

LEARNER'S PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICE IN SELF ACCESS LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study of the self access language learning (SALL) of a group of learners enrolled on an intensive English proficiency course. The study sought to investigate learners' perceptions of SALL, and their actual behaviour in a SALL environment. The data revealed that the learners held positive attitudes towards SALL, and made good use of the resources. However findings also suggested that more proficient learners tended to use the SALL opportunities less often, and identified a number of obstacles to SALL. The study findings are reported and implications for others involved in managing SALL are proposed.

Introduction

Independent language learning is an essential complement to classroom-based learning if learners are to acquire target competence in a realistic period of time. It follows that language teachers can help promote learning efficiency by making links between teacher-guided learning and learner-initiated activities outside class. In an effort to encourage out of class learning, many institutions in the last ten years have established language resource centres where learners are encouraged to learn independently. This article reports on an investigation of the perceptions and practices of a group of learners enrolled in an intensive English course in relation to their out-of-class language learning. The project sought to answer the following questions:

- How do learners perceive self access language learning (SALL)?
- How often do learners participate in SALL?
- What do learners do when they engage in SALL?
- What links do learners make between their self access language learning and their classroom learning?

Since November 1989, the English Language Institute at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) has provided a venue and resources for independent language learning for learners enrolled in its English Proficiency Programme (EPP). These facilities have ex-

panded over the last 11 years into a dedicated independent language learning facility called the Language Learning Centre (hereafter referred to as the LLC), which caters for learners of all the languages taught at VUW, as well as others for which the LLC has resources.

The SALL facilities at VUW constitute one of several course elements designed to encourage EPP learners to take more responsibility for their language learning. Publicity and all course materials for the EPP refer to this principle as an explicit aim. The programme components which contribute to the development of learner independence are:

- 1 ongoing learner-teacher dialogue
- 2 the first week study theme on "Learning a Language"
- 3 classroom tasks and materials which replicate real-life situations
- 4 a student record booklet
- 5 self-access centre

(Cotterall, 1995: 220)

Since 1989, the location and organisation of the SALL resources have changed, and the range and volume of materials and facilities have grown dramatically. However, until the summer of 1999-2000, no formal evaluation of the language resources and facilities, or the use which EPP learners made of them had been undertaken. Therefore when the opportunity arose to conduct an evaluation with the assistance of a graduate student from the Netherlands (the second author of this paper), it was greeted with enthusiasm.

This paper first presents an overview of key concepts in the literature on SALL before describing the subjects and methodology adopted in the study. In the third section, trends in the study data are discussed in relation to the questions which motivated the study. The paper concludes with a number of recommendations for teachers and managers associated with SALL.

Self Access Language Learning

According to Gremmo and Riley (1995:156) Self Access Centres (hereafter referred to as SACs) and, hence, self access learning have been in existence since the late 1960s. However in the last few years, SALL has experienced an explosion of interest, as evidenced by a growing number of conference papers, journal articles and books which seek to enhance understanding of this approach to learning. (See for example Gardner and Miller, 1994; Esch, 1994; Gremmo and Riley, 1995; Cotterall, 1995; Pemberton et.al. 1996; Benson and Voller, 1997; Morrison, 1999; Gardner and Miller, 1999; Bickerton and Gotti, 1999).

In the New Zealand context, a belief in the importance of independent learning has resulted in the creation of SACs in many language-teaching institutions around the coun-

try. In 1998, a Special Interest Group for staff working in SACs at tertiary NZ institutions was created by John Jones-Parry of Manukau Institute of Technology and colleagues. The "SACSIG", which has members from all over New Zealand as well as some in Australia, holds regular meetings in Auckland (where the majority of its members reside) and maintains an electronic discussion list, moderated by John Jones-Parry¹.

What then is SALL? Gardner and Miller begin their latest book on Self Access (1999) by defining SALL in relation to the development of learner autonomy. They see SALL as "an approach to learning language" (1999:8), and elsewhere define it as "learning in which students take more responsibility for their learning than in teacher directed settings" (1997:xvii). For the purposes of the discussion which follows, we would like to propose the following definitions:

A Self Access Centre consists of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities and support) usually located in one place, and is designed to accommodate learners of different levels, styles, goals and interests. It aims to develop learner autonomy amongst its users. Self Access Language Learning is the learning which takes place in a Self Access Centre.

