檢視學生在自學中心
自主學習之個案研究

李筱倩*

摘要

外語自學中心的設立是本於自主學習和自我導向學習之理論，其目的在於提供學生一個可取得學習資源以從事獨立學習的環境。在一些亞洲國家，已有成功的案例報導，指出學生規律並經常性地去自學中心自學。在臺灣，許多高等教育機構也都成立了外語自學中心，以促進學生的英語能力和自主學習。然而，目前有關學生在外語自學中心從事的實際學習活動紀錄及有關的教學活動建議仍有待補充更新。本研究於2011年第一學期在南臺灣某所科技大學進行，共計三十六名五年級的學生自願參加了這項研究，他們每週自我紀錄報告在自學中心所從事的活動連續達十四週，同時研究者也對這些參與學生進行了研究活動前及研究活動後之問卷調查，此外，學校定時統整之外語自學中心學生到訪紀錄時數表也為研究者一併蒐集，以藉此達到研究數據之三角交叉。研究結果顯示：學生利用外語自學中心完成學校功課，而不是把它當作一個英語學習資源的學習中心。然而，每週填寫自我報告的這項任務，激發了學生在外學中心的學習。此外，因為教師在課堂上鼓勵學生閱讀英語小說，本研究中之學生傾向於利用在自學中心的學習時間來獨立閱讀英文小說。根據這些研究結

* 國立高雄海洋科技大學
果所做的教學建議分別是：教師應鼓勵學生主動使用自學中心，而不是強制他們前往自學；同時充足的教師支持與指導也不可或缺，以確保學生在自學中心能從事與英語有關的學習活動。本研究的最後結論是：一旦學生在自學中心經歷了愉快的英語學習後，他們便會願意花更多的時間學習英語，並終而成長為能自主學習的英語學習者。

關鍵詞：外語自學中心、以英語為外語之學習、科技大學學生
Introduction

Self-access (language learning) centers (which are usually abbreviated as SAC) where students have access to resources and work independently of a teacher have been established during the past few decades as a beneficial approach in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) pedagogy. Built on the theory of learner autonomy and self-directed learning (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991), SACs are believed by many scholars to be advantageous in supporting English courses through their remedial programs or extensive practices in reading, writing, listening and speaking, in fostering autonomy and self-directive study strategies among students, and in providing multiple technologies as learning resources to motivate and enhance English learning (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001; Klassen, Detaramani, Lui, Patri, & Wu, 1998; Shen, 2008; Stepp-Greany, 2002).

In Asia, successful cases of SACs where learners visit frequently and regularly have been reported. One example is the Independent Learning Center at Sung Bin Home for Girls in South Korea (reported by LaClare, 2011). This center is a language and life skills environment for local adolescent girls. Initially learners exhibited enthusiasm for the center; however, over time interest faded and many learners ceased to be regular users. To revive interest and enhance learner identification with the center, as LaCalre (2011) reported, volunteers and staff worked together to turn the center into “a place of wonder, excitement, and change and improvement” (p. 308). The practical methods they adopted included inviting potential users to provide inputs, locating the center where the users could have easy access to, and provided items of interest and relevance to the learners. Most
important of all, the center started a cycle of “project”, whose on-going aims were to discuss ways to enhance participation, to design action, to promote activities, and to plan further projects to enhance more involvement. As a result, the declining participation was eventually reversed.

Another successful example is the English Resource Center in Saitama University in Japan (reported by Hughes, Krug, & Vye, 2011). This center provided an English learning environment available to the university-wide community. Different from the activities they usually did in a formal classroom, students visiting the center were encouraged to take charge of their own learning. Native language was strictly prohibited inside the center. When students gathered together with peers, they had to use English to communicate. The role of the advisors in the center were to facilitate English communication and rapport between the students, and they soon stepped back and let learners autonomously develop and manage their interaction. In the report by Hughes, Krug, & Vye (2011), they indicated deepened social interaction in the center as well as the development and expansion of an out-of-class second language learning community. They noticed that peer students gave each other more advises on language learning and they observed further social activities in English outside the center.

