

English Language Competence Development of English Fundamental Course II Students through the Self-Access Learning Center of Thammasat University

*Watjana Suriyatham**

Abstract

This research aimed to investigate students' development of English through the use of the Self-Access Learning Center of Thammasat University. One hundred and nineteen students who were studying Fundamental English Course II in the first semester of 2001 participated in the study. This investigation was undertaken by 1) determining if there was a significant difference between the English language score of the students before and after the use of the Self-Access Learning Center and 2) finding a relationship between the number of visits the students made to the Self-Access Learning Center and their English language post-test scores. This research also asked the students' opinions about the Self-Access Learning Center and self-directed learning in various aspects to improve the facilities and to better facilitate student use of the Self-Access Learning Center.

Introduction

Due to the fast growing pace of globalization and high competition in the world market, it is not only essential to have access to a variety of information but also to be able to interpret and analyze data accurately. Therefore, Thai students need to develop their English competence in four skills--listening, speaking, reading, and writing--to effectively communicate with both native speakers and non-native speakers of English. However, university students whose major is not English have a limited time to study it. Some have an opportunity to study only two or three courses throughout the whole undergraduate program. Another hindrance is the lack of an environment to facilitate students to practice what they have learned in class for real life communication. Since we use English as a foreign language in Thailand, once we step out of the classroom, there is no need to use English. Students, therefore, lack practice and repetition which is one of the language learning strategies for successful language learners (Stern, 1983, p. 411). These limitations may answer the question of why Thai students cannot speak or use English fluently in real life situations.

Thammasat University Language Institute recognized the above-mentioned obstacles and on November 10, 1996, the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) was established with the main objectives to encourage students to learn and develop their English competence in a self-instructed way and at their own learning pace. SALC also can respond to students' needs and their individual differences and can enable them to become autonomous learners. SALC at present has four rooms: reading & writing, sound lab, computer, and edutainment in which ample learning materials are provided such as supplementary worksheets, newspapers, magazines, UBC programs, movies, video learning programs, and the Internet.

Virasuda Sripayak and Jaruda Boonsuwan (1997) conducted a research study regarding attitudes towards SALC of Thammasat University students studying English fundamental courses and found that students were ready to study English on their own at an average mean of 2.74 and SALC was appropriate for self-access learning at the level of 3.15. After that SALC has been continuously developed every semester. Nevertheless, many students seem to neglect its importance.

Some do not pay attention to make the best use of self-access learning and SALC. How to make students want to learn is, therefore, an interesting and challenging question that teachers who act as learning facilitators have been trying to find a key to answer. Wharton and Race (1999, pp. 87-88) suggest practical ways to train students to become autonomous by “allowing learners to see for themselves how their studies are progressing, and showing them what the expected targets and standards will be” and “clarify how the outcomes of independent learning will be assessed, and explain how the self-access materials contribute to the resourcing of the programme as a whole.” Dickinson (1994, p. 134) also states that most successful language learners regularly engage in self-assessment as part of their learning. Students should learn with a purpose and receive feedback on their competence development. Thus, learners should be aware of their own proficiency before they do a study plan to develop their competence or improve what they are still weak at. If learners are not able to develop their competence, we should receive feedback and reflection from learners. Then we might perhaps further an investigation to find out factors affecting their self-access learning and conduct a SALC evaluation to measure its efficiency and effectiveness.

This quantitative study aimed at answering the research question whether SALC can enhance students’ language competence in grammar, vocabulary and reading by comparing students’ pre-test scores before attending SALC with post-test scores which were collected after 14 weeks of self-study in SALC. In addition, students were assigned to record frequency of SALC attendance to test whether there was a relationship between the post-test scores and the frequency of attendance. It was hoped that this research result would be of some help to promote students’ competence and self-access learning as well as other areas of SALC research studies.

Review of the Literature

To provide effective language teaching and learning to promote learners’ language competence, it is essential to clarify the definition of language competence before the ends and the means of how to develop learners’ competence can be specified and implemented. According to

the Council of Europe (2001), language competence is set up for the realization of communicative purpose with three components as follows:

1. Linguistic competences include lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competences.
2. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the aspect of appropriate language use in society.
3. Pragmatic competences consist of discourse, functional and design competences.

In brief, language learners need to develop not only their linguistic competence or knowledge of linguistic forms which include grammatical structures and vocabulary but also communicative competence which is the ultimate goal of language teaching and learning. That is, learners need to be able to use the language appropriately and meaningfully in real life situations and in new contexts.

Since there are too many types of both language forms and use to cover in a short limited time, teaching learners how to learn is supposed to be another practical way to enhance learners' competence. The concept of independent learning is supported by many educators who view education as a life-long continuing process. Rogers (1969, p. 104) states about the need for self-instructed learning that "We are, in my view, faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the facilitation of change and learning. The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security." Teaching learners how to learn is also supported by Dickinson, who believes that self-instruction is helpful in solving learners' practical problems, in improving learning efficiency, in coping with individual differences among learners, in helping learners to develop motivation and in providing the skills required for continuing education (Dickinson, 1994). According to Sheerin (1990), learning is the learners' responsibility. She points out that lack of involvement in the learning process is an obstacle to learning. Thus, it is necessary to train learners to take part in their own learning process and provide them with an environment to facilitate learning opportunities.

