

Understanding Autonomous Learning: Students' Perceptions

David Gardner

The Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper reports on the use of a series of open-ended questionnaires to look for signs of increasing complexity in students' own working definitions of the meaning of self-access learning as they became more exposed to it during a 10-week course which included a substantial self-access component designed to provide practical experience in, and raise students' awareness of, autonomous learning. It was expected that such increasing complexity would occur as students learnt about self-access learning and particularly as they engaged with it. Because the self-access component of the course specifically aims to foster learner autonomy it was hypothesised that an increase in the complexity of learners' definitions of self-access would demonstrate a developing awareness of autonomous learning. However, despite a semester-long involvement with self-access learning which included: a self-administered pre-course orientation, a teacher-administered in-course orientation, group discussions about autonomous learning, a 10 week engagement with hands-on self-access learning, and the maintenance by most students of a positive attitude towards the benefits of self-access learning; there is no evidence of developing complexity in students' perceptions and thus no clear indication of a developing awareness of autonomous learning. The reasons for this apparent lack of development remain unexplained by the data.

Introduction

This paper reports on one aspect of a small-scale study which looked at what autonomous learning meant to a small group of students and whether those perceptions changed with increased exposure. It was hypothesised that as exposure to self-access learning increased, the students would develop more sophisticated perceptions which would demonstrate an increasing awareness of self-access as a vehicle for the development of autonomous learning. This paper uses students' own definitions of self-access learning taken from a series of open-response questionnaires used before, during and after the students' exposure to it as a way of providing snapshots of their perceptions at key stages. Comparing these working definitions is a way of determining the extent to which students' perceptions of self-access and its role in developing them as autonomous learners developed.

The study took place while the students were engaged in a university English language course which has a large self-access learning component integrated into it. The major goal of that self-access component is to foster greater learner autonomy by: raising students' awareness of the potential of autonomous learning; guiding students through the process of goal-setting, record-keeping and reflection; encouraging experimentation with learning and exploiting diverse learning opportunities; and involving students in teacher-student and peer group dialogues about autonomous learning.

The importance of understanding the students' perceptions of self-access and autonomous learning and whether they develop with greater exposure lies in the fact that these perceptions are likely to influence students' motivation to continue engaging in autonomous language learning after they have completed their taught courses.

Developing this motivation is important for the students in this study who have further need of language development but for whom no further taught courses are available. In more general terms, this is a need which seems to be emerging in many institutions around the world.

This paper will begin by reviewing what is already known about these students' perceptions of autonomous learning. Then it will describe briefly the context in which this study took place; and the ways in which data were collected. It will then discuss in more detail the findings of the study and finish by trying to make sense of those findings.

Learners' Perceptions of Autonomous Learning

It is clear from the literature that there is no single, accepted definition of learner autonomy (see, for example, Benson, (2009); CIEL Language Support Network, 2000; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Hurd, 2005; Palfreyman, 2003; Smith, 2003) among researchers and teachers. This is further underlined by a study in which even a tight-knit group of language teachers working collaboratively to run a self-access centre demonstrated quite diverse understandings of their goals (Gardner, 2001). Much of that diversity related to individual teachers' varying definitions of autonomous learning. The purpose here is not to discuss that diversity of perceptions among teachers (even though it is fascinating, potentially a good thing and definitely worth returning to in a future study) but rather to illustrate the potential for complexity of perceptions among students faced with the concept for the first time. Paradoxically, perhaps, the student participants in that same study (Gardner, 2001) had perceptions of autonomous learning which were far less complex than their teachers', perhaps even simplistic.

It is not in doubt that learners in varying contexts appreciate and want autonomy. Lamb (2009), for example, reports the desire for control among UK secondary school students, while Sinclair (2009) found a lack of awareness but a readiness to experiment with autonomy among Mainland Chinese language teachers.

A large-scale study with an earlier cohort of students from the same course as the one focused on in this study revealed some broad perceptions among students that self-access learning offered them independence and opportunities for individualisation, and in particular, showed that they placed a high value on learner choice (Gardner, 2007). A separate study, also based on students of the same course, about the relationship between learner motivation and the development of autonomous learning found learners had a positive perception of the concept of self-access learning (Lai, 2007).

