

Action Research: Self-Access Centre for Learner Independence

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Abstract

2012 saw the completion of this initiative at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, University of Gedarif. Its primary objective was to foster greater independence and confidence in the students. The initiative targeted English-language learners who desired to improve their proficiency. In addition to pre- and post-tests and interviews, the researcher used a requirements analysis method to select project participants. This method also assisted with the evaluation procedure. As a consequence, 16 students with varying English language weaknesses were selected for the project. Interviews and portfolios were utilized to assess the performance of the students throughout the duration of the endeavour. The experience was successful in fostering student autonomy, enhancing their language abilities, and heightening their language awareness. Utilizing the self-access centre as a component of the university's semester courses (e.g., practising pronunciation, completing activities, etc.) was deemed the most essential recommendation.

Keywords: *Autonomy, Autonomous learning, Self-regulation, Deficiency, Portfolio.*

Introduction

Due to the revolution of information technology a great leap has taken place in terms of development in the field of learning and teaching languages all over the world. Accordingly, the methods of teaching and learning have changed positively towards acquiring languages. The 21st century is the era of globalization, and it is essential to be proficient in multiple foreign languages, with English being the most important. Shyamlee (2012). In Sudan there are many companies who supply internet services and makes it available for all. This service has been faced by some difficulties but it hasn't hindered it. The existence of the service and the shift in using the computers and the internet has enabled the teachers to promote the teaching and learning process by using new methods and programmes especially in the field of teaching English language. There are specific problems regarding studying English within the General Education and Higher Education institutions which led to the weakness of the English language. For example: non-qualified teachers, the problem of updating and reforming the curriculum and syllabuses and digital illiteracy in some institutions. Most of the higher education institutions and universities are not able to cope with the information technology revolution because of shortage of money and some other difficulties. Reaching out to rural and remote regions remains a formidable obstacle. In most regions of Sudan, ICT is lower on the list of essential requirements due to poverty, lack of resources, and political instability Hamdy (2007). In spite of all these problems some institutions have succeeded in developing the student's standard in English Language by using these merger resources of the

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technology. One of the first institutions in higher education that tried to capitalize on its resources was Gedarif University. The idea was to get a laboratory for the students at the department of English would improve their language skills and raise their language awareness as well as their pronunciation performance. But the idea was changed after the spread of the term "learner's autonomy", and the language lab has now turned to be a self-access centre. This idea became a reality this year. This research was conducted at the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Gedarif University, Gedarif, Sudan.

Aims and Objectives

The project mainly aimed to help the students to develop their autonomy in learning English language. In addition other skills will be gained such as: enriching and promoting their language awareness, developing their language and computer skills and raising the students' confidence. Also the students will be more familiar with the speech of the native speakers: pronunciation, accent and intonation. Encouraging and motivating the students to discover new areas and places for learning and acquiring the language apart from the classrooms. Moreover, and more interestingly, through the introduced topics, students will gain familiarity with the language's culture., thus increasing the knowledge of the students about the language and its society.

Furthermore using this self-directed way will help the students to learn prioritize and make decisions as they will be responsible of their own learning process. Acquiring such skills enable the learner to be skilled in stating goals, taking the right decisions and achieving these goals for the lifelong. Learning and developing computer skills is another added bonus of this project. Self-access learning or autonomous learning is a facilitating way of learning which is freer than the learning that takes place inside the classrooms and depends largely on the learners' motives and abilities.

