7-2013

Student Perspectives of Self-Directed Language Learning: Implications for Teaching and Research

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This article presents findings from a qualitative study examining students' perspectives of engaging in an autonomous learning project at a community college. Through the conceptual prism of self-directed learning, this study describes how students view the benefits of SDL as well as the roles of teachers. It also touches on factors contributing to the variances in students' SDL competencies. With data collected from focus group interviews, the findings confirmed the utility of SDL as a potent learning strategy for students of foreign languages because this format could lead to improvements in knowledge domain, meta-cognitive skills, and motivation. In addition, the findings call for the need to consider individual differences in the design of SDL programs. Implications of the study findings for further teaching and research are also discussed.

Key words: Self-Directed Learning, Community College, Chinese as Second Language, Foreign Language Education

Introduction

The rapid development of technology and fast pace of change in the 21st century often render professional knowledge obsolete by the time students graduate from postsecondary institutions. In addition, certain acquired competencies, such as foreign language, require constant maintenance after students leave the classroom. As such, it is incumbent on teachers to develop students' self-directed leaning skills so that they may cope with such inevitable changes. To date, self-directed learning (SDL) has been widely implemented across many fields at post-secondary institutions. The basic tenets of self-directed learning, which call for personal autonomy and responsibility, align closely with the fundamental principles of higher education (Wilcox, 1996). Notwithstanding the dominance of lectures in higher education classrooms, many scholars argue that the development of self-directed learning skills is essential to (a) improve instructional delivery by meeting the learning needs of adult learners, (b) instill interest in lifelong learning necessary in the contexts of a global economy and an information-centered society, (c) individualize the teaching of knowledge and skills unique to college student growth, and (d) promote students' self-evaluation, motivation, and critical thinking skills (Bourner, 2003; Dynan, Cate, & Rhee, 2008; Patterson, Crooks, & Lunyk-Child, 2002).

Most SDL studies (Lunyk-Child et al., 2001；see also Bourner, 2003; Schmenk, 2005) were conducted in instructional programs in which the curriculum was primarily grounded within the conceptual framework of SDL. Scholars (e.g., Schmenk, 2005) have advocated the need for more empirical studies embedded within a variety of teaching contexts. Furthermore, few studies foregrounded as a major research focus students' experiences of

engaging in self-directed learning. To date, there is still an insufficient base of empirical studies analyzing how students view the benefits and roles of teachers in SDL. This study fills the void in current literature by examining the perspectives of a group of community college students in the Western United States who participated in an SDL project embedded in a teacher-centered pedagogy.

Review of Literature

Definitions of self-directed learning abound in the literature. Knowles (1975) advanced a most authoritative and comprehensive definition of SDL:

> [It is] a 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 appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (p.18)

Furthermore, Knowles described several essential components of SDL. The teacher is the facilitator of learning; learners should be involved in identifying their learning needs, objectives, and resources; lastly, learners should evaluate the learning process. Although all learners, regardless of age, possess cognitive control over learning tasks, SDL is primarily applied in postsecondary and adult education programs in which it ranges from being a subsidiary component of traditional teacher-directed learning programs to being the guiding principle of the curriculum (Dynan, Cate, & Rhee, 2008). Despite variations in practice, one common prerequisite is that students must possess the necessary skills, competencies, and emotional maturity to successfully engage in the process (Candy, 1991; Knowles, 1975). Specifically, six essential competences are identified: assessment of learning gaps, evaluation of self and others, reflection, information management, critical thinking, and critical appraisal (Patterson, Crooks, & Lunyk-Child, 2002).

Teachers' Role in SDL

Teachers have dual tasks in SDL; they must help students acquire discipline-specific knowledge and develop a set of SDL competencies. Departing from their traditional role as lecturers, SDL teachers still have a primary responsibility to facilitate student learning by providing encouragement, negotiating a contract for goals, strategies, and evaluation criteria with learners, acting as a manager of the learning experience instead of a knowledge provider, helping learners locate resources, and creating an atmosphere of openness and trust to promote better performance (Lowry, 1989).

