PATTERNS OF SAC UTILIZATION AND THE SINE QUA NON OF THE SELF-PROPELLED DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFI-CIENCY

Furaidah
Universitas Negeri Malang

Suharmanto
Universitas Negeri Malang

Abstract: This article reports on a study intended to find out the patterns of the Self Access Center (SAC) utilization by students of the English Departments, State University of Malang, and to explore the most effective pattern in developing students' English proficiency as well as students' learning autonomy. The study involved 207 students of various years. The data were collected through questionnaires, observations, and interviews. Analyses of the students' responses to the questionnaires resulted in the findings that the more advanced the students were, the less frequently they utilized the SAC; that the students' proficiency was improving along with classes; and that the students were autonomous in their learning. In addition, the study also found out that the materials and activities need to be periodically updated in order for the SAC to better serve the learning needs of the more advanced students.

Key words: SAC, patterns of utilization, proficiency, learning autonomy, self-study materials.

In this fast changing world, learners, according to Dickinson (1987), need to be autonomous. Autonomous learners are characterized by several characteristics, some of which are learners understand their learning goal which means

that they understand what is being taught, have personal learning goal, and are capable of choosing and evaluating their learning strategies and monitoring their learning progress (Dickinson, 1987; Huda, 1999).

The concept of autonomy originated from the discussion on the development of life long learning skills which emerged in the 1960s (Garder & Miller, 1999). The concept of autonomy is defined as a situation in which learners are responsible for the decisions they make about their learning and the implementation of the decisions. In the context of second or foreign language learning, producing autonomous learners should become every teacher's mission (Brown, 2001). Autonomous learners will make strategic investment for their own success. Learning is a life time experience, so that autonomy is continuously needed. This means that autonomous learners are capable of using opportunities, inside or outside the class meetings, to always learn and try.

The concept of autonomy in language learning is, historically and theoretically, related to communicative approach (Nunan, 2000). Historically, this concept is related to the fading belief in behaviorism which tries to explain the process of language acquisition. Researchers in communicative approach show the relationship between autonomy and learners' communicative competence.

Theoretically, communicative and autonomy theories are discussed in relation with studies on learning goals and teaching effectiveness. Theories show that in a classroom context, incongruity between a teacher's and learners' perception about what the learners are studying frequently takes place. Nunan (1995:135) states that when a teacher is busy teaching something at the same time the students are concentrating on something else. Some studies also question the effectiveness of teaching, and that learning a second or foreign language will be successful if learners are given opportunity to develop and sharpen their autonomy.

Approaches which develop learners' autonomy are called with many names, such as; self-directed learning, self instruction, independent learning, and self access learning. These names all share one proposition that it is important to encourage learners to personally create and actively pursue their learning goals.

Learning autonomy is defined as the ability to direct learning, and the development of this ability is pivotal in the whole process of learning. According to Benson (2001) autonomy can be developed using various approaches which intrinsically can grow the autonomy. Those approaches are resource-based ap-

proach, technology-based approach, learner-based approach, classroom-based approach, curriculum-based approach, and teacher-based approach.

The discussion on the significance of learning autonomy also raises an issue on the needs to provide facilities for autonomous learning. Self access is a term which is frequently used in the context of autonomous learning which is based on resource-based approach. Self Access Center is an autonomous learning facility which provides learning materials for its visitors (Harmer, 2001). It is called as autonomous learning facility because in SAC students or visitors can study independently with their friends without the presence of an instructor who explains a certain thing.

SAC provides various materials from printed materials to audio visual ones. Learning materials in SAC are designed in several levels of difficulties and users can choose which material to study according to the level of their abilities. Key answers are also provided to accompany written exercises so that users can self check their work.

The English Department of State University of Malang in August 2003 established an SAC and Furaidah in 2004 conducted an action research which aimed at increasing the achievement of the students attending the Intensive Course by implementing extra curricular learning activities in the SAC. She found out that the learning activities in the SAC could help the low achievers in the Intensive Course increase their language competence related to grammar. However, the same case did not apply to vocabulary and reading. From this study the researcher recommended the need to design more intensive learning assignments in the SAC for the students and monitor the learning activities in the SAC so that learning autonomy could develop.

The establishment of the SAC can theoretically develop students to be autonomous learners. Therefore, it is important to conduct this study which investigated the pattern of the SAC utilization by the English Department students in increasing the students' language competence independently. This study aims at describing the patterns of SAC utilization by the students and finding the most effective patterns of utilization which can increase the students' English competence and learning autonomy.

