

STUDENTS' LEARNING BEHAVIORS IN THE READING UNIT OF ELRU

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ABSTRACT

The university has invested a huge amount of money and effort in the Reading Unit of the English Language Resource Unit (ELRU). The researchers aim to examine specifically whether the Reading Unit can yield the optimal productivity for the students. This article reports students' learning behaviors and styles as well as difficulties when learning in the Reading Unit. Furthermore, the attitudes towards and their perspectives on autonomous learning are also discussed along with constructive criticism for ELRU.

Keywords: learning behavior, autonomous learning, and perspective.

TÓM TẮT

Hành vi học tập của sinh viên tại Phòng đọc, Trung tâm học liệu tiếng Anh

Trường đại học đã đầu tư rất nhiều tiền và công sức vào Phòng đọc của Trung tâm học liệu tiếng Anh (ELRU). Các nhà nghiên cứu muốn tìm hiểu cụ thể rằng Phòng có thể thu hút được nhiều sinh viên của trường tham gia đọc tài liệu hay không. Bài báo này nói về hành vi học tập, kiểu học tập và những khó khăn của sinh viên khi học tập tại Trung tâm. Ngoài ra, còn bàn luận về thái độ và quan điểm học tập độc lập cùng với những góp ý xây dựng đối với ELRU.

Từ khóa: hành vi học tập, học tập độc lập, quan điểm.

1. Introduction

Autonomous learning is one of the interesting topics in the field of language learning research. The national and international interest in self-access language learning (SALL) and autonomous learning in recent years has manifested itself in a proliferation of papers, books and conference presentations. There has also been an increase in the incorporation of self-access as a component in teacher education (Gardner & Miller, 1999: 1). Many schools provide a self-access center where students are encouraged to

join and take control of their learning. At the self-access center, students decide which skills to practice, which activities to do, how long to spend on an activity, and how to evaluate their own learning (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005).

Suranaree University of Technology (SUT), a regional and national university in Nakhon Ratchasima, saw the importance of autonomous learning and established a self-access language learning center under the name of English Language Resource Unit (ELRU) as one element of a self-directed learning program in order to encourage and promote students' autonomous learning. Students at SUT are required to exploit the English

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resources available at ELRU as a part of compulsory learning activities directly related to their English curriculum. Credits are awarded to those for fulfillment of the requirement.

At present, large sums of money have been invested by the university in order to keep the ELRU running and large amounts of time have been spent by the students at ELRU. Are the students thoroughly exploiting the resources provided? Are they working efficiently there? Is it worth the financial investment? Is it worth the students' valuable time? These are among the many questions that prompted the researchers to explore the phenomena in the ELRU. The present research focused on students' learning behaviors in the Reading Unit of ELRU of Suranaree University of Technology. The purpose of the study was to find out students' learning behaviors and their perceptions of as well as their perspectives towards autonomous learning in the Reading Unit of ELRU.

The research objectives are as follows:

(1) To explore the students' English learning behaviors in the Reading Unit of ELRU;

(2) To find out the students' difficulties in learning autonomously in the Reading Unit of ELRU;

(3) To investigate the students' perspectives on autonomous learning in the Reading Unit of ELRU.

2. Literature review

Autonomous learning has been understood differently by different researchers in various studies. Henri Holec (1981, p.3) defines the term of autonomous learning as "the ability to take charge of one's own directed learning." Scharle and Szabo (2000, p.4) believe that autonomy means "the freedom and ability to manage one's own affairs which entails the right to make decisions as well." For Dickenson (1987, cited in Oxford 2003:81), autonomy refers to the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for his or her decisions and the implementation of these decisions. From previous literature, we can find neither consensus understanding of the term autonomy nor theoretical framework of learner autonomy in the field of L2 learning.

In this study, the researchers define autonomous learning as being composed of the following elements: (a) self-determination of learning, (b) the ability to monitor the learning process, and, (c) the ability to evaluate the results of learning.

Autonomous learning has been found closely related to motivation. According to the theory of Deci and Ryan (1985), self-determination leads to intrinsic motivation and that intrinsic motivation leads to more effective learning. By using intrinsic motivation, students purport to contrast it with extrinsic motivation. The former refers to the motivation to do an activity for its own sake rather than because of external

pressure or promise of reward for doing it.

Another study by Chan et al (2002) focuses on the students' attitudes and behaviors related to autonomous language learning at Hong Kong Polytechnics University. It was a large-scale study which investigated students' views of their responsibilities and decision making abilities in learning English, their motivation level and the actual language learning activities they undertook inside and outside the classroom with a view to gauging their readiness for autonomous learning. The findings revealed that students were involved in 22 outside-class activities and that among these there were 10 activities about which more than half of the respondents said they 'sometimes' or 'often' engaged in. Among other things, the respondents reported reading English notices, books, magazines and newspapers, and noting down new words and their meanings. The interview in this research found that the respondents inclined to work in the patterns of pairs and groups. This research also suggested that the students there were less motivated and less ready to learn autonomously than their peers elsewhere. The study showed that even when students have fairly positive attitudes to autonomous learning, they could still be insufficiently motivated to take full control of their language learning.

