the jaltcalljournal

ISSN 1832-4215
Vol. 11, No.1 Pages 93–102

Self-access English learning facility: A report of student use

Nicolas Gromik

University of New England, Australia
ngromik@une.edu.au

This paper reports on a case study research conducted at a Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) from 2009 to 2012. Over these four years data was collected through a survey from over 6000 participants regarding their access and use of the SELF facility and resources. The article reports on various on-site learning environments and the influence this may have of EFL students' utilization of the SALC. This observation revealed that due to competition between libraries, and the increasing emergence of mobile devices, university students are less likely to use SALC. The quantitative findings confirm that students are less likely to make use of this SALC's facility, resources and services. While students need to enhance their learning skills, SALC may no longer be the place where students congregate to do so.

Keywords: Self-access learning centre, University language learning, Independent learning practices, Impact of university structure on language centres

Introduction

A Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) can be defined as situated learning within a prescribed environment specifically delineated to enhance target language acquisition as well as empowering learners to become independent learners (Reinders, 2012). However while receiving the funding to open and operate such an environment is a matter of receiving the appropriate governmental funding (Adamson & Brown, 2012), managing a SALC can be a complicated affair. Technological developments render certain equipment obsolete, require of teachers and stakeholders to reconsider the

Forum

options available for accessing and delivering learning materials, and establish new forms of client use of the premises. The institutional demographic can at times vary significantly in terms of student language or technology abilities and teacher needs and expectations. Finally, while some of the literature presents SALC as an environment where learners can access resources and develop their independent language learning skills, mobile learning is deconstructing the need for such a physical space. The objective of this paper is to present descriptive evidence that documents language learners shift away from using the Self-Access English Learning Facility provided by the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Literature review

Self Access Learning Centers can be defined as dedicated spaces where learning, resources, technology, tasks and facilitators meet to enhance the development of independent learning as well as language skills (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001; Gardner and Miller, 1999; McMurry, Tanner & Anderson, 2009; Reinders, 2012). Since Gardner and Miller's (1999) guide on establishing and managing a SALC, the relevant literature on research foci has extended to include investigations of the concept of management, practices, technology integration, learning gain, and Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) (Adamson & Brown, 2012; Castellano, Mynard & Rubesch, 2011; Gardner & Miller, 2011; Morrison, 2005, 2008). The issues covered in the literature are all pertinent points that need to be addressed in the process of structuring and managing SAC. For example, Morrison (2005) notes that major challenges concern: catering to heterogeneous groups of learners with different skills and abilities, offering a wide range of resources to this mix of learners, meeting institutional expectations, collecting and analyzing data that can contribute to the improvement of SALC services, and evaluating learning gains (p. 269).

Amidst these concerns, Morrison (2005) applies a grounded theoretical methodology to interview a mix of 16 lecturers and learners. The study evaluates whether SALC users' learning gains meets both the learner and the institution in terms of accountability and "evidence of cost effectiveness" (p. 277). Morrison's (2005) participants concur that evaluating SALC-based language learning improvements is a futile exercise for several reasons. Firstly, the existence of potential influencing external variables may affect SALC-based language assessment. It would appear language gains by a SALC participant might not be directly related to their regular or irregular attendance of SALC learning activities. Secondly, the outcome of completing certain tasks would be dependent on the regularity and effectiveness of the SALC user. For example Morrison (2005) explains that the quality of a portfolio will depend on the regularity of a SALC student coming to the center to complete the task. And thirdly, the evaluation outcome might reveal that while students visit SAC they do not necessarily maximize their learning opportunities; they may not use the center for its intended purpose but rather to socialise. In a later study, Morrison (2008) investigates the SALC's role for enabling independent learning improvement. The questionnaires and interviews revealed that both teachers and students believed that SALC played a vital role in developing learning strategies. The evidence suggests that both the facility and the resources available through it enabled learners to develop and enhance their overall independent learning skills.

