

# THE EFFECTS OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING ON THE ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION ABILITY OF MBA STUDENTS

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## Abstract

In this study, self-directed learning (SDL) refers to practices for English reading comprehension ability of individual students outside of a classroom for 7 consecutive weeks. The objectives were to investigate the effect of SDL on English reading comprehension ability and its effect size; and to explore how SDL improves English reading comprehension ability of the 33 MBA students of a private university in Bangkok, Thailand. This research project took the form of an embedded mixed methods design with a variant of the embedded experimental model. Quantitative data were collected by the reading part of TOEIC, and qualitative data by a Learning Summary and Evaluation Sheet, and by the teacher's reflections. The dependent samples t-test reveals that, on average, the English reading comprehension ability of the subject students before the SDL ( $M = 12.30$ ,  $SD = 2.76$ ), and that after the SDL project ( $M = 13.33$ ,  $SD = 3.30$ ) is significantly different ( $p = 0.01$ ). This means that, on average, the English reading comprehension ability of the students in the post-test significantly increases from the pre-test. The effect size is 0.34, which means that its magnitude is "medium". SDL improves reading ability in terms of "increasing awareness of reading strategy use" (51.52%), "developing learning responsibility and effort" (21.21%), "providing freedom to learn" (21.21%), and "building self-confidence to read" (6.06%). Implications and applications are discussed, and recommendations are provided.

**Key words:** English, Graduate students, Reading comprehension, Self-directed learning

## Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the English language has enormously broadened its crucial role in many fields that are inclusive of business. English is

considered the international language, and is widely used in the business and commercial sectors as a tool for communication. However, it cannot be denied that Thailand, with Thai as the official language and English as a foreign language (EFL), does not provide sufficient English exposure and opportunities to use it. Such exposure and opportunities are essential for meaningful and successful English learning and a development of English proficiency. Generally, in Thailand, other than in a classroom setting, exposure to and use of English are relatively limited. Therefore, every attempt should be made to provide language learners with opportunities to be exposed to English outside of the classroom.

Outside class learning requires individual learners to take control over their own learning without the presence of a teacher. This learning capacity is in support of life-long learning which aims at enabling people to learn anytime, anywhere, and in any situation throughout their life, as per their needs and pleasure. One learning approach to enhance such learning capacity can be developed through performing self-directed learning (SDL).

## Review of Related Literature

### *Self-directed Learning (SDL)*

The learner-centeredness perspectives which emphasize SDL grow largely from the ideas addressed by the scholars in the area of humanistic psychology, and Carl Rogers (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1993) advocates that all human beings have a tendency to move towards completion or fulfillment of potential (actualizing tendency). Individuals have the creative power within themselves to solve problems, change their self-concept, and become increasingly self-directed. The individuals have the source of psychological growth and maturity within themselves.

Knowles (1975: 18) defines SDL as:

*“In its broadest meaning, ‘self-directed learning’ describes a process by which individuals take the initiative, with or without the assistance of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes”.*

According to Nunan and Lamb (1996), self-directed learners are those who are able to make informed choices about what to learn and how to learn. Making informed choices requires knowledge and skill. Acquiring SDL skills is one of the major educational purposes, which will lead to life-long learning. Educators, therefore, need to help and support learners to develop attitudes that learning is a lifelong process (Knowles, 1976 cited in Williams and Burden, 1997). Helping language learners learn how to learn involves teaching learning strategies. As Oxford (1990) points out, language learning strategies promote greater overall self-direction for learners. They know how and when to use strategies and this gives rise to a concept of *learner training*.

Dickinson (1992) broadly defines learner training as a training in various strategies of learning, while Ellis and Sinclair (1989) refer to learner training as a way that helps learners become more effective learners of English and take more responsibility for their own learning. This can be done by assisting learners to consider factors that may have an effect on their learning and find the most suitable learning strategies for their learning. Similarly, Tudor (1996) defines learner training as the process to help learners understand more about the nature of learning and acquire skills and knowledge that are necessary for their SDL and their learning goals. Therefore, learner training involves learners reflecting on their learning and teachers evaluating learners' goals, perceptions of these goals, and motivation to learn. Learner training implies teacher-learner interactions. Having important roles to play, both teachers and learners explore the learning process together.

