Supporting the Development of Autonomous Learning Skills in Reading and Writing in an Independent Language Learning Centre

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Abstract

This article draws on observations, examples and findings from previous action research and teaching experiences gathered in an independent language learning centre in a university in Hong Kong to explore strategies for supporting independent learning. The learning centre offers one-to-one and small-group learning sessions to support the development of independent learning skills in various areas. This discussion will explore particularly the focuses of reading and writing skills development. These learner-centred support sessions aim to develop awareness of different types of learning strategies to suit individual learning needs, and cultivate interest and ability for continuous self-learning. The benefits of a semi-structured scaffolding format with attention to individual learning differences and supported by technology will be highlighted.

Keywords: independent language learning, autonomy, writing conference, extensive reading, scaffolding

This article will begin with brief overviews of learner autonomy, as well as self-access and self-directed learning. It will then examine the initial development of self-access centres in Hong Kong and explore ways to support autonomous learning skills in the changing educational contexts in recent years, particularly in one of these independent learning centres.

The concept of "autonomy", which involves the situations, skills and capacity in directing one's own learning (Benson & Voller, 1997), has been used in different ways in language education to suit specific contexts. How autonomy is interpreted often depends on the degree of emphasis put on various factors which impact the learning context. These factors may involve the knowledge, ability, attitude and motivation of the learners, in addition to the various constraints the learning environment imposes on learning, such as curriculum requirements, teaching and learning approaches, and institutional control.

The terms "self-access learning", "independent learning" and "autonomous learning" have become popular at different times in the past few decades. Their level

of popularity somehow indicates the different stages of development concerning the factors which impact how learners take charge of their own learning.

"Self-access learning" was a term often used in the 1980s and 1990s when student self-learning started to receive attention and learning resource centres in the name of self-access centres (SAC) were being set up for facilitating this type of learning. Benson (1992) makes a distinction between self-access and self-directed learning. He suggests that the former refers to the design and organisation of resources, whereas the latter calls for certain skills that the learner needs to apply in a learning situation. He further points out that self-access might be defined as "the design and organisation of resources for self-directed learning" and that many SACs are in fact "other-directed to one degree or another" (Benson, 1992, p. 31), as students might lack the skills to be truly self-directed. Self-access learning at this early stage, therefore, seems to imply the provision of resources rather than truly self-directed learning.

In recent years, there has been a tendency to use the terms "independent learning" and "autonomous learning" in place of "self-access learning", as emphasis goes beyond the access and provision of resources to cover more intricate relationships between the learners and the learning processes. Although "independence" seems to be quite similar in meaning to "autonomy", Benson & Voller (1997) point out that the former denotes freedom from reliance on others, while the latter indicates the ability to make one's own decisions about what to do without being influenced or instructed to do so. The latter word also implies freedom from external control, which is often hard to achieve, particularly in current educational contexts where institutional authority often precedes individual learning preferences.

In her discussion of shifting perspectives in independent language learning (ILL), White (2011) points out that in the current educational context where emphasis is put on lifelong and life-wide learning, new dimensions on ILL (which take into account the situated and contingent nature of ILL) should receive more attention. One of these dimensions is the critical adaptive learning perspective, which considers language learners as individuals who actively seek out and evaluate the possibilities for language learning in their own contexts and learning communities.

Development of Self-Access Centres in Hong Kong Universities

Starting from the 1990s, there was a surge of interest in self-access language learning (SALL) in many parts of the world. Within East Asia, Hong Kong was gradually becoming a centre of expertise in SALL development, as a result of generous government financial support for SALL as a means to facilitate language enhancement (Pang, 1994). Self-access centres, sometimes with different names and focuses in language learning, were established in various universities in Hong Kong, for example, the Study-Centre at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and the Writing Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

As described by Benson (1994), the primary aims of such [self-access study] facilities are to enable learning to take place independently of teaching and to encourage students to direct their own learning. Students are given the opportunity to choose and use self-access materials on their own and to assess their own performance by themselves.

