# Evaluating the English Foundation Programme in the Self-Access Mode at City University

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# Abstract

This paper presents the results of an evaluation of the independent language learning programme for part-time university students taking a remedial English programme at the Language Institute, City University of Hong Kong. Achievement in four language skills between control (51 students in Classroom mode) and experimental (78 students in Self-Access mode) groups was compared by using a pre- and post-test. Those studying in the Self-Access mode made more significant improvement in reading while more significant improvement in writing was made by students in the Classroom mode. Furthermore, data from questionnaires of 718 students in the Self-Access mode and in-depth student interviews were used to evaluate students' perception of the effectiveness of the programme. The results show that students found the Self-Access mode of learning useful and motivating, and that it increased their confidence in learning English. Counsellors were also interviewed to provide additional information on their perception of independent language learning. Major factors influencing students' positive attitudes towards the Self-Access mode of learning included improvement in four language skills, increase in confidence, usefulness of materials and organisation of the course. Students preferred a combination of the Self-Access mode and the traditional Classroom mode. The data collected provides insight into the feasibility of learning English in the Self-Access mode and the design features of the programme which follow a three-part progressive structure: the directed, semi-directed and self-directed stages of learning.

## Introduction

### What is Independent Language Learning?

Independent, or Self-Access (SA) language learning, is learning a language through the use of a self-contained learning environment which provides an independent study programme with readily accessible materials, makes available a form of help, either through answer keys or through counselling and possibly offers the latest technology (Dickinson, 1987). That is, students are offered an environment in which they are active participants rather than passive recipients of information.

In this student-centred environment students basically set their own curriculum. First, they analyse their strengths and weaknesses and clarify their objectives. Then they select materials relevant to those objectives, choosing not only the medium best suited to them, but also the level appropriate to their ability. Time management plays a significant role in SA learning. Students need to set priorities, decide when and where to study, and how to pace their learning. There is a system of record keeping to indicate their progress. Finally, they evaluate their learning and, if necessary, change their plan of action after receiving feedback from a counsellor.

## Why Self-Access Language Learning?

Research indicates the effectiveness of moving towards student decision making rather than teacher decision making (Cotterall, 1995; Dickinson, 1995; Gremmo and Riley, 1995; Kember and Gow, 1994; Little, 1995; Victori and Lockhart, 1995). In the SA mode, students make important decisions regarding the level, speed and content of their work.  Students also have an opportunity to work in their preferred mode which encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning, thereby helping them to move towards autonomy. Research also suggests that students have distinct learning strategies and learn best when these individual differences are taken into consideration (Gremmo and Riley, 1995; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991).

## The Self-Access Centre  at the Language Institute, City University of Hong Kong

The Self-Access Centre (SAC) at the Language Institute, City University of Hong Kong,  which houses the latest technology, is styled on a self-serve 'supermarket' design. A major difference between this SAC and other self-access centres is the type of user. Most centres cater to students who voluntarily come into the centre; however, most students come to this SAC to complete a remedial English programme.

### Course Structure

The remedial English Foundation Programme (EFP) is a compulsory module for all first year City University students who received a D or below in the public English language examination conducted by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority. Two modes of learning are in this remedial programme: the Classroom (CL) mode and the Self-Access (SA) mode. The CL mode has been in operation for five years with approximately 2,000 full-time (FT) students taking the module every year. They have two hours per week of CL instruction for 14 weeks, totaling 28 hours. The SA mode has been introduced since November, 1993. Since that time the Language Institute has served approximately 1,100 part-time (PT) students per year in the SA mode. These students need to show evidence of 28 hours of work completed in approximately 16-18 weeks. Whether students take the CL or  SA mode, they sit for the same exit exam at the end of the programme.

### Stages of Learning

In general, university students in Hong Kong have had little experience in studying independently so there is a special need for them to be guided towards autonomous learning. The SA programme is thus divided into three progressive stages: directed (4 hours), semi-directed (14 hours) and self-directed (10 hours).

The three stages have been designed with specific goals in mind. The directed stage is intended for orientation and diagnosis purposes. The semi-directed stage is designed (1) to guide students towards independent learning of the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking; (2) to familiarise them with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs; and (3) to assist students in organising their self-directed plan. The goal of the self-directed stage is to provide students with an opportunity to put into use the concept of independent language learning.

