An Examination of the Self-Directed Learning Practices of ESL Adult Language Learners

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Abstract

Self-directed learning is one of the preeminent theories in the field of adult education. This study explored how English as a Second Language learners directed their own learning outside of the formal classroom through the use of practices that potentially advance their English language proficiency. Results from a survey of over 400 ESL students revealed that practices and resources identified by researchers are being used on a limited or infrequent basis. Implications for adult educators and their role in developing self-directedness in their ESL students are discussed.

Introduction

In 2010, the United States Census Bureau reported there were 39, 957,000foreign-born residents in the United States, making up almost 13% of the population. This includes both adults and children. Of that number, 85% speak a language other than English in their homes. Additionally, one out of 10 from this population speaks no English at all (United States Census Bureau, 2012). A lack of proficiency with the English language translates into lower incomes, higher poverty rates, and limited mobility in the labor force. Learning English is critical in order to fully assimilate into the local economy and workforce and for upward socioeconomic mobility. Additionally, adults need English in order to communicate with their employers, participate in their children's education, navigate the legal and governmental systems, stay informed about local political issues, and express themselves when faced with medical, banking, school, or business situations. Opportunities to learn English in the U.S. vary by state but are often available through community colleges, adult education centers, and local organizations that provide basic adult education and English as a Second Language(ESL)courses as part of their curriculum (Dembicki, 2013).

Adult ESL students come to school with varied expectations and with varied language levels. Huang, Tindall, and Nisbet (2011) pointed out that some want better employment while others want to learn English so they can talk to their child's teacher.

Taking advantage of learning opportunities in the formal environment is a significant step toward communicating effectively, but what may be equally important for instructors is fostering the behaviors that help students advance their language proficiency outside of the classroom. Rather than relying only on a teacher-directed method of learning, students can take a role in establishing their own goals and determining how they will meet them. Nurturing this ability to be self-directed can help students take ownership of their learning in all areas. The purpose of this study was to identify the self-directed learning practices ESL students are engaging in and the resources they are using outside of the classroom to advance their proficiency with the English language.

The term "practice" is used to describe behaviors they participate in such as watching television programs in English, and materials such as books and newspapers they are using, that may help them advance their language skills.

Background of the Study

Self-directed learning (SDL), one of Knowles' (1980) original assumptions about adult learners, helped form the basis of andragogy, an important theory in the field of adult education. Knowles (1975) described SDL as the "process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p. 18). According to Brockett & Hiemstra (1991), "self-direction in learning refers to both the external characteristics of an instructional process and the internal characteristics of the learner, where the individual assumes primary responsibility for a learning experience" (p. 24).

Various models of SDL have also been developed. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) identified three principal categories into which these models fall: linear, interactive, and instructional. In early models like those proposed by Tough (1971) and Knowles (1975), SDL was a linear process containing a series of steps toward a learning goal. Subsequent models proposed by Spear (1988), Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), and Garrison (1997) were more interactive in design and incorporated both the context and the nature of the learning process. A third model focusing explicitly on SDL as part of a formal instructional process is seen in Grow (1991).

SDL as an instructional strategy and the role of teachers or facilitators and formal educational settings has been debated. Instructional models of SDL seek to apply SDL principles to educational environments while taking into account differing levels of learner self-direction. Grow's (1991) Staged Self-Directed Learning model is perhaps the best-known SDL instructional model. Grow noted, "Students have varying abilities to respond to teaching that requires them to be self-directing" (p. 126). Building on this insight, his model describes four stages for learners, ranging from dependent to self-directed, and proposes that the "teacher's purpose is to match the learner's stage of self-direction and prepare the learner to advance to higher stages" (p. 129). As they advance through the stages, learners are given progressively more choice or control within instructional situations.

