I. Introduction

Self-access learning is another learning mode having been implemented at various educational institutions all over the world—City University of Hong Kong, English Language Institute at Oregon State University, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Khon Kan University, King Mongkut University, for instance. Its' merits have attracted a considerable amount of interest of educational personnel. A wide collection of journal articles and textbooks relating to this language mode has been published. To implement or not to implement the learning mode to each particular group of learner, however, is an issue worthy a serious consideration.

Terms and Definition

Different terms are used to refer to the learning pattern, including, self-instruction (SI), self-access learning (SA), self-direction, self-teaching, self-study, autonomous learning, semi-autonomy, and autonomy. However, SI or SA – to be used interchangeably in this report -- are used more frequently in the literature.

In terms of meaning, different definitions have been proposed to explain the characteristics of the learning mode. A few were quoted as follow.

"*Self-access (SA) language learning is learning a language through the use of a self-contained learning environment which provides an independent study program with readily accessible materials, makes available a form of help—either through answer keys or through counseling and possibly offers the latest technology*" (Klassen et al, 1998, p. 55)

Similarly, Dickinson (1994) defined self-instruction as:

"situations in which a learner, with others, or alone, is working without the direct control of a teacher. This might be for short periods within a lesson or whole lessons, or in the extreme case of learner autonomy, when he undertakes the whole of his learning without the help of a teacher." (p. 5)

Dickinson further defined autonomy—another variation of this learning mode as the following:

Autonomy [refers to] the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with this learning and the implementation of those decisions (p. 11)

The meanings quoted above indicated that SI is practiced in various fashions depending on the degrees or extent of teacher control or decision the learners have to make. That is, the teacher' role varies according to the learner's responsibility in making decision on the learning elements—what to learn, through what kind of learning material they want to learn, how much time to spend on each particular learning unit or unit of knowledge, etc.

Honeyfield (2000) classified SI into 10 different variations according to the amount of teacher control as the followings: (1) classroom work with some learner choice of tasks, (2) classroom work where students have different materials, (3) homework, (4) group work in the classroom, (5) learning through computer-based tasks, (6) syllabus negotiation, (7) participatory evaluation, (8) implementing a process syllabus, (9) self-access center, and (10) independent learning projects.

Generally, in SI, learners could work individually. They could also do pair- or group-work. They may select learning activities, and also be responsible for their learning assessment. However, some activities were to be cross-evaluated by teachers.

Optional assessment of time spent on each activity was also counted as a criterion for evaluation.

Despite the learner's right and responsibility as described, the teachers were available in the center all the time while the students were in the center. The teachers, as well as technicians, were there to facilitate the learners and provide assistance when needed.

Rationale and Scope of the Study

It is asserted by researchers (Aston, 1993; Dulay & Burt, & Krashen, 1982, Barnette & Jordan, 1991) that foreign language exposure in the natural environment increased the learner' language proficiency.

The English language learning in Thailand is characterized as EFL, where the language is not used as an official language, like the language learning in Japan, Indonesia, etc. English is not used by most people in everyday activities as it is in the environment of English as a second language.

It is, thus, assumed that the foreign language learning atmosphere and educational system in Thailand, as a whole and in the south where PSU is situated, might not efficiently promote most learning to the learners. Due partly to the lack of natural exposure to the language use, students' language skills could hardly be improved to the extent that they could communicate efficiently. In other words, one problem for English learners here in Thailand is that they lack contextual support for the development of communication competence outside the classroom (Rujiketgumjorn, 2000). Some learners turned to certain available entertaining resources, such as cable TV, radio documentary, or sound-track movies, partly for entertaining purpose and partly for English proficiency improvement.

However, such authentic language sources may not be comprehensible input leading to little learning. Providing semi-natural environment of foreign language learning in the form of self-access learning center is, therefore, expected to be of benefit to the learners' language skill increment. ESAC should be an ideal approach to enhance English language besides classroom language. That is, The English language learning in such environment seems to hint that English Self Access Center (ESAC) is needed to be promoted.

Nevertheless, prior to any investment in human, monetary or other material resources, it is crucial that the learner's learning behavior be investigated so that the waste in resources and effort could be prevented. A question to be answered is "Is it time SI learning were officially promoted and implemented to students of Prince of Songkla University? "

Therefore, this study was aimed at exploring Prince of Songkla University (PSU) students' English access learning or self-instruction (SI) behavior and the use of the university ESAC facility.