### ***English Reading Skills***

The importance of reading has been emphasized for many years. Alderson (1984: 1) states clearly that "*A reading ability is often all that is needed by learners of EFL, as well as of other foreign languages*". The importance of reading, particularly for academic purposes, and in places where English holds a status of a foreign language, is asserted by Carrell (1989) who argues that second language readers need strong reading proficiency in order to perform successfully.

Likewise, Anderson (1999: 1) believes that reading is the most important skill to master. "*With strengthened reading skills, ESL/EFL readers will make greater progress and attain greater development in all*

*academic areas*". This clearly relates and indicates the necessity of learner training as part of SDL

Although reading is a complex cognitive skill, anyone can learn to read or read more effectively because humans are pre-programed to read (Eskey, 1986). Therefore, teachers should teach students to learn how to read or strengthen their reading skills. As Dreyer and Nel (2003) point out, instruction that provides students with a variety of strategies can be effective to promote comprehension monitoring and foster comprehension. Students need strategy training to become strategic strategy users. Reading strategies, thus play a vital role in reading comprehension. In the field of learning strategies, of which reading strategy is a subcategory, it is widely accepted that learning strategies help students learn better and become better or more successful learners (Sitthhiprom, 2012).

***Characteristics of Poor and Successful Readers***

It is worthwhile exploring characteristics of poor and successful readers because this knowledge will greatly contribute to teachers who want to improve their students' reading skills. Knuth and Jones (1991) summarize the characteristics of poor and successful readers as follows (Table I).

Table I: Characteristics of poor and successful readers

<b>Characteristics of poor readers</b>	<b>Characteristics of successful readers</b>
Understanding occurs from 'getting the words right,' rereading	Understanding that they must take responsibility for construction of meaning using their prior knowledge.
Are poor strategy users: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They do not think strategically about how to read something or solve a problem.</li> <li>• They do not have an accurate sense of when they have good comprehension readiness for assessment.</li> </ul>	Are good strategy users: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They think strategically, plan, monitor their comprehension, and revise their strategies.</li> <li>• They have strategies for what to do when they do not know what to do.</li> </ul>
Have relatively low self-esteem.	Have self-confidence that they are

Characteristics of poor readers	Characteristics of successful readers
	effective learners; see themselves as agents able to actualize their potential.
See success and failure as the result of luck or teacher bias.	See success as the result of hard work and efficient thinking.

It can be concluded that potential or successful readers are those who are able to use reading strategies effectively. Moreover, they are very likely to be independent learners who are confident and know how to learn by relying on themselves, and who are reflective learners. Therefore, teaching reading strategies, in particular those applied by good readers, is essential to improve poor English readers. However, not only do teachers need to provide a reading tool, but also they need to build self-esteem and confidence in poor readers to make them perceive that they are able to improve their reading ability and become successful readers.

As suggested a long time ago by Carrell and Eisterhold (1989), teachers have a crucial role to play to assist students in strengthening their reading skills. They must develop independent readers outside the EFL/ESL classroom. This is the long-range goal for reading teachers; however, students must be able to apply classroom activities and techniques learned from the classroom to the real world beyond the reading classroom. Clearly, Carrell and Eisterhold point out a significant relationship between SDL and reading skills, in- and out-of-class learning, and the virtue of learner autonomy for English knowledge transfer to real use in real life.

In terms of research on reading and SDL in Thailand, it was found that Thai students of different ages encounter difficulties in reading English, which include technical terms, sentence structures and grammar, unfamiliar vocabulary, and reading comprehension (Chawwang, 2008; Kittikunaporn, 2008). Barriers that were found were an educational approach that lacks independence and autonomy enhancement, unattractive materials, and an unfavorable classroom environment (Chomchaiya and Dunworth, 2008). Also, it has been found that SDL helps improve English reading ability and enhance the learner autonomy of students at secondary and tertiary education levels (Vibulphol, 1996; Karnphanit et al., 1999; Leetim, 2001; Swatevacharkul, 2006; and Channuan and Wasanasomsithi, 2012). Still, there seems to be little empirical evidence on SDL and the reading ability of graduate students, and this led to the conduct of this present study.

