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The Attitude of ESP Learners towards the Role of Self-Access Language
Learning Centres in Improving their Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This article presents the attitude of ESP learners towards the role of Self-Access Language Learning Centres in improving their reading comprehension. It provides an evaluation of the success of these course elements as well as an interpretation of students' understanding of the related concepts. Finally it identifies factors that enhance or hinder the successful implementation of Self-Access Language Learning. Both qualitative and quantitative instruments were used to elicit data that gives insight into learners' perceptions of the issues under review. Self-Access Language Learning was evaluated positively by the students, both as a means to improve specialised English and as a means to develop independent learning skills. The study identified a number of factors that contributed to these perceptions. It also revealed that students' understanding of independent learning is rather shallow. Finally a number of recommendations were made for a successful implementation of Self-Access Language Learning into a curriculum.

Key words: Autonomy, Autonomous Learning, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Self-Access Centre (SAC), Self-Access Language Learning (SALL).

نگرش دانشجویان ESP نسبت به نقش مراکز خودآموزی زبان در پیشبرد مهارت خواندن و درک مطلب متون زبان تخصصی

چکیده

این مقاله به بررسی نگرش دانشجویان ESP نسبت به نقش مراکز خودآموزی زبان در پیشبرد مهارت خواندن و درک مطلب متون تخصصی می پردازد. ارزیابی میزان موفقیت اجزاء مربوط ، تفسیر میزان درک زبان آموزان از مفاهیم مربوط به آن و سرانجام شناسایی عواملی که اجرای موفقیت آمیز اینگونه مراکز را تهدید یا تشویق می کنند از دیگر موارد بحث شده در این مقاله می باشند. برای جمع آوری اطلاعاتی که نگرش دانشجویان را منعکس می کند ابزارهای کمی و کیفی مورد استفاده قرار گرفته است. خودآموزی زبان، هم به عنوان ابزاری برای بهبود مهارت زبان تخصصی و هم وسیله ای برای توسعه مهارت‌های یادگیری مستقل توسط زبان آموزان امری مثبت ارزیابی شده است. مقاله حاضر تعدادی از عواملی را که منجر به چنین برداشت و نگرشهایی از سوی زبان آموزان می شدند را شناسایی و نشان می دهد که درک دانشجویان از امر خودآموزی یا یادگیری مستقل بیشتر سطحی و ضعیف است. در نهایت برای اجرای موفقیت آمیز خودآموزی زبان در برنامه های آموزشی راه کارهایی چند ارائه شده است.

کلید واژه ها: استقلال، یادگیری مستقل، انگلیسی برای اهداف ویژه، مرکز خود آموزی، یادگیری مستقل زبان (خودآموزی زبان)

Introduction

Learner autonomy is as Little (1991) described it, the new *buzz-word* in the field of applied linguistics. Like its precursor, communicative language learning, it is starting to be an unquestionable goal and integral part of language learning methodologies throughout the world. As the theory and practice of language teaching entered a new century, the importance of helping students become more autonomous in their learning became one of its more prominent themes.

The concept of autonomy accords well with our view that language learning requires the active involvement of learners, our attempts to introduce *learner-centred* methods, and our goal of helping learners to become independent from their teachers in their learning and use of language. Accordingly the over-arching goal of all teaching is to help learners act more independently within a chosen range of domains, as a result an appropriate teaching methodology is a methodology for furthering autonomy (Littlewood, 1996).

Autonomy which can be broadly defined as the capacity to take control over one's own learning is not a method of learning, but an attribute of the learner's approach to the learning process. The concept of autonomy is grounded in a natural tendency for learners to take control over their learning. According to Benson (2001) Autonomy is a legitimate and desirable goal of language education and even learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it given appropriate conditions and preparation. The conditions for the development of autonomy include the opportunity to exercise control over learning.

Because of complexity and rapidity of change in our highly technological societies, it is important to help our learners to develop the attitude that learning is a life-long process and to acquire the skills of self-directed learning. However; due to highly complex nature of language and language learning, encouraging autonomy in language learners often proves to be a doubly difficult objective. As stated by Sinclair (2000), large amounts of time, energy and money are spent on its promotion and implementation. This is especially true for Self-Access Centres (SACs), which are believed to be an effective means to the desired end of learner autonomy.

Self-access and self-instruction foster autonomy by providing learners with opportunities to direct their own learning. Self-access language learning (SALL) is an approach to learning language, not an approach to teaching language. The focus for the development of autonomy is placed upon the learner's independent interaction with learning resources (Benson, 2001).

Self-access language learning (SALL) offers learners the opportunities to exercise control over learning plans, the selection of learning materials and the evaluation of learning. Learners are expected to develop the skill associated with these activities through process of experimentation and discovery, in which freedom of choice is a crucial factor. Learner training and support mechanisms, appropriate use of technology, the design of access systems to support self-direction, teacher and learner involvement, and the integration of self-access with the curriculum have been identified as important factors in contributing to the greater effectiveness of self-access (Benson, 2001).

Review of the related literature

Autonomy and Self-Access

Benson and Voller (1997) suggested that:

Self-access resource centres are the most typical means by which institutions have attempted to implement notions of autonomy and independence over the last twenty years to the extent that 'self-access language learning' is now often used as a synonym for 'autonomous language learning'. (p.15)

So there seem to be a difference between the two. Autonomous language learning would be the kind of learning as autonomous learner engages in. He or she would consciously make well informed decisions about his or her learning. Self-access language learning, however is the kind of learning that takes place in a SAC (Self-Access Centre) (Benson & Voller, 1997).

