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Studying the Impact of the SALC Curriculum on Learning

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Abstract

This paper gives a summary of two related projects that investigate the extent to which the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) curriculum has an actual impact on learning. By conducting a course evaluation and beginning a longitudinal project, the researchers are able to make initial observations that the curriculum affects learning behaviours and also the ways in which participants thought about their learning.

Keywords: self-directed learning, self-access, learner autonomy, curriculum evaluation,

The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of research which aimed to investigate the impact that a self-access curriculum had on actual student learning. The paper will briefly describe the context, the curriculum and its underpinnings and delivery format, and then give a brief summary of the actual research and results. As the research is ongoing, future publications are planned which will give further details of the methods and the findings and the implications for the field. The four authors work as SALC learning advisors and work closely with learners on developing learner autonomy. The researchers' motivation for beginning the study was to systematically investigate a major element of their practice in order to reflect on and improve it for the benefit of the students.

The Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC)

The SALC was established in 2001 to promote language learner autonomy and English language use outside of class. Learner autonomy is defined to be the ability to take charge of one's learning (Benson, 2011) and this is often a long term process with learners needing support both inside and outside the classroom. Although the SALC provides 9000 resources such as books and DVDs plus facilities such as various equipment and study areas, it is recognised that learners need ongoing support on developing the awareness and skills they need in order to take charge of their learning. In practical terms, learner autonomy is promoted through advising sessions, workshops, SALC orientations and even casual interactions in the SALC. In addition the SALC has been offering a curriculum in various forms since 2001. The curriculum focuses on promoting self-directed language learning (SDLL) skills as a practical way to be able to introduce tools for learning to students in order to contribute to their overall development of autonomy. SDLL draws on work in the field of self-directed learning (SDL) which is a humanistic approach to learning promoted by researchers such as Hiemstra (1994), stemming from earlier work by Knowles (1975). Learner autonomy is a complex and multifaceted concept and SDLL is just one way of approaching its development, but as its focus is on shifting control to learners, it is arguably a significant contributing factor (Benson 2011; Cotterall & Murray, 2009; Wong & Nunan, 2011).

SALC Curriculum

The SALC curriculum is a series of systematic programmes which help learners to develop an awareness of skills and tools that will help them to make the most of the various language learning opportunities and to develop a sense of control over the learning processes. The aims and learning outcomes were developed as part of a two-year curriculum evaluation process

conducted between 2011 and 2013 (see Lammons, 2013; 2014; Noguchi, 2014; Takahashi et al., 2013; Thornton, 2013; and Watkins, Curry & Mynard, 2014 for more details). Detailed learning outcomes are provided as an appendix to this paper, but the broad outcome areas for the SALC curriculum are as follows:

1. How to use the SALC
2. Setting and reviewing goals
3. Selecting, using and evaluating resources
4. Identifying, using and evaluating strategies
5. Making, implementing and evaluating a learning plan
6. Evaluation of linguistic gains

These learning outcomes are supported through optional SALC modules and courses that are available to all students.

Modules

Modules are (as of the moment of writing) non-credit, self-directed courses that students do in their own time and not as part of a class. There are two modules Effective Learning Module 1 (ELM 1) and Effective Learning Module 2 (ELM 2), both eight weeks long. The first four weeks of ELM 1 introduce the concept of self-directed learning by explicitly teaching the learners about useful tools for taking charge of their language learning. In the remaining four weeks, learners make and implement a personalised learning plan with help from a learning advisor. ELM 2 assumes that students already have the skills to develop a learning plan, so does not contain input units (unless a refresher is needed), and so begins with the learning plan which students implement throughout the remaining weeks with help from their learning advisors.

Courses

After many years of offering modules, courses were introduced as a way to offer students more support in the form of weekly classes. The content and outcomes are largely the same as the modules, but students have the opportunity to discuss their learning with classmates and get additional support from learning advisors. The courses last for one semester (15 weeks) and students earn one credit if they successfully complete all of the requirements. The courses are called Effective Language Learning Course 1 (ELLC 1) and Effective Language Learning Course 2 (ELLC 2).

