

Investigating Student Attitudes Towards CALL Programs in the Self-Access Centre at Sultan Qaboos University: an Attempt Towards Improvement

Mahmoud Al Saidi

Introduction

Studies on investigating students' patterns of use of the computer programs, their attitudes, anxieties and preferences towards them is of great importance to the field of CALL and self-access. Such studies give in-depth and close understanding of the merits of the programs we use for our students and tell us whether or not these programs are doing the jobs they are intended to do. We can also know whether the students find the programs interesting, beneficial for their language learning and whether they are easy or difficult to use. All these insights gained by studies like the present one are of great importance to language researchers, CALL developers, teachers and language teaching institutions. This study, however, is of particular importance to the Language Centre at SQU as it puts forward some ideas for improving the self-access materials, more particularly CALL materials, in the Centre.

Four main areas regarding CALL programs are the main focus of the present study. It intends to investigate the students' amount of use of the computer programs in the Self-Access Center and what made the students use or not use the programs. It also looks at whether the students felt they learnt something by using the computer programs, whether they found the programs interesting, and finally whether they found them easy to use. Answers to the following research questions were sought:

1. How much did the students use the CALL materials in the Self-Access Centre during the first and second semesters of their first year at the University?
2. How important and useful for their language improvement did the students consider the CALL materials in the Self-Access Centre?
3. How interesting did the students find the computer programs? And what types of programs are most favored by the students and what types are least favored by them?
4. Did the students find the computer programs easy to use?

Self-access, a theoretical background

What is self-access?

Generally, the concept of self-access can be said to cater for the idea of making resources and materials available and accessible to learners. Sheerin (1991) defines the concept of self-access as follows:

'Self-access' is a way of describing learning materials that are designed and organized in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own ... and obtain feedback on their own performance (ibid:143)

Taking into consideration the underlying philosophies of self-access, however, makes it difficult to provide a precise description of what a self-access system is or to assume one prototypical model for this system. This difficulty is principally due to the fact that there are many variations in the way self-access centres are set up, organized and used depending on the nature of their roles in catering for students' needs in different institutional contexts. Gremmo and Riley (1995) see that setting up self-directed learning centers should be planned locally, taking into account the

specific requirements and goals of institutions and characteristics of learners and staff, including the sociocultural constraints on learning practices. In some institutions, self-access centres have a dual function (Hill, 1994). They serve partly for the classroom-based curricula and partly for independent learners. In other institutions, these centres only serve one of these functions. Furthermore, there are cases where a self-access centre is the only resource for the learners with no other alternatives in the institution. (Harding and Esch, 1982, cited in Dickinson, 1987: 106). Therefore every specific context imposes a certain type of self-access facility.

Self-access and learner autonomy

Although there still exists some kind of discrepancy whether learner autonomy is actually a type of conduct of behavior or whether it is an ability to perform this behavior without necessarily performing it, there seems to be a consensus among authorities about what functions an autonomous learner can perform. Many researchers (Holec, 1979; Dickinson, 1987; Cotterall, 1995; Littlewood, 1997; Benson and Voller, 1997) point out functions such as setting objectives, selecting methods and materials, planning learning, monitoring learning, and evaluating achievement.

As far as self-access is concerned, two questions may be raised. First, does self-access work always lead to autonomy? And second, does self-access work in fact always require autonomous and independent learners? In the previous section we have seen the varied functions of self-access centers depending on institutional and other influential factors. We have seen, for example, that a self-access centre is sometimes used as a supplementary to classroom teaching and that in some cases student work is totally controlled by teachers. Claims from some researchers (Dickinson 1987; Jones, 1995) show that a self-access system should cater not only for autonomous learners, but also for non-autonomous learners and those between the two extremes. Sheerin (1991) points out that "self-access is by no means synonymous with 'learner autonomy' or 'learner independence'..." (ibid: 143). Moreover, Benson and Voller (1997) warn of the danger of students being dependent on limited strategies and materials in a self-access centre. It is, then, not solely the self-access system itself that facilitates autonomous work, but rather the way a self-access centre is used and the aims behind establishing it that determine whether it can lead to learner autonomy and whether independent work is in fact taking place or not (Sheerin, 1997).

Self-access materials

The dominant view of self-access materials is that they include self-correction tasks and that they are typically for supplementing classroom learning by providing extra practice in areas that are considered problematic for the students. The wider scope of self-access materials, however, suggests that these materials should provide learners with more than just practicing the language system and language skills and more than just providing them with answer keys. The issue of providing open-ended materials and materials that encourage exploratory learning and creative work is fully supported by a number of researchers (Sheerin, 1991; Stevens, 1991; Tomlinson, 1998; Lynch, 2001; Littlejohn, 1997).

