

A Study on Web-Based Self-access Learning

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In the information age, online self-access learning is regarded as of more significance to enable students to learn more efficiently and effectively. This kind of learning mode involves learners' responsibility and active participation for their own learning, thus enhancing the quality of the students' language learning experience. This paper aims at making evaluation on the effect of self-access learning by way of an empirical study. The research findings indicate that web-based self-access learning helps to enhance learner autonomy, as a result of which learners' English proficiency is improved. However, to engage in self-access learning, students need teacher's assistant on what to learn based on their needs and how to get access to meaningful learning resources.

Keywords: learner autonomy, self-access learning, learning strategies

Introduction

Self-access Learning

It is recognized nowadays that self-access learning is of great use to the success of language learning. Sheerin (1991) defined self-access as a way of describing material that is designed and organized in a way that students can choose and work on tasks independently. Gardener and Miller (1999) described self-access as a learning environment involving resources, learners, and the systems within which they are organized. Self-access language learning promotes the approach for students to study independently by choosing from among different resources that are available. The theory behind this style of learning is that students, especially foreign language students, learn better if they have a say in how they learn (Klassen, 1998). Self-access language learning is closely related to learner-centered approach, learner autonomy, and self-directed learning as all focus on student's responsibility and active participation for his/her own learning (Carter, 1999). This learning style is most often done in the setting of a self-contained learning environment or self-access center.

Self-access Learning Center

The concept of self-access brought about the establishment of self-access learning center, which is facilities designed for student's independent learning. In the center, students have access to various resources ranging from books, CDs to learning materials on computers. The advantages in using such facilities include feeling of empowerment and better learning gains. The development of advanced technology witnessed the establishment of a new form of self-access learning called "online self-access learning". Basically, online self-access learning involves institutions making language learning materials available online to students. Some on-line self-access

centers even include opportunities for supporting learners online, tools for collaborative learning, and active monitoring of students' performance by the software.

Literatue Review

Constructivism and Humanrism

There are two important theories related to self-access learning. One is constructivism and the other is humanism. Constructivism is a theory to explain how knowledge is constructed in the human being when information comes into contact with existing knowledge that has been developed by experiences. It is related to cognitive psychology and biology and an approach to education that puts emphasis on how knowledge is created in order to adapt to the world. Constructivism has implications for the theory of instruction. Humanism in English teaching lies in the idea that language learning should be an enjoyable process featured by individualism, self-access, student-centeredness, and less threat. Widdowson (1990) pointed out that the main aim of humanistic approaches is to draw the learner into an affective engagement with the learning process, to make classroom activities meaningful as experiences, which involve the individual as a whole person. The affective and emotional factors within the learning process of the students must be taken into consideration. Proponents of these concept believe that:

If learners can be encouraged to adopt the right attitude, interest and motivation in the target language and culture, as well as in the learning environment in which they find themselves, then successful learning will occur, and that if these affective factors are not right, then no set of techniques is likely to succeed, regardless of how carefully they have been devised or how solidly based on the latest theory and research. (Nunan, 1991, p. 234)

Self-access learning is also related to learner autonomy. Leaner autonomy can make it possible for language learners to be more highly-motivated, to individualize their learning, thus learning more efficiently and effectively (SUN, 2011, pp. 4-5). According to Holec (1981), learner autonomy involves the ability to take charge of one's own learning while Dickinson (1995) stated that autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions with regard to his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions.

Learning strategies are important elements in the realization of autonomous learning. Oxford (1990) referred to learning strategy as behaviors or actions learners employ to make language leaning more "successful, self-directed, enjoyable, effective, and transferable to new situation" (p. 8). Of all the learning strategies, meta-cognitive strategies are of the most importance. O'Malley and Chamot (1990), and Oxford (1990) defined meta-cognitive strategies as those which help learners think about their learning process, plan their learning, monitor the learning task, and evaluate how well they have learnt. Learners use meta-cognitive strategies to monitor, evaluate, regulate, or manage his or her learning. O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p. 227) believed that students without mastering meta-cognitive strategies do not have direction and ability to assess their progress, achievements and to determine their own future direction of learning. Therefore, meta-cognitive strategies, the most universal and applicable to all kinds of learning, should be developed first (Oxford, 1990, p. 202).

Previous Studies on Self-access Learning

Although there is no direct evidence that self-access mode of learning will, in itself, contribute to the development of learner autonomy, the self-access learning can definitely provide support for learners to

strengthen the skills and capabilities of language learning. McDevitt (1996) described the results of the self-access learning center at the UAD (University of Abertay Dunee). He said learning in the center has resulted in the growth in students' interest and motivation, and it will enhance the quality of the students' language learning experience at UAD.

