Learning more than inside the Classroom, Introduction to Self-Access Centers

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While it is a problematic task to proclaim a definitive statement on the amount of time necessary to acquire a second language because of individual differences, language separation, and teaching styles, there have been researchers who have reported on this topic. From Nakashima (2006), 2,000 to 5,000 hours are necessary to achieve basic proficiency in a second language starting from an earlier age than most Japanese learners, who generally start to study at the junior high school level. Time in the classroom is but a sliver of that figure as most students in the Japanese educational system have typically received only 740-920 hours of English classroom education by the end of high school. (Hato, 2005, p. 40) How can universities get this number up so that students can be more communicative and increase their intrinsic motivation? Creating more opportunities on campus for interaction outside of class in the second language is one solution. Self-access Centers have been part of a movement of encouraging students to be more motivated to study and stretch themselves. An option for some universities is to provide a place for students on tertiary level campuses to have self-access learning centers to supplement language learning in the classroom. Various researchers have been looking into the ways to measure success in a self-access center, what hinders students from utilizing the centers, and the effects, if any, the self-access centers have on the students. Students join these centers to further their studies on their own, to improve their scores, or improve their grammatical understanding and vocabulary. This first step into independent studies will be a tool the student may apply for the rest of their life, and is encouraged in these settings.

Self Access Centers (SAC) will have a part to play in second language acquisition as its use becomes even more widespread. Students will have the opportunity to see language outside of the classroom; not as a subject or something to be learned, rather language as something to be used to communicate with others from around the world and at the same time, create the *esprit de corps* of a community of second language users on campus.

Development of Self-Access Centers

From the 1960's, research in English language learning and teaching tended to focus on the teaching methods rather than the learner. The change in the focus from a teacher centered to a learner-centered curriculum in the 1970's and 1980's resulted in a more humanistic approach in the English language teaching process. (Morrison, 2008) As this trend deepened, students have searched for, "some personal control over either or both the planning (goals) and management (support) of the learning process" (Reinders & Lazarro, 2008)

Self-access centers can find its roots in the domain of *resourced-based learning*, which is a type of learning where the learner's focus of interaction is with the learning resources. The students are enabled/empowered to learn in the manner of their choosing outside of the teaching environment. One important part of the 'self-access' aspect of the learning style is that this learning resource further develops and has as one of its main goals as the progression of the learner's autonomy.

The environment the Self-Access Centers provides a haven for motivational support. Students with the same ideals and interest in speaking a second language may inspire each other to do better. The center is a place for students to experience the second language outside the classroom. Learners may have a positive experience without the teacher, experiencing the language at their pace, not the teacher-lead environment of the classroom. The atmosphere of speaking only in the second language may provide a positive stressor to the students, and increase their motivation as the pressure is from their peers not from above.

Many of the Self-Access Centers (SAC) are open to students on campus during regular school hours. The SAC provide an area for learning to take place independent of teaching in the classrooms. It also provides another place to receive exposure to English. These centers may also give students guidance and advice on how they may create their own self-study program. Some SAC have places to study using multi-media sources. Students may use DVD's, videos, or computers to study. Some have reading rooms where students may choose from magazines, books, and newspapers. The center may also provide reading, writing, or grammar practice, vocabulary exercises, or may have previous years' tests or exams for students to use. The most important resource of the center is the staff. The staff members provide practice for students in listening and speaking. Some SAC have

scheduled private teaching sessions or test preparation lessons.

Close integration with teachers of foreign language classes and international students or the corresponding center for International Studies are also key support for the success of the Self-Access Center. If the staff of the SAC could work with teachers to provide tasks or homework to overcome the hurdle of fear attempting to communicate in a foreign language outside of the rote drills controlled by the teacher and restraining rules. Without such structure, many students are befuddled on how to enter such an unknown territory. Such freedom outside of classroom constraints are key to forcing the students to confront their paradigm of language learning how it can be used to communicate and relate ideas. Classes can be brought to the SAC facilities for introduction to what is offered. Teachers should help prepare the students for success when they bring the students so that it will be a positive experience. Homework could be given to utilize the learning tools offered at the SAC. Passports could be made to record students' attendance in the SAC and the record could be shown to language teachers for homework points, extra credit, or some other benefit to motivate students. Of course, using such extrinsic motivation is not in itself 'self' access, but training students to feel relaxed and then stoke the fire of intrinsic motivation. Scaffolding between classes and the SAC will bring quasi-outside of class experience that will lead to students further being motivated to study language outside of class.