Literature Review

Autonomy is defined as a condition in which the learner is solely responsible for all decisions pertaining to his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions Dickson (1987). Another definition of autonomy describes it as the capacity or skill to take charge of one's own learning, confirming the learner's responsibility for his or her own decisions and accomplishments Holec (1979) .The learner's capacity for autonomy will be evident in how he or she acquires knowledge and how it is transferred to broader contexts Little (1994) . He adds that capacity can be implemented through planning, monitoring, and evaluation to bolster this point.' The learner should be able to define his /her learning goals and should have the will to achieve them. Learner autonomy is the capacity of a language student to interact with text or perform other language-related tasks independently, without significant or constant assistance from others Campbell (2004). In this definition, he also emphasizes learning in a self-directed manner that is completely independent of external assistance. Moreover, it has been given another term 'self-regulation' by Zimmerman (2002) . According to him, self-regulation is neither a mental ability nor an academic performance skill; rather, it is the self-directed process by which students transform their mental abilities into academic skills. In addition to skill-specific knowledge, self-regulation of learning requires self-awareness, self-motivation, and the ability to implement that knowledge appropriately, he explained. This emphasizes the existence of some skills into other disciplines rather than learning skills. The concept of 'autonomous learning' arose from 1960s-era discussions regarding the development of lifelong learning skills and independent thinkers Gardner and Miller (1999). This definition indicates that autonomous learning will be for the lifelong as the learner becomes an independent thinker and consequently a decision maker. Another definition by Forster (1972) cited in Philip Candy (1991) demonstrated that independent study is a

process, a method, and an educational philosophy in which a pupil acquires knowledge independently and develops the skills of inquiry and critical evaluation. It indicates the responsibility of learners concerning their own learning as they should choose, take decision, set and state goals achieve them and evaluate the outcomes. Moreover, this process will be a part of the learners' responsibilities for their lifelong and future career. From the same point of view Kesten, (1987) gave more in his definition as he said, learning in which the learner, in collaboration with relevant others, is able to make decisions necessary to meet his or her own requirements. These decisions should be made within the boundaries of social acceptability by self-directed, self-motivated, willing students. It is not only a matter of taking decisions about one's learning but also these decisions should fit the learners' social context and strengthen by the learners' own motives and will. The learner should be able to define his /her learning goals and have the will to achieve them as defined above by Kesten. This definition concentrates on the learning as a self-directed manner and that has depended totally on the learners' without any external help. There are many terms that express the meaning of the term "autonomous learning", as Kesten (1987) stated some alternatives such as : Autonomous learning ,independent study, self-directed learning, student initiated learning, project orientation discovery and inquiry, teaching for thinking, learning to learn self-instruction and lifelong learning. So, any of these terminologies above are the same in meaning, they only differ when the writer or the author tries to interpret any of these terminologies to mean something else and this according to the different contexts and different point of views of those authors /writer. Here in this paper all these terms have been used as synonyms. The concept of autonomous learning has been discussed from different points of view some of them are: firstly, personal characteristic as shown in this definition by Little (1990) "essentially a matter of the learners' psychological relation to the process and content of learning" (p.7). This view also has been confirmed by Kenny (1993) who states it as "the opportunity to become a person"(p.436). Both previous definitions reflect the ability of the learner, his aptitude and responsibility to have a decision about his own learning. Secondly, autonomous learning as a political frame work as Benson (1997) explained that a recognition of the rights of the learner within the educational system and in the context of teaching English as a foreign language, as well as a recognition of the rights of the "non-native speaker" in relation to the "native speaker" within the global order of English." (p.2). This indicates the necessity of building the curriculum and syllabus in the educational system according to the students' needs and should be adapted to different systems and contexts that applied to these needs. Lastly, autonomous learning as an educational practice as Boud (1988) cited in Gardner and Millar (1999) records, "autonomous learning is an approach of educational practice" (p.17) . This 'practice approach' represents the methods through which the learners' responsibility appears to choose, achieve and evaluate the goals of their own learning process .The above definition shows the relation between the self-access centre and the student autonomy. Autonomous learning is the kind of learning in which the learner is largely dependent upon his/her own self, and his/her ability in dealing with the resources that is available in the self-access centre. This is aside from the access to teachers that the students will have, needless to say. This also relies on student's choices and decisions and at the same time his/her ability to be able to evaluate his/her own activities. This study based on all the definitions that tackled here. The Self-access centre is physically located where the language lab used to be. It includes a service centre, a place for group discussions, a TV area, a reading nook, and computer space. According to Souto and Turner the self-access centre represents that type of materials which encourage the learners to develop an independent way of studying, this consists of all what is mentioned above (the will of the learners, abilities, acceptance,motives...etc), through which the learners depend on themselves and raise their autonomy and beside that, state and achieve their own goals of learning. This relationship appears in Souto and Turner's research, which reveals the true relationship between the self-access centre and autonomy. Another relationship between the self-access centre and autonomous learning suggests that studying at the self-access

