

LEARNERS' USE OF A SELF-ACCESS LEARNING CENTER: PAVING THE PATH TO LEARNER AUTONOMY

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Classroom-based language learning alone may not be sufficient to lead learners to mastery of the target language, so independent language learning, both in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) and outside classes, has become an essential component of English language instruction. This paper reports on a study investigating the use of a self-access language learning center (SALC) by 513 first-year Chulalongkorn University students who were required to earn 5% of the Foundation English course in the SALC. The findings reveal these learners' actual use of as well as attitudes toward the SALC. Based on the findings, implications for teachers and those involved in managing SALCs are proposed in the hope that learner autonomy can be better enhanced and mastery of the target language can be better achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Decades after the emergence of the principle of English Language Teaching (ELT), curriculum developers, administrators, and those involved in the field still find themselves searching for 'the' teaching methodology, shifting back and forth between focus on form and focus on meaning, grammar accuracy and communicative competence, whole language and English for Specific Purposes, to name only a few major trends. More recently, yet another drastic change has taken place in language instruction with the realization that traditional teacher-centered classroom instruction alone may not do much to help learners successfully acquire the target language. With such realization, the classroom becomes more and more learner-centered, the teachers are forced to adapt to their new classroom role of facilitators or managers, and learner autonomy has become a goal both teachers and learners strive for.

According to Dickinson (1987), learning autonomy takes place when learners are totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with their learning and the implementation of those decisions. So defined, autonomous learners are those who have an independent capacity to make and carry out choices regarding language learning decisions. According to Littlewood (1996), this capacity depends on two main components: ability and willingness. The former depends on possessing knowledge about the alternatives from which choices have to be made and the necessary skills for

carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate; the latter depends on having both the motivation and the confidence to take responsibility for the choices required. Littlewood emphasizes that all these four components need to be present together if learners are to be successful in acting and learning autonomously.

In an effort to encourage language learners to take charge of their own learning and to provide them with out-of-class language learning opportunities, Chulalongkorn University Language Institute set up its Self-Access Learning Center (henceforth SALC) in 1990. All first-year students who are required to take the Foundation English I and II courses earn 5% of their course grade working on the learning materials (LM) provided in the SALC at their own convenience. The present paper reports on an investigation of first-year Chulalongkorn University students' use of the SALC in the hope that light can be shed on these students' behaviors and attitudes toward the use of the SALC so that SALC management and facilitation can be adjusted and shaped to better serve these learners' language learning needs.

THE CONCEPTIONS OF SELF-ACCESS LANGUAGE LEARNING

According to Gremmo and Riley (1995), self-access learning has been in existence since the late 1960s. Sheerin (1991), defines self-access learning as a way of describing materials that are designed and organized in such a way that learners can select and work on tasks on their own and obtain feedback on their performance, while Aston (1993) defines self-access as a place where an individual is free to choose what activities to carry out and the time to dedicate to them, with learning self-directed and autonomy encouraged. As such, it becomes evident that a self-access approach requires learners to be responsible, diligent, and motivated to initiate their own learning. Further, they need to be able to make decisions about what to learn and how to learn from the resources available at their own disposal. For instance, they should be able to decide which skills need to be improved and which materials will be most helpful to them in improving those skills.

Gardner & Miller (1999) define self-access language learning in relation to the development of learner autonomy, claiming that self-access learning is basically the same as self-directed learning, self-instruction, and independent learning that assist learners to move from teacher dependence towards autonomy. However, for the purpose of the discussion in this paper, the definition proposed by Cotterall & Reinders (2000) is used as the operational definition:

A Self Access Center consists of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities, and support) usually located in one place, and is designed to accommodate learners of different levels, styles, goals, and interests. It aims to

develop learner autonomy amongst its users. Self Access Language Learning is the learning which takes place in a Self Access Center.

According to Cotterall & Reinders, any SALC has the potential to promote learner autonomy in a variety of ways: 1) it provides facilities which allow learners to pursue their own goals and interests while accommodating individual differences in learning style, level, and pace of learning; 2) the resources have the potential to raise learners' awareness of the learning process by highlighting aspects of the management of learning, such as goal setting and monitoring progress; 3) it can act as a bridge between the teacher-directed learning situation, where the target language is studied and practiced, and the "real world," where the target language is used as a means of communication; and 4) it can promote the learning autonomy of learners who prefer or are obliged to learn without a teacher.

