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Self-Access Centers: Maximizing Learners' Access to Center Resources

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Abstract

Although some students have discovered how to use self-access centers effectively, the majority appear to be unaware of available resources. A website and database of materials were created to help students locate materials and use the Self-Access Study Center (SASC) at Brigham Young University's English Language Center (ELC) more effectively. Students took two surveys regarding their use of the SASC. The first survey was given before the website and database were made available. A second survey was administered 12 weeks after students had been introduced to the resource. An analysis of the data shows that students tend to use SASC resources more autonomously as a result of having a web-based database. The survey results suggest that SAC managers can encourage more autonomous use of center materials by provided a website and database to help students find appropriate materials to use to learn English.

Autonomy

In a plenary address, Nunan (2000) states: "Autonomy implies a capacity to exercise control over one's own learning." He says that autonomous learners should be able to determine the general focus of their learning, take an active role in the management of the learning process, and have freedom of choice with regards to learning resources and activities. Benson and Voller (1997) make similar claims. They assert that autonomy means taking charge of one's own education and learning. Jones (1998) discusses various areas in which a learner can be autonomous. He discusses class

work, homework, teacher-led autonomy, teaching oneself, full autonomy, and naturalistic immersion. Jones (1998) lists self-access with teacher-led autonomy.

Although, the distinction between the teacher-led autonomy and self-access may appear evident, self-access is often used synonymously with many other terms for autonomy. The definition of self-access is by far one of the most disputed. Many researchers and practitioners do not clearly show the relationship between autonomy and self-access. However, Sheerin (1989) defines self-access as materials selected by learners to reinforce a traditional teacher-led classroom. This definition can be extended to engulf more areas of autonomy. Self-access actually refers to materials, people and other resources that learners can take advantage of to learn independently. These learners may or may not be associated with a traditional class or course. The idea is that self-access allows students to choose the materials and activities for their individual learning experience.

Continuing this definition, we find that self-access can extend into many types of autonomous learning. In fact, full-autonomy would involve complete self-access, whereas homework uses the least amount of self-access. Figure 1 illustrates an adapted version of Jones's (1998) spectrum. In this figure, we see that self-access stretches across all different types of autonomy.

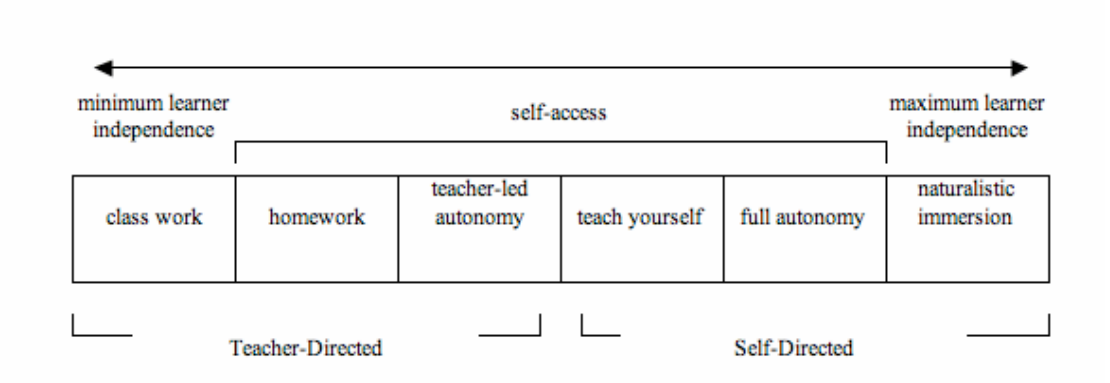

Figure 1. Jones' diagram representing scope of study with adaptations to show self-access (Jones, 1998, p. 379)

Promoting Autonomy

Teachers can promote autonomy without creating a teacher-dominated learning process. Sheerin (cited in Benson & Voller, 1997) points out that teachers have an important role in helping learners to become more autonomous. Thanasoulas (2000) suggests that autonomous learning is achieved when both cognitive and metacognitive strategies become part of the learner's skills. Anderson (2002) defines metacognition simply as thinking about thinking.

