

## Promoting EFL First-Year Students' Autonomy Through Consultation Services

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### Abstract

In English Language Teaching (ELT), consultation sessions are essential and complementary elements in enabling learners to improve their English proficiency as well as to regulate their self-directed skills. The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) identify the students' perceptions of their English skills and consulting needs, (2) explore whether consultation sessions can foster autonomy, and (3) investigate their opinions regarding the consultation sessions. Based on a convenience sampling method, data from 417 first-year students regarding language needs analysis and consulting needs were analyzed through descriptive statistics. From these results, one-on-one consultation sessions were initiated and implemented with a small number of students who volunteered to participate as advisees. Towards the end of the consultation sessions, student pre-and post- self-evaluation scores were analyzed. The findings suggest that consultation sessions yield positive results in improving students' self-directed learning skills which has the potential to enhance learner autonomy. The students also find the consultation sessions helpful and contribute to the success of their learning English.

## Introduction

One of the ultimate goals in higher education is to find ways to best support student development during their college years and ensure that students can cope with the transition and adjustment to their new academic and social life (LSU Online, 2020). According to Zewary (2020), academic advising is the process during which academic advisors meet up with students to discuss their education and career plans. As confirmed by Pargett (2011), “a faculty advisor plays an important role to students’ academic success by mentoring students throughout their academic career and by providing them with expert advice and resources to enhance student learning and development” (p. 2).

Mynard and Carson (2012) propose the term *Advising in Language Learning (ALL)* to refer to the language advising practice, while *language advising*, or *language counselling* are used by Reinders (2008b) to refer to the situation where teachers meet with students to give pedagogical advice about their language learning and help them develop their self-directed skills. With proper support and guidance from teachers, Holzweber (2019) contends that the self-directed approach can be extremely helpful in EFL classrooms, especially those with groups of mixed ability students. This is because students can be taught how to take initiative and assume responsibility for directing their learning progress at their own pace.

Although the purposes and aims of *academic advising vs. language advising/counselling* may be different, both stem from the need to support students throughout their academic years and prepare them for a successful career path. The focus of this study is primarily on language counselling; the term *consultation sessions* will be used more predominantly throughout the discussion.

Two decades ago, Wiriyaichitra (2002) stated that, “English language teaching in Thailand has not prepared Thais for the changing world” (p.1), a view fully supported by many scholars including Baker (2008), and Mackenzie (2002). Nearly twenty years have passed, and the urgency has intensified to improve Thai students’ proficiency so that they can communicate effectively, efficiently, and confidently in an international setting. According to the latest English First English Proficiency Index (EF-EPI, 2021), Thailand was ranked 100 out of 112 countries in 2021.

In order to improve the quality of English Language Teaching in Thailand, as well as to implement the principle of continuous lifelong learning as advocated in the National Scheme of Education 2017-2036 (EduBright Resources, 2021), strong attempts should be made to link self-access and classroom learning more closely so that learning and teaching do not end in the classroom but continue outside the classroom walls as well. To this end, learners should be taught to develop their learning skills and assume responsibility for their learning throughout their lifetime.

Over the past few decades, a number of self-access centers have been established in educational institutions in many parts of the world. Mynard (2019) views self-access centers as learning spaces where learner autonomy is promoted, while Victori (2007) highlights their roles in improving students' language proficiency as well as their self-directed learning (SDL) skills. However, there are concerns among scholars (e.g., Benson, 2011; Dickinson, 1987; Sheerin, 1991; Uzun, 2014) that there is no logical relationship between self-access facilities and autonomous learning. In other words, there is no guarantee that attending self-access centers will enable learners to be autonomous or know how to carry out learning on their own in the future. As Little (1991) argues, learners are "by definition inexpert in relation to their learning targets, so that they are likely to need guidance of various kinds" (p. 11). Therefore, learning support in the form of counselling is required to usher them onto their path of learning.

In order to cope with arising educational needs, language counseling has been a fast-developing area with the aim of improving the quality of language learning and at the same time enhance learner autonomy (Mynard, 2019; Reinders, 2008b; Rubin, 2007; Voller, 1998). As a result, many self-access language centers have incorporated learner support into their existing self-access learning system (Rubin, 2007). However, due to the global pandemic of the coronavirus disease, self-access centers and advising services have become digitalized in many educational institutes, e.g., Anas et al., 2020; Guban-Caisido, 2020; Uzun and Guven-Yacin (2021).

