
Self-Access Center Materials and Principles for Autonomy and Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

The production of effective independent learning materials that facilitate the development of learner autonomy first requires awareness of gaps. These gaps are often between teacher-generated materials that are currently utilized in self-access learning center environments and set principles from the field. This study investigates elements of autonomy facilitation as suggested by Tomlinson (2010) and Benson (2011) with respect to language learning materials in a Japanese university EFL self-access center. The intended outcome of this case study is to highlight specific shortcomings (i.e., lack of affective and/or cognitive engagement) of teacher-generated materials in order to benefit future materials-development by teachers. Findings reveal a discord between these elements. This supports the need to bridge the gap between currently utilized materials and guiding principles for materials development. This further suggests the future need for improvement in teacher-generated handouts in this setting. Overall, these guidelines offer support and direction to teachers and researchers to investigate the role of language learning principles and autonomy.

Introduction

Self-access learning centers are one area of university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs that strive to facilitate learner autonomy. For the development of effective self-access learning centers, Gardner and Miller (1999) conceptualize the integration of thirteen elements: resources, people, management, a system, individualization, needs analysis, learner reflection, counseling, learner training, staff training, assessment, evaluation, and materials development. All thirteen elements are integrated to provide a differentiated self-access learning center experience in support of individual student language learning needs. Each element requires in-depth research and analysis. Of these thirteen elements, this current case study focuses on teacher-generated self-access learning center materials development towards support of learner autonomy.

The purpose of this case study is to raise awareness for instructors and self-access learning center administrators through the identification of gaps between teacher-generated materials that they currently utilize in their self-access learning center environments and recommended elements from the field. On point to this, our case study specifically investigates the extent to which self-access learning center materials match principles of materials design as outlined by Tomlinson (2010). In addition, this case study concomitantly assesses self-access learning center materials for the extent to which they meet Benson's (2011) suggestions on how to facilitate student autonomy. The intended outcome of this case study is to highlight specific shortcomings (i.e., lack of affective and/or cognitive engagement) of teacher-generated materi-

als in order to benefit future materials-development by teachers. The article utilizes one Japanese EFL program with a self-access learning center and analyzes teacher-generated materials within the structure of principles for self-access learning center materials development (Tomlinson, 2010) and criteria for the facilitation of autonomy (Benson, 2011).

Autonomy

It is clear that autonomy has a significant role to play in EFL programs and in self-access learning center materials development. On point to this, Benson (2011) identifies that the learner must be “freed from direction and control of others” (p. 14) and providing appropriate choices of materials is one method of doing this. In a similar way, Dickenson (1987) highlights that learner autonomy denotes student responsibility in choice of their learning (i.e., goals) and how their learning is accomplished. In other words, learner responsibility in the selection of what and how they study is critical for the development of goal-orientated self-regulating language learners. Applying this to self-access learning centers and materials development for self-access learning centers, it is commonplace for instructional programs to be overly controlling in what and how students study within their self-access learning center programs and environments. Consequently, a realistic concern is the issue of the center becoming a homework retrieval site; thereby, negating the overall principles of autonomy in self-access learning.

There are several potential reasons to rationalize or explain why this concern tends to occur; however, Benson (2011) identifies that “In many institutions, self-access centers have been established without any strong pedagogical rationale and it is often assumed, without any strong justification, for the assumption that self-access work will automatically lead to autonomy” (p. 11). In other words, autonomy in language learning needs to be facilitated in specific ways. One prominent approach is to provide well-designed materials that are strategically conceptualized and created to support autonomy.

Principles of self-access learning center materials (Tomlinson, 2010)

Tomlinson (2010) offers five principles of what self-access learning center handouts should provide to students, basing these five principles on key tenets of language acquisition: Provision of rich input (Long 1985), affective and cognitive engagement (Arnold, 1999; Tomlinson, 1998a, 1998b), positive affect for communicative competence (Arnold, 1999), noticing (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Tomlinson, 2007), and target language production/hypothesis testing (Swain, 2005). Tomlinson (2010) provides examples of how self-access learning center materials can meet the aforementioned five principles of SLA, and these standards concomitantly serve as predetermined categories for content analysis of teacher-generated and assigned self-access center materials in this inquiry. For instance, regarding principle 2 (affective and cognitive engagement), Tomlinson (2010) suggests that materials offer affective and cognitive engagement in texts and problem tasks, activities that scaffold material, and materials that offer choice in text selection (see appendix for complete list of all five principles).

