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## **Beyond the Classroom: The Role of Self-Guided Learning in Second Language Listening and Speaking Practice**

Marion Davis, Georgia State University

### Abstract

There is a significant difference in most language instruction programs concerning the number of hours students spend practicing reading/writing skills versus listening/speaking skills. The primary cause for this is most likely due to the lack of class time that can be feasibly spent on meaningful conversation exchanges. Thus, the most logical answer is to have students practice outside the classroom. However, the transition from in-class learning to out-of-class practice is often not a very successful one. To address this deficiency and present possible options for creating successful learning environments beyond the classroom, this literature review offers an in-depth analysis of the role that guided learning plays in providing learning experiences for students beyond the classroom.

*Keywords:* SGL, self-guided learning, self-directed learning, self-access learning, and autonomous learning

Language teachers often encounter a common difficulty present in language pedagogy. While it is feasible enough to teach reading and writing skills within the classroom as students can easily study individually, each completing his or her work simultaneously and then reporting back to class, language instruction involving listening and speaking tasks is an entirely different matter. Put simply, there is just not enough time for each student to participate in a meaningful conversation within class due to schedule limitations, resulting in a need for students to often practice outside of class. Yet, from my own teaching experience, I have noted that this instruction to practice outside the confines of the classroom often comes in the form of an occasional reminder from teachers that their students should strive to practice as much as possible with native speakers—an aside from the normal reading- and writing-based homework assignments.

However, motivations provided to encourage students to practice outside the classroom seem to be lacking. In fact, in one Canadian study on ESL students' studying habits, Song (2008) discovered that while students reported spending a substantial number of hours per week developing English-language reading and writing skills, these same students admitted to only

spending forty minutes or less a week outside of the classroom speaking with or listening to native speakers of English. So where then does this deficit lie? Why are students failing to practice listening and speaking skills outside the classroom? The following review of literature will examine an array of studies on guided learning within a variety of research fields in order to determine how exactly language teachers can feasibly use technology tools to provide motivation and guidance outside the classroom for the students to be able to practice within a scaffolded learning environment. The literature reviewed in this article is specifically tailored for the purpose of informing language teachers; however, the studies chosen for this analysis were selected from a wide range of fields, not specifically language pedagogy. Thus, to better represent this expansive selection, the more general term of self-guided learning (SGL) will be implemented to describe all self-directed, self-access, and autonomous learning possibilities.

### **Self-Guided Learning within Modern Pedagogical Approaches**

Within many teaching approaches, the period of guided instruction often ends when class hours are over. Even students at a lower level of instruction—where a high level of scaffolding is imperative—are typically assigned a vast quantity of self-guided assignments outside the classroom. While SGL seems to be a growing trend within contemporary pedagogical perspectives, in fact, as described in the literature to follow, decades of empirical research have proven that implementing minimally-guided learning assignments when students have very little prior knowledge rarely results in any substantial positive effects. Thus, an increased level of teacher-based guidance is needed from the very beginning in order to help students develop to the point where they have the knowledge and experience to effectively guide their own learning.

SGL is often noted as being an appropriate learning approach of the twenty-first century as the open-ended nature of this approach matches the vast quantity of resources available nowadays (e.g. Benson & Chik, 2010). There is a cultural shift within the education field as autonomy is increasingly transferred to students' self-guided language learning outside the classroom (Benson, 2011). However, there is one caveat to hastily handing over control to students. In a study on informational self-access centers that can be interpreted somewhat as a small-scale representative of the use of the internet in modern education, King (2011) asserts that the provision of “effective support for learners, be it from a classroom teacher or a learning advisor, is critical to the success of self-access learning” (p. 258). The idea for King's study

originated primarily from the lack of ESL teachers within the author's university who were available to provide as much direction as needed; thus, a self-access learning center was introduced, and the university's language department subsequently sought to determine the best approach to providing scaffolding for these self-directed learning conditions.

King (2011) labels his study as a case study, yet it seems to take on more of a mixed methods approach as it progresses, involving a mix of qualitative surveys and quantified responses. Seventeen intermediate-level English language learners from diverse backgrounds were recruited and instructed to complete ten one-page worksheets for a scaffolded self-access portfolio over the course of the sixteen-week language program. This portfolio was not assigned to replace any class work, and it was not mentioned within the classroom. Instead, the completion of this learning tool was entirely up to the student with the only instructional guidance provided being the set of guiding questions on the cover of the portfolio "that promoted learners to reflect on their learning needs and their attitudes to learning outside of the classroom" (King, 2011, p. 259). The one-page worksheets were structured in such a way as to progress from teacher-directed to semi-directed to self-directed with the first tasks being to read a second-language newspaper article and contact a peer tutor, while the final task instruction stated simply to choose any English language activity that the students felt to be most appropriate for their learning needs.