The self-access learning center (SALC) where this study took place is located at the Rangsit Campus of Thammasat University. It is relatively small, encompassing an area of 400 square meters able to accommodate 40-50 students at a time. Since its opening in 1997 and relocation, the SALC never provided a formally organized language counselling/consulting

service. This study arose from the need to establish and formalize consulting services to the existing self-access learning center and make it sustainable over the long period of time. The research questions to be addressed are:

RQ1: What are the students' perceptions of their English skills and consultation needs?

RQ2: To what extent do consultation sessions enhance the students' self-directed skills?

RQ3: What are the opinions of first-year students towards the consultation sessions?

These questions are supported by Mynard & Carson (2012) who claim that the benefits of language advising are to enable students to become more independent in their own learning. In addition, Reinders (2007b) points out a lack of research on the effectiveness of language counseling as identified by the participants/students.

## Review of Literature

This section outlines key concepts in the areas of autonomy and the role of self-assessment in language learning, counseling and related studies that form a major part of the study.

### Learner Autonomy

The origin of self-directed learning (SDL) can be traced back to adult education. According to Knowles (1975), SDL refers to "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help from others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying human and material resources, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p. 19). This suggests that learning does not necessarily take place in isolation, but teachers, tutors, and peers play a role as well (Loyens et al. 2008).

There have been a number of similar terms that are used to refer to the concepts of self-regulated learning, some of which include *autonomy*, *autonomous learning*, *learner autonomy* and *self-access in educational contexts* (Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Saks & Leijen, 2014). The

concept of autonomy has been widely discussed in the field of ELT over the previous decades. The term has been coined as *individualization* to *learner independence* and finally to *learner autonomy* (Smith, 2008). Henri Holec, who is one of the pioneering figures in autonomy, defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3). The five aspects of learning as proposed include the abilities for learners to determine their learning objectives; define the contents and progressions; select methods and techniques to be used; monitor the procedure of acquisition; and evaluate what has been acquired. According to Holec (1981), “the autonomous learner is himself capable of making all decisions concerning the learning with which he or she wishes to be involved” (p.3).

While Holec’s definition adds a methodological aspect to the definition of autonomy, Little (1991) includes a psychological aspect by arguing that “essentially, autonomy is a *capacity* – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning” (p. 19). According to Little (1991), learning autonomously includes the way the learner learns in class as well as the way he or she transfers it to outside settings.

Benson (2016) defines autonomy as the students’ capacity for taking control of their own learning. With regard to language learning, their major abilities include planning and choosing their own learning activities, monitoring their progress, and evaluating their outcomes (Benson, 2003). In practice, Benson (2011) elaborates that autonomy is multidimensional and can be viewed by learners differently depending on the settings and contexts in which language learning takes place. Nakata (2014) encourages scholars and practitioners to continue exploring definitions of learner autonomy as well as how autonomy can best be promoted among learners.

## Self-regulation and Learner Autonomy

As autonomous learners, students assume a number of responsibilities throughout their learning process including defining learning goals, carrying out their learning, conducting self-assessment and monitoring their learning process. It is likely that some learners may find maintaining engagement to be challenging which may gradually lead to

low motivation and negligence in pursuing autonomous learning. To facilitate learners' processes, Nakata (2014) notes that learners should be encouraged to become more self-regulated while exercising their autonomy.

Stemming from cognitive psychology, the concept of self-regulated learning (SRL) holds that learning is composed of cognitive, meta-cognitive and motivational components, all of which are crucial components for self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2000). According to Zimmerman and Schunk (2011), "self-regulated learning (or self-regulation) refers to the process whereby learners personally activate and sustain cognitions, affects, and behaviors that are systematically oriented toward the attainment of learning goals" (p. 1), whereas Schraw et al. (2006) simply defines SRL as the way in which "learning relates to our ability to understand and control our learning environments" (p. 1063).

SRL involves the three major phases: planning, monitoring and evaluation. Self-reflection is present throughout as it links advanced learners' metacognitive knowledge (what learners know) and self-regulation (what they do and how they prepare for learning). In relation to foreign language learning, the learners need to take control of their thoughts, feelings, and actions in order to achieve the learning goals set (Wang & Zhan, 2020).

In order to facilitate SRL in classrooms, Zumbrunn et al. (2011) sum up strategies to be taught to students. These include goal setting, planning, self-motivation, attention control, flexible use of learning strategies, self-monitoring, appropriate help-seeking, and self-evaluation. According to Oates (2019), after self-regulatory skills have been taught by teachers in classroom, learners can develop their own strategies to help them become more successful in their learning.