Benson (2001) defined autonomy as a capacity to take control over one's own learning. Autonomy is treated as a capacity belonging to the learner. It is an attribute of the learner rather than the learning situation. Autonomous learning is learning in which the learner's capacity for autonomy is exercised and displayed.

Self-instruction and the Difference between Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) and Self-directed Learning

Dickinson (1987) defined self-instruction as a situation in which a learner, with others, or alone, is working without direct control of a teacher. Dickinson considers it a general cover term to make broad reference to situations in which learners are working without the direct control of a teacher.

Later Dickinson (1987) noted that self-direction refers to attitudes rather than techniques or even modes of instruction. Self-access learning and individualized instruction refers to modes of learning in that they are concerned with the activities of the learners, the teacher and their interaction.

According to Reinders (2000) self-directed learning is learner initiated, i.e., whereby the decision to study lies with the learner. Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) does not have to be self-directed. Benson (1996) summarised this by saying that if the autonomy is the aim, then self-direction is a means to this end, and self-access is an environment within which it can be achieved. Benson and Voller (1997) warned of the potential negative side-effects of Self-Access Language Learning (SALL):

Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) can easily lead to dependence on a narrow range of strategies and a narrowing of perspectives... there is no necessary link between learning a language in a self-access facility and the development of autonomy and independence. (p.6)

The Rationale for the Use of Self-Access Centres (SACs)

For Little (1989) the rationale for the use of Self-Access Centres (SACs) is as follows: If successful language learning depends on interaction with a large and varied diet of textual materials and the development within the learner of a capacity to take decisive initiatives, then we must provide the learner with resources that he or she can draw on as an individual. According to this view all language learning turns out to have a self-instructional component and the self-access system is seen not as an alternative to the teacher but as a necessary resource for all language learners. (p. 32)

Self-Access Centres (SACs) can give learners the opportunity to learn by themselves, and to make their own decisions about their learning. Self-Access Centres (SACs) can also fulfil another role. Crabbe (1993) said that "Autonomous learning needs to become a reference point for all classroom procedure" (p.144). Gardner and Miller (1999) also discussed the notion of the Self-Access Centre (SAC) acting as a bridge to the outside, unstructured environment in native speaker environments.

Aston (1996) saw economic reasons for institutions to have a Self-access Centre (SAC) and suggested that such centres can also be seen as providing language learning on the cheap, potentially substituting for direct teaching operations. Others do not agree with this view. McCafferty (1982 as cited in Dickinson, 1987) described Self-access Centre (SAC) as a place that offers access to materials, activities and help.

So Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) can be said to be the learning that takes

place in a SAC. It involves the development of learner autonomy, takes place in a Self-Access Centre (SAC) and caters for learners with different needs. SAC also consists of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities and help), usually in one place, that accommodates learners of different levels, styles, and with different goals and interests. It aims at developing learner autonomy among its users (Reinders, 2000).

The reasons an institution has for having a SAC is very important. This will influence the type of learning that takes place in them. Different factors together result in very different learning contexts, and thus different roles for teachers and learners (Little 1995, Cotterall 1998).

Autonomy and Autonomous Learner

Learner autonomy is generally recognized as an important pedagogical goal (Wenden, 1987, as cited in Ho & Crookall, 1995), *a philosophy of learning* (Henner-Stanchina & Riley, 1978, as cited in Ho & Crookall, 1995), an *unavoidable methodological option* (Narcy, 1994, as cited in Ho & Crookall, 1995) and as representing the *upper limit of self-directed learning* measured on a notional scale from fully directed to fully autonomous learning (Dickinson, 1978, as cited in Ho & Crookall, 1995).

Little (1991) saw autonomy as a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action. Holec (1985, as cited in Dickinson, 1995) described autonomy as a capacity and writes of *automatization* as a matter of acquiring those capacities which are necessary to carry out a self-directed learning programme.

In discussing the nature of autonomy Littlewood (1996) distinguished between general and task-specific aspects of autonomy. General aspects of autonomy are linked to a person's general capacity for independence across the range of situations which he or she encounters, i.e. autonomy as a person. Task-specific aspects of autonomy are related to individual's capacity to act autonomously in performing specific tasks.

Gardner (1993, as cited in Little, 1995), identified autonomous learner as disciplinary expert, i.e., an individual of any age who has mastered the concepts and skills of a discipline or domain and can apply such knowledge appropriately in new situations. Autonomous learners have a capacity for critical reflection and decision making, as well as the skills necessary to carry out a self-directed learning programme, i.e. the ability to define objectives, define contents and so on (Little, 1991).

Levels of Control

Benson (2001) described autonomy as a capacity to take control of one's own learning. He believes that the construct of *control* or *responsibility* is more open to investigation than the construct of *charge* or *responsibility*. Later he noted that adequate description of autonomy in language learning should at least recognise the importance of three levels at which learner control may be exercised: *learning management*, *cognitive processes* and *learning content*.

Control over Learning Management: Learning Strategies

Research on the behaviours involved in autonomous language learning has to a large extent drawn upon research on learning strategies (Benson, 2001). Cohen (1998, as cited in, Benson, 2001) defined learning strategies as learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner. The element of choice is important here because this is what gives a strategy its special character. Wenden (1983, as cited in, Benson, 2001) classified the strategies used by adult foreign language learners to direct their own learning into three categories:

- 1 Knowing what language and language learning involves.
- 2 Planning the content and methods of learning.
- 3 Self-evaluation of progress and the learning experience.