Background to the Research

Several research studies have been conducted at KUIS in recent years indicating that students benefit from the structure of the module and are supported by the advising process (Hasegawa & Thornton, 2014; McLoughlin & Mynard, 2015; Mynard, 2012; Mynard & McLoughlin, 2014; Watkins, 2015; Yamaguchi, 2014). Analysis of the reflective journals, written reports and documented use of resources have indicated that the modules have a beneficial impact on learning. However, apart from one or two case studies, previous research has tended to be based on one semester's work, and no systematic longitudinal studies have been conducted. In order to see whether there are longer-term impacts on learning, learners need to be tracked over time – ideally throughout their four years at the university. The purpose of the present research is twofold. Firstly, it forms part of the ongoing curriculum evaluation. The researchers wanted to be sure that the curriculum which was developed is actually producing the results in terms of the desired learning outcomes. Future versions of the modules to be offered from April 2017 will be credit bearing, so it is essential to be able to confidently expect the curriculum to be robust and effective. In order to ensure this, research is needed. Secondly, although learning advisors see evidence on a daily

basis to support the assumption that the SALC curriculum impacts learning in a positive way, it is important to collect systematic evidence to support (or challenge) these assumptions. This is particularly important in order to research any long term effects of the SALC curriculum. Although the present study lasts for two years, the researchers plan to continue the research for at least two more years and continue see how modules may have impacted learning over time.

Brief Overview of the Research

In order to not only evaluate the present curriculum, but also comment on the impact the curriculum may have on learning in general, it was necessary to undertake two separate but related research projects; one was a curriculum evaluation and the other is the beginning of a longitudinal study:

Project 1: Curriculum evaluation

The curriculum evaluation focussed exclusively on the ELLC 1 course for practical reasons. Although SALC courses have been running seemingly successfully since 2010, no systematic research has been conducted to investigate whether students are meeting the specified learning outcomes. The main purpose of the course evaluation was to investigate whether ELLC 1 helps students to develop self-directed learning skills.

The research question was:

- After completing ELLC 1, are students able to meet the course learning outcomes?

Project 2: Longitudinal study

The main purpose of the longitudinal study is to follow the participants over a longer period

in order to investigate the value that learners place on the experience of taking a module and whether the experience of taking a module has a role to play in their lives.

The research questions were:

- What value do students place on the experience of taking a SALC course or module (if any)?
- (How) do these perceptions change over time?
- (How) do participants' values change?

Summary of Project 1: Curriculum Evaluation

Participants

The participants were Japanese freshman students taking one of the three ELLC 1 classes in semester 1 of the 2015-6 academic year. 47 students participated voluntarily in the study. The students were from different departments as the classes are mixed.

Research methods and results

Taking an interpretative approach to the investigation the researchers undertook an evaluation of the course in order to see whether students developed the specified learning outcomes. In order to do this, there were two research methods:

1. Student survey (in Japanese)

The purpose of the survey was to gather students' perceptions of the course and what they had learned. The survey contained open and closed questions and was administered after the course had been completed via SurveyMonkey. Among other things, students were asked to comment on:

- their understanding of SDLL skills that were introduced in the course,
- whether they were able to do these things prior to the course
- whether the course influenced how they thought about their learning

Results: Students rated the course favourably and responses indicated that the course influenced the way they think about their learning. In addition, the self-evaluation showed that the course had helped them to meet all of the learning outcomes.

2. Document analysis

The purpose of the document analysis was to examine evidence of work in students' learning journals, weekly reflections, and end-of-course reflections to indicate that they had met the learning outcomes. The analysis was completed by two of the researchers according to a descriptive rubric and, after a norming process, the data were coded according to outcome areas as "Approaches the standard", "Meets the standard" and "Exceeds the standard"

Results: Generally, the analysis indicated that course effectively introduces learners to self-directed learning skills and most participants developed the majority of the SDLL skills through the course. Some areas not fully evident were resource selection and evaluation, and evaluation of linguistic gain.