METHOD

This study employed descriptive qualitative design which aimed at describing the patterns of the SAC utilization by the English students of the Faculty of Letters, Malang State University. The SAC utilization served as a means to increase the students' English proficiency independently. Quantitative data were also collected to provide information about the general patterns of the SAC utilization by the English Department students from all class years and particular class years.

The subjects of this study were 207 English Department students from all classes (year 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007 classes) and two study programs, English Literary and English Education. The inclusion of these 207 students was intended to get comprehensive description about the patterns of the SAC utilization by those students which were important for the future development plan of the SAC.

The main instruments for the data collection were the researchers themselves. Other supporting instruments were a list of guiding questions for interview with the SAC administrator and three kinds of questionnaires. The first questionnaire was used to obtain data about the SAC utilization. The second questionnaire inquired the students' perception about their English proficiency. In this instrument the students self -measured their English proficiency by using a rating scale which covered the four language skills. The third questionnaire was used to measure the degree of students' autonomy or independence. The 13 questions covered in the third instrument dealt with students' knowledge about the objective of learning activities in the SAC, their weaknesses related to English proficiency and ways to overcome them, ways to develop their English proficiency, and their perception about the presence of a lecturer in the SAC.

The interview guide was developed by modifying the interview instrument developed by Stutridge (1997) which addressed important issues in effective management of the SAC like (1) management, (2) facility, (3) staff training and development, (4) learners training and development, and (4) materials. In addition to interviews, observations were also conducted to get data related to those issues.

The next step after data collection was analysis which was done based on the following procedure: checking the validity of the data, tabulating and coding, classifying, identifying, interpreting data and drawing conclusion. The in-

terviews with the SAC administrator serves as a means for triangulation for the data collected from the questionnaires and observations. Interpretation of data was based on the principles of effective foreign language learning as suggested by Brown (2001) and Harmer (2001).

RESULTS

This study found out that the older the class years of the students the fewer the number of them who became the member of the SAC. This was also in line with the finding about the frequency of the students' visit to SAC. There was a tendency that the more advanced the students were, the bigger the number of the students who stated that they never visited the SAC. In contrast, none of the freshmen stated that they never visited the SAC.

When asked further about the average time for utilizing the SAC, most students stated that they made use of the SAC approximately between one to two hours. Next to that, this study also shows that the more advanced the classes were, the smaller the amount of time used to utilize the SAC in every visit. However, normally when older students used the SAC then the time spent was longer.

Dealing with the service in the SAC, there was one site assistant who was in charge of serving the students. However, the function of this site assistant was mostly to watch the place. The assistant had never received any training concerning with SAC management so that he had not been able to function optimally, such as giving academic assistance. In addition, the students also mentioned that the SAC staff needed to be friendlier. In response to the question about the significance of a lecturer, most of the students said that the presence of a lecturer in the SAC was still important.

The work mechanism in the SAC was currently very simple and tended to be just like a library. So far, there had been no directions on how to make use of the learning materials provided most effectively. Besides, the SAC had not developed record keeping for students' learning data which could be used by the students and lecturers to monitor learning progress. Pre test and post test to gauge the entry behavior and learning gain had not been provided. A document which was actively used was only an attendance record.

With regard to the goal of the SAC, the students in general could mention that it was a self study learning facility. This finding shows that the students

understood the goal of the establishment of the SAC. However, there were students who still regarded the SAC as a comfortable place for reading, finding information, and doing internet. This is not surprising as the SAC, so far, has been the only learning place which is air conditioned, and equipped with sofas and the internet. Some students also viewed the SAC as an alternative activity for missing classes caused by the absence of their lecturers. This indicates that students were reluctant to use the SAC outside of their scheduled classes.

When asked about what they usually did when they were in the SAC, most students mentioned that there was no one dominant activity which became their favorite. All mentioned activities generally done by the students. However, game and reading activity had bigger percentage of use than other activities.

The students were also asked about their reason for choosing a self study material or activity. Their responses show their understanding about the reason for the establishment of the SAC. Most of the students realized that their preference about what to do or to learn in the SAC should be based on personal interest and needs.

How was the collection in the SAC? An interview with the SAC staff revealed that SAC did not have a plan to update its collection periodically. What had been done so far was to include the collection update plan into the English Department's proposal competing for a competitive development grant from the government.

Concerning ways of learning in the SAC which utilizes self study model, the learning materials in the SAC should have been designed accordingly. So far, the materials which had been designed accordingly were only 25%. These were in the forms of laminated graded materials for grammar, reading, and vocabulary. The levels of difficulties were indicated by 3 colors: green meant easy, blue more difficult, and red the most difficult. The materials were arranged in open shelves so that students could directly use them.