Facilitation of autonomy in language learning

In different fields of study, various definitions of autonomy have emerged over the past thirty years. Holec (1981) defines autonomy in language development as taking charge of one’s own learning. Along this vein, Benson (2011) elaborates that autonomy refers to a learner’s *capacity* to do so. Benson (2011, p. 3) further specifies that taking charge of one’s own learning involves a learner: (1) determining the objectives, (2) defining the contents and progressions (3), selecting methods and techniques to be used, (4) monitoring

the procedure of acquisition properly, and (5) evaluating what has been acquired.

On the other hand, it may be the case that certain learners are not at an appropriate readiness state or lack the metacognitive knowledge to effectively meet Benson's (2011) five criteria. On point to this thought, Cotterall's (1995) study on learner beliefs of language learning reveals six factors of learner readiness for autonomy in language learning. Her factor analysis of a 26-item Likert-scale questionnaire (n = 139, adult ESL learners) elucidates learner perspectives surrounding the following six points: the role of the teacher, the role of feedback, learner independence, learner confidence in study ability, experience of language learning, and approach to studying. An outcome of Cotterall's (1995) study is that not all learners are at an appropriate stage of effective autonomy in language learning. Given this readiness state for learner autonomy, it is critical to note that autonomy can still be facilitated in learners if appropriate measures are taken. In the context of this study, we argue that teacher-generated materials need to be designed to facilitate learner autonomy based on certain principles. Furthermore, we contend that in order to accomplish learner autonomy and to support students at their readiness state, self-access learning center materials must be generated with learner-centered goals based on pedagogically sound principles at the forefront.

Literature and practical experience

A wide scope of research into self-access language learning has been compiled over the past three decades. For instance, there are educational institution reports on the set up/creation of specific self-access learning centers (i.e., Lee, 1997) as well as practical articles on how to make self-access learning centers more effective (i.e., Gardner, 2001). More specifically related to materials, studies on learner perceptions of materials (i.e., Cranker & Servais, 2013) and studies of materials evaluation in terms of practicality for self-access learning centers (Reinders, 2008; Reinders & Lewis, 2005, 2006) are constitutive contributors to the field of SLA and self-access learning center development. Further to the point of evaluating and selecting self-access materials, Reinders and Lewis (2006) created an evaluation checklist for self-access learning center materials. They state that the "The goal was to develop a relatively straightforward checklist which could be used by teachers and directors of self-access learning centers to make purchasing decisions" (p. 275). However, this is not an analysis of how materials meet suggestions on the facilitation of autonomy or theories of SLA. Rather, Reinders and Lewis (2006) outline evaluation tools for teachers to select appropriate self-access learning center materials as opposed to a theoretical study. In a similar manner, suggestions for the design of self-access learning center materials have been proposed (i.e., Sheerin, 1989); however, these suggestions are not specifically linked to SLA theory and data is rarely measured empirically. Overall, a review of the literature reveals a lack of empirical investigation into teacher-generated self-access learning center materials specifically for principles of second language acquisition (SLA) and autonomy. This emphasizes the importance and the relevance of this inquiry as a contribution to not only the field of SLA but concomitantly to the development of pragmatic self-access learning center materials. This discord between both SLA and self-access learning centers in terms of co-relevant research represents a need in the field and is a driving impetus for this analysis of self-access learning center materials. In order to provide empirical evidence, the researchers propose the following research question. To what extent do teacher-generated materials align with:

- principles for self-access learning center materials (as compiled by Tomlinson, 2010)
- principles of students taking charge of their learning (autonomy in language learners) as measured by the five recommendations of Benson (2011)

Methodology

The context of this case study is within an English language department at a private four-year university in Japan. The English language department is made up of 22 foreign language instructors at the onset of this study. As a part of the university curriculum, coordinating instructors of core courses were required to create and assign self-access center worksheets for students to retrieve and complete during their mandatory allocated self-access study time. These worksheets were administered at the discretion of each instructor. For example, a writing course instructor would create four separate self-access learning center worksheets while a reading course instructor might only assign two individual worksheets per semester.

For the analysis of the selected teacher-generated self-access learning center materials in our case study, the primary research tool is a data coding form, which is based on principles for self-access learning center materials development as formulated by Tomlinson (2010) and elements of how learners can take charge of their own learning by Benson (2011) (see appendix). During the materials analysis process, two raters simultaneously coded the same worksheets. These raters resolved any coding discrepancies through a dialogic process.

The researchers randomly selected teacher-generated self-access learning center materials from a one-semester pool of handouts. They analyzed three self-access learning center material handouts from each core English language course: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The one-semester pool of materials ranged in target scope from undergraduate freshman-level to junior-level students.