The promotion of self-directed learning may challenge the ingrained beliefs, attitudes, and values held by instructors, causing them to experience an unsettling shift in instructional approaches from strictly transmitting knowledge to "letting go" and facilitating learning. In fact, it has been documented that the majority of higher education faculty are either uncommitted to the SDL framework or inadequately versed in the pedagogical and curricular knowledge required for the implementation of SDL (Hong, Haefner, & Slekar, 2011; Wilcox, 1996). In a study of teachers' views toward SDL at a Hong Kong university, Chan (2003) reported that teachers still considered themselves responsible for the methodological aspects of teaching language in spite of their proclaimed recognition of the value of learner autonomy. At the same time, teachers considered themselves less responsible for students' activities outside of class, indicating their weak commitment to the SDL philosophy.

According to Black and Henig (2005), traditional instructional approaches significantly impede the development of students' skills and the widespread use of SDL in college courses. On the one hand, students are socialized to rely on pre-written course syllabi as roadmaps for completing a course; on the other hand, teachers are often unwilling to let students choose materials, activities, and evaluation criteria due to time shortages and budget factors.

Finally, students typically exhibit a broad range of variability in terms of SDL competencies, real-world experiences, and familiarity with the subject matter, posing challenges for teachers seeking to facilitate SDL. As such, it is imperative that teachers thoughtfully align instruction with the developmental levels of their students. Thus, Miflin (2004) cautioned that a simplistic and uncritical use of SDL could lead to student anxiety; furthermore, SDL does not equate to self-teaching. Likewise, Boud (1988) critiqued many university courses grounded in the SDL framework for being taught independent of classes, independent of other students, and independent of faculty. In a study of student and faculty perceptions of SDL, Lunyk-Child and colleagues (2001) found that students experienced a painful transformative process starting with negative feelings and ending with confidence and enhanced skills for lifelong learning.

Use of Portfolios in SDL
Reflective learning journals, portfolios, and study plans are utilized frequently as vehicles to engage students in SDL (Kobert, 1995; Lo, 2010). The benefits of learning journals and study plans include helping students make sense of learning, enhancing critical thinking, and improving course performance (Cisero, 2006). Loo and Thorpe (2002) asked students to write reflective learning journals as part of the requirements for an undergraduate management course. In the journal, students were asked to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of a learning event, potential plans for effective learning, and the changes needed in learning attitudes and expectations. The researchers recommended that effective learning journals would identify clear and specific objectives and that personalized teacher feedback is essential. Similarly, Meeus, Petegem, and Meijer (2008) conducted a quasi-experimental study investigating the use of the learning portfolio as a dissertation model to facilitate autonomous learning at a Dutch university. They found that the portfolio model encouraged students to acquire greater meta-cognitive knowledge and to increase their capacity for autonomous learning.

Several studies (Cisero, 2006; Kobert, 1995; Lo, 2010) revealed that portfolios can effectively integrate instruction, learning activities, and evaluation as well as promote learner autonomy. In a project designed to facilitate autonomous learning, Lo (2010) found that reflective portfolios encouraged students to engage in multi-domain learning and to develop certain meta-cognitive strategies. However, gains in critical thinking and self-evaluation skills were minimal.

Although the literature on foreign language teaching is replete with studies of learning strategies, self-directed learning has received scant attention. A self-directed language learner is defined as a person who frequently monitors learning goals, manages behaviors and environment, and selects methods of learning (Dickinson, 1987). In particular, studies investigating students' perspectives of self-directed learning are noticeably absent. Extant studies on self-directed language learning discovered several benefits of this type of learning, including increased student productivity, higher motivation, higher student

retention rates, and improved meta-cognitive skills (Ellis, 1994; Rivers, 2001). Rivers (2001) studied the SDL behaviors of third-language learners enrolled in Georgian and Kazakh college courses. He found that these experienced language learners regularly assess personal progress, learning styles, strategy preferences, conflicts with teaching styles, and the behaviors of other learners. Furthermore, these sophisticated SDL practitioners frequently demanded changes in course content, learning activities, and structure to meet their individual needs.

In terms of research methodology, existing research on student perceptions predominantly relies on quantitative methods. For instance, Ryan (1993) designed a self-rating instrument to gauge perceptions held by a group of students enrolled in a professional course. He found significant positive changes in their opinions of SDL as well as in their abilities as independent learners. However, few qualitative studies have been undertaken to illuminate student perspectives. This article presents findings from a self-directed learning project for students enrolled in a Chinese as a Second Language program at a community college. This research is intended to add substance and scope to extant literature on students' perspectives. The underlying research questions for this study are:

1) How do students view the benefits of engaging in self-directed learning?
2) How do students view the role of teachers in self-directed learning?
3) What are the factors bearing on the variance in student SDL performances?