Previous research has pointed out that classroom language instruction does not always facilitate the full development of language due to various reasons (Safnil, 1990). According to Crabbe (1993), there must be a "bridge" between "public domain" learning which is based on classroom activities and "private domain" learning which is personal individual learning behavior. In this sense, self-access learning can be considered 'a bridge' as it is a venue where both 'public' and 'private' domain learning takes place.

THE STUDY

SUBJECT SELECTION

The subjects who took part in this survey were 513 first-year students of Chulalongkorn University who took the Foundation English II (FE II) course in the second semester of 2002. They were recruited by means of convenience sampling. The researcher distributed the questionnaire to FE II teachers who were willing to administer the it in their classes. The subjects were not asked to identify themselves other than providing information regarding the faculty in which they were studying and the grade they received for their Foundation English I course (See Table 1).

INSTRUMENT

The instrument used in the present survey was a questionnaire developed by the researcher based on a questionnaire about Learners' Perceptions and Practice in Self-Access Language Learning constructed by Cotterall & Reinders (2000) and on an extensive review of literature on learner autonomy and self-access language learning (See Appendix). The aim of the questionnaire was to elicit information regarding the subjects' use of the Self-Access Learning Center in the previous

semester while they were taking the Foundation English I course. The questionnaire was distributed to the subjects by the teachers of their FE II sections who agreed to cooperate in the study. The teachers who administered the questionnaire emphasized that the students' responses to the questionnaire would not affect their FE II course grade in any way to prevent bias and to ensure the accuracy of the data obtained. The questionnaire was distributed to the subjects during the first weeks of the second semester so that they could still remember what they had done in the previous semester.

Background Information	Number	Percentage
Faculty		
Science	112	21.83
Medical science	18	3.51
Dentistry	26	5.07
Veterinary science	23	4.48
Allied health science	13	2.53
Pharmaceutical science	27	5.26
Architecture	36	7.02
Engineering	37	7.41
Commerce & Accountancy	73	14.23
Economics	8	1.56
Law	61	11.89
Education	18	3.51
Political science	60	11.70
FE I Grade		
A	45	8.77
B+	55	10.72
B	90	17.54
C+	129	25.15
C	151	29.43
D+	32	6.24
D	5	0.97
N/A	6	1.18

Table 1: Background information of the subjects

DATA ANALYSIS

Data obtained from the returned questionnaire was analyzed using the SPSS Program for Windows. Only descriptive statistics of percentage are presented in this paper to portray the overall trend of SALC use among the subjects.

THE FINDINGS

In what follows, only important trends in the questionnaire data are reported on. The subjects' responses to both closed-ended and open-ended items in the questionnaire zoom in on the trends and help raise awareness of key issues related to language learners' use of the Self-Access Learning Center.

LEARNERS' PARTICIPATION IN THE SALC

Although the FE I course required the subjects to complete a total of ten learning materials (LM) accounting for 5% of their final grade in the SALC at their convenience, their participation in the SALC varied greatly in terms of frequency. More than half of the subjects (295 or 57.50%) used the SALC only a few times during the whole semester, while just 176 subjects or 34.31% visited the SALC once or twice a week on a regular basis. Even though the subjects did not generally seem to make much use of the SALC, about 18 subjects, or 3.51%, worked in the SALC more than twice a week. One surprising discovery was that even though participation in the SALC was required, 23 subjects, or 4.48%, reported that they had never used the SALC at all in the previous semester. In fact, this was possible as they may have asked their friends to copy the answers of their LMs onto their file kept in the SALC so that when the teachers came to check the completion of their work at the end of the semester, they would have all the records needed.

When asked for the reasons why they visited the SALC, more than half of the subjects, or 64.52%, responded that they did so only because they were told to go there by their FE I teachers. Only a little more than one-third of the subjects, or 34.503%, indicated that they went to work at the SALC because they decided to improve their English. The main reason for the establishment and existence of the SALC was to enable language learners to practice various language skills of their own accord, and the subjects' responses to this particular item in the questionnaire suggests that we are probably still far from achieving this purpose.

One open-ended question included in the questionnaire asked the subjects for reasons why they did not attend the SALC regularly. The open-ended question format was used in the hope that all the possible answers could be generated by the subjects, and the subjects could give more than one

answer. Two hundred subjects, or 38.99%, stated that they were simply too busy studying for other subjects so they had no time for extra independent language practice. The second largest group of subjects, or 7.80%, frankly stated that they were just plain lazy. Other interesting responses regarding the reasons hindering the subjects from making use of the SALC included that the location of the SALC was too far away from their faculty (6.04%), the materials were ineffective or too boring in their opinion (3.90%), and that they did not know how to use the SALC well enough to learn effectively by themselves (2.14%). A small number of subjects also gave other reasons such as having no interest in English, not finding the environment in the SALC comfortable enough (too crowded or too quiet), or needing to spend time doing something else with friends.

LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SALC

The largest group of subjects, or 45.03%, rated working in the SALC as "rather" useful to their English language learning, followed by a little over one-quarter, or 26.12%, who thought that the SALC was "very" useful, and a little less than one-quarter, or 24.37%, who found the SALC was "somewhat" useful to their language development. Only a mere 3.12% of the subjects, or only 16 out of 513, found their experience working in the SALC "not useful at all" to their language learning.

Apart from the required LM materials, of the resources provided in the SALC, the listening materials (including tapes and video movies) proved the most popular as more than one-quarter, or 28.66%, said that they liked these materials most. In addition, 8.38% indicated that they liked to work on various grammar activities such as communicative grammar tasks, and 5.07% stated that they liked to use computer facilities provided to search for information on the Internet. Only 4.43% of the subjects reported that they liked to use the reading materials. It is noteworthy that the subjects of the study may have an immediate need to improve their listening skills more than other language skills. Further studies should take this issue of interest into account to determine the underlying reason why language learners place an emphasis on this particular skill so that more appropriate language instruction and provision of materials can be arranged.

The subjects were also asked to state their attitudes towards working in the SALC and how much it helps them to improve their English language skills. Close to half of the subjects, or 44.25%, believed that working in the SALC helped improve their English "just a little bit," while 37.62% felt that the experience helped "a lot." However, 4.87% did not find working in the SALC helpful at all, and 8.19% had no idea whether working in the SALC assisted them to improve English or not. Finally, when asked if they believed that it was necessary for the FE courses to include working in the SALC as part of the course requirements, the largest group of subjects, or 43.09%, believed it

was "very necessary", followed by those who thought that it was necessary "just a little bit," "not necessary at all," and "not having any idea," which accounted for 34.89%, 8.38%, and 7.80% of the responses, respectively.

OTHER FINDINGS

There were other findings which may help administrators of the institute to better manage the SALC as well as teachers to provide assistance to the learners who could indeed tremendously benefit from their engagement in the SALC.

All FE I students were given an explanation on how to use the SALC by their respective teachers at the beginning of the semester so as to prepare them to work in the SALC on their own. When asked whether the subjects found the explanation helpful, a little more than one-third of subjects, or 38.60%, indicated that the explanation was "rather helpful," one-third, or 33.33%, said it was "somewhat helpful," and 18.32%, stated that it was "very helpful." Just 22 subjects or 4.29% found that the teachers' explanation was not helpful for them at all.

The staff in the SALC were instructed to help the students who needed advice or assistance in the use of the resources provided. The largest group of subjects, or 40.55%, found the SALC staff "somewhat helpful," 25.34% "rather helpful," and 8.576% "very helpful." It was noteworthy, however, that 102 subjects, or 19.88%, found that the staff on hand were not helpful at all. This finding definitely highlights the necessity of improving the management and services offered in the SALC which could lead to higher frequency SALC use on the part of language learners.

Finally, when asked about any difficulty the subjects may have had trying to locate the resources they needed in the SALC, close to half of the subjects, or 44.64%, found that it was "somewhat difficult" to find the materials they wanted, while another rather large percentage of the subjects, or 33.14%, found the experience "rather difficult." A small percentage, or 6.04%, found that trying to find what they wanted was "very difficult" in the SALC. On the other hand, 10.53% of the total number of subjects experienced no difficulty at all when they wanted to locate the materials they were looking for.

IMPLICATIONS

TEACHERS

First and foremost, having language learners work independently in the SALC means role adjustments not only on the part of language learners but also on the part of teachers themselves. After growing accustomed to, and probably contented with, the "spoon-feeding" method traditionally used by teachers, language learners may be disoriented or confused about what is expected of their participation in the SALC. Besides, Detaramani & Chan (1999) point out that students in South East Asia are very dependent on their teachers and prefer teachers to guide them to learn English. For this reason, they may need extra explanation and guidance from their teacher. Teachers also have to adjust their role to suit the learners' special needs in the SALC. Yang (1998) contends that teachers have a very important role in helping language learners to understand language learning strategies so that they can better direct their own language learning. In so doing, instead of directly feeding the learners with knowledge and information the teachers assume learners need, they have to transform themselves into helpers, facilitators, and consultants so that their students can work independently with more confidence, with only minimal assistance and without direct instruction from teachers, in the SALC. In other words, Cotterall (1998) summarizes that important roles of teachers whose students are involved with SALC materials include familiarizing students with learning resources and raising their awareness of a variety of approaches to learning. As revealed in the present study, many students will go to a SALC only because they are required to do so by their teachers. Thus, teachers also needed to find ways of increasing their students' motivation to learn and develop their language skills independently. Detaramani & Chan (1999) suggest that probably the best way of doing this is to encourage learners to develop intrinsic motivation so that they will use the SALC more frequently.

