

Self-access centers in EFL placement test preparation classes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of a self-access center in students' exam preparation skills acquisition and students' test grades. It will examine students' test self-regulation strategies in a self-access center designed and implemented in Moodle to provide EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners with a repository of organized and categorized resources ranging from A1 to B2 to maximize students' exam results. Students' strategies include planning, time management, goal setting and exam strategies monitored and surveyed during the class designed for native Spanish speakers learning English as a foreign language. Students are expected to use these strategies while they take a placement test preparation class in a four-month cycle. This type of class is a reinforcement course planned for students that have not reached a B2 English level in a placement test at the end of a four-level English Program in 480 hours and therefore, they need to improve language use, communication skills and exam strategies to finally reach B2. In this type of class, students complete 120 hours in face-to-face classes, and they are additionally required to complete 120 self-study hours distributed in activities in the course platform and in Moodle where they can access the Moodle placement test preparation course activities and the self-study access center resources. The study used qualitative and quantitative action research methodology. Data sources included students' learning logs and students' initial and final placement tests grades. Findings indicate students used the self-access center learning areas to access English learning resources, practice the language and develop exam preparation skills.

Keywords: *self-access center; EFL; placement test; self-regulation strategies; exam preparation skills.*

1. Introduction

This paper is aimed at identifying the effects of a self-access center in the acquisition of students' placement test preparation skills and students' placement test grades results in EFL classes. For this purpose, it examines students' self-regulation strategies when they use a virtual self-access center to do asynchronous learning activities and prepare for the test.

The self-study center was created, implemented and developed in Moodle in 2022 to enable EFL students to reinforce English learning and self-prepare for placement tests. The Moodle site is an organized, resourceful and intuitive self-study e-learning environment where students can use a menu to access the self-access center profile,

objectives, international exams information and learning resources categorized in four of the six English levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: A1, A2, B1, B2. It is available through students' course directories. Students can access resources organized in Moodle books in six learning areas of the self-access center: vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening, speaking and writing. Furthermore, they can find learning objectives, English learning topics, learning tips, English learning resources and exam practice web-based sites in every learning area to support and facilitate learning.

The center was designed in Moodle following the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS). According to Egbert (2005), "Upon leaving school, the NETS require that students will be able to use a computer and peripherals, practice responsible use of technology, use electronic resources appropriately, design, develop, and publish products, gather information and collaborate with others". (p. 14). Additionally, she points out that the NETS standards correlate with TESOL standards regarding standards and conditions for English learning. (p. 14).

Students used self-regulation learning strategies in the self-access center to self-prepare for a placement test aimed at students learning English as a foreign language. Oxford (1992, p. 18) states in general that "language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps and techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language". This author looks at self-regulation more particularly in metacognitive language strategies and refers to them as "strategies that help learners exercise executive control through planning, arranging, focusing and evaluating their own learning" (ibid., p. 64).

Students' self-regulation strategies were examined in the study. Students used these strategies in the placement test virtual self-study center to manage test preparation practice activities registered in learning logs. According to the scientific basis of learning published in the volume of education research and theory *'How People Learn'*, self-regulation is present in metacognition, which is defined as "the ability to reflect on one's performance". To this respect, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1989, p. 97) refer to self-regulation in the volume "as the ability to orchestrate one's learning: to plan, monitor success, and correct errors when appropriate - all necessary for effective intentional learning".

Stern (2001, p. 411) highlights the importance of planning strategies in good learning when he refers to a good language learner. He states that: "In view of the sheer magnitude of the language learning task the good language learner will select goals and sub goals, recognize stages and developmental sequences, and actively participate in the learning process".

This paper examines how students used self-regulation strategies in a self-access center to discover their effects in EFL test preparation classes.

2. Method

Context and participants

Ten students, aged 20 to 22, took a 120-hour English placement test preparation course in 13 weeks from January to April 2024. Their native language was Spanish. This course grouped mixed ability students with proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B1. They had not been able to reach a B2 proficiency level after completing four courses of 120 hours each.

Students took the course to prepare for the placement test and reach B2. This level is required in order to take content subjects in English in their university curricular plans. The placement test evaluates students' reading skills, listening comprehension skills and language use. Students take the test face-to-face in the computing lab.

Students enrolled in the preparation placement test course took 120 class hours. Additionally, they had to complete 120 asynchronous English practice hours in three Virtual Learning Environments (VLE); the course platform, the course VLE and the self-access center. They used a course platform provided externally and they accessed the course VLE and the self-access center in their institutional Moodle courses directories.