In Taiwan, since the launch of The Teaching Excellent Project by the Ministry of Education, many higher education institutions have established an SAC to promote students’ English proficiency and learning autonomy (Li, 2008). Accordingly, researchers in Taiwan have carried out studies on students’ perceptions and learning practices of the SAC and on its effectiveness in engaging students in autonomous learning. However, still comparatively few studies have
been conducted to examine actual student learning activities at the SAC; pedagogical suggestions made from empirical studies for fostering student English learning at the SAC are also limited. Since certain conditions, such as learning strategies, motivation, attitudes (Dickinson, 1987), academic confidence (Thanasoulas, 2010) and national cultural background (Palfreyman, 2003; Scharle & Szabo, 2000), forecast learner autonomy, not every student using the SAC is well-prepared to become a self-directed and autonomous learner. In addition, the previous studies done by scholars generally recommend a certain degree of teacher involvement in student learning at the SAC, such as offering an orientation program to familiarize students with the resources at the SAC (Chao, 2003, in Chinese), providing onsite assistance like counseling services (Cheng & Lee, 2009), supervising the student learning process (Wang, 2010), and building the links between class activities and student learning at the SAC (Liou, 1995, in Chinese; Wallis, 2005). Therefore, it is important to find out what students do during their visits at the SAC and what support or guidance teachers can offer to facilitate autonomous English learning at the SAC. Research conducted to investigate these areas should help English educators to modify curricula when student independent and productive learning at the SAC is desired.

A case study was conducted at a technological junior college in southern Taiwan (school name abbreviated as NKMU) during the first semester of 2011, with 49 fourth-year junior-college students voluntarily participating in the study. The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- What do the students’ self-reports and survey answers suggest about their English learning at the SAC?
• What are students’ perceptions of learning at the SAC?
• Do students’ perceptions change after the implementation of the self-reporting task?

Answers to these questions and pedagogical suggestions thus made should help teachers of English learners better understand their students’ learning at the SAC and therefore create curricula more helpful in promoting their students’ autonomous English learning there.

Teacher Guidance of Student Learning at the SAC

The theory of learner autonomy advocates the learner’s ability to take charge of his/her own learning, and the learner’s responsibility for decision making in learning is stressed (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Scharle & Szabo, 2000). However, this does not mean that teachers have no play in students’ learning at the SAC. The teacher’s role concerning the degree of their control on student learning varies based on the different types of SACs (Healey, 1993; Shen, 2008). In some programs, teachers may only serve as a counselor or facilitator giving feedback to students’ learning results, with students being encouraged to fully structure their own learning. In other programs, teachers create a fixed learning content and sequence, while students control the rate at which they proceed. Wherever the SAC type falls on the spectrum, previous studies have suggested teacher involvement to be essential.

The primary reason for teacher supported student learning at the SAC is to prepare students for independent and autonomous learning. Dickinson (1987) holds that “autonomy is achieved slowly…through careful training and careful
preparation on the teacher’s part as well as on the learner’s” (p.2). He maintains that students have to make psychological preparation and methodological preparation in order to self instruct. Scharle & Szabo (2000) also suggest three stages in developing learner responsibility, including raising awareness, practicing the skills introduced at the previous stage, and transferring roles (p. 9).

“Consistent control” on the teacher’s part is deemed essential, as Scharle & Szabo (2000) state, “It is very important to clearly establish expectations towards the learner, the limits of acceptable behaviour and the consequences of failing to meet expectations” (p. 8).

Students need to be prepared to act as autonomous learners at the SAC. Teachers’ support and guidance are indispensable. This is particularly true with foreign language learners. Oxford (1990) points out that the task of directing one’s own learning is even more difficult with foreign language learners since both cultural and linguistic hurdles arise. A number of researchers have, for example, observed the influences of the cultural background on a Chinese learner’s development of autonomy. Ho & Crookall (1995) suggest that Chinese cultural traits may be an obstacle to the promotion of autonomy, since the Chinese students tend to value “relational hierarchy” and “would not find autonomy very comfortable” (p. 237). Lee, Good, & Chen (2006) also point out that the most challenging part in successfully implementing self-access with Chinese students is “to harmonize the idea of autonomous learning with the longstanding cultural beliefs” (p. 118) where “students regard the teacher’s control over the learning process as not only legitimate but indispensable” (p. 119).
One recent case study done by Wang (2010) describes the situation where students were unprepared for independently constructing their own learning at the SAC. Wang (2010) investigated 103 students’ perceptions and practice of the SAC at her university. The study results showed that students held a positive attitude toward the university’s requirement of asking them to spend a total of 15 hours per semester at the SAC. However, as the students chose their preferred programs to learn English at their own pace (p. 159), the top three activities students often performed were (1) surfing the Internet for assignments, (2) using facebook, youtube, or BBS, and (3) sending and receiving emails (p. 164)—most of which did not necessarily relate to autonomous English learning activities. Also, 67% of the users of the SAC indicated that they never used the learning resources there, probably because they were not provided with information about the resources. Therefore, in her conclusion, Wang suggested that “students need to be prepared for their roles as active learners,” and accordingly instructor involvement and engagement is crucial (p. 171).

