

Arriving at a Model for Self-access Materials Incorporating Features of Learner Autonomy, Self-directed Learning and Individualized Instruction

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Abstract

Self-access, autonomous learning, self-direction and individualised instruction are some of the closely related terms that are found in abundance in the literature of learner autonomy and self access. As an extension of our earlier work on self-directed learning and autonomous learning which attempted to establish the differences between these terms, this article aims at extracting the essence of self-access as a model of instruction, which can be used a framework for instructional materials.

Keywords: Individualised Instruction, Learner Autonomy, Self-access, Self-direction, Self-directed learning

1. Introduction

Researchers working in these areas have identified two characteristic features of self-access instruction, namely individualised instruction and self-directed learning, which evolved over a period of time. Self-instructional materials enable learning without the direct presence of a teacher and have been in use for a long time. Programmed texts are classic examples of these kinds of materials, followed by e-learning materials which emerged with the development of technology. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 highlight the chief features of self access learning, self-instructional materials, learner autonomy and self-directed learning, as gleaned from the literature review. These terms, despite bearing close relationships have difference nuances of interpretations. The inputs from literature form the basis for the self access model developed in this article.

1.1 Self-instructional Materials and Self-access Materials

Sheerin brings out the difference between self-access materials and Programmed Learning or “Teach yourself” kind of courses, as depending “... on the role of the learner and the degree to which he involves himself in the decisions which affect his learning.... (An Exploration 1997)”. The relationship between self-access and self-direction is brought out by Dickinson:

If self-access is attempted with learners who are not self-directed then either it does not work or the materials need to be designed so that many of the management tasks undertaken by the teacher are built into the materials. Many programmed learning materials are of this kind, and one interpretation of individualized instruction assumes materials in which a teacher is hidden (Self-Access 1991:150).

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Self-instructional materials serve learners' needs either within a formal curriculum or outside the same and share the following features: 1. Do not require the presence of a teacher, 2. Are mostly self-explanatory and 3. Allow the learners to work at their own pace and time. Programmed learning materials are a typical example of self-instructional materials, where the learning content is offered in a sequence of small steps to be mastered in a linear, lockstep fashion. When learners are exposed to minimal content at one point in time, the feedback or reinforcement provided by these materials is also immediate. Though learners can enjoy the advantage of setting their own pace and schedule of learning, they cannot go back to a particular frame, which they are considered to have mastered, thus locking their steps and pre-empting recursive activity. Some of the features of these materials were later extended to e-learning materials, distance learning and open learning materials. E-learning materials are advanced versions of teaching machines and programmed learning materials, enhanced by technology. As more advanced versions of programmed learning materials, these materials also offer immense scope for interactivity, accentuated by the features of multimedia and hypermedia. The easy readable style clothed in colloquial language, bearing close resemblance to "tutorials in print "conversation" (Rowntree) marks the characteristics of e-learning, distance learning and open learning materials

1.2 Self-Access Learner Autonomy and Self Direction

It is with the advent of communicative approach to language teaching that the focus moved from the teacher to the learner and terms such as autonomy and self-direction gained further momentum. The classical working definition of self-access is provided by Susan Sheerin as "...a way of describing learning materials that are designed and organised in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own (although this does not preclude the possibility of some form of support) and obtain feedback on their performance..." (Self-Access 143). Nevertheless, Sheerin cautions that although self-access was born out of the need for a learner-centred approach to learning, it cannot be treated as being synonymous with "learner autonomy" or "learner independence". Other than Sheerin, several experts have also studied the concept of self-access and identified some of the characteristic features of self-access and strongly related it to concepts like self-direction, individualisation, autonomy, learner responsibility and so on.

- Self-access is a learner-centred and flexible approach that can complement traditional instruction and is useful in situations where a learner's needs are hard to meet in a classroom setting (Rong Liu, 88).
- Enabling the learners to make their own choices allows for autonomous learning (Guy Aston, 219).