At the end of the semester, the majority of the students reported that they had been spending more time studying outside of the classroom for an average increase of 0.14 hours per student. Very few students reported an increased range of activities incorporated within their study habits. However, King (2011) states that the learners—as evident in their responses—were much more aware of the importance of practicing English outside of the classroom. One student even remarked that this practice gave them the chance to use what they had learned only very briefly within the classroom.

### **Teacher-Directed Learning versus Self-Guided Learning**

Teacher-directed learning is most essential when the learning process involves exposure to an unfamiliar and complex environment (Brydges, Carnahan, Rose, & Dubrowski, 2010; King, 2011; Kornell & Bjork, 2007; Osman, 2012). However, while this seems to be a commonly-accepted fact, how exactly to provide this necessary guidance is a much debated

topic. The complexities present in guided learning are many and constitute a wide range of varieties, the effectiveness of which is determined by the tasks and learning environments at hand. Both teacher-directed and SGL can have rather severe negative consequences if implemented incorrectly (Brydges et al., 2010). Accordingly, instructors must educate themselves on the variety of guided learning most suitable for the learning task and environment.

Brydges et al. (2010) introduce an interesting comparison of terms that helps to describe the different possibilities present within one particular strain of guided learning. Nowadays, SGL is becoming the go-to pedagogical approach, especially within the medical field due to a shortage of staff and the recognition of SGL for its ability to increase the number of students assigned to an educator. However, SGL is a double-edged sword; while students may be able to exert their autonomy in such a way as to prepare them to become life-long learners, current literature on this topic asserts that students “do not necessarily capitalize on learning opportunities when left to their own devices” (Brydges et al., 2010, p. 1833). To take advantage of the positive aspects of both SGL and directed learning, Brydges et al. (2010) developed a concept termed *directed self-guided learning* (DSGL) where educators use “validated learning principles” to create a scaffolded learning environment where students are “given control of an element of practice and therefore are metacognitively, behaviourally and motivationally active in their learning” (p. 1833).

The active component of directed learning and SGL lies in the intensity of the scaffolding provided—more so than who exactly is providing the guidance. If a teacher were to instruct her students simply to do their best, would this vague outcome goal be more effective than students who set step-by-step personal goals to guide themselves through a complex task? In a study within the medical field that compared the learning successes of four groups when completing a complex wound-suturing task—SGL with pre-set process goals, SGL with pre-set outcome goals, teacher-directed learning with pre-set process goals, and teacher-directed learning with pre-set outcome goals—Brydges, Carnahan, Safir, and Dubrowski (2009) found that self-guided participants who adhered to the pre-set process goals “performed better on retention than those whose access to instruction was externally controlled” (p. 512), while their outcome goals counterparts did not experience similar benefits. Those participants in either of the teacher-directed groups did not perform as well on the retention test, the reason for this being identified by Brydges et al. (2009) as the lack of autonomy necessary for students to “tailor knowledge

production to his or her specific needs and may also result in increased motivation” (p. 512). Thus, as long as the learning environment accessed by the students provided sufficient structure—e.g. a learning management system (LMS) with instructional multimedia and structured navigation—the self-guided students were able to efficiently and effectively tailor the curriculum to their own learning needs and use this autonomy to ensure better skill retention (Brydges et al., 2009). Overall, the authors stressed the effectiveness of a learning environment that combined self-guided access with the pre-determination of process goals (Brydges et al., 2009).

The findings of this study seem to be somewhat contradictory to Osman (2012), as the participants observed by Brydges et al. (2009) found much more success when self-guiding their learning experiences. However, in some regards, these two studies could be seen as partially complementary of each other, one emphasizing the importance of structured learning in the form of teacher-directed learning and the other emphasizing the importance of structured learning in the form of a directed-LMS with heavy scaffolding and pre-set process goals. Perhaps then, all that is needed to increase the effectiveness of SGL and promote its use as a tool to guide learning outside the classroom is to ensure that students have access to a well-structured learning environment with externally-determined process goals.

