

Exploring Taiwanese College Students' Acceptance of Self-Access Language Learning

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a large amount of research in the area of self-access language learning (SALL) showing that students around the world react favorably to SALL (Gardner and Miller, 1997; McDonough and Shaw, 1993; Richterich and Chanceril, 1980; Sheerin 1989; 1991). There have even been a few reports showing positive results with students in Asia (Baker, 2003; Barnett, 1995; Klassen, Champa, Lui, Patri, and Wu, 1988; Pemberton, 1992), where students are traditionally portrayed as reticent and favoring teacher-centered instruction (Riley, 1988); but there has been little research with Taiwanese students and even less with many of the students who receive a large portion of the EFL instruction: Taiwanese college students who are non-English majors and who are mandated to receive EFL instruction as part of the general education requirements. To examine their acceptance of SALL, a quantitative attitudinal survey study was conducted. Two hundred and forty-three such students, Taiwanese college students who are non-English majors, participated in the study. They were surveyed using a closed response instrument after one semester of participation in a SALL center. Their responses were compared to students' responses from other global centers to compare acceptance. We then triangulated the data with qualitative retrospective semi-structured interviews using key informants to give further breadth and scope to the results (Creswell, 1994). The evidence presented during this survey study shows that Taiwanese college students who are non-English majors also accept SALL learning as part of the EFL curriculum and offers several reasons that contribute to the acceptance.

Key Words: College students, EFL, non-English majors, Self-access, Taiwan

Global interest in self-access language learning (SALL) has resulted in the creation of self-access centers around the world (University of Nancy: France; University of Cambridge: UK; Indiana University Bloomington:USA; Australian Migrant Education Program:Australia) and sparked an increase of papers, books, and conference presentations as students have begun to successfully use SALL as part of their EFL curriculum (Brumfit and Roberts, 1983; McDonough and Shaw, 1993; Richterich and Chanceril, 1980; Sheerin, 1989; 1990); all of whom generally purport, as Gardner and Miller (1999) do, that self-access learning has become an important part of language learning and many students find it useful as a complement to what they are doing in class or as an alternative to formal lessons.

Even educators in Asia, an area where students have been portrayed as passive and resistant to non-traditional techniques (Riley, 1998), have begun to embrace SALL. As a result, centers have been created at academic institutions all over Asia (British Council Centers: Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur; Chulalongkorn University: Bangkok; Hong Kong University: Hong Kong; Chinese University of Hong Kong) and favorable research has been reported in

the area (Baker, 2003; Barnett, 1995; Pemberton, 1992) which generally shows, as Klassen, Champa, Lui, Patri, and Wu (1988) do, that "students find the self-access mode of learning useful and motivating and that it increases their confidence in learning English" (p. 55).

Even in Asia, despite the inclusion of centers and supporting research, little research has been done in Taiwan and even less has been done on a population who are the recipients of a large amount of EFL instruction in Taiwan: College students who are non-English majors and are mandated to take EFL instruction as part of their general education requirements. Such students are an especially important focus in this area of research because they are, regardless of personal interests or past performance in prior education, indicating a preference to study EFL, and are required to enroll and pass EFL language courses as part of their graduation requirement. This requirement presents a serious problem in terms of motivation. Students who do not voluntarily choose to enroll in EFL courses often feel as Garner and Miller (1999) found with one Hong Kong student during an in-depth interview: "Basically, learning English has just been as an arranged marriage for me since I was young. It was

compulsory to learn English" (p. 48). Hence, as is suggested with Gardner and Miller's student, English is often seen as just another course to be taken and passed rather than a language to be learned. Thus, identifying a method of study that such students find motivating is an important research goal.

In the present educational system in Taiwan, non-English majors at the college level often receive traditional teacher-centered instruction as part of their core courses; thus, they can, as Gardner and Miller (1999) argue, have difficulty with the pedagogy often used in today's second language instruction: "Within a traditional educational context learners' expectations may not include activities which are not teacher-centered" (p. 38), so learners may show "resistance towards the autonomy needed in communicative language classroom teaching." And, as Sinclair and Ellis (1984) further point out, "they [the students] believe it is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure learning takes place" (p. 46).