### *The Context of the Study*

The study context is a private university located in Bangkok, Thailand which provides an MBA (Master of Business Administration) program with two majors, that is, Business Administration and ASEAN Business. The curriculum requires students to take BA503: English. It is an English for academic purposes course that focuses on English reading comprehension skills. The 3-credit course is founded on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory (S/U) basis and aims to enable students to read academic texts, papers or reading materials in their fields of study. The first half of the course trains students on reading strategies and techniques, namely using an English dictionary, using context clues to guess unknown word meanings, pronoun referencing, skimming, and scanning. Prior to these lessons, an intensive review of English sentence structures is performed. After a development of English reading ability, writing skills are then focalized during the second half of the course.

The class was run in the summer semester (June and July, 2014) for 8 weeks and was made up of 33 male and female adult learners ranging in age from 23 to 42 years with different kinds of jobs in the business sector. However, some new graduates were currently unemployed. Students were required to attend a 3 hour class on Saturday and Sunday from 13.00-16.00 for 8 weeks. Their English proficiency was diverse and ranged from basic to pre-intermediate levels. Therefore, the teacher/researcher attempted to improve their English reading comprehension ability exploiting SDL. To equip students with learning tools for their SDL, a learner training scheme inclusive of what SDL is (psychological aspect) and learning strategies including cognitive and metacognitive strategies (methodological aspect) were organized at the outset of the course. The conceptual framework of this study is shown in Figure I.

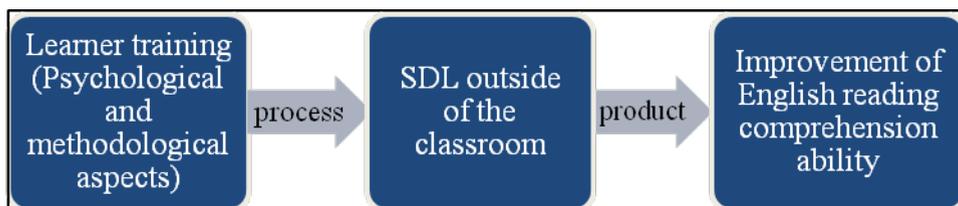


Figure I: Conceptual framework

### Research Questions

1. What is the effect of SDL on the English reading comprehension ability of MBA students? How large is the effect size?
2. How does SDL improve MBA students' English reading comprehension ability?

### Hypothesis

1. The English reading comprehension ability of MBA students in the post-test will significantly increase from the pre-test.

### Research Design and Procedure

This research project took a form of an embedded mixed methods design with a variant of the *embedded experimental model* (Creswell, 2007: 69). This model is defined by having qualitative data embedded within an experimental design (such as a true experiment or quasi-experiment). The priority of this model is established by the quantitative, experimental methodology, and the qualitative dataset is subservient within that methodology. As for the primary purpose, this mixed methods study aimed to investigate the effect of SDL on the reading comprehension ability using *One-Group Pretest-Posttest Design* (O1 X O2) under a *pre-experimental research design*. Data were gathered quantitatively using a test to investigate English reading comprehension ability of MBA (Master of Business Administration) students, which was hypothesized to be significantly increased after performing SDL outside of the classroom. A secondary purpose was to gather qualitative data that would explore how SDL improved the subject students' English reading comprehension ability. The qualitative information will explain the results of the SDL. The embedded experimental model of this study is displayed in Figure 2.

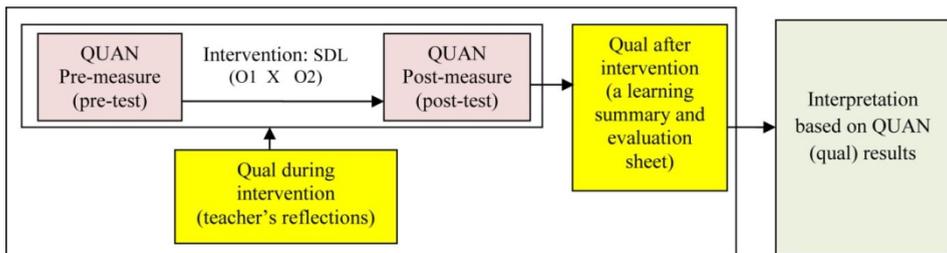


Figure 2: Embedded design: embedded experimental model

### *Subject*

33 MBA students participated in the study. Their English proficiency ranged from a low to pre-intermediate level. Female students were three times the number of their male counterparts. Among the Thai students, there were three Chinese students with the ages of 23 and 24: 2 females and 1 male.

