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College Students' Use of the Computer and Network-based Self-access Centre and Their English Learning Achievement

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Abstract

This study examined how Chinese College students' use of the computer-based Self-Access Language Learning Centre affects their English learning. The study investigated whether the gender difference influences students' perceptions of the Self-Access Centre and whether students' use of the Centre helps improve their English learning. Data was collected through questionnaires and a survey given to 120 sophomores at a technology university in Hubei, China. The data showed 1) no significant relationship between gender and students' perceptions of the use of SAC and 2) significant correlations between students' satisfaction of the SAC environment and their Oral English improvement, between students' beliefs of learning better in the SAC and the improvement in their listening ability. Based on the research results, it was suggested that to provide a relaxed and material-rich environment and to improve learners' autonomous learning can help improve the effectiveness of students' use of the SAC.

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1. Introduction

Since its introduction in the field of English Language Teaching, computer technology has been a useful support to both teachers and learners. The English language educators in China have been reconceptualising the course design of College English, using computer and network technology to provide flexible learning

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environments so as to meet the expanding needs of college students' learning English. In 2007, the Ministry of Education of China issued "College English Curriculum Requirements". According to the Requirements, colleges and universities should remould the existing unitary teacher-centred pattern of teaching models by integrating computer and network-based teaching model with the classroom-based teaching model. Through the years, College English, a required core course for all non-English majors, has evolved from a traditional lecture-based course to a course with an integration of classroom-based and computer and network-based teaching models. The Requirements also put forward the principles of teaching students in accordance with their aptitudes in order to meet the need of individualized teaching. In an effort to encourage out-of-class learning, many universities in the last ten years have established computer-based language centres where learners are encouraged to learn independently (Cotterall and Reinders, 2001). Since then, SACs (Self-Access Centres) have arisen in universities throughout China, and the studies on SALL (Self-Access Language Learning) and SACs have become popular. Much has been learnt about the advantages of SALL; however, little is mentioned about the correlation between learners' use of the SAC and their English achievement. This paper first presents the background of SAC studies and then attempts to study the correlation between learners' perceptions of Self Access Language Learning (Centre) and their English achievement.

2. Background of the SAC and SALL

2.1 Concepts of SAC and SALL

Sheerin (1989) defines Self-Access as materials selected by learners to reinforce a traditional teacher-led classroom. Self-Access merely means that the resources are immediately accessible by the learner(s) rather than being directly controlled by a teacher (cited from McMurry et al, 2009). Davies et al (1991) hold that a self-access session assists language learning by giving students the opportunity not only to work on their own, at their own pace, on activities of their own choice but also to have individual access to their teacher.

A Self-Access Centre is an educational facility designed for student learning that is at least partially, if not fully self-directed and to accommodate learners of different levels, styles, goals and interests, and consists of a number of resources ranging from photocopied exercises with answer keys to computer software for language learning. Institutions such as schools and universities may provide these resources in an open learning centre.

Self Access Language Learning (SALL) is the learning that takes place in a Self Access Centre.

2.2 Significance of Self-Access Language learning (Centres)

Since the advent of the SAC, SALL has experienced an explosion of interest (Cotterall and Reinders, 2001). SALL can help learners in a number of ways. Firstly, The SAC offers learners access to a wide range of language learning resources, as well as training in how to employ those resources (Gillies, 2010). Secondly, Self-Access Learning is a good way to learn, and effective for improving their English ability. With the help of multiple technologies, students' motivation to learn in a more independent setting has been found to be improved and their ability to work independently has also been increased by taking more responsibility for their own learning. Finally, SALL can promote learners' learning autonomy. Dickinson (2000) holds that Self-Access language learning can be highly teacher directed; it can be totally autonomous or it can be somewhere between those extremes; and the level of autonomy can vary from time to time and from individual to individual depending on the particular objectives being tackled and the needs of the individual.

Though SALL is believed to be an important means of learning foreign languages, until now, few studies have been done on the correlation between Chinese college students' perceptions of Self Access language learning and their English achievement. In view of this, the present study attempts to investigate how students' use of the SAC affects their learning achievement.

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