

The Attitudes and Perceptions of Self-Access Learning on First Year Students at the Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus

Woralak Bancha ¹

Sudarat Srirak ²

Abstract

In order to promote self-access learning, learners' attitudes and perceptions towards this method play a significant role. In the first and second semesters of the academic year 2010, the Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus, initially offered an English clinic where self-study lessons and a teacher as consultant were available. This study was aimed to investigate attitudes and perceptions of 90 FIS first-year students towards self-study, learning materials, an English clinic, and consultants. Data was collected through close- and open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The results mainly demonstrated that most of the participants held a positive attitude towards self-access learning and they spent at least half an hour self-studying per lesson. They perceived that self-study lessons and an English clinic were useful to a moderate degree while the quality of consultants was high. It is recommended that materials for self-access learning should be designed pertaining to students' interest and proficiency in order to motivate them to study and create positive attitudes toward their self-access learning.

Keywords: self-access learning, attitudes, perceptions

¹ Lecturer, Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus
woralak@phuket.psu.ac.th

² Lecturer, Faculty of International Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket Campus
sudarat.sr@phuket.psu.ac.th

ทัศนคติและแนวความคิดเกี่ยวกับการศึกษาด้วยตนเองของนักศึกษา

ชั้นปีที่ 1 คณะวิเทศศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์

วิทยาเขตภูเก็ต

วรลักษณ์ บัญชา³

สุดารัตน์ ศรีรักษ์⁴

บทคัดย่อ

การเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง เป็นวิธีการเรียนที่มีประสิทธิภาพมากที่สุด วิธีหนึ่งในการช่วยพัฒนาทักษะด้านการใช้ภาษาของผู้เรียน เนื่องจากเป็นวิธีที่สนับสนุนให้ผู้เรียนเพิ่มบทบาทของตนเองในการเรียน การเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองมุ่งให้ผู้เรียนระบุทักษะที่ต้องการปรับปรุงด้วยตนเองและศึกษาเพิ่มเติมเพื่อพัฒนาทักษะนั้น การกระทำดังกล่าวจะช่วยให้ผู้เรียนลดการพึ่งพาผู้สอนและเปลี่ยนมาพึ่งพาตนเองในการศึกษามากขึ้น การปลูกฝังแนวคิดเรื่องการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองนั้นจำเป็นอย่างยิ่งที่จะต้องคำนึงถึงแนวความคิดและทัศนคติของผู้เรียน ในภาคการศึกษาที่ 1 และ 2 ปีการศึกษา 2553 คณะวิเทศศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตภูเก็ต เปิดให้บริการห้องศูนย์การเรียนรู้ซึ่งนักศึกษาสามารถศึกษาบทเรียนด้วยตนเอง โดยมีอาจารย์ประจำห้องคายให้คำปรึกษางานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาแนวความคิดและทัศนคติของนักศึกษาคณะวิเทศศึกษาชั้นปี 1 ที่มีต่อการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง บทเรียน ห้องศูนย์การเรียนรู้ และที่ปรึกษา เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูลได้แก่ แบบสอบถามแบบปลายปิดและปลายเปิด และการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก ข้อมูลที่ได้จากแบบสอบถาม แสดงให้เห็นว่า�ักศึกษามีทัศนคติเชิงบวกต่อการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง และใช้เวลาอย่างน้อยวันละครึ่งชั่วโมง เพื่อศึกษาด้วยตนเอง นอกจากรู้นักศึกษามีความเห็นว่าบทเรียนและห้องศูนย์การเรียนรู้มีประโยชน์ ในระดับปานกลาง ในขณะที่การให้คำปรึกษามีคุณภาพสูง ข้อเสนอแนะต่องานวิจัยนี้คือควรมีการออกแบบจัดทำบทเรียนที่ตอบสนองความสนใจของผู้เรียน และเหมาะสมกับระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษของผู้เรียน เพื่อก่อให้เกิดแรงจูงใจและทัศนคติในเบื้องต้นต่อการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง

