

# What influences EFL students to learn beyond the classroom? Exploring students' learning behaviors and their usage of resources

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## Abstract

In educational research, there is an increasing interest in students' learning beyond classroom. Students' out-of-class learning is linked to improved class performance and constitutes an important part of learner development. This study investigated EFL undergraduates' learning behaviors and what influences them to learn beyond the classroom. Data were collected via email interviews with the participants and for analysis of their learning activities. Content analysis of email interviews revealed students' motivations to use learning resources for their out-of-class learning. The analysis of learning behaviors, using six categories based on a learner autonomy model, was applied to generate each participant's autonomy scores. Non-parametric Spearman rho testing on those scores and the students' resources-usage scores suggested a very strong positive relationship between students' autonomous learning behaviors and resources usage. The results also imply that social learning plays an important, but under-acknowledged role in self-access language learning. Based on these findings, it is recommended that students be encouraged to learn beyond the classroom through pedagogical activities that link classroom learning to learning-center resources. Factors of students' out-of-class learning have implications for learning and teaching and education in general.

**Key words:** learning behaviors, out-of-class learning, self-access resources

## Introduction

In recent years, there is an increasing number of English language learners. Factors of success in language learning vary widely for different purposes and for different learners. Successful learners are usually those who are motivated and able to assume more responsibility in their learning. Few people would deny that language learning requires the learner's involvement in learning both inside and outside the classroom. In learning a foreign language, particularly, the learner needs to actively engage in learning beyond the classroom (Richards, 2015).

When learning a language, one common, and practical, goal is for the learner to be able to use the language. In language education, promotion of students' communicative competence is one of the guiding principles of pedagogy of language curricula (Nunan & Richards, 2015). One way to increase language input and practice is to provide learning activities, e.g. learning resources, in order to enable the students to connect classroom learning to the world of learning beyond the classroom. The establishment of

self-access resources in educational institutions and language schools is a reaction to such a learning need.

In self-access learning, the learner is involved in independent learning in which one often makes decisions regarding various aspects of their learning, i.e. what, when and how. This approach enables one to take a more active role in the process of learning and overtime develop into a more autonomous learner. In addition, as pointed out by Reinders (2006), it is "an act of learning whereby motivated learners consciously make informed decisions about that learning" (p. 221). To foster learner autonomy, learning with provision of self-access resources can be appropriate to serve the purpose of encouraging students' autonomous learning in or outside of classroom (Benson, 2013).

This article reports part of a project on EFL (English as a foreign language) students' out-of-class learning at the learning center of a college in Taiwan. Specifically, this present study investigated what influence students to learn beyond the classroom as well as their learning behaviors in an self-access environment. It further looks at the relationship of the students' autonomous learning and use of resources. Accordingly, this study built a model, using rubrics based on Littlewood's (1996) definition of learner autonomy, to analyze the learner's behaviors and evaluate degrees of autonomy.

## Literature Review

### A. Student-centered approach

Over the past decades, student-centered approaches have been adopted in a wide variety of educational programs. This adjustment of language teaching methods places students at the center of teaching and focuses on the learners' development of language and learning. Constructivism emphasizes the active role of the learners. In the process of learning, learners construct their own knowledge and understanding of the world out of personal experiences and reflection on past experiences. The role of teacher is to help learners to develop their own understanding of the concepts, connect students and resources, and assign tasks that engage learners. To this end, both approaches call for design of syllabi, lesson plans, and activities that are based on the students' needs, abilities and learning styles.

### B. Learner autonomy and self-access resources

In second and foreign language studies, learner autonomy and motivation are two terms that are often used interchangeably. These are closely related but separated concepts (Dickinson; 1987). Some researchers believe that autonomy increases one's interest in making effort and invest time in language learning, while others see

motivation as a precedent of capacity to take responsibility of one's own learning, and take on autonomous learning behaviors. Holec's (1980) definition of learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3) has been widely cited in literature and seen as fundamental and robust (e.g., Benson, 2011). An essential of the construct of learner autonomy is that it is a capacity the learner can develop when engaged in appropriate learning situations. This presumes that there are degrees of autonomy. However, in language learning, learner autonomy can take different forms in different contexts, and to different degrees as a result of the characteristics of each learner.