It should be noted that researchers have begun warning against the presumption that Chinese learners cannot become autonomous learners. Littlewood (1999) argues that a “negotiated version of autonomy” should be employed in East Asian contexts to reject the stereotypic notions of East Asian (including Chinese) learners’ being collective instead of independent. Zhong (2010) also observes that students’ beliefs of autonomy are context-specific, reflecting individual learning experiences. There is no denying that students’ self learning at the SACs in Taiwan do not always have a smooth start. Students may not be “used to enjoying the full autonomy in learning” (Lee, 2005: p. 177) and seem to appreciate “some push
embodied in a system to help them keep learning [my translation]” (Chao, 2005, p. 16). However, this does not suggest that individual students in Taiwan have no potential to develop into autonomous learners at the SAC. Teacher guidance points out a practical solution. Little (1994, as cited in Littlewood, 1999) suggests that “learner autonomy is the product of interdependence rather than independence” (p. 75). Ryan (1991, as cited in Littlewood, 1999: p. 75) also concludes that an ideal environment for facilitating autonomy includes:

- concrete support through the provision of help and resources;
- personal concerns and involvement from significant others;
- opportunities for making choices;
- freedom from a sense of being controlled by external agents.

As teachers can appropriately act as a “significant other” and an “external agent,” and since successful cases of linking student learning practices at the SAC and classroom activities have been reported by language teachers in countries other than Taiwan (for example, Klassen et al., 1998, and Thompson & Atkinson, 2010), it stands to reason to integrate a teacher-guided learning model into student use of the SAC. Thus, this study is conducted to examine students’ independent English learning at the SAC while a teacher guidance tool, the self-report form, is used and its effect on student learning is investigated.

**Methods**

**Participants & Context**

Originally 49 fourth-year junior college students (ages between 15 and 17) at
NKMU (a technological university located in southern Taiwan) were recruited to participate in the study. However, as the study lasted approximately a whole semester (14 weeks) and not every student could meet the task requirement by submitting a self-report form weekly since their participation was voluntary, in the end only 36 students participated throughout the whole project. Among the 36 students (seven females and twenty-nine males), 15 were Shipping Technology majors and 21 were Marine Engineering majors.

General education English courses are offered in the first four years of the junior college program, with the aim of training students in four language skills, that is, speaking, listening, reading and writing. As students are taking the English courses, a total of 30 hours of self learning per semester at the SAC is required by the school and credited towards students’ English course achievements. Students visit the SAC according to their own schedules during the hours of 8:00 am to 9:00 pm from Monday through Friday. Students are encouraged to use the English learning resources provided at the SAC (such as English language learning magazines, English test practice questions, packaged computer-assisted self learning programs, and interactive English learning software). They can also bring in their own English learning materials. However, other learning activities unrelated to English learning are not allowed at the SAC. A supervisor at the SAC records students’ visits as well as the amount of time they spend there. The supervisor is also responsible for making sure that students at the SAC are on task and remain quiet. Prior to the study, the participating students had three years of experience self learning at the SAC.
Data Collection and Analysis

The 36 students participating in the study were invited to record on a weekly basis (for 14 weeks) their activities at the SAC. The self-report form (Appendix A) required the students to give information such as when they visited the SAC, what activities they did there, and how long they stayed at the SAC per visit. The weekly self-report forms were collected and recorded every week. The school-recorded SAC visit reports done by the SAC supervisor were also collected to triangulate the data. A descriptive analysis was adopted to examine both students’ self-reports and the school’s report and the results helped answer the first research question, “What do the students’ self-reports and survey answers suggest about their English learning at the SAC?” A limitation of data collection occurred as the students might not always precisely record the amount of time they spent on each individual activity at the SAC. Therefore, certain deviations were expected. To help solve the problem, those students giving vague records of their activities had been automatically excluded from the list of participants and therefore in the end only 36 students remained participating.