Results

Given that the analyzed materials are teacher-generated, they provide the researchers with opportunities to see the thought process behind the materials. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics representing the extent to which the teacher-generated materials matched Tomlinson's, (2010) principles for self-access learning center materials development and Benson's (2011) elements of students taking charge of their own learning.

Table 1. Principles for self-access learning center development by Tomlinson (2010)

<u>Are principles met?</u>	<u>Mean Scores</u>		<u>Percentages</u>	
	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Speaking	3	13	18.75%	81.25%
Writing	10.33	5.33	64.58%	33.33%
Reading	6.67	9.33	41.67%	58.33%
Listening	6	10	37.50%	62.50%

Based on the number of principles for self-access learning center materials development, the maximum score for each handout is 16. We analyzed three sets of self-access materials within each language course skill area (i.e., three handouts for listening courses); therefore, the maximum total score for each skill area is 48. In general, the mean scores in table 1 illustrate a general trend of self-access learning center materials showing limited relation to the principles outlined by both Tomlinson (2010) and Benson (2011).

Minimal relation was achieved by speaking course self-access learning center materials at 18.75%. In a similar way, the reading course materials met conditions at 41.67%, and the listening course materials achieved 37.50% of principles. Writing materials met the conditions at 64.58%. However, in terms

of language learning principles, improvements in materials can be made in areas, such as including more problem solving tasks that engender affective and cognitive engagement, scaffolding materials, interesting and relevant materials, and opportunities for contextualized target language production.

With respect to the materials provided for the writing course, there are several potential veins that are available for consideration. In particular, it was difficult to ascertain whether this was simply the structured nature of the writing process that produced the positive results for the self-access learning center materials, or whether the instructor had the curriculum development acumen to produce materials that met many of the principles and elements set forth by Tomlinson (2010) and Benson (2011). This is a limitation of our inquiry, since interviewing instructors was not within the scope of this paper. However, it is clear that there are appreciable issues with self-access learning center materials development and language learning in this context. Future studies that include structured interviews would certainly be a way to investigate in with greater certainty the extent to which teachers were aware of and or considered principles of language learning and autonomy. The scope of this inquiry and the data that we provide does highlight the importance for further analysis and shows an area of concern in teacher materials development training and self-access materials design.

Based on our initial inquiry, questions have been raised as to why and how self-access learning center materials are developed. This relates directly to the need for goals and outcomes that link self-access learning center material development to course content. Clearly, further investigation is necessary.

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics for the extent to which the analyzed materials meet Benson’s (2011) elements for facilitating students taking charge of their learning. From the data, there is a clear gap between the materials that the researchers reviewed and Benson’s (2011) elements towards the facilitation of learner autonomy. Specifically, three of the teacher-generated course material areas clearly did not meet Benson’s (2011) elements. These were speaking reading, and listening. In the speaking course self-access worksheets, 93.33% did not meet the criteria of Benson’s elements. Discouragingly, this leaves only 6.67% of teacher-generated worksheets capable of fostering autonomy according to Benson’s (2011) criteria. Further to this point, our data on the reading course self-access worksheets displayed meeting Benson’s (2011) criteria at only 6.67%. Listening course self-access worksheets, with this index being slightly higher, only met Benson’s (2011) criteria at 13.33%. Implications from the results are (a) a greater choice in student definition of goals, (b) choice of what to study, (c) student tracking of their own development/time-on task, (d) tasks that make use of more strategies, and (e) opportunities for reflection.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for Benson (2011) taking charge of ones’ own learning

	Mean Scores		Percentages	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Speaking	0.33	4.67	6.67%	93.33%
Writing	2.00	3.00	40.00%	60.00%
Reading	0.33	4.67	6.67%	93.33%
Listening	0.67	4.33	13.33%	86.67%

On a positive note, in comparison to the other three language skill areas, the writing course self-access materials showed the most potential for the facilitation of autonomy. The writing course self-access materials met Benson’s (2011) criteria at a 40.00% level. Examining the data for the writing materials further, when compared to the data in the other three language skill areas, there were more instances of (a) choice in

what to study, (b) a variety of language learning strategies, and (c) opportunities for reflection. However, this still leaves much room for improvement as 60% of the elements were not met. Specifically, despite addressing 40.00% of the elements, one area lacking in the writing course materials was that they did not allow for student definition of learning goals. Overall, the data in table 2 illustrates the importance of reviewing teacher-generated materials in order to confirm their suitability and applicability to a self-access center environment.

