

PRC students' experience with independent learning at the National Institute of Education, Singapore

Christian Shyh Chiuan Chia and Mary Ellis

Introduction

The National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore conducts various programs to meet the manpower needs for teachers in Singapore schools. It also conducts a six-month intensive English course for scholars from the People's Republic of China (PRC). As part of the curriculum, PRC students enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at the NIE have tutorial and self-access learning, also known as Self-access Language Learning (SALL).

This paper considers the effectiveness of SALL for PRC students who come from an environment where learning is still very teacher-centred. The effectiveness of SALL is considered by examining Chinese learning styles and the results of a study of PRC student use of the Self-access Centre (SAC) at NIE. This study examined how useful the centre was for improving language skills. Among the various facilities available in the SAC, the findings revealed that the students favoured reading, listening and video resources and claimed to have made greatest gains in their listening and reading skills when working at the SAC. The majority of students like the freedom of the SAC, yet a small but significant number preferred the teacher to direct their learning.

In line with the Institute's philosophy of training, PRC students are strongly encouraged to take an active role in their learning. As a result, the courses offered at the Institute are very much learner-centred, with students engaging in collaborative activities and tasks such as discussions, projects and oral presentation, as well as peer review. Students also have to work in the Institute's Self-access Centre where they are expected to take responsibility for their own learning. However, cultural variations within the learning process may give rise to resistance to the notion and practicalities of independent learning (Fitzgerald, Morrall and Morrison 1996).

PRC students are often perceived as passive and coming from a culture with a long tradition of unconditional obedience to authority (Littlewood 2000). They are also known to expect their teacher to take charge of their learning and to be a source of knowledge (Liu 1998). It was this issue and the desire to obtain feedback on how receptive PRC students are towards the Institute's self-access learning program that provided the impetus for the study into the use of the self-access centre by PRC students.

The PRC Communicative Skills Program

As a result of a cooperative initiative between the governments of China and Singapore, scholars from the People's Republic of China have been coming to Singapore to study English since 1994. These scholars work on their degrees, majoring mainly in engineering and computing, at either the National University of Singapore (NUS) or the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). After graduation, the scholars are bonded and expected to be part of the Singapore workforce for at least six years. Those selected to attend English at NIE are enrolled in an English language program which is run by the English Language and Literature Academic Group, called the *Communication Skills Program* (CSP). CSP aims to help students to:

- communicate more confidently and effectively in all skill areas for everyday purposes
- develop communication and learning skills needed in academic contexts

In order to meet the stated aims, the students take courses and have access to self-access learning, as described in Table 1.

Classes	Hour(s) class meets weekly
Introduction to Computer Skills	2
Academic Oral Communications	10
Academic Reading Comprehension	6
Academic Writing Skills	6
Self-access	1

Table 1: Courses in the NIE Communication Skills Program

All classes, apart from the self-access component, are skill-based and the content includes both general and academic English. Most components use a continual assessment scheme and project work is done in all courses.

Self-access learning at NIE

Since the inception of the intensive English program in 1994, self-access learning, known as the *Tutorial and Self-access Learning Module (TSA)*, has been made available to PRC students. A weekly one-hour session is scheduled and attendance is mandatory. At the beginning of the semester, students are given a handout of the rules and regulations, as well as an orientation on how to use the equipment. During the weekly sessions, students can seek guidance from their tutors on any of the courses. The role of the teacher changes from that of a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator.

The rationale for implementing self-access learning is for students to assume responsibility and not rely solely on the teacher for their learning. The students decide what they want to work on, set goals and assess their own progress. The aim is to cater to the individual needs of students who have differences in personalities, learning styles and study needs. The students have the option of either making use of the resources available in the SAC or bringing in their own materials.

PRC student profile

There are two groups of PRC students who come to study in Singapore. The younger group consists of those who have finished Senior Middle Two, but have not been admitted to any university. Their average age is 16 and they were first admitted to the program in 1998. The second group is students who have finished Senior Middle Three in China, have been matriculated into a Chinese university and have completed one term. The average age is 19.

