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Reflections on Transitioning Student Self-Access Learning

From a Face-to-Face Environment to an Online Platform:

A Case Study of Suratthani Rajabhat University

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บทความวิชาการนี้แสดงให้เห็นพัฒนาการของการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษด้วยตนเองของนักศึกษาหลักสูตรศิลปศาสตรบัณฑิต สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษ คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏสุราษฎร์ธานีตลอดระยะเวลา 12 ปี

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โดยเริ่มตั้งแต่การใช้ศูนย์การศึกษาเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองและหลักสูตรการศึกษาที่ศูนย์กำหนด ไปจนถึงการศึกษาในรูปแบบออนไลน์ที่เกิดขึ้นอย่างกะทันหันในช่วงการแพร่ระบาดของโรคติดเชื้อไวรัสโคโรนา 2019 โดยการใช้แอปพลิเคชันต่าง ๆ ใน Google Workspace เพื่อบรรลุเป้าหมายตามกรอบมาตรฐานการประเมินความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษจากประเทศในกลุ่มสหภาพยุโรป บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อให้ข้อมูลแก่สถาบันการศึกษาหรือบุคลากรผู้สอนภาษาที่อาจกำลังวางแผนจัดการศึกษาเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง โดยมุ่งเน้นหลักการและเหตุผลของการวางแผนการออกแบบหลักสูตร ปัญหาจำนวนมากที่พบ และสรุปผลด้วยข้อเสนอแนะที่เป็นประโยชน์

คำสำคัญ : กรอบมาตรฐานการประเมินความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษจากประเทศในกลุ่มสหภาพยุโรป สภาพแวดล้อมแบบตัวต่อตัว แพลตฟอร์มออนไลน์ การเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษด้วยตนเอง

Abstract

This academic article examines the advent and evolution of self-access learning within the English Program of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Suratthani Rajabhat University over a twelve-year period. It begins with the physical self-access center and its accompanying directed studies program and culminates in the abrupt transition to an exclusively online platform using Google Workspace applications during the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, all framed and guided by the proficiency level standards outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). By focusing on the rationale for its inception, the numerous issues encountered along the way, and concluding with recommendations, this article aims to inform organizations and individual

language teachers considering implementing self-access learning on their campus or within the confines of a single course.

Keywords : Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, face-to-face environment, online platform, self-access English learning

Introduction

It should come as no surprise to anyone who has endeavored to learn a foreign language that frequent exposure and meaningful practice are necessary preconditions for the achievement of fluency, proficiency, and competence. Putra (2020) said that English is the International Common Tongue. It is the most well-known unknown dialect. This implies that two individuals who come from various nations generally utilise English as an ordinary language to convey. That is the reason everybody needs to get familiar with the language to connect on an international level.

Unfortunately, owing to degree requirements and organizational constraints at *Rajabhat* universities in Thailand, especially Suratthani Rajabhat University, language students are required to take a series of six or more disparate courses each semester that are held once a week for 3 to 4 hours a session, some of which have little or nothing to do with language learning, a situation few would contend is conducive to effective language learning. As noted in an earlier article, ‘English is taught at *Rajabhat* universities as a series of courses rather than a language’. It is not uncommon, for example, to encounter English majors enrolled in two or

fewer English courses during a given semester with the remainder being filled with Thai medium subjects.

Language teachers do, of course, supplement face-to-face instruction with homework, projects and self-study activities, which students engage with varying degrees of commitment, ranging all too often from copying and plagiarism to beginning an assignment on the day it is due. Faced with such limitations, witnessed by the preponderance of graduating students plateauing at an elementary level (A2) of proficiency, program heads at Suratthani Rajabhat University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences decided in 2011 to design, equip and run a Self-Access Center (SAC), targeting first- and second-year English and Business English majors, most of whom entered their respective programs at a pre-A1 level. During the design phase of establishing the center, it was decided to pre-empt the likelihood of the center being underused by students, as witnessed by a previously established SAC on campus, by making participation mandatory. That is, students were assigned specific tasks and assisted, monitored, and supervised on a twice weekly basis for a total of 36 additional hours each semester.