SDL and ESL Students

Independent or autonomous learning, autodidactism, and self-directed education are terms that have been used in the literature to describe SDL, though upon closer inspection the words are defined at least slightly differently (Gerstner, 1990). Research surrounding the topic of ESL students and SDL reflects the use of different terms intended to mean almost the same thing but most commonly employs the terms *self-directed* or *autonomous learning*. In her study on English language learning by university students, Bordonaro (2006) offered that being self-directed in learning a new language means a learner is attempting "to progress independently of a language classroom in which the teacher directs the learning" (p. 29).

In the literature two themes often emerge with ESL learners. One is the facilitator's role in fostering self-direction, the other the specific techniques used to cultivate autonomous learning. The research on these topics centers on several different subpopulations of ESL learners, but the majority of studies investigate how various dimensions of SDL are typified in the university student population (Ade-ojo, 2005; Bordonaro, 2006; Chan, 2000; Lambert, 2008; Sanprasert, 2010). For example, in his study of English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) college students and their predisposition to autonomous learning, Ade-ojo (2005) found students preferred an instructor-driven curriculum. He cautioned educators about making assumptions about their learners and maintained that helping students embrace autonomous learning requires a lot of effort on the instructor's part, especially considering the historical and psychological reasons for students' hesitancy to work independently. Jingnan (2011) made a similar point, suggesting that learner autonomy has been a neglected educational goal but that the university students who participated in his research on facilitating

learner autonomy were conscious of the fact that learning is their own responsibility. He claimed students have the confidence they need to direct their own learning, but the instructor's guidance, monitoring, and encouragement are still an important part of the process. Results from other studies support Jingnan's claim (Lee, 1998; Sanprasert, 2010).

The point has been made many times over (Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1979; Papen, 2011) that humans are important resources in the SDL process in a formal environment, but SDL as an instructional strategy has rarely been a focus in the research on ESL students. A study by Omar, Ebmi, and Yunus (2012) revealed the use of social media, such as conversations among peers and teachers on Facebook, led to enhanced English language skills. Another approach was initiated by Wang (2012) to encourage a group of Chinese ESL students to extend their learning beyond the classroom. As part of what Wang called "self-directed naturalistic learning pedagogy" (pg. 339) students immersed themselves in English language television dramas to improve their speech and to enhance their understanding of western culture and values.

These studies focus on directives given in the formal classroom rather than on learners independently selecting strategies that will advance their skills in the informal environment. The current study explores what specific behaviors ESL students engage in that demonstrate an attempt to direct their own learning outside of the classroom. This study focuses on a very specific population of foreign and native-born Latino/Hispanic adults with limited English proficiency. The participants differ significantly in literacy and educational levels in their native language and home country, the length of time living in the United States, and their reasons for learning English.

Research Methods

Participants for this study included students enrolled in ESL courses in nine adult education centers in a mid-southern state. The centers ranged in size and student enrollment and were located in both rural and urban areas. Data were collected during the summer and fall of 2013 using a paper-based instrument developed by the researchers. The survey used in the study was an adaptation of SDL practice identification developed by

Grover and Miller (2014) and used with several different populations, including community members participating in social organizations. The instrument was based on a literature review of SDL practices, was pilot and field tested, and in its three previous administrations consistently had a reliability index exceeding .5990.

Prior to data collection, the survey was translated from English to Spanish and field tested with 26 ESL students to ensure clarity of instructions and readability of questions. Instructors at each site were asked to distribute the survey to students in their ESL classes.

The survey included 16 demographic questions that asked about the students' level of education completed in their country, their employment status, the number of months they had been enrolled in the program, and the reasons they were participating in ESL classes. A second section consisted of 19 items related to the SDL methods students use to enhance their English learning outside of the classroom. Students were asked to rate their level of use of each method on a five-option Likert-type scale where 1=I never do this and 5=I do this a great deal. Examples of methods included watching television in English, visiting websites in English, and attending social events where English is the spoken language.

Findings

Of the 440 ESL students who completed the survey, the majority were born outside of the United States (91.1%), with 47.9% being between the ages of 26-40, and 28.8% between the ages of 41-55 (See Table 1).

Table 1.

