Part 1: Self-Access Learning
Chapter 1: Autonomous Language Learning Study Guides: Useful Tools in the Self-access Language Learning Environment

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Abstract

This paper reports on a recent trial of Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) guides, at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT), in Christchurch and Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland, New Zealand. The guides were developed to meet a perceived need for autonomous learning support in both the language classroom and the Self-Access Centre (SAC). The aim was to investigate whether these guides were effective in fostering autonomy and enhancing learning for students during their out-of-class time. Furthermore, it evaluated how they were being used, what learning was taking place, and if they fulfilled the need for support that teachers and students may require.

The results show that the guides helped bridge the gap between the classroom and the SAC. Moreover, students appreciated having information at their fingertips about resources they can choose to access. Other findings are that they: helped students plan for their studies; helped improve language skills, raised students' self-awareness; and encouraged students to become active agents in their own learning. Some recommendations for maximising the utilisation of the guides are that: a thorough introduction to self-studies is needed; teachers should follow-up on out-of-class studies; time should be spent on learner training activities both in the classroom and in the self-access centre; and that time needs to be allocated for self-study time as part of the curriculum.

Background

The Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) guides were created in conjunction with the English language teachers and students at CPIT to meet an expressed need for more assistance with ALL development support. The guides were then re-written to suit other institutions and this small-scale research project was conducted at CPIT and Unitec to find out more about their suitability and benefits within these contexts. Two tertiary polytechnic institutes of similar size and having similar teaching structures, one from the North Island and one from the South, were chosen to collaborate in this project to give a wider base for the research data. The participants were one teacher from each institution and the learners from their classes. The students were studying at an upper-intermediate level of English. This level was chosen because they have an appropriate level of meta-language to talk about the research questions, and because the respective timetables were suitable. Both institutions had formal student orientations around using the Language Self Access Centre (LSAC) and the Independent Learning Centre (ILC), to best advantage, before the research started. The teachers were supported by the researchers in terms of
providing background explanations, associated worksheets, and tasks for them to use in the classroom. Appropriate space was dedicated in the LSAC/ILC (from now on referred to as SAC) for storing planning sheets and diaries/logs so students could make use of them outside classroom time. The teachers and researchers also had access to them at any time during the length of the study.

**The ALL guides**

The guides were created as tools for enabling a flexible and supportive approach to ensure that learning takes place at a deeper level, and with the aim of assisting the ALL development both inside and outside the classroom. They target three levels of English: Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate, and include supporting quotes, tips and ideas for self-study along with recommendations of useful study strategies and resources to improve language skills and knowledge. The Teacher Guide contains a copy of each page from the Student Guide and more detailed explanations, ideas and instructions for teachers. The guides also have meta-cognitive awareness-building exercises for self-knowledge, motivation, style, strategies, and evaluation. The aim is to assist students' understanding of how to become a more successful language student. This includes teaching transferrable skills and strategies for learning in the classroom so that students can take more control and responsibility over their own studies, in both class and out-of-class environments. The guides encourage learners to share good practice ideas for effective self-directed studies in the classroom, before and after they study in a Self-Access Centre (SAC).

Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) are included in the teacher guide for students to complete and use in a SAC. Staff in the SAC can encourage students to actively take control of their own learning by guiding them with planning, goal setting, choices of tasks to focus on using the resources on the computers and in the SAC.

This multi-faceted institutional support and encouragement for ALL, including the guides as a bridging tool between the two different places and modes of learning, is pictured in the model in Figure 1. It shows the learner in the middle using the ALL guides both in the classroom and in the SAC; teachers supporting students by making use of the guides and supplementary strategy training activities, mostly in the classroom; and Learning Facilitators (LFs) or Tutorial Assistants (TAs) who facilitate learning and its evaluation in the SAC. They are paid to assist both teachers and learners in their classroom and SAC practice, but are not teachers. The surrounding institutional support includes; committing to the autonomous learning philosophy, providing a space at the institution for a centre, allowing time for education of staff, and providing technological support for autonomous learning.
Research questions

This study was developed to investigate: (1) How the autonomous learning study guides were being used (2) What learning seemed to be evident. The study also asked for student and staff opinions about the supported self-studies, methods for the support, and the ALL guides.

The following concepts are linked to this study and will be briefly looked at in the literature review; institutional support for learning spaces, supportive teachers for autonomous learning, learning gain in SACs, strategy training, transferable skills tasks in the classroom and in SACs, advising, and the use of technology for language learning.

