Establishing Self –Access with WALL in Chinese Tertiary Education

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Abstract

Self-access language learning (SALL) and web-assisted language learning (WALL) have been attracting increasing attention from teachers, students and institutions in Chinese tertiary education. However, there are wide gaps between theoretical perspectives of SALL and empirical study of WALL. This paper tries to bridge the gaps and explore the merits of WALL by presenting references to relevant literature and research and reporting a two-semester experiment on integrating WALL in teaching intensive reading at graduate level in BIT. The results show that compared with a teacher-dominated approach, SALL can be promoted with WALL in enhancing students' productive skills, satisfying their individual needs, arousing their interest in learning English and motivating their autonomous learning.

Key words: autonomous learning, self-access, tertiary education and WALL

1. Theoretical perspectives: general beliefs and issues

The international interest in self-access language learning (SALL) and autonomous learning has manifested itself in a proliferation of papers, books and conference presentations. There have been a number of key papers in leading language and linguistics journals dealing with SALL and learner autonomy (Sheerin 1991; Dickinson and Wenden 1995; Gardner 1996). Several books have been written in this field (Dickinson 1987; Little 1989, 1991; Gardner 1996; Dam 1995).

In China more and more linguists and teachers have been involved in the discussion and incorporation of SALL as components in English language teaching (ELT), however there has been a little empirical research at graduate level. Therefore there is room for extensive study from different points of view to provide an overview of issues concerning the related areas.

1.1 General beliefs of what SALL means

To talk about SALL, we should begin with referring to the different ideas about learner autonomy, which is truly difficult to define and is an area of ongoing debate. The concept of autonomous learning stemmed from debates about the development of life-long learning skills and the development of independent thinkers in the 1960s. By 1981 Holec (1981) defined it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” and developed the definition further in 1985 by talking about autonomy as a conceptual tool. Dickinson (1987) accepted the definition of autonomy as “a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions.” Other definitions of autonomy have run into three major schools of ideas with some seeing it as “personal practice” (Little, 1990), some seeing it as a political concept (Benson, 1997) and others seeing it as “a definition of educational practice” (Boud, 1988). In addition, Dam (1995) characterized learner autonomy as “a readiness to take charge of one’s own learning”.

Approaches which assist learners to move from teacher-directed learning towards autonomy are described in a number of terms, the most common are: self-directed learning,
self-instruction, independent learning and self-access learning. Although there are differences between them, more similarities exist in that each of these approaches encourages learners to set and pursue their personal language goals. Self-access is probably the most widely used and recognized term for an approach to encourage learner autonomy and “a means of promoting learner autonomy” (Sheerin, 1991). It is for this reason that we use the term self-access throughout this paper.

1.2 Elements of SALL

Self-access language learning is an approach to learning a language instead of an approach to teaching a language. There are misconceptions in the literature about SALL. It is sometimes seen as a collection of materials and sometimes as a system for organizing resources. However, Gardner and Miller see it as an integration of a number of elements, which combine to provide a learning environment and each learner interacts with the environment in a unique way (Gardner and Miller 2002): resources, people, system, individualization, needs analysis, counseling, learning training, assessment, evaluation, materials development, staff training and learner training.

1.3 SALL environments

Gardner and Miller (2002) claim that the environments in which self-access learning can take place fall into two categories, namely controlled and uncontrolled environments. The former includes classrooms, libraries, language labs and self-access centers. These are places where self-access materials and activities can be made available in an organized way. These environments may also provide counseling services and to some degree encourage self-access learners to keep records, submit to assessment and participate in evaluation.

The other category is characterized uncontrolled because the environments are beyond the control of teachers/counselor. These are environments where self-access learners see potential for language learning and take charge of it. Such environments generally include public environments, like student clubs and student residences, and private environment, like a learner’s own home. The best use of private environments may be when learners make use of them in combination with controlled environments, thus maintaining the integration of elements of self-access, which we see as an essential feature of SALL.

1.4 Roles of students, teachers and institutions

The introduction of self-access language learning requires major changes in the roles of learners, teachers and the institutions. Learners need to become more aware of their central role in the decision-making process. They have to learn to take an increasing amount of responsibility for their learning. They have to learn about the importance of reflection on their learning and how it can assist them.