Personal Characteristics of ESL Learners Responding to the Survey

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Characteristic	n	Valid Percent
Where born		
US	2	.5
Non-US	440	91.1
Length of living in the US		
Less than a year	57	12.1
1-3 years	50	10.6
4-10 years	142	30.1
10-20 years	136	28.9
20+ years	86	18.3
Current age		
18-25	72	15.1
26-40	228	47.9
41-55	137	28.8
56-70	39	8.2
Employment status		
Full-time	183	40.1
Part-time	67	14.7
Unemployed	130	28.5
Not in labor force	76	16.7
Have at home		
A personal computer	298	62.5
Internet access	267	57.3
How often attend ESL class		
3-5 times per week	319	68.3
1-2 times per week	139	29.8
A few times a month	8	1.7
Why ESL enrollment Of N=483		
Self-improvement	391	81.0
Help children w/education	83	17.2
To get a job	229	47.4
To get a better job	199	41.2
Become a US citizen	12	
Participate in community	158	32.7
To go to college	136	28.2

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The age distribution was fairly even among participants living in the United States between 4 and 10 years and 11 to 20 years (30.1% and 28.9%). More than half of the students reported they attended ESL classes 3-5 times per week (68.3%) and had a computer in their home (62.5%), and 57.3% said they also had Internet access. Survey participants were asked about their employment status and 40.1% reported they were employed full time. Of the remaining respondents, 14.7% said they were working part time, 28.5% were unemployed, and 16.7% were not in the labor force. Their reasons for participating in ESL classes varied, and they were allowed to choose more than one of the seven options available. "Self-improvement" was the most frequently cited reason for participation (81%), followed by "To get a job" (47.4%) and "To get a better job" (41.2%). "To go to college" was the option selected least often (28.2%) by respondents.

Participants were asked to rate how often they participated in activities to help them learn English outside of their ESL class (See Table 2 for a complete list of these practices). Of the 19 practices identified in the survey, respondents reported that more than any other activity they watched television in English (mean=3.18). They also make English-speaking friends (mean=2.72), practice English at work (Mean=2.71), use electronics such as phones and tablets (2.69) and spend time with an English-speaking person (mean=2.66). The practices they participated in least often were subscribing to a magazine written in English (mean=1.59), and participating in formal workshops conducted in English (mean=1.77), followed closely by attending church in English (mean=1.80) and attending public lectures in English (mean=1.89).

Table 2.
Self-Directed Learning Practices of ESL Students

SDL Practice	n	Mean	SD	F
Watched television programs in English	430	3.186	1.2451	2.155
Make friends with English-speakers	395	2.726	1.2947	1.585
Practice English at work	368	2.714	1.5048	1.256
Use electronics (phones/tablets)	378	2.690	1.4755	2.283
Spend time with English-speaking person	354	2.661	1.3030	3.156
Read newspapers in English	399	2.581	1.3004	1.064
Read online blogs in English	384	2.518	1.3343	1.724
Watch online videos in English	381	2.422	1.3926	7.387
Use online computer programs to learn English	393	2.371	1.3994	6.054
Visit/study websites in English	368	2.173	1.3640	11.601
Read books from the library in English	390	2.071	1.1890	2.138
Purchased educational videos in English	378	2.047	1.2091	1.025
Attend social events where English is spoken	376	2.045	1.2113	.960
Use social media in English	376	2.023	1.4092	9.630
Purchased books written in English	389	2.023	1.2043	2.630
Attend public lectures in English	377	1.891	1.1234	.634
Attend church events in English	367	1.809	1.2086	1.153
Participate in formal workshops in English	382	1.774	1.1978	.872
Subscribed to a magazine in English	375	1.594	1.0526	.668

To examine whether or not there were differences in the use of self-directed learning practices by respondents based on education level earned in their home countries, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted. The results of the ANOVA identified one significant difference, indicating that the more educated the ESL student, the less likely they were to purchase educational videos in English (*f*=1.914; 1.969 at the .05 *loc*).