In addition to the outcomes from research projects centred on students similar to those who participated in the study described in this paper, the student evaluations of the course conducted at the end of each of its five iterations since self-access learning was integrated into it, have shown that students value self-access learning, believe it is worth doing and report gains from it (in terms of language learning, learning skills, independence and future potential).

Despite the evidence from the research projects and the course evaluations showing that students view the self-access learning component positively and appreciate the freedom it gives them, there has been little clear evidence about the extent to which students have understood what autonomous learning is about.

The Context

The Participants

The 30 participants in the study were members of two sub-groups of students from a group of 540 students taking a second year university EFL course for science majors which contained a self-access learning component. Both sub-groups shared the same English teacher. The students had previously studied English throughout their school careers and had taken, in their first year of undergraduate studies, a 24-contact

hour English for Academic Purposes course. The second year course had a more general theme (i.e. not EAP) with its main focus divided evenly between developing students as autonomous learners and improving their speaking skills but also with a minor focus on writing practice continuing from their first year course. The proficiency levels of students on this course varied from lower intermediate to advanced.

The Self-access Component of the Course

Students undertake a guided self-administered pre-course orientation to familiarise themselves with self-access learning and the self-access facilities of the university and the Internet. In the first session of the course, time is devoted (approximately 25 minutes) to a further orientation to self-access provided by the teacher. During the course students are required to work towards three self-access learning goals. The first (related to students' individual achievement on a grammar diagnostic test) is pre-set (i.e. a requirement) but the others are set individually by students. They have free choice in determining these goals. Students are also asked to record ideas for evaluating their progress. The orientation provided by the teacher covers points about determining and setting individual goals, ways of evaluating progress and the importance of reflection. The teacher is available to offer advice if students want it, but sets no parameters and respects student choices. The goals set by students vary widely in terms of skill areas, topics and degree of focus. For example, one student might set a goal of learning a specific number of new vocabulary items per week whereas another might set a less tangible goal of improving oral fluency.

On-going Support for Self-access

Eight of the designated class hours of the course are handed over to students for doing self-access learning. They are expected to add their own time but no specific number of hours is specified. There is no way to monitor or calculate how much time students actually spend on self-access. Support for self-access learning is also provided through two discussion sessions evenly spaced during the course. In these sessions students report progress and discuss strategies with peers.

Evidence of SALL Activity

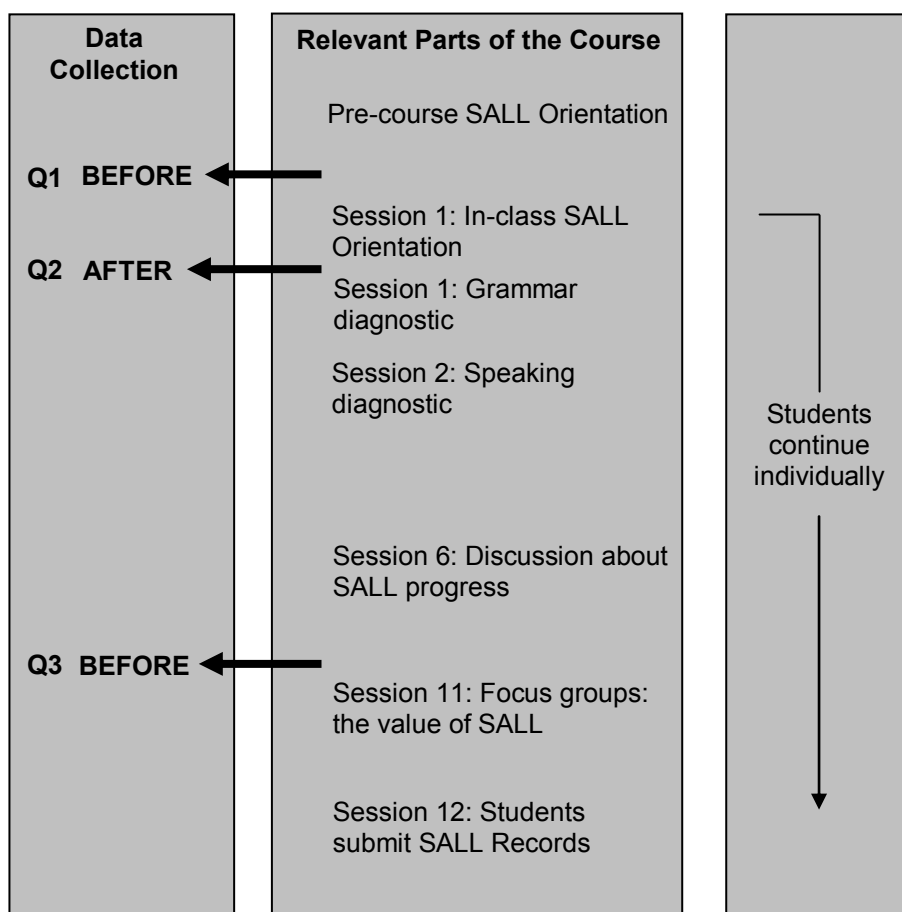
Students are required to keep a self-access record during the course in which they record their goals, activities, progress and reflections. They must submit this record at the end of the course as a demonstration of the commitment they made to self-access learning. This is a cause of complaint from some students who suggest that completing the record increases the workload significantly.