## **Language Counselling and the Consultation Framework**

In a self-access learning center, learning materials are usually organized in such a way that students can choose materials to learn on their own and receive feedback on their performance by checking the answer key. However, learning in a self-access learning center does not limit itself to this kind of learning only (Sheerin, 1991). Salvia (2000) uses the term "self-access system" to refer to "the implementation of a self-access approach in a language learning institution" (p. 97). In order to

ascertain that learning takes place inside a SALC, implementation has to be carried out effectively. Salvia (2000) proposes three major elements which include: (1) the pedagogues (teachers & counselors); (2) the self-access center staff (librarians & technicians); and (3) the institution (the manager/s). The coordination among these three elements greatly affects the success or failure of a self-access system.

Although the role and function of the counselors is not clear, it is widely accepted that their function is mainly to help learners to learn a language. Sturtridge (1992) outlines the counselors' tasks which include:

- helping learners to recognise their own responsibility for their own learning
- helping learners to know their individual language level on entry
- helping learners to decide upon their own individual objectives
- helping learners to recognise their own individual strategies and to make suggestions
- directing learners to particular materials or activities
- helping learners to become aware of what particular exercises are really teaching them
- making suggestions about more efficient ways of practice or monitoring (p. 11)

Thus, a SALC can be seen as one context in which autonomy can be developed. In a self-access system, teachers need to shift their focus and, apart from teaching linguistic knowledge, they need to promote autonomous learning through the use of self-access resources. Smith (2008), among many others, cautions that, whereas some learners may find it less problematic to adapt themselves to take more responsibility for their learning, others may not be able to go through the autonomous process themselves. This is when the role of learner counseling is called upon to assist the learners who may need help in their significant transitional period. To be a successful and qualified advisor, Stickler (2001) stresses that an advisor should be able to assist learners in using language learning strategies, provide advice about the materials in their own vicinity and possess good counseling skills so that the counseling sessions are learner-centered and beneficial for the advisees/students.

Voller (1998) defines consultation as "one way in which learners improve their language skills and at the same time become more

autonomous” (p. 3). Voller’s definition suggests that it is a consultant’s job to improve learners’ proficiency and enhance their autonomous skills as a result of attending consultation sessions. Voller (1998) lists a number of steps during the first and subsequent consultation sessions as follows:

- goal setting – that is, finding out what areas of English the learner wants
- focusing or narrowing down those goals – so that the learner can manage to reach his or her immediate goal by the end of the program of the study
- time planning – helping the learner to make a realistic assessment of how many hours of study he/she can do in a week
- study management – getting the learner to agree to keep some sort of record of his/her study and to evaluate that study
- giving advice – obviously on available resources, but also about related activities and study techniques or learning strategies if the learner requests them (p. 6)

While the nature of counseling sessions across the studies may vary among different contexts, similar elements and features can be found. In order to implement a consulting clinic, the researcher combined Voller’s framework with related studies carried out by various scholars in the field of language counseling to include Reinders (2007a), Reinders (2007b), and Reinders (2008b).

### **Needs Analysis in Language Teaching**

In ELT, learners have different needs and purposes for learning English. A good understanding of learner needs can contribute to successful course planning and learning. Several models of needs analysis as suggested by Kaewpet (2009) include: (1) a sociolinguistic model; (2) a systematic approach; (3) a learning-centered approach; (4) learner-centered approaches; and (5) a task-based approach. Each approach/model features different principles regarding how learner needs are investigated.

According to Sadeghi et al. (2014), autonomous learning can be considered as another characteristic of learner-centered programs in which learners must learn to develop independence, autonomy, and

responsibility for their learning. Therefore, learner-centered approaches have been used as the main framework to develop the needs analysis questionnaire for this study.

As one of the key figures in learner-centered approaches to needs analysis, Brindley (1984) suggests seven types of data to be included when conducting needs analysis.: (1) learners' life goals; (2) language goals; (3) objective needs; (4) language proficiency and language difficulties; (5) subject needs; (6) information about learners' attainment of objectives; and (7) information about developmental process in second language learning. Nunan (1999) suggests making needs analysis part of the learning process itself by asking learners to take part in helping to decide what they want to learn and how to learn it. The major sections in Nunan's sample of needs analysis questionnaire include general learner information, language contact survey, and methodological preferences.

Needs analysis can be carried out either inductively through case studies/observations or deductively through questionnaires/surveys. However, a questionnaire has become one of the most widely used methods of collecting information regarding learners' needs, lacks, wants, learning styles, and strategies (Ürün & Yarar, 2015). Within the Thai context, a number of needs analysis in language teaching have been conducted to investigate learner needs and problems in their English learning and usage (Piamsai, 2017; Prachanant, 2012; Tangkijmongkol & Wasanasomsithi, 2013).