SALL has the potential to promote learner autonomy in a number of ways. Firstly, it provides facilities which allow learners to pursue their own goals and interests while accommodating individual differences in learning style, level and pace of learning; secondly, the resources have the potential to raise learners' awareness of the learning process by highlighting aspects of the management of learning, such as goal setting and monitoring progress; thirdly, SALL can act as a bridge between the teacher-directed learning situation, where the target language is studied and practised, and the "real world", where the target language is used as a means of communication; fourthly, SALL can promote the learning autonomy of learners who prefer or are obliged to learn without a teacher.

Previous studies of SALL have investigated different types of learner preparation and support (Esch, 1994), materials design and evaluation (Gardner and Miller, 1994), methods of monitoring learner progress (Martyn, 1994), the role of technology (Morrison, 1999), philosophy and practice (Benson and Voller, 1997) and the implications of the role change implicit in SALL (Cotterall, 1998). More recently, concerns have arisen over the need to demonstrate the effectiveness of SALL. In discussing the evaluation of SALL, Gardner (1999:114-115) distinguishes between *efficiency* and *effectiveness*, claiming that the former is principally of administrative concern, and the latter of pedagogic concern. He considers (1999:114) that:

Efficiency measures the relationship between output and cost. In other words, it looks at value for money in terms of countable outputs like hours of access or frequencies of use ... [whereas] ... *effectiveness* ... measures how well pre-set goals are met.

Most of the research on evaluating SALL has focused on matters of efficiency. Studies generally conclude that learner preparation and support are essential, and report mixed results on learners' satisfaction with their linguistic improvement and development of learning independence. Overall, there has been little experimental research on SALL, and little which investigates learning gains, apart from two studies of learners' *perceptions* of their learning gains, one by Gremmo (1988) and a recent study conducted by Richards (1999). Gardner claims that the lack of published research on the effectiveness of SALL is due to difficulties inherent in evaluating it. These include (Gardner, 1999:112-113):

- the complexity of self-access systems
- the uniqueness of self-access systems
- the difficulty of data collection
- the difficulty of data analysis
- the purposes of evaluation (improving *learning* rather than *teaching*).

What then should be the relationship between the learning which learners do outside class and classroom-based learning? Crabbe (1993:444) believes that autonomous learning "needs to become a reference point for *all* classroom procedure". In other words, tasks which are carried out in class need to demonstrate principles associated with managing learning, which can be exploited by learners when they are learning independently. In order to facilitate this, Crabbe claims that there must be a "bridge" between "public domain" learning (that is, learning which is based on shared classroom activities) and "private domain" learning (that is, personal individual learning behaviour). SALL learning could be said to function as just such a bridge, since it belongs to both the public and private domains. Gardner and Miller (1999:22) also discuss the notion of the SAC acting as a "bridge to the outside, unstructured environment" in native speaker environments.

Context of the study

The research was carried out during a 12-week intensive English course at Victoria University of Wellington, which ran from November 15, 1999 to February 11, 2000. The 153 subjects, who came from 25 different countries, included two distinct groups. The first group were motivated by a desire to prepare for tertiary study in New Zealand; the second wished to develop their ability to use English for a range of profes-

sional purposes. A total of 15 staff were involved in delivering the course.

The location for the study was the Language Learning Centre (LLC) at VUW which includes a room called the Self Access Centre (SAC), a multimedia room, two audio visual classrooms and a seminar room. In the SAC, learners can use dictionaries, grammar books, worksheets, magazines or SAC guides (sheets containing practical information on how to locate or access resources, or advice on learning strategies - see Appendix A). The only resources learners can borrow from this room are simplified reading books. The multimedia room houses 10 Macintosh computers and 2 PCs (offering a range of CALL programmes, word processing and access to the internet), 4 television monitors which broadcast satellite TV programmes as well as offering standard video playback facilities, and 10 audio booths with recording facilities. The two audio visual classrooms are equipped with language laboratories as well as two fixed video monitors in each. These rooms are used for class teaching in the mornings, but can be used by learners for audio recording and playback in the afternoons. The seminar room can be booked by learners for private language practice, discussion or video viewing. The rest of the LLC is taken up with offices and equipment.

