Promoting Self-Access Learning: Action Research

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to investigate how teachers and students feel about the practices and the self-access elements. The study involved a series of steps taken in a spiraling process: 1) preliminary study: questionnaires were used to collect data from both students and teachers; 2) planning: the results were reported to the teachers. The ensuing discussion led to the planning of new practices; 3) acting: the new practices were implemented; 4) observing: questionnaires based on the new practices were used to collect data from students and teachers; then two focus group interviews were conducted; and 5) reflecting: the researchers reflected on the practices based on the questionnaires and interview results. The results show that both the teachers and the students thought the self-access activities helped promote autonomous learning skills and English skills. There are, however, a need to make teachers more aware of changes in their roles and a need to develop intrinsic motivation in students attempting to learn autonomously.

Keywords: *self-access learning, action research*

BACKGROUND

There have been many attempts to promote autonomous learning in Thai students in the belief and hope that if students have the ability to take charge of their own learning, they will become successful life-long learners who will thus benefit their own aspirations and those of the country. In English education, self-access

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language learning (SALL) is one of the approaches employed to promote learners' autonomy in language learning. Sheerin (1989) explained that self-access learning is aimed at enabling students to learn under their own direction through the use of self-access facilities.

The Language Institute of Thammasat University (LITU) recognized the advent of self-access and thus established a Self-Access Language Learning Center (SALC) in 1997 with its main objective being to promote autonomous language learning among students who differ in competencies and learning styles. Heinich, Molenda, Russell, & Smaldino (2002) noted that teachers should be aware of those differences and able to choose suitable materials and activities to help students expand their knowledge. Self-Access Learning at LITU involves approximately 3,000 first-year students and 20 teachers who must perform several different roles such as material writers, counselors, activity organizers and so on. Besides that, it engages other elements like resources, management systems, learner reflection, counseling, learner training, staff training, assessment and evaluation. LITU has integrated these elements and changed the practices periodically to encourage students to come to the SALC. Some examples of changes are having students keep logs of their learning experience, assigning the number of required visits, producing self-reflection forms, organizing extra activities, and giving some extra points. These changes have been made in response to random situations and informal feedback from relevant people. They did not come from a systematic study or from every group of stakeholders. Therefore, LITU did not know how students and teachers really felt about the practices and those elements.

As members of the SALC Committee, the researchers conducted action research to find out how teachers and students felt about the practices and the self-access elements in order to reflect on and make recommendations for improving those practices and elements.

The research questions were as follows:

1. What are students' and teachers' opinions about the self-access practices and elements used in the first semester?

2. What practices and elements do students and teachers want to improve?

3. What are students' and teachers' opinions about the self-access practices and elements used in the second semester?

4. In what way have the new self-access practices and elements benefited students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, two topics are addressed. Action research is discussed in the first part, and self-access learning is elaborated on in the second part.

Action Research

The term "action research" was first coined by Kurt Lewin in 1944 to describe "a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action." Burns (1999) mentioned that action research is a way for teachers to seek new directions for professional development and for educators, program administrators and researchers to improve practices.

In action research, there is a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the results of the action. The term "action research" has been defined by many scholars. Kemmis & McTaggart (1988) defines action research as a cyclic process of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and then planning again for the next cycle.

Mills (2003) sees action research as any systematic inquiry carried out to gather information. The goals are to gain insight, develop reflective practice, and improve the outcomes.

According to Parson & Brown (2002), action research is a process in which researchers have an opportunity for professional growth by observing, doing and adjusting.

Altrichter, Posch and Smekh (1993) describes three phases of action research as finding a starting point and clarifying the situation; developing action strategies and analysis; and theory generation. Wallace (1998) regards action research as systematic collection and analysis of data used to improve professional practice. Zuber-Skerritt (1992) also describes action research as a process involving identifying a problem, planning to solve the problem, implementing the plan, evaluating the solution, reflecting on the results of the evaluation, and identifying a new problem.

According to Susman (1983), the five phases of action research are diagnosing, action planning, taking action, evaluating, and specifying learning. Schmuck (1997) states that action research is aimed at improving the practice. Researchers study what they are doing, thinking, and feeling and then seek to create ways to improve their practice.

The present study is considered action research in which *a preliminary study, planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and making recommendations* have been done to improve the practices and elements.

Self-Access Learning

The theory behind self-access learning is that students learn best when they are given the freedom to learn independently. They can select the way of learning, the materials and time that are best suited to themselves. Dickinson (1987) states that self-access learning is the way students learn independently and actively with readily accessible materials.

As mentioned in Gremmo & Riley (1995), through self-access learning students can choose their own learning strategies regarding their level, speed, and content. Benson (1994) also describes self-access learning as the way learners study under their own direction. Little (1991) has a similar idea in that self-access learning enables learners to establish their own personal agenda for learning. Successful self-access learning enables students to improve their learning skills and strategies.