Contexts of the SDL Portfolio Project

This project was conducted in an accredited foreign language college in the Western United States and is intended to provide foreign language training for linguists in government agencies. Due to service demands, foreign language courses at the college are substantially more intensive and fast-paced than those at a typical four-year college. Depending on the difficulty of a given language, the course length ranges from 25 to 64 weeks. Students are diverse in terms of race, age, and prior academic background. Every day, students have six hours of instruction to instill functional language skills. The instructional approach is characterized by lectures, language drills, and frequent tests; the preparation for final capstone standardized proficiency tests is hectic. If students have the required extra college credits upon graduation, they are awarded an Associate of Art degree in Foreign Language.

The project, embedded in a 2011 intensive basic Chinese training program, involved a cohort of eighteen students taught collaboratively by a teaching team. The teacher-student ratio is approximately one to three. None of the eighteen students had any prior background in Chinese. Of the eighteen students, one had a master's degree, two had bachelor's degrees, two had an Associate of Arts degree, and twelve students had GEDs. Sixty-two percent of the students did not have any prior experience in autonomous learning.

At the beginning of the second semester (about the 34th week of instruction), instructional content was focused on the transition from simplified reading texts to authentic texts and created overwhelming challenges for students attempting to comprehend the complex linguistic properties of authentic texts. During this period, the teaching team came to appreciate the importance of self-directed learning after more than thirty weeks of teacher-centered instruction that left many students passive, exhausted, and unmotivated learners.

The team required students to independently write four portfolios of authentic Chinese online news texts to develop students' self-study skills. The study adopted the portfolio format presented by Lo (2010) as a template. Each portfolio consisted of the original text of the news article, its source, a student-made vocabulary list complete with Chinese characters, sound transcription, and corresponding English meanings, the main idea of the article with at least three details about it, and the English translation of two long sentences.

Research Methodology

The study utilized focus group interviews, ideally suited for exploring the beliefs and behaviors of individuals involved in a study (Rabiee, 2004), to illuminate students' thoughts on engaging in an SDL project. Focus group interviews are particularly beneficial for identifying agreement across a group and eliciting suggestions for course improvement. Compared with other types of qualitative interviews, focus group interviews are economical and efficient as they allow researcher to collect data from multiple individuals simultaneously. Furthermore, focus group creates a social environment in which participants can interact with each other to generate richer and more spontaneous answers (Krueger, 2000).

In this study, focus group interviews were conducted with thirteen students divided into four groups. Participants were purposively selected so that individuals with similar characteristics would feel comfortable talking to each other (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). The researcher initially selected thirteen students on the bases of their academic achievement levels as well as availabilities for interviews which were conducted in afterschool hours. Specifically, three top-performing students were selected for one group, six second-tier students for two groups, and four weak students for one group. The homogeneity of each group allowed the researcher to identify patterns among students of similar achievement levels. During the interviews, the researcher ensured all participants had an opportunity to respond to questions as well as to engage in spontaneous exchange. After analyzing data, the researcher decided not to interview the remaining five students as theoretical saturation was deemed to be achieved.

The researcher utilized pre-written questions as the interview protocol and tape-recorded the interviews, which, on average, lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. Major interview questions included: (1) Using specific examples, how does this project improve your language proficiency and independent learning skills? (2) How do you view teacher feedback in this project? (3) What can teachers do to improve feedback?

The interview transcripts were analyzed in accordance with the principles of inductive research and constant comparative analysis outlined by Glaser & Strauss (1967). The researcher used Weft QDA, a qualitative data analysis software application to manipulate and experiment with interview texts and to electronically link emergent categories with chunks of supporting texts, for the analysis and development of categories. In addition, it allowed the researcher to progressively and inductively develop categories and conceptual constructs. The researcher first coded the transcripts line-by-line and established preliminary categories to represent each incident collected from the raw data. Using the category tree feature in Weft QDA, the researcher then constantly compared the preliminary

categories to identify the patterns and relationships and developed more abstract categories related to the research questions. Finally, eight participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of developed categories, further enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to describe how students of Chinese as a second language viewed the benefits of engaging in self-directed learning, how they viewed the role of teachers within the SDL format, and what possible factors accounted for variances in SDL performances. It must be noted that the findings are bound by the unique instructional and institutional contexts of this study and are therefore not intended for making generalized claims about other programs.

