Self-Directed Language Learning of ESL Students in an American College Library

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of an American college library by English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students in a self-directed manner for the purpose of improving their English. The ESL students in this study engaged in language learning activities in the library in all four language skill areas: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. All of the participants were self-directed language learners, and several participants appeared to also exhibit language learner autonomy through awareness and reflection on their language learning activities in this setting. Findings suggest that self-directed language learners engage in browsing and recreational reading in the library as a way to improve their English, and that the manifestation of language learner autonomy in a library may be connected to content learning of English as a second language in this context. This exploratory study suggests that the library may serve as a fruitful venue for the further study of language learning issues.

Introduction

Self-directed language learning and language learner autonomy have garnered much attention in the field of second language education. This study extends our current knowledge of self-directed language learning and language learner autonomy in a new setting: it looks at the lived experiences of students learning English as a second language (ESL) in an American college library. English language learning appears to take place in the library in both a self-directed and an autonomous manner.

Self-directed language learning and language learner autonomy are not synonymous. Self-directed language learning generally describes an approach to language learning: that of a learner trying to progress independently of a language classroom in which the teacher directs the learning. The term self-directed learner is sometimes associated more with the concept of the nontraditional adult learner (Knowles, 1975; Brookfield, 1986; Caffarella, 1993) than it is with the general concept of autonomy. Its use here, however, is based on the definition offered by Benson (2001), which

states that: "Self-directed learning tends to refer simply to learning that is carried out under the learner's own direction, rather than under the direction of others" (p. 34).

Many definitions of language learner autonomy have been offered in the literature of second language education. That there is no commonly accepted definition may be adduced by a glimpse a definitional chart compiled by A.E. Finch (unpublished dissertation, Manchester University, 2000) in Appendix A. This chart offers a brief overview of some of the definitions of language learner autonomy that have arisen in the last two decades in the literature. The classic definition of language learner autonomy derives from Holec (1981) who calls it "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p.3). Holec's (1981) notion of ability underscores many of the later definitions of language learner autonomy (Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1996).

In addition to Holec's (1981) definition, both Benson's (2001) and Oh's (unpublished dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2002) definitions of language learner autonomy have informed the use of the term in this article. Benson (2001) states that, "Autonomy can be broadly defined as the capacity to take control over one's own learning" (p. 2), and he distinguishes "taking control" from Holec's (1981) "taking charge" in that Benson (2001) sees autonomy not as "a method of learning, but an attribute of the learner's approach to the learning process" (p. 2). Oh (2002) defines language learner autonomy as a set of "approaches that lead to improvement in the ability to take conscious responsibility for language learning as well as in language skills" (p. 27). Oh's (2002) definition extends the idea of autonomy as attribute put forth by Benson by grounding it in conscious reflection about both the language learning process itself (learning how to learn) and the improvement of language skills (learning English). Language learner autonomy as defined by Oh (2002) relies on elements of both language learner behaviors and language learner contexts.

This study seeks to address if ESL students are making use of an American college library for the purpose of improving their English language ability, and if so, how. It also seeks to determine that if language learning does occur in the library, is it self-directed language learning or is it language learner autonomy? Language learner autonomy is studied here through a probing of behaviors (what language learners do) and conscious awareness or reflection (what language learners are thinking about as they do it or after they have done it). Language learner autonomy differs from self-directed language learning in this study, then, in terms of the depth of learning. The difference in their use here concerns the presence, or lack thereof, of conscious awareness of language learner status on the part of those involved in the efforts of learning a second language. Language learner autonomy is therefore used here to mean both self-directed language learning plus awareness and reflection on that language learning. Awareness as used in this study refers to the conscious attention to the ongoing, current process of learning and the improvement of language skills, and reflection refers to the process of engaging in a review of what has been learned and how it has been learned. Awareness therefore is used here to mean attention on the part of learner towards his or her current English language learning, and reflection is used here to mean attention on the part of the learner towards his or her past English language learning.

30

A college library was chosen as a context for this language learning study because college libraries have traditionally been seen as physical entities designed to support and extend classroom learning. Libraries often define themselves as centers for lifelong learning (Marcum & Stone, 1991). As such, they may offer a potential breeding ground for the growth of self-directed language learning or language learning autonomy. As a non-classroom setting, it is possible that self-directed language learning and language learner autonomy could take place in this environment.

Language Learner Autonomy Perspectives

The literature on language learner autonomy has offered a number of perspectives to researchers interested in studying different aspects of its manifestations (Benson, 2001). Theoretical perspectives consider autonomy with respect to concepts such as individualization, interdependence, and learner psychology. Practice-based approaches to the study of language learner autonomy include its investigation from perspectives such as resources, technology, and the learner.