### Monitoring Student Progress

Students receive written feedback (feedback 1 and feedback 2) from a counsellor after the directed and self-directed stages and a 45-minute individual consultation after the semi-directed stage. Students are required to keep a record of their work in a record folder. The counsellor is

required to credit students with hours according to the work submitted for feedback 1, feedback 2 and the consultation, after which students are given a copy of the written feedback.

There are two requirements for students to fulfill: attendance and assessment. For the attendance requirement, students need to show evidence of work for a minimum of 22.4 hours (80% of 28 hours) of work in the SA mode. The assessment requirement is a pass consisting of 50% course work (carried out in the SA mode) and 50% end-of-course exam.

## Rationale

This study investigated the effectiveness of the 3-stage structure (directed, semi-directed and self-directed) of the EFP in the SA mode. The purpose was to examine how pedagogically sound the programme was in guiding students towards autonomous learning. Since the SA mode was developed as a substitute for the CL mode, students in both modes were required to take the same end-of-course examination. The study investigated whether students in the SA mode would make improvement in English proficiency similar to that of their counterparts in the CL mode. The study also investigated students' attitudes towards the SA programme. Thus the two research questions were:

- Is the improvement made by students in the SA mode comparable to that of the students in the CL mode at the end of the programme?

- What are the factors that affect students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the EFP in the SA mode?

To answer the first question, quantitative data from pre- and post-tests were used to measure the validity of the independent mode of learning. To answer the second question, quantitative data from student questionnaires, as well as qualitative data from student and counsellor interviews were collected.

## Methodology

### Subjects

The subjects in this study, as indicated in Figure 1, included a total of 769 ethnic Chinese students taking the EFP.

*Figure 1: Composition of subjects*

| Research Question | Subjects involved | | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| | CL mode | SA mode | |
| 1 (using pre- and post-tests) | 51 | 78 | The 78 SA students also completed the questionnaire for research question 2. |
| 2 (using questionnaires) | 0 | 718 | The SA questionnaire was irrelevant to CL students. |
| | 51 + 718 = 769 | | |

## Data Collection Instruments

### Pre- and Post-Tests

To study the improvement made by CL and SA students, they were given a test at the beginning (pre-test) and at the end (post-test) of the programme. The same paper was used for both tests in order to obtain a reliable measure of students' improvement in their language skills. Although such a 'repeated measures' design was not perfect (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989, p.139), it was used to make the measurement of improvement more reliable as our subjects, coming from two groups (PT and FT) and receiving different treatment, were not homogeneous. The testing of oral skills was not conducted since testing would have involved many part-time students who had different work schedules.

The pre- and post-tests given were a condensed version of the Higher Level English Examination (1989 and 1990 papers) set by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority. The percentage of the weighting of the skills in the tests was: reading (35%), listening (15%), writing (26%) and usage (24%).

### Questionnaires

To obtain information on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the course and attitudes towards the SA mode of learning, students were asked to complete a Student Evaluation Questionnaire at the end of the programme. The rating scale used was the 5-point Likert scale with 5 representing strongly agree and 1 strongly disagree. Students were assured of confidentiality of their comments and were not required to write their names on the questionnaires.

The questionnaire included 40 items which elicited information on the EFP course conducted in the SA mode. (Question 39, not applicable to this study, requires students to rate the SA counsellor. Questions 1-38 and question 40 are dealt with separately since the former are objective while the latter, regarding workshop attendance, is open-ended.)

In writing the questionnaire, care was taken to use objective wording, i.e., to provide balanced options as suggested in the literature (Converse, 1986; Henderson et al., 1987; Schuman and Stanley, 1981). Questionnaires had been piloted with students from the previous year and revised.

### Counsellor and Student Interviews

In order to collect in-depth information on variables such as students' attitudes towards some of the issues, semi-structured interviews with volunteer students were conducted. In preparing the 16 interview questions, care was taken to ensure that the questions were comparable to the questionnaire items. The interview consisted of 'specific and defined questions' that were preset, but which still permitted 'some elaboration in the questions and answers' (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:167). Most of the questions were phrased in such a way that students could give clear yes or no answers, but were also encouraged to give detailed comments.

Based on student interview questions, 22 counsellor interview questions were developed, including questions on counsellor training, workload, etc. Additionally, counsellors had the opportunity to comment on the present course structure and make recommendations for changes. In this report, only the findings on questions that are common to both interviews are reported to support or verify findings.

