A Needs Analysis Approach to Self-Access English Learning: Perspectives of Students and Teachers

Jessie CHOI

Hong Kong Institute of Education

Abstract. The concept of self access learning has been widely promoted and implemented in the higher education arena around the globe (Gardner & Miller, 2011). As a result, the establishment of the self-access centre can be found in nearly every institute. The review of this paper emphasizes on the importance of needs analysis in the development of self-access learning materials and tasks by including different stakeholders, such as students and teachers, in the process (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Sheerin, 1991). The purpose of this study is to find out the perceptions that a group of second language (ESL) learners and instructors have of their/students' English skills and learning needs for self-access English learning. A total of 110 ESL students majoring in different academic fields and 6 English instructors participated in the questionnaire survey of this study. Among them, 20 students and 4 instructors were invited to attend in-depth interviews to provide further information. Survey and interview information included respondents and interviewees' perceptions or evaluations on two major areas: English skills and learning needs. The results show there are both discrepancies and similarities of perceptions between students and instructors on English skills and learning needs. Finally implications for the present context are provided.

Keywords: Needs Analysis, Self-access Learning

1. Introduction

Self-access language learning is important for language education. It is generally referred to the creation of a communicative environment that can promote the development of language skills (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Swain, 1995). Self-access centres are the places where self-access language learning usually takes place. These centres provide "controlled and uncontrolled environments" (Gardner & Miller, 1999) where learners can have access to the learning materials they require. In addition, they can be social spaces where learners can meet and interact with one another using the target language. These environments can contribute to self-access language learning in two ways: providing a "relaxed atmosphere" and chances for learning the target language in ways "related to every day activity" (Cooker, 2010, p. 7). Needs analysis is particularly crucial for the self learning process as it can help to identify "what is most desired" among learners (West, 1994). By analysing learners' needs, the centres can help to shape the development of materials design for self-access language learning. In the current context under investigation, to allow for data validation, a questionnaire survey and focus group interviews were used to collect the data. The objective of the study is to examine learners' self-access English learning needs from both learners' and instructors' perspectives. More specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

- What are learners' perceptions of their English skills and learning needs?
- What are the English instructors' perceptions of the English skills and learning needs of learners?
- Are there any significant differences between learners and English instructors in their perceptions?

2. Methodology

This study was done to collect data for the Arthur Samy Language Learning Centre (ASLLC) of the HK Institute of Education. Since the Centre was sponsored by University Grant Committee of Hong Kong Government, it was decided to delimit the study to undergraduate level of the Institute as it is where the target users were according to the funding policy. The population of the study comprised full-time undergraduate (Years 1 to 3) students studying at the English Enhancement Courses conducted by the Centre for Language in Education at HK Institute of Education and their English language instructors. The age range of the student participants was 20-25 and they were from different majors of study. The English language instructors were teaching English Enhancement Courses in the Centre of Language of Education of

the Institute. The research collected data from students and instructors using the following two instruments in order to secure the validity and reliability of the research: An online questionnaire containing closed-response items and an in-depth, semi-structured follow-up participant interview. The data derived from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages for all items of the questionnaires were obtained. The data of the semi-structured interviews, which was analyzed qualitatively, underwent the procedures of data reduction and coding.

3. Discussion of Findings

110 student and 6 English instructors participated in the online questionnaire surveys to assess their/students' English skills and learning needs. This section will further discuss the findings together with the data from the in-depth interviews with 20 students and 4 instructors who were chosen randomly from the participants of the online surveys for the task.

3.1. What are learners' perceptions of their English skills and learning needs?

In the present study, most of the respondents rated their English skills as average. The skills they would like to improve the most were speaking and vocabulary. The major purpose for improving speaking was to prepare for their career. As for listening and grammar, respondents thought that improvement was needed to prepare for language tests to be taken, such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT). The major reasons given for improving reading and writing were to facilitate respondents' studies and prepare for career respectively. As for vocabulary, the main reason for improvement was to facilitate studies. Very few of them chose "for interest" as the reason for improving their English skills. The learning mode they would like to take for self-access language learning was working with printed resources. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents do not have much confidence with their English skills as most of them rated their performance in all the six English skills as average. The respondents are comparatively less confident with speaking skills. This explains why they chose that skill as the one they would like to have improvement the most. Most of them would like to improve their English skills for pragmatic reasons, such as for facilitating studies, preparing for career and language tests. This shows that very few of them have the intrinsic motivation in learning English skills.