Even though their educational backgrounds are different, an analysis of their entry placement exam scores shows no significant difference between the language ability of the two groups. Exam results show a relatively even spread across low, medium and high proficiency. Both groups generally demonstrate a high level of motivation, eagerness to learn, good participation in class and *individual initiative in their learning* (Patterson 2001).

Literature review

Cotterall and Reinders (2000: 25) define a self-access centre in this way:

An SAC consists of a number of resources ...usually located in one place, designed to accommodate learners of different levels, styles, goals and interests. It aims to develop learner autonomy amongst its users. Self access learning takes place in an SAC and promotes learner autonomy as follows:

- *Provides facilities which allow learners to pursue their own goals and interests*
- *Highlights goal setting and monitoring of progress*
- *Can act as a bridge between classroom and the real world*

Gardner and Miller (1997: xvii) offer an alternative definition of self-access learning - *Self-access language learning (SALL) is learning in which students take more responsibility for their learning than in teacher-directed settings.*

What is immediately striking is that when engaged in self-access learning, students and teachers take on different roles from those of the classroom. Ho and Crookall (1995 cited in Fitzgerald, Morrall and Morrison 1996: 56) state that it can be both emotionally and intellectually challenging for Chinese students when they are encouraged to work autonomously, given *the hierarchy of human relations in Chinese culture, and the respected position of the teacher*. The Chinese culture of learning a language can be thought of as being fundamentally concerned with the mastery of grammar and vocabulary, mainly from the teacher and textbook (Cortazzi and Jin 1996). One explanation for this stems from the teaching of Confucius, which is still influential today (Louie 1984). The verb *to teach* in Chinese is *jiao shu*, meaning *to teach the book*. The teacher and textbook are thus regarded as authoritative sources of knowledge (Cortazzi and Jin 1996: 102).

On the other hand, in current Western cultures of learning, the social and pedagogic relations are thought of in quite different terms. The major focus is on the development of skills for communication and much attention is paid to the learning contexts and student needs. Student participation and classroom interaction are ways to help learners develop skills related to the functions and uses of languages (Jin and Cortazzi 1998).

To speak of cultures of learning is to generalise. However, the vast majority of Chinese students still believe that Western cultures of learning share a different set of norms, perceptions and ideals from theirs, even though real differences do exist between native speakers from different countries (Jin and Cortazzi 1998).

There is a dearth of papers on self-access learning and Asian cultures of learning. One of the few is by Jones (1995) whose paper is based on his reflections on helping Phnom Penh University establish a self-access centre. Jones (1995: 229) stresses the importance of being culturally sensitive when implementing self-access learning as *concepts of autonomy and individual responsibility and freedom ... come laden with Western values*. Although independence and individual integrity may have iconic status in many Western societies, this is not the case in Cambodia. Cambodian learners are often characterised as *dependent and authority-oriented* and conformity is more highly prized than freedom of expression (Jones 1995: 229). In his view, an ideal self-access system must be able to cater to differing learning styles. It must permit some learners to take as much control as they want and it must also offer guidance to those who do not wish to be independent. It must also cater for those who have an aptitude for independence. Jones concludes by reiterating the point that the design of facilities and services in self-access centres must take into account the users, their cultures and their educational backgrounds (Jones 1995: 233).

A similar situation exists in Japan. Not only are Japanese students stereotypically viewed as passive learners but emphasis is also placed on the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in Japanese classrooms. Teachers are accorded a great deal of respect, which is still prevalent today (Usuki 2002). In her study of forty-six first-year Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, Usuki (2002: 12) found that her students believed that *the student's role should be that of active learner and the teacher's role that of facilitator or advisor*. This runs contrary to popular belief that Japanese students are passive learners. She also found that *the way students behave is affected by the atmosphere, which may be influenced by how the teacher relates to the students and also by how the students relate to one another* (Usuki 2002: 13). Usuki also points out that the teacher's attitude towards students can be a self-fulfilling prophecy which can limit the development of student autonomy:

