is an environment that demonstrates and encourages individual and organizational learning, and where both gaining and sharing knowledge is prioritized, valued, and rewarded. It becomes part of the ecosystem of the organization (Center of Creative Leadership, 2022).

In the context of the acquisition of the English language, it refers to the perspective, norms, and convictions that revolve around independent learning. This approach is deemed suitable and pertinent to the social circumstances of learners and is fostered through the active involvement of various parties, such as learners themselves, instructors, educational administrators, families, and the community. The ultimate goal is to enable individuals to effectively utilize the English language for communication in both their personal lives and professional endeavors (Wiriyaichitra & Nomniam, 2016). Therefore, it can be assumed that the creation of a learning culture can promote autonomous learning as well as English language improvement. According to Yamalee (2019), autonomous learning is a method that supports learners in acquiring knowledge by actively constructing it themselves, particularly in language learning. Several strategies can facilitate learners in achieving autonomous learning, such as leveraging technologies to access information or creating portfolios. Both teachers and learners must accept their roles in fostering environments that promote autonomous learning.

Several previous studies were done regarding promoting autonomous learning for English language learners, for example, the study of Bojare (2016) that developed a model of autonomous learning for English acquisition in a mixed environment of e-studies within the context of adult non-formal education. The research resulted in the development of a holistic model and recommendations to aid in the transformation of participants' value systems in adult non-formal education English acquisition programs. The findings have implications for the development of the concept of autonomous learning. Moreover, Boonma and Swatevacharkul (2020) investigated the influence of the autonomous learning process (ALP) on learner autonomy among undergraduate students in English public speaking classes, as well as the size of the effect and how the ALP reveals learner autonomy. The results showed that students' learner autonomy increased significantly in the post-questionnaire compared to the pre-questionnaire ( $p=0.00$ ). It has a substantial effect size ( $d=1.28$ ). The study of Acosta (2024) also indicated that a significant degree of autonomous learning and the level of language autonomy of Grade 10 learners were prominently displayed. The study found a substantial association between the expression of the autonomous learning process and language autonomy.

## **2. Agro-tourism**

Agro-tourism is a form of rural tourism that offers an authentic and serene experience by integrating agricultural activities into tourist attractions, showcasing rural cultures as the main allure rather than natural landscapes. It is an important feature that is growing in line with the ideal development of rural tourism and provides an authentic touch in a quiet atmosphere (Khangarot & Sahu, 2019). Agro-tourism is a growing trend in the agriculture sector, allowing farmers to generate income and urban visitors to enjoy a rural life that benefits both farmers and tourists, preserving rural landscapes (Suman, Chandra, Deb, and Mahapatro, 2023).

According to Chenchitsin and Euajarusphan (2023), the future of agro-tourism in Thailand was planned to include many key elements including the active involvement of local communities, the generation of high-quality job opportunities, the implementation of innovative digital marketing strategies, and the establishment of inclusive infrastructure was accessible to all, following the principles of Universal Design. Agro-tourism in Thailand can be effectively showcased through activities such as crop cultivation, animal husbandry, and agriculture, which are all essential components for the development of agro-tourism in line with current tourism trends. Agro-tourism will persist in allowing travelers to encounter locations and provide information in novel and captivating manners.

Meunchong, Kitjarak, and Plailek (2020) carried out a study on creating English language materials for agricultural tourism, using the sufficiency economy ideology, specifically designed for the community in Ban Siang Haeng 3, Khao Kho District, Phetchabun Province. The findings indicated that community stakeholders must utilize the English language to

identify different kinds of fruit in the orchard, demonstrate agricultural techniques and culinary procedures, explicate tourist attractions within the community, designate local products, formulate tour programs, and enhance tourism packages in English. Additionally, the study found that stakeholders preferred educational resources presented as English usage manuals that utilized uncomplicated sentence patterns. These manuals should include phonetic guides and translations.