The LLC has a permanent staff of five. Two staff work behind the counter issuing cassettes, videos and CD-Roms, as well as advising learners on learning materials and orienting them to the resources and facilities. An on-line catalogue of the LLC resources (as well as a printed version) is available to help learners make choices about the materials they wish to work on. The LLC staff also includes one staff member who is responsible for Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) development and training, and a technician who services all the equipment in the Centre. The Centre is managed by an academic staff member and functions as an independent unit within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. In addition, during the study, the SAC was staffed by the second author of this paper for three hours per day, four days per week. These hours coincided with times when EPP learners spent time learning independently in the LLC.

The LLC is open Monday to Friday from 8.45am to 5.15pm. At the beginning of each language course, one of the staff members gives learners an introductory tour of the LLC, lasting for approximately one hour. This tour normally includes an introduction to the main categories of resources, the computers, the on-line catalogue and procedures for borrowing materials and using the facilities. In some cases, class teachers provide a more detailed introduction to the resources, and in particular to the materials located in the SAC, at a later date.

Methodology

Answers to the study's research questions were sought by a number of different means.

These included a questionnaire (administered to the learners in Week 9 of the course), interviews with learners, observations of learners using resources, a teacher questionnaire, a structured discussion with the teachers and the collection of quantitative data generated by the LLC database. Due to space constraints, only the questionnaire data will be reported on in this paper. The questionnaire (see Appendix B) was designed in order to explore learners' perceptions of the usefulness of the various categories of materials, obtain details of their use of the resources and elicit suggestions about ways of improving the resources and facilities provided in the LLC. The questionnaire also contained a number of questions aimed at exploring learners' beliefs associated with independent learning.

Quantitative data about the use of materials were collected by using the LLC database (which records every item borrowed across the counter), by counting the number of users, by counting the number of books borrowed and by analysing responses to selected items included in the questionnaire. Responses to the questionnaire were analysed both to provide descriptive statistics on patterns of learner behaviour and to explore potential correlations between responses, and the potential existence of certain factors underlying learner responses.²

Trends in the Data

In what follows, important trends in the questionnaire data are reported on as they relate to the questions which motivated the study. These data are supplemented by quantitative data gathered electronically on the frequency of use of the LLC resources. Responses to closed and open-ended items in the questionnaire have contributed to the identification of these trends, as well as an awareness of key issues and concepts in SALL.

How do learners perceive SALL?

Subjects' attitudes to SALL were predominantly positive. Almost 90% of the learners reported that working in the LLC was either "quite" or "very" important for their learning of English. 88% of the respondents thought that working in the LLC helped them learn English by themselves, and 93% saw "learning to learn English by yourself" as an important course goal. It was also apparent from learners' responses to the questionnaire, that they appreciated having a staff member on hand in the SAC to answer their queries. Correlation analysis revealed that this positive predisposition was found particularly amongst the less proficient course members, who rated their learning in the LLC as more important than did more proficient learners. We also examined the relationship between learners' perceptions of the usefulness of working in the LLC and the frequency of their visits there. We expected a correlation between these two responses, and therefore used a one-tailed test. We found a correlation of 0.286 (Kendall's Tau) and 0.319 (Spearman's Rho) significant at the 0.01 level, suggesting that learners who

considered learning independently in the LLC to be useful, tended to use it more often.

The study also identified two major obstacles to use of the LLC. 60% of respondents found it "fairly", "quite" or "very difficult" to find the right materials, despite their initial orientation to the Centre and the presence of staff throughout opening hours. Furthermore, most of the materials in the SAC were on display (as opposed to being menu-driven), and almost all could also be accessed by means of the on-line and printed catalogues provided. Correlation analysis showed that the more useful learners found the orientation to the LLC, the less difficulty they had in finding the right materials. This is a powerful argument for ensuring that every learner receives a good orientation to the materials and facilities. Not surprisingly, less proficient learners found it more difficult to find the right materials, suggesting that lack of proficiency compounds other problems.