Autonomy and individualization perspectives study how language learners work on their own (Riley, 1986; Brookes & Grundy, 1988), while autonomy and interdependence perspectives study how language learners work collaboratively with other learners (Dickinson, 1987; Kohonen, 1992; Little, 1996). Learner psychology often considers language learner autonomy from the viewpoint of learner strategy training (Dickinson & Carver, 1980; Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 1990) by examining the cognitive strategies such as selecting, comprehending, storing, and retrieving input, and self-management strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating. The current study flows from this psychological perspective advocated by Wenden (1998) through the theoretical approach of learner psychology.

Practice-based approaches offer another avenue for investigation of language learner autonomy. The resource-based approach studies the use of self-access centers as a way to investigate language learner autonomy (Moore, 1992; Lonergan, 1994; Kenning, 1996), while the technology approach looks at the development of autonomy through the use of computer-assisted instruction (CALL) (Warschauer, 1996; Chapelle, 1997; Egbert & Hanson-Smith, 1999). And the learner-based approach studies language learner autonomy through changes in behavior on the part of the learner, an approach used in this study. These changes are most often described in terms of psychological changes through a description of language learner strategies (Wenden, 1998; McDonough, 1999).

In addition to the theoretical perspective of learner psychology and the practice-based approach of the learner, this study is also informed by the perspective of out-of-classroom learning (Nunan, 1991; Hyland, 2004). The study of autonomous learning in out-of-classrooms contexts is quite recent. Hyland (2004) cites a need for such studies because of the increasing emphasis on the "importance of 'lifelong education' as a means of enhancing the learning of English" (p. 180).

Research Design
Because language learner autonomy appears to be such a multi-faceted concept that could be experienced in many different ways by various individuals, this study used a

qualitative research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) in the interpretivist tradition of Bogdan and Biklen (1998). The data are the words spoken by the participants themselves. The procedure used for analyzing this data made use of Glaser's (1978) constant–comparative method which arises from grounded theory research methodology. The constant-comparative method defines a formal series of steps to follow when coding, arranging, and interpreting qualitative data.

Participants were solicited through word-of-mouth, by email, and through personal contacts. The involvement of each participant consisted of an initial interview, with follow-up interviews conducted either in person or through email several weeks later. Both the initial interviews and follow-up contacts took place during the Fall 2003 and the Spring 2004 semesters. The interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions designed to probe the participants' views towards and experiences with using the library in a manner that also may help them learn English. The written portion of the interview questions included all background questions on how long they had studied English and where (Appendix B). The second part of the interview was conducted in an oral fashion based on a template of questions (Appendix C).

The context for this study is a medium sized, private institution of higher learning affiliated with the Jesuit order of the Roman Catholic Church in the northeastern United States. The number of students currently enrolled at this college is approximately 5000, the majority of whom are American undergraduates. The participants in this study were immersed in a college campus that does not formally segregate ESL students in ways that larger institutions of higher learning often do. Participants taking ESL support classes also took classes with American students in other subject areas simultaneously. There were twenty participants (Appendix D). Their educational level included both undergraduate and graduate students. Their majors included psychology, business, religious studies, criminal justice, education, computer science and chemistry. Their ages ranged from20 to 35. There were ten men and ten women. Participants included natives of Japan, Sweden, Hungary, Haiti, Jordan, Bulgaria, China, Mexico, France, Spain, and the Dominican Republic.

Language Learning Activities in the Library
Participants viewed the library as a place that affords them an opportunity to improve their English in the four language skills areas: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Speaking
Participants saw the library as a place for improving their speaking skills because of the necessity of speaking English in this setting and because it also offers them opportunities for interaction with native speakers. Jack states that speaking in the library "helps my English." Yvonne notes: "I'm being here. I need to learn English to communicate with other people here." And Louisa agrees that the necessity of having to speak English in the library aids her speaking fluency: "You're always forced and obligated to speak English when you are here. You're talking here, and that improves the English."
Stephanie sees the value of interacting in English: "The library helps me learn English. Because if I ask any question, starting a conversation, it's good for me to interact with other people." Tom likewise seems to see interacting in the library with native speakers as a way to improve his English speaking skills: "I try to practice as

much as I can with native speakers everywhere. I try to think in English. I just say whatever I did today in English whenever I have free time. I practice in the library." And Elizabeth feels very strongly that the library offers a good opportunity in which she can improve her spoken English through interaction:

> That's the point to talk to other people in the library, to try to socialize with other people to learn English. I always try to speak to people in here. Take advantage of talking to people in the library. Before, I was already confident talking to international students because they already know how hard it is to learn English, because they are used to our accent. And we are more tolerable, because we are all learning English. But when you talk to Americans, I am sometimes afraid that maybe the Americans didn't understand what I am saying. So for me it was a big challenge. I try to speak to native speakers here.