According to the literature review, it can be assumed that a learning culture can encourage English language acquisition as well as enable effective communication and language use in a personal and professional life. Autonomous learning can support learners in actively constructing knowledge. Both teachers and learners must contribute to this environment. Additionally, previous studies have explored the promotion of autonomous learning for English language learners, for instance, developing a model for e-learning in adult non-formal education, and exploring the influence of the autonomous learning process (ALP) on learner autonomy. Therefore, the creation of an English learning culture through autonomous learning for agro-tourism stakeholders in Khao Kho, Phetchabun province can create sustainable learning and lifelong learning for people who are involved in community-based tourism, especially, local tour guides in the community.

## Methodology

### 1. Participants

The study consists of two distinct groups of participants, which are as follows:

1.1 Twenty key informants for an in-depth interview were selected by purposive sampling to investigate the role of the English language in agro-tourism in the Khao Kho District, Phetchabun Province. There were five government representatives from the Nong Mae Na Sub-District Office, the Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports in Phetchabun, and representatives from Nong Mae Na School, ten certified homestay owners in agricultural tourism, and five students who are tour guides in the community. The researcher performed the interviews, each lasting from 30 to 45 minutes until enough data was collected.

1.2 The key informants for the focus group discussion were government agencies, agritourism entrepreneurs, and students in the community. The group consisted of 8-10 participants and was selected using purposive sampling to confirm information about the agro-tourism context and the role of the English language in agritourism as well as the means to create a learning culture of English for agricultural tourism by using autonomous learning through community participation for students in the Khao Kho district of Phetchabun province. The discussion was conducted in two or more sessions, with each session lasting no more than two hours.

## 2. Research Instruments

This study employed semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, and participatory observation to gather data on agricultural tourism contexts in the Nong Mae Na Sub-District, Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province, and to explore how to create an English learning culture through autonomous learning and community participation for agricultural tourism stakeholders in Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province. The research instruments used for these purposes were as follows:

2.1 Data was collected on the impact of English on agricultural tourism in Nong Mae Na, Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province through a semi-structured interview with 20 key informants. The interview centered on the significance of English for individuals involved in the tourist industry and the enhancement of English proficiency for agro-tourism using self-directed learning and community involvement. The researcher conducted individual interviews, allocating 30 minutes per subject. The interviews consisted of a predefined set of example questions, which are given below:

- 2.1.1 What agricultural tourism activity do you set for tourists?
- 2.1.2 How often do you use English for communication with foreign tourists?
- 2.1.3 In Which situation do you use the English language for communication?
- 2.1.4 Would you like to improve your English language skills? And How?
- 2.1.5 What kinds of English language learning would you like?

2.2 In terms of the focus group discussion, the researchers categorized the key informants into two groups, each comprising 4-5 people. The objective of the interview was to examine methods for creating a culture that encourages autonomous English language learning by engaging the community. The objective was to offer guidelines for improving English proficiency through autonomous learning and community involvement to those involved in Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province. The interviews lasted for basically 40-45 minutes. Below are the indicated interview guidelines:

- 2.2.1 What specific type of English learning resource for tourism would you like for autonomous learning?
- 2.2.2 Which specific themes or content would you like to include in the English for tourism learning material?
- 2.2.3 Which particular English language skills do you aim to enhance the most through autonomous learning?

## 3. Data Collection

3.1 The researcher collected the data by contacting the leader of the homestay group, the owners of the farm, teachers, the students in the community, and other relevant individuals to arrange interviews. The interview was conducted for 25-30 minutes per person or until a satisfactory amount of data is acquired. Furthermore, the researcher utilized participatory observation techniques within the research area.

3.2 The focus group discussions were held with ten key informants who were four homestay owners, two government agency representatives, and four school representatives from Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province to verify the accuracy of the data regarding the agricultural tourism context and the significance of English for agro-tourism in Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province as well as exploring the way to create an English learning culture through autonomous learning. Additionally, the discussion also explored the method to develop English skills for agro-tourism. The focus group discussion was conducted at least twice, with each session limited to a maximum duration of two hours to gather sufficient data.