Considering the present educational climate, second language instruction indeed takes place, but learning may not always be the result. Consequently, we propose, because "self-access language learning is an

approach to learning, not an approach to teaching language" (Gardner and Miller 1999, p. 8), it may be just different enough to provide an opportunity where students can begin to reshape their perceptions of the language learning experience and perceive themselves as successful language learners rather than passive participants in yet another teacher-centered required EFL class in which they are forced participants. Thus, it is worth exploring as an educational resource.

To examine attitudes of Taiwanese college students, who are non-English majors, towards participation in a SALL center environment, we had to operationalise the construct through an instrument that enables it to be measured. Towards that aim we developed a pilot program for a SALL center. Acknowledging that SALL has had a wide variety of definitions applied to it, we, for the purposes of this study, chose Carmen and Turner's definition (2000): A self-access center is a place "where students fulfill part of their commitment to language study by working on their own in addition to any tuition provided by a language specialist in the classroom" (p. 386).

We also acknowledge that our center offers several levels of self-access to students throughout the school which exceed this definition to include open options, such as:

A self-access center provides resources and materials for learners who are sophisticated in their language learning behaviors in that they can determine what they want to do and then locate the appropriate resources and materials. A student attendant is usually on hand to help the student locate the proper materials, and the center is overseen by an administrator (Baker, 2002, p. 11). But, for the purposes of this study, we have examined its most controlled use, which states:

It is an extension of the classroom, focused on homework-based activities.

The materials are carefully selected by the teacher to complement the learners' classroom based work, it is mandatory for the learners to attend sessions for a number of hours per week, complete a certain set of assignments, and complete assessment tasks--all of which are regulated by student staff and overseen by an administrator (Baker 2002, p. 12).

We introduced activities using abridged readers, an ELLIS Computer Aided Language Learning (CALL) program, and the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) preparation materials. We then conducted an attitudinal survey study with 245 non-English majors who had participated in the center and compared their responses to those of the 543 students who participated in a similarly published study of global respondents at five centers (Gardner and Miller, 1997).

We also chose to triangulate the quantitative closed instrument survey with qualitative retrospective semi-structured interviews in a dominant/less dominant expansionist model to elaborate on the findings of the quantitative analysis and add scope and breadth to results found through the quantitative data (Denzin, 1978; Creswell, 1994).

Methods, Questionnaires, Participants

Sampling

The questionnaire portion of our study was performed with 245 students at Chung Hwa College of Medical Technology in Tainan, Taiwan. We used a purposive sample from the school's daytime program (6,761 students--1,503 male and 5,258 female). We chose two of the school's eight departments: Food & Nutrition and Medical Administration. Six classes were chosen to participate: two from the Food & Nutrition department (87 students--22 male and 65 female--out of the department's 1,569 students--427 male and 1,142 female)

and four from the Medical Administration department (158, 17--male and 141 female--out of the department's 703 students--119 male and 584 female). Each student was required to participate in the self-access center as part of his/her EFL course requirement. Each student's participation in the program was recorded through an assistant monitored time clock procedure--a lab employee checked students in and out of the lab using time cards and a time clock. At the end of the semester, each student's hours were calculated to insure participation in the program prior to inclusion in the survey. Students who did not participate in the program (N 2) were not included in the survey.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Of the 243 respondents, 39 were male with a mean age of 19.8 years (range 19-23) and 204 were female with a mean age of 19.9 years (range 19-24). Two hundred and thirty-nine were ethnic Taiwanese and four were Aborigines. And, all of the students were non-English majors from two departments, the Food & Nutrition Department and the Medical Administration Department. All of the participants were non-English majors and took English as a mandatory course as part of their general education requirements.

Materials

The questionnaire was given to all the students who participated in the self-access center. It provided five questions with a closed yes-no response form (Table 1). The original form was translated into the students' L1, Mandarin, using a back translation procedure. To further insure reliability with regards to the translation of the questionnaire, a pretest with a small number of respondents (n 25) was done to reveal potential ambiguities that may result due to translation of the original questionnaire.