centre is distinct from classroom study.. The former makes the learner feel freer than in the latter and may raise his confidence as they will do what they think it is the right way. It has been revealed that there is a strong relation between the self-access centre and learners' autonomy and consequently there is a relation between learners' autonomy and language proficiency. In this case as it is mentioned above the learner will choose his own way to learn and to achieve what he/she stated as a learning goals in the language, this strengthen their motives that encourage them to improve their language skills and then their proficiency in English. A few researches tried to find out this relationship. However, Ablard and lipschultz (1998) found that the students who applied different autonomous strategies were high-achieving students in terms of their learning outcomes. This has also been confirmed by Zang and Li (2004) who have drawn the attention to a very close relation between the learners' autonomy and the language level. Moreover, Benson (2001) has emphasized that autonomy has connected primarily with personal goals and the ability to learn effectively.

Methodology

The starting point was when the department was given 4 computers from UNHCR/Kassala .It was the first shot at something that would resemble a self-access centre. The English Institute /University of Khartoum helped a lot, especially in getting the materials. Some materials were obtained free from websites such as: the BBC/The British Council/English podcast and breaking news English. The next step was the students' themselves. First an orientation was delivered for the entire student body at the department of English ,Faculty of Education, University of Gedarif. For the learners, a psychological preparation was required, First, with persuading learners to engage in self-instruction; second, with facilitating a change in attitudes toward language learning; and third, with assisting learners in developing the self-confidence to work independently of the teacher. For the materials, contained a wide range of interesting up-to-date resources and activities alongside using technology such as TV, computers (CD,CALL..etc). Managing was required from the internal department in forms of guiding, supporting and giving a chance for research to be done. A needs analysis was conducted for the students in order to discover their deficiencies (present needs). Accordingly, the students made learning plans based on their needs analysis and choose the activities through which they were intending to improve deficiencies. In addition to that interviews and both pre and post-tests of listening and writing skills were designed. Consequently, we started with 16 students who were chosen to represent the different needs (different types of deficiencies). An individual contract was signed with the students and they were each given time sheets. The computers were fitted with a lot of materials that can assist with the different needs and learning styles of the students, to promote their autonomy and language skills. In addition to that, they were also fitted with the answer key to all exercises and activities. The participants were given on-going support from the tutor and the service desk. The project started and the students were divided into groups according to their time sheet which was prepared by the service desk. The transcripts of all the materials were prepared. The students were given a chance to choose the materials, exercises and activities that should be done, evaluated and written up in their portfolio. A group discussion meeting was held each week and an article or a book was chosen and read by each of the participants. At the beginning the student were frightened by this new experience, but after they spent the first hour, the students became comfortable and started to enjoy it. Some of them even asked for more time in the self-access centre.

Results and Findings

As stated, there was an analysis; both pre and post-test in addition to an interview for each student. The pre-test consisted of a listening and writing test. The listening test was

