

***Developing Student Support in Self-Access Centers
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DEVELOPING STUDENT SUPPORT IN SELF-ACCESS CENTERS

Pornapit Darasawang

Wareesiri Singhasiri

Sonthida Keyuravong

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand

BIO-DATA

Pornapit Darasawang is Assistant Professor in the Department of Language Studies, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand. She obtained a PhD in TESOL from the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests lie in learner autonomy, self-access learning, and learner training. pornapit.dar@kmutt.ac.th

Wareesiri Singhasiri is a lecturer in the Department of Language Studies, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand. Her PhD is in **Applied Linguistics** from the University of **Essex**. Her research interests are in learner training and learning strategies. wareesiri.sin@kmutt.ac.th

Sonthida Keyuravong works in the Department of Language Studies at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand. She has been involved with many projects concerning self-access learning and technology in language teaching and has trained local teachers across the country in these two fields. sonthidak@yahoo.com

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INTRODUCTION

'All learners are capable of learning and self-development and are regarded as being the most important in the process of learning and teaching' (Office of the National Education Commission 2000).

'Our students are not able to learn by themselves yet. We need to help them, to give explanations and to correct their work.' (a teacher working in a Students English Access Room in a province in Thailand)

At the beginning of 2004, the Thai Ministry of Education established 80 self-access centers called SEARs (Students English Access Rooms) in secondary schools across the country. These SEARs are designed as a resource for students to help train them in how to learn according to their own learning styles, to develop ability for self-directed learning and become independent learners based on their needs, interest and potentiality: in other words, to develop [learner autonomy](#) (Office of the Basic Education Commission 2004). Despite central government funding and careful planning, many teachers and students are uncertain about how to gain the most benefits from SEARs. In this chapter, we explore from different perspectives what specific problems teachers and students face in making the best use of SEARs. Our goal is to understand what future support in such limited environments will best help the beneficial development of [learner autonomy](#) within SEARs in secondary schools in Thailand.

The design and initial preparation of the SEARs

The setting up of SEARs in 2004 was the culmination of different education reforms from 1999 onwards: the National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999); the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project implemented by the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC), Ministry of Education (2000); and the Curriculum of Basic Education (2001). The overall aim of these reforms was to support a learner-centered approach in English education by providing facilities where learners could experience learning based on their own individual styles. Learners would be trained to engage with English, develop their ability for self-directed learning and become independent learners based on their needs, interest and potential (Office of the National Education Commission 2000). SEARs were to be the structured learning environment in which teachers would help learners to have more choices and make more decisions in their learning.

The 80 schools chosen to participate in the SEAR project were mostly those regarded as the best schools in the province, or schools that were ready to adopt this project since they had enough facilities and staff. Equipment in the SEARs included listening cassette players, televisions, and video players. Computers were also budgeted for, but unfortunately the purchase was cancelled, although some schools were able to allocate some of their own school budget to buy them. Paper-based and computer-based materials in the SEARs included both published and specially designed materials for self-access learning.

Equipment and materials are just one part of the puzzle, however. Setting up any kind of self-access centre involves a change of roles for both learners and teachers. Facilitators /helpers/counselors were provided in many self-access centers to give consultations when needed, and there was also documentation to help students structure their learning, such as learner contracts, record sheets, and needs analysis questionnaires (Dickinson 1987; Gardner and Miller 1999). Providing learner training in class as a preparation for using a

self-access centre was also considered necessary (Dickinson 1987; Wenden 1991, Sinclair 1996).

Three workshops were organized by the Ministry of Education to prepare teachers for the use of SEARs with their students. The first workshop, lasting 10 days and run at the beginning of the implementation of SEARs in schools, aimed to introduce self-access, learner training, use of IT, and self-access for four skills. Two teachers from each SEAR school were invited to participate. The second training was organized when the SEARs had been operating for eight months. This two-day workshop was designed for SEAR managers and focused on the materials and their classification and cataloguing systems. The third workshop, eight months later, aimed at administration and systems of use. It was organized over two days and provided further support for areas identified as problematic from the monitoring procedures, including administrative support for SEARs and certain key systems. Three teachers and a vice principal from each school were invited to join these workshops (Watson Todd, 2005).