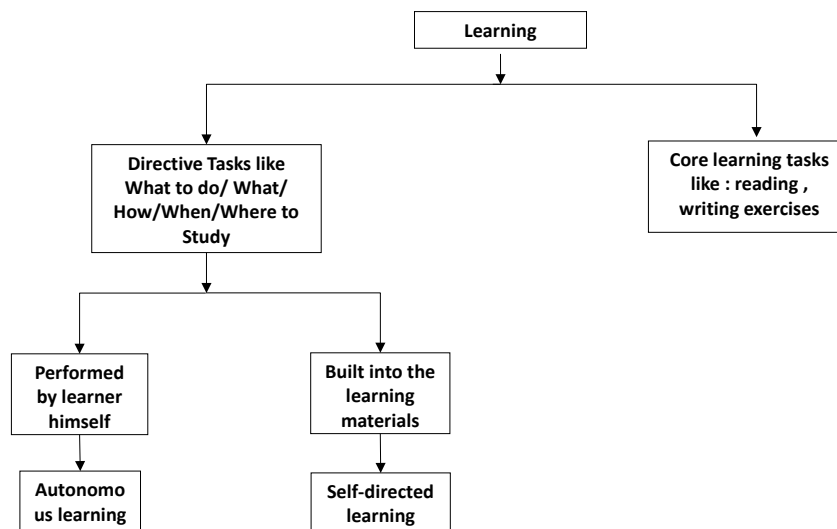


Figure 1. Self-directed learning.

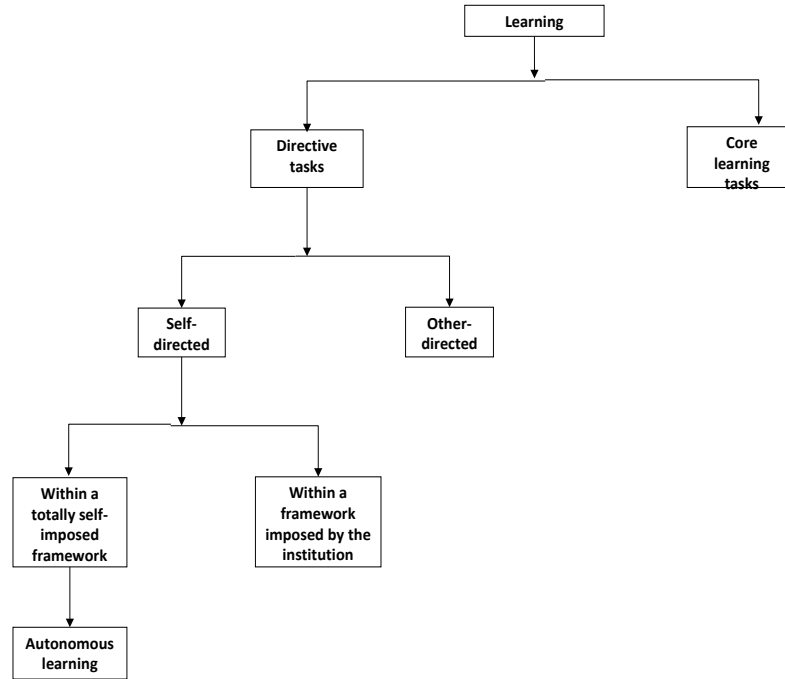


Figure 2. Autonomous learning.

Jeremy F. Jones challenges the idea that individual autonomy is a necessary goal in self-access and looks upon it as being in a more valid position to promote learner-centred philosophy (228). To Phil Benson, self access “simply described something that students did either of their own free will or because their teachers told them to do” and autonomy “described a particular way of doing it, which involved both the development of certain skills and attitudes and a willingness to develop them...”(4) Considering these definitions, it follows that autonomy cannot be limited to be just yet another goal in the journey of self access – rather, it takes on a more important role, i.e. becomes an essential goal. This is because students are required to demonstrate a certain degree of autonomy, however minimal, to cross at least a few milestones in the journey of self-access. In Leslie Dickinson’s view, “Self-access is a term which is primarily concerned with selection, organisation and preparation of learning materials so that they can be used without the mediation of the teacher. Clearly, self-access can go hand in hand with self-direction and autonomy, the organization of materials on a self-access basis facilitates self-directed learning” (Self-directed Learning 8). The differences

between autonomous learning and self-directed learning was summarised in our earlier article and the relationship between autonomy and self-direction were schematised by us through the following two figures in an earlier work.

(Recreated from earlier article published in *The English Classroom*, Kalpana and Sankarakumar p37).

Though autonomous learning includes self-direction, self-direction by itself does not imply complete autonomy and the figure below gives the relation between autonomy and self-direction.

(Recreated from earlier article published in *The English Classroom*, Kalpana and Sankarakumar, p 39).