one of the episodes in a series of programmes that the students listened to during the project. The majority of the students did not do the listening test correctly, and even the best performances had only two correct answers out of 6. This was achieved by only 2 out of the 16 students. In the interview they justified that in saying they didn't recognize the words that the English native speaker had said. In addition to that, they were used to concentrate on what the teacher in the classroom would say, and they were not familiar with doing things by themselves. Being exposed to different topics introduced by native speakers made them fear nothing when they listened, beside, recognizing the culture throughout different situations. This increased their awareness of the language and accumulated their knowledge about it. Accordingly, there was a noticeable improvement in their speaking (without hesitation, good pronunciation). In the writing test the students had been asked to write about themselves. The majority of their writing was full of spelling mistakes, only one or two sentences written in a correct way. Some of them expressed a different meaning other than what they wanted to say, which showed a semantics problem. In the post-test 9 students got most of the answers correct and the rest got more than three answers correct, this showed a progress in the way they structured their sentences and reflected more knowledge about the language usage. When they were asked the same question about their progress in listening, speaking and writing in a later interview, they said that then they were able to cope with the speed that the native speaker spoke, recognized the words and expressions and identified the structures at the same time. As for their writing post-test, here are some samples of what they wrote in their portfolios without any modifications.

Al-Safi writes in his portfolio "This program is so useful I learnt a lot of expressions now they are in my mind. Now I have confidence and can communicate with anyone without hesitation. I got benefit from studying by myself because I know what I want and concentrate on it, it is so interesting"

Zahra writes: "I feel better than before I got more confidence because I teach myself and now I can teach myself using computer's programs. Studying by me is easier and more interesting. I enjoyed it very much, it is enjoyable and interesting and wonderful. My level is pre-intermediate but now I am better than before."

Isra writes: "It is a good program for me I got benefit out of it. I faced difficulties for the first time but now I feel better than before. I need enough time to do my homework and I need also to do more discussion with others, I want to complete my way."

Inas writes: "I feel I am better. I am full of confidence I found it easier to speak. When I am studying by myself I can keep something I know it and also I can understand if I am free. I feel I am developing my skills and I got new information."

Thoyiba writes: "I am full of confidence more than before and I can speak to other people in English I can benefit from studying by myself especially I can correct my mistakes by myself."

Ja'fer writes: "When I speak to my friends at the English club I feel confident."

Sania: "I feel more confident when learning by me and it is easier. I discover that learning by myself makes me find a lot of things inside me and I am careless of it. I enjoyed this experience and I hope it will be available for all the students in English department because they will benefit from it in communication and speaking and other skills."

Umelhussien writes: "My confidence is better than first time .Now I can be good in speaking, why not? Wow, much vocabulary over one hundred, this experience is very interesting and useful."

Conclusion

All of the aforementioned evidence confirms that the students increased their independence and self-confidence. In addition, they stated that they now knew more expressions and vocabulary, which gave them the confidence to communicate with some assurance. The majority of students who provided feedback stated that they had benefited from the initiative. Initially, listening was challenging because they were unfamiliar with the speed and pronunciation of native speakers. However, they are now able to comprehend native speakers' accents and intonation. In addition, as a subskill, they have acquired the ability to use computers. Being an autonomous or self-regulated learner affords the student the opportunity to direct his or her own learning, assume responsibility for making decisions regarding his or her own learning process and, consequently, progress and achievement. The individual would become more pragmatic and less theoretical. Sinclair (1999) focuses on four additional indicators of the development of autonomy. These are:

Through improvements in proficiency, feedback from instructors and students, recording student behaviour and research on the effects of strategy training.

From what Sinclair identifies and from what we got from the learners and the tutors it is clear that this self-access centre project is a successful one for promoting the learners' autonomy and raise their confidence beside their language skills.

Implications

This experience can be generalized to all students at the faculty of Education and, by extension, to the entire university, but there is currently no location designated as a comprehensive self-access center. The self-access centre can be used to promote the staff's language skills and improve their fluency, but the majority of the staff ignores the invitation.

Recommendations

- 1-The self-access centre can be utilized as a component of departmental courses (such as the pronunciation course).
- 2- It will motivate the students if the course's practical work can be completed at the self-access centre using the computer facilities.
- 3- We must encourage students to engage in self-directed learning, thereby enhancing their language abilities and increasing their autonomy, language awareness, and self-assurance.

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