In addition to the data from the questionnaire, some other findings were obtained from the in-depth interviews. The data from the 10 non-language students reveal that 7 of them never goes to the Learning centre, 2 of them stays for 2 hours per week and the remaining one goes there for half an hour per week. Comparatively, the 10 language students are better in terms of the number of their visit to the Learning Centre as 9 out of 10 indicated that they go to the Learning Centre for about 0.5-2 hours per week. Only one stated he/she doesn't go to the Centre at all. The reasons given by those patrons vary from having entertainments (including reading newspapers and watching videos) to prepare for language tests, examinations and assignments. It is not surprising when the non-language students were asked about the problems they encountered in getting the material of the Centre for use, most of them expressed that they had no problems. Just as one of the respondents said, "I seldom encountered problems as I hardly go to ASLLC".

For identifying the specific needs of respondents, there were questions in the questionnaire for finding the focus of material in the fours skills of English: listening, writing, speaking and reading. The data reveal the major identified foci of the four English skills are as follows:

- Speaking - Pronunciation, intonation and stress
- Listening - Listening for central ideas
- Reading - Identifying key information
- Writing – Organizing ideas, giving reason/explanations, and linking ideas

In the interviews, 9 out of 20 language students indicated they would like to have more material for helping with their pronunciation, intonation or stress in the Speaking aspect. The results are similar to the one from the questionnaire and show that this is the important area for material development of the Centre. Some interviewees even suggested the use of group discussion and foreign teachers in the Centre for improving students' performance in pronunciation, intonation and stress. They would like to improve the

skills because some of them stated that "in daily life, speaking English is the most important" and they can "get prepared for the Reading Aloud section in the LPATE exam".

3.2. What are the English instructors' perceptions of the English skills and learning needs of learners?

First of all, in evaluating the English skills of learners, a majority of them thought that their learners are good at listening skills. The other skills they were also happy with were reading, speaking and writing (in order of the satisfaction level). Grammar and vocabulary were found to be the least satisfactory ones. As far as improvement is concerned, more than half of them regarded that their learners need to work more on writing. Contrary to the findings on the evaluation of the performance of learners, grammar and vocabulary were not chosen by instructors as the top priority for learners' improvement. This may be due to the fact that writing is a core skill to be assessed in most of the language tests and examinations and to be used in assignments. In consistent with the findings from the student questionnaire, which shows that speaking was chosen as the top priority for improvement, the teachers' responses indicated that most of the students asked for help in speaking in the consultation sessions of ASLLC. Listening was the skill that students asked for help the least among all English skills. The result matches the previous findings from teacher questionnaire that their learners seem to have better performance in listening skills. Also, a majority of them gave more comments on Writing than the other three English skills. This shows that they valued more on the Writing skill.

In relation to the learning purposes, a majority of them thought that learners would like to improve their speaking and writing skills because they had to prepare for language tests. According to the teacher respondents, learning the use of grammar and vocabulary was for facilitating learners' studies and preparing for their career respectively. The purpose for learners to enhance their reading skills was regarded as "for interest". As for listening skills, no major learning purpose was provided. With respect to the learning mode of self-access English learning, a considerable number of teacher respondents opted for "working with others", which means that they regard learners will learn better if they work with learners or teachers. None of them chose "working with printed resources" and only one found that "working with online resources" was the best learning modes for learners. This reflects that most of the respondents still have reservation with the use of the online learning modes.

In general, the interview results from the four English instructors support the questionnaire findings. All of them pointed out that their learners have various types of problems with the use of vocabulary and grammar, which directly affects their performance in Listening, Writing, Speaking and Reading. Also, they appeared to focus more on the Writing skill as comparatively they gave more comments on this aspect.

For identifying the specific needs of learners, there were questions in the teacher questionnaire for finding the focus of material in the fours skills of English: listening, writing, speaking and reading. The data reveal the major identified foci of the four English skills by teacher respondents are as follows:

- Speaking - Pronunciation, intonation and stress; reading aloud
- Listening - Listening for specific information; identifying key information
- Reading – Predicting; identifying key information; scanning and skimming
- Writing – Proofreading and editing; constructing sentences; comparing and contrasting