Some other types of self-access materials could include awareness-building materials and 'guiding' materials (Sheerin, 1989; Lin and Brown, 1994). The first type enables the learner to understand the nature of language and language learning and the second type is claimed to guide the students, enable them to carry out the work on their own and help them develop autonomy.

Self-access materials should also provide variety for different types of learners and for different purposes and learning settings. For example, group-work materials should be available in addition to individual-work materials. Short activities are also necessary as much as long activities. The short activities consider students' time and intellectual constraints. A variety should also be

provided between open-ended and single-focus materials. Furthermore, a combination of authentic and pedagogical materials should be taken into account. While pedagogical materials are necessary for certain types of practice, authentic materials expose the students to the real language use.

So where do we get materials for our self-access centres? Many self-access centres depend on commercial materials, but materials could also be locally produced and these may be student-generated or teacher-generated. Stating the importance of locally produced materials, Sheerin (1991) says that these materials are "... precisely targeted to a particular group of learners". Hill (1994) points out that selecting self-access materials must be a team effort and that input from users is very important in the process.

Self-access retrieval systems

The way materials are planned and sorted out in a self-access centre is very important, not only because it helps students find their way in the centre, but also because it contributes to developing important aspects of the students' learning such as learner autonomy and learner independence.

Generally, materials in a self-access centre can be made accessible to students in two ways. In an open-access system, materials are displayed physically so that students can select the items from a shelf. (Sheerin, 1991; Dickinson, 1987). In a catalogue or menu system, however, students usually request the item they need from a member of staff rather than picking them up from shelf themselves. The menu system can either be card-based or computer-based.

The menu system is claimed to (1) ensure greater security over the items, (2) provide data concerning the patterns of usage and perhaps (3) help students think carefully about their needs before choosing any item to practice (Sheerin, 1991). On the other hand, this system is accused of depriving the students of a very important activity for learners, that of browsing. Furthermore, although this system is generally seen easier and faster in terms of getting materials, this judgment could be affected when we consider the variations in students' familiarity with computers. In addition to giving an opportunity for browsing, the open-access system is claimed to be reassuring for students, especially those who are less experienced with complex systems (Sheerin, 1991). Matters of security in this system, however, are less guaranteed than the menu system.

Whatever system is used, classification of materials should be kept as simple as possible. It should facilitate the students' choice of materials; provide links between items and not to be time consuming. The materials may be organized according to level, topic, main focus, activity type, or text type (Sheerin, 1991).

Learner training

Learner training could be traced back to the early 1970s, when the concept of counseling was devised to help institutions interested in the notion of self-directed learning. (Gremmo and Riley, 1995). What has urged the development of the concept of learner training is the increasing interest in the notions of learner autonomy, independent and self-directed learning. Sheerin (1991) explains why we need this kind of training when we decide to develop and encourage learner autonomy. Lots of planning and great efforts are required to change the students' attitudes to the nature of language learning, especially in situations where the learner is perceived as a passive recipient. Learners have also been found to adopt inadequate learning strategies and to appear uneasy when given more independence on their learning.

Learner training takes different ways depending on the aims and purposes of the self-access system in an institution. In situations where the role of self-access centres is limited to supporting classroom practice, learner training tends to be of a narrow scope. It is mainly focused on preparing students technically to use the materials available. However, if independent and autonomous learning is encouraged, it is very important to provide psychological training that helps the students change their attitudes and beliefs about the nature of language learning (Holic 1980, cited in Sheerin 1991: 151). For the learners to be able to take responsibility of their learning, Hedge (1993) says that they need help in developing appropriate ways and techniques. Training may be conducted in a form of initial induction as well as continuous development and support. Continuous development is very important especially in situations where independent and autonomous learning is encouraged. Little (1995) points out that teachers should lead their students gradually in a training process until they reach the level of autonomy. Dickinson (1987) suggests that continuous support may take the form of prominent display of information, for example, posters, notice boards etc. To sum up, the teachers' role becomes that of guiding motivating and providing the skills and techniques the students need to be able to take charge of their own learning in a self-access centre.

CALL and self-access

Computer technology and self-access have affected the development of each other to a large extent. On the one hand, developments in computer technology have facilitated new learning systems that are capable of promoting self-directed learning and autonomy, and these undeniably have resulted in the wide spread of self-access systems (Gremmo and Riley, 1995). On the other hand, it is the field of self-access that has stimulated most of the progress in language learning software (Hill, 1994).