Typically, students were assigned three main tasks for each session: self-checking vocabulary or grammar worksheets with instructional content printed on one side and practice activities on the other side; self-checking reading practice using SRA kits, and computer sessions using resident and online programs such as New Interchange Interactive, Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing and in more recent years, SPEEXX (Singhara, 2016). Students followed a station approach, physically moving from one area of the room to another

in any order they deemed fit to complete each of the three tasks. They also maintained a record of their activities by creating a portfolio containing samples of their work and a logbook of the work they had completed. The portfolio and a minimum attendance requirement of 80% were both embedded within the requirements of a single course each semester. A failure to meet the SAC attendance requirement automatically resulted in a failing grade for the course.

In addition to providing students with meaningful practice opportunities, the activities selected were designed to “fill in the gaps” created by a curriculum that, with a few notable exceptions, lacked integration. As the content and focus of specific courses were, and still are, left to the vagaries of individual instructors, much of what gets taught in such courses, particularly in terms of vocabulary, is academically and technically limited to specific fields of study with little thought extended to how a given course supports or meets a student’s language needs over the span of four years. Although the university endorsed the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, also known as the CEFR. Charttrakul & Damnet (2021) said that Thai Ministry of Education has announced the CEFR as a guideline for teachers in 2019. It defined as a guideline for the users and teachers of foreign languages to use as a map to examine communicative abilities in using the foreign language (Council of Europe, 2011). The framework’s extensive list of “can do” statements for each proficiency level, A1 to C2, was not incorporated into the curriculum design process for the English program. The content and tasks assigned within the SAC, on the other hand, were carefully selected according to CEFR

standards and did acknowledge the importance of providing students with comprehensible input.

In 2012, the British Council was commissioned to do an audit of SRU’s English programs, the results of which led to a series of recommendations that stressed just how imperative the adoption of standards-based instruction was to the ELT reform process at SRU (Wilson, 2012). Although the curriculum has since been revised, the British Council’s recommendations have actually been implemented beyond those that could be accommodated by the fledgling SAC and the activities it provided to students.

During the first one to three years of operation, the students responded quite favorably to what came to be known as the Directed Studies Program (DSP), or as the students preferred to call it “เก็บชั่วโมง”. Along with the “newness” of equipment and the engaging and comfortable surroundings of the center, the hiring of a full-time fluently bilingual resource person to assist students certainly helped to motivate them to attend. However, over the span of several more years, as more than 2,500 students passed through the center’s doors to complete their DSP requirements, a discernible change in their attitudes began to manifest itself in the form of off-task behavior and the use of the native language in most exchanges. The redeployment of the resource person to another position within the university and the aging of equipment, facilities and resources made the SAC less appealing as a place to complete DSP requirements or work on course assignments and semester projects. In 2017, a new program head extended the DSP from two to three years for all English majors, and

deployed the department's foreign contract teachers to assume the duties of the former resource person, an added burden most accepted begrudgingly.

A Forced Transition

Then, when the first cases of the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) were detected in Surat Thani in 2020, the university was closed in terms of face-to-face (F2F) teaching and the DSP moved to online access only. The transition to an online platform, although rushed, was greatly assisted by the Google Suite of applications (later rebranded as Google Workspace), provided free-of-charge for educational institutions by Alphabet Inc. Like the former face-to-face DSP program, completion requirements (i.e., 36 hours over 12 weeks) for each semester were embedded within the requirements of a single course and overseen by a single teacher, but unlike the F2F program no other personnel were involved with assisting and supervising students.

Also unlike the F2F program, students were from the outset required to choose the resources they would use from a series of folders, each containing a selection of resources, that were stored on the teacher's Google Drive. To avoid becoming overwhelmed by too many choices, the first-year English majors were provided with a limited number of e-books (mostly in PDF format), supporting audio files, and links to videos from three skill focused folders, vocabulary, grammar and reading, all gauged to be at an A1 level of proficiency. The second and third years were provided with more choices, and had to choose four skills areas from a total of five, vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening and speaking, all selected at A2 and

B1 levels of proficiency. The online program was also expanded to include fourth year students during their first semester, with similar content provided at B1 and B2 levels.

Before choosing the resources they would use, students attended an online training session before each semester began, where they were shown how to select appropriate resources by using a technique that has been used by elementary school reading teachers for many years, “The 5-Finger Rule” (Scholastic Parents Staff, 2022) for extensive reading. In addition to instruction on how to select resources, students were also trained on how to make a study plan, based on the tenets of SMART goals [Eby, 2019]. Students were then required to create their own study plans and submit these to the teachers for approval.