Listening

Participants also cited the library as a place in which to improve listening skills. Sarah, for example, sees listening in this naturalistic setting as one of the best ways to improve her English:

> You have to hear the language. You get the sounds. You hear if something sounds right or wrong automatically. You don't have to think about the grammar. I think that's the second level. At first, you think, I'm supposed to put the verb here or there. But if you hear the language and hear the language, after a while, you don't have to think about that, you're going to hear if the language sounds right or wrong. And advice, to learn more actively, to practice and practice in the library, and don't be afraid to speak.

Cynthia agrees that listening to English in the library strengthens her language learning: "It's better for you because you are always hearing the language. It's easier for you to remember words. You hear the real language here." Tanya likewise notes the opportunity to listen to English as spoken by native speakers in the library. She also indicates her preference for listening to conversations between two people both present in the library as opposed to overhearing cell phone conversations: "I try to listen to conversations in library to learn English. Natural conversations, not international student conversations."

Reading

Participants saw the library as a place in which to improve their reading skills through increasing their reading speed and learning new vocabulary. Sarah, for example, no longer feels the need to look up words in the dictionary but says she can "find them in her mind": "I'm faster at it now. Just because it's easier to find the words, you don't have to think about it. You find the words easier, you don't have to think, you don't have to look them up." Stephanie likewise engages in reading in the library and also feels her reading speed increasing in English:

> I'm a bit slow. But I read 500 pages a week here. Usually I don't use the dictionary. I try to get the whole idea, the main idea. But this semester, I think I am progressing. Because at first, after two pages, I am lost in my thoughts. It took me one hour to read five pages. Last semester, I had to read about fifteen books. But this semester, I go faster.

Stephanie also cites the necessity of using library materials for her history classes as helping her improve her reading: "Because I use a lot of materials from here, so I have to read them, so that's helpful as well."

In addition to improving reading speed and comprehension in the library, a number of participants also cite the library as a setting in which they learn new vocabulary from their textbooks and from library materials. Lawrence, for example, makes lists of words to memorize while he is reading in the library:

> Every time I read a book here, whenever I find vocabularies I don't know, I check them. And I try to memorize. I still do that. Not every single word, words that I can see frequently. In my notebooks, there is a vocabulary and I'm going to memorize. I'm testing myself. For example, before I finish my studies for the day, I go to vocabulary and I make sure that I have memorized that. I like to memorize.

And Kevin similarly reads in the library but with another system for learning new words. Instead of memorizing, he "underlines and picks up some words" in his textbook:

> I learn English here by preparing for the lesson, and reviewing, and studying. Because reading is the most important thing. I can get new word. If I can get new word, I will be able to speak the word. It leads to improvement of English, eventually.

One other system mentioned by Lucas for learning new vocabulary in the library is his asking someone else in the library for help in learning new words: "Any time I have an English guy next to me, when I'm reading something here, I say, what do you think this word means…. It improved so much my English." Louisa also engages in this practice which she describes as: "I would say, is this the right word, is this how you say it?". Louisa put this strategy to use during the course of these interviews when she asked me if "unbiased" was the correct word to use when describing the difference between reading news from *CNN* and reading news from the *BBC* in terms of how she thought their reporting on world events differed.

Participants use library materials as well as from their own textbooks to learn new vocabulary words in English in the library. Raymond, for example, says: "Reading the newspaper helps me with vocabulary." Anna makes lists of vocabulary from articles she reads in the library as a way to improve her English: "I made vocabulary lists from the articles. It helped me read the articles." She adds that she would like to be able to underline words in library books as well as write notes in their margins but knows she cannot do this with library material: "I cannot write something down on the paper as I read library book. Underline too. I want to write as I go through, it helps me to read."

Participants mentioned particular library sources they use to help them with improving their reading ability in English. Elizabeth, for example, comes in every day to read the *Wall Street Journal* to "learn new business words." And Nathan reads *Sports Illustrated* in the library to improve his informal vocabulary for speaking with native speakers: "It's very helpful to learn English. First time I couldn't read because of expressions, not like textbook. More informal, more similar to natural expression in English. I became to know, to understand. It was adjustment, getting informal words for conversation."