Many researchers stress the importance of considering learners' needs when developing computer applications for language learning. Stevens (1992) talks about what he calls 'humanism in CALL' and he points out that humanistic CALL programs should provide a variety of choices for learners and provide easy and quick ways of dealing with them, e.g. moving around in the program, opportunities for quitting etc. These characteristics are very important especially when the programs are made accessible for self-access learning for they facilitate a friendly environment and help learners find their way in the programs easily. Similarly, (Hill 1994; Fox, 1994; Manning, 1996) express the importance of focusing on the learner rather than technology and making computers more adaptive to learners' needs when developing strategies for computer programs. Phinney (1996) argues for the need to provide a variety of programs that suit different needs of learners. This strong argument for the importance of learners' needs has resulted in the production of many types of software that take into account learners' needs and preferences.

Students' attitudes towards CALL have also been a point of discussion, although not so many studies have considered this important issue yet. Stevens (1991) investigated the attitudes of a group of ESP university students towards computer programs in a self-access centre and found that students generally showed positive attitudes towards computer programs. He reported that they enjoyed using computer programs for language learning and they felt their English had improved as a result of using computers. Gillespie and McKee (1999) studied factors contributing to students' resistance to the use of computers for language learning and found that this resistance was mainly caused by problems concerning accessibility of programs, incompatibility of systems, lack of familiarity with computers, boring software, and some social and psychological factors. The study also found that the students did not use the computer programs independently.

Some conclusions can be drawn from studies like these. Firstly, it has been proved that learners benefit from language learning software and find it enjoyable. Secondly, these studies suggest

that if we really want the outcomes to be fruitful we should be very careful in choosing the type of software that suits our students' needs and interests. Also, our students need to be trained psychologically and technically to use these programs in the way we want.

Methodology

Two methods of data collection were developed and administered to one hundred randomly selected students from the summer intensive English language program in the Language Centre at SQU. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative as well as qualitative data, while group interviews were mainly used to collect some qualitative data and to confirm the data collected by the questionnaires in an attempt to triangulate in the methods used. The questionnaires were administered during class time for five groups of students. Due to time constraints of the students, the group interviews were conducted with only twenty students from two groups in two separate sessions.

The questionnaire was translated into Arabic to avoid misunderstanding of questions by the students. The group interviews were conducted in Arabic too. The Arabic version of the questionnaire was piloted with a group of students from the same program. The students were invited to suggest any necessary changes.

The questionnaire items mostly followed one multiple-choice format. There was only one open-ended question asking the students, who had never visited the Self-Access Centre or used the CALL programs, to give reasons for why they hadn't so.

The group interviews took a position between fully structured interviews and completely unstructured interviews. The students were allowed to talk freely about what they felt was important while at the same time a loose structure was provided to ensure that all relevant topics were covered.

Analysis and discussion of results

1. How much did the students use the CALL materials in the Self-Access Centre during the first and second semesters of their first year at the University?

The results show that the students relatively made a limited use of the CALL materials. The results also suggest that the factors determining the students' use the CALL programs in particular seem to have been related to a higher extent to factors determining the students' use of the Self-Access Centre in general, e.g. unsatisfactory initial support, limited encouragement and follow up from teachers, time limitations and class workload and misguided ideas about the purposes and functions of self-access. There are, however, some factors related to the computer programs themselves, for example, difficulty of use and boring activities of some programs.

Out of the 100 students who filled in the questionnaires, 19% responded that they never visited the Self-Access Centre during those two semesters. However, a little more than a half of the students, 55%, said they visited the Centre once or twice a week, 14 % of them visited it 3 to 4 times, 4% went there 5 to 6 times and the remaining number, 8 %, said they visited the Centre more than 6 times a week.

Of the nineteen students who said they didn't visit the Self-Access Centre at all, 17 referred to the time factor as a reason for not using the self-access facilities. About six of them said they didn't know anything about the Centre and nobody told them about its facilities, while about four of them reported that their teachers didn't encourage them enough to practise in the Centre. A few students said they had other resources for practicing their English such as computer programs at

home and some of them also made use of other facilities in the University without specifying these resources.

The majority of the students reported that they used the CALL programs for 1 to 2 hours a week (58%) while 27% said they used the computer programs for less than one hour. Data from the group interviews confirmed these findings.

The students' responses showed that the students used the programs more during the first semester (54%), than the second (25%) and approximately 21% said they used the programs equally in both terms. These results coincide with the results of a study conducted by Stevens (1991) who found that the students' attendance in a self-access centre decreased dramatically as the academic year progressed. This phenomenon may be attributed to the motivation factor. The students get some induction at the beginning and for many of them using the programs is an innovative thing and therefore they get enthusiastic to work on the programs at the beginning, but their motivation decreases as the academic year progresses.

In the questionnaire and group interviews, the students expressed their willingness to use the programs if they are made more widely accessible in all the University workstations. More than half of the students (54%) thought they would use the computer programs more if they were connected to all the computer labs in the university, whereas only 6% of them thought they wouldn't use them more as a result of this. The rest of the students (37%) were not sure whether they would or not. This shows that the students were concerned about the distant location of the Self-Access Centre in the University

2. How important and useful for their language development do the students consider the CALL materials in the Self-Access Centre?