In response to the question about the way in using the learning materials in the SAC,   the students stated that they moved from one material to another to find the most interesting one. They usually also finished a material that they already chose. When they did an exercise, they would check their answer with the provided answer keys. However, some other students admitted that they did not have specific patterns in utilizing the materials in the SAC. The students responses toward the question about the way they use the learning materials tended to be similar with their responses toward the question about they way they did the activities in SAC. Their responses show that there was no domi-

nant activity or learning materials that became their favorite. This means that all activities and learning materials in the SAC were evenly chosen by the students.

When asked about the usefulness of the materials in the SAC in helping them increase their English proficiency, most students answered that they were very useful. It was also found that the less advanced the students were, the bigger the number who stated the positive role of the SAC in helping them increase their English proficiency. None of the 2007 class stated that the SAC was less useful or not useful at all.

How were the students' comments about the SAC in general? There were two opposing opinions among the subjects of this study. Analyzed qualitatively, most comments from more advanced classes (juniors and seniors of 2004 and 2005 classes) were negative while most comments from younger students (freshmen and sophomores of 2006 and 2007 classes) were more positive.

When asked to make a self reflection on their weaknesses related to language components (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation), the students could identify problems they perceived as their weaknesses. The result shows that the number of the students who thought that they were good at grammar was bigger than the number of students who thought they were good at vocabulary and pronunciation. When asked about ways to solve their weaknesses, the students said that to overcome their weaknesses related to grammar, most of them read grammar books or did grammar exercises.

Related to weaknesses in vocabulary, most students overcame the problems by reading simplified and non-simplified novels, books, and magazines. Few students tried to overcome it by watching movies, using dictionary, listening to English songs, memorizing new vocabulary, or keeping notes for difficult words. Dealing with pronunciation problems, there was not any dominant way that the students used to overcome them. Activities like learning from dictionary, speaking in English, watching films and videos, listening to radio, and having pronunciation exercises were mentioned by the students with relatively even frequency.

When asked to reflect on their weaknesses related to the four language skills, most of the students said that they felt incompetent in listening, speaking and writing and more competent in reading.

What did the students think about their language proficiency? Using the self assessment scale which consists of the description of 7 levels of English

proficiency, the students who were involved in this study perceived that the average score of their English was 4.55 for listening, 4.49 for speaking, 4.55 for reading, and 4.49 for writing. It was also found that the older the classes of the students the higher they rated their English proficiency for all language skills. However, the analysis on the average score of each class revealed that the more advanced classes did not dare to give the highest score for their English proficiency. This is indicated by the result of their self assessment. None of their average score reached 6. The average scores were 5.51 for listening, 5.71 for speaking, 5.74 for reading, and 5.52 for writing.

DISCUSSION

This study found the tendency showing that the more advanced the classes of the students were, the bigger the number of the students who stated that they never visited the SAC. In contrast, none of the freshmen stated that they never visited the SAC. In line with that finding is the fact that senior students spent less time than the junior ones in their visit to the SAC. . However, normally when older students used the SAC then the time spent was longer. The junior students also had more favorable comments about the availability of the learning materials in the SAC.

This tendency can be traced back to the opposing opinions of the senior and junior students. Senior students seemed to have bigger dissatisfactions about the availability of learning materials in the SAC that could not meet their more advanced learning needs.

The following are some examples of the negative comments from the senior students:

- *"The books are not complete, cannot be checked out. That makes me reluctant to go there." "*
- *"I want to do some internet but the internet facility is so slow."*
- *"The facilities are not sufficient, the listening equipment needs updating, the internet needs speeding up, the site assistant needs to be friendlier."*
- *"The reading and audio visual materials are out of date. Senior students should be treated accordingly. We don't need graded materials (the laminated reading, grammar, vocabulary materials). We need practical things like movies from which we can study grammar, listening, syntax, vocabu-*

lary, and culture. The materials are not enough for us so we are reluctant to visit SAC."

- *"The place is nice, but the facilities need to be developed. The site assistant is not friendly and the internet is poor."*

The tendency showing that junior students visited the SAC more frequently was in line with their favorable comments about the SAC though they also still complained about the bandwidth capacity of the internet. The following are some examples of comments from the freshmen and sophomores.