Over the course of each semester, students designed and submitted two two-week study plans and two one-month study plans. To facilitate communication between the teacher and students, and to provide the teacher with a means of monitoring students in real time, students were also trained how to create an e-portfolio, using Google Site, in accordance with insights derived in part from research conducted by Jusriati et al. (2021) and Wicaksono et al. (2022). Each student created their own e-portfolio and sent a link to it on Google Sheet that had been posted on the class’ Google Classroom. The e-portfolios consisted of a series of Google Docs files that students updated on a regular basis, addressing both course content and independent self-study. Although the sections included in course portfolios

varied from one course to another, Figure 1 below provides a representative example of the typical structure and format found in most:



Figure 1 Example of a Student E-portfolio

Source : Authors

By insisting that students share both their portfolios and the Google Docs within them with the teacher, giving him editor rights, the teacher could

comment on the work they were doing and highlight any mistakes or issues of concern.

Three sections of the e-portfolios were of particular relevance to the students' self-study: study plans, learning reports, and end-of-semester video presentations. As mentioned before, the study plans section of the portfolios was devoted to the design of each student's individual self-study plans over the course of three months, based on the selection of suitable resources from the teacher's Google Drive. Once the plans were approved, the students were expected to pursue their plans as best they could over the specified time period. At the culmination of each study plan period, students then wrote a minimum of 200 words about their experiences as the learning report to complete the study plans. Here, they would discuss what they had learned and any issues or problems they had encountered. The main issue for many, particularly the first-year students, was having planned too much in terms of what could be accomplished within a three-to-four-hour period each week. Then, on the basis of the learning report they had just reflected upon and written, students would then produce their next study plan. Finally, towards the end of the semester, students created a five-minute video as the end-of-semester video presentations, focusing on all they had done in terms of independent self-study over the course of the entire semester, uploaded the video to YouTube, and then provided a link to the video in their e-portfolios.

Issues and Problems

The foremost problem when initiating online self-access and self-study has always been the steep learning curve faced by first year students. Not only is there a lot of IT related information to grasp and make use of in a relatively short period, but students often struggle to embrace the value of planning and directing their own learning outside the parameters of course content, questioning its relevance within a grades-based system. The first of these problems was dealt with over a series of semesters by instigating an online pre-course orientation workshop that showed students where they could access an expanding set of *do-it-yourself IT* instructional resources and by setting up class groups in both Facebook and LINE, permitting students the chance to field questions and receive assistance in a timely manner.

The second of these problems – motivating students – was dealt with by acquainting students with the CEFR, and the annual requirement of meeting certain benchmarks, regardless of their demonstrated standing in each semester’s complement of courses. That is, at the end of each year all students are expected to reach proficiency at the following levels:

1 st Year	A1	Beginner
2 nd Year	A2	Elementary
3 rd Year	B1	Pre-intermediate
4 th Year	B2	Intermediate

Towards the end of the second semester each academic year, all students sit for the Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT), a CEFR calibrated

online English proficiency test (Atatürk University, 2021), and for those who are not at the designated level according to their year of entry, they must attend a one-month, 60-hour intensive summer course during the long break. For fourth-year students, a failure to meet their requisite level means they cannot graduate, and must, after taking an intensive six-week ‘refresher’ course, sit for an approved exit level exam at their own expense, as many times as it takes to achieve a B2 level of proficiency.

By elucidating these requirements to first-year English majors and coupling this with an understanding that the only sure guarantee of achievement is through focused self-study beyond the confines of individual courses, some – certainly, not all – students did develop a willingness to embrace the extra time and effort demanded by the study plans.

Designing a study plan is one thing, but following through and doing the activities involved is quite another. This is where the follow-up learning reports and final reflective video are factored in as an integral part of the e-portfolio’s design. Students, who actually did attempt to follow-up and actualize their study plans, usually had a lot to discuss in their reports in terms of content and examples, whereas students, who made little effort to follow through on their plans, limited their comments to a list of unit headings, general topics and page numbers.

To incentivize students to study on their own, the e-portfolios contributed up to 25% of each semester’s grades. Students who embraced the effort demanded consistently did well in terms of course grades and the end-of-year CEFR benchmark exams. On the other hand, students who did not put in the effort struggled to meet course requirements, and often

ended up having to repeat courses and/or attend ‘summer school’. To minimize failure the instructor frequently monitored student portfolios, identifying those at risk and providing them with constructive feedback and encouragement.