The roles of teachers change dramatically as their learners engage in self-access learning. Teachers need to relinquish some of their control over learners, even allowing them to make mistakes. Teachers need to learn new skills to take on their new roles. Some of the new roles for teachers in SALL may look familiar however these roles have to be redefined when the new roles of learners are also taken into account (Gardner and Miller, 1997).

As learners and teacher change their roles the institutions must do so. It needs to move from a directive stance to one of being a provider of learning opportunities. These opportunities may be used by different learners in different ways and choices about how to use
them must lie with the learners and not with the institution.

1.5 Validity of SALL

The appropriateness of classroom teaching is rarely questioned. It is a time-honored approach with general approval because it is traditional. SALL does not have the same seal of approval and may be questioned by those who have not been fully aware of the significance of self-access learning or hostile to it. There is, nevertheless, some evidence that learners find SALL useful and sometime enjoyable, and our informed common sense as teachers leads us to believe that extra exposure to language is beneficial. If SALL is organized and systematic it allows maximum exposure to a wide variety of language learning opportunities. What’s more, it is highly flexible: it can be used on a large scale or a small scale; it can be conducted in a classroom, in a dedicated self-access center or elsewhere; it allows individualization but also supports groups. Besides supporting language learning, SALL can result in increased learner autonomy. It is appropriate to all levels of learners and all ages of learners. Last but not least SALL does not threaten teachers’ jobs: it creates new and important roles for teachers who remain integral part of the learning process.

2. Current needs of ELT in tertiary education in China

An agreement that has been reached among language teachers and linguists in recent years has been a dissatisfaction with the results obtained by traditional methods, often at great cost to institutions and language systems, and the expenditure of tremendous effort by learners and teachers. Learners typically spent years learning English and yet many of them were still unable to use the language effectively. Although learners were able to parrot response in predicable situations, they had difficulty communicating effectively in the relatively unpredictable world beyond the classroom.

In traditional language classrooms learners are taught about language and its rules with grammar-translation mode. The primary role of the learner is as a relatively passive recipient of knowledge. The teacher’s role is to provide that knowledge by transmitting it to the learner, largely through lockstep, teacher-fronted modes of learning. In language classroom operating within such a mode, learners practice patterns provided by teachers, textbooks, and tapes, and they spend most time copying and reproducing language written down by others. Such a drilled-based pedagogical culture is evident in most traditional English classrooms in China and leads to the increasing disability of using language actively and creatively. This is especially a serious problem for graduates who are supposed to use their target language in a more independent and critical way.

Apart from the stated weaknesses in traditional ELT, in the past few years most key universities in China have enlarged their enrollment of graduate students at the rate of 35% every year, which has given rise to a noticeable shortage of both teachers and classrooms. To cope with the resultant problems, some universities have tried large-size class teaching and some have reduced instructional hours. However, according to Cai Jigang (2000), in a large-size class, learners have fewer chances to use the target language. Besides this problem, English instruction in China tertiary education has traditionally been dominated by the teaching of grammatical rules, which has caused learners to have difficulty in writing and speaking English (Hu Long et al, 2001).

Faced with these challenges, we have gradually recognized and accepted that a new approach based on SALL to language learning and teaching is needed. We believe that learners
should be given more opportunities than before to make choices when it comes to the linguistic options available to them and the means through which they learn language because learning to make informed choices is an important skill for all learners to develop to some degree. Now it is obvious that our greatest challenge is to incorporate new approaches to English teaching and learning into existing practice. In this sense, some fundamental changes will be needed to encourage learners in developing an awareness of assuming greater and greater responsibilities for their own learning.

3. Integrating WALL in ELT to promote SALL — a survey study in BIT

3.1 Brief description of the courseware

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has served different uses in the field of language teaching and proved to be an effective tool for improving the quality of language education (Warschauer 1998, Sullivan 1993, Shen 1999, González-Lloret 2002). How to put CALL into practice has been researched in China for more than ten years (Dong Zhe, 2000; Lu Long et al, 2001; Lin Liyuan and Jia Guotong, 1998; Zhao Shuanke and Yang Hong, 1998). However, when it comes to WALL, empirical research at graduate level has barely been tackled.