Apart from the idea of learning strategies which learners select for themselves, some educators and researchers explore ideas about the resource people and the

selection of materials involved in self-access learning. Lawson (2006) mentions that learners select their own ways of learning with the benefit of teachers' help or advice. Self-access learning, therefore, allows learners to learn independently through the use of suitable self-access facilities (Sheerin, 1989). According to Knowles (1975), self-access learning is a process in which individuals have the responsibility of diagnosing their own needs, formulating their goals, identifying resources, selecting strategies and evaluating outcomes, with or without the help of others.

At the Self-Access Learning Center of Thammasat University, students are allowed to decide what, when and where they want to learn with the help of a counselor and Center staff. They keep a record of their learning and their own individual progress and they receive helpful feedback from their teacher.

METHODOLOGY

In this action research, the steps were taken in a spiraling process as follows:

1. Preliminary

Investigation   2. Plan

5.Reflect

4. Collect Data

3.Act

6. Revised Plan
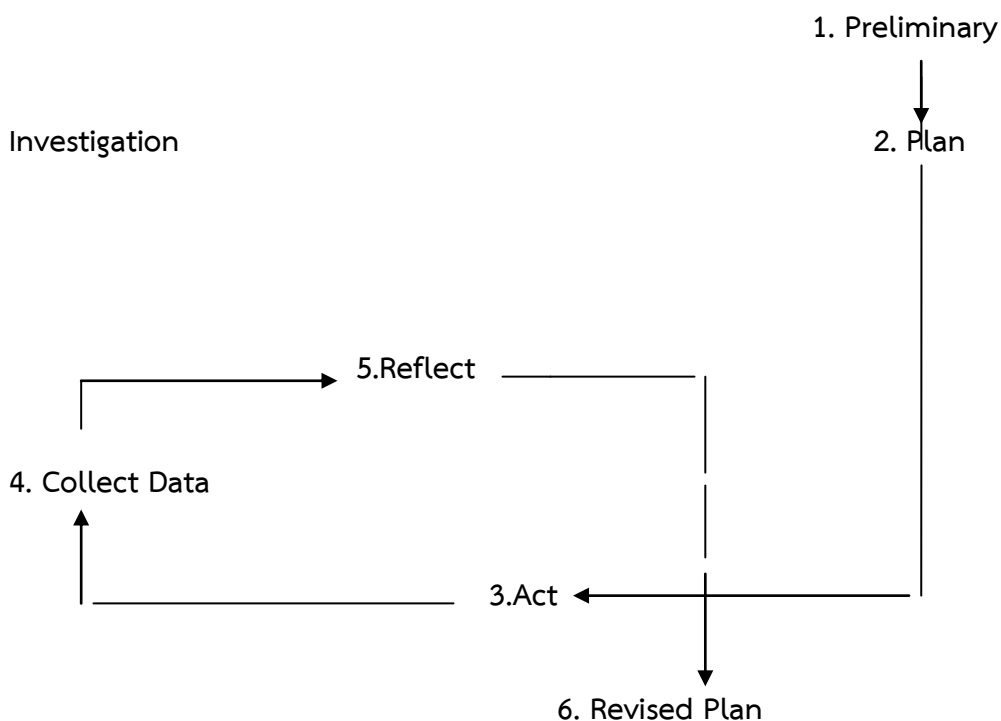
Action Research Process

PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

Preliminary study: questionnaires developed by the researchers were employed as a survey instrument to collect data from 1,995 undergraduate students taking the English Fundamental Courses in the first semester as the patrons of SALC and 20 relevant teachers. Then, the data were analyzed by the percentage, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation.

1. Objective:

To find out the opinions of teachers and students on the Elements and Practices of the Self-Access Learning Center used in the first semester regarding resources, people, management, system, individualization, learner reflection , and assessment and evaluation.

2. Instruments and Technique

- Students' questionnaire
- Teachers' questionnaire

PLAN

Planning: the researchers reported the results from the questionnaires to the teachers in a teacher meeting. The discussion led to the planning of new practices of self-access learning in the second semester.

Step 1: Report the results from the preliminary investigation to the teachers in a teacher meeting.

Step 2: Discuss the strengths, the weaknesses, and the solutions to the problems of the Elements and Practices.

Step 3: Make an action plan for the following semester.

ACT

Acting: the new practices were implemented in the second semester as planned.

Step 1: Inform both teachers and students about the new practices.

Step 2: Call for the special activity proposals.

Step 3: Implement the new practices as planned.