In the context in which English is learned as a foreign language, English is traditionally treated as a subject of study of formal curricula. In such contexts, one way to support the students to continue learning after leaving the classroom is to provide various learning resources inside and outside of classroom. This can be realized with provisions of resources and contexts serves language learners to have flexible learning beyond the classroom in terms of what resources, when and how to learn according to their needs. Further, learners' autonomous language learning is "highly sensitive to the availability of resources (people, texts, media)" (Benson, 2013, p. 840). In educational settings, self-access, or self-access centers (SACs), is seen as a means to encourage students to learn

beyond the classroom. For example, the use of computer technology and oral practice activities are two kinds of resources of SACs as ways in which students' interaction with the target language can be enhanced. In Asia, SACs have been established by tertiary institutions and language schools (Benson, 2011; Kongchan & Darasawang, 2015). In its early days a few SACs were set up primarily to promote learner autonomy. Over the years, SACs have become a standard feature of formal educational settings, with a role more supportive to learning and teaching. It calls for research on SACs as a venue linked to classroom and out-of-class learning and how self-access resources are utilized in teaching and learning.

### C. An operational framework

The literature generally agrees that there are degrees of autonomy (Littlewood, 1999; Reinders, 2006), and it "is manifested in the form of autonomous language learning" (Benson, 2013, p. 840). Little (1991) suggest we can recognize autonomous learners by their learning behaviors. How independent students are, requires a rate scale and rubrics for evaluation. To do this, this framework is an autonomy model, employing six rubrics from Littlewood's work (1996) and definition of autonomy, to analyze the learner's behaviors and evaluate degrees of autonomy. A framework for evaluating the participants' learning behaviors is presented in Table I.

TABLE I  
FEATURES, DOMAINS AND LEVELS OF EFL LEARNING AUTONOMY

Learner Autonomy	Subcategory
Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Taking responsibility of one' own learning</li> <li>● Taking ownership (partial or total) of one's own learning</li> </ul>
Domains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Autonomy as a communicator</li> <li>● Autonomy as a learner</li> </ul>
Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Proactive autonomy</li> <li>● Reactive autonomy</li> </ul>

## Research Questions

The current study addresses the following questions.

1. What motivates students to learn beyond the classroom?
2. What activities do they do when utilizing the SAC (Self-Access Center) resources for language learning?

## Methods

The current study adopted a mixed-methods approach to investigate what influences students to learn beyond the classroom. Particularly it examines their learning behaviors and the relationship between EFL college students' autonomous learning behaviors and their use of resources of the SAC. The qualitative-quantitative mixed methods include email interview for data collection, content analysis to quantify the content of email data, and statistic analysis to exam how participants' learning behaviors are related to their resources usage.

### A. Setting and participants

The study set on its locus of the natural setting – the SAC of a college of languages in the outskirts of a major city in Southern Taiwan. The SAC is a free-standing unit in a formal educational setting, providing open and free

language learning resources accessible to students.

The participants comprised Taiwanese college students from various years of the college programs, all of whom volunteered to participate. In total, 35 participants completed the email interviews. The participants were tabulated in order to track their use of the learning resources and keep records of their activities at the SAC. When asked of when was the first time they attended the sessions of the SAC, most of the participants (23 of 35) said it was in earlier years. The participants thus include both beginning users (BUs) and non-beginning users (NBUs).

### B. Data collection

During the study, the participants were sent interview questions and interviewed in two to four times of correspondence with follow-up questions. The interview questions evolved in the process of interview, but mainly focused on the questions regarding 1) what motivated the students to come to use the SAC, 2) what activities did they do, and 3) what did they think of the activities in terms of effectiveness. To facilitate the students' communication, all interviews were conducted in Mandarin. The respondents were tabulated in order to track their use of the center and keep records of their activities at the center. The records served the purpose of email

interview students who used the centers at least two times.