Cognitive strategies deal primarily with the manipulation of input such as repetition or notetaking. Thanasoulas (2000) suggests that developing these skills will contribute to

the overall development of autonomy in language learners. Wenden (1998) defines metacognition as the "facts learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations" (p. 34). Metacognitive strategies are not learning strategies in the same way that cognitive strategies are. Metacognitive strategies deal with learning about how an individual learns. They involve techniques such as self-monitoring and self-evaluation. These are key aspects of self-access. If self-access truly involves self-monitoring and self-evaluation, then self-access centers are essential in helping learners become more autonomous.

Using Self-Access centers to Promote Autonomy

In an effort to promote autonomy, many institutions have developed self-access centers. These centers have become increasingly more popular in the last few decades. The first such center was developed by CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues) at the University of Nancy, France (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). Since then, centers have arisen in locations in the United States, throughout Europe, Asia, and elsewhere around the globe. The idea behind these self-access centers is to promote and facilitate autonomous learning. These centers may contain books, audiovisual equipment, and/or tutors. The purpose of these centers is to complement teacher instruction. Students can go to these places to participate in activities ranging from class homework to fully autonomous learning of language concepts.

However, for many institutions, autonomous learning is not defined as independent learning. In many situations, a center exists, but nothing is done to promote learner autonomy. The center quickly becomes a computer lab or library, but maintains the name, claiming that it is a self-access center. In short, there are many self-access centers, but the information we have with regards to their efficacy and functionality is limited.

Cotterall and Reinders (2001) explore how a self-access center at the University of Victoria in Wellington (VUW) was being used. They also wanted to learn about the students' perceptions of the center. Students at VUW reported in a survey that 70% of the work they did was work they wanted to do. In addition, they reported one learner felt "that her class work (i.e., work directed by the teacher) 'interrupted my learning cycle in the [center]'" (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001, p. 29). The authors suggest that the classroom and self-access center should not compete for the attention of learners. The study raises an important question. Although the students do activities that they want to do, are these items chosen by the students or by the teachers?

As mentioned previously, Thanasoulas (2000) suggests that motivation and attitude are also important factors in the development of autonomy. Cotterall and Reinders (2001) find that the attitudes of students at the University of Victoria at Wellington towards their self-access center are positive. A survey given to the students showed that 90% of the students found the self-access center to be important to their learning

experience. From a standpoint of autonomy, 88% of those that participated said that the center helped them to learn by themselves. Overall, 93% said that "learning to learn English by yourself" is an important objective. Correlation tests and statistics from the survey suggest that those who chose to use the center and had a positive attitude towards the center were the learners at lower levels of proficiency. The numbers also suggest that learners who considered autonomous learning important used the center more often (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001).

The survey also showed an important relationship between the proficiency of the learners and the use of other resources. Some higher proficiency students indicated that they used materials outside of the center while others used the center rather exclusively (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001). The materials used outside of the center were not specifically mentioned.

One problem that centers encounter is the one-sided use of homework and teacher-led autonomous exercises. As effective as these centers may be, full autonomy is usually not promoted there. Potentially, the gradual process of becoming fully autonomous is stunted, and students usually don't go beyond teacher-fronted work.

The study done at VUW revealed some problems. Approximately 60% of the students reported that it was difficult to find the right materials. Helping students access the materials available may be helpful in promoting worthwhile use of these centers. They also found that the students who received and understood the orientation had little problem finding appropriate materials, suggesting that learner training in self-access centers would definitely benefit learners.

Recent studies on autonomy have dealt with self-access centers. Researchers want to determine how and if these centers are promoting autonomy. In other studies, researchers have tried to determine what makes a person a good language learner. They then try to find a way to transfer these techniques and integrate them into language programs (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). Gremmo and Riley also noticed that in self-directed learning there is a link between language learning and learning-to-learn. They suggest that research should be done with regards to counseling and development of learning-to-learn programs. Metacognition seems to be a clear factor for producing learner autonomy.