คำสำคัญ: การเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง ทัศนคติ การรับรู้

³ อาจารย์ประจำคณะวิเทศศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตภูเก็ต
woralak@phuket.psu.ac.th

⁴ อาจารย์ประจำคณะวิเทศศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์ วิทยาเขตภูเก็ต
sudarat.sr@phuket.psu.ac.th

Introduction

First year students in three programs: International Business, China (IBC), Chinese Studies (CNS) and Thai studies (THS) at the faculty of International Studies (FIS) have different background knowledge of English. As it is necessary to facilitate students' readiness to study in an international program, the Faculty of International Studies (FIS) provided an intensive course in order to be certain that students would have appropriate basic skills in English. However, the two-week intensive course which served as a trial was not successful. This was mainly due to time limitation. Thus, the Faculty of International Studies attempted to tackle the problem by having students study at their own pace.

Self-access learning is one of the effective methods assisting students' continuous language improvement. Moreover, it can provide students with opportunities to study at their own preference and convenience (Sanprasert, 2009).

The Faculty of International Studies firstly diagnosed the students' skills that needed to be improved by having students take a pre-test. Then, students were required to self-study lessons provided in both the English Clinic and the university online learning resource. Finally, after having completed all the self-study lessons, students had to take a post-test that was later used to assess their improvement.

Even though theoretically there are many advantages in self-study, it should not be forgotten that achieving effective self-study practice requires both high motivation and positive attitudes from students. In addition, since it was the first time that this method had been employed with FIS first year students, it is necessary to investigate students' attitudes and perceptions of self-access learning.

Self-Access Learning

A number of educational researchers concur that there is a great need to foster learner autonomy or self-directed learning (Benson, 2001; Cotterall, 1995; Dickinson, 1995; 1995; Little, 1995; Rukthong, 2008; Sanprasert, 2010). This is because it can increase learning motivation and bring about greater learning effectiveness. According to Little (1995), learner autonomy can be defined as the process of learning in which students take responsibility for their own learning, are able to identify their needs, and create their own opportunities to practice the language whenever they can. The teacher's role in self-directed learning is to facilitate students' learning, guide them to diagnose their language difficulties, and make themselves available for students who may need assistance.

Gardner and Miller (1999) point out that "self-access is probably the most widely used and recognized term for an approach to encouraging autonomy..." and is seen

"as a way of encouraging learners to move from teacher dependence towards autonomy" (p. 8). Several research studies have been done to validate the significance of self-access learning (Koyalan, 2009; Morrison, 2008). Koyalan (2009), for instance, investigated the effectiveness of self-directed learning and self-access centers at Izmir University of Economics in Turkey. He found that self-access learning helped students achieve higher grades and make fewer errors regarding grammar use, reading, listening, and vocabulary. The results further showed that both students and staff greatly valued self-access learning as it encouraged students to become more responsible and independent. Another similar research was carried out by Morrison (2008) who studied the roles of self-access language learning. His participants included students, teachers, coordinators and support staff at a Hong Kong Tertiary Institution Language Centre. The research findings revealed that self-access language learning brought about students' independent learning and better English skills and proficiency. Additionally, it provided necessary learning resources and support to students.

The aforementioned studies examined the effects of the self-directed learning method on learners' language achievement. Likewise, learners' attitudes and perception of this learning approach play a significant role in terms of whether or not such a method would be successfully implemented.

Attitudes

Allport (1935 cited in Pickens, 2005) defined an attitude as

a mental or neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence on the individual's response to all objects and situations to which it is related. A simpler definition of attitude is a mindset or a tendency to act in a particular way due to both an individual's experience and temperament. (p. 44)

Dubin and Olshtain (1986, cited in Dulyarat, 2002) define attitudes as feelings and beliefs. Attitudes in language learning are divided into two types. The first type refers to attitudes towards the target language, speakers of the language and cultures of the language. The second type is defined as the attitudes towards the learning process.