The students also filled out a pre-study survey (administered at the beginning of the semester) and a post-study survey (at the end of the semester), both including ten five-point Likert scale questions and three multiple choice questions. The survey asked the students to describe their activities at the SAC and to express opinions and perceptions of their learning there. The post-study survey asked five more Likert scale questions than the pre-study survey so that student’s opinions toward the self-report form were investigated (see Appendix B for all the survey questions). Descriptive analysis was used to examine the pre- and post-study
survey answers and helped answer the first research question. Also a paired samples t-test was used to see if there were any significant differences between students’ pre- and post-project survey answers. Understandings thus gained helped answer the second research question, “What are students’ perceptions of learning at the SAC?” and the third question, “Do students’ perceptions change after the implementation of the self reporting task?”

Findings

As is stated above, various sources of data were collected and analyzed. Findings obtained from data analysis revealed the following information:

What do the students’ self-reports and survey answers suggest about their English learning at the SAC?

Students truthfully recorded what activities they were engaged in during their visits at the SAC. As a result, the self reports showed that on average each of the 36 students spent 12.7 hours in total at the SAC learning English, doing things such as memorizing vocabulary, reading English novels, preparing for the nationwide English competence test, studying for the ESP course (English for Special Purposes, and in this case English for Shipping Technology and Marine Engineering), and using the English learning software. Most of the learning activities were for practical purposes, such as passing the tests of the school courses and earning the certificates of general English proficiency tests. Meanwhile, the school record (which had a fair correlation with students’ self reports, r=0.573, p<.01) indicated that on average each of the 36 students spent 23.8 hours at the SAC. That is,
although the school record showed that one student might spend a total of 23.8 hours at the SAC, only 53% of the amount of time he/she spent there was used to learn English. A close examination of all the entries in students’ self reports also suggested that when the students stayed at the SAC, they did not necessarily study English. They sometimes studied for their other subjects. Or sometimes they chatted with their friends (in person or by text messaging), dozed off, or simply spent their time idly without doing anything in particular.

Students’ answers to the pre- and post-project surveys also gave insight to their learning at the SAC. First of all, it appeared that the students considered the SAC a study center, which functioned the same way as a library hall. Therefore, most of the activities the students did there were English course related learning activities, such as preparing for the in-class quizzes, reading English novels (which was part of the English course’s take-home assignments), and studying the English textbook (see Table 1).
Table 1

*Students’ top five activities at the SAC*

The activities I was engaged at the SAC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Pre-Survey</th>
<th>(%)</th>
<th>Post-Survey</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Preparing for the in-class quizzes</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>Studying English textbook</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Reading English novels</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>Preparing for the in-class quizzes</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Studying English textbook</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>Reading English novels</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Other activities</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>Preparing for the nationwide English competence test</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Preparing for the nationwide English competence test</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>Reading English magazines</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for how many hours students spent at the SAC per week, the pre- and post-project surveys indicated that one to three hours was the most common length of time (see Table 2). The results also revealed that students tended to spend more hours at the SAC during this semester than the previous one. The post-survey showed that 55.6% of the students spent one to three hours at the SAC, while only 27.8% of the students did so before the project began. In addition, 22.2% of the students spent less than one hour at the SAC in the previous semester, while during this semester the percentage decreased to 8.3%. That is, more students spent longer hours than one at the SAC during the semester. What is worthy of note is that the students may have boasted a little bit when they filled in the survey at the beginning of the project. 5.6% of the students stated that they stayed at the SAC around eight to ten hours per week, and 2.8% of the students stated that they stayed at the SAC more than ten hours per week. At the end of the semester, when the students answered the same survey question, no students made such a statement.
Table 2

*Average hours students spent per week at the SAC*

The amount of time per week I spent at the SAC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Pre-Survey (hr.)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
<th>Post-Survey (hr.)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Less than 1</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>5-7</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5-7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>More than 1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>More than 10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>More than 10</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are students’ perceptions of learning at the SAC?