The other principal difficulty encountered by learners in accessing the SALL opportunities was lack of time. This raises the question of how learners allocated their time. A frequent complaint from learners on EPP courses is that they have too much homework to do. If indeed teacher-directed activities are taking up most of learners' independent learning time, this suggests the need to re-evaluate the goals of those activities in relation to learners' personal objectives.

How often do learners participate in SALL?

The learners made frequent visits to the LLC to use the resources and facilities. During the study, approximately 200 learners visited the SAC (one room within the LLC) each week. In other words, on average 40 learners per day (26% of those enrolled on the course) made use of the grammar, reading and vocabulary resources located in that room. Many more made use of other facilities and resources in the LLC, including the computers, the audio facilities, the satellite television and the videotapes. 71.8% of the respondents reported using the LLC facilities at least once or twice per week, and approximately one third of the total number of course members regularly borrowed books from the SAC.

Responses to the questionnaire indicated that the less proficient learners made more frequent use of the LLC than the more proficient learners. Furthermore, more proficient learners perceived working in the LLC as a less useful way of learning than did less proficient learners. This finding is disturbing if it suggests that the more proficient learners felt the LLC had little to offer them. While they may have been able to access resources elsewhere more easily than the less proficient course members (an assumption supported by our data), it is not necessarily the case that the higher proficiency learners were more skilled at managing their learning. In fact they may have overlooked the LLC's potential as a place to practise important learning-to-learn skills such as planning, monitoring and evaluating learning.

While the more proficient learners may have underused the LLC resources, it is also possible that some learners depended exclusively on them. We found a significant (at the .01 level) correlation of $-.318$ (Kendall's Tau) and $-.374$ (Spearman's Rho) between proficiency and the use of "other" resources such as the university library and the Public Library. In other words, the less proficient the learners, the less use they made of other (unsimplified) resources for their language learning. In fact, 55% of learners reported using resources other than the LLC only "sometimes". Is it possible that a learning centre can become so comfortable for learners that it functions more as a fortress (discouraging them from venturing out) than as a bridge to the outside world?

What do learners do when they engage in SALL?

Of the resources provided in the LLC, the listening materials proved the most popular. 80% of the respondents rated the listening resources as "quite" or "very" useful, and 73% rated the CALL programmes as "quite" or "very" useful. These findings are neither controversial nor surprising. One of the most useful kinds of practice which a SAC can offer, is access to recorded listening material which learners can listen to at their own pace, and use in a variety of ways. In response to question five, for each resource type listed, as many as 20% of respondents reported not having used it. However, the listening materials were the exception, with only 5.6% of the subjects reporting not having used these. In contrast, the SAC guides (described above) proved unpopular with learners. Given the dual role these guides were intended to play - (a) orienting learners to English language learning resources in the wider community, and (b) providing practical advice on strategies for solving learning problems - this is a disappointing finding. Future research is needed to determine the explanation for learners' apparent lack of interest in these guides.

What links do learners make between their SALL and their classroom learning?

In response to a question focused on how they decided what to work on in the LLC, more than 70% of the respondents claimed that they mostly worked in the LLC on things they wanted to do. This finding can be interpreted in at least two ways. It may reflect self-awareness on the part of learners, indicating that they do not require teacher guidance in their independent learning activity. Alternatively, it might indicate that teachers made few suggestions to their learners about out-of-class learning activities. Correlation analysis indicates that learners in our study who mostly worked on activities which they chose for themselves, used the LLC more than learners who were told to by their teachers. This may suggest that compulsion is not the best way to encourage learners to increase the amount of time they spend learning independently. In either case, it is clear that links between learning carried out in the "public" and "private" domains could usefully be made.

One of the most surprising and discouraging findings of the study was that learners reported making very little use of English outside the classroom, despite living in an English-speaking country. 36% of learners admitted to using English only “sometimes” outside VUW, with the less proficient learners using English less outside VUW than the more proficient ones. Analysis also confirmed that the learners who used resources other than those provided in the LLC more, also used English more outside VUW. This finding probably reflects the fact that less proficient learners are likely to have more difficulty using the target language outside the language learning environment.