SALCs are not places solely used to enhance "the learner's ability to take responsibility for" their own learning (Reinders, 2012, p. 1) – their ability to study independently. As

Gardner and Miller's (1999) definition suggests, SALCs are also areas where students can develop their independent use of technology to enhance their learning skills. Castellano, Mynard, and Rubesch (2011) apply an action research methodology to understand their clientele's use of technology available at their university SALC. While the findings regarding students' use of technology (such as videos, DVD, the Internet to access social networking websites) are compelling, the article does not capitalize on student feedback. Castellano *et al*. state, "seven students mentioned an interest in learning about mobile technology for language learning, including the iPad" (2011, p. 19), and yet little is debated for increasing the use of such technology in SAC. The authors may be aware but did not explore the possibility that Japanese students, like any mobile-capable university students, have the opportunity of learning with computers and laptops and, more recently, have access to a wide range of free learning resources on their mobile devices (Jackson & Shenton, 2010).

Gardner and Miller (2011) also reported on seven Hong Kong-based SALC managers' perceptions of governing principles of SALC. The findings contribute to developing a more global consensus of the definition and purpose of SALC and its role in developing independent learning. The literature would agree with Gardner and Miller that a "self access is about facilities, the focus is on provision of materials, location and support" to engage students to take responsibilities for their learning (p. 82; see also Reinders, 2012). Nonetheless, the participants' data suggests that "real" purpose of SALC was either vaguely understood or set within general teaching terms, and three out of seven SALCs are set within a clear rationale. Gardner and Miller's (2011) research and the issues raised in the literature imply that SALC originally had commendable goals but, due to more modern times, little is discussed about the complexity involved in understanding SALC. For example, the literature does not identify SALC's competition. SALCs as learning centers compete with departmental and central libraries, each providing study centers, writing support groups, and comfortable environments, with some even providing areas to relax. For example, Jackson and Shenton (2010) define learning centers as "'learning zones,' 'learning spaces,' and 'learning cafes'" (p. 215), areas in which students are more likely to use technology to access text materials rather than open a physical book. Institutions and governments invest heavily in the establishment of a SAC (Adamson & Brown, 2012; Gardner & Miller, 2011) and the justification for sustaining its presence, relevance and role establishes a new area of research.

The aim of this paper is to present the history of the Self-Access English Learning Facility located on the Center for English Language Communication (CELC) premises at NUS. It also reports on students' use of this facility and to report on the infrastructure developments at NUS affecting students visits to the center.

Method

Structured as a case study, the paper is an inquiry to "investigate a contemporary phenomenon within real-life context" (Yin, 1999, p. 23). The data presented in this report were collected from observations of the institution's infrastructures available onsite and on the university website. Quantitative data were collected from the electronic sign in system in place at the SALC. Once SALC visitors have finished using the facilities and resources, they are encouraged to complete an electronic survey. The survey was designed in 2005, however some of the data collected were not suitable for evaluation. Therefore, evidence generated from the digital records from 2009 to 2012 is reported. The survey includes questions regarding students' faculty and English study background, length of use of the facilities

for that period of time, purpose of visit, purpose of study, activity completed and the name of the teacher who encouraged them to use the SALC facilities. The survey responses were sorted, organized and analyzed with SPSS 20, because this software provided fast data analysis.

Since the SALC visitors' electronic surveys had not previously been analyzed, it was thought that such evidence might provide some information that may justify future directions for improving students' access to the facilities.

The Center for English Language Communication SALC context

NUS students come from various Asian countries and their English language abilities vary from low intermediate to fluent. Since English is the medium language of instruction at NUS, most students are required to undertake one or two compulsory introductory English language courses as well as some faculty-specific English courses in order to graduate. Courses can range from Academic English writing for engineering students, to English communication skills for music students. The courses are offered as part of faculty programs and grades are awarded for students' performance in a skill (such as academic writing skills) rather than a score of their English competence (such as IELTS). These English courses are offered by the CELC.

The Self-Access English Learning Facility (SELF) opened its doors as a library and a center facility to enhance students' skills in 2000. It is located on the CELC premises and it is opened from 9:00 until 17:30 on weekdays. It is not open on weekends. The SELF is managed by one coordinator and three CELC-appointed faculty committee members for a minimum of one academic year. In addition to their normal teaching loads, these committee members oversee the general running of the SELF, manage the SELF website, purchase learning resources, and work with SELF student helpers to manage the SELF Library. Duties are negotiated and shared to ensure that all members have equal input in the overall SELF management.