**Data Collection Procedures**

***Pre- and Post-tests***

All students, both the CL and SA mode, were sent letters requesting voluntary participation in the pre- and post-tests. A total of 51 CL students and 78 SA students sat the pre- and post-tests.

Students from the CL mode included 57% from Arts and Business disciplines and 43% from Science and Technology.  In the SA mode, 72% were from Arts and Business and 28% from Science and Technology.  The same marker was used for both tests to ensure consistency in marking. After each test, students were given written feedback on their performance.

***Questionnaires***

Students were given the Student Evaluation Questionnaire in the absence of the counsellor. Data obtained included responses from 718 students.

***Interviews***

After the programme was completed, 46 voluntary students (6.5% of the population) were interviewed  by four counsellors (investigators). The interviews were tape-recorded with students' permission.

Counsellors were also invited to attend a voluntary interview. Interviews of 9 out of 17 counsellors (approximately 51%) were also tape-recorded by five investigators.

# Results

The following data include results obtained from pre- and post-tests, student questionnaires and student and counsellor interviews.

## Pre- and Post-Tests

In order to ensure accurate measurement of improvement made in the four language skills by students after taking the programme, the scale for writing, listening, usage and reading was rescaled to carry equal weighting, i.e., 25% each. Means and standard deviations were first obtained for the pre- and post-test results.

According to the t-test, students in both the CL mode and SA mode were found to have made improvement in their language skills . At  0.001 significance level, students in both modes showed significant improvement in their writing, listening and reading skills.

*Table 1a: Descriptive statistics---pre- and post-tests results: improvement made by students in the CL mode   n = 51*

| Variable | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Improvement Made | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | Std Dev | Mean | Std Dev | Difference in mean | Std Dev | p-value |
| **Writing** | 10.35 | 3.63 | 12.75 | 3.96 | 2.4 | 3.17 | 0.000 |
| **Listening** | 13.99 | 5.13 | 16.80 | 4.01 | 2.81 | 3.61 | 0.000 |
| **Usage** | 14.85 | 4.26 | 15.26 | 3.82 | 0.41 | 2.91 | 0.321 |
| **Reading** | 10.66 | 4.14 | 14.24 | 4.52 | 3.58 | 3.94 | 0.000 |
| **Overall Total** | 49.84 | 12.98 | 59.04 | 13.28 | 9.20 | 7.16 | 0.000 |

*Table 1b: Descriptive statistics---pre- and post-tests results: improvement made by students in the SA mode   n = 78*

| Variable | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Improvement Made | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | Std Dev | Mean | Std Dev | Difference in mean | Std Dev | p-value |
| **Writing** | 9.35 | 3.55 | 10.64 | 3.61 | 1.29 | 2.38 | 0.000 |
| **Listening** | 11.81 | 4.58 | 14.64 | 5.35 | 2.83 | 4.16 | 0.000 |
| **Usage** | 13.17 | 4.24 | 13.58 | 3.91 | 0.41 | 3.23 | 0.264 |
| **Reading** | 9.06 | 3.92 | 14.28 | 4.65 | 5.22 | 3.67 | 0.000 |
| **Overall Total** | 43.39 | 12.35 | 53.14 | 13.26 | 9.75 | 7.23 | 0.000 |

A 2-tailed t-test was conducted to investigate if the improvement made by the CL and SA mode students was significantly different. Results (Table 2) show that at 0.05 significance level, CL students improved more in writing (p-value = 0.025) while SA students made more improvement in reading (p-value = 0.018). From the p-value obtained for overall improvement (0.675), improvement made in the CL and SA mode cannot be viewed as significantly different.

*Table 2: Comparison of improvement between the CL mode and SA mode*

| Variable | Difference in improvement | t-value | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Improvement in writing** | **1.1043** | **2.26** | **0.025** |
| **Improvement in listening** | -0.0165 | -0.02 | 0.981 |
| **Improvement in usage** | -0.0003 | 0.00 | 1.000 |
| **Improvement in reading** | -1.6316 | -2.40 | 0.018 |
| **Overall improvement** | -0.5441 | -0.42 | 0.675 |

## Student Questionnaires

### Percentage of Agreement and Disagreement

Frequency counts for the 38 questionnaire items were computed. Students rated these statements on the following 5-point scale:

    1+2=Disagree

    3   =Neutral

    4+5=Agree

For question 26 'I would prefer to study in the classroom mode rather than in the self-access mode' the scale was reversed.