Table 1: Non-English Major College Students' Perceptions of Working in a SALL Environment (English Translation)

	Yes	No
1. I like to use a self-access center for learning a language.		
2. I think self-access is a good way to learn.		
3. The SAC is as effective as classroom lessons in improving my English.		
4. I benefit by using the SAC.		
5. Self-access work helps me develop good study habits.		
Source: Gardner and Miller (1997)		

Procedures

Administration of the Survey Instrument

The questionnaire was directly administered to each class during their regular class time to ensure a high response rate. The survey was administered by the class captains without the instructor present to avoid researcher interference--the instructor played a key role in the design and implementation of the lab and thus could be seen as an authority figure. Six of the participants were unavailable to participate in the original survey administration and a follow up survey using the identical instrument was administered when they returned to class the following class session. All of the questionnaires were submitted anonymously.

Return Rate

All but two of the students who began the program were included in the survey (n 243). They, the two students, dropped out of the program prior to the end of the semester. Of those students who participated in the program, all returned the questionnaire during the in-class survey and all completed each question (Table 2).

Questionnaire Analysis

The quantitative data is first presented as our students' responses to the five-item questionnaire. The responses are then compared to the data from the Gardner Miller Study (1997) to test the two hypotheses: First, whether Taiwanese student responses using the Gardner Miller questionnaire about reactions to using the SALL center were both favorable, and second, were they at least equal to the favorable responses found in the Gardner and Miller study. For a full analysis, see the Results section.

Interviews, Participants

Sampling

We chose to use key informants (Fraenkel and Wallen 2000, p. 510) for their "ability to elaborate or explicate constructions that have already been introduced" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen, 1993, p. 91). We chose to use the captains (hereafter called informants) of the classes as key informants because, as captains, the informants were in a position to understand the culture, reflect on it, and explain it to the researcher in a holistic manner.

We also chose the captains as informants because their attitudes and orientation were related to their position: Their positions involved active roles in the SALL center throughout the entire study that not only allowed them to participate as students, but also put them in key observer positions because their duties and the time spent in the lab to complete those duties included assisting staff and teachers with SALL student orientation, helping to instruct students about lab procedures and materials, helping to maintain supplies and equipment, and liaising between students and teachers for procedural questions. This role allowed them to "express thoughts, feelings, opinions, and perspectives, on the topic being studied and to shape the total picture of the context beyond the quantitative data supplied by the questionnaires" (Merriam, 1988, p. 76).

Characteristics of the Respondents

The six key informants were chosen because of their positions as class captains without regards to gender, age, or nationality. While no attempt was made to control these variables, the group was nonetheless

representative in gender and age. It consisted of four female and two male members with a mean age of 19.64 years (range 18.3-20.25). The informants were not, however, representative of the larger college population with regards to nationality: They consisted completely of Taiwan nationals and none of the local minority aborigine population were represented.

Materials

We used interview questions based on Gardner and Miller's (1997) original closed yes-no questionnaire. We did this for the five reasons identified by Creswell (1994):

Firstly, because of triangulation, by which it is hoped that the information gained during the interviews confirms the data from the questionnaire. This helps improve the internal validity of the investigation results. Secondly, the interviews can complement the questionnaire results by exploring issues in more depth, for example by finding out why the subjects answered the questionnaire in the way they did. Thirdly, the interviews can investigate reasons for unexpected or unusual answers to the questionnaire items. For example, more information can be sought on why interviewees gave a "Don't Know" response, or why their answer was unusual; for example being at the opposite end of the scale from the mean. It can also provide grounds for analysis when the reliability of some of the questionnaire data is in doubt. Fourthly, the interviewees may bring a fresh perspective to the topic under investigation, one which was not investigated by the questionnaire items. Finally, in summary of the points above, a second research instrument adds scope and breadth to a study. (p. 175)

We also changed the verb tenses from

procedure for each of the five questions. During the analysis, as we completed each question, several of the qualitative categories, which emerged from one question, repeated themselves in the next and thus can be found in several areas. The CALL materials, for example, were mentioned repeatedly in areas of speaking, listening, and reading and thus overlapped each other in different ways during each question. While we acknowledge that the data could logically be regrouped all into

one area, we feel that the categories are significant and should be treated individually in each section. Thus we coded and reported each question's data separately to give breadth and scope to each question, which would have been lost had they been grouped. For a full analysis, see the Results section.