This new concept of learning contradicted conventional educational concepts in Hong Kong, and called for a need to re-define the roles of teachers and learners. Instead of being at the centre of the learning process, the teacher was expected to play a more subsidiary role for facilitating and supporting learning. The learners took over at the centre, where they were expected to make decisions in directing their own learning. However, as pointed out by Benson (1994), it does not necessarily follow that students will be able to direct their own learning simply by visiting a self-access centre. Farmer (1994) also suggests that Hong Kong students were used to highly structured tuition where learners were expected to adopt a highly passive role. Without confidence in using English and a foundation to develop autonomy, self-access learning was initially an unfamiliar and difficult task.

As reported in several studies in Gardner & Miller (1994), a number of universities which established their SACs in the 1990s embarked on learner training programmes to help their students develop self-access learning skills. Examples were the self-directed project at Lingnan College, the self-access project undertaken by first-year undergraduates at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and another seven-day programme that trained learners to utilise (for self-directed language learning) the resources of the Independent Learning Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Researchers exploring the initial development of SALL during this period, such as Cooley (1993), suggested that most students were not yet ready for self-access learning. A great deal of teacher and institutional support was clearly needed and offered at universities for helping students develop into self-directed learners.

The Present Educational Context and the Type of Support Needed in SACs

A comparison of the newly established English Language Study-Centre at Hong Kong Polytechnic described by Farmer (1994) and the current Centre for Independent Language Learning in the same institute (now upgraded to a university), may highlight the difference in the type of support needed for students in the present educational context.

In the 1990s when the Study-Centre was first established at Hong Kong Polytechnic, the centre primarily catered to weak students who were referred in pairs or small groups. The centre offered remedial support to those students who required supplementary tuition (Farmer, 1994). Like most other universities, the self-access centre in the university also helps students develop self-access learning skills by offering individual and small-group consultation sessions for solving individual learning problems, or helping students devise and implement self-study or language improvement plans. Similar types of support are still being offered currently at the centre (now re-named Centre for Independent Language Learning) Independent learning has also become more integrated into the formal curriculum as a part of the course requirements. Some new courses, especially those developed for the new four-year curriculum which started in 2012, make independent learning a kind of web-work requirement for passing the courses. In other words, face-to-face instruction has become increasingly blended with individual self-learning, facilitated by technology.

Inclusive curriculums and variegated learning needs

The new curriculum in the university, like those in many other present-day universities, is becoming continuously inclusive in covering a wide array of skills and objectives. As shown in the web description of the new four-year curriculum from one of the universities (Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2011), in 2012-13, students are expected not only to attain learning outcomes for professional competence in their own chosen discipline, but also to develop multidisciplinary

perspectives with a broad knowledge base. They should also achieve generic outcomes for all-round development, including critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, creativity and innovation, communication and language skills, global outlook, leadership and teamwork skills, entrepreneurship, cultural appreciation, social and national responsibility, and even healthy lifestyle and lifelong learning capability (Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2011).

With the increasingly overloaded curriculum and the inclusion of independent learning as one component of the curriculum, students no longer prefer to make voluntary commitments for long-term independent learning according to a detailed plan in the form of a learning contract. Advances in technology, such as the development of the internet, have enabled easy access to various types of resources, and diminished the role of self-access centres as resource depositories. However, there is an increasing demand on the development of complex cognitive skills to cope with the high demands of modern university education, for addressing learning needs within the formal curriculum and beyond it. These are often described as higher order thinking skills, such as critical and creative thinking skills of logical reasoning, analysis, evaluation, judgement, problem-solving and creation (Brookhart, 2010).

In their discussion of the learning styles of millennial students, Howe and Strauss (2007) describe seven core traits of the millennial generation. Two traits are particularly relevant in exploring the learning needs of present-day students: pressured and achieving. Students nowadays face a great deal of pressure to study hard and show their outstanding performance in various areas of abilities. To be an outstanding achiever requires higher order thinking skills, which need to develop gradually. Compared to students in the past, current students need even more support to fulfil various expectations and learning targets to accomplish more within a shorter time.

The concept of autonomy needs to be re-defined in the present educational context. Learning is supposed to be more autonomous with the development of technology. Learners are increasingly encouraged to take charge of their own learning, and they are more capable in accessing information. However, this easy access to a large amount of information also causes difficulties in making choices and decisions. The development of technology brings stronger institutional control, higher performance expectations and less freedom for individual learners. Being an autonomous learner in the current educational context means having the ability to take

into account all these factors and maintaining a good balance of subjection, independence, and autonomy.

