
SELF-ACCESS LEARNING AT THE AIT

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Abstract

The Self-Access Listening Library (SALL) at the Language Center of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangkok, Thailand has been operating since 1990 and the users are students, staff, faculty and their families. While it is generally known that the SALL plays an important role in learning at AIT, the writer tries to find out the extent of its usefulness and the learners' needs and preferences by conducting a survey with a questionnaire and informal talks with users. The aim is to find out the learners' attitude towards (a) self-access learning, (b) the materials available in the SALL, and (c) the operating system. This article reports on the findings of the survey.

Background

The context of this study is an international institution for post-graduate studies in Bangkok, Thailand which has been specially established for the development of the Asia and Pacific region. The institution is known as the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) and it addresses the requirements of the countries of the region through appropriate introduction or transfer of new technologies. It offers degree, diploma and certificate programs and the medium of instruction and communication at the institute is English. Such being the case in this educational setting, the need for the language is apparent and so the interest in introducing the self-access learning approach arises from this need.

Students from some 30 countries come to study at AIT. They are both male and female in their late 20s. Some are fresh graduates while others have worked for some years after graduating. They come with different

backgrounds in the use of the English language; for some, English is a second language and for the others it is a foreign language. Many of the students say that they do not have many opportunities to use English in their countries. Some had very little to do with English in their university days as well as at work. Some do not need to use it at their work at all. It is obvious that many students have not had much exposure to English or prior opportunity to use English, thus making them reluctant to use English. With such backgrounds, once a student enters AIT, he or she has to face a demanding situation as regards the use of English for academic purposes. The faculty are multinationals speaking in a variety of accents and with different styles. Students have to give oral presentations and take part in discussions, workshops and seminars in English. They have to read extensively, write assignments, research reports and theses are administrative demands that students need to perform in English. English is used for socializing in AIT's multinational community. It is a residential

university and all the students live in university housing. Some students are married (with children) and live with their families on the campus. Students speak their first language among their national groups, but it is not possible to use it in socializing with other nationalities. The student population is generally made up of people from the Asia and Pacific region where English is mostly used as a second language. Therefore, English is the common language used for socializing and so becomes as demanding as academic study; students need help in overcoming the inhibitions that make them reluctant to use English.

The role of the Language Center (LC)

The LC is trying to help students who need language assistance. It tries to satisfy all the common needs by offering well-designed courses. But the students have limited time for language classes as they have to cope with enormous pressure in their respective divisions with examinations, subject assignments and oral presentations, etc. Thus the contact hours the LC has with the students is very limited (3 to 4 hours per week) and the scope of work that can be done is very limited. It is not practical for the LC to take more of the students' time. So other steps are considered to extend the scope of the assistance of the LC in easing the students' entry into an English speaking academic environment and to develop their potential to learn and to communicate in English throughout their five terms. This has resulted in the setting up of the LC Self Access Listening Library (SALL).

Self-access learning

What is self-access? "Self-access is a way of describing learning materials that are designed and organized in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own and obtain feedback on their performance, for example, by comparing their answer to a key which accompanies the material" (Sheerin, 1991:143). Students are responsible for making decisions on what they need to learn, in what order and how they are going to achieve their goals. This kind of learning program encourages learners to learn on their own rather than to be told what to learn by a teacher. This way of learning is learning at one's own pace. It is time saving and can be an effective way of

learning that is not found in a traditional classroom setting. It also allows more proficient students to progress at a faster pace.

Self-access listening library in the AIT Language Center (SALL)

SALL is located in a room of its own in the LC. It has 9 listening booths, 1 TV, 1 video player, 1 computer, more than 300 course books and about 950 audiotapes and 50 video tapes. These include a few films and some tapes about engineering, but mainly consist of tapes made by students themselves on our intensive pre-master's program. Apart from English material which forms the greatest portion, materials are also available in Thai, French, Japanese and German.

All the AIT students are adults who do not need any close supervision. It is assumed that they are mature enough to know their own needs and are willing to work and learn on their own. So a learning situation where the learners can work through the materials at their own pace and at times which are convenient to them is created.

As mentioned earlier, students have to deal with a variety of demanding tasks and are always running against time. Because of this time constraint, students are given an alternative--either to work in the SALL or check out the items.

Accessibility

Due attention has been paid to accessibility. To help students have easy access to materials, information folders are kept. Students can get information about the organization of the SALL cataloguing system from these folders. There is a main catalogue in which all the tapes and books available in the SALL are alphabetically listed. These tapes and books are again classified according to specific skills or purposes and entered in separate catalogues bearing appropriate labels such as BE (Business English), GC (General English Course), GL (General Listening), GP (General Pronunciation), GD (Grammar Drills), LP (Listening for Pleasure), EX (Examinations), etc. Figure 1 is an example of an entry in the BE catalogue. It gives the information the student would wish to know about the material. It contains the code, title, number of cassettes, level, purpose, accent and type of text.