Self-access language learning can be highly teacher directed, it can be totally autonomous or it can be somewhere between those extremes; Jones (2001) argued that teacher's role in promoting learner autonomy is of great significance, and Sheerin (1997) reminded us that teachers should support the learners to make them well prepared "on the path to greater autonomy" (p. 63). Lai (1999) stressed the effectiveness of a tutor-guided learning scheme in a self-access centre. Manurung (2005) argued that the improvement of the EFL (English as a foreign language) performance of the students can be owed to the instruction in the use of language learning strategies, the frequency of the use of the taught learning strategies, and the newly-described learning strategies used in the self-access centre. He recommended that instruction of the potential learning strategies should be carried out in teaching context to improve learner autonomy.

Evaluation of Self-access Learning

Research Design

The study was carried out during the first semester of 2012-2013 school year. Sixty non-English major students coming from two classes at Beijing Information Science and Technology University were chosen to participate in the research. Both classes are at the same level of English proficiency based on their performance in English proficiency test before the study. One class acts as an EC (experimental class), which is supposed to engage in online self-access learning after class with teacher's assistance, and the other as a CC (contrast class), which only has after-class assignment given by the teacher rather than online self-access learning task.

The questions to answer is that whether or not self-access learning can contribute to the improvement of English learning based on teacher's instructions on learning strategies. The study instruments are as follows:

- (1) Two English test papers. One is used before the study and the other is used after the study.
- (2) Questionnaire for learner autonomy.

The questionnaire is designed with a description of Likert scale of 1 to 5. It aims to test students' abilities to learn independently. Some items are modeled after established instrument by Oxford (1990) and slight change is made to meet the needs of the researcher. After using on a small scale and making necessary changes, finally, the Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire reached a high level of 0.798 (> 0.7), confirming the reliability for the items and questionnaire has good internal consistency and the results of the study are reliable. The data gained from the questionnaire are analyzed with SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions).

- (3) Questionnaire for interview.

Consisting of three questions, it is used to get information about participants' ideas about self-access learning. Compared with other methods of data-collection, interview is more personalized and enables the interviewers to gather in-depth information based on free response and flexibility that can not be achieved by other procedures (Seliger & Schohamy, 1989, p. 166).

The study is conducted based on the following procedure:

(1) The two classes take the English proficiency test at the beginning and end of the semester and their performances in two tests are compared with each other.

(2) Learning strategies instruction is carried out in EC to enrich learners' knowledge about learning strategies. It mainly focuses on meta-cognitive strategies which are vital to learner autonomy development.

(3) The teacher assigns learning tasks to EC. The on-line self-access learning is based on the system called "New Perspective Foreign Language Teaching" and "Learning Platform". In addition to the exercise and test related to textbooks, students can choose other resources to learn at their will on the basis of their learning needs.

(4) At the end of the semester, the participants' autonomy in learning and English proficiency are tested and the results are analyzed.

(5) Interviews were arranged at the end of semester. Ten out of 30 students in EC were chosen to be interviewed, including five high-scoring students and five lower-scoring ones. The interview lasted about 30 minutes, during which the interviewees were encouraged to describe and evaluate the effect of self-access learning.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The results of data-analysis are presented in the sequence of study procedure. Three statistical instruments (descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, and independent sample *t*-test) are used to analyze the data obtained from questionnaire and English tests.

Table 1

Learner Autonomy

Scores		N	Mean	Std. deviation	(Independent sample test) Sig. (2-tailed)
Learner autonomy	EC	30	36.14	9.01	0.000
	CC	30	29.19	8.08	

Table 1 indicates that learner autonomy of the EC is at a high level while that of the CC is at a low level. The independent sample test shows that the difference between the two scores is significant with $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, revealing that the EC has an overall stronger ability to engage in autonomous learning than the CC, but there is still room for improvement either for the EC or the CC.

Table 2

Scores in Two English Tests

EC			CC	
Average	Post-study	73.64	Post-study	67.67
	Pre-study	63.58	Pre-study	64.07
Std.	Post-study	8.92	Post-study	11.29
	Pre-study	14.26	Pre-study	15.34

Table 2 shows the average scores of two classes in two English proficiency tests. At the beginning of the semester, the scores of the two classes in English proficiency test have no significant difference and the students in both classes vary greatly in scores from person to person based on the standard deviation. At the end of the semester, the standard deviations indicate that the students in EC have made bigger progress and narrowed their difference in grades between each other, while students in the CC still vary greatly in scores from person to person, though they have also achieved improvement. The *t*-test (chart omitted) of two mean scores ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$)

shows that scores of the two classes in post-study test have significant difference revealing that the EC has gained a higher English proficiency after engaging in self-access learning.