Learners using the materials in a self-access system access them in particular ways to suit their individual learning needs and therefore is looked upon by Sheerin “as a means of promoting learner autonomy” (qtd. in Gardner and Miller 8). A typical self-access system described by McCafferty has spoken and written text materials at varying levels right at the core, wherein the learners proceed along various learning pathways leading them to the necessary support materials, explanatory language materials and so on. This system is organised in such a manner that the customary barriers to learning, namely time, duration,

pace and the pressure to toe the lockstep is removed. Self-access is closely related to independent learning and self-direction as put forth by Sheerin, who thinks that self-access can be viewed “...as the logical development and physical manifestation of individualisation on the one hand and as a means of promoting learner autonomy and self-directed learning on the other, but the two need not necessarily go hand in hand...” (Self-Access 144). She also brings out the primary difference between “self-access” and “independent learning” as follows: The former refers to “learning materials and organizational systems” and the latter refers to “an educational philosophy and process” (An Exploration 54).

3. Self-Access

The earlier sections revealed the underlying consistency and common threads in definitions, despite the terminological variations. The authors have adopted a model, based on the following theory outlined by Sheerin: “Self-access can be seen as the logical development of and physical manifestation of individualisation on the one hand and as a means of promoting learner autonomy and self-directed learning on the other...” (144). The framework is close to the one put forth by Dickinson:

- “The term self-instruction... is a general cover term to make broad reference to situations in which learners are working without the direct control of a teacher” (Self-Instruction 8).
- Self-instruction releases learners from the need to work at the same rate and to break the “lockstep”. It makes provisions for differences among learners in terms of language learning

aptitudes and cognitive styles and strategies (Self-instruction 18-20).

- Self-direction refers to a “particular attitude towards learning whereby the learner accepts responsibility for all the decisions concerned with his learning but does not necessarily undertake the implementation of these decisions” (Self-Instruction 11).

The following conclusions derived from the literature survey of terms and definitions form the basis for the model developed in this study:

- Self-access includes individualised instruction and self-direction. The former allows learners to meet their individual learning needs and set their own pace for learning. The latter refers to an attitude to learning in which the learners accept responsibility for their learning and learning-related decisions. Still, the responsibility of implementing these decisions need not necessarily rest with the learners.
- Individualised instruction offers learners a choice of learning pathways within which they meet their individual learning needs. Since exploration of content by learners happens based on their schemata, cognitive abilities and learner strategies, in order to progress, they should be freed from the lockstep rhythm of a classroom.
- Self-direction is an essential component of autonomy, but is not the same as autonomy. Learners cannot be autonomous without being self-directed, but they can be self-directed without being fully autonomous. Self-direction further requires that the learners decide which pathways

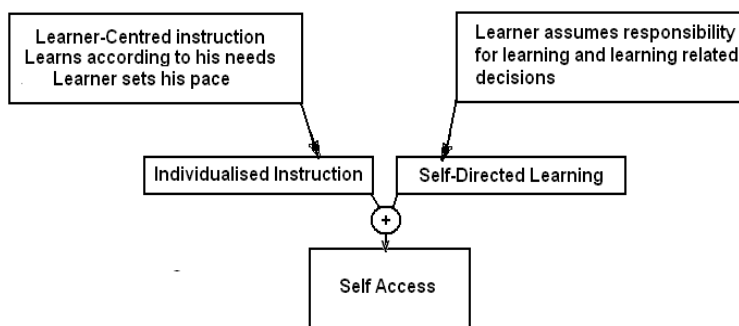


Figure 3. Self-access.

are best suited for them, which implies a certain degree of autonomy in itself.

- Learning with self-access materials cannot be said to indicate or even imply completely autonomous learning. The learners are offered a wide range of options but these options are limited by the materials themselves. Thus they are deprived of absolute independence or autonomy and are free to implement their learning decisions within the bounds imposed by these materials
- Based on the points discussed, the following model has been developed that incorporates the features of both in Figure 3 given below:

4. Conclusion

The model of self-access materials, developed in this study have the functional similarities with the dynamics of information-access in self-access centres, which incorporated learning resources such as index cards, location signs and cross-referencing facilities and the materials themselves played a more passive role as stores of information. The highlight of this model is the fact that the functionality of information-access can be incorporated into the materials, making them more self-contained and feasible for use directly in a classroom, thus dispensing with the need for any additional infrastructure or external sources of support. These materials can embody the spirit of self-access, namely individualised instruction and self-direction depending on the creativity of the teacher or the materials designer.

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