With respect to speaking sub-skills, the interview findings match the ones from those of the questionnaire. The results reflect the needs of learners in the speaking skills. As most of them need to take language tests, such as IELTS or LPATE, in the course of studies, thereby it is important for learners to be well prepared for the pronunciation and reading aloud requirements of the speaking tests. There are, however, teacher interview findings which do not totally support the questionnaire findings. As far as listening sub-skills are concerned, the foci chosen by the interviewees are different from the ones from the questionnaire. Nearly all of them would like learners to learn more vocabulary/expressions and have more listening practices using authentic (for social context; dialogues) materials. They regarded these are crucial for building up learners' listening skills. With regard to reading sub-skills, two of the respondents gave nil responses. One concerned about the reading speed and the other on preparing learners for examination. The responses are not exactly the same as those identified by the questionnaire. In relation to writing sub-skills,

nearly all of the interviewees focused on developing learners' academic skills. They tended to look at the needs in a broader sense and with the consideration of the real needs of learners, who have to take IELTS or LPATE in the coming years. This explains why the micro skills involved were not mentioned in the interviews.

3.3. Are there any significant differences between learners and English instructors in their perceptions?

With respect to the evaluation of English skills, there are some differences in the perceptions of students and teachers. The differences are found when the two groups were asked to rate the performance of learners in the English skills. Students regarded themselves as average in all the six aspects while teachers found that students were "good" at listening and satisfactory in speaking and writing, but they were poor at grammar and vocabulary.

As for learning needs, there are both differences and similarities in the views of students and teachers. Firstly, when asked for the aspect that improvement was needed the most, students chose "speaking" whereas the teachers' choice was "writing". This could be viewed as a difference but at the same time, a similarity, as both groups weighed on the English "productive skills", which are important for preparing for language tests/examinations. When choosing the learning mode, differences occurred. Students opted for "printed sources" while teachers chose" working with others". It is interesting that "working with online sources" was not the major choice of the two groups. Printed sources were chosen by students as this was the most popular learning mode for them. As for teachers, they tended to think that interaction brings "better learning".

When asked for the focus of the material in each of the English sub-skills for the Learning Centre, a similarity was found on speaking as both groups chose "pronunciation, intonation and stress" as the major focus of the speaking sub-skill. However, a divergence of perceptions between the two groups in the sub-skills of other aspects was noted. In listening skills, students perceived "listening for central ideas" as the most important while teachers opted for "listening for specific information" and "identifying key information". The greatest differences existed in the reading and writing skills. Instructors perceived "predicting " as an important sub-skill for reading but students did not view it as the focus. Instead, they thought "identifying key information" as more important. What is also notable is that instructors and students had very different perception on the focus of the sub-skills of writing. The three items, which were "proofreading and editing", "constructing sentences" and "comparing and contrasting" were not in the list of the students. On the contrary, they opted for "organizing+ ideas", "giving reason/explanations", and "linking ideas". As shown above, the divergences between instructors and students stem from their identities. As students, they will concern more on the material they will help them in examinations, so they focused on the sub-skills that can help them in this aspect; while as instructors, they value more on promoting the learning of the English language itself, which explains the reasons for the choices of the sub-skills.

4. Conclusion and Implications

The findings of the study show that students are not very confident with their English skills as they gave an average to their performance on all English skills and would like to improve their speaking skills the most. The instructors, however, regarded the students' "listening skills' as good while their speaking and reading skills as average. As for improvement, the instructors thought that the students need to work more on their writing skills. The data reveal that the students and instructors have had some discrepancies towards the evaluation of English skills and learning needs. If we would like to promote self-access learning, we have to create a learning environment that can address the real needs. We cannot just take the views of one side as "objective language learning need can only be appropriately recognized if both teachers' valuable experiences and students' reasonable subjective wants are taken into accounts" (Shamsaee & Shams, 2010). Constant and ongoing evaluation and assessment should be carried out to ascertain students' self- access learning needs and the prioritization of the Centre's materials development.

The data from the study have illustrated a number of significant implications for implementing self-access English language learning. First of all, an identification of the real needs by taking into the different

perceptions of stakeholders is essential for the continuous running of the centre, including for both materials development and administration mode. Ongoing assessments with different parties, which can inform materials design specifications (Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002), are a critical component for the development of a self-access learning centre. Furthermore, the Centre should provide more orientations on the use of materials and facilities as orientations could "heighten students' awareness of resources in the center, thereby allowing them the opportunity to make greater use of these materials" (McMurry, Tanner, & Anderson, 2009). In addition, an integration of students, ESL teachers and specialists in the development process of the Centre is essential. Moreover, learner training should be provided to prepare learners to be an independent learner who has the necessary skills and strategies to be autonomous in their learning. By doing so, the intrinsic motivation of learners can be cultivated, which will ultimately enhance the use of the self-access language learning centre.

5. References

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