### Results and Analysis

To answer research question one, content analysis was used to analyze participants' email interviews to find out what motivates students to learn at the SAC. After multiple

times of reading of the data, four themes emerged and a motivation coding scheme was generated. They include motivations to learn for class-related, seeking alternative resources, independent learning, and proficiency test preparation (Table II).

TABLE II  
STUDENTS' MOTIVATIONS TO LEARN BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Motivations to learn beyond the classroom	Subcategory
Class-related	1. Class requirement 2. Resources for doing tasks and assignment 3. Tutorial for improving general class performance
Seeking learning resources	1. Facilities - Computer and software - Print and digital materials 2. Consultations or small-group learning sessions
Independent learning	1. Personal belief of self-effort and striving 2. Personal goals (speaking practice/free talk)
Proficiency test preparation	GEPT (General English Proficiency Test), TOEIC/TOEFL

The analysis revealed that the students were often motivated by their class work (20 out of 35, or 57%) to use the SAC as they usually came to the center to fulfill a class requirement (i.e., E-course) or receive help with class assignments. Some BUs came to the SAC because they felt bad about their performance in class or had low scores on class work. Seeking alternative to the traditional classroom learning (17 out of 35, or 48%), i.e. using the facilities and learning materials at the center, or writing consultation, was another motivation for them to return to the center.

Above half of the participants (19 out of 35, or 54%) were motivated to use the SAC for independent learning, i.e. for personal goals or beliefs in self-effort. Among the reasons mentioned in the email interviews with the NBUs, a willingness to learn English was the number one priority, and an urge to complete self-learning or take part in consultation services. A need to study for the CSEPT (College Student English Proficiency Test) also motivated them (6 out of 35, or 17%) to learn at the SAC. Figure 1 shows motivations of the participants to use SAC for out-of-class learning.

To answer research question two, what are students' learning behaviors when utilizing the SAC resources, the narrative data from the email interviews were analyzed for evidence of autonomous learning behaviors. To start with, To produce *autonomy scores*, the data were coded into six categories of autonomous learning using the operational framework in the preceding section and rated on an ordinal scale of measurement (either one, two, or three points, or never, sometimes, or always). Only the NBUs' interview data were used because they had attended learning sessions at the SAC and used the resources for some time at by the time of data collection.

Next, to obtain resources-usage scores, the SAC's logs of individual student activity were analyzed for the numbers of times they attended learning sessions, how often they used the learning materials and facilities, and how many types of activities their email interviews described. One point was awarded to each of these instances. The lowest resources-usage score thus obtained was five, and the highest, 54.

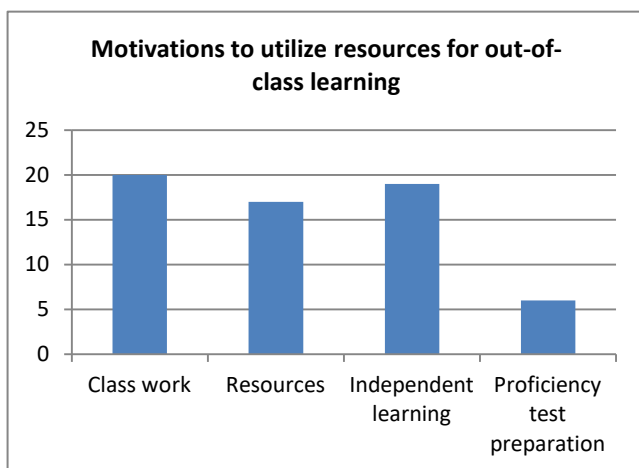


Fig. 1 This chart shows what motivates students to utilize self-access resources for out-of-class learning.