### **Providing Scaffolding outside the Classroom**

Attempting to discover how the use of online learning environments can help provide an easily-accessible form of scaffolding outside the classroom, Ahmadian (2012) sought to determine what online course structure had the greatest effect on students’ “oral production of English articles” as well as the “global complexity and fluency of intermediate EFL learners’ oral language performance” (p. 129). In the author’s study, forty-five intermediate English-language learners (ELL) were equally separated into three groups: “guided careful online planning, unguided careful online planning, and pressured online planning” (Ahmadian, 2012, p. 129). The students in the pressured online planning group were given general instructions and a time limit for the completion of the assigned task. The students in the unguided careful online planning group were given general instructions and as much time as was needed to complete the task. The guided careful online planning group was also given general task instructions and unlimited time; however, they were given a handout reviewing the language structures being

learned before commencing the exercise. All students were then required to record a short speech. These narrations were transcribed and coded for “complexity, accuracy, and fluency” (Ahmadian, 2012, p. 139). The narrations were compared across groups with a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine if the complexity, accuracy, and overall fluency means of each group were significantly different. Ahmadian (2012) indicated that focusing EFL learners’ attention on particular English language structures during the online planning process aids learners in producing more accurate linguistic features while those learners who were required to record their narration within a time limit “tend[ed] to put more premium on the pre-linguistic conceptualization stage and, to some extent, bypass form...in favor of meaning” (Ahmadian, 2012, p. 144).

In order to inform the creation of curriculum designed for self-study outside of the classroom, instructors can turn to past research conducted on the use of structured learning tools within the classroom to see what works best and decide how best to convert these to items that can be used to help guide student learning outside of the classroom. In a meta-analysis on the effectiveness of guided notes, Haydon, Mancil, Kroeger, McLeskey, and Lin (2011) reviewed 13 studies in an attempt to examine how effective the use of guided notes is within the classroom. This meta-analysis study was based on past research that “has revealed that if students who struggle academically are to be successful, they need support or scaffolding in taking appropriate notes” (Haydon et al., 2011, p. 226). Overall, the meta-analysis conducted by Haydon et al. (2011) indicated that studying with guided notes typically produced better outcomes than traditional note-taking across the board, resulting—more specifically—in “improved test scores, improved accuracy of note taking, and, at least in one investigation, increased student responses during class” (Haydon et al., 2011, p. 229). These results indicated that guided notes are the perfect scaffolding tool in that they focus students on certain aspects of the lecture or reading content and—in doing so—provide students with an example of the correct approach to create concise and meaningful notes.

Using structured learning curriculum as a means of providing scaffolding outside of the classroom is a practice that can be implemented within a wide variety of learning subject areas and task complexity levels. Moore, Kerr, and Hadgraft (2011) acknowledged that experiential learning is a crucial aspect of the learning experience. However, it can be a bit difficult to provide students with real-life pragmatic experiences when limited to the confines of the

classroom, and large-scale class field trips are often far from practical. To identify a solution to this problem, Moore et al. (2011) sought to determine a framework that would be capable of providing a “safe, active learning experience by way of self-guided field trips that is suitable for implementation with large classes” (p. 107) and identify the elements necessary to support this framework. The prototype developed by Moore et al. (2011) was tested out on an impressive population size of 260 students who visited the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne on their own schedule. In order for the field trip to be successful as a learning experience, the authors determined that students must first be instructed on the subject, reviewing the rationale and “key learning objectives, before setting out to compile the various multimedia components required” (Moore et al., 2011, p. 113). These multimedia components were similar to the voice-guided tour CDs that tourists can buy and listen to as they navigate a historical area. After completing the field trip, the students took an online survey in which they assessed the overall quality of their field trip experience. The majority of the students rated the experience as a positive one, identifying the only major downsides as being a result of logistical problems.