Students completed asynchronous hours in the course platform and in the Moodle course to practice the course content and objectives. They used the virtual self-access center as a placement test preparation learning environment to practice language use, develop communication skills and acquire exam skills. The self-access center enabled students to focus on their learning needs, do English activities in six learning areas and choose resources categorized from A2 to B2. Students were taking other major subjects of their curricular plan in addition to the placement preparation course dealing with academic requirements and time management demands.

3. Results

There were qualitative and quantitative data sources in the study. Qualitative data sources included students' learning logs results as shown in tables 1, 2 and 3. Quantitative data sources were students' placement test results presented in Table 3.

Overall students' learning logs results are presented in Table 1. They used them to register self-access center learning activities assigned weekly. Students' learning logs were examined to observe how they used self-regulation strategies when they used a virtual self-access center to keep a weekly record of exam preparation activities. Friesner and Hart (2005) state that learning logs "are ideal for encouraging learners to reflect on learning". In addition, these authors point out that "they are also a source of collective data" (p. 117).

Students completed learning logs in Moodle through a Google Drive folder where the following information was kept:

Time	Learning area	Topic	Learning objective	What I learned	Follow up learning topics	Self-access center resources
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According to the students' learning logs results shown in Table 1, 10 out of 11 students used learning logs to organize, plan, choose, monitor and manage asynchronous test preparation learning activities and resources through the virtual self-access center during the course. Forty-nine hours in total were spent by 10 students in learning logs. Students' learning time varied from a minimum of one hour to a maximum of ten hours of asynchronous activities. Students managed and registered time in logs individually. Students registered the self-access center topics, objectives, activities and follow up practice topics in their logs. Seven students registered 10 topics, one student registered 16 topics and one student registered 9 topics respectively. One student did not complete the learning log.

Students used different exam preparation sites such as *Exam English* and *Test-English* to evaluate their results. They accessed the self-access center resources in levels ranging from A2 to B2 in different sites such as, *Exam English*, *British Council*, *English Radar* and *Test English* being the most commonly used.

Table 1. Students' self-access center learning logs results.

Students' number	Learning time	Self-access learning areas and students' learning choices	Students' topics	Students' learning objectives	Learning logs activities	Follow up learning topics	Self-access center resources
1	1 hour 10 min	grammar (2), listening (1)	3	3	3	3	3
2	4 hours 5 min	grammar (4), reading (6)	10	10	10	10	10
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

4	9 hours	grammar (5), reading (2), listening (3)	10	10	10	10	10
5	5 hours 23 min	grammar (5), reading (1), listening (2), vocabulary (2)	10	10	10	10	10
6	1 hour 30 min	listening (3), writing (1), grammar (4), vocabulary (1)	9	9	9	9	9
7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
8	7 hours	Vocabulary (3), grammar (2), reading (1), listening (4)	10	10	10	10	10
9	4 hours 41 min	grammar (7), reading (3)	10	10	10	10	10
10	5 hours 45 min	grammar (7), reading (7), vocabulary (2)	16	16	16	16	16
11	10 hours	grammar (3), reading (3), vocabulary (1), listening (3)	10	10	10	10	10
11 sts	49		98	98	98	98	96

The number of students' choices in learning areas of the self-access center are reported in the second table. Ten students used five of the six self-access center learning areas: grammar, vocabulary, reading, listening and writing. Students' learning choices were higher in two of the self-study learning areas: grammar and reading as shown below.

Table 2. Students' self-access center in terms of language skills and areas.

Students' number	Grammar	Listening	Reading	Writing	Vocabulary
1	2	1	0	0	0
2	4	0	6	0	0
3	0	0	0	0	0
4	5	3	2	0	0
5	5	2	1	0	2

6	4	3	1	1	1
7	10	0	0	0	0
8	2	4	1	0	3
9	7	0	3	0	0
10	7	0	7	0	2
11	3	3	3	0	1
	49	16	24	1	9

Students' placement test results are presented in Table 3 to compare students' placement tests results before and after they took the placement test preparation course.

Placement tests were used to evaluate students' English proficiency levels in three areas: reading, listening and language use. They took placement tests in the course platform in the computing lab. Tests were administered to evaluate their proficiency levels. The initial and final placement tests grades were compared to report on students' placement results at the end of the placement test preparation course.

Students' placement test grades were saved and kept in the course platform after the tests administration. Students' grades were accessed through the course test reports platform option. According to the students' platform placement results, seven out of eleven students were placed in higher levels ranging from B1 to B2. Five out of these seven students reached a B1 level. One student was placed in B1+ and one student was placed in B2. Students took the placement test in the course platform on dates indicated in table 3; the test was taken twice, before and after the placement test preparation course.