Students’ Reflections

At the end of semester 1 during the 2022 academic session, 119 second, third, and fourth-year students completed an anonymous questionnaire designed to ascertain their sentiments about the online self-study activities they had participated in over the course of their time at SRU. Most expressed positive comments, seeing the value of self-study as a way to improve their skills and proficiency, but many complained that the workload was too much. As one student put it, “I do more work in your course than all my other courses combined. I think studying by myself is good but there shouldn’t be so much to do. The teacher needs to understand that students have a lot to do every semester.”

When asked what they would prefer to do in the second semester, students responded as shown in Figure 2 below:

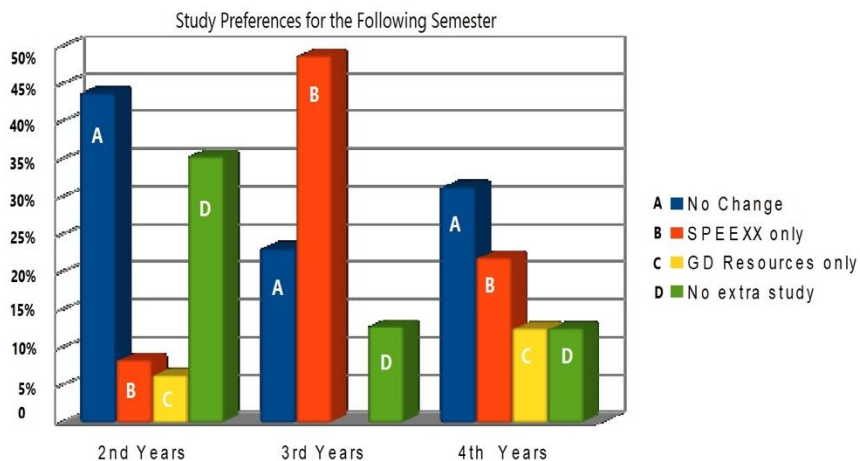


Figure 2 Student Preferences Concerning Semester 2, 2022's Self-Study Options

Source : Authors

Column A – No Change means the respondents wanted to continue with the existing program and requirements, a combination of using the online program SPEEXX and the self-study resources from the instructor's Google Drive. *Column B – SPEEXX only* means the respondents wanted to use the online SPEEXX program only and eschew all the activities (study plan, learning report and video) associated with the using the instructor's Google Drive resources. *Column C – GD Resources only* means the opposite of *Column B*, using the Google Drive resources only, and *column D – No*

extra study means the respondents wanted to focus solely on course content without doing any extra self-study.

As can be seen from Figure 2, there was considerable variation in responses, according to the number of years students had studied at SRU. Nonetheless, maintaining the *status quo*, despite the demanding workload involved with both SPEEXX and the Google Drive resources, was the majority's first choice for second- and fourth-year students, and second choice for third-year majors. Likewise, few respondents favored focusing exclusively on the Google Drive resources, preferring SPEEXX over the other resources. Interestingly, only a significant number of the second years (35.4%) said they would rather not do any kind of self-study unrelated to course content. Such differences between the second years, on the one hand, and the third and fourth years, on the other, may be attributed to the impact that the B2 exit requirement has on students who are beginning to focus on their impending graduation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Whether planning and implementing self-study through a physical SAC or an online platform, it is crucial to embed the program within a standards-based curriculum such as the benchmarks provided by the CEFR. Unless achievable milestones are targeted for each year of study, and an evidence-based exit criteria is provided, with enforceable consequences for those who fail to meet the requirements, a SAC will devolve into little more than an infrequently visited drop-in center and an online platform will be little more than a repository of data storage. As all but the most motivated

of language learners will invariably take the path of least resistance in terms of their studies, extra language study and practice, outside the confines of a given course, must be mandated as a requirement if it is to be successful.

Once student participation is mandated as a requirement, the next step is to delineate achievable benchmarks for each year of study. Backwards design, a proven technique in curriculum development, (University of San Diego, n.d.) can certainly assist in designing success-oriented self-study, provided the exit level is calibrated realistically. As cited in an online article commissioned by Cambridge University Press (Knight, 2018), it typically takes ‘motivated adult learners... between 100 and 200 hours of guided learning to get from one CEFR level to the next’ with higher levels (from B1 to B2) requiring upwards of 260 hours. Given the demands placed on students, a full calendar year to progress from one level to the next is both realistic and achievable.