Literature Review

Institutional support for learning spaces

Weinstein, Acee, Jung, & Dearman (2011) argue that key elements for success in the 21st century are the ability for learners to take initiative and to employ self-direction. This study adopts the following five definitions of autonomy described by Benson and Voller (1997, pp. 1-2):
1. for *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own
2. for a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning
3. for an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education
4. for the exercise of *learners' responsibility* for their own learning
5. for the *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning

Educational institutions, which are committed to encouraging autonomous learning, have specific responsibilities to create *situations* where learners can study on their own, encourage the acquisition of required *skills*, and allow students to explore their own *capacity, accountability* and *self-determination*.

Miyahara (2012) claims that "the road to autonomy is ... by no means a linear process; rather it is a dynamic interplay of description, reflection, communication and dialogue with self and others." (p. 76). Within the autonomous learning process in classrooms, SACs and other learning places, there are a range of reciprocal learning interactions between all of the following agents: teachers, LFs, TAs, and learners. Institutions can provide SACs which may in turn act as a hub for many of these interactions as it makes space for, and creates a feeling of ownership and valuable 'personal' connections among all the users and stakeholders. Moreover, Dofs and Hornby (2006) identified pre-requisites for institutional and management support for SACs, including:

1. Providing adequate funding for staff, resources, materials and facilities
2. Being positively oriented to, and supportive of, a SAC culture
3. Providing on-going staff induction and professional development relating to a SAC
4. Overseeing relationships with other organisations, faculties and departments
5. Including SAC considerations in programme documentation and course outcomes
6. Providing pre- and in-service training for teachers in the advisor/counsellor/mentor role
7. Funding the development of information guides for learners and teachers about SAC provision

**Supportive teachers for autonomous learning**

While Sheerin (1989) points out that the required attitudinal change from the teachers may not be easy because "Most teachers have been trained and gained their experience in the traditional mode" (p. 7), The Socrates Lingua Learner Autonomy Group (2004) maintains that learner autonomy development and learners taking charge of their own progress can only be successful if the *control over and responsibility for the learning situation is gradually transferred from teachers to learners*. Lázaro and Reinders (2008) argue that support for autonomous learning can be more effective when *self-access learning is combined with classroom-based learning*. Kanzaka (2007) suggests a model for fostering learner autonomy through "apprenticeship of learner strategies" in which:

*Teachers' meta-cognitive knowledge and skills for critical reflection should be shared through teacher-student dialogue. Students should be guided in a scaffolded way with explicit instruction in the beginning, and then, the locus of control should be gradually*
shifted to the side of the learners. (p. 6).

This leads to the issue of teacher autonomy being a prerequisite before learner autonomy can be fully encouraged amongst students (Lamb & Reinders, 2008; McGrath, Sinclair, & Lamb 2000).

Learning gain in SACs

Murray (2011) found that students having their own dedicated space was very beneficial on several levels of learning, particularly for older language learners. Establishing what actually works best for students in terms of advising, materials, and students' own input for autonomous learning can be problematical. Mozzon-McPherson (2001) states that the difficulties in the evaluation of learner gain in a SAC arise because:

...learning consists of the reorganisation and restructuring of the learning experience rather than the gradual internalisation or discovery or pre-determined knowledge ... subjectivity, rather than objectivity, comes to the fore and with it an emphasis on learner's representations, beliefs and behaviours. (pp. 12-13)

Morrison (2005) proposes the use of learning diaries, tests, learner portfolios, focus groups and various types of self-assessment as evaluation tools. He maintains that it is possible to evaluate learning gain. His proposed tools can:

...help the learner to make an informed judgement about the degree of learning gain achieved. It is for the learner to decide which of these to use and how; with the support and guidance, where appropriate, from the SAC teacher (p. 286).

Mynard (2006) agrees that it is "far more beneficial to describe and discuss evidence of learner autonomy in a given context rather than attempt to measure it" (p. 3). Law's (2011) study on evaluation of learning gain in a SAC identified the kinds of learning gain that participants perceived they had received in the self-access language learning process, and tentatively concluded that providing appropriate learner support enhanced the learning gain of learners.