From theory to practice, a great number of self-access learning centers have been opened to encourage language learners to learn

independently with or without a guide from teachers or tutors. It is believed that self-access facilities are suitable for language learning as attested to by Sheerin (1997, p. 55), who claims that "it is clear that good self-access facilities create the opportunity for highly effective individualization of learning."

Self-Access Learning Center, Thammasat University

Location:	Thammasat University, Rangsit Campus
Staff:	Thai and foreign English teachers and SALC administrative staff
Number of Students:	approximately 3,000 students in the first semester and 2,000 in the second semester
Students' Background:	first-year students studying English Fundamental Courses I-III
Facilities:	SALC consists of three rooms in a two-floor building and a single-storey building divided as follows:

1. Reading and Writing Room (100 seats)

Materials provided in this room include:

- self-study reading and grammar worksheets
- SRA reading materials
- grammar and writing practice exercises
- a wide range of magazines such as Reader's Digest, Entertainment, Time, Seventeen, National Geographic, and Future
- outside reading books
- reference materials (grammars and dictionaries)
- newspapers

2. Edutainment Room (60 seats)

Materials supplied in this room are 24 sets of TV monitors and video players equipped with headphones, various kinds of movies, video materials, and vocabulary practice games.

3. Listening Room (Sound Lab with 64 seats)

Most of the materials focus on listening practice such as sound advice, minimal pairs, listening worksheets, learning English by songs, and UBC programs.

4. Computer Room (52 seats)

Students can learn English from CD-ROMs and the Internet.

SALC Objectives:

1. to encourage and train students to learn independently without interference from teachers
2. to facilitate learning flexibility according to individual differences
3. to provide learners with a variety of self-access learning materials
4. to create an environment for learners to practice English skills that match their specific needs and to have a chance to be exposed to English
5. to encourage students to spend time wisely and to acquire English skills naturally and effectively

Use of SALC

All students who enroll in English courses I, II and III are assigned to self-access learning at the SALC as a part of the program eight times, four times before the mid-term exam and the other four times before the final exam. The courses require the students to record what they have learned in their log books as an assessment of the students' progress and hand in an assignment related to their self-access learning.

Apparently, SALC is deemed ready and appropriate for facilitation of self-access learning. However, SALC evaluations in terms of its contribution to self-access learning and evaluations of self-access learning to provide feedback to learners have not been conducted. Therefore, it should be useful to investigate whether SALC is a practical resource to facilitate self-access learning and the research results obtained from the study can be a guide for further development.

Research Studies on Self-Access Learning

Duangta Lakunaprasit (1992) analyzed factors affecting language learning achievement of highly successful learners and found that they used self-directed learning from media such as newspapers, radio, TV programs, movies and videos. They also gave themselves opportunities to receive exposure to English by interacting with native speakers.

Gardner and Miller (1997) investigated 541 learners and 58 teachers' perceptions about self-access learning. The results showed a high degree of satisfaction with the self-access facilities, and most of the learners considered it worthwhile to use the Self-Access Center to improve their English.

Virasuda Sripayak and Jaruda Boonsuwan (1997) conducted a research study regarding attitudes towards self-access learning of Thammasat University students studying English fundamental courses and found that students were ready to take up autonomous learning at an average mean of 2.74 and the Self-Access Learning Center was appropriate for self-access learning at the level of 3.15.

Yaowarat Karnphanit et al. (1999) studied English reading achievement through the self-directed learning of 837 Khon Kaen University first-year students and found that it significantly increased at the 0.01 statistical level. The majority of students thought that the self-access learning center could help develop self-access learning skills.

As there has been no study conducted to investigate the development of learners' competence through self-access learning from the Self-Access Learning Center, it is, therefore, deemed necessary to do research to examine the progress of this particular group of learners so that we can have learners' feedback regarding their performance and how learners implement self-access learning.

Research Methodology

Subject Selection

The subjects who took part in this study were 119 first-year Thammasat University students who were studying English Fundamental Course II and were willing to join the study.

Instrumentation

The study employed the following research instruments: the English proficiency test designed by the English Language Institute, University of Michigan, the report of attendance and a questionnaire of opinions about self-instructed learning in SALC. Before conducting the research, the reliability of the proficiency test was tested and its alpha was .8855. The subjects could go to SALC as often as they wanted and could choose what they wanted to learn. The only thing they had in mind was that they attended SALC with a purpose and they were totally responsible for their own learning.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by using SPSS (VERSION 10). The pre-test and post-test scores were compared by the statistical measure of the mean and the standard deviation. The difference of the two means was tested by the t-test. The Pearson product-moment correlation was employed to find a relationship between the frequency of attendance and the post-test scores.