Liuolienė and Metiūnienė (2006) state that in a classroom setting, many factors can create positive attitudes; for example, teachers, textbooks, classroom activities and so on. Positive attitudes towards the learning context will help students have fun, want to learn and be more patient with the difficulties of the target language.

In terms of second language acquisition, positive attitudes play important roles in success in second language learning (Gardner, 1985, cited in Lightbown and Spada,

1993). This is in harmony with Krashen and Terrell (1995) who point out that positive attitudes are very significant because they lower the affective filter and allow input to become intake for learners.

Context of Self-Access Learning at the Faculty of International Studies

Ninety FIS first year students who got lower than 400 TOEIC score had to take a pre-test on three skills: listening and speaking, reading, and writing (grammar). Based on their pre-test scores, students were required to review their weakest skills whether they were listening and speaking, reading, or writing (grammar).

Self-study lessons

Lessons were designed by the English teacher team and were reviewed and examined by a language teaching specialist. Each lesson on all the three skills followed the same format: objectives of the lesson, contents, exercises and answer keys. The lessons were created based on remedial teaching theory. They were aimed at helping students to overcome their particular language problems as students were required to take the test to find out their weakest skill and then studied a lesson for that skill. After the students had studied, a post-test based on what had been studied was distributed and answers or feedback were provided by a teacher or a counselor on duty in order to evaluate if students passed or failed. If students received a minimum of 70 percent from the post-test of each lesson, they could move on to a new lesson. If not, they had to restudy the same lesson and redo the post-test.

Lessons were printed and provided in the language clinic and uploaded in LMS (Learning Management System), an e-learning resource of Prince of Songkla University. Students could study on their own by studying the lessons at the clinic or by downloading the lessons from LMS, and then take the test at the clinic later.

At the end of the semester, they were again required to take a post-test after they had completed all the lessons.

Listening and speaking lessons

Listening and speaking skills consisted of 24 lessons: greeting and introducing oneself (oneself + others), making small talk 1 (weather, family), making small talk 2 (favorites, plans), talking about health, closing the conversation, talking about free time activities, talking about past events, talking about weekend plans, giving thanks, making an apology, giving instructions, shopping, requesting, offering, making an invitation, giving suggestions/ advice, asking for permission, talking about rules and

regulations, talking about preferences (likes and dislikes), ordering food and drinks, making telephone calls and taking phone messages, giving directions, expressing opinions, and making complaints.

Reading lessons

There were 24 lessons that were divided into two levels of 12 basic lessons and 12 advanced lessons. The lessons included previewing and predicting, skimming, scanning, making inferences, finding pronoun references, guessing the meaning of vocabulary from contexts, finding topics, finding main ideas, understanding the paragraph, patterns of organization, summarizing, and application.

Writing lessons

The writing lessons consisted of 2 levels (an elementary level and a pre-intermediate level) with 3 units each. The first 3 units in an elementary level focused on descriptive paragraph writing (describe people, one's own life, and places), and the other 3 units in a pre-intermediate level focused on writing a formal letter to apply for a job, describe a holiday trip, and book a hotel room.

English clinic

The English clinic was open from 9:00 to 17:00 hours. Students came to the English clinic to study and take the post-test of each lesson. Lessons on every skill were provided in the room. After the students came in and signed their name, they chose the lesson they wanted to study and then studied in the clinic. At the language clinic, a teacher was available to assist the students who had any problems with the lessons. After they finished studying, students had to ask the teacher for the post-test of the lesson they just studied and again submitted the post-test to the teacher who graded and gave feedback. Lastly, the teacher noted their progress of study in their portfolios which were placed and kept in the clinic.

Effectiveness of the self-study lessons

The pre-test and post-test were employed to test students' understanding of the lessons as well as their particular language skill progress.

Pre-test

The pre-test was designed based on all the topics the students had studied in a multiple-choice format. Students took the test on all the three skills of listening and

speaking, reading and writing (grammar). Each pre-test skill was comprised of 30 items. The allotted time for each pre-test skill was different: listening and speaking lasted 25 minutes, grammar lasted 30 minutes, and reading lasted 45 minutes.