Strategy training

It may be assumed that learners become more autonomous solely as a result of providing resources in a language SAC. However Sinclair (1996) clearly states that "experience has shown that the average learner needs a period of guided induction and adjustment to the demands of self-directed learning, especially when it is presented in an institutionalised way in the form of a self-access centre" (p. 159). Since then others have pointed out that simply providing these resources does not necessarily lead to development of autonomy amongst learners (Benson, 2001, Cooker & Torpey, 2004). Some form of guidance or learner training is usually needed so learners can understand what self-directed learning entails, and how to make the best use of the centre. Furthermore, learning autonomously does not necessarily equate to studying alone in a centre, as successful learners also often take advantage of support from teachers, fellow students, and advisors (Dofs & Hobbs, 2011).

Learner training aims to prepare students for autonomous learning and to help them become more effective language learners. While Ellis and Sinclair (1989) suggest that this should include discovery of suitable learning strategies and learning about factors
that affect language learning, Wenden and Rubin (1987), Oxford (1990), and Brown (2002) all suggest that learner strategy training should be **initiated by the teacher** in the classroom. Crabbe (1993) states that teachers should explain clearly the aims and potential hurdles of certain tasks when presenting strategies, whereas Sheerin (1997) uses the phrase "Learner Development" which implies a process in which **students learn more about what they should include** to make their own learning more efficient and not simply use a set of skills presented by their teachers or learning advisors. Brown (2002) agrees and further this by suggesting that learners should share useful strategies for self-study. Brandon (2003) uses a similar term, "Guided Individual Learning" which suggests a learner-centred process incorporating some additional roles for the teacher, such as guide, facilitator, counsellor and mentor. She places **the control and responsibility for learning jointly between teachers/advisors and learners**. Moreover, she states that best practice in guided individual learning can be defined as providing the most appropriate response to student goals and needs within the available pragmatic frameworks of budget and time. Little (2003) notes that an important part of becoming an autonomous learner involves **self-management** and utilising "a capacity to set one's own learning goals, monitor one's own learning progress, and evaluate one's own learning outcomes" (p. 223). Dofs (2007) adds to this by suggesting that language courses should **integrate learner training in the classroom and studies in a SAC**.

**Transferable skills tasks in the classroom and in SACs**

Whatever the autonomous learning setting, on-line, distance, or in a SAC, learners typically need skills practice to gain knowledge, to make progress, and also to increase metacognitive study skills and understand how to improve their ability to undertake successful self-studies. Assistance to improve listening, reading, writing and speaking skills is an important part of the total support provided at institutions, and a specific focus of most SACs. This is enhanced if students get an opportunity for prior learning about self-study skills in the classroom. Crabbe (1993) suggests that in order to foster autonomy in the classroom, when teachers introduce tasks, they should, (1) Design tasks and use classroom discourse to allow knowledge transfer to out-of class studies and (2) Be overt with the purpose of tasks, the nature of difficulties the students may face, and discuss what appropriate learning and communication strategies could be used to meet those difficulties. This should allow for knowledge transfer from the classroom to learners' own study situations outside the classroom, and optimally result in learners becoming more autonomous, internalising this capacity, and being able to apply their knowledge and skills to further studies and pursuits in their lives.

**Advising**

Lázaro and Reinders (2008) state that learner training and on-going support, for example in the form of language advisory sessions, are crucial. Learner advising may take different forms in different institutions, some tertiary learning advisors tend to use one-on-one advising time to focus on assisting students to develop skills which enable them to learn effectively on their own (Manalo, 2007). Other institutions offer on-the-spot help and have a 'needs-based' approach within the SAC, both for groups and individuals, either as part of the course or on a voluntary basis (Dofs & Hobbs, 2011).

Advising can be viewed as a three-level negotiation process (Gremmo, 2007), having
three conditions necessary for a truly helping relationship leading to the development of an autonomous self-directing learner; (1) timetabled advising sessions with time to allow students to practise what is discussed and to reflect on their learning, (2) regular meetings scheduled with an advisor, with enough time set aside to comprehend its usefulness, and (3) sessions continuously adapted by the learner and the advisor according to the learner's needs.

Mozzon-McPherson (2007) asserts that advisors need to be aware of the sometimes difficult balance between over-informing or over-supporting students and encouraging them to seek out answers for themselves. She also argues that institutions need to provide the necessary infrastructure so that all parts of the self-access system work efficiently as a learning scheme. Given these conditions, Hobbs and Jones-Parry (2007) found that amongst students receiving advising, there appeared to be a "shift in learners' attitudes and willingness to take responsibility for their learning..." (p. 139) and they showed signs of "heightened meta-cognitive awareness and an increased confidence in their ability to manage their learning."