Based on systemic research within the theoretical framework of information processing theory, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) proposed a more detailed schema based on three major categories:

- 1 *Cognitive strategies* [italics added] are operations carried out directly on the material to be learned.
- 2 *Metacognitive strategies* [italics added] make use of knowledge of cognitive processes to regulate the learning process.
- 3 *Social/affective strategies* [italics added] involve the ways in which learners interact with others and control themselves in order to enhance their learning.

Resource-based Learning: Self-Access

According to Benson (2001) practices with the development of autonomy are classified under six broad headings including: *Resource based, Technology based, Learner-based, Classroom-based, Curriculum-based, and Teacher-based* approaches. In resource-based learning the focus for the development of autonomy is placed upon the learner's independent interaction with learning resources. Learners are provided with the opportunity to exercise control over learning plans, the selection of learning materials and the evaluation of learning. Self-access which lies at the heart of resource based learning is what Gardner and Miller (1999) defined as an environment for learning involving resources, teachers, learners and the systems within which they are organised. At the core of the idea of self-access language learning is the self-access centre, which often function as a quasi-independent unit with its own philosophy and routines for engaging learners in study outside the classroom. (Benson, 2001)

Self-Access Systems

Gardner and Miller (1999) argued that self-access centres are distinguished both by the kinds of resources and services they provide and by the systems through which these are made available to the learners. Within a self-access system, the access and retrieval system represents the interface between the centre's learning resources and the learner (Sheerin, 1991). Riley (1986) pointed out, self-access centres differ from libraries in that their users are less likely to be interested in the authors, titles and topics of materials than in the kinds of learning activities they support. Among the factors that appear to be most important in fostering autonomy are the extent to which the system encourages and facilitates choice, the extent to which it is oriented towards the description of activities rather than materials and the transparency of the system to its users.

English for Specific Purposes: Favorable Conditions for Language Learning

As Dudley-Evans (2001) aptly phrased it, "ESP, has always been itself as material-driven, and as a classroom based activity concerned with practical outcomes" (p. 131). Defining features of ESP according to Robinson (1991) are limited duration and adult learners. According to Dudley-Evans (2001) ESP is concerned with teaching language, discourse and relevant communicative skills, it exploits topics and the underlying methodology of the target discipline to present language, discourse and skills.

For Dudley-Evans (2001) identified absolute characteristics of ESP are as follows:

- ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves
- ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, Register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to the activities.

One of the ways ESP courses strive to provide favorable conditions for language learning is by their attempt to create an optimal linguistic environment, one in which learners are provided with plenty of input in the form of exposure to the target specialist language and opportunities for students to interact with it. Sufficient quantity and quality of linguistic input

and interaction are understood to be conditions favorable for language learning (Basturkmen, 2006)

Objectives in Teaching ESP

Basturkmen (2006) identified five main objectives in teaching ESP:

- Reveal Subject-Specific Language Use: aims to show how English is used in the target environment.
- Develop Target Performance Competencies: teaching oriented toward this objective presents language operationally in terms of what people do with language and the skills they need to do it. Courses are organized around core skills and competencies.
- Teach Underlying Knowledge: disciplinary concepts from the students' field of study.
- Develop Strategic Competence: a mediator between the external situational context and the internal language and background knowledge that is needed to respond to the communicative situation.
- Foster Critical Awareness: creation of awareness towards the roles of ESP defined in terms of helping English language learners meet the demands of expectations of the target environment, or to close the gap between the students' present state of skills and knowledge and the level required by members of the target environment.

Learner Beliefs

According to Reinders (2000) teaching learners to become more independent is one thing, how learners experience this and what they think of it, is another. It is largely determined by how they see languages, language learning, learner and teacher roles etc. when they enter a particular educational institution. These beliefs will have an influence on their behaviour and it is therefore important to understand them. Cotterall (1999, as cited in McDonough, 1999) stated that:

What we believe we are doing, what we pay attention to, what we think is important, how we choose to behave, how we prefer to solve problems, form the basis of our personal decisions as to how to proceed. An important fact about this argument is that it is not necessary for these kinds of evidence to be true for them to have important consequences for our further development. (p.9)

Benson and Lor (1999) claimed that beliefs about learning are based on conceptions. What is important here is that there is a difference between conceptions and beliefs, where conceptions are what learners think the object and processes of learning are and beliefs are what the learner holds to be true about these objects and processes. Our conceptions limit our beliefs, which in turn determine our approach. Beliefs about learning and language learning are complex and made up of different elements. Although it is unclear how learners' conceptions and beliefs influence behaviour, it is clear that they do, and that therefore, they need to be addressed if any changes in behaviour are to be expected. (Reinders, 2000)

ESP Learners: Beliefs and Attitudes towards the SALL

In order to investigate ESP learners' beliefs and attitude towards the role of SALL and SAC in improving their Specialised English knowledge, we had to determine their general understanding of different resources provided by SAC, which were believed as an efficient tool in improving this kind of knowledge. Learners' understanding of different resources available was considered as one of the main factors which could inhibit or enhance the effectiveness of the SAC. As a result major focus was on this qualitative aspect of learning rather than quantitative aspects such as number of users, use of materials, and etc. furthermore Self-Access Centre (SAC) was chosen as an ideal environment which could make it easier for learners to learn. The basic idea of choosing SAC as learning environment was based on its ability to foster autonomy in their users. As it was mentioned before learners' beliefs influence their learning behaviour. If this is so, then we tried to clarify and

describe this belief towards the SALL and SAC and their promotion in particular course by evaluating student reports on their learning experiences within a SAC.