BE 9	12 CASSETTES
ENGLISH FOR SECRETARIES	OUP
12 UNITS, 2 LANGUAGE LABORATORY SECTIONS PER UNIT SECRETARIAL ENGLISH, BRITISH ACCENTS UPPER INTERMEDIATE TO ADVANCED LEVEL THERE IS AN ACTIVE LISTENING EXERCISE IN EACH UNIT	
USE THE STUDENT'S BOOK WHEN RECORDING THE EXERCISES AND THE TEACHER'S BOOK FOR CHECKING OR CORRECTING THE LISTENING EXERCISES.	
USEFUL FOR	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - STRESS, RHYTHM, INTONATION & PRONUNCIATION - LEARNING COMMON OFFICE PHRASEOLOGY - LISTENING COMPREHENSION 	

Fig. 1 An example of an entry in BE catalogue

As the learners are given detailed information of the material, they can select the material to suit their own purpose. As an alternative way of providing help to the learners, the SALL is now also in the process of developing a computer index of the tapes and materials describing the key features of each item. Books and tapes of any one section are stored together and section is clearly labelled such as BE, GP, etc. They are horizontally stored in the cupboard so that the learners can easily read the titles and the code. Thus, a user who wants to get a tape on business English can find it easily in the BE section. Since the same code number is used for the tape and its worksheet or tapescript, the learner can conveniently choose the tape and the worksheet or tapescript that goes with it.

Academic division tapes

As for the tapes of the AIT academic divisions, they are classified division-wise in labelled folders bearing division codes such as WRE (Water Resources Engineering), GTE (Geotechnical and Transportation Engineering), AFE (Agriculture and Food Engineering), etc. Each folder contains all the subjects connected with the particular division, for example, the AFE folder contains subjects like crop nutrition, fish in tropical countries, fish spoilage, etc. Detailed information about the content of the tape is given as follows:

Example

AFE 13. Crop Nutrition

In this lecture, how to go about developing a fertilizer policy for a particular crop is described generally and specifically.

Since the faculty are multinational and the students need time to adjust to a wide variety of accents and styles of speech, as many recordings of professors' lectures as possible are kept at the SALL along with recordings made by the LC faculty. These recordings include lectures of common interest such as on research methodology and lectures that deal with specific matters, for example, on crop nutrition. These recordings make available a wide number of accents and speaking styles, and provide students with an opportunity for practice in listening to these. We believe that they accelerate the process of adjustment to accents by familiarization, serve the students' need to improve their language proficiency and at the same time widen the students' scope of knowledge of their particular fields.

Learning strategies

Most of the materials are accompanied by worksheets and tapescripts and since they are supplied with keys students can obtain feedback by comparing

the answers to a key. Students can do several different activities on the worksheets concentrating on different strategies, for example, predicting, skimming, scanning and inferencing. The instructions as to what students need to do are clearly given on the worksheets. Figure 2 is a worksheet which illustrates the kind of

activities a student can do. Students can use the same material for different purposes, for instance, for listening practice, vocabulary building or note taking. Tasks available are designed in such a way that they can be applied to a number of different texts rather than to one particular text, illustrated in Figure 3.

<p>A SEISMIC DOWN-HOLE SURVEY</p> <p>Section A</p> <p>Listen to the tape and use the information that is presented in the lecture to complete the notes on the worksheet:</p> <p>Introduction:</p> <p>Recently, seismic resistant design of earth structures has attracted many engineering concerns esp. for-nuclear power plts require _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Reason: _____ may collapse as a result of _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>*nucl. p.p. - many people die _____</p> <p>*e.f. dams - _____</p> <p>Important to predict if-- _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Usually use _____ to predict earthquake response.</p> <p>For this purpose shear modulus of soil is one of the most _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>in earthquake _____ of the ground.</p> <p>Section B</p> <p>Listen to the tape and answer the questions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why is no typical, standard value of shear modulus available? 2. Why is measurement of shear modulus at a particular site very important? 3. How were the vibrations detected? 4. What do plotted triangles indicate? 5. Why is seismic down-shole survey very popular all over the world?
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Fig. 2 A worksheet from the GTE folder

Implementation of Inventory Systems in China

Purpose: Recognizing contrasting ideas.

Instructions:

Read the article. For each section, indicate what idea the underlined word or words is contrasting.

Example :

Section 1 :

While organisations in developed countries have moved well beyond lot sizing...

- ... current policy and decision makers recognise the problem
- ... there is a desire for greater efficiency
- ... strong desire to adopt Western practices
- x. lot sizing is now in use in China

The word **while** signals that the following idea is in contrast to some idea the writer has already given or will give us. In this case, the writer tells us that lot sizing is now in use in China in contrast to developed countries which have moved beyond this method.