The context of our study

The introduction of the SEARs was detailed and well-planned, but their implementation in individual schools posed some problems of use for teachers and students, so we wanted in our action research project to look more closely at such questions. We were interested in focusing on the start-up of a SEAR in a school typical enough to help us understand more generally the problems that other schools might face. Based in Bangkok, we also needed to use a school that was not too far away and with which we had already established a relationship by providing certain materials for self-access learning.

Samut Sakorn Burana School is about 30 kilometers from Bangkok and has a student population of about 3,200. It is a provincial secondary (Grade 7 through 12 or age 13 to 17)

school where the best students of the province come to study. The school had already been operating its own self-access English Language Learning Center since 1999, which acted like a resource room with collections of commercial and in-house English language materials for practicing English outside class. When SEARs were set up in June 2004, the school converted the existing Self-Access Center. The school was willing to allow us to observe the SEAR in use and interview teachers and students individually. We interviewed two teachers who were actively using the SEAR and two who were involved in the development of the previous self-access center. We also interviewed eight randomly chosen students.

The Samut Sakorn Burana SEAR is not officially integrated into the English curriculum. Each individual teacher holds the responsibility for linking their classroom with the SEAR. However, it turned out that there are only two teachers (the SEAR manager and one classroom teacher) who integrated such self-access learning into their teaching. They did this by giving an orientation about the SEAR to their students and assigning students to practice particular language points in the SEAR in their own free time. Siriluck, a 16-year-old female student, described this initial orientation in the following way: "The teacher takes us into the room, introduces us to the concept of self-access learning, and shows the materials and how to use them." During the orientation, teachers gave students assignments for the whole semester to spend extra time outside class practicing more English. There were both open materials in the SEAR such as short stories, magazines, newspaper and specially designed self-access materials provided by the Ministry of Education. "We have to work on any 10 pieces of materials during the whole semester, and each piece is worth 0.5 %. The teachers check our work and give marks," explained Siriluck in a matter of fact way. The two teachers assigned different levels of material to different age groups, but the choice of specific materials and activities mainly came from the students' preferred skills rather than from the areas where they decided they were weak or proficient.

Support given to students

As we were interested in seeing how and whether the students developed [their learner autonomy](#) through the support provided, we first looked at the kind of support they received and then at how this affected their use of the SEAR and their working processes and behavior.

We found that there were two types of support: direct teacher guidance and indirect guidance through worksheets.

Direct teacher guidance

The teachers gave support in various roles as a guide, a facilitator, an assessor and a counselor. As **a guide**, the teachers introduced the SEAR to the students and explained how to use it. The teachers informed the students of the importance of self-access learning, the purposes of the SEAR, the location of materials, and the system for borrowing and returning materials. They also explained the documents used in the SEAR, such as the self-study plan and personal record sheet. The teachers tried to encourage the students to learn by themselves, by training them to make a plan and record their study regularly.

However, from looking at how the students learned, our investigation shows that [they organized their learning in a](#) rather mechanical [way](#). One student mentioned that she wanted the teachers to give more suggestions about strategies and techniques while tackling [different tasks](#): “I did not want the teacher to check whether I have completed the assignments or not. I prefer to have her suggest that if I had the same problem next time, what I should do. I would like to know how to do it. For example, if I don’t understand a grammar point, I’d like her to tell me what the most effective way to learn this grammar point is.”