There is a tremendous need for more research regarding self-access centers. Cotterall and Reinders (2001) suggest four areas that can help improve the effectiveness of these centers.

1. Self-access center administrators should explore learners' beliefs.
2. Students need an effective initial orientation to the self-access center.
3. Administrators should provide on-going support to students.
4. There should be more links between the self-access center and the classroom.

We are not aware of any research in these areas. Future research should involve learner training programs and their effectiveness in promoting autonomy and overall activity in self-access centers.

In order for self-access centers to be effective in the promotion of autonomy, they must be organized in such a way that they provide more than word processing access or other casual use. Observations by center administrators, and a more extensive study conducted by Tanner, McMurry, and Allen (2004) have shown that the majority of students who use Brigham Young University's (BYU) SASC are primarily participating in activities such as word processing and general computer use.

As mentioned earlier, Cotterall and Reinders (2001) suggest that exploring learners' beliefs, orienting them to the available resources, providing on-going support to the students and strengthening the link between the classroom and these centers may help increase the use of the center as a harbor for autonomous students as opposed to a computer lab. If self-access centers are to succeed, studies should be done to verify the effectiveness of these suggestions. The results will lead to more research and the strengthening of self-access centers and their ability to provide what their name implies. This research study addresses one of Cotteral and Reinders' (2003) points.

Database/Website Design

In an effort to provide ongoing support for students and teachers, a website and database were created to provide users with information regarding materials available in the SASC at BYU's English Language Center. All the center resources were categorized by language proficiency level and skill area objectives rather than simply to the item titles (or other identifiers). A web interface thus allowed users to search the database by objective, level, skill area, media and other categories.

The database relational; it links data to other databases. The first database included program-specific information, such as objectives. The objectives for each skill area were listed in a table. These objectives were written by the program administrators, and freely distributed at the ELC. The table includes information about each objective with regard to the proficiency level and skill area. The table also has an additional field containing keywords that can be used in a search. The last field is composed of groups of numbers. These numbers refer to ID numbers of materials, which are then listed in the second database.

The second database includes information about the materials themselves. The main table of data contains four fields:

1. Titles of materials
2. Type of materials (CD-ROM, book, website, etc.)
3. Location of the materials
4. Keywords to use for database queries

On the website, users can search for materials and other resources based on keywords. A list is returned giving information regarding the material: media type, location, and suggested use. Users can also browse the database by skill level or skill area. They then see the objectives for that level or skill, and are able to select materials corresponding to that particular objective. The interface provides users with multiple ways to find materials to help them study and improve their English skills.

Evaluation

Students were surveyed on two separate occasions in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the database in promoting autonomous use of the SASC. The first survey took place ten months before the database implementation.

Eight weeks after the website and database were deployed, an evaluation of the orientation and use of the SASC was conducted. Students again completed a survey. Although the second survey was slightly different they both collected the necessary data. (The differences were mainly regarding other aspects of the SASC and not its use.) The survey gathered information about use of the SASC. The information gathered provided evidence about how the initial orientation and database had affected the use of their SASC. The results from the second survey were then compared with the first one.

Survey Data and Results

At the time the first survey was administered, approximately 250 students were enrolled at the English Language Center (ELC). Of these students, 127 participated in a survey regarding the use of the SASC. A paper copy was given to each student in one of his or her classes, so that a student did not complete more than one survey.

One hundred twenty-four (124) of approximately 306 students enrolled in the ELC participated in the second survey. Every student was given the opportunity to take the survey. Not only were the students encouraged to take the survey weeks before school ended, but also as they finished their final exams they were again offered the opportunity. These multiple opportunities to complete the survey were provided to ensure that students who rarely visited the SASC or computer lab would have several opportunities to participate.

Survey Demographics

Languages. Table 1 shows a break down of survey participants by their native languages.

Most of the changes in languages represented in the survey were minor. However, the number of Japanese students who participated in the second survey doubled from the first survey, and the number of Chinese and Mongolian students who participated was reduced by half.