## Methodology

### Research Design

The research nature of this study combines features of both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The questionnaire which comprised both types of data in its design was primarily used to collect data regarding the participants' needs for their English improvement and consultation needs. Semi-structured interviews followed. A qualitative method was applied during the one-on-one consultation sessions with individual students. Dialogues provided a valuable opportunity to engage with the participants' language problems and enhance their self-directed skills. Towards the end of the study, an evaluation questionnaire was used to investigate the effectiveness of the consultation sessions.

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## Participants

The participants in the study were a mixed group of first-year students enrolled in English Foundation Courses at the Rangsit Campus of Thammasat University, Thailand. The courses consist of integrated skills with the main goal of improving students' general English proficiency. Based on a convenience sampling, there were 417 students (145 males and 272 females) who took part in the first phase of the study completing the needs analysis in the first semester. They were between 17-20 years old. The majority of them (n=132, 31.65%) came from the Faculty of Science and Technology, followed by the Faculties of Liberal Arts (n=54, 12.95%) and Political Science (n=45, 10.79%). A smaller number of students came from the Faculties of Law (n=38, 9.11%), Allied Health Science (n=33, 7.91%), and Commerce and Accountancy (n=25, 6.00%). After a needs analysis was completed, there were seven students (5 males and 2 females) who voluntarily joined the consulting sessions as advisees in the second semester.

## Research Instruments

The first tool used in the study was the needs analysis questionnaire which was based on learner-centered approaches proposed by Brindley (1984) and Nunan (1999). As these approaches mainly serve the purpose of curriculum development, some adaptations were made to reflect more closely to the nature of this study. The questionnaire was divided into 6 parts: learner's general information, learner's level of language proficiency, current needs in using English, English skills and tasks likely to be performed in the future, preferences for language consultation sessions, and open-ended questions.

The second instrument was the self-evaluation form which was based on what Holec (1981) believes are the five qualities a self-directed learner possesses. The form allows the researcher to understand how differently the participants in the main study managed their learning before and after the consultation sessions. The construct of the form with examples is as follows:

- A. Determining the objectives, e.g., I think about why I am learning English.

- B. Defining the contents and progressions, e.g., I keep checking if I am making progress in my learning.
- C. Selecting methods and techniques to be used, e.g., I use language learning strategies to help me learn better.
- D. Monitoring the procedures of acquisition, e.g., I monitor my progress in learning.
- E. Evaluating what has been acquired, e.g., I use the test results to guide me about the level of my success.

Towards the end of the consultation sessions, an evaluation questionnaire was distributed to see how well the sessions were implemented, what impacts they had on the students, and what improvements can be made for future consultation sessions.

## Research Procedure

The research procedures and data collection of this study took place in the SALC before the outbreak of COVID-19, which made it possible to distribute a needs analysis questionnaire in class and conduct face-to-face consultation. The study was divided into two phases.

The first phase took place in the first semester in which a needs analysis questionnaire was distributed to the sampling group enrolled in the English Foundation Courses. The data was based on 417 students were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods through frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. As for the semi-structured interviews, all recordings were transcribed and analyzed for content. After data analysis, some general insights were drawn and compiled.

The second phase of the study involved meeting up with the students to conduct consultation sessions. As stated earlier, there were 7 students (5 males and 2 females) who agreed to take part in the study as advisees throughout the five consultation sessions. It should be noted that the length between each session was at least two weeks to ensure the students had sufficient time to carry out their own learning. Details of each session are as follows:

### Session 1:

- Complete self-evaluation form.
- Elicit from the student the main reasons for their visit and determine the student's problematic areas.

- Discuss and establish language learning objectives.
- Recommend appropriate materials and activities and schedule a follow-up appointment.

**Session 2:**

- Discuss progress made and problems experienced.
- Suggest further resources and schedule a follow-up appointment.

**Session 3:**

- Discuss progress made and problems experienced.
- Introduce students to the concept of learning styles.
- Discuss further resources to match with their learning styles and schedule a follow-up appointment.

**Session 4:**

- Discuss progress made and problems experienced.
- Introduce students to the concept of language learning strategies.
- Discuss further resources to match with language learning strategies and schedule a follow-up appointment.

**Session 5:**

- Discuss progress made and problems experienced.
- Reflect and evaluate on learning experience.
- Discuss and revise learning objectives (if required).
- Complete self-evaluation form and consultation evaluation questionnaire.