Writing

Participants viewed the library as a setting in which to practice their writing as well. The writing that appears to occur in the library takes the form of writing academic papers, writing email, writing vocabulary notebooks, and recreational writing. But although almost all of the participants use the library as a place in which to write their papers and compose email messages, most of them do not specifically describe either type of writing as a way to improve their English. Two exceptions are Stephanie and Lucas. Stephanie's use of the library for writing papers includes her use of a thesaurus while she is writing. She seems to see this as a way to improve her writing because it gives her a greater range of words to work with while she is writing: "When I write papers here, I usually use a lot a thesaurus. Most of the time I use it. It helps me write my papers." And when Lucas writes papers for his business classes in the library, he often learns new words from a fellow Hungarian student who often studies with him: "He already has a degree in economics and finance. And whenever I had a problem, he explained me the stuff. He helped me a lot."

The writing of vocabulary notebooks in the library is, however, seen as an activity that improves their English. Raymond writes vocabulary notebooks quite extensively as a way to learn new words to use in his papers:

> I use the vocabulary notebook here, the words we started doing in class. I put the word in both English and French. When I write the word, it's beginning to notice, to remember it. I check the word, I try to remember it. Like the chemistry word, stem. We use it a lot in chemistry and I need it in my paper, so I write it down. At first, I didn't know it, so I put it in the book.

Lawrence likewise uses a vocabulary notebook. He makes lists of words from his reading to memorize, and then tries to use them in a paper: "It helps me learning English."

Recreational writing in the library (writing not required for class work) likewise appears to lend itself to the improvement of English. Jack, for example, writes a daily diary. "When I relax, I have a little book, a notebook, I write in how I feel." In addition to keeping a daily journal in which to record his thoughts and feelings, Jack also expresses those sentiments in the form of poetry he composes: "I like to write poetry sometimes, here in the library as well as in my room." He thinks this helps him learn English because he is working with the language in a freer way than he is when he writing academic papers. And Lucas also engages in recreational writing in the library through the use of a diary. In contrast to expressing thoughts and feelings of an emotional nature, however, Lucas uses his diary to record his travels:

> Whenever I come back from a trip, I just write my diary down. Just this morning here, I wrote my diary about yesterday, the excursion to Falling Waters. And I try to make it a little more beautiful than just saying I went there and I've seen this. Whether I was touched, or didn't like it. Trying to help people who were never there a little bit explain what I experienced there. So I didn't write down this morning, the wall was green, or the trees were beautiful, but what I felt there. So I think that can be done mostly in writing. Diary is mixed, English and Hungarian. So that's so good, that helps me.

All twenty participants identified their use of the library as a way for them to improve their English in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Louisa says: "Engaging in all these activities [in the library] helps improve my English." Nathan says: "All my study here is English, and is in English." And Lucas adds: "I can't separate the two – learning English and using the library."

Self-Directed Language Learning and Language Learner Autonomy
All of the language-learning activities that participants engage in at the library are self-initiated on their part. All of the participants in this study, then, appear to be self-directed language learners in the library. What distinguishes self-directed language learning from language learner autonomy, however, is the presence or absence of awareness and reflection that accompanies such language learning. And while awareness and reflection did surface in this study, most participants did not connect either their general awareness or reflection on language learning to the specific language learning activities they engaged in at the library. This would seem to point towards a general absence of language learner autonomy being present in the use of the library on the part of most participants in this study.

Awareness

In response to being questioned on how they know if their English is improving, most participants answered that they know this because they were now able to understand native speakers of English more easily than they could before in terms of listening comprehension. William, for example, says: "I'm starting, day by day, to understand more." Kevin says: "Now I listen better." Raymond adds: "I can easily understand other people." And Stephanie states: "I can basically understand everything."

Other participants seem to feel that their English is improving in general because other people tell them so. Henry, for example, says: "My friends tell me, my English improved. So I can know my English improved." Ellen agrees: "I know I am improving because a German guy understands me. He told me I am much better than when I first arrived." Elizabeth also uses this standard to judge whether or not her English is improving: "My friends told me when I first came here, I was so nervous and didn't speak, but now I'm okay."

Still other participants attribute their improvement in English in general to being able to speak more fluently. Louisa says: "The words simply come out." Sarah agrees: "I can find words more easily." And Tom concurs: "I can measure my English ability when I notice I can put into words more what I want to say. I mean it's like fluency level." Irene adds that her speaking speed has increased: "I'm faster now. Other people don't have to wait for me to say something."