The answers given in the post-project survey provided understanding about students’ perceptions of learning at the SAC during this semester (see Table3).

Table 3

*Students’ perceptions of learning at the SAC*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item (Agree % VS. Disagree %)</th>
<th>TA(%)</th>
<th>A(%)</th>
<th>N(%)</th>
<th>DA(%)</th>
<th>TD(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I enjoy learning at the SAC. (36% VS. 39%)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I think the requirement of spending 30 hours at the SAC each semester is appropriate. (41% VS. 28%)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I think it is appropriate for the school to grade the amount of time we spend at the SAC. (25% VS. 50%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am willing to spend extra hours learning at the SAC. (42% VS. 28%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 3

*Students’ perceptions of learning at the SAC*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item (Agree % VS. Disagree%)</th>
<th>TA(%)</th>
<th>A(%)</th>
<th>N(%)</th>
<th>DA(%)</th>
<th>TD(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. I think learning at the SAC helps to raise my English proficiency level (39% VS. 34%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I feel bored at the SAC because I have nothing to do there. (17% VS. 56%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I think the learning resources at the SAC are sufficient. (25% VS. 28%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I can concentrate on my study at the SAC. (30% VS. 42%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel that I am more motivated to learn English because of the establishment of the SAC. (47% VS. 22%)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I think I have made the best use of my time spent at the SAC. (16% VS. 42%)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TA= Totally Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, DA=Disagree, TD= Totally Disagree

Table 3 reveals that an equal number of students enjoyed and did not enjoy learning at the SAC (36% versus 39%). In general, more than one third of the students agreed that learning at the SAC helped improve their English (39%) and motivated them (47%). However, more than one third of the students (42%) did not feel they could concentrate on their learning at the SAC, and only one-fourth of the students found the resources provided at the SAC sufficient. This might suggest that students could accept the idea of learning at the SAC, and appreciated the benefits of such a learning center, but that they expected a more conformable and
resourceful SAC. This could be further supported by the fact that 56% of the students did not feel they were bored at the SAC and 42% of the students did not think they had made the best use of the time they spent at the SAC. In other words, if the SAC is set up to more properly meet students’ needs and expectations, it is very likely that more students will enjoy learning at the SAC.

On the other hand, the students particularly disliked that they were demanded to study at the SAC as part of the course requirements (25% found it appropriate while 50% found it not). Interestingly, the students did not seem to mind how long they were required to learn at the SAC: 41% of the students found the amount of 30 hours appropriate (while 28% did not think so) and 42% of the students were willing to spend extra hours there (while 28% were not). This might again suggest that the students did not reject the idea of learning at the SAC; however, they disliked being required to do so.

Students’ visits to the SAC being graded as part of the course requirements became the main reason for the students to learn there. Both pre- and post surveys revealed that the top three reasons for the students to use the SAC were 1) It was required by the school; 2) It was required by the teacher; 3) They were there to prepare for the tests (see Table 4). Therefore, students did not show enthusiasm towards making use of the English resources provided at the SAC; nor did they go there completely voluntarily. However, a decrease in the percentages did appear at the post-project survey answers concerning the mandatory aspect, which might suggest that in this semester fewer students felt obliged to go to the SAC as it was required by the school and the teacher.
Table 4

*Students’ top three reasons of going to the SAC*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Pre-Survey</th>
<th>(%)</th>
<th>Post-Survey</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Required by the school</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>Required by the school</td>
<td>83.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Required by the school</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>Required by the school</td>
<td>72.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Preparing for tests</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>Doing homework</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Do students’ perceptions change after the implementation of the self reporting task?**

A paired samples t-test was also used to examine the change in students’ answers on the pre- and post-project surveys. The results (see Table 5) showed that there was a significant difference between students’ opinions toward item eight (“I can concentrate on my study at the SAC”) before the project (M=2.42; SD=1.025) and their opinions toward it after the project (M=3.00; SD=1.042), t(35)= 3.734, p=0.001. There was also a significant difference between students’ opinions of item nine (“I feel that I am more motivated to learn English because of the establishment of the SAC.”) before the project (M=2.33; SD=0.986) and their opinions of it after the project (M=2.64; SD=1.046), t(35)=2.063, p<0.05. That is, by the end of the project, the students felt that they could concentrate better on their studies at the SAC and felt more positive about the SAC’s function in motivating them to study English.
Table 5