**Technology for language learning**

New technology and e-learning initiatives may place demands on how to best utilise an ever-increasing range of new tools and applications for teaching and learning. Students often need guidance to find the most useful websites and teachers need to feel comfortable with their assistance for this. Earlier the SAC was typically sourced with computer programs which could easily be taught to students so they could continue using them comfortably on their own. However, Lamb (2008) points out that new technology and e-learning support will increase "exponentially" in the future which will "shift the role of the teacher/advisor" (p. 273). For example, O'Reilly, (2007) claimed that the move from Web 1.0, where information was merely gathered by individuals, to Web 2.0, where information and experiences are shared, resulted in a plethora of interactive websites for learning. As the amount of web-sites available for interactive language learning has increased in recent years, teachers and advisors may have to act as filters so that students can make best use of them. Nowadays, as the amount of increasing data may be overwhelming, the emerging of Web 3.0 which enables users to search through semantic webs to find contextualised information, may make searching and guiding easier for both students and support personnel. Search engines have now emerged (for example; Hakia), which ensure that; information comes from credible sources, it is the most recent information available, and that it is absolutely relevant to the query. Furthermore, Chan, Fisher and Sauer (2011) state that "an important principle [is] ...to match the use of technology to appropriate learning outcomes" (p. 27). To ensure advisor and teacher knowledge of the opportunities in technology as tools for learning in any advising is therefore a vital part of any institutional support for life-long autonomous learning.

**Method**

**Methodology**

The research project took a qualitative, action research approach, as both of the researchers have senior responsibilities for the autonomous learning development in the
ILC/LSAC at their institutions and therefore actively seek answers to pertinent research questions. Data was gathered from two upper-intermediate English as Additional Language (EAL) classes, one at each of the institutions. There were 31 students in total in the two classes. There were two teachers, one learning facilitator and one tutorial assistant participating. They all volunteered after a call for interested participants was announced. There were more teachers interested so to minimise the differences between the data from the two institutions the decision was made to choose similar classes with the same level of English. The number of participants was small which made the research more manageable and enabled depth rather than breadth; however the drawback was that this may have affected the validity due to the sample size. Data was triangulated by comparing: on-site observations of students, teachers and LSAC staff members; semi-structured interviews with the two teachers, two centre staff members and six students in each of the classes; follow-up questionnaires, distributed to the teachers, centre staff and all students in both of the classes; and literature in the field of advising, learner autonomy and technology.

The two institutions had slightly different arrangements for this project. At CPIT the self-study time was compulsory and scheduled as part of the curriculum for one hour per week in the LSAC, with support from Learning Facilitators (LFs). In addition to this, students could use the LSAC in their own time outside class time. At Unitec there was an expectation of twenty hours self-study time per week but it was up to the students whether they made use of the ILC or another space for this. Tutorial Assistants (TAs) supported students in the classroom, computer labs, language labs, and the ILC. The research questions evolved around how the guides were being used and what evidence there were of learning gains, achievements, reflections and attitudes towards self-study.

Data analysis

In order to reach significant findings and strong themes, data was analysed using a method of structured, focused comparison, as outlined by Creswell, (2009), meaning the results of the study was narrowed down through focused thematic analysis. The emerging themes suggested answers to the research questions which evolved around how the autonomous learning study guides were being used and what learning seemed to be evident. The study also asked for student and staff opinions about the supported self-studies, methods for the support, and the ALL guides.

Results and Discussion

The word limitation of this chapter prevents a lengthy results report so the following is a shortened summary of the analysis related to the research questions.

How the autonomous learning study guides were being used

The interviews revealed that the teachers referred to the guides in the classroom and made use of the suggested exercises with their classes. One of the teachers seemed to have some problems fitting it into the teaching time and pointed out the importance of having a designated time for learner training activities in the timetable, so it does not become an 'ad hoc' part of a course. Observations showed that some students typically made use of the guides outside the classroom when they needed new resources, wanted to learn how to improve skills, and/or to learn new strategies. This was consistent with
comments from the class questionnaires which showed that students had utilised advice from the guides. This was further confirmed in the interview with one of the staff members which established that students needed to be reminded of, and taught, how to best make use of the guides and also about the benefits of autonomous learning. The staff member spent a lot of time introducing and re-introducing the guides and as a result the usage was more frequent at the end than in the beginning of the study. In addition, observations revealed that students seemed to follow the suggestions and guiding comments which were written on the planning sheets by teachers and SAC staff.