In particular, it surveyed the situation of English SI by undergraduate students seeking to discover if students undertook the learning mode, when, where, and what activities they did in undertaking SI. Also investigated were reasons of those who did not undertake this learning mode. In so doing the university's English Self- Access Center (ESAC) was drawn to connect with this study. That is, SI in this study included both SI at the university's ESAC and elsewhere. The result was hoped to be an indication to help making decision on how to improve the existing ESAC and how to implement SI to the university students.

English learning at Prince of Songkla University

Like other institutions in the higher education system in this country, the actual educational practice at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai, Thailand, comprised two portions. Formal classroom learning was provided by each faculty and practiced systematically across all disciplines. Self-access learning outside the classroom, on the other hand, depended on the instructor, materials used and each individual student's learning behavior.

The syllabi for English language learning at PSU, especially the two required courses called *Foundation I* and *Foundation II*, embraced both classroom language learning and self-access work. Each chapter of the textbook used for both courses contained SI exercises and assignments.

So far, based on the researcher's experience and informal observation, however, it was found that the class conduct for the 2 courses has been going through difficulty. The problems arose partly due to the learners' limited proficiency. Further, learners with rather different proficiency levels were placed together in each class. In such situation, the teacher inevitably decided to conduct class according to the pace and proficiency of the main stream seemingly ignoring the students' various levels of proficiency and needs. Those who had limited proficiency could hardly catch up with the lessons, while the more efficient learners virtually got along well with the instructor's pace. This accentuated the problems in English language teaching and caused boredom to those poor learners. Each semester a great number of students received a failing grade in the English course they took.

To alleviate such problem SI seems to be a promising learning- teaching alternative because of its numerous advantages (Littlewood, 1999). Among the good sides of SI is learner autonomy, which is the ultimate goal of teaching. In addition,

this learning mode was attested to cater individual's needs, interests, and learning strategies (Dickinson, 1994). That is, learners develop their skills on individual pace and learning objectives and approach to learn. Therefore, it is time implementing SI approach to PSU students was considered.

At Prince of Songkla University, learner autonomy was viewed as one of the university's important mission aimed to attain, as stated by the university president at a conference on quality assurance at the Faculty of Liberal Arts (July 13th, 2001). He concernedly stated that university needed to catch up with the globalization emphasizing that we (educators) needed to conduct our duty according to the external pressure in the following fashions.

First, education in the future needs to be life-long endeavor. The university does not expect to produce graduates who cease learning as soon as (or even before) a degree is conferred. SI is seen able to enable learners to continue learning as long as they still wish to learn more.

Second, education must gear students to meet international standards and needs. It can be inferred that students should be able to attain an English proficiency adequate for international communication.

Finally, future education must be child-centered. Apparently, merely formal classroom learning and teaching may not meet the demand of such objectives mentioned above.

Thus, considering the merits and scenario elaborated above, the researcher conjectured that it was time SI learning be seriously promoted. The fact that SI learning can gradually build up the learner' unceasing learning behavior, this learning mode seems potential to help attain the university goal or mission, especially the

implementation of a learning mode which was applied or modified according to Thai learners, PSU students in particular.

To efficient and effective implement the learning mode, however, it is necessary to extensively study the factors involving the issue in question —English SI by PSU students.

Self-access center at PSU

There was no serious encouraging or support for SI by the university. Nonetheless, self-access center started in 1984. The Department of Foreign Language (then) in co-operation with the university central library, considered establishing the so-called English self-access center (ESAC). A section at the library was subsequently allocated for the purpose. The initial aim of the learning center was to provide students with a resource center where they could make use of the available resources to revise what they had studied in the classroom and increase language skills and knowledge. ESAC held both printed and audio-visual materials.

As mentioned earlier, one fact of English language teaching problem here in PSU is the difference in proficiency levels of the learners. Thus, besides providing learning resources for any interested users, ESAC was established mainly to assist those who had limited English proficiency and wanted to reestablish their English language foundation. It was hoped that using the ESAC would subsequently lead them to catch up with the lessons taught in the classroom and be able to get along with the pace of their classmates and the instructor. However, up to the time data collection of this study took place, ESAC had not had English instructors standing by to help learners when they needed help with SI in the ESAC.