Current support in independent learning centres

In recent years, students are not so interested in seeking advice on devising and implementing long-term self-learning plans. They often go to the independent language learning centre to seek help to address more immediate and short-term learning needs for fulfilling various learning targets within or beyond the core curriculum. These are mostly tackled by individual and small group consultation/support sessions offered in the independent learning centre where I conducted my action research studies.

Reading and Writing Support Sessions in an Independent Language Learning Centre

The remainder of this article will discuss examples of engaging learning support sessions conducted in an independent language learning centre in one of the universities in Hong Kong. These were individual (one-to-one) or small-group (three to five students) support sessions led by a teacher for tackling various learning needs, such as reading and writing, group discussion, oral presentation, job- or study-related application and public exam skills. Students identify their own learning targets and ask the teacher to give them guidance or advice to fulfil these in the sessions.

These learning sessions are offered on a voluntary basis to the undergraduate and postgraduate students of Hong Kong Polytechnic University in various disciplines, including humanity and technical subjects. Students can choose their own time slots and teachers to work with, and request the type of help they need. The learning sessions can be flexibly structured to suit different learning needs. They can be quite unstructured or semi-structured depending on student needs and the teacher's perception of what kind of instructional strategy will be effective and engaging for fulfilling learning objectives. They also offer the opportunity for learners to direct and monitor the learning process, as well as to reflect on their own learning.

Appropriate scaffolding strategies need to be used to support the development of learning ability. According to Vygotsky's (1978) theory on the zone of proximal development, interaction and collaboration with a more skilled expert can help to speed up a learner's progression to another developmental level, enabling him or her

to do independently what he or she could previously do only with assistance. Based on these ideas on interactive and collaborative support, Gibbons (2002) further suggests that the use of this type of scaffolding can help learners to move toward new skills, concepts, or levels of understanding. With this type of temporary assistance by which a teacher helps a learner know how to do something, the learner will later be able to complete a similar task independently.

This type of assistance is in fact relevant to both classroom teaching and for supporting autonomous learning. Autonomous learning involves not only the motivation to take charge of one's own learning, but also the ability to do something beneficial independently. Autonomous learning skills are neither something that students can finish learning, nor something they either have or do not have. Rather, they are a continuum of different levels of abilities which require continuous development. Autonomous learning skills need to be developed at all times, because different educational environments create different learning needs that students need to tackle.

The types of scaffolding provided in these learning support sessions are different from what occur in the classroom, as they are more learner-centred and flexible in addressing individual learning needs. In supporting independent learning, the level of teacher directiveness can always be adjusted according to the requirements of the learning contexts and needs of the students. In their analysis of the written discursive devices used by language advisors in providing input to learners on planning and implementing an individualized self-directed learning plan, Mynard & Thornton (2012) describe different degrees of directiveness according to the needs and levels of awareness the students show in the learning process. In the learning support sessions discussed in this article, the levels of teacher directiveness can also be adjusted according to how autonomous individual students are. The higher level of directiveness in some parts of the sessions can also serve as models for students to refer to when they tackle similar learning targets on their own.

An important objective of these learning sessions is to encourage the development of continuous and voluntary autonomous self-learning. Students have perfect freedom in enrolling in these sessions. The kind of strategies they gain and the ability they develop will also help to sustain their interest and motivation in continuous learning. This type of support is suitable in the present educational context when students need to face a wide array of learning needs.

Students nowadays need to use three major types of autonomous learning skills: (a) general learning or study skills, such as researching, making choices and decisions about one's learning; (b) language learning skills or abilities for different focuses, such as independent writing and revision skills, extensive reading skills and interests, and other skills in developing their reading, speaking, writing and listening abilities; and (c) higher order thinking skills to tackle the various learning outcomes (both language and non-language).

In language learning, the three types of skills described above often merge for effective autonomous learners. In the following sections of this article, experiences of conducting individual and small-group support sessions for developing reading and writing skills are reported and discussed based on data and examples from two small-scale action research studies.

