

Can Thai Students Become Self-directed Learners?

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Abstract

Recently in Thailand, there have been attempts to integrate self-directed learning into existing English programmes in a large number of institutions including King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, where the importance of learner-centredness and learner self-assessment is stressed. However, questions about the possibility and effectiveness of the programmes and the students' ability to become self-directed learners have arisen. This paper will explore the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of learning through self-access to find out whether this learning mode could help improve their English proficiency.

What is self-directed learning?

There are few references to the term self-directed learning in language learning. It tends to be used differently by different teachers. It is claimed that it has some overlap between the terms self-directed learning and autonomy. Boud and Sidery (cited in Dickinson, 1978) described the two terms as "two names for the same phenomenon" as follows:

"We understand self-directed to imply maximum autonomy for the individual concomitant with concern for the autonomy of others, and the use of each other's resources in sensitive and effective ways."

"Underlying this definition of self-directed learning is an assumption of what it means to be an educated person. The assumption is that an educated person is one who can identify his own needs, set his own goals, develop strategies for meeting his needs and be able to monitor his own action in this process. He can co-operate with others to obtain mutual support and assistance so that each may gain fulfillment."

However, Dickinson (1978) argued that autonomy represents the upper limit of self-directed learning measured on a notional scale from total direction to full freedom. Consequently, autonomy is one set of possibilities within the larger category of self-directed learning. In other words, where the learners' choices can be made freely, we have fully self-directed learning. Where only some are freely made, we

have some degree of self-directed learning.

In short, self-directed learning can be described as an approach in which learners are encouraged to choose what they want to learn or do that suits their learning styles. They can set their own goals of learning and choose means to achieve those goals. Moreover, they can monitor and assess their own work. As a consequence, self-directed learning stresses the importance of individual differences, learner training and learner self-assessment.

Why self-access language learning?

Due to the rapid developments of technology, such as television, tape recorders, the video recorders, fax, as well as media like newspapers, magazines and the Internet, the idea of self-directed learning has become a possible alternative to the traditional teacher-led approach. However, rich varieties of tools and techniques yield nothing for the self-directed learning if the learners do not know how to use them to improve their English. A grammar drill on the internet is just like that in the textbook if the learners have little choice of what they like to do or insufficient training on how to work independently without teacher support.

A number of recent studies indicate the effectiveness of moving towards student decision making rather than teacher decision making (Cotterall, 1995; Dickinson, 1995; Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Victori & Lockhart, 1995). Additionally, some research suggests that students have different learning strategies and learn best when they learn any learning task under their own direction (Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Wenden, 1991).

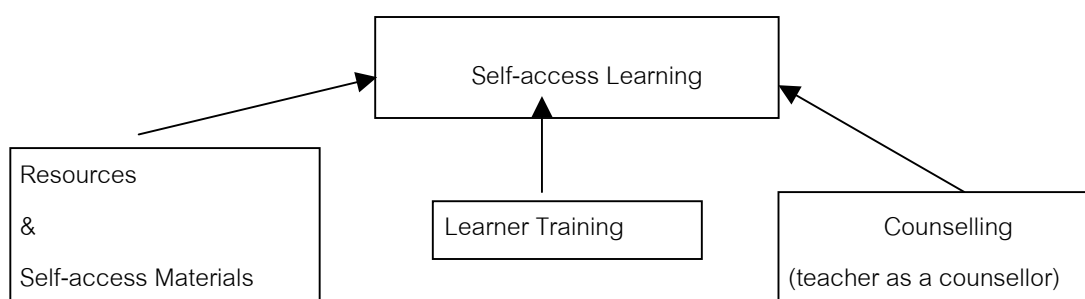
It is interesting to note that some form of self-directed learning with institutional support in the shape of counselling and resource centres has been found very useful in numerous institutions for language learning. For example, the Language Centre of University of Cambridge offers self-directed learning for more than 40 different languages (Gremmo and Riley, 1995).

However, there is no universal model for setting up a self-directed scheme. It can be adapted to various institution requirements and expectations, the particular characteristics of the learners and staff, and to meet different local needs. In this paper, the term self-access scheme is used to represent an example of how to develop a self-directed scheme under the local constraints.