The SELF Library is managed by a group of student helpers. Their role is to welcome visitors, to answer their queries, assist them in locating books or viewing movies, and to manage the general running of the library. The library infrastructure includes a reception desk, tables, chairs, cubicles, and sofas. The library provides students with access to computers, books, dictionaries, newspapers and magazines, CDs, videos, cassette tapes and players, and worksheets. The library also has a teacher resource collection. Students can only access these items while they are in the library and they cannot take them out. In addition, in collaboration with the Writing Hub, the library is a place where students come to receive training, support, and guidance to improve their writing. At the time of writing the Writing Hub had no data regarding students' access to this service. However in the process of writing this report, the Writing Hub leaders mentioned that they may begin to keep track of students' visits in a more structured way.

Originally the SELF's purpose matched the SALC definition previously stated above (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001; Gardner and Miller, 1999; McMurry, Tanner & Anderson, 2009; Reinders, 2012). In line with NUS's mission, the SELF provides a space as well as the resources for students to improve their English and study skills on their own within a comfortable and conducive learning environment. However, since 2000 much has changed around NUS. For example, the Singapore Government invested "more than $2 billion on integrating information technology into its national education programme" (Weber, Yow &

Soong, 2005, p. 150). This investment resulted in the National University of Singapore being able to offer free wi-fi access across the whole campus. This may have been the cause for the reduced number of students visits to the SELF, which began to resemble McMurry *et al.*'s (2009) description of SALC quickly becoming a library/computer lab. It could be argued that since NUS students have increased access to mobile technology and through this technology they have access to online resources, and that the technology affords these students the opportunity to learn anytime anywhere at any pace, the SELF may have lost its appeal.

The NUS Library context

The whole NUS campus is covered by wireless connectivity allowing students to access the internet anywhere anytime on a mobile or laptop computer. There are seven libraries at NUS; The Central Library, Business, Chinese and Japanese, Law, Medical, Music, and Science libraries. The Central Library provides a computer hub, cubicles for independent studies with computer connection, general study areas, and open and closed reading areas. While some books are still available in hard copy, more resources are increasingly becoming available in digital form, accessible either from the publishers or from the library's digital holdings.

Study areas where students can study in the open air anytime at their convenience surround the outside of the Central Library. Within walking distance, students can access eating areas and coffee shops. While the area surrounding the Central Library is old, the University Town (UTown) was completed in 2011 to promote open academic interaction. UTown includes open study areas with a Starbucks, enclosed computer working hubs, and a writing center.

The NUS Student

A walk around the campus will show NUS students with tablet computers and/or cell phones. They use their devices constantly to chat, study, or play games. Classroom observations will reveal that students use their tablet computers to access online journals, homework, or course documents. In general, the NUS student is familiar and comfortable with mobile-based learning and interaction.

Findings

The SELF computer-based survey

Discussions with colleagues indicated that in the inception of the SELF, students in the Foundation English program were guided to use the SELF resources. Teachers provided these students with tasks to complete. However by 2009, fewer teachers guided students to use this facility. By 2012, it appeared that only students from the Academic Writing course were directed to go to the SELF to view the practice test answer sheets.

Students from eight different faculties visited and used learning materials from the SELF. In total, as Table 1 reveals, over the 4 years, 2,829 students from the Foundation English program, 1372 from the Engineering faculty, 848 students from the Arts and Social Sciences, and 369 students from the Science department as well as 250 from the Design

and Environment, 237 from the School of Computing, 90 from the Business faculty, and 14 students from the Music department visited the SELF.

Table 1: Faculty demographic

	Faculty								
	Arts and Social Sciences	Business	Design and Environment	Engineering	Foundation English	Music	School of Computing	Science	Total
2009	499	51	79	633	1,580	13	140	165	3,160
2010	109	28	83	410	297	1	54	70	1,052
2011	112	8	73	245	584	0	29	95	1,146
2012	128	3	15	84	368	0	14	39	651
Total	848	90	250	1,372	2,829	14	237	369	6,009

The greater number of students visiting the SELF are the Mainland Chinese Foundation English learners, the cohort for which this center was originally opened. The number of visitors from the Business Faculty has decreased dramatically. In 2009 there was a low number of Music students making use of the SELF facilities, hence it is not surprising that they have not visited the SELF. However, it would be interesting to investigate why the numbers of Music students has always remained low. Students from the Arts and Social Sciences and the Science departments still continue to use the SELF facilities, but these numbers are also decreasing.