After the consultation sessions were complete, the two sets of mean scores of the self-evaluation forms were analyzed and compared, while the data based on the consultation evaluation questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results from open-ended questions were grouped and described.

## Results

### RQ1: What Are the Students' Perceptions of Their English Skills and Consultation Needs?

### *Students' Perceptions of Their English Skills*

The majority of the students had been studying English for 13-16 years (n=241, 57.79 %), followed by those who had been studying for 9-12 years (n=148, 35.49 %). There was a smaller number of students (n=24, 5.76 %) who had been studying English for 5-8 years. The students were asked to evaluate the level of their English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. There were five levels in the rating scale: very good, good, average, poor and very poor.

**Table 1**

#### *Students' Evaluation of Their English Skills*

English skill	Very good		Good		Average		Poor		Very Poor	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Reading	7	1.68	123	29.50	249	59.71	33	7.91	5	1.20
Writing	1	0.24	22	5.28	249	59.71	124	29.74	21	5.04
Speaking	4	0.96	36	8.63	225	53.96	132	31.65	20	4.80
Listening	1	0.24	56	13.43	232	55.64	113	27.10	15	3.60
Vocabulary	2	0.48	48	11.51	226	54.20	119	28.54	22	5.28
Pronunciation	5	1.20	52	12.47	221	53.00	129	30.94	10	2.40
Grammar	3	0.72	37	8.87	203	48.68	135	32.37	39	9.35
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>5.52</b>	<b>374</b>	<b>89.69</b>	<b>1605</b>	<b>384.9</b>	<b>785</b>	<b>188.25</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>31.67</b>

As shown by the number of students and percentages, data from Table 1 suggest that very few students perceived themselves as *very good* in their English skills, while the majority rated themselves moderately in most language skills as well as other areas of English learning including vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. More than one-fourth of the students rated themselves as *poor* in the language skills of writing (n=124, 29.74%), speaking (n=132, 31.65%) and listening (n=113, 27.10%) as well as vocabulary (n=119, 28.54%), pronunciation (n=129, 30.94%), and grammar (n=135, 32.37%). It should be noted that the only exception was the reading skill, in which a number of the students rated themselves as *very good* (n=7 students, 1.68%) and *good* (n=123 students, 29.50%).

Table 2 records the scores in which the students were asked to rank which skills they wanted to improve most in English, from most (=1),

2, 3, ... to least (=7). The sums of each English skill were added up and ranked. The skills the students wanted to improve most are shown by the low scores, while the skills they wanted to improve the least can be seen by the higher scores.

**Table 2**

*Ranked Scores of the English Skills to be Improved*

English skill	Rank Order	Ranked Scores in points
Speaking	1	1,001
Listening	2	1,358
Writing	3	1,611
Grammar	4	1,764
Vocabulary	5	1,762
Pronunciation	6	1,848
Reading	7	1,965

Table 2 reveals the English skills which the students felt they wanted to improve most, in ranked order. The sums of the ranked scores for each component suggest that the English skills the students wanted to improve from most to least were speaking (1,001 points), listening (1,358 points), writing (1,611 points), grammar (1,764 points), vocabulary (1,762 points), pronunciation (1,848 points) and reading (1,965 points). The next part of the questionnaire asked the students to discuss their weaknesses. The data are presented in quotes as follows:

**Speaking**

- "I lack confidence to speak English."
- "I am shy to communicate in English."
- "When speaking, I don't know how to organize my thoughts in English."
- "I understand what has been said, but I don't know how to reply."
- "I have difficulties understanding different accents."

**Listening**

- "I have problems understanding English."
- "I can't listen for gist."
- "I don't understand fast speech in English."

**Writing**

- "I have a lot of problems in writing."
- "I cannot write well because my grammar is not so good."

**Grammar**

- “My knowledge of grammar is limited.”
- “I can’t apply the grammatical rules I know correctly.”
- “I can’t make use of grammatical knowledge in daily life.”
- “I’m confused with verb tenses in English.”

**Vocabulary**

- “I don’t know new words I come across in tests.”
- “I have difficulties understanding difficult vocabulary.”
- “I can’t remember the meaning of new words.”
- “I have limited vocabulary.”

***Students’ Needs for Language Consultation Sessions***

The students were asked to express their level of interest in joining consultation sessions, ranging from “definitely yes”, “probably yes”, “not sure”, “probably not” to “definitely no”. It was found that nearly half of the students (n=183, 43.88%) chose “probably yes”, while 116 students (27.82%) showed strong interest as “definitely yes” in joining the language consultation sessions. However, nearly one-third of the students (n=103, 24.70%) were not sure if they would join the sessions, and only a couple of students (n=2, 0.48%) showed no interest at all in joining the sessions.