Section 2:

While the discussion is focused on China ...

- ... the problem is implementation
- ... there is insufficient capital and resources
- ... this paper suggests ways to overcome the problems
- ... this paper suggests a general approach to transmitting technical solutions

Section 3:

Although the government requires companies to estimate their needs...

- ... large companies receive equipment from state government
- ... smaller firms are supplied by local government
- ... allocations are provided in terms of materials, not budgets
- ... estimation is often done poorly

Section 4:

On the other hand, items in surplus may be overstocked...

- ... resources and capital are limited
- ... state and local government don't coordinate plans
- ... some factories are not finished due to material shortages
- ... companies overstock materials in short supply

Section 5:

However, in the new environment, the government will control companies indirectly...

- ... it takes a long time to implement change
- ... China has well entrenched systems
- ... companies were controlled directly in the old environment
- ... it will decrease the quality of products

Section 6:

They do, **however**, affect the recommendations in the next section...

- ... none of the problems are unique
- ... the problems are related to inventory and production
- ... the recommendations are for implementation of inventory systems in China
- ... the problems are particular chinese problems

Fig. 3 Task

Help and guidance

Information folders tell the users about the organization and cataloguing system. These folders help them select material that suits their purpose. Even then, if there is any difficulty in finding what they want, they can ask the LC technician for help. They can also ask a faculty member for advice if they are not sure what they need or what material to choose. Help is also provided by instructions posted in every listening booth showing which button to use for what purpose. This is to help the learners know what to do for repeating if they

want to listen again to a word or phrase, and for recording their own voice or erasing it, etc.

Importance of publicity is not overlooked. It is important to make users well informed about the SALL and so information about it is occasionally given in the AIT Bulletin, a weekly newsletter (see Figure 4). The users are informed about what kind of materials and facilities are available. Sometimes different areas and materials are highlighted, for example, giving suggestions on which materials to choose to improve a particular skill.

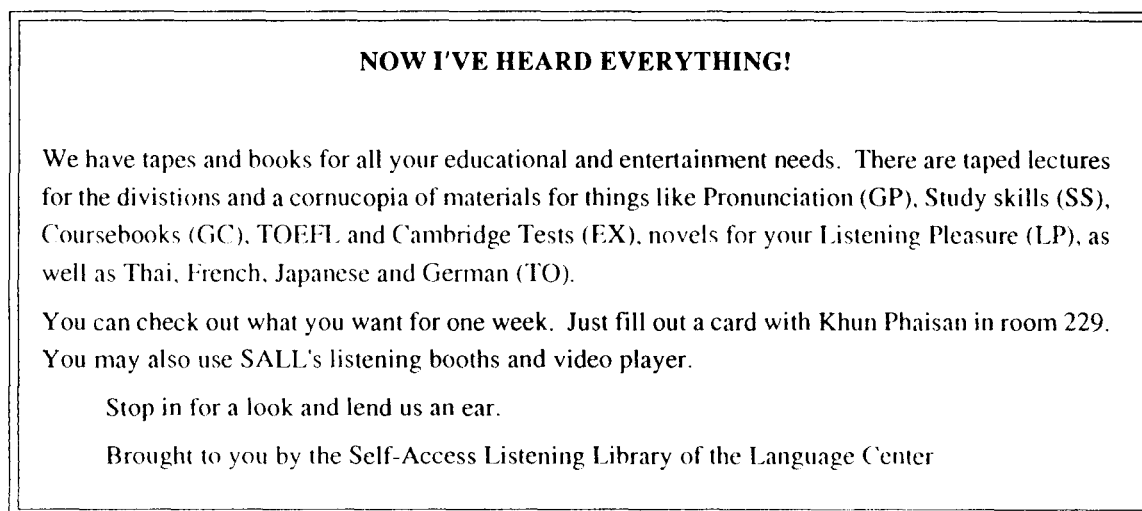


Fig. 4 AIT bulletin giving information about the SALL.

Evaluating the SALL facilities

It has been more than 3 years since SALL was set up and it was felt that it was now time to find out the users' response. A questionnaire was prepared and the target group chosen to answer the questionnaire was the participants of the 8-week intensive workshop in language and technology (November-December 1992 workshop and March-April 1993 workshop).

Respondents

The participants were of different nationalities, different educational backgrounds, different levels of competence in English with varied needs and interests in English. Of the 48 participants (29 males and 19 females), 19 were from Thailand, 8 from Vietnam, 10 from Lao PDR, 7 from Indonesia, 2 from the People's Republic of China, 1 from Taiwan and 1 from Myanmar. Regarding their professional background, there were 17 engineers (civil and electrical), 5 architects, 9 teachers, 2 computer programmers, 1 translator, 1 electronics worker, 1 geophysician, 1 oil service

worker, 1 research worker, 1 from an international aid division, 2 from the Vietnamese Women's Union, 3 from a social science department, and 4 from a telecommunication department. Some already had years of work experience behind them before attending the workshop.