The frequency counts indicate that the majority of students either neutrally responded or agreed with a large number of the items on the questionnaire. The percentage of agreement ranges from 28.9% to 62.9% while disagreement ranges from 6% to 34.6%. The percentage of students who selected neutral ranges from 31.1% to 53.8%.

*Table 3a:   Percentage of agreement and disagreement ---items with favourable ratings*

| Item no | Statement | Agree % | Disagree % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 11 | The consultation was useful | **62.9** | 6 |
| 27 | I  prefer a combination of classroom mode and self-access mode of learning. | **57.3** | 11.2 |
| 1 | The course was useful. | **54.6** | 10.6 |
| 10 | The teacher-student communication through Feedback-2 was useful. | **52.9** | 8.6 |
| 5 | The information on the course guide was clear. | **52.5** | 11.6 |
| 8 | The group discussion was good for testing my oral ability. | **52.5** | 10.7 |
| 6 | The information on handing in folders was clear. | **52.4** | 9.1 |
| 12 | The materials in the SAC were useful. | **52** | 8.2 |
| 13 | The instructions on the worksheets were clear. | **51.8** | 10.9 |
| 38 | Now that I have completed the course, I want to continue to use the SAC to improve my English. | **50.6** | 11.9 |

Among the 38 statements, the items students most agreed with were 'The consultation was useful.' (62.9%) and 'I prefer a combination of classroom mode and self-access mode of learning.' (57.3%) (Table 3a).  The items that have the highest percentages of disagreement were 'The opening hours of the SAC were adequate.' (34.6%) and 'The CALL programs were useful.' (28.8%) (Table 3b).

*Table 3b: Percentage of agreement and disagreement — items with unfavourable ratings*

| Item No | Statement | Agree % | **Disagree %** |
|---------|-----------|---------|----------------|
| 37 | The opening hours of the SAC were adequate. | 31.2 | **34.6** |
| 16 | The CALL programs were useful. | 31.2 | **28.8** |
| 26 | I would prefer to learn in the CL mode instead of in the SA mode. | 41.9 | **22.2** |
| 36 | Whenever I had language problems I preferred to talk to the counsellor on duty. | 32.5 | **21.6** |
| 29 | There were adequate audio players in the SAC. | 37 | **21.5** |
| 25 | I feel learning in the SA mode was as effective as learning in the classroom. | 33.5 | **21.4** |

### *Factor Analysis*

Factor analysis was conducted on all 38 items in an attempt to use fewer variables to explain students' attitudes towards the course in the SA mode. Only variables with a factor loading of .5 and above were selected for the analysis.

Seven underlying factors were identified (Table 4) . The total cumulative proportion of the variance explained by the seven factors is 52.3%.  Factor one accounts for 27.7% and factors two to seven account for 24.6%.

Factor one includes the variables speaking-improved, listening-improved, writing-improved, reading-improved, increase in confidence and course-useful. The identifiable factor underlying these variables seems to be students' perceptions about improvement in their language proficiency. Due to this improvement, their confidence in using the language may have increased, which led to a positive attitude toward course usefulness.  Hence, this factor is labeled **improvement in language**.

Factors two and three include variables that are related to the environment of the SAC. Factor two includes the variables video-adequate, audio-adequate, AAC-adequate, inter-active video-adequate and books-adequate. Their impression on the adequacy of the equipment in the Self-Access Centre may be based on whether they had access to them when needed.  This factor is therefore labeled **availability of facilities** and the variance explained by this factor is 6.3%. Factor three includes only one variable, opening hours - sufficient, which is labeled **opening hours of SAC** and the variance explained by this factor is 2.8%.

Students working in the SAC rely heavily on the learning materials. If they find these materials useful, they may become more interested in the learning process. As a result, their interest in self-access learning will have been enhanced, and thus they prefer to use the centre even after the course is completed. Therefore, the fourth factor which includes the variables materials - stimulated interest, use SAC in future, SA learning -  interesting and motivating, levels on worksheets realistic is labeled **usefulness of materials** and the variance explained by this factor is 4.8% .