As **a facilitator**, the teachers walked around and checked whether the students had problems or [not working in the SEAR](#). The teachers would also help manage the room, help students

find materials and answer questions. From our interviews with the teachers, we learned that the students rarely asked any questions. As the teachers assigned the students work to do in the room, they also acted as **assessors of student** work. They gave feedback and asked questions to check whether the students **had** really worked. Then they would give marks and sign the **students'** worksheets. An ideal self-access center normally provides **a counselor** for the users. Although our observations did not reveal teachers taking such a role, the students reported that the teacher would **occasionally** give helpful suggestions when they had problems:

Sanya: "The teacher tries to motivate me to work in **the** SEAR. Sometimes she asks me to find out materials about grammar and explains how to learn from it. She gives feedback right after I submit my work at the front desk."

Somchai: "She normally walks around and helps explain if we have problems such as on grammar usage."

From our interviews with the students, we learnt that students normally asked two main types of question -- about the use of the SEAR and language problems. Questions about the use of the SEAR concerned where the materials **were** located and how they **could** use the materials **and** equipment in **the** SEAR. Otherwise, students were concerned about language (mainly grammar) rather than strategies or other skills. One student mentioned that she would like to be taught how to use **learning** strategies, **but most students** did not seem particularly curious about seeking **any** such advice. **They felt that** grammar **was** their **top** priority **for** learning English, **and** without it they **could not** read, write and speak.

Indirect guidance through documents and worksheets

In addition to signs **telling** the students what to do step by step in the SEAR, the teachers provided a Self-Study Plan and a Personal Study Record. The students used **the** Self-Study Plan to fill in **the** number of hours they planned to self-study within one week, what they wanted to learn and how long they would spend learning it. This form was introduced by the teachers in the classroom. It seems that filling in the study plan was only one step in using the SEAR, but it was not **particularly** meaningful to the students as less than half of **them** could understand **its practical purpose**. Our research revealed that some students wrote plans which did not correspond with their study records. For example, they set one goal, but the materials they chose to study did not match **that goal**. The students used the “Personal Study Record” to fill in what activities/exercises they had done, the dates they worked on the materials, materials codes and their level of satisfaction. The two forms were prepared by teachers in the main committee of the project at the Ministry of Education. **Both were** quite formulaic **in** asking the students to fill in information about what skills they would like to practice and what activities they **were** planning to do. The forms, however, **did** not ask the learners to reflect on **how** they had learnt, problems they had encountered, or alternative actions they could have taken.

Students’ uses of **the SEAR and their working processes and behaviour**

Based on our interviews with students, we developed a more detailed questionnaire. It had four main parts: personal details, training, the use of SEAR and the students’ attitudes towards the SEAR. The questionnaire was distributed to 73 students who had been trained to use **the** SEAR. We learnt that on average the students used the SEAR 2-3 times per week, spending about one hour each time. Normally, they came in a group but worked individually, **with many using** specially-prepared materials **for the** four skills, English magazines, books about grammar usage, graded readers, and self-study student-generated materials. We could summarize the students’ working processes as follows:

- a. Sign their names.

- b. Plan what to do and fill in the “Self-Study Plan”.
- c. Choose the materials that they were interested in.
- d. Do the exercise, if there is one. If the materials are more open, **such** as a book, or a magazine, note down new words instead.
- e. Record what they have done in **their** “Personal Study Record”.
- f. Ask the teacher to check their work. While checking, the teacher might ask questions to **see** if the students **had** really **done** the exercise and understood the content. The students might ask the teachers questions if they had any problem.

Even though the students reported that they knew what the self-study plan and the personal study record were, it was quite surprising to learn that only 39% of them used the study plan when they started working, and only 45% used the personal record. It seems as if the students did not **really see the need to use these forms**.

