

A Tutor-Guided Learning Scheme in a Self-Access Centre

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Dickinson (1987) stresses that self-access learning is using materials in a self-instructed way to facilitate learning. The term is "neutral on how self-directed or other-directed the learners are". Thus, students could choose to be either self-directed or tutor-directed learners in the centre. Seen in this light, tutor-guided schemes might be considered to be an appropriate device for students who opt for tutor-directed learning in the self-access learning centre. This article tries to look into the practical use of tutor-guided schemes in a self-access centre.

What Is Self-Access Learning?

Although self-access learning/autonomous learning has become more and more popular in the language teaching/learning field, the general attitude towards the application of self-access learning is still rather mixed. Dickinson (1987: 11) defines self-access learning as learners using materials in a self-instructed way to facilitate learning as "the term is neutral as to how self-directed or other-directed the learners are". Jones (1995) and Pemberton (1996) share a similar belief with Dickinson, believing that self-access learning takes place where materials/facilities are organised in order to facilitate learning. This learning may range from self-directed to teacher-directed. Though its applications may vary, the ultimate goal is the same -- facilitating autonomous learning.

Sheerin (1989) perceives the primary aim of self-access learning as to "enable learning to take place independently of teaching" and learners can ultimately direct their own learning through the use of the self-access facilities. Sheerin (op. cit.) puts more emphasis on learner-directed learning rather than other-directed learning in the self-access approach. Benson (1994: 10) holds similar ideas as Sheerin's, for him, self-access/autonomous learning "implies that learners study under their own direction rather than under the direction of another". Benson (1996) describes self-access learning as dealing with the relationship between the self-access system and autonomy in learning which means learners organising the self-access learning resources and environments to interact with the process of their own learning. Despite the variations in defining self-access learning, all the above educators acknowledge the important role that a learner plays in the language acquisition process in the self-access approach of learning and emphasise the promotion of autonomous learning in each individual through taking responsibility for his/her own learning.

As suggested from the above, self-access learning provides learners with more choices and flexibility and then they make decisions for their own learning. Seen in this light, learners have every right to choose to be assisted by others (e.g. tutors) to help them to learn (Dickinson, 1987). As long as it is the choice of a learner, it is self-access/autonomous learning. However, there is not enough evidence/research to suggest that other-directed/tutor-directed learning is acceptable in the self-access system.

Building a Bridge

With the practice of teacher-directed learning over the years at primary and secondary levels, Hong Kong students are so used to this way of learning. On arrival at the universities, students are suddenly open to other alternatives of learning, like self-access learning at a self-access language centre. Students may be able to appreciate the flexibility and the autonomy provided in the self-access system, however, they may also have psychological and practical problems in employing this new method of learning. Seen in this light, tutors at the centres should offer a hand to lead them into the system.

One of my students commented on tutor support in the self-access centre in the following way:

"I feel tutors can give us more tailored-made advice while I also have my own choices for learning. This makes me feel more confident learning English."

Direct guidance from tutors is preferred even in the self-access learning environment. A tutor-guided scheme may offer a pathway for

learners to gradually start learning independently on this new ground of autonomous/self-access learning. Tutor-guided schemes may also provide semi-autonomous learning situations for learners as they can have their own choices and at the same time be directed by tutors to begin with. Students can also decide on their degree of dependence on tutors in the scheme. Students who prefer to take a less dominant role in the tutor-guided scheme can request more tutor support while those who would like to lead their own learning can have no interferences from the tutors at all. This is perfectly logical as a tutor-guided scheme is to provide semi-independent learning environment for students to prepare themselves to become independent/autonomous learners.

In my university, we have been doing a tutor-guided scheme in our self-access learning centre for more a year. There seems to be a general positive feeling towards the scheme among students though I am not attempting to draw any general conclusions about the actual effectiveness of the scheme even though I did conduct a pilot study interviewing students about their opinions on the scheme. The perceived value of the scheme is generally high from the interviewed students. This may shed light on using tutor-guided schemes as a bridge to allow new self-access users to have a taste of independent learning with direct support from tutors. Learners' choices are respected while they are also learning under much guidance in the tutor-guided schemes. Thus, these schemes can be seen as a means or tool to help self-access learning beginners to master the basics and gradually build up autonomous learning skills on their own.

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