The Data

All the data in this study were collected in English in which participants' are able to function sufficiently well because; self-access learning was conducted as part of an English course during which all materials and discussions are in English; and concepts related to autonomous learning were introduced in English but may have been unfamiliar to many of the students in their own language.

This paper focuses on data drawn from open-ended questionnaires administered before (Q1) and after (Q2) the in-class orientation, and at the end of the course (Q3) (see Figure 1 for the relationship between data collection events and the flow of the course). A comparison of responses from Q1 and Q2 is used to show the effect on students' perceptions, if any, of the teacher's orientation session about self-access. A comparison of responses from Q2 and Q3 is used to show the impact on perceptions, if any, of the students' 10 week period of hands-on experience with self-access learning.

Figure 1: The Relationship between Data Collection Events and the Flow of the Course



All questionnaire responses were open-ended to allow students to express themselves fully and to prevent them being unduly prompted (as would have happened if a checklist had been provided). The purpose of the questionnaires was made clear to students by explaining that:

- responses were confidential, for research purposes only and would not be used for assessment
- answers should be honest
- points should be accompanied by practical examples where possible
- the goal (of the later questionnaires) was to see whether participants' perceptions had changed

The drawback of open-ended questions is that they allow a lot of flexibility in expressing similar or even identical concepts. To facilitate comparison of the responses between all students on each questionnaire and between each questionnaire for the same student, each response was compared to a list of possible items. The list was constructed from the total of all items mentioned by all respondents. Each response was scored by adding one point for each listed item mentioned. The resulting scores were used to compare the completeness of responses as definitions of self-access learning. Thus, a higher score signifies a response which contains more items (i.e. more constituent elements) and is thus considered more detailed or more complete.

The Findings

The findings discussed in this paper relate to the degree to which students understood the concept of self-access learning and by association the concept of autonomous learning that it was intended to promote.

Students' Understanding of the Concept of Self-access Learning

In each of the three questionnaires, students were asked to define self-access learning. The full set of (relevant) constituent elements, that is, discrete parts of a complete definition, used by all respondents is shown in Table 1. For each element mentioned in a response, a point was added to that respondent's score.

