

Promoting Self-Access Language Learning for EFL Learners

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Abstract:

This paper explores the prospect of self-access language learning (SALL) in an EFL context, such as in China. Starting with some definitions of autonomous learning, the paper argues for autonomy to be cultivated in EFL learners and explains how it can be developed in an input-poor environment. Some concrete examples of various activities that teachers can design and organize to prepare students for more independence are presented too. The need for integration of self-access learning with classroom teaching and the issue of assessments are addressed as well.

Introduction

Autonomous learning is not a new concept to EFL teachers and learners around the world. Although there has always been the idea of self-teaching in China, it is different from the concept of autonomous learning and is only peripheral in the Chinese educational culture. Confucius believed that it was important for students to learn on their own initiative, as learning should be a process of independent exploring and understanding, but in reality greater importance has been attached to the teacher's role as the only source of knowledge, the instructor, the authority, and the judge. Formal classroom learning is always favored over self-teaching. With many misconceptions, students in China are greatly teacher-dependent and lack the initiative to implement learning on their own. To many of them, the classroom is the only place where they can learn English. This situation should be changed in order for EFL teaching at schools and universities to be more effective and successful.

1. Definition of autonomous learning

The concept of autonomous learning originated in the 1960's when there were debates about the development of life-long learning skills and independent thinking. Holec (1981:3) defines autonomy as "the ability of take charge of one's own learning". Dickinson (1987:11) states that autonomy is a "situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions". Benson (1997:29) sees autonomy as "a recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems"

and, in the EFL teaching context, as “a recognition of the rights of the ‘non-native speaker’ in relation to the ‘native speaker’ within the global order of English”.

However, “the fully autonomous learner is an ideal, rather than a reality” (Nunan, 1997:193). There are different degrees of autonomy. Most researchers use the term “self-access” to refer to the approach that assists learners to move from teacher dependence to autonomy.

Self-access learning includes, but is not limited to, learning without a teacher, which usually happens in uncontrolled environments, like students’ residences and English corners. When students learn in controlled or semi-controlled environments like self-access centers and libraries, counseling service may be provided. In this case, teachers take on new roles of counselors, facilitators, assessors, and administrators.

2. Rationale for encouraging autonomy

We believe that in an EFL teaching context, such as in China, SALL should be nurtured and encouraged because it contributes to the learners’ successful acquisition of English in many ways:

1) Self-access learning provides learners with extra exposure to the target language. Our common sense as EFL teachers tells us that the more students are exposed to English, the faster they can acquire it. Extra exposure is especially beneficial and necessary in an input-poor environment like China, because the limited class hours (usually 4 hours per week for non-English majors) is far from enough for second language acquisition to be successful. In the non-native environment self-access maximizes the opportunities to learn. “If SALL is organized and systematic it allows maximum exposure to a wide variety of language-learning opportunities for a large number of learners in the least time-consuming and least costly way”(Gardner & Miller, 1999:25). In this sense we say that autonomous learning complements, not replaces, classroom teaching, by offering exposure to the target language.

2) Self-access learning better caters to the individual needs of learners at all levels, which are so diverse that no formal classroom teaching can satisfy them. SALL is very flexible. It can be conducted in a classroom, in a self-access center, in a library, or in students’ residences, and at times convenient to the learner. It can function with all the four language skills and at all proficiency levels. It accommodates individual differences in learning styles and strategies. It allows freedom in selecting the content of learning materials. It supports individualism but does not exclude collaborative learning (Gardner & Miller, 1999).

3) Allowing students more freedom and autonomy will enhance the learner's motivation and quality of learning (Dickinson, 1995). Formal classroom teaching deprives students of the freedom to decide what to learn and how to learn it. Self-access learning, on the other hand, returns to them the long-lost right to exercise responsibility for their own learning. As a result of this freedom, self-access learners usually are more motivated than students who are teacher-dependent, and are more efficient in learning. "There is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught" (Knowles, 1975).

4) Once learners become autonomous, they have acquired a life-long learning skill and a habit of independent thinking, which will benefit them long after leaving university.

3. Designing and implementing SALL

The introduction of SALL requires change in the roles of the institution, teachers and students.

The institution needs to change its attitude towards SALL and to support it in various ways. First, SALL should be made part of institutional policy so that teachers gain the power and freedom to link SALL to the school curriculum. Today, most schools and colleges in China have not recognized the great potential of SALL in facilitating language learning. Therefore, it is necessary to increase administrative awareness of the benefits of SALL. Second, institutions should allocate a space for the location of the self-access center. Third, it should provide start-up funds to get the self-access center started and recurrent funds to maintain its operations. The costs can present a problem to colleges and schools with a tight budget, especially those in the underdeveloped parts of the country.

Teachers also need to be more aware of their new roles. Three major roles have been identified for teachers working on SALL (Voller, 1997): (1) the teacher as facilitator, (2) the teacher as counselor, and (3) the teacher as resource. Although most EFL teachers in China hold positive attitudes towards learner independence (Qi and Pang, 2002), they seem not to have adequate knowledge about how to help with SALL. There is a need for teachers to upgrade their theoretical and pedagogical foundations, so that they can acquire new skills to function in new ways.

