Self-Regulated Learning Activities for an English Language Course

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One of the challenges of distance education courses is that to be successful, students need high levels of self-motivation and independence. Although the quality of the learning experience and the achievement of learning outcomes are generally comparable in distance and face-to-face courses (Bernard et al., 2004; Zhao & Tan, 2004), a common disadvantage of the distance education model is lower rates of completion (Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2002).

Distance courses and various iterations of them, such as hybrid courses, are a common component of higher education institutions. Estimates indicate that approximately two-thirds of public colleges and universities in the U.S. offer some form of distance learning (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Institutions that deliver instruction solely by distance are also increasingly common. Greater numbers of non-traditional and diverse students accessing higher education point to the need to approach teaching and learning in innovative ways to accommodate multiple responsibilities of students (e.g., family, work, education) and differences in learning styles. Additionally, enrollment increases and decreases, maximization of facilities, and budget limitations are encouraging institutions to rethink their instructional delivery modes. These issues in higher education have resulted in an increased focus on distance education as a possible solution. However, for educational goals to be realized, students need to succeed in their courses. We maintain that helping students become responsible for the factors affecting their learning, in other words, helping them become self-regulated learners, will support their success. Self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies can be introduced within the context of distance education courses. We illustrate SRL activities that are integrated into English language courses.

Theoretical Background

The concept of autonomy in distance learning has received much attention (Moore, 1972; Garrison, 2003; Holec, 1981; Hurd, 1998; Little, 1991), yet remains “elusive” (Hurd, 2005, p. 1). Autonomy has been described as the capacity for taking responsibility for learning (Holec, 1981) and as the “freedom and ability to manage one’s own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions” (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p. 4). Capacity and choice are central tenets.

Related to autonomy, but with distinct differences, is the concept of SRL, or “the ability of learners to control the factors or conditions affecting their learning” (Dembo, Junge, & Lynch, 2006, p. 188). While autonomy has a focus on learner choice and learner attributes, SRL emphasizes how learners can be more effective in the learning process. Learners can be taught strategies related to the six dimensions of SRL, specifically motive (e.g., reasons for learning, motivation, setting goals, managing emotions), methods of learning (e.g., how to learn, strategies for learning), time (e.g., when to study, how long to study, prioritizing, avoiding procrastination), physical environment (e.g., where to study, minimizing distractions), social environment (e.g., with whom to study; how, when, and where to seek help), and performance (what is learned, observation, reflection, adjusting goals) (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). These dimensions form the basis for our course design.
Another theory critical to our model and course design is Moore’s (1972, 2007) theory of transactional distance. Moore includes three variables – dialogue (interactions among teachers and students), structure (accomplished through course study guides, assignments, schedules), and autonomy (learner choice in what, when, where, and how to learn).

Our courses are focused on English language learning. For language acquisition to occur, learners must have opportunities for input and output. Input occurs through reading and listening at an appropriate level—slightly beyond the learner’s proficiency (Krashen, 1985); output provides opportunities for learners to produce language, test rules, negotiate meaning, and get feedback (Swain, 1995; Long, 1996). The latter is accomplished through writing and speaking. These language acquisition principles require that distance language courses be interactive.

Course Design Model
Based on the theoretical foundations we have described, our course design model emphasizes providing students with a high degree of scaffolding through structure and dialogue, which initially decreases autonomy, in order to help them develop SRL. Dialogue, accomplished in the course through assignment feedback, e-mail, discussion boards, and live individualized tutoring, not only provides support but also opportunities for interactivity and language practice. Structure occurs through instruction in the study guide, the course calendar, audio and video presentations, and the textbook. As students work with the course content, practice the language, and participate in SRL activities, they increase their levels of SRL, capacity for autonomy, and the likelihood of persisting in the course. This process is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Scaffolding of structure and dialogue → Build SRL and language skill → Successful learning, increased autonomy and SRL, course persistence

Becoming a successful self-regulated distance language learner.

Before we discuss specific features of the course and how SRL activities are built into the instruction and assignments, we share a brief overview of the learners and the course. Students are primarily outside the United States with many from developing countries. They have varying levels of academic preparation, computer literacy and access, and motivation. Their English language proficiency is at a high intermediate level although courses are also in development for low intermediate and advanced level learners. Courses are delivered through an online course management system and are synchronous with some synchronous interactivity (i.e., live tutoring). Although most students access the course online, for those with limited computer access, the course is provided in print form and on a CD-Rom. These students still need to submit assignments over the Internet but can work on the course independent of the Internet much of the time.

Course Features
Following are examples of course features designed to support the development of SRL as well as interactivity and language learning. Students begin the course by taking a Manage Your Learning Survey. The survey helps students diagnose their strengths and weaknesses related to the dimensions of SRL. On this basis, they choose one SRL activity to work on each week from activities such as these given below.

1. Motive – To help students understand the importance of learning English and have role models, they listen to a short excerpt of a talk by a pilot for a major German airline who, when he was young, found English impossible to learn until he discovered he needed to know English to be a pilot. His
motivation changed immediately. Students respond to this listening activity by reflecting on their motivation for learning English and setting goals.

2. Methods of Learning – Students examine a list of learning strategies for reading, identify how frequently they use various strategies, and set goals for using new strategies. This is followed by reflection on their success and revision of their goals as needed.

3. Time – Students keep a daily schedule of how they use their time to increase awareness of how to plan and prioritize. They then set goals for when to work on the course each day and for how long.

4. Physical Environment – Students taking distance courses rarely study in formal educational institutional settings. Identifying where they currently study and where they could study for each aspect of their online course helps them assess this aspect of their learning. Students write each study location on a chart and then evaluate how effective that location is for the work they need to do.

5. Social Environment – Being successful involves knowing how to get help when needed. Distance students often need help with technology, finding various course components in the course management system, and communicating with classmates, teacher, and tutors. To understand the repercussions of not getting this information and the steps for getting assistance, students complete an exercise that requires them to consider these issues.

6. Performance – At the beginning, of the course, students self-assess their strengths and weaknesses as language learners. Through this reflection, they determine where they need to expend more effort. As they move through the course, they continually monitor and evaluate their performance with regard to both learning English and developing SRL skills. For example, at midterm, they look back at their performance and make adjustments in the areas they wish to develop.

Our course design model uses a direct approach to training English language learners in SRL. Not only do our course study guides contain learning tips, pose reflective questions, and offer opportunities for interaction with teachers, tutors, and peers through live interactive tutoring, web pages, and online discussion groups, but the courses are designed to increase students’ English language proficiency and SRL skills simultaneously. Hence, our model guides both the design/development phase and the delivery/teaching phase. The SRL dimensions are integral to the course, and the language and SRL activities are folded together.

Conclusion

Support systems for distance courses can help learners develop strategies that lead to more effective learning. These systems should be included in the course design. To enable learners to take more responsibility for their learning, we based our course design on Moore’s (1972, 2007) theory of transactional distance and the six dimensions of SRL. The course activities provide teachers with clear direction in terms of not only helping students gain content knowledge, in our case, language proficiency, but helping them increase their levels of SRL, capacity for self-regulation, and persistence in the course.

References


About the Presenters

Maureen S. Andrade is the associate dean of University College at Utah Valley University. She has extensive experience in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, and was the director of an English as a Second Language program for nine years. Dr. Andrade’s professional interests include teaching English for academic purposes, content-based language instruction, program assessment, and adjustment and retention issues for international students. She is particularly interested in developing and teaching distance courses for English as a Second Language and helping students be successful.

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