One of the survey items requires the students to indicate the number of times they visit the SELF per month. The responses reveal that a large number of students visited the SELF regularly. Nonetheless, over the years the number of visits decreased from 3160 in 2009 to 651 in 2012 (see Table 2). The evidence not only confirms that students are making less use of the SELF facilities, but also that they have been less inclined to come more than four times per month.

Table 2: Number of SELF visits per month

	Number of SELF visits					
	Once per month	Two times per month	Three times per month	Four times per month	More than four times	Total
2009	723	361	212	129	1,735	3,160
2010	409	167	73	43	366	1,052
2011	393	171	89	66	427	1,146
2012	205	85	59	38	262	651
Total	1,723	784	433	276	2,791	6,009

At the beginning of the SELF, teachers promoted the facility to the students and encouraged them to make use of the resources available on the premises. Some teachers recommended that students complete certain activities while they visited the center. For example, the evidence in Table 3 reveals that Foundation English students were encouraged to go to the SELF to practice their reading and listening skills. This data for this group

were triangulated against the names of the teachers in charge of teaching the Foundation English programme. Engineering students have a higher interest in reading because they are part of the Academic Writing programme, which requires of them to research magazines and newspapers to complete their homework. Students from other faculties did not report that they were guided by their teachers to use the SELF facilities, therefore these numbers reflect more the students' general interest to develop certain skills.

The data do not reveal the types of books students are reading or any type of reading activities they undertake, skill they are practicing or the purpose for their reading (language skills development reading, language learning reading, academic writing reading, for example).

Table 3: Recommended skill development total

	Recommended Skill Development Total						
	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Grammar	Writing	Vocabulary	Total
Arts and Social Sciences	238	590	1	11	6	2	846
Business	30	50	0	3	6	1	90
Design and Environment	50	159	0	30	11	0	250
Engineering	364	915	2	54	30	7	1,372
Foundation English	732	1,973	0	41	64	19	2,829
Music	4	10	0	0	0	0	14
School of Computing	63	163	1	7	2	1	237
Science	118	217	5	9	20	0	369
Total	1,599	4,077	9	155	139	30	6,009

Borrowing records

The borrowing record is not part of the computer-based survey, it is a paper-based borrowing document that records requests for borrowing a movie to view in the SELF. The date, time of borrowing and time of returning the video are recorded. Data collected from the reception borrowing records provide some evidence concerning visitor use of video resources. Table 4 below shows the average time of video use. In 2009, there were 198 cases of video borrowing. In 2010 the number increases to 317 and in 2011, the number falls to 125. Again, in 2012 the number fell to 77 video borrowing cases.

Table 4: Video borrowing time

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error	95% confidence interval for mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower bound	Upper bound		
2009	198	82.51	49.011	3.483	75.64	89.37	1	235
2010	317	78.01	57.195	3.212	71.69	84.33	1	410
2011	125	77.69	61.185	5.473	66.86	88.52	1	270
2012	77	85.10	58.689	6.688	71.78	98.42	1	230
Total	717	79.96	55.909	2.088	75.86	84.05	1	410

One potential reason for the decrease in the number of students coming to the SELF could be due to two reasons. First, the collection of video does not change. Budget constraints may have prevented the SELF from purchasing newer movies. Second, it is easier for Internet subscribers to view movies on video storing websites such as YouTube or DailyMotion. Since NUS has a campus-wide system, it would be possible for students to view streamed videos anytime and anywhere at their convenience.

Discussion

There is little evidence in the literature reporting on the use of the Self Access Learning Center by a large group of students over a long period of time. In addition, the literature reviewed presented mostly a positive view of the benefits of SALCs. However, the findings from this paper indicate that over time, fewer students are making use of such facilities. The literature reviewed revealed that unless a SALC provides training and services, managers and students will perceive little benefits of such facilities. As the evidence presented suggests, the numbers of students accessing and using the SALC is decreasing over time and across all faculties. Compared to other faculties, Foundation English programme participants are most likely to use this facility. One of the main reasons students visit the SALC is to complete listening and reading tasks. Speaking activities are not conducted inside the SALC, which operates mainly as a library. Some students do visit the SALC to study grammar, to improve their writing or to learn vocabulary items. However since this particular SALC seems to operate as an environment where learners take the initiative to use the facility, and take the responsibility to study on their own, little training is provided to improve their study, language skills or learning skills. Thus students may have decided that they can complete the same amount of study in another environment. Further research about students' awareness and decision for using or not using the SALC is necessary.