Individual (one-to-one) writing conferences

These individual writing conferences are one-hour writing assistance sessions offered on a one-to-one basis in which the students can request the type of help they need, based on a piece of writing they brought for discussion. These learner-centred writing sessions offered assistance to suit the various writing needs of university students, such as: (a) assignments for different subjects (e.g. term papers, project reports, theses); (b) various types of applications (e.g. for jobs, postgraduate studies, exchange programmes, internship, scholarship); (c) public exam skills development (e.g. IELTS, Use of English Exam (public pre-university matriculation examination in Hong Kong some students need to re-take); (d) students' own writing practice for various purposes to develop their writing skills and ability.

These one-to-one writing conferences are not supposed to be a kind of improvement service on students' writing, as it is impossible to offer individual assistance to the vast amount of writing that students need to do. Instead, it is a kind of awareness-building learning session to help students develop the skills to identify problems in their writing and do useful revisions on their own. In other words, the consultation sessions are examples of model reflective exercises for students to imitate for improving their writing.

Structure of writing conferences

The writing conferences are generally structured to include six main focuses to ensure that the target of enhancing students' reflective skills is achieved. Depending on students' skills and abilities, instructional strategies can vary to suit the needs of individual students, with different emphases on these focus areas:

A. Student's quiet reflections at the beginning on the overall strengths and weaknesses of the piece of writing by jotting notes on the work sheet; teacher reading of writing

B. Student's oral reflections on overall strengths and weaknesses

C. Student's oral reflections on most common language problems

D. Discussion of language problems

E. Discussion of content and organisation of ideas

F. End-of-conference reflections and feedback

The first five minutes of the conference is usually spent on students' reflections and note-taking, as well as the teacher's reading and quick marking of the piece of writing (e.g. underlining). The student then orally reflects on his/her overall strengths and weaknesses and major language problems. Next, the teacher elicits responses from the student about his/her suggestions concerning problems in language, content and organisation of ideas. The session ends with reflections and feedback on what has been learned.

Although there is a relatively high level of teacher directiveness for facilitating the development of skills in some parts of these consultation sessions, students' own reflections also receive a great deal of emphasis, especially at the beginning and the end of the session. Before discussing specific language and content/organisation problems, students are given a two-part reflection sheet (see Appendix A and B) for writing notes on the overall strengths and weaknesses of the piece of writing, as well as analysing the types of language mistakes it contains. They then present these orally. Their ideas will be revisited in the end-of-conference reflections when they have to comment on their initial judgement after analysing the piece of writing with the teacher and recapitulating useful ideas gained from the session.

There are different levels of directiveness in different parts of the conference. Parts A and F are the most student-directed, as the teacher allows them to give their

own views before responding. Parts B and C are also highly student-directed, although sometimes the teacher needs to elicit more relevant ideas or clarify unclear ideas. Parts D and E are the most teacher-directed compared to the other parts. They serve as frameworks for analysing writing which students can use as a model when they are doing their own writing revisions unaided.

Prompting questions were used in different parts of the conference to help students reflect and revise their own writing, especially in parts of the conferences with a higher level of teacher directiveness. The following are examples of prompting questions for scaffolding students' ability to analyse their language problems and suggest improvements in content and organisation:

1. What is wrong with the underlined words?
2. The meaning of this sentence is unclear. What do you want to say?
3. What do you mean by this word?
4. What other connective words can you use instead of this one, to show a contrast between these two parts of the sentence?
5. The sentence contains too much information. Which is the most important idea you want to convey? What are the key words you have to keep?

These prompting questions also serve as guidelines for students' own reflections in working individually. When students reflect on their piece of writing unaided, they can also look for problems in the areas highlighted in prompting questions. For example, the use of appropriate words, such as connective words, unclear sentences, or overloaded sentences with too much information.

The following are the analyses of examples from the writing conferences where scaffolding strategies worked well, extracted from a small piece of action research by Chiu (2011a).

Initial self-directed reflections on students' writing

At the beginning of most sessions, students can usually identify one or more area of strength and weakness close to those later pointed out by the teachers. Even if their ideas are different from those of the teacher, initial reflections followed by close analysis of their writing and final reflections at the end help students to construct a metacognitive framework for evaluating their own writing.