Method

This study aimed to focus on qualitative aspect of learning and teaching and matters relating to effectiveness rather than quantitative aspects and matters relating to efficiency. Gardner (1999) makes this distinction describing efficiency as the relationship between cost and output and effectiveness as how well pre-set goals are met. In the case of Self-Access Language Centres (SACs), pre-set goals would be that it should make it easier for students to learn, allow them to learn more, or to learn better. Since SACs are based on the idea of fostering learner autonomy, they should help in the development of autonomy in their users (Star, 1994).

This research relies heavily on students reports about their learning experiences. It was therefore essential to identify learners' attitudes towards the learning process and the concepts that were the focus of the study. Students' understanding and attitudes are valuable fields of study in their own right. This is especially true with the concept of learner autonomy and Self-Access Language Learning (SALL), as these are to a large degree subjective and may therefore be imposed on learners. A SAC as mentioned by Reinders (2000) does not operate in a vacuum. It is embedded in a specific educational setting that influences its success. Learners, the actual users of such resources, define to a large extent what success is in a particular context. It was thus crucial to our understanding of the functioning of Self-Access Centre (SAC) to take learners' experiences and attitudes towards SAC and SALL into account.

Therefore; the purpose of this study had been to investigate the attitude of ESP learners towards the role of Self-Access Language Learning Centres (SAC) in improving their reading comprehension. The researcher intended to determine the attitude of ESP learners towards the role of dictionaries, graded readers, graded readers with cassettes, grammar and vocabulary books with exercises, listening and writing materials, computer programs and audio-video tapes in improving their specialised reading skills.

Furthermore this research was a try to determine the general attitude of ESP learners towards the usefulness of Self-Access Language Learning and their understanding of SALL based on their attitude towards SALL and SAC. More importantly because learners' understanding is one of the factors that enhance or hinder efficient and effective use of SAC and certain behaviours can have a positive outcome on learning ability; this study also aimed to investigate factors which students believed can inhibit or enhance Self-Access Language Learning.

Participants

The study was carried out in Rubbi Rashidi Higher Education College in Tabriz with 120 insurance students doing an English for Insurance course and Biology students doing English for Biology course, aged 18 to 24. They had done Basic English One, Basic English Two, and general English as a prerequisite. In the second week of the course, the researcher visited every class and explained the projects (Appendix A). There were no refusals to cooperate. To further ensure subjects' privacy, the questionnaire was anonymous and all names that could identify subjects were removed.

Instrumentation

The instruments developed for the study were as follows:

Questionnaire (Appendix A):

One of the ways to obtain answers to our research question was by administering a questionnaire to all the students. Questionnaires contained open and closed questions. Closed

questions were easier for quantification, but open questions provided more meaningful information.

The Likert Scale, provided an easily quantifiable set of answers for closed questions, the 12th week of the course was chosen to administer the questionnaire, since we expected that, by then, students would be able to give us informed answers about their self-access language learning. The use of difficult words or difficult grammatical constructions was avoided.

Observations:

During the whole course at least three hours were spent every day in the SAC to give the students advice on how to learn English, which materials to use etc. No structural form of note-taking was taken place. The major purpose of the observation was to reach a general idea of learners' inclination towards the use of different facilities and resources while trying to learn English by themselves.

Procedures

The study was carried out during a specialized English reading course at Rubbi Rashidi Higher Education College in Tabriz from September 29, 1389 to January 5, 2011. The specialised English reading course is a fourteen-week intensive English course for students of Insurance major. The aims of the course generally were to improve learners' performance in reading complex information about different types of insurance around the world, taking an active part in discussions and becoming an independent reader of specialised texts.

There were two Insurance English classes including 85 male and female students and one Biology English class including 35 male and female students. Students spent an average of 3 hours per week on this course held on Thursday 10AM to 13PM, Monday 10AM to 13PM and Wednesday 14PM to 17PM.

Observations started from the beginning of the course and took three hours a day in the SAC (provided by the college library). The researcher was present in SAC, an independent unit within the college, an average time of three hours a day to provide learners advice on learning materials and orienting them to the resources and facilities. A questionnaire including 6 open questions and 13 closed questions was administered during the 12th session of the course.

Results and Discussions

The Attitude of ESP Learners towards the Usefulness of SAC and the Role of Dictionaries, Computer Programmes, Graded Readers with Cassettes, Audio and Video Tapes, Graded Readers, Grammar Books and Exercises, Vocabulary Books and Exercises, in Enhancing their Specialised Reading Comprehension

1. The attitude of ESP learners towards the role of self-access language learning centres (SACs) in improving their reading comprehension and enhancing their learning as a whole was determined through extracting the percentage of evaluative questions within the questionnaire; including closed questions 3-18-16-17-5 and open question 4. Closed questions revealed hard information about the attitude of ESP learners towards the following concepts: (see Table 1)
 - i. the usefulness of working in the SAC, to learn specialised English (Q. 3). (the effectiveness of the SAC was determined by measuring its contribution to language learning)
 - ii. the activities done in SAC for learning a language (Q. 18) (the matter of usefulness of the SAC for students' own development in specialised English was evaluated).