New, Returning, and Continuing Students. One important part of the data was the students' status. Students who are new or returning from vacation were required to be at the initial orientation.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Native Language

Languages	First Survey	Second Survey	Languages	First Survey	Second Survey
Arabic	1	0	*Korean*	31	25
Armenian	0	1	*Mongolian*	14	7
Bulgarian	1	1	*Polish*	1	1
Cantonese	0	1	*Portuguese*	5	4
Chinese	13	6	*Russian*	1	1
French	3	1	*Spanish*	40	46
Italian	1	2	*Thai*	2	1
Japanese	13	27	***Total***	**126**	**124**

Continuing students did not attend the orientation, and therefore did not have access to the same information about the SASC and the website. Table 2 shows the status of the students who took the second survey. These data indicate that 86 of the students who participated in this survey should have been at the orientation, and therefore should also have been made aware of the SASC website.

Table 2. Distribution of Participants by Student status

Student Status	Number of Students
New students	73
Returning students	38
Continuing students	13
Total	**124**

Promoting Autonomy

As part of the survey, students who used the SASC indicated why they came to the SASC. Table 3 shows what the students indicated in both surveys. After the website and database were implemented, 46 percent of the responses indicated that the use of word processing software or email was the most important reason why the students used the SASC. Seventeen percent of the reasons were teacher motivated and the remaining 37 percent were not directly teacher-motivated.

However, prior to the project's implementation, 36 percent of the most important reasons given were computer-related. Thirty-five percent were teacher-motivated reasons, and 29 percent were motivated by reasons not involving the teacher. Although computer usage went up, it is interesting to notice that teacher-motivated use of the SASC is down by 18 percent.

In addition to comparing students' activities in the center, the data also provided information regarding the types of materials students use. General computer use and word processing had the highest percentage of people reporting frequent use. The most obvious change in the data was that more students reported using books, studying together, and studying by themselves after the implementation of the website than they did previously.

Table 3. SASC Activities by Percentages

	Percentages First Survey	Percentages Second Survey
Type papers	83	76
Email	68	65
Learn English	64	55
Get help with Homework	58	54
Required by teacher	54	33
Wants to study alone	46	53
Quiet place to study	32	31
Talk to friends	26	34
Required by ELC	23	16
Instant messenger	-	43

Although many other factors affect the information collected, a decrease in teacher-motivated work in the SASC and an increase in self-initiated study alone and with others shows that the students appear to be becoming more autonomous in their learning than those of the previous year.

SASC Usage

Eighty-eight (88%) percent of the students who participated in the first survey reported that they used the SASC. Ninety-seven percent of those who participated in the Fall 2004 survey reported that they used the SASC. Assuming that this is a representative group of students, the data show a rather dramatic increase in the use of the SASC compared to the students who participated in the first survey.

Orientation and Web page

The objective of the survey was to determine if students used the SASC more because of the orientation they attended, and/or the support provided by the website.

Orientation. Table 4 shows the opinions of students who attended the orientation with respect to how helpful they thought the orientation was. It also shows if those students felt that the orientation encouraged them to use the SASC during the semester. Forty-three (43) of those present at the orientation reported it to be very helpful while only six students said it was not helpful. Seventy students said that the orientation encouraged them to use the SASC during the semester. In contrast, only 16 said it did not encourage them.

Table 4. Students' Opinions Regarding the Website (by number)

	Helpful Orientation	Encouraging	Not Encouraging
Very Helpful	43	38	5
Somewhat Helpful	37	30	7
Not helpful	6	2	4
Totals	**86**	**70**	**16**

Website. Unlike orientation attendance, all those who took the survey reported having the ability to use the website to find materials in the SASC. However, those who participated in the orientation received explicit training on how to use the website and SASC.

The data indicate that 84 of the 85 students who attended the orientation used the website. In contrast, only 8 students of the 38 who were not at the orientation used it.

This seems to show that the orientation played an important role in how the students used the website and SASC. It is also important to mention that 3 of the 4 students who said they didn't use the SASC were not at the orientation.

Table 5 shows how useful the students felt the website was.[1] All but one of the students found it to be somewhat or very helpful.