More positively, analysis uncovered a significant correlation between learners’ use of English outside VUW and their beliefs about the importance in a course like the EPP to learn English by themselves. It is therefore probably true that when learners are more able to make use of opportunities outside the classroom, they see the importance of linking this use of the language to ways of learning by themselves. It is interesting to speculate whether a causal relationship exists between the two. If such a relationship could be demonstrated, then teachers could be confident that encouraging their learners to use their English in natural settings would result in their wanting to develop their independent learning skills.

What is the implication of these results for the way in which the learners see their SALL? It seems clear that SALL provides extra language **input** and **practice**, but if the majority of learners do not engage in practice outside VUW, then the LLC is not acting as a bridge to the real world. It is possible that some of our less proficient learners saw no need to try out their English in the “real world” because they found our LLC so comfortable. For other more adventurous learners, “the protected world of the SAC may seem less attractive than the real world” (Gardner and Miller, 1999:23). Given that in the current New Zealand context, learners can survive without making use of English outside class, it could be said that one of the key functions of SALL is to prompt learners to engage with the target speaking community.

Implications for SALL Managers and Language Teachers

It is possible to extrapolate from the results obtained in the VUW study a number of general implications for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of SALL. Taking into consideration the range of settings in which independent language learning occurs, we consider that the following broad recommendations have wide application.

Explore learners’ beliefs about SALL

It is essential to find out how learners perceive SALL, and how willing they are to adopt such an approach to their language learning before attempting to introduce it. (See, for example, Gardner and Miller, 1999, and Cotterall, 1999). Learners who believe that learn-

ing can only take place when the teacher is present, may not see the point of spending time working independently in a SAC. Advanced learners who consider that SALL is appropriate only for beginning language learners, may overlook the potential of SALL to provide them with practice in managing their independent learning. In order to adequately prepare learners for SALL, attention needs to be paid to explaining the rationale behind independent language learning, and to exploring learners' beliefs about it.

Design good initial orientation (s) to SALL

As well as an appreciation of the rationale behind SALL - what Holec (1980:27) calls "psychological preparation" for self-directed learning - effective independent language learning depends on a good orientation to the resources and a sound understanding of how to learn independently. Methodological preparation might include practice with needs analysis, goal setting, selecting appropriate materials, self-assessment, record keeping and self-evaluation. It would also involve training in the use of computers, video and audio equipment and all other facilities provided in the SALL environment.

Provide ongoing support

One orientation session at the start of a course is unlikely to provide an adequate introduction to SALL. Learners need access to support (in the form of staff, documentation, training, feedback etc) at all times. SAC staff play a crucial role in providing this kind of support. Their support might involve encouraging learners who lack motivation, helping select materials to address learners' specific language needs, or providing instruction in how to use CALL programmes.

Enhance the links between SALL and class activity

Learners need to perceive the links between public and private domain learning. Teachers can help by using class tasks to model procedures for solving language problems in private learning, or by designing projects which incorporate both public and private elements. SALL managers can also help promote "real world" language practice, for example by publicising events which offer opportunities for authentic language practice.

Conclusion

The study reported on here highlighted the importance of providing adequate preparation for learners who are expected to make use of opportunities and facilities for self access language learning. Gremmo and Riley claim (1995: 157):

The major lesson which has been learnt from resource centres is that if they are to be successful, they must provide some sort of learner training.

Dickinson and Carver (1980) suggest that learner training for SALL should incorporate three types of preparation: psychological, methodological and practice in self-direction. The challenge for those involved in promoting SALL is to provide appropriate training and support as well as expert advice, while still respecting learners' freedom to decide how and what they learn.

¹ Contact John at <john.jones-parry@manukau.ac.nz> for further information.

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Appendix A

Sample SAC Guide

Self Access Guide No. 23

English Language Institute

English Proficiency Programme

LISTENING STRATEGIES

Listening is a very important skill since we spend almost 60% of our time listening. However, it is not always easy to understand spoken English so it is important to practise your listening skills. Here you will find some strategies that you can use to improve your listening skills. But first you need to understand the difference between *interactive* and *noninteractive* listening.