In the past, I too had a stereotypical view of Japanese students' classroom behaviour. I believed that students had grown accustomed to teacher authority and spoon-fed education, and that therefore they preferred to be told what to do by their teacher and to accept everything ... However, after conducting the focus group interviews, I realized that I was unconsciously expecting them to be dependent students ... I saw them in a negative light because I assumed that they were not aware of their responsibility for their own learning. (Usuki 2002: 13)

Thomson (1996) believes that people are born self-directed learners, but are influenced by their cultural, educational and developmental background. Sinclair (1997) is of the view that different cultures and learning contexts require different approaches to promoting learner autonomy. Perhaps the issue between culture and autonomy is best summed up by Aoki and Smith (1996 cited in Usuki 2002):

The important issue with regard to learner autonomy is not whether autonomy itself is appropriate in a cultural context – but how negotiated versions of autonomy can be best enabled in all contexts, in varying ways, in educative counterbalance to more authoritarian, teacher-dominated arrangements.

It can be seen that the learners' cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as teacher attitudes, affect the development of learner autonomy. Instead of advocating that a self-access system be run in a way which lets learners decide on the amount of autonomy that they wish to manage, based on what they have been used to, Jones (1995) advocates that a self-access system should give students the opportunity to experience taking control of their own learning. He sees it as important to gather

feedback from students as to whether they are capable of handling the autonomy and whether taking control of their learning is useful in helping them progress in language learning. As in Usuki's (2002) case, it may indeed be that Jones has a self-fulfilling prophesy that is denying his students the opportunity to develop autonomy.

Rationale for the study

The Chinese culture of learning would seem to run contrary to autonomous learning, with Chinese students relying heavily on their teachers as the providers of knowledge. If this is true, then it would also appear that PRC students would bring with them preconceived ideas of the role of the teacher and the role of the student and would not benefit from independent learning when studying at NIE. These students could only benefit from working in the SAC if they were willing to alter their roles as learners and to consider their work in the self-access centre as valuable. Learner expectations of teacher authority can be problematic for teachers who desire their learners to assume responsibility for their learning (Cotterall 1995).

Aim and research questions

The study of PRC student use of the Self-access Centre (SAC) at NIE was limited to achieving a better understanding of how Chinese students make use of the self-access centre. More specifically, the research questions were:

- 1 Do Chinese students like working in the self-access centre?
- 2 Do Chinese students find working in the self-access centre beneficial in helping them improve their language skills?
- 3 What activities do they engage in when they are in the self-access centre?
- 4 Which activities do they like best and which activities do they not like?
- 5 Do students find that working in the SAC helps them decide on how they can improve their language skills when they engage in self-study?

Method

Students from five tutorial groups were invited to participate in a questionnaire survey. A total of 96 out of 100 students took part in the study, giving an overall response rate of ninety-six per cent. To encourage the students to take part in the study, it was emphasised that the questionnaire would be anonymous and their responses kept confidential. Written consent was collected separately from the completed questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of twenty statements in random order. The students were asked to respond to the statements using the following scale: *Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly disagree*. In addition, they were encouraged to write additional comments on the self-access sessions.

Results and discussion

Table 2 quantitates student responses about the benefits of the Tutorial and Self-access (TSA) sessions for improving the macroskills.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1 The TSA sessions help me to improve my English reading skill.	4 (4.2%)	35 (36.5%)	37 (38.5%)	20 (20.8%)	0
2 The TSA sessions help me to improve my English writing skill.	0	15 (15.6%)	49 (51%)	29 (30.2%)	3 (3.1%)
3 The TSA sessions help me to improve my English listening skill.	13 (13.5%)	44 (45.8%)	26 (27.1%)	12 (12.5%)	1 (1%)
4 The TSA sessions help me to improve my English speaking skill.	1 (1%)	13 (13.5%)	38 (39.6%)	37 (38.5%)	7 (7.3%)

Table 2: Improvement in English language macroskills

The results of this survey show that students believe that the TSA sessions are most beneficial in helping them improve their listening (59.3%) and reading (40.7%) skills. The survey indicated that students see the sessions as least effective in helping them make progress in their speaking and writing skills. As the students are expected to maintain silence in the Self-access Centre, it is understandable why these students did not recognise the usefulness of the TSA tutorials in helping them improve their speaking ability. However, this is less clear with regard to writing skills. Books on grammar exercises are available in the centre and other grammar exercises can also be accessed on the Institute’s website. The students are informed of this during their first TSA session. It is noteworthy that a significant number of students, ranging between 27.1% and 51%, submitted a neutral response to the four statements. It can be concluded that these students were either ambivalent or did not have a strong opinion about the usefulness of the TSA sessions in helping them improve their English.