Benefits of SDL
Participants derived several benefits through participation in this project, including an exposure to news texts, an improvement in meta-cognitive ability, higher motivation, and improved SDL abilities. First, the project afforded all participants a rare opportunity to familiarize themselves with the structure and linguistic properties of news articles in Chinese. One top student commented, "I felt that I have learned the approach to reading news. In the past, reading news was not easy because its structure is unfamiliar to me." Another student commented, "Before this project, I never had an interest in news. It forces me out of my shell and put me into the mode of seeing what kind of news is out there." One weak student said, "For me, I really do not follow news regularly. It was just a good start for me to get into the habit of just being introduced to the news."

Second, seven students developed meta-cognitive skills such as the ability to prioritize tasks, independently locate resources, read strategically, and critically self-appraise. For instance, one top student reported that the project enabled him to prioritize learning tasks:

> I think this type of exercise helps these students by going through something they could do at home. They have to determine what is important and what is not important. Then, doing it in Chinese could help them figure out these series of words, this kind of grammar, characters are important.

Students also developed appropriate reading strategies through trial and error. One top student reflected on the change in course strategy as the project progressed:

> Generally, when I am studying news now, I am picking out the important data rather than trying to understand the whole things at first; I will skim to find the time, who is it about, what is it about, why it happened. Just important information, then I go back and look for details that might also be important. What I did in the beginning of the project was totally different.

Instead of reading word by word, three students developed sophisticated reading strategies, one top student shared:

> For me, I read the news article, and then I ask myself, "Hey, what happened?" And I pick out the sentence or maybe the paragraph of what generally happened. It

usually comes at the beginning, and then I go on to the details. I ask myself what happened and then I try to find answers.

In making vocabulary lists, several students intentionally selected words that they could not understand from the context of the articles as well as words they judged to be important. One student said, "For me, if a word or several words can answer questions like whom, where, what, I would include it as important vocabulary." Another student chose words based on frequency by "picking out the recurring vocabulary you need to be able to understand the passage. And just the words I think I would be using in the future a lot."

Likewise, two top students chose news topics based on a critical self-appraisal of their language proficiency as well as the importance of the news. One student commented, "I chose passages about things, like aspects I am weak in. If I am weak at political vocabulary, I chose politics. If I am weak at natural disaster vocabulary, then I chose that." Another student said, "I chose, based on importance, if it is a big thing in the news, then I go to Voice of America (VOA) and I find the news article in Chinese."

Three students learned to formulate realistic goals consistent with their emergent language levels and to live with what they did not know. One students said, "Mainly I just read through, just deal with it, like, hey, I am not getting most of this, but I got down the important part, and I go back and try to figure out what I didn't know."

Third, the immersion in self-directed learning enhanced students' motivation and sense of personal accomplishment. One student commented, "Especially after I finished the first one, I saw how helpful it is. It motivated me to work hard to follow news. It encouraged me to read more news on my own." Another student appreciated the freedom of choice offered in this project: "I think it is motivating whenever you have a free choice. Like you say, go find an article and do it. Any student would say, 'Ah, I could do whatever I want.'"

Finally, a majority of students reported enhanced SDL competencies by virtue of participating in the project. One student reflected:

I didn't have to study at high school. And in college, a little bit. I think, being here, not only you have to study a lot, but you have to learn how to study effectively, And you need to continuously reassess how you need to study. So I feel this project taught me how to study and to look at how I am studying.

Another student reflected on the process of learning how to study news independently:

As we started, it was our first time reading news. As you move along, you have a better feel how self-study should go, and you can make this faster by knowing exactly what to look for. You can get, like, "OK, I know what this means, and this would be from there." You can do this quickly; you can skim and find words you don't know and write them down. Speed-wise, understanding [the] article takes the same amount of time, but being able to do self-studying, the time goes faster because you know exactly what to do.