End-of-conference student reflections and feedback

Mostly positive comments were received at the end of the conference sessions. The following are some examples of comments from students on the feedback sheets:

- Very helpful instructor I have met, many tips received.
- It's useful and interesting. I think I have learnt new knowledge from the session.
- The teacher is very helpful and provided me with good advice on improving the language of my paper, especially in terms of tenses and connections.
- She is a very professional teacher with enthusiasm. She really helped me a lot in my writing and logical thinking.

In short, most of the feedback received for the writing conferences was very positive. Recurrent ideas were usefulness of the instruction: to suit individual needs, in terms of writing development, and in specific areas such as language, connection of ideas and logical thinking. Some students also felt that the conference sessions were interesting.

Students were asked to describe the useful things they had learned in the session, which help them to recapitulate ideas and reflect about the session. This facilitates the development of independent analysis and reflective skills on other pieces of writing. Students can also reflect on the strategies used in the session, and use these as a model for analysing their own writing independently later.

Examples for more teacher-directed analyses of language problems

There are a number of common language problems which often occur in students' writing. These are often related to the use of vocabulary or expressions which are inappropriate (e.g. collocation problems), imprecise, unnecessary, or lack variety. There are also grammatical mistakes such as those related to tenses, word forms, sentence structure, agreement (or singular/plural forms), prepositions or voice (active/passive).

The following are two examples of how scaffolding strategies worked effectively to engage students' attention and help them to work out ways of tackling the language problems:

1. Use of precise words

In one of the individual writing conferences, the student did some practice for the IELTS writing task. He wrote a short piece of descriptive writing to describe the data

in a graph. The following is a sentence with a problem using precise words (underlined).

Sample text:

In general, the total quantity of items transported increased obviously, while the amount of goods carried by railways <u>fluctuated</u> during these 28 years.
The problem in using the word "fluctuated" was that it did not exactly describe what was shown in the graph, which indicated only small changes in quantity over the period instead of great "fluctuations".

To help the student understand the problem, the teacher used a number of prompting questions to guide him in thinking in the right direction.

Teacher: Have there been great changes in quantities during the period?

Student: No.

Teacher: What's happening in the graph?

Student: The same.

Teacher: So is it a good idea to say "fluctuated"? The word means great changes.

Student: No, not many change.

Teacher: What other words are better then?

Student: Stable … same …

Teacher: So can we say "remained quite stable"?

Although the student could not give the exact expression to replace the inappropriate word, he was guided to realise the problem, and he could give the key words for forming the appropriate expression.

2. Appropriate collocation

This example was from an expository essay on problems and solutions on the topic of overpopulation. The following is a sentence with a problem in appropriate collocation (underlined).

Sample text:

If effective solutions are implemented, we can <u>build</u> a more harmonious and peaceful <u>life</u> to live in.

There is a problem of collocation, as the word "build" does not collocate with the word "life". To help the student understand the problem, the teacher used a number of prompting questions to guide him in thinking in the right direction.

Teacher: We usually say 'build a house', but we use another word with the word 'life'. Can you think of other possible words?

Student: Make …

Teacher: You are quite close. Can you think of other similar words?

Student: Live …

Teacher: You are almost there. If you like your life, what can you say about it?

Student: Enjoy?

Teacher: Very good! We can say 'have' a more harmonious and peaceful life, or 'enjoy' a more harmonious and peaceful life.

The student finally hit on the word 'enjoy' after the teacher had asked him a few relevant prompting questions.

Examples of more teacher-directed analyses of content/organisation of problems

The most common problems for content and organisation of ideas involve a lack of sufficient contextualisation and elaboration of ideas, a lack of focus within paragraphs, and failure to use specific words to convey ideas clearly.

The following are two examples of how scaffolding strategies worked effectively to engage students' attention and help them to work out ways of tackling problems in content and organisation of ideas:

1. Organisation of ideas within a paragraph

Type of writing: Expository essay on problems and solutions concerning overpopulation (public exam)

Sample text:

In poor countries, people are facing the scarcity of food, water and other daily goods. In addition, it is common that the limit number of children per family have chances to be educated. As we all know, poor countries suffer lots of unemployment which lower the people's life standard. There is no doubt that an increase in population simply makes the situation worse.