Table 1: Check List of Constituent Items Demonstrating Understanding of the Concept of Self-access and/or Autonomous Learning

- 1 Self-/independent/own learning
- 2 Individual differences/needs/wants
- 3 Identify/assess/focus on own/personal needs/weakness(es)/wants
- 4 Produce/choose/set/tailor own plans/goals/targets
- 5 Make/set/monitor/tailor own effort/progress/schedule
- 6 Flexibility of schedule/place/materials/methods
- 7 Self-assessment of learning
- 8 Evaluation of/reflection on methods/progress/self or self-monitoring
- 9 Record progress/keep a record
- 10 Feedback into plan
- 11 Freedom
- 12 Take responsibility for learning/planning/progress
- 13 Self-direction/self-discipline/self-motivation/own initiative
- 14 Contrast with traditional knowledge transfer mode of teaching/learning
- 15 Learning beyond the classroom
- 16 Equip for future learning needs

Initial Understanding of the Concept of Self-access

When students responded to Q1 at the beginning of the course they had completed the pre-course orientation exercise but had not yet heard the teacher's in-class orientation including a detailed explanation of the uses and importance of self-access, including its role in fostering autonomous learning, and how it was incorporated into the course. It is possible that at this stage students would have only a superficial understanding of self-access and, perhaps would not describe it using the key elements which associate it with autonomous learning.

Of the 16 possible areas that could have been mentioned (Table 1) all students scored only between 0 and 6 points in Q1 (with a mean score of 2.53 and a standard deviation of 1.36). It is not surprising that the range is low because self-access was a new concept to almost all of the students on the course. It is also possible that some of the students may not have completed the pre-course orientation although they might still have been able to score one or two points by guessing. For example, almost every student mentioned 'self-learning' which is easy to guess from the title of the orientation and the questionnaire.

It is surprising that no students scored higher than 6 points in the first questionnaire. The higher scores (4 points and above) are restricted to only 5 of the 30 students whereas the lower scores are evenly spread among the majority of students. Taken together the above points suggest that the pre-course orientation only provided

students with a basic understanding of the nature of self-access language learning. The majority of students expressed their basic understanding in relatively simple but clear terms like:

Learn English alone. Without tutor or teacher. LRC provided all the materials needed.

[LRC = Language Resource Centre (the self-access centre)]

Or:

I think SALL is a kind of learning in which I have to find out what's my weaknesses.

Understanding of the Concept of Self-access after the In-class Orientation

The expectation in designing the course to include a teacher's orientation conducted in class as a follow up to the self-administered pre-course orientation was that it would have a significant impact by adding depth to students' understanding of the concept of self-access and autonomous learning. Q2 was administered immediately after the teacher's in-class orientation. A comparison of scores for Q1 and Q2 (Table 2) reveals unexpectedly that the impact of the teacher's orientation was minimal. This is shown by no change in the range of scores across the two questionnaires and a minimal change in the distribution of scores.

Table 2: A Comparison of Scores for Questionnaires 1 and 2

	Q1	Q2
Max	6	6
Min	0	0
Mean	2.53	2.6
Std	1.36	1.4

In addition, a comparison of the individual students' scores for Questionnaires 1 and 2, that is before and after the teacher's orientation session, shows there is no statistically significant difference (using a paired t-test, $p=0.73$). That is to say, students expressed about the same level of detail in their understanding of self-access learning after the teacher's orientation session as they had before it. On an individual basis some students did increase their level of complexity in describing what self-access meant to them but equally others decreased. These changes were small (and it should be remembered that the overall range was small and did not change from Questionnaire 1 to 2) and apparently random.

These results definitely do not meet the expectation established during course development that the teacher's orientation would enrich students' understandings of self-access learning. A possible explanation for this lack of increase in the number of points mentioned by students in defining self-access might be due to:

- a) no increase in their understanding
- b) a belief (perhaps emerging from the teacher's explanation) that self-access can be defined by just one of the constituent elements although this is unlikely as the students did not all mention the same points
- c) questionnaire fatigue, although this seems unlikely as the questionnaires were spaced out and also because the same problem appeared with questionnaires conducted in other weeks when there was no fatigue

Understanding of the Concept of Self-access by the End of the Course

It was predicted that by the end of the course students would have a deeper understanding of self-access and autonomous learning. It was expected that this would result in richer descriptions in their definitions. By this time, students had had a chance to listen to the explanations of the early orientations, participate in in-class discussions about self-access learning, share ideas and swap strategies with peers, and, perhaps most importantly, gain hands-on experience during the 10 weeks of the course in which they were spending a minimum of one hour a week pursuing their own goals in self-access learning. It seemed a reasonable expectation that many students would have developed a clearer perception of self-access learning and the role it plays in fostering autonomous learning. It was expected that students would mention more of the constituent elements of a complete definition of autonomous learning, not least because they had been exposed to group discussions in which the concepts were discussed.