Assessment is Still a Work in Progress
As research on self-access centers is still in its infancy, deciding how to assess the centers has brought to light some of the difficulties in measuring success in this type of educational setting. Various parties within the university system with vested interest in self-access centers would like to see results that prove it is a cost effective and time effective approach to learning. (Reinders & Lazarro, 2008)

The difficulties in assessing the success of SAC are many fold. Measuring the gains students make from accessing the center is difficult at best. Student work in the center may be because of the opportunities afforded to the students by the school, or by the motivation of the student. Gardner and Miller (1999) suggest some ways of evaluating the effectiveness of the SAC such as:
- Asking learners which facilities they used most
- Asking staff about their work at the SAC and the learners there

- Conducting observations of the facilities and student interactions
- Giving out questionnaires to a random sample of users to find out why they use the SAC. (Reinders & Lazarro, 2008)

One other way of measuring the SAC was to see the roles it played on campus and how it fulfilled those roles. Some of the roles identified, were to serve as a language learning and independent learning center, a learner support area, a resource center, and as an enabling center. Different from a resource center, the enabling role is one where the center will act as a catalyst for the development of independent learning skills and encourage further experimentation and enhancement to language learning skills. (Morrison, 2008)

Measuring SAC, which are easy to forget that they are 100% voluntary, is not ready to be labeled tried and true. SAC are not a regular part of a curriculum, so students study at their own pace and on their own volition. Further research needs to be done on how a SAC operates on the increase of motivation and how it interacts with the process of learning.

Self-Access Center Success

Many of the previous research on SAC have included surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and evaluations given to students. Students who are willing to put the extra effort into learning have insightful comments on how the centers have changed their lives.

One learner gave his reason for visiting the SAC, "⋯when I find there is something I need to use in English and then I will go to the centre to find things out." (Morrison, 2008)

Other ways that SAC are measured are through the staff and their comments on their interactions with the students. One staff mentioned on how the SAC will further students' learning strategies, "⋯ I think the more that students experiment with things, the more they learn about themselves, strategies that are suitable for themselves, the ways they like to learn⋯" (Morrison, 2008)

Some ways to improve the SAC and make it more of a success come from different research and pedagogical backgrounds. Teachers and staff need to encourage the students of the need for the importance of learning these self-access skills and be proactive. To make the first step is the most difficult, but also the most rewarding. Hayo Reinders says that giving school credits to students for

their effort in the SAC will help with recognition of their time spent and encourage further language acquisition. Students may work more efficiently and have higher motivation, which will keep the effort of various staff from going to waste. Reinders continues to suggest that students may benefit in staff teaching students how to study to become more of an independent learner. (Reinders, 2005)

In the literature, the majority of the authors expressed trepidation, or the need for further research into the ways to measure success in SAC. Lumping students into one group as in a survey or some other latitudinal study does not do justice to the independent work each student accomplishes and the effort to take part in something outside of class. Success can be measured in test scores, but can also be measured in student satisfaction, changed lives, and growth in independent learning. Success can be simply to support learners in their lifelong linguistic endeavors.

Conclusion

With the growth of number of second language learners around the world, support for these students has become increasingly important at the university level. Studies have identified the SAC have a main role in focusing on both increasing linguistic knowledge and fluency, while at the same time developing effective learning strategies. These main roles fit the needs of the students as teachers may have difficulty addressing these types of proficiencies within the constraints of the classroom. Teachers may not have the time to spend with each separate student or be trained to counsel students on an individual level. Other secondary roles are to provide an encouraging learning space, applicable resources, and advisors sensitive to individual needs and the ability to lead students in further independent learning.

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Learning more than inside the Classroom An Introduction to Self-Access Learning Centers at the university level

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Abstract

This paper explains how time spent in second language classrooms is not enough for students to acquire a second language. One avenue for some tertiary level students is to find outlets to further their classroom knowledge and transform that classroom study into higher communicative ability with self-study outside of class. Self-access Centers are such a place where motivated students may study to find an additional outlet for their desire to learn more and provide resources to help the students attain their goals. Studies into Self-Access Centers are still not mature and cost-performance issues are difficult to measure and always challenging university budgets. With implementing such centers, a successful program can produce a student body with higher motivation and access to tools to meet their second language acquisition goals.