Learning strategies participants use to improve their skills in speaking, listening, reading, or writing also appear as a form of awareness about current language learning. Tom, for example, says that he continues to try to improve his spoken English by "just saying what I did today in English whenever I have free time."

Asking other people to correct their spoken English also seems to be another type of awareness. Sarah, for example, consciously uses this strategy to learn new vocabulary: "I ask Americans to correct me, to let me know when I am making

mistakes. And even after I say it, I can sometimes hear myself say it. And I like having the feedback." And Louisa wants "Americans to correct me if they are trying to help me." She distinguishes feedback given in a friendly way to feedback given in a way meant only to embarrass her.

The conscious necessity to work on improving English every single day also seems to be a form of awareness. Lucas, for example, says that he works on improving his English:

Every single day. I learn new words and expressions. I really have to focus on it. That's one of my goals, here in the United States. Learning to speak English and using language as good as possible. But it's an every day jo. So even after two years, I still have to work on it every single day.

Stephanie likewise appears to display awareness of the nature of English language learning being a constant state: "I'm always learning English." And Lawrence appears aware that learning English is not only an ongoing process, but sometimes a very long one in which there seem to be plateaus where his English is not improving: "It takes time to learn English. There are certainly some periods over which you don't improve. I think everyone has such periods. Be patient. And in such periods, study harder."

Reflection

Reflection on language learning also surfaced in this study. And as with awareness, most comments are of a general language learning variety. Some reflections are, however, specifically connected to library use.

The most common type of reflection on learning English offered by participants center on their past experiences learning it in their native countries. Anna, for example, seems to be engaging in reflection when she describes her experiences learning English in Japan:

In Japan, we memorize whole sentence to show grammar rules, all example sentences, maybe 500. I can't do this. I hated study English in Japan. I did well but I never enjoyed it. I always wanted to communicate with people, communicate like we are now, but I never enjoyed reading what I don't want to read.

Ellen similarly appears to be reflecting on her experiences learning English in Spain:

The way of learning English in Spain is really, really awful. Because you are all your life studying English, grammar and vocabulary, and you can't speak English because you can't practice. They only correct me in grammar in Spain, so I don't know pronunciation well.

Lucas, however, directly connects his reflections about language learning to library use:

My parents were poor but there were always books around us. And I want my children to see that there are good books out there. Because very often, well, I am

reading since I was six, but very often I just went to the shelves in the living room like what shall I read? And I thought this is a good book, and that recommends another one. So I jumped from one book to another. And that was a very good experience, I learn a lot from reading. And very often, I can't afford to buy everything of course, so I just go to the library, I just went there. It's my hobby. And I always focus on having a library. I have at least 3000 books in Hungarian, German, and English. I love books. And I always use libraries for learning.

Reflections on particular learning strategies used in the past also came to light. One such reflection involves Anna's strategy for learning new words. She apparently engaged in a strategy of writing down many words she encountered as she was reading. But she reflected that this process did not always help her commit the words to memory: "I wrote tons of words (I got the paper from the recycle bin next to the printer in the library), but I never really remembered. However, it was still meaningful process for me. I looked up words at least once. It helped me read the articles, but I don't know if it helped me know the vocabulary." Like Lucas, Anna grounds this reflection in her stated use of the library for language learning purposes.

Reflecting about the use of particular materials seems to be another type of reflection which may be connected to the use of the library as a place to improve English. Lawrence, for example, used to dislike reading novels for his English classes in Japan, but now thinks that maybe he could learn English from books: "I used to hate reading. Especially novels. But I don't hate it now. Maybe it's the willingness to learn now from books." With this reflection, Lawrence seems to see his own growth as a language learner in that he is now willing to use materials that he did not want to consider before. Raymond also reflects on this same shift, from previously not using books, to now using books as a language learner: "I'm not a reader in France, but I'm a reader here." Both reflections seem to offer thoughts about past learning experiences that the participants now seem to be reconsidering in terms of how learning now may take place for them.

Both self-directed language learning and language learner autonomy emerge from this study. In general, however, self-directed language learning appears to be more evident in the participants' stated use of the library than does language learner autonomy. The difference seems to lie in the general lack of awareness and reflection voiced by most of the participants in terms of how they connect their use of the library to the improvement of their English language skills.

Browsing the Stacks and Recreational Reading in the Library
The self-directed language learners in this study engaged in browsing and recreational reading in the library as a means of improving their English with browsing taking place in a purposeful manner. Cynthia, for example, browses for books in the area where the new books are displayed: "I was looking at the first books like when you enter the library. It says new books. And I picked one that has pictures. In the place by the two comfortable chairs and the table." And Stephanie walks through the stacks when looking for books for leisure reading:

> Usually I have a look around at all the books that look so interesting…. I look around the whole library, and the new books too. I have a look around, usually I go where the signs are. And I go walk, back and forth.