Eight students continued to study the news in Chinese after the completion of the project, demonstrating their acceptance of the value and utility of SDL in learning a foreign language. In a similar vein, a majority of the students preferred the assignments for this project to

traditional, cookie-cutter homework; they recognized the value of autonomy and free choice in homework assignments. One student shared:

> I just want to stress how it (this project) is good, useful homework. I think it is just easy to fall into track of assigning mechanical, useless homework. This project, although it requires more work on the teachers' part, it is something that definitely needs to be continued because it is effective.

Role of Teachers
Due to a heavy teaching load, the researcher, in his dual role as the teacher of this project, was only able to provide generic feedback to the students. The researcher reviewed each portfolio and corrected errors in the vocabulary list, in sentence translations, and in presentations of the main idea and details of the articles. In addition, the researcher checked for topic variety in each submitted portfolio and provided links to Chinese news websites. Apparently, some students viewed feedback as insufficient and confusing. Most students have high expectations of one-on-one feedback with teachers, thereby reaffirming the recognition of the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge. Only a few students appreciated their independence from teachers' guidance.

First, an overwhelming majority of the students, regardless of their respective language levels, valued one-on-one review with teachers as the most effective form of feedback. For example, some students believed that teachers could correct mistakes in front of the whole class. One top student said:

> Teacher can dedicate one or two class hours, so a student can get 10 or 15 minutes alone with the teacher, so that way, any part that the teacher circles when he evaluates it, or the student remembers from the passage because it is still fresh on his mind, any part he is struggling with, any question he has, he can go over with the teacher.

Likewise, one weak student indicated a heavy reliance on teachers for the understanding of news passages. He commented:

> For me, the best way to learn is going over sentence by sentence and translating. So, in an ideal situation, [with teachers] just going through the sentence and translating into English, teacher then says you are right, or you are wrong, this is the way it should be translated. So this is the easiest way for me to learn it.

However, four students preferred a form of feedback that was less teacher-dependent. In stark contrast to the preference for mechanical, sentence-by-sentence translation, one top student appreciated the opportunity to report news to the teacher: "If we had our articles, then teachers could ask us to report the news in our own words. This way teachers can check whether the student truly understands this passage or not." Two students expressed an interest in presenting news to the whole class. One said, "Most people are nervous when speaking in front of other people, but they need to speak in front of many people, so this could be a good exercise."

Second, students wanted more straightforward feedback. One student expressed her frustration about the lack of individualized feedback when she said:

> I just remember, like, the second portfolio we got back, it was just check mark on it. It was like, he (the teacher) didn't read it, there was just no feedback from it. So, I want to know what I did wrong, what I need to improve on.

Another student questioned the lack of clear guidelines presented at the beginning of the project:

> I think either having more time, or maybe, like, make it clear what the main idea should include. If I know it from the beginning, earlier I would know better what to pay attention to when I am reading. Like, can I say in one Chinese sentence what is this article about?

While a majority of the students showed a heavy reliance on teacher feedback, evidence also existed of inchoate student independence. For example, one top student recognized the value of personal agency:

> I mean, for vocabulary, there is really nothing teachers can do. For super long sentences, you have to put them all together, so I think really there is nothing teachers can do except, like, here is the vocabulary, and here is the article, study this. I really don't think there is much that teachers can do because it pretty much is the self-study thing. If the students are motivated, they will self-study. He is not motivated; he is not going to be committed.

Contributing Factors of Variance in SDL

A review of portfolios reveals students exhibited significant variances in SDL competencies and performances. Completing the project on time constituted the primary goal for weak students, as their portfolios were often written in a cursory manner, whereas seven more advanced students produced detailed analyses of news texts, indicating a strong commitment to self-directed learning. In this study, a number of factors were found to account for the variances in student performance including prior self-study experience, personal agency, and individual learning style.

First, having prior exposure to self-study was positively linked with SDL competencies. Most of the participants with advanced SDL competencies had prior self-study experience at the college or graduate school level. For example, one student believed that writing graduate school research papers laid a foundation for this project. He was accustomed to "doing research on my own. A lot of times, professors just canceled classes and said, 'this is the chapter we did,' and you need to go over it on your own." Another student, who did not have prior college experience, took initiative and studied news independently before the start of this project. He said:

> I am impartial (toward the usefulness of the project). Before the project, I was already studying articles like this. I would look them up, try to get new vocabulary from them. So I was doing the same thing, but haven't written and turned it in.