With regard to self-access learning, Richards and Lockhart (1994) suggested that students have different kinds of

difficulties in language learning. Some perceive grammar as being difficult to master; others find a problem with pronunciation. Some may have a very positive attitude towards a language like English, whereas others may see it more negatively as something they have to learn rather than something they want to learn. Different learners may have different personal goals in learning the language. For some, being able to pass a test or have minimum competence might be the goal, for others they want native-like pronunciation and full command of the language.

3. The study

This study examined the autonomous learning in the Reading Unit of ELRU and the perspectives of the students towards autonomous learning. As the university has invested a huge amount of money and effort in the Reading Unit, then the researchers aimed to study specifically whether the Reading Unit can yield the optimal productivity for the students. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

(1) What are the behaviors related to learning English found in the Reading Unit of ELRU?

(2) Do students have any difficulties when learning autonomously? If so, what are they? And how do they try to overcome them?

(3) What are the students' perspectives on autonomous learning in the Reading Unit of ELRU?

Methodology

Informants. University undergraduate students enrolled in five English courses, English I to English V, participated in this study. Purposive sampling methods were used to select the informants with specific features related to the research objectives. Two categories of informants were selected based on their learning behaviors in the Reading Unit of ELRU: those who are occupied in the process of language learning (Group A) and those who are not occupied in the process of language learning (Group B). In total, 10 informants were involved in the study and 5 were chosen to represent each category.

Data collection. The data for this study were collected from two resources: observations and semi-structured interviews. The data were collected over a period of three weeks. The time duration for observation was between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., covering the whole of the working hours of ELRU. For the observation, the researchers followed Robinson framework (Robinson, 2003) which includes dimensions such as the space, the actor, action, goal, object, the feelings, and the event. During the on-site observation, the researchers kept detailed records of events in the Reading Unit of ELRU. For interviews, three kinds of probing techniques were employed: detail-oriented probing, elaboration-oriented probing, and clarification-oriented probing. Guiding questions were used to help researchers to focus on the research objectives. Interviews were tape recorded

in their entirety during the interview sessions. The conversation with the staff was noted down to provide information related to the procedure of using ELRU.

Data analysis. The data collected from the observation and semi-structured interview were analyzed qualitatively using several different methods often used in studies of this type. First, the data from the interview recordings were transcribed from the spoken version to the written version. Second, the written versions of the interview were translated from Thai into English. Third, the researchers followed the procedure of familiarization, organization, and coding. For open coding, the data were first broken into discrete parts before being closely examined and compared. It was performed on each individual participant's data set. All relevant data were grouped into emerging themes. These themes led to concept and categories. After concept and categories were developed, the raw data were examined and all relevant data bits were put under an appropriate concept. Open coding was completed for each participant before any comparisons were attempted across participants. Once the data had been filed for each participant and categories had been developed, the researchers began to draft the descriptions of each individual case. The data was synthesized and pulled together to capture the essence of individual participants. For the cross case analysis, the categories for individual participants seemed to cluster naturally into themes

which were further analyzed after reexamining the raw data. Some categories were combined. Some new categories appeared in the study. For axial coding, the relationships between different categories were carefully examined. Connections as well as links were established.

4. Results and findings

The qualitative information from the data analysis fell into five major categories: (1) students' learning behaviors in the Reading Unit, (2) patterns of learning in the Reading Unit, (3) informants' difficulties in learning in the Reading Unit, (4) informants' expressed attitudes to the English Language, and, (5) students' perspectives on autonomous learning.

(1) Students' learning behaviors in the Reading Unit

Researchers classified learning behaviors of informants into two groups, labeled as group A and group B. Group A was comprised of the students who came to study in the Reading Unit. They performed different activities such as vocabulary, grammar, and reading exercises or read magazines, short stories, novels, and textbooks. Some from this group did class assignments, and copied reading passages, vocabulary, and exercises.

Group B was comprised of the students who came but did not study in the Reading Unit. They spent their time chatting and hanging out with their friends, doing exercises irrelevant to English learning. Some from this group

were supposed to come to study, but instead sat around and waited for the time to get the stamps which were given by the staff of ELRU to confirm their presence and "work".

(2) Patterns of learning in the Reading Unit

According to the observation and interview, three patterns of learning can be obviously identified. Some students preferred to work in groups, some in pairs, and others individually. Those in groups or pairs claimed that they could have more chances to help each other to overcome the difficulties related to unknown vocabulary, complicated grammar structures, and comprehension of the texts. Those who worked individually claimed that they could work without any interruptions from others.