### *Instruments*

There were three major research instruments employed to gather data, that is, a Test of English for International Communication or TOEIC, a learning summary and evaluation sheet, and the teacher's reflections. Besides that, pedagogical instruments were used to support and probe the quantitative and qualitative findings: a record of work and reading strategy checklist.

#### **I. English reading comprehension test**

For research question 1, the test taken from the reading comprehension part of TOEIC, consists of 20 multiple choice type items with 4 choices, was used for two purposes – to be the pre-test and the post-test for the students' English reading comprehension ability.

#### **2. Learning summary and evaluation sheet**

Research question 2 employed a Learning Summary and Evaluation Sheet consisting of a list of open-ended questions for students to express

their thoughts and opinions in writing in Thai after the end of the course. The questions used to collect data for this paper are:

- Do you think SDL can help you improve your English reading ability?
- If so, why and how?

### **3. Teacher's reflections**

The teacher's written reflections were based on checking a Record of Work and from informal talks with students each week in class.

### **4. Pedagogical instruments**

A Record of Work and Reading Strategy Checklist were the two pedagogical instruments. The former consisting of *My learning goal, What I have done, What I have learned, Reflections on usefulness and problems, and Future plans* (Benson, 2011: 71) required each student to reflect on his or her SDL on a weekly basis, while the reading strategy checklist is a 3-point Likert scale of reading strategy statements (Swatevacharkul, 2006). Students rated each statement after finishing their weekly SDL.

### ***Data Collection Procedure***

Week 1: the pre-test had been administered during the first session in class. The test time was 30 minutes. After that, the students received *learner training* which refers to a preparation program for students to perform SDL outside of the classroom. It aims to prepare students psychologically and methodologically. The psychological preparation has a focal aim to introduce the concept of SDL and create favorable attitudes towards their autonomy fostered by SDL. Attitudes, willingness, self-confidence, and motivation to learn autonomously outside of class must be appreciated by the students. The methodological preparation deals with reading strategies inclusive of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The psychological preparation was done in the first session. However, the reading strategy training was carried out for 4 consecutive weeks from weeks 1 to 4.

Weeks 1-7: individual students took on a role of a self-directed learner who performed SDL outside of the classroom for 7 consecutive weeks. Each week, they decided on what to read, and selected a piece of reading material of their own interest. Then, they did the reading and

completed a *Record of Work* and rated on a *3-Scale Reading Strategy Checklist* as well as attaching the *reading material* for submission in class on every Saturday. They received their task back and a feedback from the teacher/researcher the following Saturday. In week 8, they submitted a portfolio having all of the 7 pieces of the SDL tasks.

The teacher acted as a counselor. Each week the teacher provided written feedback regarding any aspects of the student’s SDL in a space for Feedback of a Record of Work. In class, the teacher personally talked informally to each particular student about his or her SDL. Verbal advice on their SDL was provided.

Week 8: the reading post-test, which was the same form as the pre-test, was administered to all students at the end of the course in week 8 with the same test time, like the pre-test. After the post-test, the subject students were requested to express their opinions on a Learning Summary and Evaluation Sheet. They wrote their opinions in Thai in order to prevent any language barrier affecting their opinion, thought, or perception.

## Data Analysis and Results

For research question I, a dependent samples t-test was calculated to test the hypothesis. To measure the magnitude of a treatment effect, the effect size was calculated using a computer program. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The Effect of SDL on English reading comprehension ability

Test	n	Mean	SD	df	t	Sig.(I-tailed)
Pre-test	33	12.30	2.76	32	2.40	0.01
Post-test	33	13.33	3.30			

P < 0.05

Table 2 shows that  $.05 < 2.40$ , and the hypothesis was accepted. Therefore, on average, the English reading comprehension ability of the subject students before the SDL (M = 12.30, SD = 2.76), and that after the SDL project (M = 13.33, SD = 3.30) was significantly different ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). This means that, on average, English reading comprehension ability of MBA students in the post-test significantly increased from the pre-test. The

effect size was 0.34, which means that its magnitude is “medium” (Cohen, 1988).