Students’ attitudes towards the SEAR and towards the **support provided**

The **questionnaire** data reveal that more than 65% of the students had been trained to use the SEAR, **do** self-study, fill in the study plan and write a personal study record. In the students’ opinions, **the SEAR** was where they could learn English by themselves. It provided them with useful materials. **Some students saw** the SEAR **as** similar to a library **for learning** English and **doing** other activities. Even though the students revealed that they understood the concepts and objectives of the SEAR, it was quite interesting to learn that 69% of them reported that they came to use this room as it was a course requirement. Only 27% said that they used it because they wanted to. We also found that **just** 50% of the students **thought** that the SEAR was useful.

As for difficulties in using the SEAR, 86% of the students reported that they did not have any problems, while 36% of them mentioned that they needed more training in grammar, speaking, vocabulary and reading. If possible, they wanted the teachers to train them to use other resources such as videos and tape recorders. Some students said that they were not clear what the SEAR was. None of them reported that they had problems in using a study plan and a personal study record. It seems, then, that the training or support the teachers gave might not have been enough to enable the students to learn on their own. This may help explain why the majority of the students (69%) explained that their main reason for using the SEAR was that they had been directed by their teachers.

Teachers' attitudes towards the SEAR and towards providing support for learners

As mentioned earlier, only two teachers (the SEAR manager and one classroom teacher) integrated use of the SEAR into their teaching. These two teachers were very positive about the SEAR. They each had about 30 years of teaching experience and had attended two of the three Ministry of Education workshops on self-access learning. However, they seemed quite exhausted by the SEAR responsibilities they had:

Laddawan: "This is a really big responsibility for us. We have to run the SEAR without much support from other teachers. The responsibilities include manning the room, training students to use the room, giving consultations, producing materials, and so on. This is on top of our teaching load. Apart from that, we have to go beyond our regular teaching responsibilities to keep the SEAR open after school to accommodate our students' needs. We are very tired. If we did not think of the benefits our students will get from the SEAR, we might have quit a long time ago."

Somsri: “Even though the students are assigned to come to use the SEAR, some of them are not motivated enough to come. We have to think of ways to encourage them to come. This is extra work. Apart from this, weaker students need a lot of teacher support and encouragement. As a result, we have to pay much attention to these students when they are in the SEAR.”

Our initial visits and familiarization with the school let us see there were many factors that would limit the effective teacher-led introduction of the SEAR. The first limitation **came** from the school administrators **who, blind to the benefits of the project, simply adopted the project because it was a top-down government policy**. Without genuine **administrative** support, the English Department **could not** force the involvement of every teacher in the project. The second limitation was **the teachers' overwhelming** workload. They **were** not only responsible for teaching about 15-20 classroom contact hours per week, but also **had** to help with the administration **of the SEAR**. To **make it work** for the students' benefit, they had to go **well** beyond their **normal** teaching and administrative responsibilities. Working long hours on their own really **had** an effect on their attitude and efficiency. The last limitation **was that the teachers did not have** a clear understanding of the principles of **learner autonomy** and what **its development** involves. They **simply believed** that students can do **self-studying** by themselves, **once the teacher has told them what to do**. The teachers did not truly understand the importance of students setting objectives for learning, choosing **appropriate materials to achieve their goals**, and monitoring and evaluating their own learning, so these components **were not highlighted in the training they gave students**. This **also had** a clear effect on how both teachers **ran** the SEAR. What they **were** trying to do **was** push as many students **as possible** to work in the SEAR, because they believed that it **would** help increase the students' proficiency and **make them** autonomous learners, as Somsri **explained**: “We have noticed some improvement in the students' grades. We think that SEAR has a part to

play in this. In the next semester we will do a pre- and post-test to check for evidence of students' improvement.”

DISCUSSION & SUGGESTIONS

Whether or not the use of the SEAR through support from teachers' and documents enabled the students to develop **their learner autonomy** is not clear from the students' attitudes and the development of their self-directed skills. What we did find interesting was that there were more students who seemed extrinsically motivated to use the SEAR (69% used it because it was imposed by the teachers and was grade-driven) than those who were intrinsically motivated (27% wanted to use it and see its benefits). So most students did things because they were told to, not because they wanted to. The problem is that **learner autonomy** tends to develop best when learners are *intrinsically* motivated (Dickinson 1995; Noel et al.1999 cited in Dornyei 2001).