Learners also need to change their traditional beliefs about EFL learning and to become more aware of their central role in learning. According to Gardner and Miller (1999), learners in SALL should take on these new roles: planner (of own learning), assessor (self and others),

administrator (of own learning), organizer (of own learning), and advisor (to other learners).

When Chinese students come to the classroom at the university, they bring with them learning experiences and habits formed in their primary and secondary years, which are characterized by dependence on the teacher. Our interviews with the students at our university showed that many of them considered it to be the teacher's responsibility to ensure that learning take place, and that few of them had given serious thought to how they might study English without a teacher. In order for self-access learning to be successful, teachers should give students adequate training to prepare them psychologically and technically for more independence and responsibility.

There are a large variety of training activities that teachers can organize to prepare students for their ultimate autonomy. The following are some examples:

1) The teacher can initiate discussions and activities in the class that challenge students' traditional beliefs about EFL learning and cultivate confidence in SALL. These discussions play the important role of facilitating changes in students' perceptions and attitudes to language learning.

2) The teacher may also ask students to think about the learning resources available to them outside the classroom.

3) The teacher may ask students to identify their language abilities and difficulties, to help them prioritize their learning goals. In the initial stages the teacher may distribute a "Language Ability" worksheet (Gardner & Miller, 1999:125) and lead students to reflect on their own needs.

4) The teacher may introduce a "Learning Plan" worksheet to help students plan their daily SALL activities in a specific way:

Learning Plan	
Name: _____	Date: _____
Time I plan to spend on self-access: _____	
Today I plan to do the following:	
Goal	Time on activity
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____
After you have finished your work complete the second section of this plan.	
Reflection: Consider the work you did today, write a few words to remind yourself of your performance or anything you need to consider in your future self-access work.	
Goal 1: _____	
Goal 2: _____	
Goal 3: _____	

Based on Gardner and Miller (1999)

4. Self-access centers

Self-access centers (SACs) are crucial for the success of SALL in input-poor environments like China. But so far, few organized SACs have been established at educational institutions in China. As teachers we often hear our students complain that they cannot gain access to English materials that may interest them, or that they cannot find a place where they can learn comfortably. A well-managed SAC can be a solution, because it provides learners with the freedom to choose from materials of a wide range of interests, the freedom to learn at their own pace, the counseling of a teacher, and a comfortable setting. Consequently a student's motivation and efficiency of learning will be considerably increased.

An EFL SAC involves these elements: physical setting, EFL materials, equipment, counseling, and management. It can be a section of a library, a special classroom, or any space allocated by the institution. It can provide EFL books, worksheets, newspapers, magazines, audiotapes, videotapes, VCDs, CD-ROMs, DVDs, the Internet, and so on. Technical equipment, such as tape players, computers, and photocopy machines are included too. Counseling service is often provided. The counselor, often a teacher working part-time at the center, gives advice, offers suggestions, answers questions, provides encouragement and gives feedback and assessment to learners. To ensure effective counseling, the teacher needs to be trained in a

range of macro-skills and micro-skills (Kelly, 1996). The SAC should be provided with full-time staff too in order to maintain its daily operation and to ensure that it is open to learners outside office hours as well.

5. Integrating SALL with course curriculum

SALL needs to be linked to classroom teaching so that students feel it is an integral part of their language learning and that undertaking it is worthwhile. To assure learners that they are engaged in serious and respectable learning and to boost their confidence in SALL, teachers can design a variety of classroom activities. Some teachers, for instance, can use a worksheet to help students to record their own readings done in their extracurricular time in order to nurture their reading autonomy. The activities should be effective in both improving students' reading skills and developing their interests in reading on their own.

6. Assessment in SALL

Assessment on a regular basis is necessary in SALL for a number of reasons. Assessment shows learners how much they have learned during the previous period. Successful assessment can boost their self-confidence and motivation, while unsuccessful assessment can help them improve their study plans. Assessments are also opportunities for learners to reflect on their learning. In organized SALL, assessment helps teachers and administrators to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of SALL programs.

There are different kinds of assessment suitable for SALL, including teacher-prepared assessment, generic assessment, collaborative assessment, learner-prepared assessment, and portfolio assessment. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages. For instance, teacher-prepared assessments have high face validity but are not cost effective. Learner-prepared assessments are cost effective but are weak in expert input (Gardner & Miller, 1999). The choice of assessments depends on the learners' levels of autonomy and language proficiency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, autonomous learning should be cultivated and developed among EFL learners in an input-poor environment. Learners, teachers, and administrators need to be more aware of the benefits that SALL brings to English education and be ready to take on their new roles. Teachers should design and organize various activities to prepare students for more independence and responsibility. SALL needs to be integrated into the course curriculum and be assessed on a regular basis.

All learning is ultimately autonomous in the sense that learning depends on the efforts of the learners themselves. It is time for teachers to sow the seeds of autonomy and cultivate a life-long habit of independent learning within our students.

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