*The results of the paired samples t-test*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I enjoy learning at the SAC.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>1.028</td>
<td>0.162</td>
<td>0.872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I think the requirement of spending 30 hours at the SAC each semester is appropriate.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.250</td>
<td>0.770</td>
<td>-1.948</td>
<td>0.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I think it is appropriate for the school to grade the amount of time we spend at the SAC.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.373</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am willing to spend extra hours learning at the SAC.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.222</td>
<td>0.959</td>
<td>-1.390</td>
<td>0.173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I think learning at the SAC helps to raise my English proficiency level.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.222</td>
<td>1.290</td>
<td>-1.034</td>
<td>0.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I feel bored at the SAC because I have nothing to do there.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.389</td>
<td>1.248</td>
<td>-1.869</td>
<td>0.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I think the learning resources at the SAC are sufficient.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I can concentrate on my study at the SAC.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.583</td>
<td>0.937</td>
<td>-3.734</td>
<td>0.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel that I am more motivated to learn English because of the establishment of the SAC.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.306</td>
<td>0.889</td>
<td>-2.063</td>
<td>0.047*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I think I have made the best use of my time spent at the SAC.</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>0.333</td>
<td>1.309</td>
<td>-1.528</td>
<td>0.136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* = p<0.05    ** = p<0.01

The change of students’ attitudes toward item nine (“I feel that I am more motivated to learn English because of the establishment of the SAC.”) might suggest that the students, after one semester of filling in the self-report forms and therefore constantly reflecting their learning behaviors there, turned to appreciate the SAC more. However, the change of their attitudes toward item eight (“I can concentrate on my study at the SAC”) could not arbitrarily be attributed to the self-reporting task. As the nation-wide English competence test (TOEIC) was
approaching (November and the next March), many of the students used their time at the SAC studying for the test. Therefore, it could be that the preparation for the test motivated the students and helped them focus when learning at the SAC.

The extra five questions students answered in the post-project survey gave more information of students’ perceptions of the self-reporting task (see Table 6):

Table 6

Students’ perceptions of the self-reporting task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>VS. Disagree %</th>
<th>TA(%)</th>
<th>A(%)</th>
<th>N(%)</th>
<th>DA(%)</th>
<th>TD(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14. The self-reporting task motivates me to learn at the SAC. (33% VS. 39%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Because I need to turn in the weekly reports to the teacher, I make more plans about my learning at the SAC. (30% VS. 39%)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. When filling in the self-report forms, I earnestly reflect on how much I have learned at the SAC. (24% VS. 41%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. It is a meaningless task to turn in the weekly self-report forms. (24% VS. 27%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. The weekly self-reports have no effect on me. (12% VS. 42%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 6 reveals, the self-reporting task did not necessarily make a big impact on students’ learning at the SAC. Around the same number of students agreed (33%) or disagreed (39%) that they were motivated to learn at the SAC because of the task. Also, only a slightly greater number of students (9% more)
found that the task led them to make more study plans at the SAC. However, to some degree (although not tremendously), the task still impacted the students, as 42% of the students disagreed that the task had no effect on them and 47% remained undecided. In addition, half of the students chose a neutral answer when they were asked if the task was meaningless to them. This indicated that somewhat the students recognized the effect or value of the self-reporting task. However, what was troublesome was that only 24% of the students stated that they earnestly reflected on how much they had learned at the SAC. This might suggest that the students dutifully recorded what they did at the SAC, which helped arouse their attention to the benefits or values of learning at the SAC, yet not to such a strong degree to facilitate them to make the most of the time they spent there. As a result, their English proficiency, as the students perceived (Table 3), did not progress as a result of their learning at the SAC.