The Elements and Practices Used in the First and Second Semesters		
Elements	**Practices**	
	1st semester	**2nd semester**
1. Report Forms	Generic Forms (*See Appendix C.*) • Study Plan • SAL Quiz • SAL Report • Portfolio • Worksheet for Reading Magazines • Film Reviews • Worksheet for Using the Internet	Generic Forms • Study Plan • SAL Report • Portfolio • Worksheet for Reading Magazines • Film Reviews • Worksheet for Using the Internet Special Activity Forms • Buddhist Talk • Father's Day Exhibition • Spelling Competition • Worksheet for Kru Lily's Talk • Valentine's Day Fair * Report Samples were provided in the SALC.
2. No. of SALC Visits	At least 10 visits required	At least 5 visits required
3. Special Activities	None	8 activities • Buddhist Talk • Father's Day Exhibition • Essay Competition

		• Spelling Competition
		• Karaoke Singing Contest
		• Kru Lily's Talk
		• Valentine's Day Fair
		• Speech Contest
4. Score	10 generic reports = 10 pts.	5 generic reports = 5 pts.
		1 special activity report = 5 pts.
5. Report Submission	1 portfolio of at least 10 generic reports submitted at the end of the semester	At least any of the 2 reports submitted in the middle of the semester 1 portfolio of at least 5generic reports and 1 special activity report submitted at the end of the semester
6. Choices of Visits	At least 10 visits to any corners desired	At least 5 visits of 5 different corners required

DATA COLLECTION

Observing: the questionnaires based on the new practices were used to collect data from 830 undergraduate students taking the English Fundamental Courses in the second semester as the patrons of SALC and 20 relevant teachers. Then, the data were analyzed by the percentage, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation; the two focus group interviews were conducted with 12 representative students and 10 teachers.

1. Objective:

To find out the opinions of teachers and students on the Elements and Practices of the Self-Access Learning Center used in the second semester

2. Instruments and Techniques

2.1 Questionnaires

- Students' questionnaire
- Teachers' questionnaire

2.2 Focus group interview

- Students' focus group interview
- Teachers' focus group interview

REFLECT

Reflecting: the researchers reflected on the practices based on the questionnaires and interview results and made recommendations for improving the practices and elements.

REVISED PLAN

Recommendations on the following were made to improve the practices:

1. Roles and responsibilities of the people involved

- Teachers

- Students

- Staff

2. Practices

- Activities

- Report Forms

- Assessment and Evaluation

3. Management

- Organization

- Budget

- Plan

RESULTS

This article discusses some parts of the results of the research. (All of the results can be found in Soontornwipast and Sribayak's *Promoting Self-Access Learning: Action Research.*)

RESULTS FROM STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Results from Students' Questionnaire		
Elements & Practices	The 1st Semester	The 2nd Semester
1. No. of SALC visits	-24.3% of students visited SALC 10 times. -22.8% of students visited SALC more than 10 times.	-60.1% of students visited SALC 5 times. -34.7% of students visited SALC more than 5 times.
2. No. of reports submitted	-94.1% of students submitted 10 reports. -0.6% of students submitted more than 10 reports.	-90.6 % of students submitted 5 reports. -6.3% of students submitted more than 5 reports.
4. No. of reports made up without attending the SALC	-66.5% of students never made up reports.	-71.8% of students *never made up* reports. -15% made up 1 report.
5. No. of reports copied from other people	-54% of students *never copied* from others.	-70.8% of students *never copied* from others. -12% of students copied 1 report.
6. Reasons for writing reports on their own	-48% of students wanted to practice writing. -31.1% realized the importance of self-access learning.	-40.4% of students wanted to practice writing. -26.4% realized the importance of self-access learning.
7. Reasons for making up reports from other people	-37.6% of students had problems with the schedule. -20.4% of students were lazy.	-21.3% of students had problems with the schedule. -10.4% of students were lazy.
8. Reasons for copying reports from other people	-38.4% of students had problems with the schedule. -24% of students had problems in writing.	-16.1% of students had problems in writing. -16% of students had problems with the schedule.

9. How students rated the benefits of recording learning experience and creating a portfolio	High (4.0)	High (3.9)
10. How students rated the appropriateness of requirements, e. g. no. of visits required, types of activities or corners assigned, scores, etc.	Moderate (3.5)	High (3.8)
11. How students rated the appropriateness of report forms	High (3.6)	High (3.6)

RESULTS FROM TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

Results from Teachers' Questionnaire		
Elements & Practices	The 1st Semester	The 2nd Semester
1. How teachers rated the benefits of recording learning experience and creating a portfolio	High (3.6)	High (3.9)
2. How teachers rated the appropriateness of requirements, e. g. no. of required visits, types of activities or assigned corners, scores, etc.	Moderate (3.5)	High(3.7)
3. How teachers rated the appropriateness of report forms	High (3.8)	High (3.8)

RESULTS FROM STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRES (OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS)