Post-test

The post-test was the same as the pre-test, but the students were required to take only the skill they had studied. Time allocation was also the same as the pre-test.

Post-test results

With respect to the results of the post-test, the self-study lessons yielded good results and could help the students improve their weakest skill. The results of the post-test revealed that a majority of them (72.8%) received better results than those of the pre-test. A quarter of them (20.33%) received lower scores and a slight number of the students (6.77%) received equal scores.

Findings

The participants who answered the questionnaire were 90 first year students of the Faculty of International Studies. Forty-eight of them were International Business: China (IBC) students. Another twenty-six were Chinese Studies (CNS) students, and the other sixteen were Thai Studies students.

After self-studying the lessons provided by the faculty, student questionnaires and in-depth interview were employed to investigate students' attitudes and perception of self-access learning. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open ended items which covered issues regarding lessons, the English clinic, and the consultants. After that, questions from open-ended questionnaires were used in the interview with 25 students in order to obtain further insightful information.

The results demonstrated that approximately equal numbers of participants (47.8% and 46.7%) perceived that self-access learning was very useful and useful whereas a few of them (5.6%) thought that self-access learning was not very useful.

The findings indicated that the majority of the students perceived that self-study aided and only a few of them did not study by themselves. Considering the time they spent on self-study, it was found that most of the students (44.4%) spent 1 hour a day studying by themselves. About 30 percent always studied on their own for half an hour a day. The rest (approximately 15 percent and 13 percent of them respectively) took 2 hours or more a day to study by themselves.

Background	Number	Percent	Background	Number	Percent
1. Students' perception of self-study			Others		
Very useful	43	47.8	Games	1	20
Useful	42	46.7	MSN	2	40
Not very useful	5	5.6	Facebook	1	20
Not useful	0	0	Writing a diary in English	1	20
Total	90	100	Total	5	100
2. Have you ever studied by yourself?			Reasons why not self-study		
Yes	86	95.6	I have to study many subjects.	4	33.33
No	4	4.4	I have a lot of homework or assignments.	4	33.33
Total	90	100	It is not necessary in daily life.	3	25
Methods employed in self-study			I have enough knowledge, so there is no need to practice more.	1	8.34
Listening to English music	78	20.05	Total	12	100
Watching English films/ cartoons	59	15.17	Others		
Reading English newspapers/ documents/ textbooks/ magazines	58	14.91	I do not know how to self-study.	1	33.33
Listening to English news/ any English programs	45	11.57	I do not have time.	1	33.33
Speaking to foreigners	44	11.31	I play a game.	1	33.33
Reading English novels/ short stories/ comics/ magazines	42	10.80	Total	3	100
Speaking English with classmates	37	9.51	3. Self-study hour		
Writing an email to foreign peers	26	6.68	1 hr.	40	44.4
Total	389	100	2 hr.	13	14.4
			>2 hr.	11	12.2
			Total	90	100

According to the questionnaire results, almost all participants preferred listening to music (20.05%), watching English films or cartoons (15.17%), reading English newspapers/ documents/ textbooks/ magazines (14.91%). Furthermore, they self-studied by listening to English news/ any English programs (11.57%), speaking to foreigners (11.31%), reading English novels/ short stories/ comics/ magazines (48.8%), speaking English with classmates (9.51%), and writing emails to foreign peers (9.51%). Apart from the methods mentioned, a slight number of participants practiced English by playing games, chatting on MSN, posting messages on Facebook and writing a diary.

The findings revealed that the majority of the students self-studied and just a few of them did not study by themselves.

As for the reasons for not doing self-access learning, four participants mentioned their having too many subjects to study, a lot of homework or assignments and no chance to use English in daily life. Additionally, they pointed out some other obstacles to self-access learning which were not knowing how to learn by themselves, not having enough time, and the playing of games.

Regarding the self-access learning center provided by the faculty, almost half of the participants attended English clinic approximately for an hour to one hour and a half in one week. Fewer than half of them studied in the English clinic for one or two hours a week and the rest spent more than 2 hours there.