When we first hit upon the idea of using WALL, we intended to provide more learning opportunities for our students. Though the five skills (writing, listening, reading, translating and speaking) are incorporated into the tasks of our courseware, the writing skill is highly emphasized with a wide variety of writing tasks throughout the six parts: before reading, global reading, detailed reading, supplementary reading, translating and writing tasks and tasks for group work. Various writing tasks entail answering comprehensive questions in the students’ own words, completing the outline of the text with key words or phrases, writing a summary of the text, paraphrasing difficult sentences, translating from Chinese into English and writing a composition. The courseware also offers supplementary reading with related tasks for those who want to have more exposure to the authentic materials and do more exercises. In addition, students are provided with three or four questions to do group discussions in their spare time. What’s worthy of mention is that all the tasks are designed with immediate feedback for students to interact with the courseware, whereby they can see some tasks with detailed explanation or several suggested answers. Above all, the courseware is put on the intranet so that students can gain access to it whenever they want to.

Concerning technical support, fortunately we have one website for non-English major graduate students in BIT with a courseware for the moment and learning system and managing system in the next term. In the learning system we can provide rich resources of learning materials and update the materials according to the learners’ needs whereas in the managing system we teachers can keep track of learners’ learning process, retrieve information about the learners’ performance and give support if necessary. As for learners using WALL, they record their performance and make timely adjustment to their learning pace and rate.

3.2 Subjects

In order to find out whether incorporating WALL into ELT can develop students’ awareness of SALL at graduate level. We conducted a two-term experiment. In the first academic term (from Sept. 2002 to Jan. 2003), we targeted 118 graduate students as the experimental group (E group) from the School of Information and the School of Vehicle Engineering at Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT), whose English entrance examination
scores vary from 51 to 59 while 119 graduate students were selected as the control group (C group) from the School of Information and the School of Mechatronic Engineering at BIT, whose English entrance examination scores also range from 51 to 59. We regard them as from the same population, ignoring differences in age, sex, family background and personality traits.

In the second academic term (from Sept. 2003 to Jan. 2004) subjects compared in the E group was 241 and from the School of Information and the School of Vehicle Engineering. The subjects compared in the C group was 269 and from the School of Information and the School of Mechatronic Engineering. Both groups’ scores of English entrance examination range from 41 to 59.

3.3 Teaching and learning setting

The teachers for the E group and the C group have rich teaching experiences. They also adopted the same syllabus for their instructional guidance. Moreover, they followed similar teaching plans with the same textbook. However, variations occurred in the teaching and learning settings for the E and the C groups (see Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1. A contrast of E & C groups in teaching and learning settings for intensive reading (1st academic term)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WALL</th>
<th>Teaching approach</th>
<th>Instructional hour a week</th>
<th>Class size</th>
<th>Learning flexibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E Group</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Learner-centeredness</td>
<td>One class hour(45minutes)</td>
<td>About 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Group</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Teacher-dominance</td>
<td>Two class hours</td>
<td>About 65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: E Group: the Experimental group; C Group: the Control Group.

Table 2. A contrast of E & C groups in teaching and learning settings for intensive reading (2nd academic term)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WALL</th>
<th>Teaching approach</th>
<th>Instructional hour a week</th>
<th>Class size</th>
<th>Learning flexibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E Group</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Learner-centeredness</td>
<td>One class hour(45minutes)</td>
<td>About 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Group</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Teacher-dominance</td>
<td>Two class hours</td>
<td>About 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: E Group: the Experimental group; C Group: the Control Group.

Firstly, students in the E group are expected to study the text independently with the help of the on-line courseware, during the process of which students have to learn gradually to be responsible for their own learning. Secondly, they have only one contact hour with the instructor for intensive reading each week, in which learner-centeredness has been ensured: students do most of the talking in class such as pointing out and discussing sentences with comprehensive difficulty and doing group work. Thirdly, the class-size is small, about 30 students in one class, which gives students more opportunities to use English. Lastly, such self-access learning in controlled and uncontrolled environments should offer students more flexibility, easy access to a variety of learning materials.

Students in the C group have two contact hours with the teacher per week for intensive reading, in which teacher-centeredness is obvious. The teacher dominates the class by explaining the text in detail while students sit passively listening. Secondly, students have difficult access to tasks or materials other than those provided by the textbook. Lastly, the class-size is much larger, about 65 in each class, where students have fewer chances to practice English.