Table 3 summarises the student responses to the TSA sessions as a break from classroom routine.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
8 I like the TSA sessions because they give me a break from the regular classes.	34 (35.4%)	47 (49%)	12 (12.5%)	3 (3.1%)	0

Table 3: Preference for TSA sessions as a break from classroom routine

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A considerable number of students indicated that they were unsure of the benefits of the TSA session. However they gave a resounding endorsement to the weekly TSA session, with 84.4% of students liking the TSA session because it gave them a break from their regular classes. This is perhaps due to the fact that students are in control and are responsible for their own progress. In addition, they are also free to choose the activities that they wish to engage in, in order to improve their language skills.

Table 4 summarises student responses to other features of the TSA sessions.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
12 I like the TSA sessions because I can use the tape recorder to listen to cassettes.	7 (7.3%)	34 (35.4%)	34 (35.4%)	20 (20.8%)	1 (1%)
13 I like the TSA sessions because I can watch videos.	21 (21.9%)	43 (44.8%)	15 (15.6%)	16 (16.7%)	1 (1%)
14 I like the TSA sessions	18	60	14	4	0

	because I can read and borrow books available in the self-access room.	(18.8%)	(62.5%)	(14.6%)	(4.2%)	
15	I like the TSA sessions because I can use the printer.	6 (6.3%)	33 (34.4%)	32 (33.3%)	25 (26%)	0

Table 4: Student responses to other features of TSA sessions

The results show that the favourite activity in the self-access centre is reading and borrowing books. One reason for this is that these readers are not available through the NTU or NIE libraries. Similar books can only be borrowed in public off-campus libraries. The following quote comes from a student who found this resource useful:

During the TSA sessions, I can do whatever I want to [in order] to improve my English. Besides, I can also select my favourite books to read. It is quite different from other classes.

Two other favourite activities are watching videos and using the tape recorder to listen to cassettes. However, many students gave the feedback that the weekly TSA session is too short. As each session lasts only 50 minutes, they need two to three sessions to finish a movie. This greatly reduces the enjoyment of movie watching.

Two types of cassette tapes are available in the centre, individual tapes and those with accompanying books. One student commented that *the tapes are hard to find outside the TSA room* and this may be one reason why listening is one of the most popular activities at the centre. Another reason is that the students can listen to the stories being read to them while referring to the book at the same time. This not only helps them understand the story better but the narrator also serves as a model of spoken English.

Cotterall and Reinders (2000: 30) also found that listening materials in self-access centres were the most popular as students can listen to these materials at their own pace and use them in a variety of ways.

Table 5 summarises student use of computer facilities and time in the TSA sessions.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
11 I like the TSA sessions because I can use the computer.	1 (1%)	14 (14.6%)	30 (31.3%)	43 (44.8%)	8 (8.3%)
16 I like the TSA sessions because I can access different websites to improve my English.	1 (1%)	20 (20.8%)	38 (39.6%)	34 (35.4%)	3 (3.1%)
17 I like the TSA sessions because I can access different websites to read the news.	0	22 (22.9%)	40 (41.7%)	27 (28.1%)	7 (7.3%)
18 I like the TSA sessions because I can use the time to complete my homework.	2 (2.1%)	28 (29.2%)	28 (29.2%)	28 (29.2%)	10 (10.4%)

Table 5: Student use of computer facilities and time in TSA sessions

Initially, it was quite surprising to note that having access to computers is not highly regarded as only 15.6% gave a positive response to the statement - *I like the TSA session because I can use the computer*. However, a check with the students revealed that most buy their own computer or laptop within three months of arrival. Also students were warned at the beginning of the semester that they were not allowed to check their emails during the session and the facility for reading Chinese characters on the computers was blocked. Many students complained that the machines were too slow. These reasons, to a large extent, account for the unpopularity of working with computers during TSA sessions. Based on observation, the minority who do use the computers either use them for editing purposes or to print out relevant or useful articles from various websites. It is thus not surprising that only a small percentage of students (approximately 22%) claimed they use the computer to access websites to either read the news or to improve their language skills during the TSA session.