The self-directed language learners in this study who say that they do a lot of recreational reading in the library also appear to think the most about their language learning in terms of how best they learn and in terms of what strategies they are consciously engaging in to improve their English in the library. Lucas, Anna, and Stephanie are the participants in this study who appear to most engage in behavior associated with language learner autonomy, namely that of expressing awareness and reflection upon language learning. These three participants also seem to engage the most in recreational reading in the library.

Lucas, for example, is a voracious reader of books for recreational reading. He reads widely on many subjects that interest him. At the time of this study, he was reading books about Frank Lloyd Wright. He remarks that he not only learns about Frank Lloyd Wright from these books, but that they help him learn vocabulary as well. He says: "So I'm reading something about architecture in English. So if there's a new word like cantilever – did I say it right? – that's the newest word I picked up." Lucas also admits that he loves books: "I love books. I love the smell of books, I love the touch of books." And as with Lucas, Anna admits that she loves books too: "I love books. I love looking at books."

Stephanie, on the other hand, engages in recreational reading of books relating to her classroom work. These are books that are not assigned by professors, but are books she wants to read in order to understand more about the subjects she is taking classes in. Because she is a double major in English literature and history, most of her recreational reading seems to be concentrated in those areas. In terms of reading these books, she voices the thought that reading them in the library seems to be helping her improve both her reading and writing of English: "I hope I am consciously helping myself, like it helps me to write faster and I am actually learning English words."

Awareness and reflection about language learning seem to be associated with those participants in this study who engage in the most amounts of recreational reading in the library. This does not mean, however, that recreational reading results in or causes language learner autonomy. It only suggests that there may be a link between recreational reading and language learner autonomy in those participants who exhibit characteristics of both.

Content Learning and Language Learning in the Library
The self-directed language learners in this study who view content learning (learning a subject area) as inextricable from language learning also appear to show more evidence of language learner autonomy in the library.

Participants in this study say that they are engaging in content learning in their use of the library. Kevin, for example, reads his management books in the library, as does Lucas. Louisa works on homework for her finance classes and is studying for the certified public accountant exam in this setting. Anna reads philosophy books for classes. William looks for material for papers on topics having to do with religion.

Lucas, Anna, and Stephanie, however, seem to think they are learning English while they are learning another subject at the same time in the library. Lucas, for example, says that the best way to learn English is through learning a particular subject:

> That's the best way. I think it's even better than just learning English by itself. Because I'm learning another subject, and I have to solve the problem, and I have to write my paper, and I have to write my homework. So I think, I it doesn't make sense to learn English just by itself. And I like learning foreign languages, it's a very interesting thing.

Similarly, Anna and Stephanie both seem to view learning a subject as learning English as well. Anna says that the best way to learn English is through studying different subjects: "For improving English skills, study a subject." And Stephanie is accustomed to studying different subjects in English, because at her university in France, English majors already engage in this practice: "English is my major; all my classes are in English in France. I learn history in English too." She says that by participating in this practice, she is learning English as well: "When I work, I think in English." She would like to extend her improvement of English in this manner by becoming a history teacher herself in France who works in English: "I would like to be an English teacher in France, but focused on history. I would like to teach American history in France, but in English."

It appears that those participants who seem to exhibit more of the awareness and reflection on language learning in the library in this study also seem to view the learning of English as inseparable from the learning of content material. Why this may be such an interesting finding is that the study of language learner autonomy involves the study of people who are able to separate what they are doing from what they are thinking. But yet those participants in this study who cannot separate English language learning from subject content learning appear to engage in reflection at a deeper level about their language learning than do those participants who seem to see them as separate types of learning. One type of thinking involves looking at the whole (both English learning and language learning together) instead of the parts, while the other type of thinking involves the ability to divide domains (the doing of language learning versus the thinking about language learning). The self-directed language learners in this study who also appear to exhibit language learner autonomy seem to be able to make this distinction.

Discussion

Although browsing and recreational reading have not been seriously investigated in second language education, the literature concerning extensive reading may help to explain the findings of this study. Extensive reading is seen as beneficial in the development of reading and writing skills (Janopolous, 1986; Tudor & Hafiz, 1989; Krashen, 1993; Tsang, 1997; Day & Bamford, 1998). Where this study differs from most studies on extensive reading, however, is in the use made of the college library as a setting for the self-selection of materials outside the control of a classroom teacher.