In regard to research question 2, the data obtained from the portfolios containing learning summary and evaluation sheets were analyzed using a thematic content analysis which revealed that every student (100%) reported that SDL helped improve their reading ability. The quantified qualitative findings are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: How SDL improve English reading comprehension ability

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Increase awareness of reading strategy use	17	51.52
2. Develop learning responsibility and effort	7	21.21
3. Provide freedom to learn	7	21.21
4. Build self-confidence to read	2	6.06

According to Table 3, SDL helps *increase their awareness of reading strategy use* (51.52%), followed by the two reasons with an equal percentage (21.21%), that is, *SDL develops learning responsibility and effort, and provides freedom to learn*. The last category reason is that *SDL builds self-confidence to read* (6.06%). Some excerpts in relation to each reason category are shown below.

#### I. Increase awareness of reading strategy use

*“SDL is very useful in improving my reading skills because we practice reading articles and news, and summarize them using skimming and scanning techniques. This increases my vocabulary. Writing sentences is a practice of what we have learned, but forgot it”. (Female, Thai, no.1)*

*“I think this way of learning will really improve my English reading skills because we must start with selecting news. There are several kinds of news with different lengths. If we apply skimming and scanning, they will help us effectively select news. While reading, if I don’t know some vocabulary, I consult a dictionary so that I find the right meanings; this makes me understand the news better”. (Female, Thai, no.2)*

*“It helps because it’s a practice of reading and spelling at the same time. I’ve seen new sentence structures, new vocabulary, and new slang that I’ve never seen”. (Male, Thai, no.3)*

*“I think this way of learning helps improve my English reading comprehension ability. During the first few weeks, I felt it’s so difficult to read something in English. I really didn’t understand it, and I needed to use a dictionary to find the meaning of almost every word. However, the more I practice, the easier I feel doing the reading tasks”. (Female, Chinese, no.4)*

### **2.Develop learning responsibility and effort**

*“It helps a lot because it’s a practice of you yourself in terms of determination, punctuality, knowledge development, and application of knowledge being learned in class in a real situation”. (Male, Thai, no.5)*

*“It does improve because we must be determined to do the assignments and read English texts, as well as understand the texts. If we don’t do it, we don’t have work for submission”. (Female, Thai, no.6)*

### **3.Provide freedom to learn**

*“I think SDL helps improve English reading ability because the teacher doesn’t force us to read, but we are able to select reading materials. We can choose to read what we’re interested in. We read and try to understand it, and then summarize it. Since we have an interest in what we’re reading, we’re curious to know its content. We’re willing to do it. We do it not because we’re forced to do, and this leads to curiosity and a willingness to read. Consequently, our reading ability’s improved”. (Female, Thai, no.7)*

*“In my opinion, SDL has improved my English reading and critical skills a lot since the SDL tasks were designed appropriately for each student’s knowledge and skills of English. There are questions that are effective for the development of critical thinking skills. Also, setting a reading goal facilitates each student to improve their reading and*

*critical thinking skills each week. Personally, SDL is very useful". (Female, Thai, no.8)*

#### **4. Build self-confidence to read**

*"It helps a lot. At least, we dare to read English, no more fear. The course content provided by the teacher is good and useful for reading and English learning". (Male, Chinese, no.9)*

## **Discussion**

Based on the findings, although the effect size is medium, the evidence shows that SDL does have the positive effects on the subject students' English reading comprehension ability, which corroborates the works of several researchers (Cho, Ellinger and Hezlett, 2006; Swatevacharkul, 2006; Dafei, 2007; Edmondson, Boyer and Artis, 2012; Myartawan, Latief, and Suharmanto, 2013). The discussion will be done simultaneously with the qualitative findings on how SDL helps improve their reading comprehension ability.

### **I. On-going learner training as an essential part of SDL**

The learner training program was given to the subject students with the main aim to train them to become effective self-directed learners (Holec, 1981). The students received learner training which includes both psychological and methodological aspects for 4 consecutive weeks. The theoretical concept of learner training based on the points of view of Ellis and Sinclair (1989) and Tudor (1996) is to help learners become more effective English learners by helping them understand better the learning and acquire skills and knowledge that are necessary to perform their SDL according to their learning goal.