3.4 Findings and discussion

In order to find out whether there were significant differences between the E and the C group, we analyzed their average scores of two exams (entrance exam and end-of-term exam) using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

◆ Result of the T-test
At the end of the first academic term, all the students took the same exam including listening comprehension, paraphrase, reading comprehension, translation, composition and an oral test. After all the marks (see Table 4) were put in the computer by a staff member and checked by another from the Graduate School, we confirmed that the data were of or close to normal distribution. Then we used T-test in SPSS to measure the significant differences in students’ average scores of entrance exam, end-of-term exam, and parts of productive skills at the end-of-term exam such as paraphrase, composition and the oral test (see Table 5).

Table 3. Students average scores in two exams (1st academic term).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Numbers</th>
<th>Entrance Exam (full score 100)</th>
<th>End-of-term Exam (full score 100)</th>
<th>Paraphrase (full score 10)</th>
<th>Composition (full score 10)</th>
<th>Oral test (full score 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E Group (118)</td>
<td>55.22</td>
<td>60.95</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>14.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Group (119)</td>
<td>56.06</td>
<td>57.82</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>13.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To illustrate, we provide two graphs of normal distribution (see Figure 1).

Table 3. Students average scores in two exams (1st academic term).

Table 4. Results of T-test (1st academic term)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entrance exam</th>
<th>End-of-the-term exam</th>
<th>Paraphrase</th>
<th>Oral test</th>
<th>Composition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sig.(2 tailed)</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Difference is significant at the .005 or <.005 level.

At the end of the second academic term, we repeated the same procedures for statistics in
The results indicate that students in the E group apparently outperformed students in the C group in all areas. (see Table 5).

Table 5. Students average scores in two exams (2nd academic term).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>entrance Exam (full score 100)</th>
<th>End-of-term exam (full score 100)</th>
<th>paraphrase (full score 10)</th>
<th>composition (full score 10)</th>
<th>Oral test (full score 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E Group</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>51.55</td>
<td>67.43</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>14.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Group</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>50.73</td>
<td>65.11</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Results of T-test (2nd academic term)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entrance exam</th>
<th>End-of-the-term exam</th>
<th>Oral test</th>
<th>Composition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sig.(2 tailed)</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Difference is significant at the .005 or <.005 level.

Table 6 shows that in students’ average total scores of entrance exam there is no significant difference, which indicates that students from the E and the C groups were at almost the same level of English proficiency. But after a term’s study with different approaches, students’ composition (P=.000) and spoken English (P=.000) are of significant differences. Therefore, we safely conclude that integrating WALL in intensive reading is more effective in improving students’ English proficiency, especially in their productive skills such as writing and speaking.

◆ Discussion

The data presented above reveal a clear distinction between traditional teacher-dominated language learning and web-assisted language learning. Several reasons may account for the significant differences. Firstly, students in the E group had an easy access to a wide variety of on-line materials with different levels of difficulty. Such self-access learning has not only provided them with extra exposure to language but also satisfied their individual needs, which has benefited our graduate students with various levels of language proficiency.

Secondly, roles of teachers and students have changed so much that there has been much
more interaction between them, which in turn encourages students to make decisions about their learning, to rely on themselves and to learn to get support from their peers. During the process of WALL students have performed the roles of planners of their learning, organizers of their group work, independent thinkers in fulfilling the tasks on the courseware and self-assessors of their performance by comparing their performance with the on-line feedback.

Thirdly, WALL helps students to establish SALL by providing them with wonderful learning flexibility, which is congruent with David Nunan’s (2001) interpretation for the learner-centeredness that “from the very first lesson, learners have a right to be involved in the decision making process about what they should learn, how they should learn, and how they might be evaluated”. In another word students have almost complete control of their own learning in that they have more freedom to make their own decisions not only about time and place to learn English but also about their learning strategies, learning rates, learning contents, and learning procedures. As a result, they have enhanced their motivation to learn the language.

Lastly, the importance of learner-centeredness has been recognized and ensured in the learning process with WALL. Taking our graduate students’ individualization into account such as learning rates, learning styles and learning strategies, we have designed a wide range of tasks and rich sources of materials in our courseware with different level of difficulty. Students can “learn actively” in and after class with support from teachers who have performed the roles of answering the students’ questions both in classroom and on the intranet, helping them improving their learning strategies, evaluating their learning outcome, assisting them to redefine their learning goals, organizing classroom activities or commenting on students’ assignments and their presentation of the group work.

4. Conclusion

The two-term experiment has showed that WALL is an efficient way of assisting graduate students to develop an awareness of SALL, improve their productive skills, promote their learner-centeredness, arouse their interest in learning English and satisfy their individual needs. Such self-access learning with WALL has also fostered students’ independent and critical thinking and improved their learning strategies. In addition, we believe WALL should be seen as a useful complement to language teaching, which enhances opportunities of using English and provides students with independent learning skills to continue learning English after their formal studies at the university.