(3) Informants' difficulties in learning in the Reading Unit

According to the interviews, the informants had difficulties in understanding unfamiliar lexical items, intricate syntactic structures, and some foreign cultural backgrounds. When such difficulties were encountered, they would try various strategies such as guessing the meanings of new words from the context, using dictionaries, referring to grammar books, and negotiating with their friends. With the help of those strategies, sometimes they could successfully solve their problems and language obstacles, but other times they just met with frustration and could not solve their problems.

(4) Informants' attitudes toward the English language

The interviews revealed that the students in group A had a positive attitude towards English; 4 of the informants claimed that they like English and one claimed that he moderately likes English. For group B, the researchers found that one likes, three moderately like, and one dislikes English.

(5) Students' perspectives on autonomous learning

The data revealed that all ten informants from both group A and group B have positive perspectives on autonomous learning. They claimed that autonomous learning could extend their working hours beyond the limitation of class time. They believed that more knowledge could be obtained from autonomous learning.

5. Discussion

Students' learning behaviors in the Reading Unit of ELRU will be presented and discussed according to the four main points: the existence of autonomous learning in the Reading Unit of ELRU; students' difficulties in autonomous learning; divergence between students' beliefs and behaviors, and students' motivation; and students' learning behavior of copying. Researchers will discuss these behaviors in the order presented above.

(1) The existence of autonomous learning in the Reading Unit of ELRU

The students, who came to study English in the Reading Unit during our research, were students who were

studying in English courses ranging from English 1 to English 5. The emergent data from the observation and semi-structured interview showed that students who spent the time in the Reading Unit of ELRU were free to choose their own learning material. Some of them did vocabulary, grammar and reading exercises while others read magazines, short stories, and novels.

Further inquiry found that students chose their own ways of learning differently. Some chose to study in groups, some in pairs, and some individually. Students who came to work in groups or in pairs in the Reading Unit preferred to read magazines, novels, short stories, or work on reading and vocabulary exercises. They enjoyed discussions, exchanges of ideas, and sharing academic texts with each other (Dam, 1995). In contrast, some of students preferred to work individually. Their reasons were that they said they needed to concentrate on their own reading without interruptions.

More data came up from the semi-structure interview when researchers posed questions to all ten informants on their views towards learning and reading apart from the school setting. All of the informants expressed a positive perspective on reading. They claimed that they could choose what they like to read and be independent from the teachers. Some of them claimed that their class time was not sufficient.

Jones' (1995) study on English language students in Cambodia indicated

that students were ready to work independently of the teacher despite their strong orientation towards acceptance of power, authority, collectivism and inter-dependence.

According to students' learning behaviors in the Reading Unit of ELRU and our own definition in this study, autonomous learning occurred in the Reading Unit of ELRU because of three reasons. Firstly, students could take charge of their own learning. They had the freedom to choose what to learn and how to learn it. They could control their thinking and focus their attention on the work at hand. Secondly, they could study independently without teacher control. Lastly, they had positive attitudes towards learning and practicing by themselves. Lee (1998) did research on tertiary students in Hong Kong, and found that effective self-learning involves taking responsibility for the objectives of learning, self-monitoring, self-assessing, and taking an active role in learning. Dickenson (1995) states that those who have capacity for being active and independent in the learning process can identify goals, formulate their goals, and can change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests and monitor their own learning. Gieve and Clark (2005) compared reflections written by Chinese students with those of European students, finding that the Chinese students actually appreciated the benefits of autonomous study and claimed to make good use of opportunity.

(2) The difficulties of autonomous learning

The students had difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension of texts. This is common to most language learners. However, they were able to use effective strategies to deal with their difficulties. When difficulties could be solved, the informants could carry on studying smoothly. At the early stages, the informants tried to solve their difficulties without consulting outside facilitators, for example, by using dictionaries or asking their friends. They tried to solve their problems with their own syntactic structure knowledge by guessing the unknown words from the context. If they still could not resolve their problems, then they turned to consult outside facilitators. ELRU provided such facilitators as dictionaries and a variety of other books for students to use to overcome their difficulties. The students took advantage of ELRU's resources. On the other hand, when difficulties were not overcome, the learners may have been discouraged to continue the work at hand. The difficulties involved in the autonomous learning in the Reading Unit could be related to the learners' language proficiency levels. In the course of observation, the researchers found that some learners could have difficulties with simple words such as "mice", "hole", "wall", "wait". Some learners' language proficiency level might not match the level required for autonomous learning in the Reading Corner. The research study