Based on the justification that learner training is the essential prerequisite for SDL outside of a classroom without the presence of a teacher, students were psychologically and methodologically prepared. The psychological preparation attempts to change students' roles and help them develop learning responsibility, to change their attitudes, and to develop self-confidence and self-esteem (Dickinson, 1987, cited in Swatevacharkul, 2014). The subject students received this type of training during the first session of the course.

Furthermore and importantly, students received the extensive and on-going training of the methodological or practical aspect; they were trained each week in class in reading strategies; cognitive and metacognitive, according to the course contents. In other words, students received the on-going English reading strategy training in class, which should continuously raise their reading strategy awareness. As Dickinson (1995) points out, methodological preparation helps learners develop and/or become conscious of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, which could help them acquire the reading abilities and techniques necessary for their SDL. Moreover, outside of the class, students performed SDL on a weekly basis. This means that they had opportunities to apply knowledge and skills they learned in class to their outside of the class learning. Use of learning strategies is essential for language learning and achievement. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) strongly argue that language learning is related to conscious learning by applying learning strategies to enhance learners' mastery of the target language. In brief, on-going strategy training and application of such strategies are beneficial for learning achievement.

## **2. Change of cognitive behaviors**

As strikingly shown by the qualitative data evidence, the first reason why SDL improves students' reading comprehension ability is that SDL increases their awareness of reading strategy use. This reflects a change of their cognitive behaviors.

The excerpts clearly show that students apply both cognitive and metacognitive strategies for their reading practices. Potential or successful readers are those who are able to use reading strategies effectively. However, prior to their MBA study and enrolment in this English course, the informal talks with them revealed that the subject students were not aware of using reading strategies. Additionally, most of them did not have opportunities to use English in their daily life or at work. As Oxford (1994) argues, conscious use of the strategies has a relationship with language learning achievement and proficiency. Language learning strategies are therefore good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems faced during the language learning process; and they give language teachers valuable clues about how their students learn.

The awareness of use of reading strategies is possibly formed by regular practices of reading. As the qualitative findings exhibited, *practice* is the word mentioned often by the subject students, and this explicitly reflects

their perception of learning a foreign language, i.e. that practice is essential for language learning success. Simply put, language learning means doing. The more they practice, the better language learners they are. Successful language learning is not an innate ability, but it is a result of learning and practice. In addition, the rating of the reading strategies they used for each week of SDL may greatly contribute to the development of strategy use awareness. Repetitively receiving and responding to the reading strategies checklist is beneficial to boost their recognition of use of such strategies. Therefore, it can be concluded that the cognitive behaviors of the students are positively developed by regular practices with exposure to a list of reading strategies, which results in an increased awareness of the use of reading strategies and, in turn, leading to a sense of learning achievement and success. Very clearly, extensive use of reading strategies has positive effects on a development of English reading ability.

### **3. Development of affective behaviors**

As the qualitative evidence revealed, SDL develops learning responsibility and effort, and this appears to give rise to persistence in language learning. The findings appear to show causal relationships among these factors that facilitate learning achievement. Taking responsibility for their SDL on a weekly basis persistently engages students in a learning process, and this is seen to develop learning effort. According to Weiner (1986), effort is an internal and unstable factor, and it can be controlled a great deal by the learner. If a learner attributes their learning success to factors over which they can control, that learner is very likely to be a motivated and successful language learner (Hsieh, 2012). Supported by Wang and Peverley (1986, cited in Dickinson, 1995), learning behaviors that are affectively active are as important as cognitively active. Being affectively active in the language learning process is seen to have a positive effect on students' learning outcomes.

At the same time, freedom received from SDL is not the freedom to learn without the presence of the teacher. However, it is the authority the students are given to select what they really want to learn in terms of content, difficulty level and length of the reading materials. Everything involved in the SDL process is under the control of individual students. This possibly makes them feel relaxed and at ease to perform SDL. When everything is under their control, they feel motivated and willing to put effort into their SDL. Learning effort and persistence definitely results in a sense of gradual

learning achievement. Accumulated sense of learning achievement over a certain period of time appears to build more self-confidence in performing SDL. As the empirical evidence shows, their persistent effort in doing SDL makes the reading easier, and they are more confident to read English. Their fear to read is eliminated. All of these interactively reflect their positive affective behaviors on their SDL, giving rise to a development of characteristics of good language readers (Knuth and Jones, 1991).