However, our experiment has some limitations. For instance, it does not offer technical help or a chat room for teachers and students to exchange ideas due to the low-quality server. What’s more one important element has not yet been fully incorporated into our courseware, that’s learner’s profile which contribute to enhancing the self-access learning experience.

We do hope that what we have done in WALL can offer links between theory and practice in SALL at graduate level and make it clear that WALL can be applicable and rewarding in enhancing learner’s effectiveness in English teaching and learning.

References
Dam, L. 1995 Learner Autonomy 3: From Theory to Classroom to Practice Dublin: Authentik.

**Appendix**

**Questionnaire 1 for the Experimental Group**

*(original version in Chinese)*

This questionnaire is aimed at getting your feedback about our English teaching and your English learning. It should take you about 5 minutes. Of course, your responses will be kept anonymous. Many thanks for your help. (Numbers in brackets indicate percentage of total respondents who checked each response.)

1. How many times do you read the text before you do the tasks on the courseware?
   A. 4 (6.6%)  B. 3(33%)  C. 2 (41.5%)  D. 1 (17.9%)  E. 0 (9%)

2. How many average hours do you spend on the courseware per week?
   A. 4 (8.5%)  B. 3(27.4%)  C. 2(48.1%)  D. 1(16%)  E. 0

3. In your opinion, the web-based instruction plus the teacher’s contact hour is ____________.
   A. very good (11.3%)  B. good (81.1%)  C. not so good (6.6%)  D. bad (9%)

4. To what degree does the courseware help you understand the text?
   A.90% or above (7.5%)  B.75% or so (46.2%)  
   C.50% (45.3%)  D. almost unable to help (9%)

5. To what degree do you think you have improved your writing in this semester?
   A. Greatly(1.9%)  B.60% (18.9%)  C. About 30%(69.8%)  D. No improvement(9.4%)

6. To what degree do you think you have improved your reading comprehension in this semester?
   A. Greatly(9%)  B.60% (4.7%)  C. About 30%(72.6%)  D. No improvement(21.7%)

7. To what degree do you think you have improved your listening comprehension in this semester?
8. To what degree do you think you have improved your oral English in this semester?
A. Greatly (3.8%)  B. 60% (21.7%)  C. About 30% (66%)  D. No improvement (8.5%)
9. Please make comments on the web-based instruction in this semester.

Questionnaire 2 for the control group

(original version in Chinese)

This questionnaire is aimed at getting your feedback about our English teaching and your English learning. It should take you about 5 minutes. Of course, your responses will be kept anonymous. Many thanks for your help. (Numbers in brackets indicate percentage of total respondents who checked each response.)

1. How many times do you read the text before class?
   A. 4 (1.7%)  B. 3 (1.4%)  C. 2 (11.6%)  D. 1 (61.8%)  E. 0 (23.5%)
2. How many times do you review the text?
   A. 4 (1.9%)  B. 3 (3.6%)  C. 2 (19.2%)  D. 1 (55.5%)  E. 0 (19.9%)
3. What do you think of large-size class for intensive reading?
   A. very good (4.5%)  B. good (18%)  C. not so good (50%)  D. bad (27.5%)
4. To what degree does the teacher help you understand the text?
   A. 90% or above (20.6%)  B. 75% or so (64.2%)  C. 50% (29.6%)  D. almost unable to help (5.9%)
5. To what degree do you think you have improved your writing in this semester?
   A. Greatly (1.4%)  B. 60% (3.6%)  C. About 30% (62.1%)  D. No improvement (32.9%)
6. To what degree do you think you have improved your reading comprehension in this semester?
   A. Greatly (1.7%)  B. 60% (8.1%)  C. About 30% (63%)  D. No improvement (28%)
7. To what degree do you think you have improved your listening comprehension in this semester?
   A. Greatly (1.7%)  B. 60% (21.6%)  C. About 30% (63.7%)  D. No improvement (13%)
8. To what degree do you think you have improved your oral English in this semester?
   A. Greatly (2.4%)  B. 60% (17.3%)  C. About 30% (64.2%)  D. No improvement (16.1%)
9. Please make comments on improving English instruction for the graduate students.