- *"It helps us a lot in increasing our English proficiency. Great."*
- *"It is very useful for students because we can get a lot of information and can have conversation with our friends."*
- *"The facilities are sufficient and interesting, the place is comfortable, the internet facility is not good."*
- *"Convenient, complete, internet is poor."*
- *"Very important for students of literary department because finding books and novels in English is difficult (and expensive)."*

Juxtaposed with the findings about the condition of the SAC, the tendency was not surprising. Data from interviews and observations showed the minimum capacity of the SAC to meet the learning needs of senior students. The availability of the self study learning materials, for instance, was only 25% of the whole SAC collections and so far the SAC has not had a plan to update its collections periodically. The SAC had not developed a learning system which could give learning feedback to its users either, and the SAC staff had never received any SAC training so that the academic function of the SAC staff could not be optimally realized.

Referring to an SAC performance, Benson (2001) states that the failure or success of an SAC is determined by two factors: the design of the materials for independent learning and the management of an SAC. In terms of material design, the following issues should be addressed by those planning to establish an SAC: Can the location be accessed easily? Are the facilities sufficiently good? Are the learning materials periodically updated? Does the arrangement of the materials stimulate the development of learning autonomy? Do the materials state explicitly their learning objectives? Are the materials accompanied with clear instructions? Are they also equipped with instrument for self evaluation,

for instance, in the form of a test? Do the materials give learning feedback? Are the materials designed and arranged with clear gradation of difficulties? From the management point of view, the establishment of an SAC should consider questions like: Is there any training for SAC staff? Is there any feedback mechanism for SAC staff concerning their work performance? Sheerin (1997) adds that a successful SAC usually has good management and utilization which is frequently integrated with language learning process so that the SAC can be used by learners who are in all stages of learning process, from the beginning level to the advanced one.

These all mean that the English Department of the State University of Malang, which established the SAC still needs to improve the institution if the SAC is expected to be able to meet the learning needs of all classes of different levels of English proficiency.

Despite the imperfectness of the SAC, the students in general understood the reason for the establishment of the SAC as a self study learning center and that the preference about what to do and what to learn in the SAC should be based on personal interest and needs.

One the findings shows the tendency of the senior students to spend less time in the SAC than the junior ones, but normally when older students used the SAC then the time spent was longer. Longer time spent means more investment which should result in better language proficiency. However, the finding about the students' self reflection on their English proficiency shows that none of the senior students confidently stated that their English proficiency was on the top scale or reached the score of 6. The average scores were 5.51 for listening, 5.71 for speaking, 5.74 for reading, and 5.52 for writing. This is likely related to their unfavorable comments about the capacity of the SAC which could not meet their learning needs optimally. The score which is not optimal also indicates that they had some learning problems with their English competence and needs improvements. They should actively seek for solutions, one of which is to study in the SAC outside of their class meeting.

Brown (2001) states that one determinant factor in the success of language learning is strategic investment. Strategic investment means the amount of time, efforts, and attention invested by a learner to learn and use the target language. However, these senior students could not make the strategic investment to boost their language proficiency because of the insufficient learning facilities in the SAC.

Dealing with the characteristics of autonomous learners, the subjects of this study all shared these. Chanock (2004) states that someone can be considered autonomous if she or he can evaluate her or his learning and is responsible to solve problems faced.

Little (1991) defines learning autonomy as a capacity to make detachment or critical reflection and make independent decision and action. Autonomy is also related to learner's psychological relationship with the learning process and content which can be categorized as metacognitive strategies in the form of learner's involvement in a learning process. The involvement includes the capacity to plan his or her self study, monitor learning progress, and ability to learn from mistakes.

The capacity to be autonomous later can be seen from a learner's ability to transfer what he or she learns to a wider context. Detachment involves the students' ability to understand why they have to learn English and see the benefit of a learning activity. The next aspect of autonomy is the capacity to do self reflection, which means that students can see their strengths and weaknesses. The result of the questionnaire shows that the students could identify their strengths and weaknesses of their language proficiency related to the mastery of language components and language skills. Being autonomous also means that the students are capable of making decisions based on the information about kinds of activities and their level of difficulties.

The analysis of the students' knowledge about learning goals in the SAC, their reflection about the level of their English proficiency, weaknesses and ways to overcome them, ways to develop their English proficiency indicate the presence of the characteristics autonomous learners.

Concerning with weaknesses, the students were capable of making self reflection on their weaknesses concerning their mastery of language components and language skills. The result of the reflection cannot be separated from the learning context of English as a foreign language in Indonesia in which language proficiency is more frequently obtained through conscious learning than subconscious acquisition. Therefore, it is not surprising if the students in this study felt more competent in grammar and reading than in the other language components and skills.