There is also evidence showing the interactive effects of the awareness of strategy use and affective dimensions of the students. As the excerpt (no. 5) revealed, besides developing his learning determination and responsibility, this student applied the knowledge he gained from the classroom to his SDL which involves his work. From the excerpt (no.7), a personal interest in her own selected reading materials gives rise to curiosity and willingness to read, which, in turn, leads to her reading ability improvement. Figure 3 displays the above discussions about how SDL affects the English reading comprehension ability of the subject students.

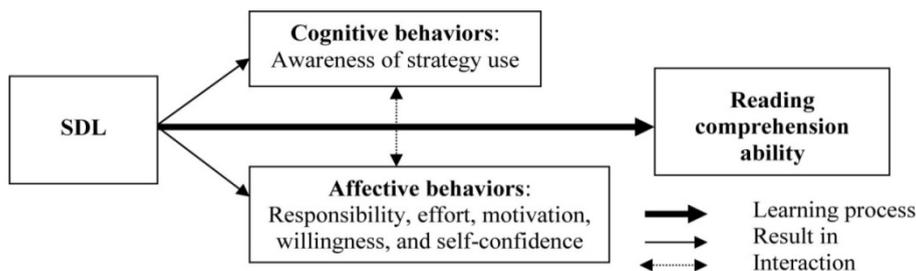


Figure 3: How SDL affects English reading comprehension ability

#### 4. Time factor

The medium effect size of SDL on students' English reading comprehension ability may be due to the time factor. As pointed out by Little (1995), in any case the time constraints usually are a key factor in shaping every program of language teaching, which tends to strictly limit direct learner training. The subjects were exposed to only 4 weeks of learner training and 7 weeks of SDL. The time for SDL is obviously too short for the students to demonstrate significant gains in their general English reading comprehension ability, measured by English proficiency reading tests, like TOEIC. Compared to the achievement test, which is also used to measure students' learning achievement in a formal educational context, the

proficiency test is of a higher level of difficulty. The time factor issue in relation to the treatment is also pointed out by Cohen et al. (1998: 150) in undertaking the experimental study where they acknowledge that "...the seven-week span for the treatment between pre- and post-testing was not really long enough for there to emerge truly substantive results". The empirical data on a longer length of learning strategy instruction to explore the effects of strategy instruction can be gained from the studies carried out by Chamot, Barnhardt, et al. (1993) and Chamot, Robbins, et al. (1993). These two studies covered three years for the strategy training to investigate students' learning achievement.

## **Implications and Applications**

Firstly, learner training that aims to explicitly teach reading strategies needs to be done on a regular basis, preferably on a weekly basis throughout the course. Only a few sessions of methodological preparation of reading strategies is not fully effective.

Secondly, a teacher is central in the process of students' SDL. SDL is not only a learning process that engages students and requires their learning effort and persistence throughout the process, but also requires teacher engagements at the outset of the SDL process. Course content must facilitate SDL outside class. Students must be given opportunities to apply the knowledge they gain from the classroom to their SDL. Classroom learning must support and make SDL meaningful and challenging. Classroom knowledge is like a tool for SDL. If students do not have a tool for their SDL, frustration and learning avoidance is very likely to occur. Course design and course content are, therefore, the very first things to consider so as accommodating SDL outside of class without the presence of a teacher.

Thirdly, during the SDL process, students must be required to make a commitment to, or take responsibility for, their SDL by turning in their work on a regular basis. Although the subject students are adult learners, they are mainly occupied with their office work plus the learning requirements of other courses. Being adult learners does not guarantee that they will always be willing to perform academic assignments. Thus, their time and effort must be worthwhile and make them perceive their English learning development. A record of their learning on a regular basis is needed as a way to monitor their learning and view their progress. The feeling of

learning progress is a vital motivational factor for individual learners at every learning level.