- iii. the extent working in the SAC has helped them to learn how to learn English by themselves in the future (Q. 16) (effectiveness of the SAC in developing students' independent learning skills)
- iv. the use of self-access centre (SAC) and to learn how to improve specialised English reading comprehension individually (Q. 17).
- v. the usefulness of different materials provided by SAC in improving their reading comprehension and their language learning as a whole (Q. 5).

Table 1.

The percentage of positive attitude of ESP learners towards the evaluative questions in the questionnaire (Questions 3-18-16-17-5)

Question	3	18	16	17	5a	5b	5c	5d	5e	5f	5g	5h	5i
Percentage of students' Positive Attitude	~70 %	~70 %	~80 %	~80 %	~66.7 %	12.5 %	62.5 %	77.5 %	66%	66%	83.4 %	12.5 %	58.3 %

As it is presented in table 1, ESP learners had a positive attitude towards the usefulness of working in the SAC, all the activities done with in the SAC and different materials provided by the SAC. Except for the graded readers with cassettes and audio tapes which only 12.5% of the students evaluated as positive.

Question 4 of the questionnaire was an open question that asked 'what (if anything) did you find particularly useful about the SAC?' Only one of the students spontaneously responded that it had helped her to become a better learner. All the other responses referred to materials. Since this question came before question 16 that asked students to say whether they thought if working in the Self-Access Centre had helped them to learn English by themselves in the future (i.e. to become more independent learners), this perhaps means that the development of learner independence is not something that immediately springs up in students' minds when thinking of Self-Access Language Learning.

2. The correlational analysis of different questions within the questionnaire was determined. The Spearman correlation coefficient (ρ) between evaluative questions (3-4-5-16-17-18) and the rest of the questions within the questionnaire was calculated using SPSS program (Statistical Package of the Social Sciences) version 19. The Spearman correlation coefficient (ρ) was calculated between questions 1-3, 1-16, 1-17, 1-8, 1-13, 1-10, 13-17, 13-18, 3-13 10-13, 17-18, 3-11, 11-16, 3-12, 14-16,.15-3, 1-11, 1-12.

To see if students' attitude towards the usefulness of the Self-Access Centre to learn English was related to how often they used the resources, we first looked at students' frequency of use of the resources (Q.1).

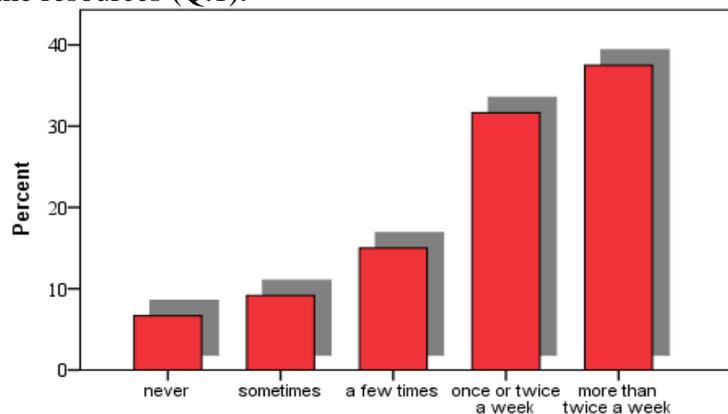


Figure 1. The rate of the students' use of the SAC throughout the course (Q. 1)

According to Figure 1, 69.2% of the students used the SAC once, twice or even more than that. This was equal to 83 students. Only 8 students didn't use them at all which was equal to 6.7% of the population. We tried to relate this result to those obtained from question 3, 8, and 16. There was indeed a significant correlation between them which could possibly mean that students who:

- used the resources more, were more positive about its effect on their development in specialised English;
- mostly did things they themselves decided to do, used the SAC more than students who did things their teachers told them to do; and
- used the resources more, value its potential to help them to learn how to learn higher.

The following table indicates the results of the correlational analysis between questions 1-3, 1-8, and 1-16.

Table 2.

Spearman's correlation coefficient (rho) analysis for questions 1-3, 1-8, and 1-16

Questions	Spearman's Correlation Coefficient (rho)
1-3	0.875
1-8	0.319
1-16	0.756

There was no correlation between students' use of the SAC and the importance of learning to learn and comprehend specialised English in an ESP course. The higher value that regular user of the self-access resources gave to them for learning to learn specialised English and comprehension of ESP materials was probably the result of their work, rather than of any preconception about SAC and SALL.

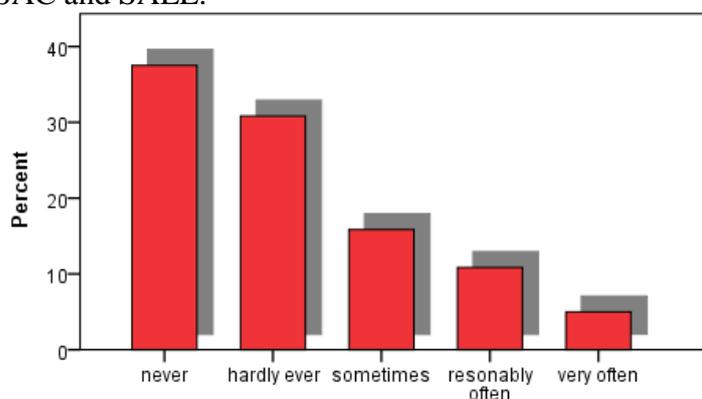


Figure 2. The rate of students' use of English outside Rubbi Rashidi Higher Education College (Q. 13)