Why were the majority of the students extrinsically motivated, driven only by teacher pressure and grades? We found four **main** factors at work.

1. The development of learner autonomy was compromised by the focus on grades.

Perhaps because the two teachers managing the SEAR project were under great pressure, they compromised by linking students' grades with work in the SEAR, assigned specific tasks, **required students to report on what they had done each time**, and based final grades on this work. Students were not left alone to make decisions about their own learning.

Alternatively, **the teachers** could have designed a more autonomous project which made better use of the SEAR, such as using it as a resource or giving more choices in the materials than they did. A good example **would be** project work. The teacher **could** give the students a theme such as fashion, youth and drugs, environment, etc. and then ask students to come

up with a specific title for the project under the theme they are interested in. After that, the teacher discusses the process with the students, which might include finding, organizing, analyzing and synthesizing information before presenting it orally or in writing. With a full understanding of the process, students can be left on their own to do the project in the SEAR. Two stages of the process where students can make full use of the SEAR are:

✧ Looking for content. If there is not enough information on paper, they can always turn to the internet.

✧ Preparing their presentation. This is when they can focus on the language and there is plenty of material (?) on grammar and writing, which they can access with the teacher's help if necessary.

This kind of approach would allow students more freedom to plan their project, choose materials, and make their own decisions in the process. This would definitely help to lead students to learner autonomy more effectively than being assigned specific learning tasks by the teachers, where their only choice was which exercise to do.

2. Students were following teachers' directions rather than their own needs and interests.

Since the teachers had to give the students a grade for their work, the activities they assigned were quite closed, which naturally affected how students used the SEAR: most of them tended to use materials which could easily be completed and checked, to meet the requirement set by the teachers. This question is connected with the attitudes of the teachers. If teachers accept that a key principle underpinning learner autonomy is the freedom to learn, it becomes easier for them to set up supplementary activities which enable them to assess students' genuine engagement in independent learning. However, because the activities of the SEAR were score-oriented, students had to follow what their teachers directed them to do

if they wanted to get a good score. They were not thinking of learning to fulfill their own desires, interests or needs.

3. Conflicting teachers' roles created a confused perception about the purpose of the SEAR.

Students were also deterred from developing their learner autonomy because of confusing teachers' roles in the SEAR. The three roles the teachers played, namely *guide*, *facilitator* and *counselor*, were supportive. However, when they acted as assessors, checking whether the students were studying or not, it created the perception that learning in the SEAR was compulsory.

4. Teachers saw the SEAR as a place to practise work done in class.

Teachers seemed to use the SEAR to practice skills learned in class and to check the right answers. However, the SEAR was set up as a place where learners can engage with English and explore learning styles which work best for them, through working with various materials and, as a result, developing a self-directed mode of learning (Sturtridge 1992). We felt that the students were not really making genuine choices in their learning, and this affected their motivation to use the SEAR and the development of their autonomy.

For these last two points, the root of the problems lies mainly in the teachers' lack of understanding of their roles, learner autonomy and the purpose of the SEAR. Their belief that the SEAR was set up to provide supplementary English practice outside class affected how they designed the tasks for students to use in the SEAR, their roles in the SEAR and their evaluation of the students' learning. Teacher development is very important because, if done well, it will open them to new ideas.

The excessive influence of extrinsic motivation on the development of students' self-directed skills was very apparent in the way the students planned and monitored their learning. Their

use of **the study plan and personal study record** was superficial in that they **completed** the documents only because they were required. The contents did not really help them to set genuine learning objectives, as their plan and the materials they **chose** did not correspond. Many students clearly did not understand the concept of a study plan or how it could help **their** study in the SEAR, **and they recorded only facts** in the personal study record. Moreover, every time they used the SEAR, they recorded the same information: **there was no step forward** from the previous time, no sense of development in their study.