by Yang Xinde (2007) also showed that difficulty in autonomous learning can be caused by the mismatch of the students' ability and the degree of difficulty of the text. It has also found that not all the difficulties met by the learners could be successfully overcome. Failing to overcome the difficulties might result in a decrease of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in both the value of doing something by oneself and his/her ability to accomplish it. Self-efficacy may influence one's performance and achievement. The lower the self-efficacy is, the lower the possible achievement one may get. So, difficulty in autonomous learning can result in more harmful and destructive effects than merely the failure to overcome the learning obstacles at hand. According to Mozzon & Pherson (2006), not all the learners who use a self-access center are already fully independent. They may be at different stages of their learning development and may want to access different levels of support while in the center. In this case, the university and ELRU need to support students with different strategies in order to generate optimal success from autonomous learning.

(3) The divergence between beliefs and behaviors

Why was the level of effectiveness of autonomous learning so different in Group B as compared to Group A? We can't attribute it to their expressed attitudes towards the English language, neither can we attribute it to their

perspectives toward autonomous learning, because most of them claimed to have positive attitudes towards the English language (although not so strong as that in Group A on average) and all of them had positive perspectives on autonomous learning. The divergence between attitude and behavior is no surprise in social life. Fred P. Pestello¹, H. Frances G. Pestello (2000) sought to challenge the typical simplistic assumptions of consistency between words and deeds. Thus, behavioral problems cannot be completely solved by developing the desirable attitude. A remedy for the problem could be to stimulate the students' intrinsic motivation, as will be discussed as follows.

(4) The function of motivation

According to the scoring system, the students (involved in the course from English 1 to English 5) have to work in ELRU 10 times in order to get 5% of their final score. Each time they have to stay there for approximately 1 hour to earn the stamps given by the ELRU staff which confirms their presence. The scoring system is an extrinsic motivation since the learners are more interested in the result. Anyway, it is indispensable. Without the scoring system, many fewer learners would work in the ELRU. Due to the encouragement from the scoring system, so many students have come and really learned English. But, extrinsic motivation is not long lasting. Once the reward is canceled, the learners might no longer continue working in the ELRU.

Intrinsic motivation can compensate for the limitations of extrinsic motivation. Since the learners involved have interest in the learning activity itself, they have the inner force for learning regardless of whether outside reward exist or not.

(5) *The behavior of learning by copying*

A lot of informants in Group A learned English by copying in the Reading Unit of ELRU. They copied very neatly and carefully. They claimed that they copied for class presentation and for language improvement. Copying may be a learning style for some people. But since so many informants employed it, peer influence might be involved in the behavior. In the research of Chan et al (2002), the respondents reported that “reading English notices, books, magazine and newspapers, and noting down new words and their meaning” were the general methods of reading involved in autonomous learning. The researchers have found little positive evaluation with regard to the effectiveness of learning by copying. Copying might not be so efficient for those who just followed the “fashion”. On the plus side, copying probably occupies a certain amount of their attention, which could result in deeper processing of the information. Copying slows down the speed of reading and is not advantageous for the reader to mentally combine different parts of the context in order to catch a full picture of the content. Copying consumes a lot of the students precious time that could be

more efficiently used to provide the students more comprehensible input, which is the driving force for inter-language development (Judie Haynes, 1998).

6. Recommendations & suggestions

According to the present study, the researchers put forward the following suggestions for further consideration:

(1) Measures should be taken to stimulate and strengthen the students’ intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is rooted in the interest in the language learning itself. English games, role playing, and other activities are popular means which can be employed to stimulate the learners’ interest in the English language learning.

(2) Set up programs to help learners to develop strategies related to English reading such as reading for general ideas, reading for details, or reading for enjoyment. The learners have to learn how to learn (Hill, 1994, as cited Zhao Chunrong 2006)

7. Future research

The findings from this study suggest three areas of future research, which are, first, the study of ways of stimulating the students’ intrinsic motivation for learning at ELRU. The researchers raise this suggestion because we found that intrinsic motivation can lead to successful autonomous learning. The second area is the study of training students to use the resources at ELRU most efficiently. The third area is the study of probing into the two other parts of ELRU, the Listening and Computer

Units. These are the main areas that the researchers suggest for future study.

8. Conclusion

The informants in the Reading Unit of ELRU were found to be involved in autonomous learning. Although they had difficulties with new words, grammar, and text comprehension, they could select effective strategies to overcome a lot of the difficulties. Most had positive attitudes towards the English language, and had positive perspectives on

autonomous learning. Yet, the difficulties which they were unable to overcome might have a negative effect on the learners because they could reduce the learners' self-efficacy. Intrinsic motivation needs to be developed in order to provide the learners a long lasting push for language learning. Reading strategies need to be developed to help the learners use the resources in the ELRU more effectively.

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