

Abstract

Any learner who has been successful in attaining command of a foreign language such as English cannot help acknowledging the important role independent learning plays in acquiring the language. However, many language learners do encounter a number of difficulties in their independent learning of English and therefore fail to be efficient learners. What, then, are common difficulties learners often face in their independent learning and why do these occur? How can the establishment of a self-access center facilitate the learner's independent learning in helping them overcome some of these difficulties? This study attempts to seek answers to these questions.

A number of studies have been conducted in the area of problems that second and/or foreign language learners encounter in their independent learning. This study is concerned with the difficulties as perceived by 86 second year students in learning English as a foreign language at the Institute for International Relations (IIR), Hanoi, Vietnam.

Among the 86 Second Year university students, 15 of them, comprising five high level students, five medium level and five low level students, were selected for semi-structured interviews. The interviews centered on the difficulties that the students encountered in their independent learning, their perceptions about the possible sources of these difficulties, and the kind of materials that they found most useful for their learning.

The 86 students were then asked to respond to a questionnaire, wherein the questions centered on their experience of independent learning of English, some of the specific

difficulties that they faced in their independent learning, the possible sources of these difficulties, their preferences of materials for their learning and their perceptions about the factors that they believed would facilitate their independent learning.

The results of this study shows that in independent learning, second year students often encounter many difficulties, including those concerning language learning strategies, organization of materials, goal-setting, self-monitoring, concentration and time management. The study indicates that these difficulties derive mainly from the students' over-dependence on their teacher which in turn has led to the lack of development of the necessary meta-cognitive knowledge to organize their own learning, as well as confidence and motivation to pursue their own English studies. Besides these sources, the constraints of time available for learning and unfavorable learning conditions were also revealed as the factors that contributed to making learning difficult.

The study also indicates that authentic materials are those that are most favoured by the students in their independent English studies. At the same time, the study suggests that support from the teacher in encouraging students to learn independently, by means of learner training strategies and the provision of references for appropriate self-study materials, can help facilitate their learning. The study also provides suggestions for the establishment of an effective self-access center at the IIR that can promote the students' independent learning. The suggestions focus on training learners to be more independent in learning and the collection and design of self-access materials for the center.