However, the distribution of scores for students' definitions of self-access in Questionnaire 3 varies only slightly from those reported for Questionnaires 1 and 2 (Table 3). This means that despite the considerable additional input and practical experience they engaged in, students' definitions of self-access language learning were no more detailed than previously.

Table 3: Distribution of Scores in All Questionnaires

	Q1	Q2	Q3
Max	6	6	7
Min	0	0	0
Mean	2.53	2.6	3.2
Std	1.36	1.4	1.83

More importantly, it should be noted that a comparison of individual students' scores in Questionnaire 2 and Questionnaire 3 showed that the differences were not statistically significant (using a paired t-test, $p=0.14$). Some individual students' scores did change. Some decreased and some increased between the two questionnaires while others' did not change at all. However, these changes have no significance because the overall scores remained within the same range. The changes were, in effect, random. There is no easy explanation for this result other than those suggested above to explain the lack of significant difference between scores before and after the teacher's orientation session.

It is clear that, contrary to expectations, there was no overall increase in the complexity of students' definitions of self-access despite being exposed to discussion and practice over a 10 week period.

Conclusion

This study set out to look for evidence of increasing complexity in students' definitions of self-access learning as they became more familiar with it over a period of time through exposure to explanations, peer discussion and hands-on experience. Although many students were able to construct reasonably clear definitions of self-access learning following their initial self-administered orientation to it, their definitions did not become more comprehensive or complex as a result of listening to a teacher's orientation or as a result of 10 weeks of hands-on experience with self-access. This was contrary to the initial expectation that when self-access was explained by a teacher and especially as students became more practically involved with it, they would develop a greater understanding of it resulting in more complete definitions which

included a greater number of the elements which constitute a fuller definition of autonomous learning. This did not happen. It is worth noting that despite a lack of development in their definitions other data from the study (not reported here) demonstrates that the students maintained a positive attitude to self-access learning throughout the period of the study. This suggests that the lack of development of their working definitions was not a result of a waning interest in self-access learning. It is possible, although not demonstrable, that there was a difference of perception that was not matched by an increase in ability to express the difference and this is something that needs to be considered in a later study.

Although this study has been unable to determine why students' perceptions of self-access learning, as expressed in their definitions of it, do not develop significantly it has served to reveal that, within this specific area the role of the teacher's orientation is clearly insignificant. This is not to say that the orientation does not serve other roles but it seems, unexpectedly, to have had no significant impact in developing students' definitions of self-access learning. Because all the data in this study relates to students who were subjected to an orientation by the same teacher it is not clear to what extent the lack of development relates to the teacher as opposed to the orientation session.

It is equally clear that engaging in hands-on experience has also had no significant effect in developing the complexity of students' expressions of the meaning of self-access learning. This finding relates only to student's' definitions of what they are doing. It does not imply in any way that engaging in self-access learning was not productive and also does not suggest that this experience has not had an effect in fostering learner autonomy.

It might be easy but also erroneous to jump to the conclusion that this study shows students did not understand self-access learning and did not develop their learner autonomy. However, the study simply shows that there is no evidence that students were able to define self-access learning in any more detail at the end of the study than at the beginning. It must be acknowledged that while it may seem logical that a developing understanding of self-access learning and its associated impact on learner autonomy would be accompanied by a developing ability to define it in more detail, this may not be true or, at least, there may be a lag in the development of this ability.

Perhaps a next step is to extend the study to a larger group of students to see if the results are replicated and whether the results can be influenced by changing the teacher who conducts the orientation. In addition, it would be important to give further consideration to the relationship between students' perceptions of self-access and/or autonomous learning and their ability to express those perceptions, especially the degree to which changes in the former can be adequately matched by changes in the latter.

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