Table 3

Correlations Between Test Scores and Learner Autonomy

	Correlations	Test scores	Learner autonomy
Test scores	Pearson correlation	1	0.465**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	60	60
Learner autonomy	Pearson correlation	0.465**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	60	60

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

It is shown in Table 3 that correlation is significant greatly and positively between test scores and learner autonomy, which reveals that the stronger learner autonomy students have, the better they will perform in examination and vice versa. This further proves that learner autonomy in the long run can enhance English proficiency.

In order to gain more information about the students' attitudes towards web-based self-access learning, an interview was carried out in the classroom after the questionnaires were collected.

According to the interview, most students tend to be interested in learning language in a self-access way, for they can choose to learn what matters and is suitable to them, and this individualized learning approach enables them to control their own learning process, as a result of which they can have time to evaluate what they have learned and find solution to problems arising in learning. They confirmed the usefulness of self-access learning process and claimed to achieve learning gains more or less through fulfilling learning tasks assigned by teacher. They felt that they have been awakened to the importance of learning on their own and obtained greater autonomy to engage in self-access learning; some even said that they had rid themselves of the panic about examination by which they had been haunted previously. They tend to have clear goals of learning independently and have mastered the basic techniques of self-monitoring and self-evaluating thanks to learning strategy instruction. They also felt motivated by the opportunities to take advantage of various resources available to achieve specific purpose.

However, some students admitted that they had difficulties in learning regularly due to the fact that sometimes they still feel at a loss what to do except what the teacher asks them to. They expressed the longing for more teacher's assistance on learning techniques. So it is necessary to conduct strategy instruction on independent learning both in class and after class. As Nunan (1999, p. 62) pointed out, strategy training should be included in the regular language teaching plans rather than regarding it as an independent learning process.

Conclusions

The research findings reveal the fact that the students in EC have improved their learner autonomy and performed better in English test than the CC. It is apparent that web-based self-access learning coupled with teachers' assistance on learning strategies instruction contributes to the effectiveness and efficiency of language

learning. Sheerin (1997, p. 56) described a general belief among educators that learning is more effective when learners take an active part in the learning process, actively take on responsibility for their learning, and participate in the decisions that affect it.

The study has important pedagogical implications for teachers to find the proper way to motivate the students to engage in language learning by raising their awareness of learner autonomy. It provides further statistic evidence to strengthen the belief that learning efficiency can be enhanced greatly in the self-access environment. The study emphasizes the necessity for language teachers to give priority to learner training on learning strategies to be used in the self-access setting rather than merely focusing on teaching facts which is an easy way to teach but can bear no fruits in the long run. Although many language teachers have already realized the importance of cultivating learner autonomy, it is not a common practice for them to carry out systematically some effective learning project to exert strong enough motivation on the learners to achieve the goals of independent learning. As a matter of fact, lack of learning techniques and necessary incentive mechanism is the major obstacle to improvement of learning efficiency both in classroom and out of classroom. Therefore, it is highly recommended that teachers and learners should make full use of resources available to practice learning strategies, make the most of students' potential to learn and exercise their brains to the fullest extent, thus achieving the goal of shifting the responsibility of learning from teachers to learners.

However, during the whole process of self-access learning, the teacher will have a hard job keeping everything going smoothly, including monitoring students' work in self-access learning and offering guidance to students whenever necessary, giving timely response to students' feedback, etc., what is more, they must keep up with the latest development in computer technology so as to facilitate offering assistance on line. After all, web-based self-access learning is a trend in modern times. It is something of a systematic project which calls for the cooperation of all the departments concerned. Though there are still some difficulties, we are making joint efforts to achieve as good results as possible to improve English teaching to non-English major students.

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Appendix: Questionnaire for Self-Access Learning

1—never or almost never true of me; 2—usually not true of me; 3—somewhat true of me; 4—usually true of me; 5—always or almost always true of me

1. I believe I should be responsible for my own learning.
1 2 3 4 5
2. I like self-access learning because it gives me freedom to do what I want to.
1 2 3 4 5
3. I can learn English in self-access way without teacher's supervision.
1 2 3 4 5
4. I spend at least five hours learning on line every week.
1 2 3 4 5
5. I know how to make use of the on-line resources to engage in English learning.
1 2 3 4 5
6. In language learning, I enjoy tasks that I can fulfill on my own.
1 2 3 4 5
7. I review what I have learned both in class and after class.
1 2 3 4 5
8. I try to learn English regularly.
1 2 3 4 5
9. I look for opportunity to read as much as possible in English.
1 2 3 4 5
10. I have clear goals for self-access learning.
1 2 3 4 5