3.3 The participatory observation was conducted by the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the community's context. The active involvement of the community is crucial to creating a culturally and linguistically immersive environment for learning the English language. This is specifically designed to be responsive to the interests and preferences of people involved in agricultural tourism in Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province. The period of the observation was ten years.

#### 4. Data Analysis

The researcher utilized data analysis through content analysis and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as follows:

4.1 The researcher read and re-read to become familiar with its contents.

4.2 The data were generated codes for identifying the data's important features concerning what might be relevant to answer the research questions. Then all codes and all relevant data extracts are organized together for analysis.

4.3 The researcher examined the codes and collated data to identify significant broader patterns of meaning. Data relevant to each theme are then organized together.

4.4 The theme was checked against the potential themes in the dataset to determine whether they answered the research questions.

4.5 The researcher developed a detailed analysis of each theme, determining the scope and focus of each theme and deciding upon the key information for each.

4.6 The data was written by weaving the analytical narrative and data extracts and contextualizing the analysis with relation to existing studies and theories.

#### Research Results

1. From the interviews conducted on the role of the English language in agro-tourism in Nong Mae Na sub-district, Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province, it was found that the majority of participants strongly agreed that the English language was important, particularly in the context of tourism, as Khao Kho was well-known among Thai and foreign tourists. Moreover, it could attract more international tourists to the community and increase the income of community members. The results of the interview with the community leader revealed that the community was prepared to expand into agro-tourism and was interested



in developing tourist attractions. Additionally, based on interviews with students in the community who were involved in promoting agro-tourism to foreign tourists, it was found that these students needed to become local ambassadors and develop their English language skills to serve as tour guides in the community when foreign tourists came to visit their community.

*“Although we rarely use English for communication with foreign tourists, however, we think English is very important for tourism in our community”*

(A homestay owner, an interview, April 26, 2022)

*“I wish I could communicate in English. I would like to speak with foreigners. I would like to invite foreign visitors to my home to enjoy the fruit orchard.”*

(A student in the community, an interview, April 26, 2022)

*“I would like people from other countries to know my fruit orchard of a home. We have traditionally worked in agriculture; hence, I want to highlight it.”*

(A student in the community, a focus group interview, July 5, 2022)

From the results, it was evident that stakeholders regarding agricultural tourism had a positive attitude towards using the English language for communication and they strongly agreed that English was very important, especially in the tourism industry. They were also prepared to enhance tourism in their community. Therefore, it cannot be denied that the English language plays a crucial role in community-based tourism as a medium of communication and has a status as a lingua franca for non-native speakers to facilitate each other to get meaning for communication.

2. In terms of creating a learning culture of English for agricultural tourism by using autonomous learning through community participation, the findings indicated that most participants were willing to establish an English learning environment for agro-tourism to create a learning culture of the English language by setting their fruit garden to be a learning hub for junior tourist guides in the community. Thus, this would involve autonomous learning through community participation in local tourism and can assist the junior tourist guides improve their language skills by training them to become bilingual tour guides proficient in both Thai and English.



**Figure 1**

*“Mae Tang Mo Rambutan Garden” at Ban Rom Sai, Moo 10 Nong Mae Na sub-district, Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province*



*Annotation.* By Wanwisa Meunchong, photographed on July 5, 2022

**Figure 2**

*Integrated Farming at Nong Mae Na sub-district, Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province*



*Annotation.* By Wanwisa Meunchong, photographed on July 5, 2022

Furthermore, interviews conducted with the school director exposed the school's intentions to incorporate English language instruction with the fields of tourism and the local language. The community leader indicated that the local authorities in the Nong Mae Na sub-district were prepared to actively assist and encourage tourism. This included offering accommodations, managing tourist attractions, and participating in international tourism promotion efforts.

From the study results, it was indicated that both the community and policymakers in the agricultural tourism development sector in the Nong Mae Na sub-district were willing to actively engage in the establishment of a culture that promotes English language learning. This

was accomplished by creating an educational hub for the community, specifically targeting kids who would act as representatives of the local area.