The next question investigated their preference regarding the nationality of the counselor. The choices ranged from “a native speaker of English”, “Thai”, or “both are acceptable”. The data reveal that the majority of the students do not mind having either a native speaker of English or a Thai as a counselor (n=228, 54.68%). However, between the choices of a native speaker of English or a Thai, the preference for a Thai counselor is higher (n=134, 32.13%) compared to that of a native speaker (n=55, 13.19%).

Regarding the type of consulting session, the majority of the students would like to work with the counselor individually (n=224, 53.72%), while a smaller number of students would prefer to work in a small group (n=134, 32.13%). Some students would prefer to work in pairs (n=55, 13.19%) with a few students (n=4, 0.96%) leaving it to the counselor to decide, depending on the nature of the language problems they have. When asked what their purposes in attending the consultation sessions would be, self-improvement in language skills, being able to communicate with a native speaker, and further practice in English skills were stated to be their top priorities, respectively.

In the last part of the questionnaire, the students were asked to express their opinions about how a consulting clinic could be best organized to meet their needs as much as possible. Their answers follow, grouped under topics and supported with student excerpts.

#### **Description of a Consultation Session**

- “Thai or foreigner staff can work together to provide the consultation service in a consulting clinic. They should introduce books that give good advice on how to learn English. The organization should be simple and not too complicated.”
- “There should be an international staff to listen to students’ problems and are eager to provide them help.”
- “Ultimate care should be provided to the students. The consultation sessions should run on a continuous basis.”
- “The consultation sessions should be sub-divided into different language skills, such as, speaking, writing, etc. Those who’re interested can then choose which group they’d like to join.”
- “The focus should begin by developing an individual from the basic to a more advance level.”

#### **Characteristics of a Counselor**

- “The counselor should be an easy-going person, understands the students’ feelings and doesn’t put too much pressure on them.”
- “The counselor should answer all the questions as honestly as possible and gives opportunities to those students who are not very competent in English.”
- “The counselor should be able to answer all questions very clearly.”
- “The counselor should meet up with an individual student to find out what his/her problems are in the first session. The following sessions should be on how to fix those problems.”
- “The students should be able to meet with the counselor at all times.”

### **RQ2: To What Extent Do Consultation Sessions Enhance the Students’ Self-directed Skills?**

Table 3 presents a comparison of self-directed learning scores in the forms of mean scores, standard deviation (SD) and mean difference. Data were based on the 7 students who took part in the consultation sessions. Although each area of SDL consists of three statements, only the average is presented.

**Table 3***Compared Self-directed Learning Scores*

Areas of Self-Directed Learning	Pre		Post		Mean Difference
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	
<b>(A) Determining the objectives</b>	3.29	1.12	4.19	0.59	+0.90
1. I think about why I am learning English.					
2. I plan my learning goals in the order of importance.					
3. I learn how to set manageable language learning goals.					
<b>(B) Defining the contents and progressions</b>	2.90	0.73	4.24	0.22	+1.34
4. I think about what I need to do to meet my learning goals.					
5. I keep checking if I am making progress in my learning.					
6. I choose learning materials that work for me.					
<b>(C) Selecting methods and techniques to be used</b>	2.67	0.66	4.33	0.08	+1.66
7. I make decision about how to improve my English outside class.					
8. I use language learning strategies to help me learn better.					
9. I incorporate learning styles into my learning.					
<b>(D) Monitoring the procedures of acquisition</b>	3.14	0.80	4.29	0.62	+1.15
10. I monitor my progress in learning.					
11. I learn from my own mistakes.					
12. I know what kind(s) of learning problems I have.					
<b>(E) Evaluating what has been acquired</b>	2.81	0.46	4.14	0.25	+1.33
13. I evaluate my own progress.					
14. I know what my strengths and weaknesses are.					
15. I use the test results to guide me about the level of my success.					
<b>Total of increased mean score</b>	<b>2.96</b>	<b>0.70</b>	<b>4.24</b>	<b>0.36</b>	<b>+1.28</b>

All statements received a higher mean score in the post-evaluation. The highest increased mean score of self-directed processes in ranking

were under the areas of C. Selecting methods and techniques to be used (+1.66), followed by B. Defining the contents and progressions (+1.34), E. Evaluating what has been acquired (+1.33), D. Monitoring the procedures of acquisition (+1.15), and lastly A. Determining the objectives (+0.90).