Results

Several fairly consistent patterns in scoring among the responses emerged as we

analyzed the quantitative data: The respondents, as evidenced by their responses, showed clear evidence they favorably view participating in a SALL environment. They responded with positive means of 72.62% for question 1, 82.31% for question 2, 74.31% for question 3, 86.12% for question 4, and 80.27% for question 5. We then compared the results to Gardner and Miller's original study (1997) (Table 2).

Table 2:

Compared Responses of Global Respondents and Taiwanese College Students' Perceptions of studying in a SALL Environment

	Gardner and Miller Study		Present Study	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. I like to use a self-access center for learning a language.	86.14	13.68	72.62	27.38
2. I think self-access is a good way to learn.	88.91	9.24	82.31	17.69
3. The SAC is as effective as classroom lessons in improving my English.	58.78	38.63	74.31	25.69
4. I benefit by using the SAC.	84.10	14.60	86.12	13.88
5. Self-access work helps me develop good study habits.	63.59	34.58	80.27	19.73

All scores are to be read as percentages. Note: Some percentages of the original study (Gardner and Miller, 1997) are based on fewer responses due to respondents failing to answer all of the questions.

To find out whether the responses to the SALL center were both favorable and at least equal to the favorable responses found in the Gardner and Miller study, we performed statistical tests for one proportion to compare the proportion of favorable response in the SALL survey to a neutral

response rate (50% favorable) and to the expected proportion found in the Gardner and Miller study. First, we tested the hypotheses that the proportion of favorable response to each survey question is equal to 0.50, and then we repeated the test using as the null hypotheses the proportions found in

the Gardner and Miller study. Based upon the percentages in table 2 and the sample size $n = 243$, we calculated a Z test statistic and its corresponding p-value. (Table 3).

Table 3: Compared Responses of Global Respondents and Taiwanese College Students' Perceptions of studying in a SALL Environment

Question	Observed Yes Responses	Observed Percentage Yes Response	Hypothesis	Z-statistic	P-value
Q1	176	72%	50%	6.99	<0.001
			86%*	-6.10	<0.001
Q2	200	82%	50%	10.07	<0.001
			89%*	-3.34	<0.001
Q3	181	74%	50%	7.63	<0.001
			59%*	4.91	<0.001
Q4	209	86%	50%	11.23	<0.001
			84%*	0.85	0.393
Q5	195	80%	50%	9.43	<0.001
			64%*	5.28	<0.001

*Proportions found in the Gardner Miller study.

The consistent qualitative data presented alongside the quantitative data added breadth and scope to each individual question:

Question 1: I Like to Use a Self-access Center for Learning a Language.

Based upon the Z-statistic, we reject the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 50%, and therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is greater than 50%. Based upon the Z-statistic, we also reject the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 86%, and can therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is less than 86%. The survey data indicate that a lower proportion of students in the present study like to use the SALL for learning a language than that proportion found in the Gardner and Miller study; however, the majority of students in the present study (72.62%) do like to use a self-access center for learning a language.

During the interview, all the students answered the initial question positively, but not all the answers to the follow up questions were positive. There were 19 positive comments in 3 areas during the follow up questions. There were 10 comments about students being able to self select their materials that interested them (books, ELLIS, English movies on VCD's, and CD's); 7 comments explaining that they liked the SALL because it was not teacher-centered; 1 comment was that the students could interact one-to-one with the teacher; and 1 comment reporting that the student was not forced to study grammar. There were also 3 negative comments during the follow up questions: There were 2 comments about the size of the facilities and 1 comment about the lack of materials.

Question 2: I Think Self-access is a Good Way to Learn.

Based upon the Z-statistic, we reject the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 50%, and therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is greater than 50%. Based upon the Z-statistic, we also reject the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 89%, and can therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is less than 89%. The survey

data indicate that a lower proportion of students in the present study think self-access is a good way to learn than that proportion found in the Gardner and Miller study; however, the majority (82.31%) of students in the present study do think self-access is a good way to learn.