Table 5. Website Use

	Web Site Used	Web Site Not Used	Total
Those attending orientation	85	1	86
Those not attending orientation	8	30	38
Total	**93**	**31**	**124**

Conclusions, Implications and Suggestions

The purpose of this research was to determine ELC students' use of the SASC and what might be done to promote autonomy in self-access centers. This survey, along with previous ones, indicates that the SASC is not being used to promote learner autonomy or to help engage students in autonomous learning to the extent it could be. However, with the addition of a database-driven website which gives students immediate access to the center's resources, there were slight changes in the way the SASC was used. Students reported using more books from the SASC as well as spending more time studying alone and with others.

As shown earlier, the literature illustrates that autonomy has a role in language learning. According to Jones (1998), language learning students cannot escape autonomy as it even takes part in classroom activities. The core question that has driven this project sought to determine what could be done to make self-access centers encourage student use and promote autonomous language learning. The initial orientation effected how the students used the SASC. The database and Web page were useful, but no direct connection between them and center use could be made.

The data show that the students who attended the initial orientation before classes began were more likely to use the resources explained and highlighted in that meeting. In this example, we see that those students tended to use the website more than those who did not attend. Students who were well oriented were more frequent visitors to the SASC as well.

We now know that the orientation has a strong effect on how the students use the SASC. As mentioned in the results above, students who attended the initial orientation were more likely to use the web-based database and search for resources to aid their

language learning. Since one of the fundamental purposes of the orientation was to introduce the web database, it seems apparent that orientation heightened students' awareness of resources in the center, thereby allowing them the opportunity to make greater use of these materials.

This information is important for those administrating self-access centers. It appears that in order for students to make better use of the self-access centers, a few key procedures should be put in place.

1. Students should be provided with easy access to a database to help them locate materials for language learning.
2. Students should be oriented at the beginning of each term so that they are aware of what is available, how to find it and where it is located.
3. Teachers should be made aware of the materials available for students to use outside of class.
4. A teacher orientation should be conducted to help motivate them to encourage students to use the SASC to better their English on their own time. As Cotterall and Reinders (2003) mentioned, links between the classroom and the center may increase the promotion of autonomy.
5. Ongoing support should be provided for both teachers and students through interaction with lab attendants, administrators, and tutors.

Limitations

The data did not answer all of the questions. Although we see that the focus of the SASC has begun to shift from teacher-motivated activities, there are too many intervening variables to determine what actually caused this change. For example, while issuing the survey, we were asked by several students what website the survey referred to. Some remembered quickly, and others had no idea.

Directions for Future Research

There are many areas that still need research. Self-access center management and staff behavior could be studied in order to see how these factors affect students' use of a SAC. Research regarding the effects of metacognition in learning would give us more information on how to improve self-access centers. Strategy training with respect to using strategies best suited for an autonomous environment may prove to be one of the more effective ways of promoting autonomy and the use of self-access centers. Researchers should also explore other forms of on-going support and observe how this support affects the use of self-access centers.

Certainly, the other suggestions given by Cotterall and Reinders' (2003) would be a good starting point for more research, as only one of these is explored here. Exploring the beliefs of students who consider themselves autonomous learners and comparing them to other students may provide additional data that speaks to how SACs can be enhanced.

We should also focus on how links between self-access centers and classrooms affect these centers' use. How do students of teachers who are familiar with self-access centers use them, as compared to students of teachers who do not feel comfortable with them?

Other areas to explore include how teacher orientations might affect the students' use of self-access centers. Introducing institutional ways to encourage teachers to link the classroom to such a center may also prove interesting. The effects of teachers on autonomy in student learning may be significant, indicating that links between self-access centers and the classroom are pivotal to helping students become more autonomous.

Educational practices can be evaluated and adapted to an autonomous environment. We need to look at which methodologies lend themselves to an increase in learner autonomy, and what qualities learners have that make them more autonomous language learners. Self-access centers provide a key role in understanding these practices.

Notes

[1] One student reported that it was helpful, but also reported that he did not use the SASC. This could indicate that he either used the website at home or was confused by the question in the survey.

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