As it is presented in Figure 2, only 15.8% of the students admitted to only using English sometimes. Almost 70% of them never or hardly ever used English outside the college. To see if this attitude is reflected in their attitude towards the usefulness of the SAC and SALL correlational analysis was done between 13-1, 13-18, 13-17, 13-3, 13-10. Students' use of English outside the college was not related to their attitude towards the:

- use of the language facilities,
- importance of working in the SAC for improving ESP reading comprehension,
- development of independent specialised English reading skills,
- usefulness of working in the SAC for learning specialised English,
- use of other resources such as other university library or the public library. (see Table 3)

The frequency of use was not also related to students' attitude towards the use of other resources such as other university library or the public library. The following Table indicates the results:

Table 3.

Spearman's correlation coefficient (rho) analysis for questions 13-1, 13-18, 13-17, 13-3, 13-10 and 1-10

Questions	Spearman's Correlation Coefficient (rho)
13-1	0.000
13-18	0.000
13-17	0.000
13-3	0.000
13-10	0.000
1-10	0.000

There was a significant correlation of 0.909 between question 17 and 18 of the questionnaire. Students who found the SAC more important for learning specialised English and improving their reading comprehension also found learning to learn more important.

Three other factors influenced students' attitude towards the usefulness of the SAC. Introduction to the SAC at the beginning of the course was considered one of the factors influencing students' attitude towards the usefulness of the SAC. There was a significant correlation between students' attitude towards the introduction to the SAC (Q.11) and:

- students' use of the SAC (Q, 3);
- students' attitude towards the usefulness of the SAC for learning to learn and comprehend specialised English (Q.16);
- students' use of the resources within the SAC (Q. 1). (see Table 4)

Table 4.

Spearman's correlation coefficient (rho) analysis for questions 3-11, 16-11, and 1-11

Questions	Spearman's Correlation Coefficient (rho)
3-11	0.927
16-11	0.819
1-11	0.210

The second factor influencing learner attitude was the presence of the researcher in the SAC. The on-going support was evaluated very positive by students. More than 83.3% found the presence of the researcher either quite or very helpful. (Figure 3).

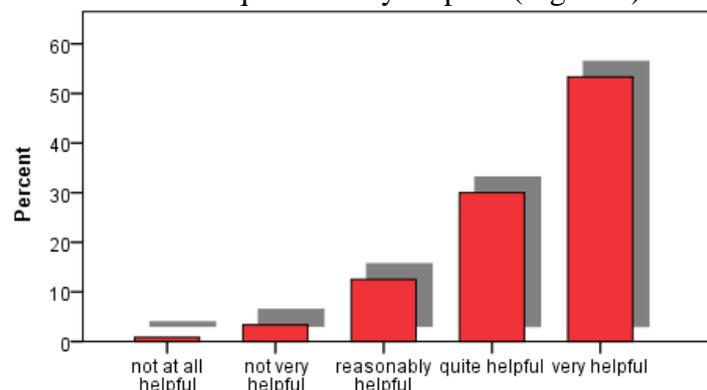


Figure 3. Students' attitude towards the presence of the researcher in the SAC to help and give advice (Q. 12)

There was a significant correlation between students' attitude towards the presence of the researcher in the SAC and their use of resources (Q.1) and also their attitude towards the usefulness of the SAC for learning English (Q.3). It could be that the extra support and friendliness had a very big influence on the number of students using the resources. (see Table 5)

Table 5.

Spearman's correlation coefficient (rho) analysis for questions 1-12 and 3-12

Questions	Spearman's Correlation Coefficient (rho)
1-12	0.768
3-12	0.760

The third factor that influenced attitude of the usefulness of the SAC for learning to learn was the difficulty that learners had finding the right materials. There was no correlation between students' attitude towards the usefulness of the SAC for learning to learn and comprehend specialised English (Q. 16) and their attitude towards the difficulty of finding the right materials (Q.14). The number of students who had more or less difficulty in finding right materials was only 23.3% of the population which had no correlation with 95% of the population which rated the working in the SAC as more or less important for learning specialised English and improving their reading comprehension skill. The less difficult they found it, the more useful they found the SAC in terms of helping them to become more independent learners.

There was also no correlation between previous experience in working in a SAC (Q.15) and the degree to which students' rated the resources as useful (Q.3). Since only 8.3 % of the users said they had much previous experience with working in a SAC like the one at Rubbi Rashidi Higher Education College, this means that their attitude towards the usefulness of resources were not influenced by comparisons and fixed attitudes.

The Students' Attitude towards the Self-Access Language Learning (SALL)

The findings reported on above already gave us some information on what Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) and Self-Access Centre (SAC) were to students. This is particularly important since most students (95 %) saw the development of independent learning skills as an important part of a course like the ESP and a large number (around 82.5 %) said that the SAC has had a major impact in this.

As mentioned before, none of the respondents referred to the development of their independent learning skills when asked to say what the most useful aspect of the SAC was (Q. 4). It could just be that the question was misunderstood, but it could also be that it is not a very salient aspect of SALL, even though the students might agree with its importance when explicitly asked so.