It is also worth noting that the present study found a number of students unsatisfied with how they were introduced to using SALC by their teachers at the beginning of the semester. It is suggested, therefore, that teachers should make sure that they provide sufficient guidance to their students which leave them feeling confident that they can work by themselves in the SALC with the least possible trouble. This does not mean, however, that the students can be left totally on their own while in the SALC. Teachers should be available to provide counseling and assistance when needed. This follows the suggestions of Yeung & Hyland (1999) who caution that some students may need more guidance than others in making informed choices in the SALC as they may lack a clear understanding not only of their own specific problem areas but also of how to monitor their progress.

Moreover, teachers should train learners in how to learn independently in a SALC. One way of doing so is through learner training activities. According to Lee (1998), learner-training helps learners become more aware of the learning process, more ready to take charge of their own learning, replacing ineffective strategies with more effective ones. Lee further suggests that such training can be of particular benefit to 'lazy' learners whose self-confidence and self-esteem needs to be boosted. Such students need to be made to believe that they can be successful language learners, before self-directed learning can be achieved.

In addition to learner training, another thing that teachers can do to make student SALC use more effective is to design language courses which promote learner autonomy by incorporating means of transferring responsibility for aspects of the language learning process (such as setting goals, selecting learning strategies, and evaluating progress) from the teacher to learners (Cotterall, 2000). For example, teachers may determine the general theme of lessons but instead of designing and preparing all the materials needed for classroom instruction, they can ask learners to be responsible for material selection, although they may like to set the balance between commercial and authentic materials. Learners may also be assigned to come up with activities such as group discussions or role-plays for the materials they have selected. In so doing, the responsibility of planning lessons will be shifted from teachers to learners, helping them to take more charge of their own learning process.

Finally, in terms of assessment, when working in the self-access learning center, learners should be encouraged to become more independent. Although they are working with resources that may encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning, they may not always have the means to assess how well they are doing. For every self-access learning opportunity that is offered, therefore, a self-assessment opportunity should also be available (Gardner, 1996). Not only should materials allow learners to practice and develop their language skills independently, but they should also provide appropriate assessment methods which might consist of paper and pencil or machine-based materials. When such assessment methods are offered, learners are provided with the opportunity to learn about and judge their own performance. It is so hoped that those who are not content with their performance will try to improve their language proficiency.

SALC ADMINISTRATORS / MANAGERS

Persons in charge of setting up self-access centers should consider the needs, objectives, interests, and motivations of the potential users before ordering equipment and materials (Sheerin, 1991). Thus, a survey of students' needs is deemed necessary if the manager / administrator would like to arrange the SALC in ways that most benefit learners. For instance, in the present study, the subjects indicated that they would like to see more listening and speaking materials added into the SALC,

both in terms of number and variety. Although there are a number of video movies for Chulalongkorn University students to work on, the subjects asserted that they would like to have some musical cassette tapes or compact discs so that they can learn the lyrics of songs in English while practicing listening. Further, like the Hong Kong subjects in Detaramani & Chan's (1999) study, some subjects suggested that they would like to see speaking activities in the SALC. As a result, those who are responsible for preparing materials in the SALC should consider a range of things learners might do to better their speaking ability there. In fact, teachers should be consulted when learning materials and resources are selected for any SALC since they will be able to suggest materials suitable to students they teach in terms of both background knowledge/interest and current level of language proficiency. It is important that counselors in charge of self-access centers consider factors such as learners' abilities and perceived language needs as they affect autonomous behavior when selecting materials. For this reason, if centers are set up without taking students' interests, their levels of proficiency, and their language needs into careful consideration, it will be difficult to encourage students to use these centers as they will not find them so motivating or of much use in improving their English.