Discussion

The findings from this study indicate participants are using self-directed practices included in the survey infrequently, if at all. Participants have demonstrated some level of self-directedness by recognizing their need to learn English and attending ESL classes. However, according to the results the majority of participants have been living in the U.S. between 4 and 20 years and this may be their first attempt to learn the language in a formal classroom.

The strategy participants used most often is watching television programs in English, an unsurprising result since the majority of programs offered through cable television in the areas where the survey was administered are in English. More students than not reported they have a computer in their home (62.5%) and have internet access (57.3%), but this leaves a large percentage who have neither, making many of the practices included in the survey, such as visiting websites in English or using computer programs to learn, difficult, unless they were using alternative electronic devices to do so. The strategies and resources participants said they use least

often are subscribing to magazines in English and participating in formal workshops in English.

Approximately one-third of respondents (28.2%) said one reason they are enrolled in ESL classes is to go to college. For the non-native English speaker, higher education can be especially challenging, and SDL skills might mean survival in this postsecondary environment. ESL students moving on to adult basic education, adult secondary education, or GED prep could benefit from self-directed practices as well. In these classrooms they will likely be learning alongside native English speakers and will face a very different environment than in the ESL classroom.

Implications

Several researchers (Ade-ojo, 2005; Chan, 2000; Jingnan, 2011; Lee, 1998; Sanprasert, 2010; Victori & Lockhart, 1995) have acknowledged the important role of the instructor in promoting learning autonomy. Adult educators do not necessarily need to recognize SDL as a theory of learning to appreciate the potential benefits of embedding SDL techniques in their classroom and fostering within their students the ability to learn autonomously. SDL can serve as a viable instructional strategy for ESL students who presumably want to learn English to improve their communication skills with others outside of the classroom. This ability to progress independently of the instructor, according to Bordonaro (2006), defines SDL for ESL students. It is incumbent on the instructor to help students make the connection between learning independently and how this ability can enrich their daily life.

This can be a challenge in the ESL classroom, where teachers individualize instruction to address the various levels of student proficiency with the English language. Culture also plays a role in how ESL students learn; some students have only been exposed to a very traditional, teacher-centered environment where students are wholly dependent on the instructor for direction. The goal of instruction should be the development of the student, and identifying self-directed instructional strategies that will enhance the learning of entry-level students who may not be ready to take ownership of their learning. This is also true for advanced students who are more proficient with

language and ready to take responsibility for their learning but still want and need guidance.

Teachers need professional development to learn how to assess learners' capacity for self-direction. Models like Grow's (1991) and Francom's (2010) offer instructors a framework they can use to help a student progress from total dependence on their supervision to assuming some level of control over their own learning. Researchers also suggest ways to make content relevant to adult students' lives by embedding pedagogical techniques into instruction that encourage self-direction. Interaction during class time (Fukuda, 2013), activities that center on employment, technology, consumer-related goods and services, and civic participation, and the use of practical materials such as menus, labels, and brochures (Huang, Tindall, & Nisbett, 2011) are examples of ways to simulate real-world situations. Activities such as these increase students' comfort level with navigating systems like education, healthcare, financial, and legal, outside of the formal classroom. Facilitators can then encourage students to engage in other informal learning activities, such as finding conversation partners, blogging in English, and reading newspapers written in English.

Instructors can also encourage students to engage in some of the practices included in the survey outside of the formal environment. The student, as part of their SDL development, should be a part of the decision-making and suggest ways they can practice language skills.

One limitation of the study is that the survey was originally designed for native English speakers. Despite the field test, there is still the possibility that some students encountered a lack of clarity in the questions, or their level of literacy in their native language was a barrier to their understanding of the directions. Future studies should explore the practices advanced ESL students use as compared to entry-level students, as advanced students may have a higher level of SDL readiness than beginning students. Future research should also explore ways ESL teachers are encouraging their students to continue their learning outside of the formal environment.

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