Findings and Discussion of Findings

1. Language Competence Development through the Self-Access Learning Center

The language competence development was indicated by the t-test value of the two means of pre-test and post-test scores with the significance difference of 0.01. Based on the findings, SALC is likely to enable students to develop their English language competence. The findings confirm the results of the research study conducted by Yaowalak Karnphanit (1999) which state that the vast majority of students believe that self-access learning in SALC can help them develop their learning skill. The analysis revealed that the achievement reading test scores of students from every faculty increased at the significance level of 0.01.

The findings also supported what Wharton and Race (1999, pp. 87-88) suggest in order to encourage students to learn independently through SALC. The particular tips which were utilized in this study were “allowing learners to see for themselves how their studies are

progressing, and showing them what the expected targets and standards will be" and attempting to "clarify how the outcomes of independent learning will be assessed, and explain how the self-access materials contribute to the resourcing of the programme as a whole." The students were informed of their pre-test scores and the purpose of learning, and advised how to learn on their own and make the best use of SALC to develop their competence. After 14 weeks of their study, they were informed again of their post-test scores which could show how much progress they had made.

From the students' opinion towards self-access learning from SALC, it was discovered that the majority went to SALC for acquiring English knowledge at the mean of 3.74. Similarly, many students attended SALC for pleasure and recreational purposes at the mean of 3.73. This suggests that the learners tend to practice English outside the classroom in a relaxing way. In other words, they want to learn English with fun.

2. Relationship between the Frequency of Attendance and the Post-Test Scores

The Pearson correlation showed a relationship between the frequency of SALC attendance and the post-test scores with the significance difference of 0.01. The findings demonstrated that the students who attended SALC less than eight times did not increase their English competence, whereas the students who attended SALC about at least once a week could show a certain degree of development. Based on the findings, it seems that the frequency of attendance is likely to result in language development. That is, the more learners practice and are exposed to English, the better language competence they can gain. Stern (1983) points out that practice is one of the strategies for successful language learners. In addition to practicing, it is believed that extroverted learners who don't feel embarrassed to communicate in a foreign language and find many opportunities to practice it are likely to become the most successful learners (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). In brief, the key to learning a language is practicing and using it regularly until learners become fluent in it.

3. Factor Influencing Students' Language Development

A factor that helps students develop their competence is motivation. From the findings of students' opinions, the great majority desired to be good at English because it is a widely used international language at the mean of 4.65. This indicated they were highly motivated to become successful language learners. The results confirm the study on the relationship between motivation and competence conducted by Pramot Krongboonsri (1990) and that of Lightbown and Spada (1993, p. 40), who state that "if learners need to speak the second language in a wide range of social situations or to fulfill professional ambitions, they will therefore be motivated to acquire proficiency in it." Another significant aspect of motivation stated by Lightbown and Spada is that students are likely to lose motivation when they are not challenged. This viewpoint is in agreement with that of Rujiketgumjorn (2000). From her experience, she found out that "the students' motivation can be aroused, to a certain extent, provided that the activities and tasks offered are challenging, achievable, and presented in a well-prepared program implementation package." (Rujiketgumjorn, 2000, p. 78). In the present study, the way learners' progress was measured by the pre-test and post-test was regarded as challenging for the majority of students and it could be indicated by the frequency of attendance. They were willing to visit SALC once a week although they were assigned to self-access learning only eight times throughout the course.

Implications and Suggestions

According to the findings of the present study, self-access learning through SALC is another possible means to promote students' language competence. It is suggested that English teachers encourage learners to realize the value of self-access learning, to have a correct understanding of SALC's objectives as well as how SALC materials can contribute to their language practice and learning. To achieve the goal of language development, English teachers should take the following suggestions into consideration:

1. Clarify learning objectives and provide feedback to learners.
2. Provide learners with a training session concerning how to learn independently by using self-access materials and useful tips about self-access facilities.
3. Encourage learners to be exposed to English by visiting SALC regularly, at least once a week.
4. Encourage learners to acquire information in which they are interested from SALC materials and present it to the class or relate what they have learned from SALC to real life situations.
5. Introduce an incentive or assign a challenging task to promote students' motivation to learn independently.

As it is a helpful resource to facilitate independent learning, SALC should therefore be developed continuously and supported in every way such as financial support so that new and updated SALC materials can be produced to keep up with constantly changing innovations and technology. Additionally, SALC office hours should be flexible to match students' study schedule. To create a recreational environment to attract learners, SALC materials such as movies, magazines, games, the Internet, and CD ROMs should be added regularly. These materials not only show the real use of the English language, but they also enable learners to acquire the language naturally.

The above suggestions are some ideas for English teachers and administrators to work together in order to develop the Self-Access Learning Center to become a beneficial place to facilitate independent learning. It is hoped that other areas of SALC research studies will be investigated to make the best use of SALC and how autonomous learning can contribute to meet students' needs as well as individual differences.

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