The results showed that the guides help learners in several ways: to bridge the gap between the classroom and the SAC, to find a range of resources, to reach their self-directed goals, to plan for their studies, to help improve language skills, and to be self-reflective. However, it also confirms that learners do not become autonomous solely because they have easily accessible resources - they also need guidance, especially initially, as autonomous learning may be a new concept for many of them.

**Evidence for learning**

In the interviews, one of the students explained how the ALL Guides helped them reach their self-directed goals, while another pointed out the useful list of extra self-access resources. There were also some comments which indicated that some students were uncertain how to best take charge of their own learning - they either did not fully understand the self-study concept, or said they did not have enough time for self-studies. However, answers in the questionnaires and interviews showed that the learners and staff members indicated that learning gains were made, for example, how to set goals, metacognitive awareness, learning how to self-study, own needs and what areas to focus on, planning for autonomous learning, and how to improve language skills.

**Student opinions about the ALL guides and fulfilling support for autonomous learning**

Students' opinions about the usefulness of the guides, as revealed in the interviews, showed that some students thought the ALL guides were most useful for other students, and maybe for students who already had reached some level of autonomy, i.e. who already had taken some control over their study choices and were looking at the guides for more assistance. At first glance this may seem like a contradiction, however, the first claim can perhaps be explained by them being a bit too comfortable in their "comfort zone" so they are not inclined to try out new methods and techniques. The second claim could be because the learners were in upper intermediate classes, so have been studying for a long time and are already somewhat autonomous, but they could see the benefit of the guides in terms of receiving more information. However, only six in each of the classes were interviewed whereas the questionnaire reached all 31 students. It was interesting to note that comments made in the questionnaire showed that many students thought that by using the guides they had learnt some new and useful strategies for learning language skills and that they had increased their metacognitive awareness.

**Staff opinions about the ALL guides and fulfilling support for autonomous learning**

The results from the teacher interviews and questionnaires showed several interesting points: they appreciated that the ALL guides bridged the gap between the classroom and out-of-class studies; they used the planning sheets for written suggestions and guiding
comments; and that they thought the ALL guides help teachers and learners realise how important and difficult personal motivation and discipline can be. Time constraints seemed to be an issue preventing full utilisation of the ALL guides thereby preventing support for autonomy effectively in the classroom. It was pointed out in the teacher interviews that there needs to be dedicated time for it to work properly, both in and outside the classroom. Nevertheless they thought students had learnt something useful around how to study on their own and what to do to become more successful. Moreover, they said that learners were becoming less reliant on a teacher figure as a result of using the ALL guides.

In the interviews with staff working in the centre it was noted that the ALL guides had an increasing impact on students' self-studies during the time of the project. The guides were continually referred to and students were encouraged to use all the suggested resources. Ideas about ways to use the resources were suggested, and students were helped to set their own goals and plan for their future self-study times. This gave students an appreciation for having information readily available about resources that were quick and easy to find. The staff member found that encouragement to use the ALL guides was needed, mostly in the beginning, and this was done by referring to the lists of resources, web sites and strategy tips. The staff member also stated that the planning document assisted staff learning about the students so it was easier to meet their needs. This was also confirmed in the student interviews and questionnaires as these showed that the individual planning sheets helped them stay "on task", as well as functioning as a tool for centre staff to give timely assistance about their chosen area of study.

**Limitations**

This was a small-scale study only and the results need to be interpreted cautiously. Findings are mainly relevant to the studied context because of the small sample size and relatively limited data collection and analysis. As this was a qualitative research project, there was no attempt to achieve statistical reliability, and the data was interpreted in descriptive terms only. Moreover, some of the questionnaire items may have been interpreted by students in a different way to the intentions of the authors. Therefore, follow-up interviews with all students could have strengthened the findings. A broader study including students and classes at pre-intermediate and intermediate level of English would also reinforce the findings.

**Discussion/Conclusions**

The main focus of this project was to gain knowledge within the following three areas;

1. How the ALL guides were being used,
2. Learning gain as a result of utilising the guides
3. If the guides fulfil the support for autonomous language learning development needed by teachers and learners.

Through all the sources of data, a clearer picture of the role of the ALL study guides in supporting autonomous learning in the classroom and in the SAC emerged. The ALL guides are related to institutional support, strategy training, skills practice, advising and
from a range of vocational disciplines. Both roles exhibit a continuing interest and commitment to helping students achieve their short and long term learning goals.

References.