Problem: Different problems related to overpopulation are not well-connected

Solution: Organisation of ideas under one main focus (putting the three factors of resources, education and employment under the main theme of "scarcity")

Prompting questions: Can you suggest a key word which is related to all the ideas covered in this paragraph? Do people have enough of everything? Which word in the paragraph means that you don't have enough of something?

Student's response: After a few prompting questions, the student was able to point out the word "scarcity". Then she was guided to indicate that she discussed three main factors in the paragraph: resources, education and employment.

2. Enhancing clarity by elaboration

Type of writing: Final-year project report on the topic of online apparel purchasing

Sample text:

Online Reputation Systems (ORS), in which feedbacks of the buyers are collected, analysed and presented, which enable the good reputation of the sellers.

Problem: There is a breach in logic, as it is not clear how the good reputation of the company is related to the feedback, which can be both positive and negative.

Solution: Elaborating on the benefits of feedback in helping the company to improve their services, before saying that a good reputation can be built up for the company.

Prompting questions: How is feedback related to the building up of a good reputation, since feedback can be both positive and negative? Is feedback good only if it is positive? Can negative feedback be good? How can it be good?

Student's response: She was gradually guided to suggest that negative feedback can be good sometimes, as it can help the company to improve their services.

Encouragement for continuous self-learning: Use of online materials

Besides using prompting questions to guide students to work out ways to improve their writing, the teacher can also suggest ideas for further self-learning that are specifically related to the problem areas, making use of web materials accessed through a computer used in the support session. The following were examples of suggestions given in these writing conferences:

1. Referring students to online concordancers to check word collocations, e.g. the teacher types the words 'build' and 'life' on the concordancer on the English Language Centre (ELC) website to show that these two words could not occur side by side.
2. Referring students to online dictionaries, e.g. for checking the meaning and ways of using the word 'fluctuated'.
3. Showing students examples from writing models of a relevant genre to illustrate improvements in various areas, such as style, coherence or elaboration of ideas.
4. Referring students to the 'Grammar' link on the ELC website to check up on grammatical structures they cannot manage well in their writing.

Strategies used in some parts of the writing conferences seem to be too teacher-directed for an autonomous learning context. However, the teacher guidance provides students with models for analysing and evaluating their writing. This contributes to the development of students' metacognitive skills in monitoring their own learning, which is an important condition for students to become truly autonomous learners.

Small-group reading discussion sessions

Other types of consultation sessions offered in the independent language learning centre are small-group discussion sessions of three to five students led by a teacher for tackling various types of learning needs, mostly speaking-related, such as group discussion, oral presentation, job interview, social English and pronunciation. Students usually make their own decisions about learning targets and ask the teacher to give them guidance or advice in the session.

At this university, the encouragement of extensive reading and the cultivation of a reading culture is one of the reform initiatives for the new four-year university curriculum (Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2011). However, reading extensively in a second language (L2) is not the type of easy pleasure reading we often associate with extensive reading in general. It is a great challenge for second language learners to try to access extensive reading materials intended for first language (L1) readers. To support interest in voluntary extensive reading for L2 readers in this situation, I conducted a small-scale action research study in implementing reading support sessions in the independent language learning centre of the university, making use of the small-group discussion support sessions to introduce students to English books (fiction or non-fiction) for extensive reading (Chiu, 2011b).

The main purpose of these sessions is not to teach reading comprehension, but to help students develop an interest in and the ability for voluntary self-reading, initially for the targeted book and later for other books when a reading habit is developed. These are called introductory reading sessions, as they aim to introduce fiction and non-fiction books (originally intended for general L1 extensive readers) to these L2 learners who may find the books a little difficult for pleasure reading.

These one-hour semi-structured discussion sessions are offered to small groups of three to five students who are voluntary participants. Students need to first read a short fiction or non-fiction extract for 10 to 15 minutes. They then follow through with the activities suggested in the task sheet to discuss answers to a few questions to enhance their understanding of the text and the context of the extract. After that they have a ten-minute discussion on a given topic which is related to a theme from the text and to some ideas or concepts which were familiar to them. At the end of the session, they reflect on their learning experience.