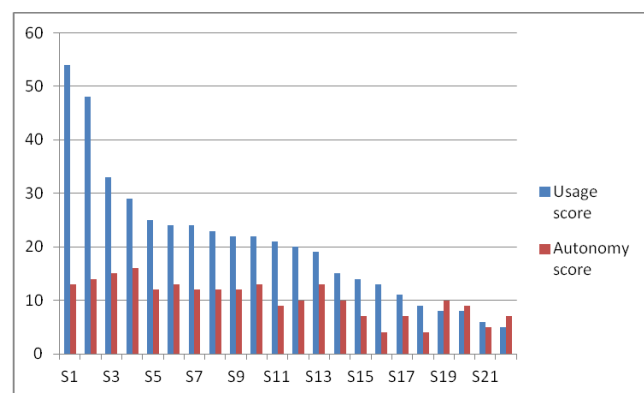


Fig. 2 This chart shows students' resources-usage scores and their autonomy scores.

#### A. Students' SAC usage and their autonomous learning

In Figure 2 above, data distribution presents each student's resources-usage scores and autonomy score. Students were grouped, using the data distribution, into

heavy-users group, moderate-users group, and light-users group. As it indicates, members of the High group were heavy SAC users, with resources-usage scores ranging from 29 to 54; the Middle group learners scored 11-25 as moderate users; and the Low group were all light users, with usage scores 4-9. However, the middle group had mixed scores with a wide spectrum on resources usage and autonomous behaviors. Overall, the results suggest that the three groups are distinct in degrees of autonomous learning and resources usage. The analysis of the relationship between resources-usage scores and autonomy scores, using nonparametric Spearman's rho tests, shows a positive and statistically significant correlation with a correlation coefficient of  $\rho = .837$  at  $p < .001$ .

#### B. Examples of autonomous language learning

Based on qualitative analysis, selected examples of students' learning are presented in this section.

- "Because I felt [I was having] difficulty catching up with the class...An upper-classmate recommended the SAC...so I came to talk to teachers at the Center." (Hami, BU)
- "Some assignments need to use the E-course. I usually use the facility at the SAC to preview the lessons." (Cintia, NBU)
- "I also join with other students to participate in an English pronunciation course at the SAC. ... We made [certain] days as our English-only day." (Rose, BU)
- "I hope to enforce my English speaking in conversation with native speaker. I look for oral practice ... " (Annie, BU)
- "I would invite others to join me [learning English]. We decided to form a study group this semester... It is good to practice English with peers, reading and discussion as a group." (Emi, NBU)

#### C. Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that majority of the students were mostly motivated to use the SAC by class work. Further analysis on participants' class-related learning gave a reading that the students make use of the SAC for a task or to fulfill part of a requirement, i.e. a class project or working on a short speech, or to receive help with class assignments. This indicates that SAC learning activities were incorporated into classroom teaching and learning. On the other hand, experienced users had more autonomous reasons for using the SAC to learn English. These students' autonomous learning was related to various reasons, including seeking alternative resources for learning English, i.e. digital media and software, small group print materials, and making use of opportunities for oral practice/free talk.

##### Social learning

Moreover, the results of this study suggest an understanding of autonomy that goes beyond the behaviors described in previous literature. That is, learner autonomy consists of more than independent learning of the target language and its use to communicate independently. In this study, most of the students were in the post-secondary education. These teenage students often came to learn at the center for social reasons, i.e., join a friend or a group and be joined by others. Students started to use resources often because of

recommendations by and encouragement of teachers or senior students. The students' usage of the SAC was learned through social interactions. This suggests that social learning plays a role in self-access language learning. The learner's learning behaviors can be influenced by the environment. Vygotsky's theory delineates learning through the more knowledgeable other (Wertsch, 1985); as such, it promotes contexts in which students play an active role in learning, and emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction in the process of cognitive development.

## CONCLUSION

This study found similarities and differences between novice and experienced users in terms of their reasons for learning there, the learning activities they chose, and how they valued such activities. This may be due to disparity in the length of time they spent at the SAC. The evidence showed that there was a very strong relationship between SAC use and autonomous-language learning behaviors, and that those students with more such behaviors used a broader array of SAC resources than their less-autonomous counterparts. The teacher may incorporate self-access resources into classroom teaching with web-based activities that can be accessed at the SAC or other sites; or develop courses accessible on-line. Also, teachers may incorporate learning sessions as part of class work and action projects for more experienced students exercising more freedom of choices on their activities.

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