The common attribute of students with limited SDL competencies was lack of prior self-study experience; this lack reduced effective performance in the project. For example, one student doubted the usefulness of the project: "At the beginning, when we first started, I didn't see the whole purpose of doing it. It was hard and stressful at the moment. Because of that, I didn't obtain a whole lot at that time."

Second, a student's perception of self-efficacy appears to be intimately linked with actual SDL performance. Students who excelled at SDL possessed some common traits such as self-confidence, a willingness to take risks, a drive to attain goals, and a strong intellectual curiosity. One student with a master's degree shared his confidence:

> As I got older and was doing more and more of this kind of activity, at some point, I realized that I was able to find what is important. It may not be the same with what somebody else may think of as important as long as I could support my idea. It was OK.

Moreover, students with advanced SDL skills often deliberately challenged themselves in the selection of topics and the difficulty of chosen news passages. One student said, "Usually, I chose topics that I am weakest at. For example, articles on the economy." Another student appreciated the opportunity to read and analyze authentic news articles:

> I feel like it is useful if you put work into it. Like some people, even myself, I could just copy and paste and go over it really quickly, and on other ones where actually I have time to do it, if I really look into it, I learn more.

In contrast, students who perceived themselves as ineffectual language learners often found it stressful to engage in SDL, at least in the initial stage. For example, one student shared his lack of readiness at the start of the project:
> I thought it was a little difficult because, at that time, we did not have enough vocabulary really to even get the gist of that paragraph and a lot of news. So that would be the only problem I could see with it—maybe we could do it a little later.

As a result, these students usually played it safe by selecting short passages and topics they were comfortable with. In addition, they reported few initial benefits from the project.

Third, it appeared that the learning style of each participant, to a certain degree, affected his or her SDL performance. A review of each participant's learning style vis-à-vis the quality of submitted portfolios, although restricted by the small sample size as well as by the unique contexts of the project, indicated that successful SDL learners possessed certain common characteristics of learning styles. Out of the seven participants demonstrating high SDL competencies, five of the students were reflective (in that they preferred to think about information before applying it), intuitive (in that they frequently discovered possibilities and relationships), visual (in that they preferred to receive information by reading and writing), and global (in that they preferred to receive information top-down). However, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the relationships of these learning styles to SDL have not been empirically tested, and the possible roles of other learning styles (e.g., active, sensing, sequential) in facilitating SDL competencies cannot be excluded.

Discussions

This study is intended to analyze how CSL (Chinese as a Second Language) students perceived both the benefits of engaging in an SDL project and the role of teachers within the SDL framework as well as factors contributing to variances in student SDL performance. Although bounded by the unique instructional and institutional contexts of the project, the

findings of this study expanded current SDL literature on foreign language learning in several important ways.

First, students who participated in this project benefited in areas of content knowledge, cognition, motivation, and SDL competencies. Thus, this study confirmed and expanded upon the benefits reported in previous studies (Lo, 2010; Meeus et al., 2008; Patterson, Crooks, & Lunyk-Child, 2002). In a meta-analysis of effectiveness of SDL in the education of health workers, Murad et al. (2010) concluded that, in comparison with traditional teaching methods, SDL was more effective in improving students' knowledge base and might be as effective in improving the skills and attitudes. Similarly, all students who took part in this project reported improvements in knowledge domain; for example, they claimed to have an increased understanding of the linguistic properties of authentic news texts as well as an increased vocabulary. While a majority of the students reported an increase in SDL competencies, a few students reported increased intrinsic motivation resulting from a sense of personal accomplishment. These findings validated the utility of SDL in foreign language teaching where learning outcomes primarily fall into the knowledge domain. SDL was also found to improve the affective domain of foreign language learning by cultivating language appreciation, enthusiasm, motivation, and positive attitudes.