Interactive and Noninteractive listening

Interactive listening happens when you are having a conversation. Sometimes you listen and sometimes you speak. *Noninteractive listening* happens when you watch the news, listen to the radio or go to lectures (although these can also be interactive). If you want to improve your listening ability, it is important to understand the difference between these two types of listening.

It is probably a good idea to try to improve your *noninteractive listening* skills first. You will find a lot of materials in the Language Learning Centre that you can work with to improve your noninteractive listening skills. There are videotapes, cassettes, graded readers with cassettes, satellite TV and CD-Roms covering many different topics and levels. *Interactive listening*, on the other hand, is difficult to practise by yourself. The best advice is to speak English as much as you can with native speakers. You will find some specific tips on how to make your listening practice easier below.

Noninteractive listening - watching TV and movies:

Watching TV and movies are fun ways of learning to listen. Sometimes, they can be quite difficult though. Here are a few tips. They all relate to prediction, i.e. trying to prepare yourself to understand what is said by using knowledge you already have.

- ☐ use visual clues: try to get as much information as you can from people's facial expressions, their gestures, and from the situation. Are people angry, happy, afraid?
- ☐ use background knowledge: ask yourself what you know about the topic. What do you think they will talk about?
- ☐ focus on what is relevant: not all information is relevant. If you are listening to an interview, concentrate on questions like *who*, *what*, *where*.
- ☐ listen to familiar elements: concentrate on what you know, rather than on what you don't know. If you hear words, or names that you know, use these to guess what the words and names that you don't know will mean.
- ☐ listen for familiar sounding words: many words sound alike in different languages. Maybe you can understand them even if you don't know them.
- ☐ numbers: try to learn numbers and proper names (names of cities, important people) as soon as you can, because they are used very often.

Interactive listening - listening to and speaking with people

When you speak to people it is sometimes difficult to understand what they are saying. Here are several things you can do to help you understand better:

- ☐ let the speaker know you're having trouble: don't be afraid to tell your conversation partner that you're having problems understanding him or her.
- ☐ ask for repetition: ask the speaker to repeat what (s)he said.
- ☐ ask the speaker to slow down: native speakers do not always realise that they speak fast, so ask them to speak more slowly.
- ☐ seek clarification: if you are not sure what the speaker means, just ask him or her to explain. For example, you can say "What does the word "X" mean?"
- ☐ rephrase : if you are not sure what the speaker means, tell them what you think they said. For example, you can say 'Do you mean that..'
- ☐ repeat: if you are not sure what the speaker means, repeat the sentence word for word in a questioning tone.
- ☐ pay attention to intonation and tone of voice: these may help you work out the meaning of what is being said and tell you if it's a statement or a question
- ☐ focus on question words: question words are very important because they tell you that the speaker wants you to give him or her information, and also tell you what kind of information (s)he wants. There are only a few question words in English. Remember them and focus on them while you are listening.
- ☐ assume that the 'here and now' are important: mostly when you speak to someone, the conversation will be about something related to where you are and what you are doing. This helps you predict what is being said.

Finally: don't stop listening!

- ☐ concentrate on familiar elements: try to focus on what you know, rather than on what you don't know.
- ☐ concentrate on important elements: you don't need to understand everything in order to understand what is being said. The context will help you understand. Don't panic if you miss a word.
- ☐ Just keep listening! Good luck!

Appendix B Questionnaire

Hi everyone,

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

Class number.....

1. How often did you use the Language Centre (LLC) during the summer course?

usually more than twice a week

usually once or twice a week

a few times

never

2. If you have never (or rarely) used the LLC, could you tell us why?

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

very useful

not at all useful

5

4

3

2

1

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

5. Which materials did you often use in the LLC ? ☐

How useful did you find them?

(please rate all of them)

		Very useful			Not at all useful		
Graded readers	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	4	3	2	1	
Graded readers with cassettes	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	4	3	2	1	
Other reading materials	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	4	3	2	1	
Dictionaries	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	4	3	2	1	
Grammar books & exercises	<input type="checkbox"/>	5	4	3	2	1	