Only 31.2% of the students stated that they like the TSA session because they can use the time to catch up on their homework. This implies that during TSA sessions, most students make use of the resources available in the SAC.

Table 6 summarises student responses to taking responsibility for learning in the TSA sessions.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5 The TSA sessions make me responsible in learning English.	6 (6.3%)	47 (49%)	35 (36.5%)	8 (8.3%)	0
7 I make full use of my time to improve my English during the TSA sessions.	3 (3.1%)	34 (35.4%)	45 (46.9%)	12 (12.5%)	2 (2.1%)

Table 6: Student responsibility for learning in the TSA sessions

Table 6 shows that 55.3% of students indicated that the TSA sessions make them take responsibility for their language learning, since they are encouraged to set learning goals at the beginning of the semester. However, less than 40% claimed that they made full use of their time to improve their language skills during the TSA session. One reason for this is lack of accountability and one solution to this is requiring the students to keep a weekly log of their activities. Instead of using the conventional paper-pencil method, students will be asked to key their entry using the online bulletin board discussion forum. They will be encouraged to add comments regarding the completed activity, with other students able to add further comments.

Table 7 summarises student responses to the autonomy of working independently in TSA sessions.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
9 I like the TSA sessions because the teacher gives me the freedom to decide on how to improve my English.	35 (36.5%)	51 (53.1%)	9 (9.4%)	1 (1%)	0
10 I prefer the teacher to tell me what to do during the TSA sessions.	1 (1%)	10 (10.4%)	22 (22.9%)	46 (47.9%)	17 (17.7%)
19 When I studied in China, my teachers sometimes gave me the freedom to decide on what I would like to study during English lessons.	1 (1%)	36 (37.5%)	24 (25%)	22 (22.9%)	6 (6.3%)
20 In general, I prefer my teachers to tell me what to do in order to improve my English.	4 (4.2%)	33 (34.4%)	21 (21.9%)	33 (34.4%)	5 (5.2%)

Table 7: Student responses to autonomy in TSA sessions

The majority of students (89.6%) value the freedom accorded to them in TSA sessions to choose activities. However teacher instruction is still valued. Although 11.4% indicated that they would like their teacher to guide them during the TSA session, a significant 38.6% like their teachers to direct their learning in general as is obvious in the following student comments:

- *At the beginning, I think it's better [for the teacher] to tell us what to do during TSA lessons.*
- *I think it will be better if [the] teacher can give us more advice on how to learn English.*
- *[The] teacher should give us some pressure such as giv[ing] us a little homework .*

To a large extent, these students still hold the view that the teacher is the source of learning and that the teacher knows best (Chia 2001). This is quite surprising as the students surveyed were already exposed to the concept of learner autonomy with approximately 45% indicating that when they were studying in China, their teachers sometimes gave them the freedom to decide on what to study during their English lessons.

Table 8 summarises student responses to the statement that working independently in TSA sessions helps them to make decisions about how to improve their English.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
6 Working independently during the TSA sessions helps me decide how I can improve my English.	6 uto (6.3%)	57 (59.4%)	23 (24%)	9 (9.4%)	1 (1%)

Table 3: Preference for TSA sessions as a break from classroom routine

Despite the students showing a preference for teacher directed learning, Table 8 shows that more than 60% of the students believed that the freedom accorded to them in TSA sessions was beneficial in helping them make decisions as to how they could improve their English.

Summary of student comments

Fifty students gave additional comments in the survey and their responses are summarized below.