English Clinic Study Time

English Clinic Study Time	Frequency	Percent
½-1 hour/week	43	48.86
1-2 hours/week	37	42.05
>2 hr/wk	8	9.09
Total	88	100

How Self-Study Improves Students' English Proficiency

At a certain degree, do the self-study lessons provided by the faculty help improve your language skill?	Frequency	Percent
Very much	30	33.3
Neutral	56	62.2
Not much	4	4.4
Total	90	100.0

In the participants' opinion, self-study lessons helped improve their skills neutrally (62%), very much (33.3%) and not much (4.4%).

Results derived from the mean scores of questionnaires on students' perceptions about self-study were interpreted as follows:

4.51–5.00 means very high 3.51–4.50 means high 2.51–3.50 means moderate
 1.50–2.50 means low 1.00–1.49 means very low

Table 1: Perceptions of Self-access Learning Lessons

Perceptions of Self-access Learning Lessons	Mean	SD
1. The instructions for self-study lessons were effective.	3.65	0.66
2. The content was appropriate for the skill level of the students.	3.84	0.71
3. The content was well-developed.	3.70	0.76
4. The language used was easy to understand.	3.70	0.80
5. The exercises were developed according to the content given.	4.04	0.60
6. The exercises made me better understand the contents.	3.96	0.72
7. The lessons were interestingly designed and made me want to study.	3.47	0.84
8. The number of lessons is appropriate.	3.69	0.67
9. The posttests appropriately measured what I have studied.	3.75	0.64
10. The quality of audio files was high.	3.24	0.98
Total	3.70	

With respect to the table, the mean scores showed that the students perceived that self-study lessons were appropriate at a high level (3.70).

Participants highly perceived that the exercises were developed according to the content given (4.04), the exercises made them better understand the contents (3.96), the content was appropriate for the skill level of the students (3.84), the post-tests appropriately measured what they had studied (3.75), the contents were well-developed (4.04), the language used was easy to understand (3.70), the number of lessons was appropriate (3.69), and the instructions for self-access learning lessons were effective (3.65).

Some items were perceived to be moderate, such as interestingly designed lessons which made them want to study (3.47), and the high quality of audio files (3.24).

Apart from the findings obtained from the survey questionnaires, results from the open-ended part of the questionnaires were in accordance with the ones from in-depth interviews with 32 students. Findings showed that a few students (12.5) commented that there were too many lessons, audio files had low quality and some of them weren't complete or did not match with a lesson. Moreover, a slight number of students pointed out problems related to reading lessons. For instance, some lessons were difficult to understand. Students had problems with unfamiliar vocabulary and this hampered their progress. Besides, learning was not effective because many students came to the clinic on the last day and copied the answers from their friends in order to be able to finish in time.

In addition, a small group of students suggested that the contents of the reading lessons should be more interesting, for example, there should have been vocabulary from films, comics, short stories, food, and so forth. There would have been some pictures along the stories for better understanding. Many students pointed out that they needed teachers' assistance to facilitate their learning and to explain vocabulary. Furthermore, they should not be forced to learn by themselves. Instead, teachers should provide them with a comfortable common room with modern learning equipment, and teachers in the clinic should support them in improving their English.

Table 2.2: Perceptions of English Clinic

Perceptions of English Clinic	Mean	SD
1. The location was good.	3.04	0.91
2. The space used was appropriate.	2.61	0.90
3. The computer equipment was sufficient.	2.97	0.92
4. The computer equipment functioned properly.	2.97	0.88

5. The learning facilities (tables and chairs) were comfortable.	3.09	0.89
6. The atmosphere urged learning motivation and eagerness.	3.49	0.86
7. The opening hours were appropriate.	3.92	0.78
8. The information was thoroughly provided.	3.40	1.03
9. The instructions of the clinic use were effective.	3.54	0.84
10. The record of the work I have done was kept appropriately in the clinic.	3.44	0.85
Total	3.25	

Results obtained from the questionnaires revealed that the participants' points of view about the English Clinic were in the level of moderate (3.25). The mean scores showed that the majority of the participants viewed the appropriateness of the opening hours (3.92), and the effectiveness of the instructions of the clinic use (3.54) to be in the high level. Almost all participants somewhat agreed that the atmosphere urged learning motivation and eagerness (3.49).