At the beginning of the consultation sessions, the mean score of the students' self-evaluation was found to be as low as 2.96. However, their mean score shows a significant improvement to 4.24 after having five one-on-one consultation sessions with the counselor. The difference between the two sets of scores with an increase of 1.28 suggests a high level of the students' improvement of self-directed skills.

### RQ3: What Are the Opinions the First-year Students Towards the Consultation Sessions?

The three main parts of the consultation evaluation questionnaire can be summarized as follows. First, Table 4 presents students' opinions in response to the benefits of the consultation sessions towards the development of their English. Data are presented through mean and standard deviation. The five different levels of agreement were (5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-somewhat agree, 2-disagree, and 1-strongly disagree).

**Table 4**

#### *Students' Opinions Towards Consultation Sessions*

Statement	Mean	SD
The consulting sessions help me to:		
1. know how to learn English by myself	4.57	0.53
2. improve my English skills	4.00	0.58
3. become a better English user	3.86	0.69
4. facilitate my learning process	4.14	0.69
5. increase my confidence	3.86	0.90
<b>Average mean score</b>	<b>4.09</b>	<b>0.30</b>

What can be concluded from Table 4 is that the students (n=7) found the consultation sessions helpful in many ways, resulting in an average mean score of 4.09 with a standard deviation of 0.30. No statements received a "disagree" or "strongly disagree" rating. Most students thought that the consultation sessions helped them learn English by themselves (item 1, mean = 4.57, SD = 0.53), followed by facilitate their

learning process (item 4, mean = 4.14, SD = 0.69), and improve their English skills (item 2, mean = 4.00, SD = 0.58). The students thought they had become better English users (item 3) and increased their confidence (item 5) with a mean score of 3.86 and standard deviations of 0.69 and 0.90, respectively.

Next, Table 5 presents students' opinions regarding different aspects of the consultation sessions, some of which included the content, the materials and the hand-outs provided, and the consultant. Data are presented through mean and standard deviation for the five different levels of satisfaction (5-excellent, 4-good, 3-satisfactory, 2-fair and 1-poor).

**Table 5**

*Students' Satisfaction Towards Consultation Sessions*

<i>Your satisfaction towards:</i>	Mean	SD
1. Consultation sessions meet my expectations.	4.57	0.53
2. Consultation content is appropriate.	4.57	0.53
3. I'm satisfied with the consultant.	5.00	0.00
4. The hand-outs are useful.	4.57	0.53
5. The location of the consulting clinic is convenient.	4.71	0.49
6. The consulting time is suitable.	4.86	0.38
7. My overall satisfaction towards the consultation sessions is	4.86	0.38
<b>Average mean score</b>	<b>4.73</b>	<b>0.17</b>

Table 5 shows that the students were satisfied with the consultation sessions with a narrow mean score range of 4.57-5.00. The overall satisfaction level of the consultation sessions was 4.73 with a standard deviation of 0.17. All satisfaction statements were rated at the two highest levels of "excellent" or "good".

All students (n=7) were satisfied with the consultant (Item 3) resulting in the highest score of 5.00. The mean score for consulting time (Item 6) and overall satisfaction towards the consultation sessions (Item 7) were both 4.86, SD = 0.38. The students also found the location of the consulting clinic convenient (item 5, mean = 4.71, SD = 0.49). The three statements with the same mean scores of 4.57 and standard deviation of 0.53 are items 1 "consultation sessions meet my expectations", 2 "consultation content is appropriate", and 4 "the hand-outs are useful".

When asked if the students would recommend attending consulting sessions to their friends, all of them answered “yes”. Some of their given reasons were: “I think there are many students out there who need to learn about the concept of self-study.” “It is the kind of training that you have to experience and try it out yourselves.” “It’s useful for language learning in the future.” “The consulting sessions are really useful. I’d love to have my friends attend them just like me.” “What has been suggested throughout the consulting sessions is very practical.”

In the final part of the questionnaire, the students were asked to express their opinions regarding the consulting clinic and to offer any suggestions. Some of their answers reflected the benefits of attending the sessions: e.g. “I’ve gained a lot of benefits and knowledge from attending the consulting clinic.” “The consulting advice is extremely useful for students taking a course in English. It helps to know our weak areas and enhance our strong ones.” In addition, some students found that language learning strategies and learning styles were helpful tools. One student commented, “The counselor guided us through the concepts of language learning strategies and learning styles so that we know which styles suit us better. They make English learning more fun and help to improve our language skills greatly. Without knowing about these concepts, we won’t learn as effectively and tend to forget what we learn more quickly.”