However, most of the subjects of this study also still mentioned the importance of a lecturer's presence to guide how to overcome their language weaknesses. This means that lecturers need to equip the students with language learning strategies usually employed by successful language learners. In addi-

tion to that, students need to learn the characteristics of a successful good language learner. Brown (2001) and Harmer (2001) state that by learning those characteristics, a learner will also indirectly learn about the principles of language learning. The knowledge about the principles will help them develop to be autonomous learner

The tendency of expecting the presence of a lecturer is in line with the result of a study by Zou (2006). Zou's finding shows that students who were already highly autonomous still needed the presence of their lecturers. According to him, this fact may be related to the learning culture which is teacher-centered. In Asia, the dependence on the teachers is, in general, still very high. After one-month experiment which involved students in an SAC, Zou found out that some subjects lost their self study enthusiasm and felt confused about what to do. This means, in line with Chanock's suggestion (2004), autonomous learning does not mean total absence of lecturers or instructors during the learning process. Dependence on the instructors, in certain cases, can actually reflect learning autonomy. When students face problems, for instance, they know when to ask their lecturers.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the foregoing description and discussion, several conclusions are drawn as follows. First, the more advanced the classes of the students the bigger the number of the students who did not become the member of the SAC. This is in accordance with the finding about the frequency of the students' visit to SAC which reveals that the more advanced the classes were the bigger number of the students who said that they never or rarely went to the SAC. None of the freshmen and sophomores mentioned that they never visited the SAC. If this is compared with the result of the interviews with the SAC staff which shows that the SAC did not have a periodic plan to renew its collection, it can be predicted that more advanced students may have used all of the materials in the SAC and the SAC became a place which could not attract them anymore. In other words, the SAC is utilized more by most or even all students of less advanced classes and left by the students of more advanced classes. This condition was caused by the condition of the materials which could not meet the needs of the more advanced students. The unfriendliness of the site assistant also increased the more advanced students' reluctance. These all mean that

the success of the SAC depends on two things, i.e.: the right design of the materials for self study activities and the management of the SAC utilization.

Second, there was also a tendency that the students from more advanced classes perceived their English proficiency higher. However, none of their scores reached the optimal score of 7.This is likely related to the limited capacity of the SAC in meeting the senior students' learning needs which influenced the intensity of the strategic investment the senior students could realize.

Third, the students in this study could be categorized as autonomous as indicated by their ability to make self reflection on their competence in language components (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) and language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) and the ways to overcome their weaknesses. The result of their reflection cannot be separated from the context of English as a foreign language whose learning process tends to be geared more to conscious learning than to subconscious acquisition. Therefore, it is not surprising that these students felt that they mastered grammar and reading skills better than the other language components and skills.

Dealing with the management of the SAC, the SAC of English Department needed to be updated periodically to meet the learning needs of students of various years. This study shows that the less advanced students felt that the number and the variety of learning activities and materials is sufficiently a lot and varied. On the other hand, the more advanced felt the opposite. The SAC staff also needed to establish more supporting attitude by performing friendlier attitude to increase students' motivation to utilize the SAC. Sherin (1997) states that a successful SAC usually has a good management and utilization system which is frequently integrated into language learning process. The integration allows an SAC to be used by students of all learning stages, from beginners to advanced learners.

Based on the aforementioned conclusions, some suggestions are proposed as follows. First, lecturers need to collaborate to design the optimal utilization of the SAC. The collaboration can be in the forms of , for instance, assigning students to make some investigation to find certain fact about a topic by exploring information in the SAC. The integration of lectures and SAC activities can help develop learning autonomy better.

Second, the SAC needs to update and increase the number of its collection periodically if it aims to be a professional SAC which can meet the learning needs of students of all years and learning stages. The SAC also needs to train its staff to be more responsive to the students' demands. In addition, the SAC

needs to develop a record keeping system which can be used by lecturers and students to monitor students' learning progress. The data resulted from the record keeping help lecturers and students make correct learning diagnose and remedial treatment. The record keeping also allows students to evaluate their own learning and to be responsible to overcome their learning problems. In short, periodic upgrading of the learning facilities and system in the SAC is a sine qua non of a professional SAC.

The last, further study that focuses on the development of effective patterns of SAC utilization to increase students' English proficiency and learning autonomy needs to be conducted. Models of utilization based on the result of this study and discussion of theories and results of previous related studies can be proposed.

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