

Towards Learner Autonomy: The Effectiveness of Self-Access Centres in Enhancing English Language Skills at the Tertiary Level.

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ABSTRACT : Current studies on learner autonomy have dealt with self-access centres. Scholars need to determine how these centers are promoting autonomy of language learners, particularly L2 learners. In many studies, researchers have made attempts to ascertain what makes a person a good language learner. They try to find a way to transfer these techniques and integrate them into language programs. This paper is an attempt to explain the effectiveness of Self-Access Centres in facilitating learner autonomy with minimum academic interference by the teacher and the possibilities in establishing Self-Access Centres in our institutions where English is taught as a second language. The paper also proceeds to give an overview of the role of Self-Access Centres in understanding learners' language development process and evolving language needs.

Key Words: autonomy, academic, tertiary, self-access centres

Introduction

Self-Access Centres are specifically designed to provide additional instruction and encouragement to students who find the regular college hours inadequate in developing English language skills. The concept of Self-access Centre is popular in institutions of higher learning all over the world, especially, in countries where English is taught as a target language to develop the students' linguistic proficiency by promoting active learning and use of English through extensive practice in all the language skills needed in academic, professional and personal situations. The Self-access centre is an independent unit or facility set up in institutions to facilitate English language learning that is self-directed. The objective of this paper is to present a broad overview of the features of self-access centres, so the primary methodology used in study is descriptive analysis. This study tries to explore the features of self access centres in general and its contribution in making the learners autonomous.

Self-Access Centre and Learner Autonomy

Nunan (2000) states "Autonomy implies a capacity to exercise control over one's own learning". He also believes that autonomous learners should be able to determine the general focus of their learning, take an active role in the management of the learning process, and have freedom of choice with regards to learning resources and activities.

Benson and Voller (1997) also agree that autonomy means taking charge of one's own education and learning. In an effort to promote such autonomy, many institutions have developed Self-Access Centres. Self-Access actually refers to study materials, people and other resources that learners can use to learn independently. The students may utilize the facilities of the Self Access Centre on a regular basis/slots provided by the institution or at their own spare time. One of the main purposes of self-access centre is bridging the gap between performers and the slow learners. Materials which would enhance the previous learning experience at college enable the slow learners to cope with current learning requirements.

Language learning is a continuous process and the students at the tertiary level may not have enough language classes to enhance their language skills. The language classes allotted in their curriculum, prescribed texts and other available resources may not fully provide an opportunity to the learners of the language to a desired level. Therefore, students have to find out avenues outside their classroom for attaining the desired level in language learning. The Self-Access Centres help such students to develop their own learning structure. The students frequent the Self-Access Centre whenever they have time or need. The unrestricted access to learning materials and self-directed assessment programmes arguably make learning effective.

David Nunan opines that not everything can be taught in class (Nunan 1988 a:3) or a teacher will not always be around if and when students wish to use the language in real life (Cotterall 1995:220). The idea of Self-access centres is to compliment the views of Nunan and Cotterall. Self-Access Centres promote and facilitate autonomous learning. These centres contain books, audio-visual

equipments and / or tutors. The purpose of establishing Self-Access Centres is to support teacher instruction. Students may go to the self-access centre for a number of fully autonomous languages learning activities. According to Jones (1998), language learning students cannot escape autonomy as it even takes part in classroom activities.

Cotterall and Reinders (2001) suggest four areas that can help improve the effectiveness of Self-access centres.

- Self-access centres' administrators should explore learners' benefits.
- Students need an effective initial orientation to the Self-access centres.
- Administrators should provide continuous support to students.
- There should be more links between the Self-Access Centre and the classroom.

Physical Description of Self-Access Centres

The Self-Access Centres has the facilities of a library and a language laboratory. The centre is equipped with study materials like books, journals, audio-visual system, cassettes, CDs, and computers with internet connectivity. The centre aims to provide a non-judgmental and Self-learning environment.

The Self-Access Centres is divided into four sections based on the four major language skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing. The information desk at the entrance of the centre will provide information the students need to use the Self-Access Centres based on their needs. The materials are arranged according to the language proficiency level and skill area objectives. The database of the centre should include titles of materials, types of materials, and the location of materials. The composition and arrangement in the different sections of the self-access centre are detailed below:

Listening Section

This section provides support to students interested in enhancing their listening skills. The section has cubicles (as required by the institution) with personal computers with headphones, recorded CDs, and internet connections, to assist students listen to different listening materials including online

resources. The students may listen to different listening materials that include conversations, songs, stories, and articles. The students assess their acquired skill by completing listening tasks or worksheets on the listening material. They may repeat the exercises several times and grade themselves.

Speaking Section

This section has cubicles enhanced with microphones, and earphones connected to computers. The computers are programmed with software designed to improve the oral skills of the students by practice. The students record their speech and practice till they attain the desired level of proficiency. The software installed in this section has scope for assessing the oral skills of the learners. The students feel free to practice speaking as they are not conscious of the audience / teachers.

Reading Section

The reading section provides additional support to students for improving their reading competency. This section has reading materials which are graded according to the difficulty level. The students can choose their reading materials that include reading kits which contain short reading pieces (texts) and evaluation sheets to enhance the reading comprehension and vocabulary of the students, newspapers, magazines and readers.

Writing Section

This section occupies the maximum space in the centre. It has computers and printers apart from large tables which will be utilized to provide work space for students with writing difficulties. The writing centre has materials like workbooks, worksheets for sequential writing activities and exercises to learn the basic mechanics of writing.

Conclusion

The success of Self-Access Centres solely depends on the administrators of the centres. The resource materials used in the centre are prepared by the

teachers of the institution. Teachers need to provide continuous orientation to the students regarding the use of Self-Access Centres, keep them involved and interested, update materials regularly and get feedback for further development.

Ultimately, the aim of Self-access centres is to create an opportunity for the students to learn and practice language skills and to make them independent learners by using proven learning strategies and effective use of information technology. This learning is predominantly autonomous and has enough scope for self-assessment.

Taking into account the challenges faced by teachers in effectively imparting English language skills and the limitations of the current methods of instruction, in countries like India, the establishment of facilities like Self-access centres is a bare necessity. Such centres will definitely enhance the pace and quality of English language learning and teaching.

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