In the first week of the workshop, the participants were introduced to the SALL and detailed instructions and advice were given on how to use it. After the workshop, 30 participants continued their academic studies at AIT while the rest went back to their respective countries.

The questionnaire and the findings

A questionnaire was constructed and given to all the 48 participants at the end of the workshop. The first part of the questionnaire (see Figure 5) asked general questions about use of the SALL. All said they visited the SALL even though the number of visits varied - 41 visited everyday while 6 made only 4 or 5 visits and 1 did not mention the number of visits made.

required to find out the causes. As to the last question on whether the participants will continue to learn independently, 93% reply yes while the rest do not commit themselves.

An attempt has been made to evaluate the SALL facilities, operating system and organization and find out the users' attitude towards this method of learning. We have tried to cover these two main areas in making the survey, but it cannot be claimed that it is exhaustive. Some aspects might have been left out and so further research in those areas as well as in other areas of self-access learning may be needed, especially in our context.

One significant point is we found that 64% who think they made reasonable progress are those who have made several visits to the SALL while those who do not think so include two kinds of visitors (a) those who have visited the SALL only 4 or 5 times and (b) those who have made several visits. The fact that the latter, in spite of several visits, have not made reasonable progress needs further investigation. It may be due to them not being used to the learning method. Do they find it difficult to adapt themselves to the change from the teacher-centered approach they have perhaps been used to, to the one which is learner-centered? Can they successfully identify their needs and define their own objectives? Is it due to difficulty in using the equipment in the SALL?

These are some of the questions that need to be

researched. In fact, how the students assess their own progress is not known and so the need to provide the students with measures for self-assessment arises. Future investigations should also concentrate on this area.

Conclusion

On the whole the present SALL service is found to be satisfactory as the majority of users gave favourable answers to most of the questions. As the staff have become more aware of the learners' needs and preferences, they will be able to fulfil their requirements more easily. Through informal talks with the participants, the staff have learned that the idea of self-access learning is quite new to all of them and this is the first time they have ever had a chance to learn by this approach. Surprisingly it is well liked and well accepted. They all accept SALL as a necessary resource for learners and seem to believe that SALL is offering the opportunity to them, adult learners, to become investigative researchers for knowledge. In the LC, where the style of learning is learner-centered, most of the students who have been accustomed only to the traditional teacher-centered method in their own country need to change their style of learning and it is believed that the SALL is helping them a great deal in doing so. Thus, it can be concluded that the SALL is serving its purpose and with the growing demand of the institution the need for an expanded SALL is apparent.

Note

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Appendix

Evaluation of the Self-Access Listening Library (SALL)

Which country do you come from?

What professional field do you belong to in your country?

Are you going back home after attending the "Talkase Programme" or are you going to stay on and study at AIT?

Do you visit the SALL? [Yes] [No]

If no, why not?

- | | | |
|---|-------|------|
| a. I don't think SALL can give me any help. | [Yes] | [No] |
| b. I don't have time. | [Yes] | [No] |
| c. I don't think the materials are very good. | [Yes] | [No] |
| d. Other reasons | | |

If yes, please answer the following questions.

What do you use it for---listening practice,	[]
practising speaking?	[]

How many times did you visit the SALL?

What kind of materials and activities do you like best?

What kind of materials and activities do you like least?

Do you think the materials available are appropriate? [Yes] [No]

Are the materials systematically classified and organised? [Yes] [No]

Are the materials fully indexed? [Yes] [No]

Are the materials stored in such a way that browsing is easily possible? [Yes] [No]

Can you easily find the worksheets or transcripts that match the particular tapes? [Yes] [No]

Which do you prefer using :

(a) materials with worksheets

(b) materials without worksheets

Do you think tapes accompanied by worksheets are more advantageous than those tapes which are not accompanied by worksheets?

[Yes] [No]

Do you think the materials in the SALL could be improved?

[Yes] [No]

If the answer is Yes, how?

Do you like this way of learning?

[Yes] [No]

Do you like studying at your own pace?

[Yes] [No]

Do you need any teacher or helper present?

[Yes] [No]

Do you think study in the SALL is enough or do you study at home as well?

Do you expect full learning success from studying in the SALL alone?

[Yes] [No]

Do you think the SALL operating a home loan service allows you greater freedom to work as and when you choose?

[Yes] [No]

Is SALL a necessary resource for learners?

[Yes] [No]

Do you find it easy or difficult to use the SALL facilities?

Does the SALL make you nervous?

[Yes] [No]

Do you enjoy working in the SALL?

[Yes] [No]

Will you continue to learn independently?

[Yes] [No]

Do you think you have made reasonable progress or you do not progress very far?

Any other comments.



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