Conclusions: Attention needs to be paid to the ways in which some of the SDLL skills are introduced in future courses; specifically, ways in which students are taught how to select and evaluate resources for learning, and also how evaluation of linguistic and learning gains are introduced.

Next steps: The results were shared with the learning advisor team so that there is awareness of the learning outcome areas that need attention. The survey was administered again at the end of semester 1 the following year with similar results. A document analysis will also be conducted to see if any change has occurred. In future years, the research team will undertake similar research with modules to see if the format (i.e. self-directed rather than as a taught class) affects the results.

Summary of Project 2: Longitudinal Study

Participants

Participants were six volunteer freshman students from different departments who had completed one semester of a module or course in semester 1 of the 2015-6 academic year and had signed up for a follow-up module or course.

Research methods

The longitudinal study aims to investigate the impact and changes of perceptions of the participants on their SDLL skills over four years. At the time of writing this paper, the researchers had completed the first year of data collection and analysis which comprise semi-structured annual interviews conducted in Japanese (video and audio recorded) with each participant. The recordings were analysed thematically by two of the researchers taking an interpretative approach (Hatch, 2002). In addition, a document analysis of learners' weekly reflective journals were conducted, again analysed thematically by the two researchers.

Preliminary results: Analysis of the interviews and reflective journals indicated that participants seemed to be aware of their behavioral and affective tendencies, and created the conditions necessary for controlling them by using their metacognitive skills and utilizing the

framework that the SALC curriculum provides. For example, after one year, the following observations were made:

- **Behavioral regulation:** Maintaining momentum for studying regularly regardless of their day-to-day motivational level helped them to persist in their self-directed learning and this momentum appears to support their commitment to continue studying.
- **Affective regulation:** Doing their weekly studies and writing about them in the weekly journal meant they had a sense of achievement, which in turn motivated them to persist in learning independently.
- **Metacognitive regulation:** The participants gained practice in metacognitive skills by planning, controlling, monitoring and evaluating their learning process through weekly learning activities and writing about them in their journal.

Conclusions: Although only the data for the first year has been analysed, there is compelling evidence to suggest that the modules affect learning in significant ways. Participants place high value on the SDLL experience and explain how their involvement in the SALC has influenced their student life.

Next steps: The interviews and document analysis (where available) will continue for three more years in order to be able to answer the other two research questions relating to whether perceptions and values change over time.

Conclusions

The results indicate that the SALC curriculum impacts learning behaviours by equipping freshman learners with tools they need to manage and persist in their self-directed learning.

In addition, it also appears to have a profound effect on cognition and metacognition, i.e. how students think about their learning. Continuing the research for two more years will help the researchers to see the longer term impact (if any) and be able to make adjustments to the materials and support if necessary.

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Appendix
Learning Outcomes for All SALC Courses and Modules

1. How to use the SALC

- Freshman students should know what a self-access centre is and how it can help them
- Freshman students should know how to get a SALC card and how to participate in SALC events
- Students should know the purpose of the advising service
- Freshman students should know how to access services and facilities
- Students should know how to access online resources for self-directed learning

2. Setting and reviewing goals

- Freshman students should be able to identify their language strengths and weaknesses
- Freshman students should know how to set a relevant and realistic goal considering their wants, interests, and needs
- Students should draw upon previous knowledge and experiences in order to individualise their plan

3. Selecting, using and evaluating resources

- Students should be able to locate resources that will help them to address their goals
- Students should try at least two new resources and reflect on their suitability for their goals

4. Identifying, using and evaluating strategies

- Students should try at least two new strategies and reflect on their effectiveness and suitability for their goals
- Students should know how to get information about learning additional strategies when they need them

5. Making, implementing and evaluating a learning plan

- Students should demonstrate that they understand the difference between S, U and R (Study, Use and Review) activities
- Students should be able to make a basic learning plan which forms a practical guide for a period of self-directed study

6. Evaluation of linguistic gains

- Students should demonstrate that they understand the meaning of “evaluation” of learning progress (embedded into outcomes above)
- Students should demonstrate how they can evaluate linguistic gains
- Students should be able to evaluate whether or not there have been linguistic gains