During the interviews, all the students answered the initial question positively, but not all the answers to the follow up questions were positive. There were 15 positive comments in 4 areas during the follow up questions. There were 7 comments about individual learning to include learning by oneself (lack of pressure, enhanced motivation, and being away from overcrowded classes); 5 comments about the authentic language found in the ELLIS software, VCD movies, books, and CD's; two comments about having more one-to-one interaction with the teacher; and 1 comment about being able to check resources right away when students needed to look something up. There were also 2 negative comments, both of which complained about the facilities: a lack of equipment and outdated films.

Question 3: The SAC is as Effective as Classroom Lessons in Improving my English.

Based upon the Z-statistic, we reject the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 50%, and therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is greater than 50%. Based upon the Z-statistic, we reject the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 59%, and can therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is greater than 59%. The survey data indicate that a greater proportion of students in the present study think the SAC is as effective as classroom lessons in improving English than that proportion found in the Gardner and Miller study, and the majority of students (74.31%) in the present study do think the SAC is as effective as classroom lessons in improving English.

During the interviews, all the students answered the initial question positively.

There were no negative responses. There were 13 positive comments in 7 areas. There were 3 about students being able to self-select materials that interested them; 3 about having more materials than were available in the classroom; 2 about authentic materials; 2 about avoiding overcrowded class sizes; 1 about having a quiet environment; 1 about not having to compete with the better students who talk all the time; and 1 reporting that the class and the lab were a good combination.

Question 4: I Benefit by Using the SAC.

Based upon the Z-statistic, we reject the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 50%, and therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is greater than 50%. Based upon the Z-statistic, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 84%, and can therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is equal to 84%. Alternatively, we cannot conclude that the proportion is greater than or less than 84%. The survey data indicate that the same proportion of students in the present study benefit by using the SAC as the proportion found in the Gardner and Miller study, and the majority of students (86.12%) in the present study benefit by using the SAC.

During the interviews, all the students answered the question positively. There were no negative responses. There were 13 positive responses in 4 areas. There were 5 about improving one's speaking ability by using ELLIS to record and compare one's voice, pronunciation, and authentic language, and using its self-paced learning, features, and role playing modes; 3 about one-to-one conversation with the teachers; 2 about improving one's listening performance with ELLIS, VCD's, and CD's; and 3 about being able to improve reading with regards to enjoyment, speed, and comprehension.

Question 5: Self-access Work Helps me Develop Good Study Habits.

Based upon the Z-statistic, we reject

the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 50%, and therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is greater than 50%. Based upon the Z-statistic, we reject the null hypothesis that the proportion of favorable responses is equal to 64%, and can therefore conclude from the survey data that the proportion is greater than 64%. The survey data indicate that a greater proportion of students in the present study think self-access work helps them develop good study habits than that proportion found in the Gardner and Miller study, and the majority of students (80.27%) in the present study do think that self-access work helps them develop good study habits.

During the interviews, all the students answered the initial question positively. There were no negative responses. There were 8 positive answers in three areas. There were 3 comments about being able to study frequently even for short periods time because the lab was convenient. There were 3 comments about the lab being an enjoyable and inviting place to study because it was comfortable; and 2 comments

about being able to go at one's own pace--to study or take a break anytime.

Conclusions

The results of our survey study demonstrate that Taiwanese students enrolled in non-English majors react favorably to second language learning in a self-access center learning environment in the areas covered by each of the five questions. It is true that some questions presented a higher means average than others, but each means average was favorable. It is also true that some of the means averages of our study were lower than the original Gardner and Miller study, but the results were still favorable. The positive responses to the questionnaire, the positively triangulated responses in the interviews, and the relevant positive qualitative information provided by the informants during the interviews gives scope and breadth to results, especially with regards to the reasons behind their answers to each individual question. While we must, however, report that the percentages of female to male students and Taiwanese to

aborigine students may not be representative of the larger Taiwanese college population, we do not feel that gender and race are intervening variables. Thus, we conclude that the students who participated in the study react favorably to SALL environments.

Discussion

The results of this study show students who participated in the study favorably accept SALL and thus we argue the results can be generalized to a larger population of college students who are non-English majors in Taiwan. However, while the research shows evidence of favorable acceptance, there is another important question for future research: Does participation in SALL improve the target population's English competencies? While the participants' performance during the study shows such preliminary gains, it is not the purpose of this paper to make such claims and thus future research in the area still needs to be done.

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