Since the SA mode of learning is a new experience to students in Hong Kong, clear explanation of various aspects of the course plays an important role. These aspects include instructions on course administration and how students can use the SAC facilities. Factor five which includes clarity

of: submission of folders, course guide, instructions in materials, and retrieval of materials is labeled **clarity of instructions** and the variance explained by this factor is 4.2%.

Factor six includes the variables usefulness of feedback 1, 2, and the consultation. The underlying identifiable factor is how much help students obtained from the counsellor at different stages of the course. This factor is therefore labeled **student - counsellor communication** and the variance explained by this factor is 3.4%.

Factor seven includes the variables prefer CL mode and prefer a combination of SA and CL mode. The choices students were given include studying in the normal CL mode, the SA mode and a combination of both. This factor is labeled **preference of mode** and the variance explained by this factor is 3.1%.

*Table 4:  Factor analysis of student questionnaire*

| Factor | Variable (factor loading) | Contribution to the total sample variance |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Improvement in Language | Speaking -improved (0.77) <br> Listening - improved (0.75) <br> Reading -improved (0.66) <br> Increase in confidence (0.66) <br> Writing - improved (0.65) <br> Course-useful (0.56) | 27.7% |
| 2. Availability of Facilities | Video -adequate (0.77) <br> Audio -adequate (0.75) <br> AAC - adequate (0.73) <br> Inter-active Video -adequate (0.73) <br> Computers -adequate (0.67) <br> Books - adequate (0.51) | 6.3% |
| 3. Opening Hours of SAC | Opening hours - sufficient (0.58) | 2.8% |
| 4. Usefulness of Materials | Materials - Stimulated Interest (0.69) <br> Use SAC in future (0.60) <br> SA learning - Int'g and Mot'g (0.55) <br> Levels on worksheets - realistic (0.53) | 4.8% |
| 5. Clarity of Instructions | Folders submission instructions (0.75) <br> Course Guide - clear (0.74) <br> Instrs. in materials -clear (0.66) <br> Locating materials - easy (0.53) | 4.2% |
| 6. Student-Counsellor Communication | Feedback 2 - useful (0.76) <br> Feedback 1 - useful (0.76) <br> Consultation -useful (0.63) | 3.4% |
| 7. Preference of Mode | Prefer Classroom (0.83) <br> Prefer SA + CL  (-0.640) | 3.1% |

### Workshops

The information from workshop attendance provided information regarding the percentage of students who attended workshops and the reasons that kept them from participating.

Out of the 718 valid questionnaires, 84% responded to this open-ended question. Among those who responded, 35% attended workshops, and the majority (98%) found the workshops useful. The main reasons provided by students who did not attend workshops included time scheduling problems (90%) and lack of information (8%).

### Student Interviews

In general, the interview results support the questionnaire findings. Interviewees responded positively to the learner training that they received, evaluating the Course Guide as being very clear. This is consistent with the generally positive rating for the Course Guide in the questionnaire results (52.5% agreed). The majority of students believed that they knew their strengths and weaknesses in learning English after taking the programme and felt confident that they could make a self-study plan.

With regard to student-counsellor communication, 72% agreed that they benefited from feedback 1 and 2, while 91% were happy with the consultation. Students commented that the written feedback was useful, especially in pointing out their areas of weaknesses. Similarly in the consultation, they enjoyed the opportunity of practising speaking skills and the immediate feedback received from the counsellor on accuracy, especially in their essays.

As far as resources are concerned, 91% of the interviewees agreed that the materials in the SAC were useful, offering a wide range in the choice of media, variety and level of difficulty.

With regard to the preference of the mode of language learning, 83% of students preferred the combination of the SA mode and CL mode. When examining the reasons for the preference for the combination mode, it was found that students enjoyed the flexibility (an important consideration for mature PT students) and the choices available to them in the SA mode, but favoured more guidance from the counsellor.

There are also positive results (96%) indicating students' intention to use the SAC in the future; however, many added the escape clause, 'If time permits . . .'

The negative finding of the interviews, which is supported by the questionnaire, is the opening hours of the SAC. 72% thought that the opening hours of the SAC should be extended, e.g., to that of the library.

There are, however, student interview findings which do not support the student questionnaire results. With respect to guidance provided by the course, only a quarter of the interviewees found the induction programme useful. The comments made by students indicate that the main reason for negativity was the environment of the induction, i.e., the noise, large group size, etc.