A proposed self-access learning scheme

In the new task-based curriculum at KMUTT, self-directed learning is integrated into every English foundation course through the use of the course adjuncts which are spread across the whole term with supportive classroom lessons and consultations given at regular intervals (Watson Todd, 2001). A self-access project and a portfolio project are the first two adjuncts that students who study LNG 101 and LNG 102 have to work on as a part of the course requirements. The major focus of these two adjuncts is diagnosing students' weak points in grammatical performance from looking over the students' portfolios on which they work from a topic they choose. Furthermore, in face-to-face consultations, students have to report the results of their self-access work to the teacher and discuss their problems, progress and plans for further practice (Intrathat, 2001). However, some drawbacks of these projects have been found, such as students' unreal freedom in choosing tasks and a lack of teacher preparation for counselling support. Also, it is not the case that not every student needs to improve his grammar. Some may want to practice speaking, writing or other language skills. The existing self-access project does not seem to provide them the 'real' freedom to choose any task they like. Moreover, students do not know how to choose the 'right' task for their level; consequently, they choose any task at hand no matter what it is. They do not realize what or how they can learn from that task. Besides, the teacher may not know how to give effective consultations to help support students' learning. The only thing they know is that they should correct students' grammatical mistakes. Therefore, the proposed self-access scheme described in this study has been designed in the hope that it would help improve students' motivation and performance in English as it allows more freedom for students to choose their tasks and some training on how to choose the right task by setting their own learning objectives.

The components of a proposed self-access learning programme are as follows:



This self-access learning scheme provides a variety of methodological and linguistic resources e.g. self-access materials in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC), on-line lessons and authentic

materials. The scheme also provides learner training, the goal of which is to help all learners, especially those who are less effective, to become more active and more independent in their learning. To achieve this goal, both methodological and psychological preparation must be given to students. Furthermore, counselling is needed to help students to develop their learning competence in language learning. In this scheme, the teachers take on the role of counsellor in addition to their teaching responsibilities.

Procedures for self-access learning

Step 1: Students identify their problems and needs in English language learning in their first consultation (in groups) with the help of the teacher.

Step 2: Students set their own objectives of learning and choose the task compatible with their learning styles in consultation with the teacher.

Step 3: Students work individually on the task chosen in SALC or other resources over the next 3 weeks.

Step 4: Students attend the second consultation session (one-to-one) and get feedback on their work from the teacher.

Step 5: Students access their work and reflect on their feelings towards it in a Task Record Form and keep this in their portfolio.

Step 6: Students choose their second task and follow the same procedure again.

Step 7: Students attend the third consultation session and discuss with the counsellor individually about what they feel towards the self-access scheme.

Methodology

To obtain information on students' perceptions of learning through self-access, 24 students were asked to complete an Attitude Questionnaire for Self-Directed Learning and student interviews at the end of the programme. The questionnaire was adapted from Barnett 's Attitudes questionnaire for self-access (Wenden, 1991) and includes 20 items. Items 1-15 elicited the characteristics of the subjects, while items 15-20 dealt with the self-directed programme. The rating scale used was a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 representing *strongly agree* and 1 *strongly disagree*. The data obtained from the scale were interpreted according to the following criteria:

1.00- 1.80 = very low

1.81 - 2.60 = low

2.61 - 3.40 = average

3.41 - 4.20 = high

4.21 - 5.00 = very high

Results

The following data include results obtained from student questionnaires as well as student interviews.

No.	Students' Perceptions towards Self-directed Learning	M	SD	Interpretation
1	I can learn English by myself without teacher supervision.	3.58	0.93	high
2	I can learn English by working alone at my own pace.	3.46	0.93	high
3	I can choose my own way of learning English and learning situations suitable to it.	3.88	0.74	high
4	A big problem in most classes is that students have different levels.	4.00	0.83	high
5	If I had the right materials, I would prefer to spend some time studying alone.	4.50	0.59	very high
6	Students don't have enough choice about what and how they study	2.92	1.18	average
7	Besides language class, I plan activities that give me a chance to use and learn English.	4.13	0.74	high
8	Cassettes, videos and computers are good resources for individual students to learn English.	4.58	0.58	very high
9	I can set my own objectives of learning.	4.25	0.74	very high
10	I can figure out my special problems and do something about my special problems.	3.79	0.59	high
11	I can develop my own techniques to practice listening, speaking, reading and writing.	3.96	0.69	high
12	I can develop my own techniques to improve my pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.	3.92	0.65	high
13	If I make a mistake, I don't hesitate to ask people to correct me.	4.29	0.69	very high

14	I can learn English from my own mistakes.	4.17	0.64	high
15	I think I am a competent student with good study habits.	3.42	1.02	average

Table 1: Students' perceptions towards self-directed learning

(Adapted from Barnett 's Attitudes questionnaire for self-access in Wenden, 1991)

The findings indicate that the majority of students agreed with a large number of the items on the questionnaire (see Table 1 and Table 2). Only items 6 and 14 in Table 1 elicited neutrally responses. These finding are very surprising as they could help change the existing views towards Thai students as passive learners who need to be taught in the traditional classrooms to students with the potential to become self-directed learners.