	Results from Students' Questionnaire	Results from Teachers' Questionnaire
1. Strengths/Advantages of Self-Access Learning	1. Develop self-access learning strategies 2. Practice and improve language skills 3. Improve affective aspects	1. Students had a chance to practice their language skills. 2. Students had a chance to be exposed to a variety of learning activities, which would be guidelines for their learning. 3. Students had a chance to reflect and evaluate themselves.
2.Weaknesses/Disadvantages/Problems	1. How to record learning experience 2. Quality and quantity of learning resources 3. Time	1. Quality and quantity of resources 2. Students copied reports from friends.
3. Suggestions	1. Teachers should teach how to write reports and sample reports should be provided. 2. Improve the quality and quantity of resources. 3. Extend the service time of the SALC.	1. Same activities every semester 2. Give more points to self-access learning activities to motivate students

RESULTS FROM FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Results from Focus Group Interview with Students	Results from Focus Group Interview with Teachers

<u>Activities</u>
   • Variety
"There are a variety of activities. We can choose to join the one we are interested in."
"So many activities. I can choose the time that I am available."
   • Awareness of Its Benefits
"I had a chance to practice and use the language."
"I had a chance to use the language. It is like a real life experience."
   • Types of Activities
"Teachers should assign types of activities or corners for students to do."
"Teachers should assign the corners in the 1st semester when students are new to the SALC. Then let us choose what we like in the 2nd semester."
"Students should be assigned to do activities in every corner because each corner provides practice for different skills."
	<u>Activities</u>
	   "Some activities are not relevant to classroom lessons."

<u>Recording Self-Access Learning Experience</u>
   • Benefits
"I have a chance to practice writing."
"I practice thinking about my study plan."
"I can check what I have done."
"Even students who copied still gained benefits from it."
   • Content
"Redundant"
	<u>Recording Self-Access Learning Experience</u>
	   • Benefits
	"It is a reinforcement which encourages students to set clear goal for learning."
	   • Content
	"The reflection section doesn't benefit students and so it should be deleted."
	   • Problems
	"It is difficult to write in English."

Scores	Scores
• Motivation "*It is a strategy to force students to come to the SALC*" "*Scores are like gifts or rewards for students*" "*The proportion is appropriate, not too much.*" • Demanding for Quality Checking "*Students' report should be scored according to its quality.*" "*Place more focus on quality than quantity.*" • Giving Feedback "*Apart from reports, teachers should take students intention and overall performance into consideration while grading.*"	• Support/Aware of Its Importance "*Giving scores for self-access learning is one strategy to encourage students.*" "*Without scores, Thai students won't do it.*" • Against "*This instills negative behavior in students. They will do it to get scores, not for the sake of learning.*" "*We cannot force anyone to learn if they don't want to. So don't use scores as a means to persuade students to learn.*"
Problems Concerning Students	Problems Concerning Students
• Time "*SALC is closed too early. When I finish my class, the SALC has already been closed.*" "*I study all day, so I don't have time to go to SALC.*" • Place and location Inconvenience "*It is too far from the lecture hall.*"	• Lack of Awareness "*Students are not aware of the benefits of self-access learning.*" • Lack of Knowledge and Understanding of Learning Strategies "*Students don't know how to learn on their own.*" • Time "*Students' schedules are so tight. They don't have time to come to the SALC.*" • Ethical or Moral issues "*Many students copied reports from their friends.*"

<u>Staff</u> • Work Performance, Personality and Characteristic "*Staff should be more friendly and supportive.*" "*Staff should be available all the time.*" "Staff here are so scary.	
	<u>Problems Concerning Teachers</u> • Heavy Workload "*I teach so many hours, so I don't have time to check students' report.*" • Different Understanding of Self-Access Learning "*Teachers have different ways of practices.*" • Place and Location "*The SALC is too far from students' classrooms. The students who come to the SALC must have a strong intention.*"
	<u>Giving Feedback</u> • Focus on Language "*This is a chance to teach writing skills.*" "*Students expect us to correct their language.*" • Focus on Both Language and Content "*We should check what and how they learn.*" "*Teachers should give comments on content as well.*" • Heavy Workload

	"*This is too much. I can't look at details.*" "*I am too busy with my teaching.*"

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, both the teachers and the students realized the importance of self-access learning. They thought that the self-access activities were appropriate and helped promote autonomous learning skills, English skills, and positive attitude towards autonomous learning. However, there is a need to make teachers more aware of changes in their roles and to help them take on those roles more effectively. Besides, although students have positive attitudes towards self-access, there is a need to build intrinsic motivation in them to learn autonomously.

Further studies on the following are recommended:

1. Future research on systems and activities used in self-access learning centers
2. The materials promoting self-access learning
3. The evaluation of the elements and practices in self-access learning centers.

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