Although students expressed their preference for more teacher input in the programme, only 11% attended workshops. They justified their non-attendance by claiming that they were ignorant of the provision, that they had time clashes or that they were too busy. Many students expressed that it was fear which stopped them from asking the counsellor on duty for help, in addition to the embarrassment of speaking to strangers in public or asking for help in front of other students, etc.

Although 41% of the students agreed that learning in the SA mode was as effective as studying in the CL mode, when asked specifically which mode they preferred, 15% preferred the CL and only 2% the SA mode.

### *Counsellor Interviews*

The results of counsellor interviews were tabulated to determine if the findings supported those of the student questionnaires. When asked if counsellors thought that students had benefited from the individual consultation, 89% gave positive responses, supporting the findings of the student questionnaires. Counsellors felt it was useful because they could use this opportunity to establish a rapport with their students. During this face-to-face meeting they could offer individual help for specific language problems, especially in discussing student essays. The consultation also gave them an opportunity to confirm their impressions regarding students' strengths and weaknesses.

Regarding the preference of mode, counsellors had strikingly similar responses to the students. Two-thirds preferred the combination mode because it had the advantages of flexibility and teacher guidance at the same time.

While an overwhelming majority of students said that the materials in the SAC were very useful, only 33% of the counsellors agreed with this viewpoint;  the rest of the counsellors expressed doubt as to how useful the SA materials were in helping students improve their English. Some said that they had detected gaps in the skills represented in the worksheets.

Apart from the consultation, counsellors also gave written feedback to students on the quality of work evident in the record folder. While students felt that these written comments on prescribed forms were useful, only 22% of counsellors shared this view. 56% said these forms were too tightly structured to allow room for meaningful comments.

# Discussion

## Student Performance in Pre- and Post- Tests

In answer to the first research question, 'Is the improvement made by students in the SA mode comparable to that of the students in the CL mode at the end of the programme?', the results of the pre- and post-tests suggest that students made improvement in listening, reading and writing in both the SA and CL modes. The overall improvement in the SA mode, however, is not significantly different from the overall improvement made by students in the CL mode. These results suggest that both modes of learning were effective since all students made improvement.

As mentioned, the improvement in reading by the SA and CL mode students show that students in both modes made improvement; however, improvement made by SA students was much higher. This greater improvement can be explained by the fact that the SA students worked on their own and thus had to read more as they received most of their instructions on paper. They did considerably more reading than the CL mode students who had a teacher giving them verbal instructions and explanations in class.

On the other hand, students in the CL mode made greater improvement in writing than those in the SA mode. This result can be logically explained. In the CL mode students had more feedback from teachers using a process writing approach. The classroom teachers commented on many drafts of their work which appeared to have helped them. In contrast, students in the SA mode saw a counsellor only once throughout the programme (in the 45-minute individual consultation), so the amount of input they received on improving their writing was limited. Printed materials can explain to students how to write, but cannot sufficiently address individual problems.

### Student Attitudes Towards taking the EFP in the SA Mode

In answer to the second research question, 'What are students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the EFP in the SA mode?', quantitative data from end-of-course student questionnaires and qualitative data from student and counsellor interviews were collected.

#### *Improvement in Four Skills*

One important conclusion that can be drawn from the questionnaire results is that students' perception of improvement in skills is associated with course usefulness. This is also evidenced by the questionnaire results where 38.5 - 45.7% of the students agreed to an improvement in the skills while very few disagreed (8.8 - 12.7%). Also, Factor 1 (improvement in language) from factor analysis which includes improvement in the four skills accounts for 27.7% of the cumulative variance explained by the seven factors. In other words, improvement in skills is one of the major factors influencing students' positive attitudes towards the SA mode of learning. Therefore, students will evaluate a course positively if it is a value-added one. The EFP in the SA mode is a remedial English course where students expect to improve their language skills. When such an expectation is fulfilled, they will have a positive attitude towards the course.

#### *Increase in Confidence*

The increase in confidence is another factor influencing learners' positive attitudes. This finding is supported by the questionnaire in which 42% agreed to an increase in confidence after the SA mode of learning. A typical comment collected in student interviews was, 'I was confused and suspicious of learning in the SA mode in the beginning, but I am motivated now, less afraid to study on my own.' It appears that the initial feeling that the SA mode is a completely new and difficult approach became less frightening as time progressed. Student confidence presumably began to build up when students discovered that they could handle this mode of learning. The three-part structure (directed, semi-directed and self-directed learning) would appear to have been useful in leading students towards autonomous learning. Additionally, improvement in the four skills would have enhanced student confidence to use the language and thus become more positive towards the new mode of learning.