Through their examination of the effectiveness of self-guided field trips, Moore et al. (2011) present an interesting perspective on the variety of learning tasks actually possible outside the classroom. Studying habits—for one—are an integral area of the learning process, an area in which students are often ill-equipped. Yet, so often, instructors may automatically assume that their students are capable of employing the correct study habits, *correctness* possibly being determined by the amount of time spent on each concept to be studied. In one multi-layered study, Kornell and Bjork (2007) evaluated a series of articles to determine which studying habit models are most appropriate for assessing study skill levels, deciding upon the “region of proximal learning (RPL) model of study time allocation, which holds that study choices depend on a person’s goals, which in turn depend on the situation” (p. 219). In a review of their past study a few years before, Kornell and Bjork discussed the effect of externally-imposed studying rules and self-set studying determinations. The study was structured based on a student survey that had revealed that 56% of students are likely to use flashcards when studying and 75% of these will *drop* flashcards when they believe themselves to be familiar enough with a topic. Was this somewhat instinctual self-determined decision to *drop* flashcards—in other words, move on once a concept is deemed to be learned—an effective approach to learning? To answer this question, the authors separated an unidentified number of participants randomly and equally into



two groups. Each group was given 10 minutes to study Swahili vocabulary words using flashcards. One group was allowed to drop flashcards while the other group was not permitted to do so. At the end of these ten minutes, the students were given an assessment to determine how many Swahili vocabulary words they remembered. Those students who were *not* allowed to drop flashcards had an accuracy rate of 63% as compared to the *drop* group with an accuracy rate of 59%

What Kornell and Bjork (2007) asserted based on their findings was that many students commonly incorporate studying habits that actually have no merit to speak of. In fact, students often rely on their intuition too heavily when encountering seemingly basic learning practices, resulting in a series of bad habits that lead to a lesser level of learning success. To determine what college students do and do not know about correct studying practices, Kornell and Bjork administered a questionnaire to 472 students enrolled in a freshman psychology course at UCLA. The results were somewhat astonishing with only “one in five students...report[ing] having been taught study strategies—and those strategies may not have been optimal” (Kornell & Bjork, 2007, p. 224). Consequently, instructors must take care to determine students’ studying ability, correcting any erroneous practices and adding on to students’ correct study habits skill set.

Taking on a more general perspective, Tullis and Benjamin (2011) conducted a quantitative study on students’ ability to pace themselves as they study. Two hundred and thirty-four freshman psychology students from a local university were each assigned to individual rooms equipped with a single desktop computer. The participants were split up equally in the number of individuals assigned to three groups: self-paced condition, fixed-rate condition, and normative-allotment condition. The first condition allowed students to allot as much time to each study point as necessary. The second condition assigned the same amount of time to each study point. The last condition allocated a certain amount of time in which a concept could be studied based on the statistically-determined difficulty of that particular item. After studying these points, the participants took a short assessment. The self-pacers scored significantly higher than the other two groups while the normative-allotment subjects scored the lowest out of all three groups. These findings can be seen as linking back to the continually-emerging theme that the most effective method of integrating aspects of both SGL and directed learning is to equip students with the framework and learning skills necessary to complete a task in any learning

environment but let the students fill in the gaps, using their autonomy as the guiding factor so as to tailor their own learning in such a way as to make it more personally meaningful.

### **Conclusion**

In all, these findings can help to inform the development of language learning tasks and corresponding provided instruction, as well as educator decisions made concerning the development of supporting scaffolded online learning environments. By providing students with a set of guided instructions with process goals to use outside of the classroom, instructors will be able to prepare their students as much as possible for the learning experiences they are likely to encounter. For example, teachers could provide their students with portfolios that instruct their students to interview native English speakers and ask them a set of questions that was prepared in class ahead of time. This allows the students to prepare for the exercise within the classroom under the supervision of the instructor. However, instead of limiting the activity to the confines of the classroom, by requiring students to go and interview individuals as homework, this allows the instructors to incorporate actual conversational English practice into the students' language studies and yet still provide their students with some sort of scaffolding.

Thus, with the provision of enough out-of-class guidance, the intimidating and overwhelming nature of learning outside the classroom becomes much more manageable. With the further development and enhancement of methods for providing a scaffolded online environment, this external guidance can be used as a source of motivation for language students to study outside the classroom, referring to the corresponding directions for navigation as they encounter pragmatic listening and speaking learning experiences within the real world.

### **Notes on the Contributor**

Marion Davis is an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teacher, curriculum designer, and educational technology instructor. She began her career as an adult ESL teacher in Atlanta, Georgia, upon earning her Master's degree in Applied Linguistics & ESL. Later on, while working as an English language teacher in South Korea, Marion was part of a recruited team of teachers who developed technology-enhanced educational curriculum for elementary students enrolled in a summer school program. To enhance her instructional design skills, she applied to the Instructional Technology Ph.D. program at Georgia State University and began taking online

courses with the university while still teaching abroad. Upon returning to Atlanta, she has continued to work as an ESL teacher, in addition to resuming her studies at Georgia State University.

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