Finally, all staff posted in any SALC providing assistance to learners should be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to help facilitate learners' autonomous language learning there. It is likely that where staff lack such knowledge and skills as in the present study, SALC users will find them unhelpful. As a consequence, those who are in charge of SALC management should organize training sessions that enable staff to be of value to learners, to make learners' experience in the SALC more fulfilling, and again, to encourage them to use the SALC more for their own benefits.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should be conducted to investigate the links learners make between their participation in SALC and both their in-class and out-of-class language learning in different areas:

1. Correlational research should be carried out to investigate the relationships between learner factors such as levels of target language proficiency, major areas of study, and personal interest and their attitudes toward, beliefs about, and practice in the SALC to see whether such relationships exist or not. The findings of such research studies would be interesting because if the findings confirm that statistically significant relationships do exist, teachers and SALC administrators would be better equipped with knowledge and understanding that would enable them to select the resources and prepare the tasks that will more appropriately suit language learners' individual needs.

2. Survey research should be conducted to explore language learners' beliefs about and attitudes toward self-access learning. According to Cotterall (1999), learners approach the task of learning a language in different ways according to various individual characteristics including the beliefs they hold about language learning. Also, Wasanasomsithi (2000) points out that different learners have different learning style preferences. For these reasons, if teachers are equipped with much needed awareness of different learner types, they can better arrange both classroom instruction and guidance of learners' participation in SALCs to accommodate different learners. For example, learners who believe that learning can only take place in the presence of teachers may need explanation from the teachers about the benefits they can gain from independent learning, while those who prefer working in a group may need guidance on how independent practice in the SALC can speed up their mastery of the target language. In addition, the identification of learners' beliefs and learning style preferences might also reflect the nature of self-directed learning and autonomous language learning behavior. Again, with such reflection, teachers should be better able to satisfy language learners' needs.
3. Qualitative studies, which include observations of learners while engaged with activities in the SALC, should be carried out to shed light on the actual behaviors of the learners. Further, in-depth interviews should be conducted to find out learners' other out-of-class language learning activities so that teachers can incorporate classroom activities which support and encourage both participation in their SALC and the learners' individual development of English outside classes. For instance, teachers may supplement their classroom lessons with independent student research in the SALC and also individual projects to be carried out by learners outside of class. By doing so, students will be provided with opportunities to realize that learning can also take place outside class without direct instruction from teachers and that the language learning experiences they seek out for themselves may be even more fun and worthwhile than their classroom language learning experience.

CONCLUSION

The goal of all education is to help people to think, act, and learn independently in relevant areas of their lives. Self-access learning has become an important part of language learning. Many students find it useful as a complement to what they are doing in class or as an alternative to formal lessons.

The findings of the present study have highlighted a range of issues related to learners' use of and attitudes toward the SALC. The challenge for teachers is to find ways of encouraging individual learners to make the most of their SALC. Students need to do this in ways they see as beneficial to their development and at their own pace so that they are eventually equipped with the tools they need, to pave the pathway to language learning autonomy.

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APPENDIX

Survey Questionnaire of Self-Access Learning Center Use

Hi everyone,

This questionnaire is to find out what you think about the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) and about how you use it. This information will help us improve the facilities provided to you in the future. IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH YOUR FE II CLASS. Don't worry. You don't have to tell us who you are, so the information you provide will not affect your FE grade in any way! Thank you for your help. You can answer in Thai.

Faculty: _____

FE I Grade: _____

1. How often did you use the SALC in the last semester?

- usually more than twice a week
 usually once or twice a week
 only a few times during the whole semester
 never

2. You went to the SALC mainly because

- My teacher told me to go.
 I decided to go myself to improve my English.

3. Could you tell us why you did not use the SALC more often?

Because _____

4. How useful do you think working in the SALC is to learning English?

- very useful
 rather useful
 somewhat useful
 not useful at all

5. What do you like most about the SALC?

6. What materials would you like to see more of in the SALC?

7. What is the most difficult thing for you about working in the SALC?
- _____
8. Do you think that your FE I teacher's explanation of how to use the SALC at the beginning of the semester was helpful for you?
- very helpful
- rather helpful
- somewhat helpful
- not helpful at all
9. How helpful were the staff in the SALC who helped you and gave you advice?
- very helpful
- rather helpful
- somewhat helpful
- not helpful at all
10. How difficult was it for you to find the materials you wanted in the SALC?
- very difficult
- rather difficult
- somewhat difficult
- not difficult at all
11. Do you think that working in the SALC helps you to improve your English?
- Yes, it helps a lot.
- Just a little bit.
- No, it does not help at all.
- I don't know.
12. Do you think that it is necessary for FE courses to require you to work in the SALC?
- Yes, it is very necessary.
- Just a little bit.
- No, it is not necessary at all.
- I don't know.
13. Any other comments or suggestions for us?
- _____
- _____

Thank you again for your help!

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