The findings also showed that most participants considered the appropriateness of an English clinic at a moderate degree. The record of their work was kept appropriately in the clinic (3.44), the information was thoroughly provided (3.40), the learning facilities (tables and chairs) were comfortable (3.09), the location was good (3.04), the computer equipment was sufficient (2.97), the computer equipment functioned properly (2.97), and the space used was appropriate (2.61).

According to the results derived from the open-ended questionnaires and interviews, it was found that about 10 students (29.41%) complained that the language clinic room was changed too often, the room was too small, there was not enough computer equipment, and opening and closing times coincided with their study time in regular classes. In addition, some of them recommended that information about the English clinic should be given in a better way, the English clinic should stay open for longer until the late evenings, and the clinic should be better-equipped with comfortable chairs and more and up-to-date computers and headphones. Furthermore, there should be separate stations for each skill. Moreover, it was suggested more short story books and dictionaries should be provided. Last, there should be more teachers helping students practice listening and speaking.

Table 2.3: Perceptions of consultants

Perceptions of consultants	Mean	SD
1. The consultants were sufficient.	3.54	0.79

2. The consultants were punctual.	3.87	0.75
3. The consultants were well-prepared.	3.80	0.81
4. The consultants could give effective feedback.	3.74	0.82
5. The consultants could tell me what progress I was making.	3.57	0.85
6. The consultants could tell me what my difficulties were.	3.67	0.86
7. The consultants could answer questions clearly.	3.61	0.83
8. The consultant's presence was necessary in the English clinic.	3.58	0.86
9. The consultants had friendly personalities.	3.71	0.89
10. The consultants could help solve any problems that occurred in the clinic.	3.57	0.85
Total	3.67	

Regarding the participants' perceptions of consultants, the findings from the questionnaires demonstrated that all of them thought that the overall quality of consultants was high (3.67). Most students were highly aware that the consultants were punctual (3.87) and well-prepared (3.80), gave effective feedback (3.87), had friendly personalities (3.71) and told them what their difficulties were (3.67). In addition, the participants agreed that the consultants could answer questions clearly (3.61), were necessary in the clinic (3.58), could tell them about their progress (3.57), could solve any problems in the clinic (3.57), and were sufficient (3.54).

With respect to the data obtained from both open-ended questionnaires and interviews, a few students mentioned that some teachers as counselors were unfriendly, should speak more politely, should give better advice, and should better understand lessons for better explanation.

Further, a few students (12.5%) gave some suggestions that consultants should be Thai teachers because students who had difficulty speaking English may not be able to communicate with native-speaking teachers. Moreover, Thai teachers should speak Thai if students did not understand English.

Conclusion and Recommendation

It is quite straightforward that classroom language only is not sufficient to facilitate second language learners to acquire and master the language they are studying (Rukthong, 2008; Sanprasert, 2010); hence, it is necessary to promote self-access learning to students because this method potentially helps students increase language

proficiency and become more independent learners (Koyalan, 2009; Morrison, 2008).

Based on the results, most students believed that self-access learning lessons provided by the faculty helped them improve their English skills. Overall, the lessons and the quality of consultants were effective at a high level while an English clinic room was appropriate at a moderate level. It is interesting to notice that the majority of the participants perceived that both the lessons and the English clinic room were deemed to be moderately useful. Also, the findings from the interviews demonstrated that, for several students, self-access learning lessons and the room offered by the faculty did not have an obvious impact on their English language learning.

Such findings suggest that in order to improve the effectiveness of self-access learning, the materials provided need to be better-designed and suitable for students' interest and for their level of English proficiency to increase their motivation and positive attitudes towards self-access learning as well as to improve their English competency at a higher degree. Moreover, it is worth noting that better self-access learning management and more comfortable rooms can attract students to use the room and lessons.

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