## Discussion

The results based on the needs analysis revealed that more than half of the students rated their English skills as *average* with more than one-fourth rating themselves as *poor* and *very poor* in major language skills, suggesting that they felt inadequate and needed help with their English. The students’ feedback about their weakness in English also help to support the problems they face with their English learning more concretely. The findings are consistent with Choi (2012) who reported that EFL/ESL students tend to feel they are incompetent with their use of English, reflecting a lack of confidence in their English skills.

Although the concept of consultations at a SALC may be new to most students, the open-ended sections of the questionnaire indicated that the students were most concerned about the nature of a consultation and the characteristics of a counselor. Being relaxed and easy-going are some of the major characteristics demanded of a counselor. Some

students preferred having consultation sessions set up in a manner similar to language workshops, in which they can choose to join according to their needs. This highlights the counselor's dual role in assisting learners psychologically and methodologically, as proposed by Karlsson et al. (2007), Mozzon-McPherson (2007) and Victori (2007).

The gain of the mean scores in the post-self-evaluation confirms that a consulting clinic makes a difference in enabling the students to rely more on themselves in seeking knowledge, as supported by Reinders (2008a). They also agreed that the consultation sessions helped them to learn English by themselves, facilitated their learning process, improved their English skills, increased their confidence, and prepared them to become better English users.

Most importantly, the higher increased self-directed mean scores help verify the effectiveness of the framework and the quality of consultation sessions. The framework, which is based on the five qualities of self-directed learners as adopted from Holec (1981), has been proven to encourage students to greatly develop their self-regulated skills and take responsibility for their own learning as autonomous learners. In addition, with reference to the discussion above regarding the counselor's roles, it can be stated that the consultation services have been successfully implemented to develop the students' autonomous learning abilities.

The findings also revealed that the students were in favor of consultation sessions in many ways, as attested by the average high mean scores. Many aspects of the consultation, including the counselor, location, and timing, contributed to the overall satisfaction of the consultation sessions. As expressed by one student, "I think attending the consultation sessions is a good way to learn English on your own. The advice given can be put into real practice and adapted for future use". This allows us to reflect on the distinctive aspects of consulting and how it differs from language teaching. As argued by Reinders (2008a), language consultation at the tertiary level should focus on facilitating the language learning process and not on tutoring.

Another student observed, "The advice helps to pave ways so that I can continue learning English in the future." This is in line with Smith (2008) in advising that, apart from possessing good counseling skills, a successful and qualified counsellor should assist learners to use learning strategies while giving advice about which materials the students can utilize by themselves in their own time.

## Conclusion

This study helps to confirm that autonomy places a number of responsibilities on the part of the learner and that not all learners are capable of becoming autonomous without support or guidance. The students' improved self-directed scores reflect the benefits of a consulting clinic in enabling them to rely more on themselves in seeking knowledge. The advice proffered by counsellors was found to be more direct, individualized, and relevant to the students' proficiency and language development needs, whereas teachers who deliver the language content in a typical English language classroom setting may place little or no emphasis on facilitating the students' learning process.

In order to achieve the ultimate goal of higher education in enabling students to become lifelong learners, the teacher has to shift their role from a content provider to offer more support in helping the learners develop their self-regulated skills through autonomy-supportive teaching. It is only through autonomous learning that learners are empowered to play an active role in the learning process so that learning can be carried on throughout a lifetime.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are made for future research. First, the research data was obtained from undergraduate students who were enrolled in Foundation English Courses. A similar study with students in an ESP context should also be carried out so that it might yield different kinds of language and consulting needs. Moreover, a similar study can take place in other public as well as private universities to increase the degree of generalization. Next, the consultation sessions in this study were based on a certain agreement with the students for research purposes. A more natural consulting clinic can be set up to reflect the students' real consulting behaviors. Lastly, a large-scale study involving more consultants and students can be conducted in which dialogues are recorded to improve advising practices.

Finally, the Coronavirus pandemic may cause limitations in implementing in-person consultation sessions due to the shift from on-site

to an online learning mode. However, the need to support students both in schools and universities, especially during this transitional period, can be intensified, and teachers need to have new perspectives on handling the current situation. A movement to online self-access learning, providing online learning materials and resources, using web-based technologies, as well as consulting services via online synchronous language support sessions, are among several options that educational institutes must consider in providing academic support. All of these activities offer an abundance of research opportunities on which to embark in the future.

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