Question 5 of the questionnaire asked learners to rate the usefulness of different kinds of resources available in the SAC. Of interest here is that the graded readers with cassettes and Audio CDs, were the least popular type of resources. Only 12.5 % of the respondents rated them as useful, whereas for example computer programmes scored over 83 %. Dictionaries were rated 77.5% useful while video CDs with only 58.3%.were rated the lowest after audio CDs.

Likewise, when asked what the most difficult aspect of working in the SAC was (Question 9), none of the answers referred to matters of planning, monitoring progress, evaluating etc. Again, it could be that students interpreted this question as being about the resources more than their learning, but even that indicates that students see the SAC primarily as a resource centre. It seems that students didn't know what they didn't know.

Almost 16 % of the students said they used English only *sometimes* outside the university. It is evident that there is no direct link between learner autonomy on the one hand

and the use of authentic materials and real-life communication on the other. In general a lower degree of independence is accompanied by them. Although most students said that working in the SAC had helped them to become more independent learners, this probably did not mean to them using the target language more. If that is true then finding opportunities and actually using the language was not seen by students as something related to the development of learner independence.

Although most students said that working in the SAC had helped them to learn how to learn, 23.3 % said they found it more or less difficult to find the right materials and, by the second half of the course 23.3% of the students still had considerable problems in finding the right resources. The important thing for the researcher was that ¼ students had not yet developed one of the most important skills in independent learning: the ability to find appropriate resources. Obviously, although students said that working in the SAC had helped them to become more independent learners, this did not mean that they developed this skill. These findings seem to contradict each other. It could be that the SAC did not help students with this, or it could be that students don't see being able to locate appropriate materials as a skill related to, or important for, independent learning.

We have to keep in mind here that students didn't live in a second language environment. The course was only three hours per week for each class group. Every day they were free to use SAC but also from the begging it was agreed that students use the SAC at least once or twice a week during the course especially when the researcher was present at the SAC (from 9.30AM to 12.30AM). The remainder of the time is for homework, self-study (as part of the programme). However, for a number of students, the classroom still provides almost all of their learning opportunities.

Factors that Students Think Enhance or Inhibit Self-Access Language Learning (SALL)?

Question 2 of the questionnaire asked students who had rarely used the SAC to tell us why this was so. Since most students used the resources often, there were not many responses to this question. The most frequently mentioned reason was lack of time. None of the responses revealed any structural problems in the working of the Self-Access Centre.

Question 9 was similar but asked all students about the most difficult thing about working in the Self-Access Centre. Again time was mentioned, as well as the audio CDs.

Questions 4 to 7 showed that especially the computer programmes, graded readers, vocabulary books and also the dictionaries were rated very positively. The information from the SAC database confirmed this. Probably these materials have a high face validity for students and therefore are likely to provide good ways of making people use the resources more.

As already mentioned the introduction was a factor related to students' perception of the usefulness of the resources. A poor introduction does not provide students with sufficient knowledge of the resources and can act as a major handicap for them when using the SAC. It is also related to students' use of the resources. There was a significant but weak correlation of 0.210 (Spearman's rho) at the .05 level between students' attitude towards the usefulness of the introduction to the SAC and their use of the resources

Also already mentioned the presence of the researcher in the SAC was influential. The on-going support was evaluated very positively by students. More than 83.3 % found the presence of the researcher either 'quite' or 'very' helpful.

When asked for additional suggestions (question 19), several students requested more help and the presence of teachers in the SAC. There are two possible explanations for this. Either the resources were badly organised and the helper not very useful, or students did not develop the skill of locating appropriate resources during this course. Both possibilities have serious implications. The latter explanation given above then means that, the classroom did not provide students with the necessary skills, and that there were no facilitating resources in

the SAC that allowed students to develop them by working there. Links between the classroom and the resources were probably too weak or absent. Perhaps this presents one of the greatest obstacles to using the SAC. The potential of the resources was not unleashed. One of the obstacles in this respect could be the use of language which is too difficult for some students in the Centre. There was also no relationship between previous experience with working in a SAC and the difficulty students had in using the resources.

Conclusion

The SAC at Rubbi Rashidi Higher Education College had an average number of users. On the whole they were very positive about the resources, as shown by the questionnaire. Almost 80.8 % of the students rated the SAC as useful for learning specialized English, although we have no evidence to show us if it made them learn better or faster. In the sense that very few students had previous experience of working in a SAC, the results were not colored by their previous attitude toward the SAC.

Also a large number of students (95 %) found the SAC useful for learning to learn. However, the students did not mention this as an advantage of SALL when not asked explicitly. It can be that students didn't have a strong interest in this aspect of SALL. The higher value that regular users of the self-access resources attribute to them for learning to learn is probably a result of their work, rather than of any preconceptions about it. Students' satisfaction depended partly on the degree of difficulty they had in finding the right materials. The more difficult they found it, the less useful they found the SAC in terms of helping them to become more independent learners.

Fostering independent learning was found to be an important goal in a course such as the ESP by 82.5 % of the respondents. Those who did see the SAC as helpful for learning English also found learning to learn more important. There seemed to be different modes of learning that led to an appreciation of the development of independent learning specialized English skills.

Students' attitude towards the usefulness was influenced by the (perceived) quality of the introduction. On-going support was identified as a crucial factor. We also found that the additional support in the form of a helper in the SAC, was influential.