The relationship between content learning and language learning may also add understanding to these findings. The studies that investigate the use of content learning in ESL settings emphasize it as a useful way for students to learn English

(Hudson, 1991; Snow, 1991; Iancu, 1993). The participants in this study, however, did not engage in content learning under the direction of a teacher. They do, however, appear to engage in content learning through the studying of their academic course material in the library. That they may also be improving their English at the same time may be seen in their comments about their reading speed increasing and their vocabulary knowledge building.

The role of automaticity in second language reading (Carpenter & Just, 1986; Stanovich, 1990) may further aid in an understanding of the findings of this study. Grabe (1991) views automaticity as the ability of higher proficiency readers to attend less to the forms of words and sentence structures and more to the meaning attached to a text as they are reading. Why the concept of reading automaticity may be helpful in the understanding of this study lies in its ability to perhaps explain why those participants who seemed to exhibit more language learner autonomy by being able to articulate how they were improving their English could not easily separate their content learning from their language learning. Automaticity could mean that they are attending to content, not language form, while performing the act of reading.

Conclusion
This study investigated the uses of an American college library by ESL students. These language learners identified the library as a place to improve their English in all four language skill areas: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. But although self-directed language learning is evident in this study, the presence of language learner autonomy is minimal. The self-directed language learners appeared to engage in language learning in the library through the use of browsing and recreational reading. The self-directed language learners who appeared to also exhibit language learner autonomy seemed to connect content learning to language learning in the library.

These findings suggest that the library may serve as a fruitful context for the further study of language learning issues. This study could contribute to the field of language learner autonomy through both a resource-based approach (in looking at how the participants improved their English through the use of library materials) as well as through a learner-centered approach. This study therefore fits Oxford's (2003) call for using more fluid boundaries to describe perspectives on language learner autonomy. It also underscores Hyland's (2004) emphasis on out-of-classroom learning as an appropriate venue for the study of language learner autonomy.

Implications arising from this study include the provision of both better material support and instructional support for ESL students in American college libraries. Better material support could include the addition of more recreational material in college libraries, and better instructional support could include strengthening the connections between libraries and ESL teachers.

The major limitation of this study is that transferability of findings would depend upon the context of the readers. The proficiency level of the participants interviewed in this study might also be another limiting factor. And because the conclusions of this study are based on behaviors that could not directly be observed, care must be taken in interpreting results in any sort of definitive or global fashion.

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42

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Appendix A

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TABLE IX: DEFINITIONS OF AUTONOMY IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Author	Definition of Autonomy
Holec (1980:4)	"... an ability, a power or capacity to do something (Concise Oxford Dictionary) "and not a type of conduct, behaviour. ... To say of a learner that he is autonomous is therefore to say that he is capable of taking charge of his own learning and nothing more.
Holec (1981:3).	"... the ability to take charge of one's own learning. ... This ability is not inborn but must be acquired either by "natural means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, in a systematic, deliberate way.
Young (1986:19)	"The fundamental idea in autonomy is that of authoring one's own world without being subject to the will of others.
Dickinson (1987:11)	"... complete responsibility for one's learning, carried out without the involvement of a teacher or pedagogic materials.
Boud (1988:23):	"The main characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instruction.
Hunt, Gow & Barnes (1989:209)	"... the decision-making process involved in identifying problems and making relevant decisions for their solution through access to sufficient sources of information.
Allwright (1990:12)	"... a constantly changing but at any time optimal state of equilibrium between maximal self-development and human interdependence.
Little (1991:4)	"... a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action.
Legutke & Thomas, (1991:270)	"... the ability to assume responsibility for one's own affairs (see Holec 1980). ... the ability to act in a situation in which he [the learner] is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of the decision.
Wenden (1991b:15)	"... successful or expert or intelligent learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous.
Dickinson (1992:330)	"... an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning.
Cotterall (1995b:195)	"... the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to use a set of tactics for taking control of their learning.
Benson (1996:34)	"Autonomization is necessarily a transformation of the learner as a social individual. ... Autonomy not only transforms individuals, it also transforms the social situations and structures in which they are participants.
Littlewood (1996:428)	"We can define an autonomous person as one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions. This capacity depends on two main components: ability and willingness. ... Ability depends on possessing both knowledge about the alternatives from which

choices have to be made and the necessary skills for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and the confidence to take responsibility for the choices required.

Appendix B

Written Questionnaire

Please take a few minutes to fill out some background information about yourself and your language learning experiences.