The next implication lies on giving feedback effectively for the students' SDL. The feedback is not only inclusive of correcting students' English, but also of informative feedback. Telling students what is incorrect and why it is incorrect is very useful for students. There is evidence showing that students find feedback beneficial since they know their mistakes and will avoid such mistakes. Consequently, they feel they are learning and improving their English. Besides informative feedback, affective feedback is extremely essential, i.e. dealing with emotional and motivational support. The teacher should provide morale support and encouragement to challenge the learners to greater endeavor in the SDL, as well as provide positive reinforcement. All of these can be given in written work and orally face-to-face in class, and this creates rapport between the teacher and individual students. A positive relationship enables people to grow (Rogers, 1951, cited in Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004), and definitely results in students' positive attitudes towards their language learning in any approaches. Such positive attitudes are a pivotal basic for successful language learning.

Furthermore, from the teacher's reflections, it appeared that during the very first weeks of SDL, students were likely to select reading materials of difficulty and length that are grossly beyond their current reading ability. The informal talks with them revealed that they chose such demanding reading materials because they thought that such texts were appropriate for the graduate education level, although the texts are beyond their English ability. Also, demanding texts would fulfill the teacher's needs and requirements. This may be the reason why the Chinese female student (no.4) struggled a great deal performing her SDL at the beginning. She felt desperate for her SDL. Negative affections hinder language learning, while positive attitudes and emotions can create enjoyable language learning (Oxford, 1990). Therefore, the teacher needs to be a guide for appropriate reading materials for each student. Giving feedback considering the *i+1* comprehensible input theory (Krashen, 1982, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 1999) is therefore paramount as an emotional and motivational learning support. According to Krashen, if learners are exposed to comprehensible input which contains forms and structures just beyond their current level of language competence, they will comprehend and acquire the language. Accordingly, the implication lies in applying the *i+1* comprehensible input at a very first stage of SDL.

However, at a later stage it was observed that some students appeared to repetitively select similar reading materials as they might be less demanding in terms of effort to read and understand. Therefore, the feedback given at this stage should aim to encourage students to do more challenging or demanding reading for their higher skills development. In other words, the teacher must help them to actualize their potential in reading English.

## **Conclusion**

SDL is found to be an effective pedagogy to increase adult students' English reading comprehension ability. SDL outside of a classroom forms the cognitive behaviors of the students by cultivating their awareness of using both cognitive and metacognitive strategies to perform their SDL tasks. They are aware of using reading strategies and plan their SDL by setting learning goals, selecting reading materials, monitoring their own learning, solving learning problems, and evaluating their learning. Moreover, SDL develops affective behaviors of the subject students. They appreciate the value of and hold positive attitudes towards SDL since it helps them be responsible for and learn to put effort into their own English learning although without the presence of a teacher. Learning effort gradually results in better learning achievement, and this gives rise to their learning motivation, enjoyment, and willingness to continue their SDL. Self-confidence to perform SDL is also developed to a certain extent.

The legitimacy of SDL as an effective learning approach outside of the classroom does not only require an active role of the students, but also it requires teacher engagement in the SDL process. The teacher as a counselor is seen to be beneficial for students' learning development. A counselor must provide both informative and affective feedback to each student. During the very first period of SDL, students need their +I comprehensible input feedback; the teacher needs to guide them towards appropriate reading materials. In addition, morale support, encouragement to put more endeavor into the SDL, and positive reinforcement are all necessary. Later on, the feedback given must aim at developing each student's proximal learning capacity for the fullest language learning achievement. Performing more challenging SDL by selecting more demanding reading materials must be encouraged.

## Recommendations

1. The time of the experiment should cover a longer period, at least a normal term of 4 months so as to investigate a factor of time on English reading comprehension ability.

2. The research results show that the English reading comprehension ability of the MBA students improved at the end of the course, SDL, therefore, gains its legitimacy in being beneficially employed and effectively integrated into the EAP course. Students should be empowered to take control over their own English language learning.

3. This study should be carried out with young learners of English in order to investigate whether and how SDL has effects on their English reading comprehension ability.

4. A study on whether and how SDL has effects on learner autonomy development is suggested.

5. For pedagogical purposes, learning and reading strategies should be explicitly taught or students should be exposed to them on a regular basis.

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