The study plan and the personal study record **forms are** quite formulaic. **They** focus on **facts** such as what day of the week **students** study, what skills they would like to practice **and** what activities they are planning to do. The forms do not **ask** learners to reflect on how they learnt, problems they encountered, **or** alternative actions they could have taken. **We believe they have** made the learners mechanical in their learning, because they do not require **them** to consider alternative ways of reaching their goals. **The** concern here is that these two supports simply reinforce what **learners** already do, rather than help them to develop their own learning. So **we see a strong need to** adapt the form to include more of the “how” **of the learning process -- how they plan to learn**, how they solved problems, how they evaluate their learning **-- in order to** encourage **them** to think more about their learning.

The Samut Sakorn Burana SEAR did not really develop **learner autonomy**, especially in those students who **were** not motivated to learn English. It is clear that support from every party **-- the** Ministry of Education, school administrators, colleagues **--** needs to be provided for any innovation like this to be successful. However, we believe that what is more important is the real understanding of the concept behind the innovation. In the case of this study, although workshops were provided for the teachers involved in the project, they still did not use the SEAR to really develop **their students' learner autonomy**. This partly comes from their trying to deal with an innovation while keeping their regular routines: **because of the restrictions of the**

grade-oriented curriculum in the secondary school, making project work a requirement for students was the safest way for them.

Another factor we felt contributed to the teachers' decisions was their beliefs. In order for learner autonomy to develop, students need to experience freedom in learning, an intimidating concept for teachers, in that it challenges long-held beliefs and a well-established teaching approach. This is a challenge which is not easy for teachers to accept completely.

Student support in the SEAR was also a concern. Merely providing support was not enough: how it was provided was more important. Developing self-directed skills needs time and consistency, as students need to do it continuously and learn how to change to a more reflective role. The support given has to be meaningful, and students need to see it as real support, not just a compulsory part of their grade. Furthermore, students should also have the chance to choose the kind of support they need in order to develop their learner autonomy. For a self-access centre to become an environment in which learners can effectively develop autonomy, it needs to offer the users choice, to be open to them and promote their creativity and self-criticism (Benson, 1994).

Final thoughts

All three of us have been involved with the SEAR project -- Thailand's largest self-access innovation -- at various stages. Doing this study has helped us see the complete picture of the project from the starting to the end of its cycle -- from establishment to evaluation. It has helped us to gain an insight into how a self-access center is run in a particular school, how students work in the SEAR, how teachers and students are trained, what students think about learning in a SEAR, and a lot more. This is very useful for us as both classroom teachers and teacher trainers.

We have also been **personally** enriched in the process of conducting **this study by exploring** how to write and explain our research. **We started out with a** formal style in which as **researchers we viewed** things from the outside **and followed** a certain **formulaic** pattern in our writing. **We have tried to move from this to** talking to the reader in person **where we have been** **challenged to** include the voices of **different** people in **our** study. For non-native speakers like **the** three of us, **a** formal **report** style **seems** easier, **but the alternative multi-voiced approach** **has** **challenged us** tremendously. **We were blind at the beginning but the pictures became clearer and clearer through the editing process. We are proud to see how the work came out at the end.** The different layers of collaboration **in this project have been** interesting for us **here** (the first layer, among **ourselves** at KMUTT; the second layer, our **partner project in Hong Kong**; and the third, the editors). **Working collaboratively on these three levels has** **taught us that keeping to the deadline is the most crucial element in international collaboration.**

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Key words:

Supports → teacher supports, document supports

Self-access Learning Center

education reform

study record form

self-study plan

teachers' preparation

students' attitudes

orientation for self-access learning

self-access assignments

limitations

roles of teachers → teachers as guides, teachers as facilitators, teachers as assessors

observation

goal setting

SEAR (Students English Access Room)