Discussion

Proper pedagogical foundations and theory behind available materials are at the core of the facilitation of learner autonomy in self-access centers. Implications for this study are threefold, relating to autonomy and language learners. First, this study makes known what specific theoretical considerations are at the forefront of material developers. Second, this research pinpoints areas that self-access center materials developers need to focus on. Overall, this research shows the thought processes behind the creation of self-access center materials by specific instructors from each language skill area. This highlights a greater need for instruction into autonomy facilitation in second language teacher preparation programs.

The discussion of teacher-generated materials and their potential successes and pitfalls in a self-access center lead directly to the data we have presented in this case study. Taken in the aggregate, the data clearly shows these two specific findings. First, our review of teacher-generated materials displays a failure in self-access center worksheets to consider relevant pedagogy based on current research into materials development (Tomlinson, 2010) and autonomy (Benson, 2011). Second, our inquiry reveals an inability to integrate pedagogically sound materials in a self-access center that are relevant to course work other than linking of the topic.

Limitations

Similar to any empirical study, there are limitations in our analysis. First, it should be noted that we are analyzing a one-semester set of teacher-generated self-access language learning center materials. Greater inquiry into this area of self-access center learning is necessary. In support of this, the next step would be to replicate this study at this particular university. This replication study would involve additional materials including structured interviews with instructors. We do remind readers that there were no instances of teachers placing more than 4 original teacher-generated materials per language course. From this selection of four possible worksheets, we measured three, which means the analysis of 75% of teacher-generated materials for one semester. Second, certain elements of Tomlinson's (2010) self-access center materials development principles may not apply to certain courses; for example, the component of extensive reading may not be applicable to a speaking course. However, we are investigating the overall extent to which self-access center materials meet two distinct areas of need for language students: learning pedagogy and the facilitation of autonomy.

Conclusion

This case study intended to investigate and analyze teacher-generated materials. Specifically, we analyze teacher-generated materials within the parameters of language learning for self-access center materials development (Tomlinson, 2010) and elements of facilitating autonomy (Benson, 2010). It is clear that both materials for self-access learning and autonomy for students in a self-access center are intricately intertwined. Both have a considerable impact on the learning experiences students encounter in self-access

centers. The area of materials development for self-access center usage offers both teachers and researchers opportunities to investigate the role of language learning principles and autonomy. Ultimately, the onus for effective guidance of learners towards effective self-access center engagement falls squarely on teachers providing up-to-date and theoretically-based materials.

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Appendix

Principles of language Acquisition Tomlinson (2010)	SAC materials development Principles	Coding criteria	Yes	No	Notes
Provision of rich input (Long 1985)	Extensive reading	Presence or absence			
	Listening and viewing materials.	Presence or absence			
	Experience with the materials.	Presence or absence			
	Authenticity of language.	Authentic or simplified for learner level			
Affective and Cognitive engagement (Arnold, 1999; Tomlinson, 1998a, 1998b)	Texts and problem solving tasks that involve affective and cognitive engagement.	Language use task, mechanical language drill, or comprehension question			
	Scaffold material.	Presence or absence			
	Materials that allow learners to find own texts	Teacher provided or do learners have freedom to search?			
Positive affect for communicative (Arnold 1999)	Interesting enjoyable text and tasks	Judged by coder on a 0-2 holistic scale for interest and relevance 0 = not interesting 1 = somewhat interesting 2 = interesting			
	Relevant text and tasks	Judged by coder on a 0-2 holistic scale for relevance. 0 = not relevant 1 = somewhat relevant 2 = relevant			
	“Set achievable challenges” to increase confidence.	Presence or absence			
Noticing (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Tomlinson, 2007)	Holistic experience with input followed by personal response.	Presence or absence			
	Focus on linguistic or pragmatic elements.	Presence or absence			
	Experiential and analytic activities for common errors.	Presence or absence			
	Facilitate learners searching for authentic materials.	Presence or absence			
TL production/ hypothesis testing (Swain, 2005)	Opportunities for TL production towards outcomes.	Presence or absence			
	Contextualized TL production activities.	Presence or absence			

Benson (2011) Taking charge of one's own learning					
Determining the objectives	Student choice in learning goals during a given session.	Presence or absence			
Defining content and progressions	Student choice in what to study. Student tracking of development and time-on-task.	Presence or absence			
Selecting methods and techniques to be used	Use of tasks that require a variety of language learning strategies as opposed to mechanical drills.	Presence or absence			
Monitoring of procedures of acquisition	Student tracking of progress in individual language development.	Presence or absence			
Evaluating what has been acquired	Opportunities for reflection in learning. Self-evaluation check lists.	Presence or absence			