The great majority of the students considered the computer one of the best ways to study English (90%), while only a small fraction (10%) didn't consider it to be so. About 93 % of them said they found the computer activities very useful for improving their language skills, while only 7% of them didn't find them useful for their language learning. Also, 44% of them found the computer programs helpful when they faced difficulties with the language, whereas 6% didn't find them so.

3. How interesting did the students find the computer programs? And what types of programs were most favored by the students and what types were least favored?

One of the questions asked the students to indicate how interesting they found the computer programs in each of the four skills as well as grammar and vocabulary. The students' responses showed that 14% of them found computer programs in the skill of reading not interesting at all, 49% found them a little bit interesting, and 15% said they were very interesting. With regard to programs in the writing skill, 20% of the students found them not interesting at all, 49% said they were a little bit interesting, and approximately 19% decided they were very interesting. In the listening skill, however, the number of students who found computer programs very interesting is notably higher than that of the previous two skills (32%), whereas 15% marked 'not interesting at all' and almost 42% chose 'a little bit interesting'. The highest percentage of the students found the grammar practice programs very interesting, approximately 46%, while 31% found them a little bit interesting and only 10% said they were not interesting at all. Finally, the majority of the students found the programs only a little bit interesting in the area of vocabulary (52%), while about 20% said they were very interesting and 10% found them not interesting at all.

Students' preferences of computer programs showed that the majority (64%) regarded the attractiveness of design of a program, e.g. sound and graphic illustration, very important while

27% regarded the time duration of the activity very important. Also, 26% of them suggested it is very important for the program to offer instructions for use and 31% expressed high importance to the easiness of use of a program. Finally, 46% of the students preferred programs that give practice in areas that are practised less in the classroom.

4. Did the students find the computer programs easy to use?

Results suggest that the students generally found the programs easy to use. Only a negligible number of students said they found the programs very difficult to use (2%). About the same number said that they either found them 'only a little bit difficult to use' (40%) or found 'only some of them difficult' (39%). 10% of the students said that the programs were not difficult at all. Thus, although they weren't satisfied with the induction training they got, they were able to find their way in the programs relatively easily.

Implications and conclusions

This study has some implications for language teaching institutions, language teachers and program developers. The results suggest that the location of a self-access centre affects students' use of its facilities. Teacher encouragement and follow up has also been found to play an important role. Low encouragement and unsatisfactory follow up from teachers has been found to be one reason behind the students' limited use of self-access and computer programs. The results also suggest that students need to be trained technically to use computer programs and other facilities. Students also need to be made aware of the purpose and benefits of self-access work. The study shows that students generally have positive attitudes towards learning with computers. Furthermore, the study has found that even with considerably little training, students can find their way in using computer programs. Finally, the results confirm previous research that students have different needs and preferences concerning computer programs and they choose the programs that fulfill these needs and preferences.

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are made for improving the self-access facilities in the Language Centre at SQU.

1. A way should be devised to network the computer programs so as to make them accessible for the students in various workstations in the University. This seems to help the students, who are constrained by time, to use these programs in workstations near their classrooms.
2. Students need to be motivated and to help them sustain their motivation for a longer period of time. The following steps may be taken:
 - a. Involving the students in selecting and planning the materials and activities of the Centre.
 - b. Increasing teacher follow up and encouragement.
 - c. Integrating self-access work with classroom work by, for example, basing classroom projects on materials from the Self-Access Centre.
 - d. Conducting Continuous training for students to use the computer programs in the Centre.
 - e. Raising the students' awareness about the purpose of self-access work and training them to assume more independent work in self-access.
3. Students' different needs, wants and preferences should be considered when selecting language-learning software.

4. Links should be created between the computer materials on the one hand and between these materials and other types of materials on the other hand. Such links will guide the students to the suitable materials available for them and provide them with quick means of finding the correct materials.
5. Teacher training, especially on the use of computers and the available programs, is essential if they are required to help their students in using self-access facilities.
6. Teachers' contribution to the materials of the Self-Access Center is a good way of increasing their interest in self-access work.

This study has contributed some interesting ideas to self-access and CALL and more specifically to the context of the Language Centre at SQU. There are, however, some limitations of the way this study was conducted. First, it principally depended on the students' points of view by means of questionnaires and interviews. The data would have been much more enlightening if other methods, such as teacher interviews, observing students' work and analyzing students' work records were used. Second, the researcher didn't have access to all the students at the time of the study because many of them had already passed all the courses in the intensive English program. Therefore, the data could have possibly yielded some other interesting results if a comparison was made between students' attitudes at different levels. These two limitations were mainly caused by the researcher's time constraints. If further research is done in the future, these two limitations need to be overcome.

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