#### *Usefulness of Materials*

Another factor that contributes to positive student attitudes towards the SA mode of learning is the variety and quantity of the materials provided in the SAC. Half of the students who filled in the questionnaires agreed that the materials were useful. Most students appreciated the variety and choice of learning materials in the SAC, which are streamed according to the level of difficulty making it easy for the students to select the worksheets/books that they are most comfortable working with. In addition, the freedom which allows them to choose topics that are interesting to them reinforced their perception that the SA materials were useful, interesting and motivating. Many students commented that the worksheets were interesting and useful because they addressed their weaknesses in language use. As Sheerin (1989) states, an essential prerequisite to self-access learning is the provision of materials within an organised framework so that students get what they want. Apart from the printed material, students also expressed enthusiasm for the variety of available materials such as audio cassettes, videos, movies, computers and other multimedia resources. They found these materials more interesting alternatives to the traditional pen-and-paper tasks. However, usefulness of the CALL programs is rated unfavourably (28.8%). One reason for this seems to be that the programs were time consuming.

Responses given in the counsellor interviews show a different picture. Only one-third of the counsellors found the materials useful. One area of concern was the provision of answer keys.

Some counsellors expressed concern over exclusively providing answer keys, commenting that providing answer keys was not comparable to face-to-face feedback in a classroom situation. Speculation regarding the difference of opinion suggests that counsellors were more critical of the pedagogical values of teaching materials. Further research is required to ascertain if the materials provide adequate stimuli for independent learning, and whether the answer keys provide adequate feedback.

### Course Administration

Students also have positive attitudes toward the Course Guide and information on handing in of folders. From the questionnaire results, more than half of the students agreed that the Course Guide and the information on submission of folders were clear.

Student opinion regarding the opening hours of the SAC was somewhat divided (34.6% disagreed with the opening hours, 34.2% were neutral and 31.2% agreed). Those who disagreed felt that longer opening hours, especially during the weekend (indicated at the interviews), would give them more flexibility.

### Preference of a Combination Mode (Self-Access and Classroom)

The two items in the questionnaire that most students agreed with were the usefulness of the consultation (62.9%) and the preference of a combined mode of study (CL and SA, 57.3%).

The face-to-face consultation was useful because students gained valuable feedback from counsellors. They not only had an opportunity to ask questions to clarify doubts about the programme, but they could also discuss specific language related problems. This finding is not surprising, as Hong Kong students adopt a passive role and expect their teachers to spoonfeed them and 'are conditioned to believe that in order to learn one must be taught ...' (Farmer, 1994:14). Scollon (1994) expresses a similar view - the teacher is expected to exercise authority, i.e., to look after, nurture and take care of her students.

The preference for a combination mode of study is also confirmed by the interview data. Students considered that a combination mode possessed 'combined advantages' of the two modes. They would have teacher guidance, and at the same time have the freedom to choose materials appropriate to their individual needs. They felt the course would not be as boring as in the traditional classroom mode. A bias towards this combination mode indicates the desire for flexibility with the retention of teacher guidance. A covert reason for students' positive attitudes towards this combination mode, however, may be related to their heavy workload. One other source of information that adds weight to this assumption is that only 35% attended workshops. Although this was an opportunity where teacher input was provided, the majority (90%) of those who did not attend workshops claimed that they had time-scheduling problems. Most PT evening students with daytime jobs need to attend evening lectures and tutorials with their parent department three nights a week. If students needed to take the EFP in the classroom mode, they would have to attend classes four times a week which would not appeal to them.

### Future Use of the SAC

Students' positive attitudes toward the SA mode, supported by the perception of improvement in the four skills, might have led students to consider SA learning to be effective which, in turn, could have affected their decision to use the SAC in the future. Half of the students who responded to the questionnaire agreed that they would use the SAC in the future. Students interviewed said that they would use the video and audio tapes in the future if time allowed.