According to students' placement test results processed in the course platform, one student was placed in the same B1 level. One student was placed in A2 level and one student was placed in a lower level than the initial. This student's placement was lowered from B2 to A2.

Table 3. Example of a student' learning log vocabulary topic.

Reinforcement Class: Self-Study Lesson

Week-Date Time Spent	Learning Area	Topic	Learning Objective	What I learned	What I still need to practice	Resources Add the link of the page you practiced and the score capture
1. February 13 th , 2024 1 hour	Vocabulary	Holidays	Put the words in order to make sentences and choose the best word to complete sentences to learn words.	I learned the basic and intermediate 2 vocabulary of holidays.	I need to practice a little more about different places to go on holidays.	https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/vocabulary/a1-a2-vocabulary/holidays Total score is 12 out of 12 (100%) https://www.examenglish.com/B2/b2_vocabulary_holidays.htm Reset Score:9/10

Table 4. Students' initial and placement tests results.

	Test dates	Placement	Test dates	Placement	Levels
1	1/8/2024	Basic 3	4/4/2024	Intermediate 1	B1
2	22/11/2023	Intermediate1	4/4/2024	Intermediate 1	B1
3	22/11/2023	Basic 2	4/10/2024	Basic 2	A2
4	22/11/2023	Basic 3	21/06/2024	Intermediate 1	B1
5	24/3/2022	Basic 2	4/4/2024	Intermediate 1	B1
6	18/2/2021	Basic 2	4/4/2024	Intermediate 1	B1
7	30/11/2023	Basic 2	4/4/2024	Intermediate 2	B1+
8	19/7/2023	Intermediate 2	4/4/2024	Intermediate 1	B1
9	22/11/2023	Basic 3	4/4/2024	Intermediate 2	B1+
10	24/11/2023	Advanced 1	4/4/2024	Basic 3	A2
11	21/11/2023	Basic 3	4/4/2024	Intermediate 3	B2

4. Discussion

Results indicate the effects of a self-access center in asynchronous English learning activities in an EFL placement test preparation class in terms of students' learning activities management, language practice and resources chronological organization. According to students' learning logs records, the self-access center was used once a week for 13 weeks as a virtual learning environment for students' time management, self - study and self - evaluation purposes.

Students' learning logs results show students focused on their learning needs and kept records of the self-access center test preparation learning activities and learning resources. Logs indicate students planned and organized self-study time, learning objectives and learning resources, making their own learning choices and focusing language practice on grammar, vocabulary, reading, listening and writing as shown in the example of one student's learning log vocabulary topic in table 3.

Students' learning choices were higher in grammar and reading than in other learning areas of the self-access center as shown in the results. Students accessed different English learning web sites to complete asynchronous vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing and listening activities and prepare for the test. In addition, they self-evaluated their English knowledge and skills using resources provided in web sites designed for self-evaluation purposes. English learning websites were registered in their learning logs, including captures of activity's scores. Speaking was not included in students' learning logs.

70% of the students reached higher levels in the final placement test at the end of the class. Placement tests results are indicators of students' progress in the placement test preparation class where students used three virtual learning environments: an external English learning platform, the Moodle virtual learning environment and the self-access center to maximize time management, language practice and skills development.

5. Conclusions

This paper looked at the effects of a self-study center in students' exam preparation skills acquisition and students' placement test results. According to overall findings, students used the self-study center to reinforce learning, prepare for the test and acquire exam preparation skills as registered in their learning logs. Findings show students acquired exam preparation skills such as, following instructions, controlling time, planning, self-evaluating and monitoring progress when they practiced and self-prepared for the test through self-access resources planned, selected and managed by students.

Students' final placement test results indicate that 70% of the students were placed in higher proficiency levels while 30% of the students were placed in the same initial level according to the platform reports. Students used an external platform and a Moodle class as two more virtual learning environments to prepare for the test in addition to the self-study center. Therefore, this study does not measure the quantitative effects of the self-study center in students' achievement levels progression. A further study seems to be an option to focus on and measure its quantitative effects in students' achievement levels development.

The study implies beneficial effects of incorporating a self-access center institutionally for students' exam preparation training purposes, as they can maximize students' test preparation time management and exam skills. It would be recommendable to start with induction sessions and/or tutorial videos to inform about its purpose and functionality as shown in this [introductory video](#).

There are additional implications in the study regarding time management. Concerning this point, students can use self-study centers to increase and maximize exam preparation time, provided they dedicate enough time to self-exam preparation practice. They can use them to focus on their learning needs, make their own learning choices, use learning strategies and develop exam skills.

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