No.	Students' Attitudes towards the Self-access Scheme.	M	SD	Interpretation
1	My ability in reading English has improved after taking this programme.	4.25	0.68	very high
2	My ability in listening English has improved after taking this programme.	4.00	0.72	high
3	My ability in speaking English has improved after taking this programme.	3.88	0.54	high
4	My ability in writing English has improved after taking this programme.	3.79	0.83	high
5	My overall ability in English has improved after taking this programme.	4.04	0.46	high

Table 2: Students' attitudes towards the self-access scheme

Students' improvement in English proficiency is one of the major factors influencing students' perceptions towards the self-access programme (Klassen et al., 1998). It can be seen from the data mentioned above that the majority of the students perceived that their overall ability in English had improved after taking this self-access programme.

A Pearson correlation was conducted to investigate if there is the correlation between students' overall ability in English (question 5, Table 2) and their perceptions towards self-directed learning (questions 1-15, Table 1). These are shown in Table 3 below.

No.	Students' Perceptions towards Self-directed Learning	<i>r</i>
1	I can learn English by myself without teacher supervision.	-.019
2	I can learn English by working alone at my own pace.	-.042
3	I can choose my own way of learning English and learning situations suitable to it.	.611**
4	A big problem in most classes is that students have different levels.	.255
5	If I had the right materials, I would prefer to spend some time studying alone.	.181
6	Students don't have enough choice about what and how they study	.015
7	Besides language class, I plan activities that give me a chance to use and learn English.	.395
8	Cassettes, videos and computers are good resources for individual students to learn English.	.152
9	I can set my own objectives of learning.	.361
10	I can figure out my special problems and do something about my special problems.	.075
11	I can develop my own techniques to practice listening, speaking, reading and writing.	.321
12	I can develop my own techniques to improve my pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.	.027
13	If I make a mistake, I don't hesitate to ask people to correct me.	.219
14	I can learn English from my own mistakes.	.279
15	I think I am a competent student with good study habits.	.436*

Table 3: Correlation between students' overall ability in English and their perceptions towards self-directed learning

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed).

Results (see Table 3) show that at the 0.01 significant level, students preferred to choose their own ways of learning English and learning situations suitable to them ($r = 0.611$). Additionally, the r -value obtained from students' beliefs in their competence in English and good study habits ($r = 0.436$) can be viewed as significant at the 0.05 significance level. While the second of these correlations may reflect the fact that student self-esteem is a key factor in self-assessment of ability and progress (Tarone and Yule, 1989), the more significant correlation between choosing own ways of learning and perceived improvement is less easy to explain. It may be that freedom of choice for students is a crucial influence on students' perceptions of success in autonomous learning.

It may be seen from the questionnaire results that students' perceptions of their improvement in English proficiency were influenced by their positive attitudes towards self-directed learning and self-access scheme. They believed in their own ability in choosing their ways of learning and suitable learning situations.

However, the average score of 2.92 in Question 6 (Table 3) implied that a considerable number of students seemed to hesitate about their inability to choose the tasks appropriate to their levels. They gave further clarification in the interview that they were quite satisfied at being able to choose the tasks by themselves.

“ I prefer to choose my own tasks and materials as I think I would have deeper understanding when working on them.”

Yet, they still needed some more training and guidance on how to choose the "right" materials to practice on their own.

In addition, they admitted that their confidence in their competence in learning English was increased after taking this self-access programme. Some of the students' interesting comments in student interviews expressed both their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in language learning. For example,

“I realize that my English proficiency especially reading and listening have improved a lot after taking this self-access programme. However, I still need more practice.”

“I am not afraid to study on my own because I am motivated and I would like to be able to

“speak English like a farang (a native speaker).”

“I think English is very important for my future career. I will get a good job if I have a good command of English.”

With respect to good study habits of a good language learner, there are, however, a few students who admitted in the student interviews that they sometimes could not control themselves to practice English regularly. They said they needed this kind of self-study mode to be integrated into the existing ELT courses. That would help them to control themselves. It was very surprising that even though students enjoyed their freedom of choice, they still favoured some guidance or feedback from the teachers.

The data from the student interviews expressed students' highly positive feelings towards self-access learning as they realized the importance of self-directed learning as a means to become autonomous or self-directed learners. The majority of the students agreed that they would pursue independent learning in the future; however, some added the most popular escape clause, “If time permits...” This has led to me to doubt the possibility of Thai students becoming self-directed learners.

Conclusion

Even though the findings from the questionnaires, the interviews as well as the face-to-face consultations with the teacher indicate students' positive perceptions towards the effectiveness of learning through the self-access learning scheme, we cannot claim that Thai students are capable of being effective self-directed learners. It seems to be very difficult for Thai students, who get used to following instructions rather than taking the initiative and have little chance to experience this kind of self-study programme, to adjust themselves to this relatively new teaching methodology. However, the results of this study are promising and suggest that it is valuable to continue encouraging students to adopt a more active and independent role in learning. It is recommended that what we do need are not only more learner training packages for the students but also formal training for teachers in facilitating independent learning.

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