In a similar SDL portfolio project for English as a Second Language students, Lo (2010) reported a number of main meta-cognitive benefits for students, including awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses and improvement in critical thinking skills. In the same vein, a few students in the present study developed a range of meta-cognitive skills, such as the ability to prioritize learning tasks, locate resources independently, develop suitable reading strategies (e.g., skimming and scanning), synthesize, and self-appraise critically. These benefits cover five of the six levels of Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive domains (knowledge, comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) with the exception of the domain "application". In this study, all students improved in the domains of knowledge, comprehension, and analysis. A couple of students also demonstrated improvement in synthesis and evaluation. Given the short duration of the project and students' lack of prior SDL experience, these results confirmed the idea that the application of SDL in foreign language classes holds a promising potential to increase cognition.

Second, the findings of this study raised important issues with regard to the roles of the teacher and the learning structure in SDL. In particular, participants had high expectations of one-on-one feedback with the teacher, considering it critical for evaluating learning outcomes.   This viewpoint indicated a strong recognition of the teacher as the primary transmitter of knowledge. In part, this perception could be a byproduct of the structured learning assignments adopted within the unique contexts of this project, which juxtaposed SDL and traditional teaching methods. The students' lack of prior SDL experience may also have triggered these feedback expectations. Cranton (1992) argued that teaching methods must be matched to the learner's stage of direction. Wilcox (1996) suggested that instructors could provide more structure in the beginning of a program and gradually give students more control in the design of learning tasks as the course progresses. As such, a structured learning environment is best suited to students with low-to-average SDL readiness levels (Dynan, Cate, & Rhee, 2010). Lo (2010) advised that instructors may need to alternate between the roles of decision maker and facilitator depending upon the dynamic needs of students. Thus, the implementation of SDL is a fluid process in which the faculty must have the ability and disposition to diagnose teaching contexts, model learning skills, and engage in multiple teaching tasks that could even be contradictory in nature.

One of the most compelling reasons for the use of the portfolio lies in its potential for developing cognitive and critical thinking skill (Lo, 2010). The present study did not explicitly include components of reflection and self-appraisal in the portfolio; however, a few students demonstrated signs of emergent higher-order thinking. Lo (2010) recommended that teachers design meaningful tasks to encourage higher-order thinking. For example, in this project, the teacher could require students to present portfolios to the class or explicitly include components that obliged students to reflect on the learning process and to rate their performances，as suggested by Ryan (1993). Due to time constraints, the project did not include a period of orientation that would have allowed student to acclimate to the unique demands and study techniques of SDL. This lack created confusion and ambiguity for students. Taylor and Burgess (1995) outlined four areas of orientation for SDL programs intended to inform students of teachers' expectations of SDL, the role of the facilitators, the goal of group learning, and the level of time management expected. According to Bown (2009), orientations could address a series of challenges learners are likely to face. In particular, such an orientation should pertain to the affective challenges resulting from the loneliness that can occur during the process of independent study.

Thirdly, this study contributed significantly to the current SDL knowledge base with the discovery of several student variables that bear on SDL performance. Findings suggested that both prior SDL experience and self-efficacy affected students' initial comfort with SDL as well as the scope and depth of learning activities that ensued. Generally speaking, a student with prior independent learning experience who happened to be a proactive risk taker was more disposed to succeed with SDL, lending support to the assertion that effective self-regulators demonstrate an awareness of their role as agents and exercise agency by actively shaping their learning environment (Bown, 2009). Self-efficacy is defined as a fluid and context-specific assessment of one's competence to perform a specific task (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1986) further argued that self-efficacy primarily comes from authentic mastery of experience and from observing others. As a result, teachers can ensure that SDL is an authentic, social, and positive task for students. In addition to addressing the procedural aspects of learning, teachers should be aware of the need to manage students' emotional responses to SDL.

This study shed light on the under-explored link between learning styles and SDL performance. Notwithstanding the small sample size, successful learners shared the common features of being reflective, intuitive, visual, and global. Kreber (1998) investigated the link between psychological types and the efficacy of SDL in a Canadian university. In addition to the importance of reflection reported in my study, Kreber (1998) found extraverted intuition to be a strong indicator of SDL competency. Furthermore, he suggested that faculty could develop lifelong learning skills by providing students with opportunities to develop both intuition and logical reasoning. The investigation of the untested link between learning styles and SDL might help faculty members gain a clear understanding of how they can account for individual differences when designing learning tasks.