However, most counsellors did not hold quite as optimistic a view as the students. Although the majority were of the opinion that students had the ability to self-diagnose their strengths and

weaknesses after completing the course, only half believed that these students would be able to create their own study plan in the future. This response can be interpreted as saying that knowledge of one's strong and weak points is not always sufficient for independent learning. Furthermore, the majority of counsellors predicted that work pressure and personal obligations would prevent students from actually pursuing independent learning in the future.

## Limitations to the Study

In retrospect, one always finds areas which could have been improved. This certainly is true for this study. It is possible that the 5-point Likert scale provided skewed results. As students were not required to take a positive or negative stand, some may have taken the middle road, especially those who were tired of endless course evaluations at the end of a semester. A 6-point scale might have given different results.

In order to preserve anonymity, students were not asked to give personal information on the questionnaires. However, it would have been valuable for the researchers to correlate high or low improvement in the pre- and post-tests with their perception of improvement in the language skills and their performance in the post-test or their results in the end-of-course examination. This could have provided valuable information.

Another factor influencing the results may have been the status of the subjects of the study. It would have been ideal to have both control and experimental groups taken from the same (PT) population. This, however, was not possible since PT students would then have had to attend a fourth evening of classes.

A factor that was overlooked in the design of the questionnaire was the absence of items which explicitly elicited information regarding student attitudes towards the SA mode of learning. Most of the questionnaire items were concerned with course evaluation.

A further drawback is that the questionnaire did not lend itself to meaningful comparison with the questionnaire for FT students. Valuable information regarding the pros and cons of the SA and CL modes might have been obtained if more items of the two questionnaires had been comparable.

## Conclusions and Implications

The major conclusions drawn from our study are:

- students in the CL mode made more improvement in writing than those in the SA mode;

- students in the SA mode made more improvement in reading than those in the CL mode;

- improvement in skills, increase in confidence, usefulness of materials and organisation of the course were the major reasons why students found the EFP in the SA mode effective.

Since Hong Kong students have little experience in self-access learning, subjects in this study indicated strong desire for more teacher input. In this regard, several suggestions can be made.

It is recommended that students be provided with more extensive learner training packages. It is possible that they would then feel more comfortable with the SA mode.

To provide students with immediate feedback, interactive multimedia materials should be introduced. At the time of the study, these resources were not incorporated into the programme. Interactive packages give students more individual feedback and could have influenced the

present results found in writing, making improvement in the SA mode more comparable to that of the CL mode.

Another way to deal with the need for more teacher input may be to have a programme consisting of a mixture of the SA and CL mode, as suggested by students. This would enable them to feel psychologically secure with a teacher, to whom the students could refer to for guidance and feedback. Moreover, it would allow students to enjoy the flexibility of the SA mode of learning. The possibility of a mixed mode was also supported by some counsellors who indicated in both the questionnaires and interviews that weak students would benefit more from a mixed mode. Many suggested that learning on their own with only one face-to-face consultation was too daunting for weak students.

This leads to the question, 'What is the ideal percentage of time that students should spend studying in the three stages of the SA mode?' The present time ratio is:

| | |
|---|---|
| directed | 4 hours or 14.3% (of 28 hours) |
| semi-directed | 14 hours or 50% |
| self-directed | 10 hours or 35.7% |

If we take student preference into consideration, they would spend more time in the directed stage. This requires the provision of more materials for diagnosing strengths and weaknesses, along with provision of more suggested pathways for students to follow in the next stage: semi-directed. A possible percentage for each stage would then be:

| | |
|---|---|
| directed | 10 hours or 35% |
| semi-directed | 10 hours or 35% |
| self-directed | 8 hours or 30% |

Whether this is the right balance between guidance and independence, however, needs further research.

The present research also indicates that counsellors were a little skeptical of autonomous learning and the existing materials. This may be due to the fact that the SA mode is still a relatively novel experience for most counsellors, and most have not had formal training in facilitating independent learning. As a result, their inexperience may have affected their attitudes. If the system is to be maximised, not only should there be more learner training packages for students, but also more counsellor training sessions.

Another area that needs evaluation and revision is the existing set of SA materials. Preferably, this would be done by an expert or a team of experts in the SA field.

Results of this study should only be viewed as findings of one research project. More large-scale studies of a curriculum-based programme will need to be carried out to support the results of improvement in students' language proficiency and their perception of satisfaction with the autonomous mode of language learning.

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