An interesting finding was that it is probably difficult to influence learners' attitude towards the usefulness of SALL and SAC by directing them to the SAC. There was little previous research with which to compare our findings. However, results quite strongly indicate that students had a shallow awareness of what independent learning and especially independent reading comprehension skill entailed. Also, their understanding of the function of the SAC was limited. 87.6 % of the students found learning to learn an important goal of the ESP and found the SAC helpful in this respect. Our participants seemed to be willing to take responsibility for their own learning.

Students probably didn't see being able to locate appropriate resources as a skill related to, or important for independent learning. Some students indicated having problems in finding materials, while at the same time claiming that working in the SAC had made them more independent learners. Since the number of students who claimed not to have used English much outside the university was so high, it could be said that it obviously did not help in linking the class and the outside world. Perhaps the SAC keeps learners inside, by providing a non-threatening and too comfortable environment. The potential of the SAC probably was not employed in the sense that although most students used the resources regularly, this didn't result in an increased awareness of what independent learning was, and one fears, of their independent learning skills.

The findings above identified factors that influence the success of a SAC. There is a need for increased awareness among students, both about what independent learning is and about the true potential of the SAC, particularly in forming a bridge to the outside

world. In general, it will be the teachers' responsibility to foster the links between the classroom and the SAC.

An important obstacle seemed to be the difficulty some students had in finding the right resources. This could indicate that the preparation and training that the ESP provides is insufficient, so extra support was found to be a crucial. The same can be said for the introduction which is suspected to be the main cause for students' satisfaction with SAC/SALL.

The resources did seem to be motivating for students, even if they were not used to their full potential. The graded readers, grammar books and exercises, dictionaries and the computers especially seem to have high face validity for the students and they are probably a good way of getting students to use the materials.

One of the advantages of the SAC is that it gives its users the opportunity to work in a quiet atmosphere, with a large number of resources. Many students do not have this opportunity at home or cannot afford some of the materials and reported being very content with the self-access resources for these reasons. Others mentioned that they found it a friendly place and therefore liked to come there. From the observations made by the researcher it was also clear that students saw it as good place to meet other students to study together or just to chat. It was certainly not only individual study that took place in the SAC. In short, students do seem to benefit from the resources, even if only for practical reasons.

Therefore, it could be concluded that successful implementation of the SALL requires some sort of integration, awareness, training and bridging. SALL has to be integrated into an existing curriculum. Students need to feel it is an important part of the course. They also have to realize what an independent learning is and appreciate its benefits. Independent learning has to be taught and supported and finally classroom learning needs to be linked to the outside world. The SAC can function as a bridge and prepare learners for actual language use.

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Appendix A: The Questionnaire

Rubbi Rashidi Higher Education College in Tabriz

Dear Students,

This questionnaire is to find out what you think about the English language materials and facilities in your college resource centre and about how you use them. This information will help us to improve the centre in the future. Thank you for helping us.

Major: -----

1. How often did you use the Language facilities throughout the course?
 - 5- usually more than twice a week
 - 4- usually once or twice a week
 - 3- a few times
 - 2- sometimes
 - 1- never

2. If you have never (or rarely) used the Self-Access Centre (SAC), could you tell us why?

3. How useful do you think that working in the SAC is, to learn English?

Very useful				Not at all useful
5	4	3	2	1

4. What (if anything) did you find particularly useful about the SAC?

5. Which materials did you often use in the SAC? How useful did you find them? (please rate all of them)

	Very useful		Didn't use	Not at all useful	
a. Graded readers	5	4	3	2	1
b. Graded readers with cassettes	5	4	3	2	1
c. Other reading materials	5	4	3	2	1
d. Dictionaries	5	4	3	2	1
e. Grammar books & exercises	5	4	3	2	1
f. Vocabulary books & exercises	5	4	3	2	1
g. Computer programmes	5	4	3	2	1
h. Audio tapes	5	4	3	2	1
i. Video tapes	5	4	3	2	1

6. What other materials would you like us to provide in the SAC?

7. What materials would you like to have more examples / copies of?

8. When you work in the SAC, to what extent do things you decided to do yourself rather than following your teacher guidelines?

Very much				None
5	4	3	2	1

9. What is the most difficult thing for you about working in the SAC?

10. Did you make use of other resources such as other University Library, or the Public Library?

Yes, often		Sometimes		No, never
5	4	3	2	1

11. How useful did you find the introduction to the SAC?

Very useful				Not at all useful
5	4	3	2	1

12. How helpful was it that there was someone in the Language Resource Centre to help and give advice?

Very helpful	helpful	A little helpful	Not much helpful	Not at all helpful
5	4	3	2	1

13. How often do you use English outside Rubbi Rashidi Higher Education College?

Very often	Reasonably often	Sometimes	Hardly ever	No, never
5	4	3	2	1

14. How difficult was it for you to find the right materials in the SAC?

Very difficult				Not at all difficult
5	4	3	2	1

15. How much previous experience did you have with working in a Language Resource Centre like ours, before you started on this course?

Very much	A little	None
5	3	1

16. Do you think that working in the SAC has helped you to learn how to learn English by yourself, in the future?

Yes, absolutely	Very much	A little	No	I don't know
5	4	3	2	1

17. Do you think it is important that in a course like this to learn how to learn English by yourself?

Yes, very important	Quite important	A bit important	No, not important	I don't know
5	4	3	2	1

18. How important for you is the work you do in the SAC for learning English?

Very important	Quite important	A bit important	Not important	I don't know
5	4	3	2	1

19. Do you have any suggestions that could help us improve the SAC?