1. How many years have you studied English? _____

2. Where have you studied English? (as a school child, at another college or university, at a language school, etc.)
_____

3. What is your native country? What is your native language?
_____

4. How long have you been in the United States?
_____

5. How long have you been at this particular college? How long will you stay at this particular college?
_____

6. What is your major? _____

7. What is your age? _____

8. How would your rate your own proficiency level in English?
     (low? intermediate? high?) And why?

9. How have you learned English up to this point? (In what ways have you learned English?)

10. How do you know if your English is improving? Do you test yourself in any way? If so, how?

Appendix C

Oral Interview Questionnaire

Oral Interview Questions

How do you use this library?

       Study hall for doing homework

       Recreational reading

       Meeting friends and socializing

       Doing research for papers

       Improving your English

Some people believe there may be a connection between using a library and language learning. What do you think about that idea? Has that been your experience? Is there anything you do in the library that you think helps you learn English? Can you give me any specific examples?

What kinds of things does the library not do to help you in your language learning?

Have you ever not understood something in the library? (signs in the building, directions on the web page, oral directions in a library instruction class?) If that has happened to you, then what did you do next? Did you use a dictionary? Did you ask someone for help?

Have you used any other American college libraries besides this one? How does an American college library differ from a college library in your native country?

How much time do you spend in this library during a typical week? When do you use it? Do you use library resources such as online databases in your dorm room or other places besides the library? When? Where?

How do you find out about resources available either in or through the library? Do you ask other people? Who?

_____
___

[From the chart below] Do you do any of these activities in or through the library?

Have you ever learned English from doing any of these activities?

Speaking and Listening:	Reading:	Writing:
- asking questions at the circulation desk, information desk, periodicals desk - talking with a librarian or student worker - attending or participating in a library instruction class - taking a tour - asking other students for help in finding materials - requesting or listening to videos - borrowing a laptop - working in groups with other students on class projects in the library - meeting and talking with friends in the library - others?	- reading web pages - reading books - reading magazines or newspapers - reading homework assignments in the library - recreational or leisure reading in the library - others?	- writing email or chat messages to family or friends - writing email or chat messages to the librarians - writing papers on library computers - filling out request forms - writing homework assignments in the library - others?

If you could give other people advice on the best way to improve their English, what would you tell them?

Appendix D

Participants in the Study

Pseudonym	Gender	Prior years of English	Exchange or degree student	Native country	Native language	Years in the U.S.	Major and Level	Age	Self-rated proficiency level
Anna	Female	8	Degree	Japan	Japanese	2	Psychology, undergraduate	21	Intermediate
Cynthia	Female	5	Degree	Mexico	Spanish	½	Psychology, undergraduate	22	High
David	Male	7	Degree	Japan	Japanese	1	Economics, graduate	23	Low
Elizabeth	Female	12	Degree	Japan	Japanese	2 ½	Management, graduate	29	Intermediate
Ellen	Female	9	Exchange	Spain	Spanish	½	Computer science, undergraduate	27	Intermediate
Henry	Male	7	Exchange	Japan	Japanese	½	Music, undergraduate	21	Intermediate
Irene	Female	10	Degree	Bulgaria	Bulgarian	2	Biology, undergraduate	21	High
Jack	Male	8	Degree	Dominican Republic	Spanish	8	Criminal justice, undergraduate	20	High
Kevin	Male	8	Degree	Japan	Japanese	½	Management, undergraduate	28	Low
Lawrence	Male	7	Degree	Japan	Korean	1	Business, undergraduate	20	Intermediate
Louisa	Female	17	Degree	Jordan	Arabic	4	Accounting, undergraduate	21	High
Lucas	Male	12	Degree	Hungary	Hungarian	2	Management, graduate	26	High
Nathan	Male	8	Degree	Japan	Japanese	1	Management, graduate	26	Low
Raymond	Male	10	Exchange	France	French	½	Chemistry, undergraduate	20	High
Sarah	Female	13	Exchange	Sweden	Swedish	½	Marketing, undergraduate	23	High
Stephanie	Female	12	Exchange	France	French	1	English and history, undergraduate	21	High
Tanya	Female	10	Degree	Japan	Japanese	1 ½	Counseling, graduate	35	Intermediate
Tom	Male	9	Exchange	Japan	Japanese	1	Economics, undergraduate	22	High
William	Male	1	Seminarian	Haiti	Creole	½	Religious studies, graduate	34	Low
Yvonne	Female	4	Degree	China	Chinese	4	International business, undergraduate	20	Intermediate