**Discussions and Conclusion**

The findings suggest that the students utilized the SAC as a study-room for completing schoolwork instead of an English learning resource. However, the weekly self-reporting task seemed to influence the students and caused them to take learning at the SAC more seriously than they otherwise would have. The students spent more time there, doing more things related to English learning. Their drive to prepare for the TOEIC test (given in November and the following March) may have also affected their actions towards the SAC, and they became more focused when studying at the SAC. In addition, as English novel reading was encouraged during English class hours, the students tended to use their time at the SAC to
independently read English novels. However, although students seemed to be more motivated in learning at the SAC, they did not seriously modify their study plans so that they could make the best use of the SAC, which mostly could be explained by the fact that students’ visits at the SAC were mandatory rather than voluntary.

Pedagogical suggestions based on the findings are thus made. To begin, students’ visits to the SAC should be encouraged rather than compulsory. When students felt that they had to stay at the SAC for a certain amount of time (in this case, 30 hours) to meet the school’s course requirement, they seemed to idle around or do things unrelated to English learning just to fulfill their time requirement (as is also observed by Wang, 2010, see earlier section). Therefore, raising students’ interest and willingness to autonomously learn at the SAC should be the primary goal for teachers of English using this facility. This can be done through building a SAC full of interesting English learning resources that are of practical use to students. LaClare (2011) pointed out the importance of enhancing learner identification. He emphasized that at the early stage of the construction of a SAC, it would be essential to create opportunities for input from potential users. Therefore, inviting students to provide suggestions on what learning materials and resources they would like to use in the SAC should be a good start.

In her research report, Chao (2003, in Chinese) suggested that the three most popular learning practices at the SAC were the online learning programs, chatting at the English zone with foreigners, and working together within a study group. Hughes, Krug, and Vye’s (2011) report also indicated that students enjoyed the social interaction they had with peers in the SAC. Both reports provided useful tips for the construction of SAC: In addition to English learning software and materials,
more interactive and practical English learning activities should be arranged. Students visiting the SAC should be encouraged to use English to communicate with one another. This way, English will become a practical communicative tool rather than a boring subject when students come to the SAC. More importantly, students’ visits to the SAC should not be mandatory. Instead, they should be encouraged and when students express the needs of learning certain English skills (in this case, for example, students studied to enhance their reading comprehension and listening skills to pass the TOEIC exam), related learning resources should be provided. Once students view their visits to the SAC as an enjoyable English learning experience and consider it helpful to their personal life and future career, they will become more willing to spend time studying English there. Eventually, there will stand a great possibility that students become autonomous English learners in the future.

As the literature review suggests (see Chao, 2003; Cheng & Lee, 2009; Wang, 2010), teacher support and guidance ensure a smoother start for students who are not used to learning independently or autonomously. In this study, the self-reporting task somehow functioned as a “consistent control” (Scharle & Szabo, 2000), which reminded the students to visit the SAC regularly and to become more conscious of what they were engaged in there. Therefore, it could be implied that a regular report (such as a learning log) and frequent self-evaluation should help regulate students and their behaviors at the SAC. Moreover, when teachers create more student-centered, individual-oriented learning assignments (which require students to set their own goals, learning schedules, and create their own learning product), students should be triggered to better use the resources provided and their
time spent at the SAC in fulfilling their assignments. In this study, as English novel reading was encouraged in class hours, very often the students reported that they brought the novels to read at the SAC. Therefore, when English courses are created to require more independent learning, students’ use of the SAC should become more substantial.

The current study contributes more understanding of students’ learning activities at the SAC. Accordingly, more practical pedagogical suggestions are also provided. However, there were certain limits to the findings of the study. The small size of the group of participants was the primary limit when making a conclusion about the majority of students’ learning experiences at the SAC. Secondly, as the participating students might not always have been perfectly precise in their entries of the self-report forms, a certain amount of miscues in the exact English learning time at the SAC were inevitable. The triangulation of data sources should help to some extent to solve the problem; yet a more scientific method should be attempted when conducting a further study. On the other hand, although the students exhibited some attitude changes after carrying out the self-reporting task, it would be more convincing if a control group were available so that a comparison between the two groups can be made. Therefore, a further study with a bigger sample size and both experimental and control groups set up will be essential if more details about the changes in students’ attitudes are to be discovered. Further research can also be conducted to investigate what happens when more student-centered activities are designed in the curricula. How will that affect students’ learning experiences at the SAC? Will they become more motivated to visit the SAC? This study serves to initiate a discussion of how students spent their time at the SAC and what teachers
can do to help their students become more autonomous learners at the SAC. Hopefully more sophisticated discussions and further investigation will be facilitated in the future so that our students can be guided to evolve into more autonomous learners.