*"I am pleased to collaborate in utilizing the fruit orchard as an English learning resource for children in the community to develop their skills as tour guides."*

(A fruit orchard owner, an interview, April 26, 2022)

*"I mainly teach vocabulary to the children here, as they do not have much exposure to the English language. They have difficulties in all skills, but they enjoy participating in activities. We have a policy to integrate tourism with the local language, but the school has not implemented it yet. It would be beneficial if the children could attend English language camps or have opportunities for extracurricular language development, as it would help improve their proficiency."*

(English teacher in the community, an interview, April 26, 2022)

## Discussion

The study investigated the influence of a collaborative method in learning the English language on cultural creation, with a specific emphasis on the engagement of the agricultural tourism community in Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province. The results are discussed as follows:

1. The majority of participants strongly agreed that the English language is important, particularly in the context of tourism since Khao Kho was well-known among Thai and foreign tourists. Therefore, it can attract more international tourists to the community and increase the income of community members. Moreover, the result from an interview with the community leader revealed that the community was also prepared to expand into agro-tourism and was interested in developing tourist attractions.

Additionally, based on the interviews with students in the community who were involved in promoting agro-tourism to foreign tourists, it was found that these students needed to become local ambassadors and develop their English language skills to serve as tour guides in the community. The finding is in line with Widiastuti, Astawa, Mantra, and Susanti (2021), who claimed that English had a significant impact on the growth of the tourism sector. Proficient English-speaking employees could significantly contribute to the growth of tourism enterprises by expanding sales programs and enhancing service efficiency. Tourism stakeholders should consistently improve the English language proficiency of their personnel through the implementation of educational English programs.

2. Most participants were willing to create an English learning environment for agro-tourism to create a learning culture of the English language by setting their fruit orchards to be a learning hub for junior tourist guides in the community. Thus, this would involve autonomous learning through community participation in local tourism and could assist the junior tourist guides in improving their language skills by training them to become bilingual

tour guides proficient in both Thai and English. The research findings are consistent with Bojare (2016) who developed a model of autonomous learning for English acquisition in a mixed environment of e-studies within the context of adult non-formal education. The research resulted in the development of a holistic model and recommendations to aid in the transformation of participants' value systems in adult non-formal education English acquisition programs. The findings had implications for the development of the concept of autonomous learning. Moreover, Boonma and Swatevacharkul (2020) investigated the influence of the autonomous learning process (ALP) on learner autonomy among undergraduate students in English public speaking classes, as well as the size of the effect, and how the ALP reveals learner autonomy. The results showed that students' learner autonomy increased significantly in the post-questionnaire compared to the pre-questionnaire ( $p=0.00$ ). It has a substantial effect size ( $d=1.28$ ).

Furthermore, the school director exposed the school's intentions to incorporate English language instruction with the fields of tourism and the local language. Also, the community leader indicated that the local authorities in the Nong Mae Na sub-district were prepared to actively assist and encourage tourism. This included offering accommodations, managing tourist attractions, and participating in international tourism promotion efforts. The finding is in line with the Center of Creative Leadership (2022) which indicated that a learning culture was an organizational environment that actively promoted and supported both individual and collective learning. In this culture, acquiring and sharing knowledge was not only encouraged but also highly valued and rewarded. Learning becomes an integral part of the organization's ecosystem, shaping its operations and priorities.

## **Recommendation**

### **Recommendation for Implementation**

1. It is recommended to employ research findings to generate online English language training resources tailored for agricultural tourism to construct a self-learning program with this objective.
2. It is advisable to incorporate research findings into the development of the curriculum for agricultural tourism education, with a focus on content related to agricultural tourism or the enhancement of tourism-related subjects, particularly community-based tourism.

### **Recommendation for Further Study**

The research should be conducted on the development of online English learning materials specifically for agro-tourism in various agricultural contexts in Phetchabun province.

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