- Nineteen students indicated that they want more TSA sessions, either in the form of increased frequency per week or an extended session.

- Seven students suggested that there be more teacher input. In addition, the teacher ought to suggest to them the kinds of activities that they can be involved in while at the self-access centre and to help them plan an activity that they can complete. They also see the teacher as helping them organise group work and discussions, and they want the teacher to be involved in discussions so that they can model the teacher's language to improve their speaking skills. Those who indicated a preference for more teacher involvement are perhaps incapable or feel uncomfortable in handling the freedom that is accorded to them.
- One student enjoyed the freedom while another two students indicated that the TSA sessions were beneficial in other aspects:
 - *In my opinion, TSA class is wonderful. It gives us freedom and we can use the time freely to help [improve] the weak points.*
 - *TSA is a good time for us to learn English in a relaxed mood.*
 - *I think it is good and necessary to have TSA as it can help me with self-study.*
- Students also commented that they wanted more and newer videos and books, as well as faster computers in the self-access centre.

The following student comment perhaps epitomises the benefits of running self-access sessions: *Different students have different needs and different proficiency levels. Their individual needs cannot be met during regular classes. However, during TSA sessions, everyone can be involved in some activity based on his/her proficiency.*

Conclusion

The survey shows that most students liked the TSA sessions as a break from their regular classes. The students rated the ability to read and borrow books at the SAC as the highest benefit. They also enjoyed watching videos and listening to cassettes but access to the computers was not highly regarded. Participation in self-access learning was not perceived as highly beneficial in helping them improve their language skills. Despite the fact that less than half the students admitted making full use of their time during TSA sessions to improve their English, they nonetheless believed that engaging in self-access learning made them more responsible in learning English. Although a significant number preferred to be left alone to make decisions during the TSA sessions, almost half the students still preferred their teachers to direct their English learning in general.

Based on the survey of students using the self-access facilities at NIE, the following recommendations are made in relation to maximising the benefit of self-access sessions:

- 1 The rationale for making students work independently should be emphasised at the beginning of the program to allow students to understand the numerous benefits of autonomous learning.
- 2 Students should be prepared before they engage in the activities at the self-access centre. One way to prepare them would be to have them voice their apprehensions and to anticipate problems that may result from these.
- 3 At the beginning of the semester, students should be made to set goals in relation to the areas they want to improve. Teachers could assist students in target setting to ensure that their goals are realistic and achievable.
- 4 Teachers should initially suggest activities for the students, with students gradually becoming more responsible for their own learning
- 6 The students should keep a log of their weekly activities at the centre to motivate them to make full use of their time at the centre.

Unlike most self-access centres in Singapore, where students are sent by teacher referral, all PRC scholars are expected to attend the weekly TSA session. A potentially interesting piece of future research would be to study how students of various proficiency levels view and handle autonomy. Other factors to consider would be the strategies they use and the activities they engage in to improve their language skills.

From the beginning of the 2003/2004 academic year, the Self-access Centre at NIE will be moved to a new location with twenty-five state-of-the-art computers. Each student will have access to a computer which is equipped with an audio-video function. It will be interesting to note if students spend more time engaging in computer-related activities.

As a follow up to this study, a more in-depth study will be conducted in the new semester. As well as administering another questionnaire, students will also be interviewed and asked to keep a journal when they work in the SAC. Through these additional research instruments, it is hoped that further insights will be obtained into the way PRC students participate in self-access learning.

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About the authors

Christian Shyh Chiuan Chia has taught English Language at various institutions including Auckland University of Technology and the National University of Singapore. He is now a lecturer at the National Institute of Education, Singapore and is working on his Doctor of Education degree with the University of Leicester. His research interests include grammar teaching and learning, independent learning, teacher and student beliefs.

E-mail: scschia@nie.edu.sg

Mary Ellis has been a lecturer at the National Institute of Education in Singapore since 1997, where she is currently pursuing her doctoral degree. Previously, she taught in Malaysia and at the University of Wisconsin and Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her research areas include information literacy and learning strategies for Asian students.

E-mail: mellis@nie.edu.sg