Book choices

Books targeted for general L1 extensive readers are used for these support sessions. They are divided into three main categories: fiction classics, contemporary fiction and non-fiction. The books are selected according to whether they are suitable for young educated persons of today, based on at least one or two of the following principles:

- Containing themes or ideas interesting or meaningful for university students
- Not too difficult in terms of both content and language for university

undegraduates who are L2 learners of English

- Popular (e.g. best-sellers, or with film adaptations)
- Well-written (e.g. award-winners)

Fiction books can be best-sellers and have film adaptations. These are contemporary popular books which suit current interest or time-honoured classics with a lasting currency. Non-fiction books can be contemporary writings on current topics of general interest which are particularly relevant to university students, such as those about relationships, communication, self-improvement and modern developments.

The following are examples of books used in these sessions:

Fiction classics

Animal Farm by George Orwell

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens

Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

Contemporary fiction

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone by J. K. Rowling

The Client by John Grisham

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

Non-fiction

How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie

Rich Dad Poor Dad by Robert T. Kiyosaki

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen R. Covey

A reading extract most representative of each book, or most likely to arouse interest in reading the book, is selected for students to read for 10 to 15 minutes. Other similar books can also be used to suit different interests. If there is a repository of task sheets produced for different books, students can have wider choices of books they would like to read.

Support materials and procedures

The reading discussion sessions are conducted according to the structure set out in a set of support materials for each book. A task sheet selected to support the discussion session is structured according to the following headings:

A. Author description

B. Book summary

C. Context of reading extract

D. Comprehension questions

E. Discussion task

F. Online materials for further reading

The teacher only gives brief background information before students read and discuss the reading extract. Sections A, B and F are mainly for students to read on their own later. The teacher briefly describes the context of the reading extract using the information in section C. Section D is mostly teacher-directed, and the purpose is to help students grasp main ideas for understanding and appreciating the reading extract. Section E can be conducted without much teacher intervention, unless instances where teacher guidance is needed are identified. Students can also share short reflections about the session at the end to enhance their cognitive orientations about starting to read and discuss a book of their own choice.

Like the writing conferences, these reading discussion sessions can be conducted with different levels of teacher directiveness in different parts of the sessions in response to the level of autonomy different groups of students exercise. Teachers and students can also make decisions about the relative emphases and time they spend on different parts of the sessions.

Discussion task/topic

The topics in the discussion tasks are designed in a way which can help students interact quite independently without too much scaffolding from the teacher concerning topics that connect to their own lives, as well as to major themes in the book. These topics can also be connected to the other non-language learning outcomes promoted in today's inclusive university curricula, such as critical thinking skills, cultural appreciation, whole-person development, lifelong learning, global

outlook, sense of ethical conduct and social responsibility. The following are examples of discussion topics for the three types of books:

Fiction classic: *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens

If you were offered a similar type of benefit and opportunity by an unknown person on similar conditions, like what was given to Pip, would you accept it? Why or why not?

Conditions for the offer to Pip:

- Always bear the name of Pip
- The name of the benefactor remains a secret until he chooses to reveal it

(The reading extract is Chapter 18 of the book. The young protagonist Pip meets Jaggers, a lawyer from London, who informs him of a secret benefactor's intention to offer a sum of money for Pip's education to become a gentleman.)

Contemporary fiction: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J. K. Rowling

Why do you think the Harry Potter books are so popular? Can you suggest some reasons after reading this extract? Do you like the book yourself? Do you think you will enjoy reading the book on your own?

(The reading extract is from Chapter 7 of the book. It describes the welcome ceremony of the Hogwarts School of Magic, in which new students are magically sorted by the headmaster into different houses.)

Non-fiction: *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey

The text describes five levels of listening:

1. Ignoring
2. Pretending
3. Selective listening
4. Attentive listening
5. Empathic listening

Can you think of some examples in your life when you practised listening at one or more of these levels, e.g. listening to a friend, your parents, or the lectures? Do you agree with the author's evaluation of the fifth level of listening?