This research is not without limitations. The most noticeable limitation is the lack of consistency in the structure of the online data collection survey, as well as the lack of a comment section. Collecting students' comment or conducting interviews may confirm certain questions raised in this research, such as the effect of having access to other libraries to study, or the effect of free wi-fi across campus on preferred study styles.

Implications

It could be argued that this paper is not directly connected to Computer Assisted Language Learning. However, evidence from this research may open up the debate regarding the effect of mobile technology as an influencing factor that may challenge the need to invest in CALL classrooms. One issue that emerges from this research is that increasingly, libraries are providing digital access to textbooks and academic articles. With technology advancements, students can access and download these digital resources on their mobile devices. The potential question that further research may investigate is, how do free digital resources which are downloadable on a mobile device affect or change the learning behavior of students? Gaudreau, Miranda and Gareau (2014) have begun to investigate this question. These authors report that student-computer interaction can be classified as school related or unrelated "laptop utilization" (p. 252), indicating that some laptop behaviors can be conducive to learning, while others are distractors. Hence, this paper has investigated students' use of the SALC, and has observed the current institutional infrastructure in an

attempt to understand the potential reasons behind the decrease in students' visits to the SALC. While this paper has not directly researched the effect of mobile technology, it does set the ground for further research.

Conclusion

This case study has reported on the use and access of a Self-Access Learning Center at a Singapore university. The data presented attempted to understand whom the stakeholders were, how often they came to make use of the facilities, and the types of language learning activities they undertook. The data revealed that fewer students are making use of this particular SALC. To understand the reason observations of the NUS infrastructure and the access to free wi-fi across the campus were hypothesized as potential influencing factors; however, further research is necessary.

The findings from the survey indicated that over a four-year period, fewer students are making full use of this particular SALC physical space, and thus, it may be time for such a facility to be reconsidered.

References

Adamson, J., & Brown, H. (2012). Evidence-informed leadership in the Japanese context: Middle managers at a university self-access center. *Tertiary Education and Management, 18* (4), 353–374.

Castellano, J., Mynard, J., & Rubesch, T. (2011). Action Research: Student technology use in a self-access center. *Language Learning & Technology, 15*(3), 12–27.

Cotterall, S., & Reinders, H. (2001). Fortress or bridge? Learners' perceptions and practice in self-access language learning. *Tesolanz, 8,* 23–38. Retrieved from http://www.innovationinteaching.org/docs/article%20-%202001%20-%20Tesolanz.pdf

Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (2011). Managing self-access language learning: Principles and practice. *System, 39,* 78–89.

Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (1999). *Establishing Self-Access.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gromik, N. (2009). Do you know who we are? Undergraduate students' access to technology: A survey report. The *JALT CALL Journal,* 5(3), 57–66.

Gaudreau, P., Miranda, D., & Gareau, A. (2014). Canadian university students in wireless classrooms: What do they do on their laptops and does it really matter? *Computers & Education, 70,* 245–255.

Koyalan, A. (2009). The evaluation of a self-access centre: A useful addition to class-based teaching? *System, 37,* 731–740.

Jackson, M., & Shenton, A.K. (2010). Independent learning areas and student learning. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 42*(2), 215–223.

McMurry, B.J., Tanner, M.W., & Anderson, N.J. (2009). Self-access centers: Maximizing learners' access to center resources. *TESL-EJ, 12*(4), 1–13.

Morrison, B. (2008). The role of the self-access centre in the tertiary language learning process. *System, 36,* 123–140.

Morrison, B. (2005). Evaluating learning gain in a self-access language learning centre. *Language Teaching Research, 9* (3), 267–293.

Webber, I., Yow, K. C., & Soong, B. (2005). Tuning in to students' mobile learning needs: A Singapore interactive initiative. In A. Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, J. (Eds.). *Mobile learning: A handbook for educators and trainers* (pp. 150–156). London: Routledge.