Acknowledgements

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References


Appendices

Appendix A. Student Self-Report Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>日期</th>
<th>學習活動</th>
<th>學習時間</th>
<th>備註</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B. Survey Questions

1. I enjoy learning at the SAC.
   □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
2. I think the requirement of spending 30 hours at the SAC each semester is appropriate.
   □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
3. I think it is appropriate for the school to grade the amount of time we spend at the SAC.
   □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
4. I am willing to spend extra hours learning at the SAC.
   □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
5. I think learning at the SAC helps to raise my English proficiency level.
   □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
6. I feel bored at the SAC because I have nothing to do there.
   □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
7. I think the learning resources at the SAC are sufficient.
   □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
8. I can concentrate on my study at the SAC.
   □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
9. I feel that I am more motivated to learn English because of the establishment of the SAC.
   □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
10. I think I have made the best use of my time spent at the SAC.
    □ Totally Agree □ Agree □ Neutral □ Disagree □ Totally Disagree
11. On average every week I spend ____ learning at the SAC.
    □ More than 10 hours
    □ 8-10 hours
    □ 5-7 hours
    □ 4-6 hours
    □ 1-3 hours
    □ Below 1 hour
12. The reason(s) why I use the SAC is/are _______ (multiple choices).
    □ It is required by the school.
    □ It is required by the teacher.
    □ I would like to do my homework.
    □ I would like to prepare for the test(s).
    □ I would like to expand my knowledge.
    □ I would like to spend my free time.
    □ Other
13. The activity/activities I do most at the SAC is/are _____ (multiple choices).
- Watching English videos
- Reading English magazines
- Doing online practice tests
- Reading English novels
- Studying English textbooks
- Preparing for class quizzes
- Studying for TOEIC or GEPT tests
- Reading other English readings
- Other

(Note: The extra five questions in the post-survey are presented below.)
14. The self-reporting task motivates me to learn at the SAC.
- Totally Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Totally Disagree
15. Because I need to turn in the weekly reports to the teacher, I make more plans about my learning at the SAC.
- Totally Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Totally Disagree
16. When filling in the self-report forms, I earnestly reflect on how much I have learned at the SAC.
- Totally Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Totally Disagree
17. It is a meaningless task to turn in the weekly self-report forms.
- Totally Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Totally Disagree
18. The weekly self-reports have no effect on me.
- Totally Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Totally Disagree
A Case Study of Examining Student Autonomous Learning at the Self-Access Language Learning Center

Hsiao-chien Lee

Abstract

Built on the theory of learner autonomy and self-directed learning, self-access (language learning) centers (usually abbreviated as SAC), where students have access to resources and work independently of a teacher, are believed to benefit students in their English learning. Successful cases of SAC where students visit regularly and frequently have been reported in some Asian countries. In Taiwan, many higher education institutions also have established an SAC to promote students’ English proficiency and learning autonomy. However, comparatively few studies have been conducted to examine actual learning activities at the SAC; pedagogical suggestions made from empirical studies for fostering students’ English learning at an SAC are also limited. This study was conducted at a technological junior college in southern Taiwan during the first semester of 2011. Thirty-six fourth-year junior college students voluntarily participated in the study, self-reporting weekly (for 14 weeks) their activities at the SAC and filling out pre- and post-study surveys. The school recorded SAC visit report was also collected to triangulate the data. The findings suggest that the students utilized the SAC as a study-room for completing schoolwork instead of an English learning resource. However, the weekly self-reporting task did motivate the

* National Kaohsiung Marine University
students to take learning at the SAC more seriously. In addition, as English novel reading was encouraged during English class hours, the students tended to use their time at the SAC to independently read English novels. Pedagogical suggestions based on the findings include that students’ visits to the SAC should be encouraged rather than mandatory and that more teacher support is essential in order to ensure student activities at the SAC are related to English learning. In the end, it is concluded that once students view their visits at the SAC as an enjoyable English learning experience, they will be willing to spend more time studying English there and eventually evolve into autonomous English learners.

Keywords: Self-access Language Learning Center, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Learning, Technological University Students
Do Education