Implications for Teaching and Research

The present study on SDL was conducted within the contexts of a traditional teacher-centered foreign language instructional program. Therefore, the findings were not intended

to be generalizable across other teaching contexts. However, the findings of the present study raised a number of pedagogical implications for faculty interested in initiating instructional programs grounded in the conceptual framework of SDL within contexts akin to the present study.   First, data from the present study revealed that a lack of orientation period constrained the students' understandings and expectations about the course objectives and teacher feedback.   As such, faculty should consider the inclusion of orientations and pre-SDL diagnoses of student competencies as critical components of a SDL program. During the orientation, teachers should clearly communicate to students the goals, learning activities, assessment criteria, schedule, available resources, and teacher roles in the program. Moreover, students should have opportunities to get to know each other if group learning is involved. Teachers can gauge students' affective attitudes toward SDL to determine their initial comfort levels with the format. Meanwhile, teachers can use a number of validated instruments, such as the Self-Direct Learning Readiness Scale, to measure critical variables affecting SDL success, which include student readiness, learning styles, and psychology types. The collected information will assist teachers in determining the initial degree to which they should structure the program in accordance with SDL and design learning tasks that incorporate differences in learning styles.

Second, a successful SDL program demands a close alignment between contextual variables and specific learning tasks. Findings in the present study suggested that SDL is most effective in instructional programs that are primarily intended to transmit knowledge. The present study also indicated the need for more structured learning tasks to bridge the gap with traditional teacher-centered programs. Structured tasks were also beneficial for the majority of the students who had little or no prior SDL experience and thus were less inclined to take complete control of their learning. The present study also suggested that students are heavily reliant on one-on-one, individualized feedback from the teacher as a means of critical assessment. SDL is not an instructional design that fits all learning situations (Black & Henig, 2005). Thus, before designing SDL programs, instructors should consider key contextual conditions, such as the rationale for adopting SDL, students' prior experiences and readiness levels, and the teacher's skill, attitude, and commitment to SDL.

Third, future SDL programs can be enhanced by the inclusion of more collaborative SDL projects in which peer learning and collaboration are considered to be key components. Bown (2009) stated that social learning could contribute to the success of SDL because peer collaboration alleviates the sense of isolation inherent in individual learning. Furthermore, institutional policies could be changed to support the unique demands of SDL programs. In particular, policies should adjust the traditional emphasis placed on grading and adherence to pre-written syllabi to align with SDL features that allow students to control learning tasks and peer evaluations.

The findings of this study suggested several areas of future research pertaining to the application of SDL. Given student self-efficacy was found to contribute to individual differences in SDL performances, a new line of inquiry could center on the design, implementation, and effectiveness of instructional activities aimed at cultivating self-efficacy for SDL students. Future research could reveal teacher-student interaction variables (e.g., setting challenging yet attainable goals) specific to SDL that could improve students' affective attitudes.   Longitudinal studies, such as ethnography, could be undertaken to explore the trajectory of student self-efficacy development stemming from targeted teacher interventions.   Additionally, researchers could shed light on ways to design activities promoting meta-cognitive and critical thinking skills, which, by all accounts, are critical

attributes of SDL (Lo, 2010). Specifically, future research could illuminate how teachers can design comprehensive components of assessment criteria while taking into account self-evaluation, accomplishment of course objectives, teacher and peer evaluation, and improvement of SDL competencies. Finally, given the fact that the present study focused on improving comprehension of foreign language texts, future research could determine the effectiveness of SDL within a variety of foreign language teaching contexts. Such contexts include listening comprehension, cultural studies, and the potential for Web 2.0 tools as mediums for autonomous learning.

Summary

Building on the extant body of research on self-directed learning, this paper studied the perspectives of CSL students engaged in an SDL project that focused on reading authentic news texts. The findings confirmed the utility of SDL as a potent learning strategy for students of foreign languages because this format could lead to improvements in knowledge domain (e.g., understanding of vocabulary and news structure), meta-cognitive skills, and motivation. To expand upon this study, future research might attend to the little-explored links between student variables and discrepancies in SDL performance. Finally, the facilitation of SDL entails a set of paradigm shifts for the instructor that touches on issues such as the provision of resources, assessment, the shift between the roles of knowledge transmitter and facilitator, and the management of students' affective attitudes, among other things.

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