(The reading extract is from the section 'Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood'. It is related to the principles of empathetic communication.)

The main purpose of these support sessions is to develop students' interest and ability in further extensive reading on their own for the same book which they start reading in the small group, and even for other books for general L1 readers. It is hoped that they can gradually develop an extensive reading habit.

Online materials for continuous extensive reading

The online references at the end of the task sheet provide material to cultivate students' reading interest further. They can be online reviews or critical analyses of the book for which students have read the extract, as well as multi-media materials for stimulating interest, such as film titles and audio recordings.

Student feedback

Feedback taken from the student reflections at the end of the sessions indicate that these reading sessions are beneficial for developing reading interest and ability. Students felt that they gained a better understanding of the book at the end of the reading sessions and some of them indicated that they would be interested in reading the book later or watching the film adaptation of the book.

Conclusion

The development of good writing skills and extensive reading habits requires self-directed learning efforts. However, they are difficult to develop without initial teacher support. They are also hard to sustain without the cultivation of interest. These guided sessions can provide support and stimulation to encourage individual learning efforts.

The development and attainment of other non-language learning outcomes promoted in the new curriculum of the university, such as critical thinking skills, cultural appreciation, a broad knowledge base, and a sense of ethical conduct and social responsibility, can only be achieved through sustained self-learning. This type of long-term learning effort also needs initial encouragement and support from teachers.

Face-to-face individualised instruction is valuable at all times. In a technological age where digital access to information is becoming easier, individualised personal instruction can focus more on the development of critical engagement and higher order thinking skills. In our changing educational environment, intensive individualised instruction would still be needed to help students cope with the large amounts of information and knowledge they are exposed to, in order to develop higher order cognitive skills to make good use of these in tackling various types of learning needs.

The types of scaffolding provided in these learning sessions are different from those which often occur in the classroom. The sessions are flexible and learner-centred to address different individual learning needs chosen to be addressed by students rather than decided by the teacher. The teacher can also adjust the level of directiveness in conducting these sessions in response to the different levels of autonomous learning skills students have. Scaffolding strategies used by the teacher can also serve as models for students to monitor their own learning.

These learning sessions can be used flexibly to address specific learning needs. They can be easily replicated by small groups of students who are interested in working on their own without teacher guidance by following the suggested structures or materials. The voluntary and impromptu nature of these learning sessions suit the learning style of present-day students who are facing high demands on their educational performance and who also have a busy learning schedule, but might not be readily prepared to commit to activities which are too demanding and time-consuming. They are also relatively easy and flexible to be conducted in independent learning centres.

With initial support to make (extensive) reading and writing in a second language a less intimidating task for students, there is a possibility that they can gradually develop into independent readers and writers with an interest and ability in self-directed reading and writing development. This is one of the important goals for helping students become autonomous learners.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Writing Reflection Sheet

Part A: General reflections on writing

Reflect on your major strengths and weaknesses, especially in content and organisation of ideas.

Strengths	Weaknesses

Appendix B

Part B: Language problems analysis

Tick your major types of errors (around three of them) and give examples below (or mark them on your piece of writing).

Types of errors	*Examples from your writing*
A. Tenses e.g. I <u>meet</u> an old friend yesterday.	
B. Verb forms e.g. He <u>was read</u> a book when the bell <u>ringing</u>.	
C. Parts of speech e.g. She followed the steps <u>careful</u> when she worked on the project.	
D. Sentence structures e.g. We happy last night saw old friends.	
E. Incorrect/Inappropriate words e.g. I was <u>fear</u> of the dog.	
F. Redundant/Unnecessary words e.g. Robert returned <u>back</u> the book to her.	
G. Connectives e.g. I don't really like this idea. <u>Therefore</u>, I am totally against it.	
H. –ing and –ed forms e.g. I am very <u>interesting</u> in chess.	
I. Prepositions e.g. We have to take action <u>with</u> response to the situation.	
J. Singular/Plural forms/Agreement e.g. There <u>is</u> many <u>student</u> in the class.	
K. Others: e.g. spelling, articles, active/passive voices, word order	