Progressing from one level to another, although achievable, does require motivation, commitment, sustained focus, and regular practice on the part of students. This is where the teacher’s contribution becomes indispensable. To maximize the full potential of self-study, a teacher must, of course, provide the necessary resources, but more importantly, students must be instructed on how to best utilize the resources. Activating previous knowledge, reading and following instructions carefully, making good use of answer keys and transcripts, guessing meaning from context, staggered review of previously practiced content, time management and self-reflection are all crucial techniques to be taught through demonstration and ‘think aloud’ modelling (Fisher et al., 2011). Simply put, a teacher must not assume

that students will know or acquire such learning strategies naturally on their own; they must be taught these.

Likewise, just as students need to practice regularly, teachers need to monitor students frequently, providing encouragement, corrective feedback and assistance when needed. This is where immediate access through e-portfolios, instant messaging and video conferencing facilitate communication. With a few guidelines set in place concerning teacher availability and contact times at the beginning of each semester, students are free to contact their teacher when seeking help, and teachers can provide timely feedback when monitoring and assessing e-portfolio study plans and learning reports.

Embedding a self-study program within a single course over several semesters does, of course, hinge on the resources provided to students. Great care must be taken in the selection of the materials to be uploaded to the teacher's Google Drive and shared (as Viewer) with students. Insights from reading instruction can illuminate and assist in the selection process, based on the three levels of reading fluency: independent, instructional and frustration. Of these, only independent level texts, audio and video files and links to websites should be included in the resources made available at each of the CEFR levels. By definition, independent level resources mean the language input is 'relatively easy for the reader, with no more than approximately 1 in 20 words difficult for the reader; 95% success or higher; with 90% comprehension' (McGraw-Hill, 2008). Selecting resources is, of course, relatively easy for commercially made resources that have calibrated their series according to CEFR benchmarks, and in the case of graded readers

by level and headword counts, but even within a given CEFR level there will be a wide range of individual variability in terms of skill development among a group of students. For this reason, the teacher should provide enough resources to accommodate such variability and give each student sufficient time to locate their personal “Goldilocks zone” in terms of interest and comprehensibility.

Providing students with a sufficient number of high-interest, comprehensible resources must, however, be weighed against two constraints. First, providing too many resources within individual skills folders such as vocabulary, grammar, listening and reading may overwhelm students with too much choice, causing them to flounder during their *trial-and-error*, discovery selection process and to select resources without much critical reflection. It is better, therefore, particularly at the A1 level and to a lesser extent at A2, to limit the number of resources within a skill folder to just a few titles that manage to cover a reasonable range of interests and individual variability.

At a related level, the selection of resources should also favor in the case of printed texts activities that support active engagement, whether self-checking exercises that include answer keys, audio tracks that include transcripts, videos that permit turning on or off closed captions, and content that is attractively presented and easy to view on devices as small as a smartphone. Links to websites should favor those that are easy to navigate and are free of click-bait and misleading advertisements.

Limiting the number of resources available to students is likewise necessary to accommodate the second constraint facing teachers: storage

capacity. As of April 2023, those who work within an institution that has the free version of Google Workspace for Education ‘have a baseline of 100 TB of pooled storage shared across [all] users and accounts.’ (Google, 2023). For those working in institutions without Google Workspace for Education, teachers can still use all pertinent Google Workspace apps through their own personal Google account, but they are capped at just 15 TB of storage, and that includes emails, photos and anything stored on Google Drive. At present, Google does, however, permit personal account holders to have an unlimited number of such accounts so, although cumbersome, a teacher could set up a personal account for each of the target groups they plan to work with. In this case, teachers will need to delete all unnecessary files and purge their various trash bins on a regular basis.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, anyone interested in designing and implementing standards-based self-study activities must weigh the benefits of helping students achieve learner autonomy through guided self-study against the risks and pitfalls of overwhelming students with too much work and the incumbent stress this will undoubtedly cause some. There is a fine line, easily crossed, when attempting to motivate students through pep talks, course requirements and grades, on the one hand, and unwittingly creating targets that are unreachable, on the other. Although B2 is an attainable level for four years of university study, as demonstrated by the many students who have done just that, the decision to adopt a standards-based curriculum should be viewed within the larger context of a university’s overall organization and the demands it places on students. Being lackadaisical towards cancelling classes, mandating students to participate

in too many extra-curricular activities, reducing the number of contact weeks in a semester and not having a coherent policy concerning make up classes, all take a toll in terms of distracting students and reducing their ability to focus and organize their personal time effectively. Unless senior management endorses a standards-based curriculum and provides the necessary logistical and policy support needed to assist both teachers and students, success will likely be undermined by stress and frustration for all concerned.

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