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## Taking Stock and Looking Forward

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# Student Perception of Open and Mobile Space Designs for Autonomous English Language Learning in Second Life

**Dean A. F. Gui**
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

## Abstract

This study follows from previously published studies by the author based on language learning designs for English technical writing and through MMOs, and completed Teaching & Learning projects focusing on collaboration and interdisciplinary learning. It reports on the results of a survey completed by Year One undergraduate students from an English for University Studies (EUS) subject at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU), regarding their perception towards—and interest in—using Second Life to supplement their language learning. Thirty-one students responded to the survey which asked participants whether they would be receptive to the idea of using a virtual mobile or outdoor café to supplement their English language learning. Results indicated that most students (90%) liked the idea of learning in a virtual cafe because of its relaxing and familiar atmosphere as well as the potential to interact with other virtual learners; however, about half the respondents (40%) noted that they would consider a different design for the learning space. While the response rate was relatively small, this study reframes the characteristics of autonomy and language learning centers, and additionally is an area of independent language learning which has been little investigated, particularly in an Asian context.

## 1. Introduction

Legend (acronyms related to self-access and language acquisition):
SLA – Second Language Acquisition
SAC – Self-Access Centre
SALL – Self-Access Language Learning
VSAC – Virtual Self-Access Centre
VSALC – Virtual Self-Access Language Centre
ESL – English as a Second Language
SAL – Self-Access Learning

What is a self-access center? This is a question that many educators and researchers of second language acquisition have been exploring. They have realized that the notion of self-access centers (SACs) and learner autonomy, while rooted in European educational thinking (Balcikanli, 2017; Laurier, Stewart, Thornton, Ray, Nakagawa & Rouault, 2017; and Gremmo & Riley, 1995) and in the areas of Applied Linguistics and Education (Morrison, 2008)—have developed and changed: to move from the teacher to the learner, to complement the traditional face-to-face classroom (Gardner, 2001), to improve linguistic and independent learning skills, and to shift the teacher's role to that of a mentor or advisor (Morrison and Navarro, 2012).

Self-access and independent learning have taken hold in Asia and other non-European parts of the world (Kongchan & Darasawang, 2015; and Gremmo & Riley, 1995). At present, in China, universities have established computer-based language centers, observing that the learning environment is a factor for student improvement in oral proficiency (Lu & Zhang, 2012). In Japan, students express that a non-restricted learning environment improves confidence and lowers anxiety (Kirova, Petkovska, & Koceva, 2012); and in Hong Kong, SACs support a multitude of languages and are being considered by secondary and primary schools (Gardner, 2001).

However, a new challenge has recently surfaced, manoeuvring attention to innovation in assessment of SAC effectiveness (Choi, 2017; Little, 2017; and Gardner & Miller, 1997) and the introduction of virtual resources and environments (Lai, Shum & Tian, 2016; and Gardner & Miller, 2011) as a response to cultural variation, lack of follow-through on techno-pedagogy, and the growing number of student registrations in our institutions (Gardner, 2017; Alzahrani & Wright, 2016; and Gremmo & Riley, 1995). Second Life (SL) (Rymaszewski, Au, Wallace, Winters, Ondrejka & Batstone-Cunningham, 2007) is one such virtual environment.

In addition to the pedagogical implications of developing and implementing SACs, design considerations have also been a vital part of autonomous learning, even though research has been sparse in this area. Design environments should i) be communicative and allow natural interaction, ii) be an ideal place for students to access English resources (Cheng & Lin, 2010), iii) implement analysis and evaluation measures, iv) consider a variety of platforms, v) incorporate, interactive e-learning resources (Adnan & Zamari, 2012; Klassen, Detaramani, Lui, Patri, & Wu, 1994), vi) be pedagogically justified, vii) have institutional support, viii) be voluntary, ix) allow student input and management; x) offer teacher guidance; and xi) encourage students to move from guided individualised learning to eventual independent learning (Morrison & Navarro, 2012).

In Hong Kong, at Lingnan University, a "Global Classroom" created in SL serves as an introductory language-learning activity between students in Hong Kong and the United States, using audio voice communications, machine translation, and simulation of face-to-face interaction, to negotiate communication between disparate cultures (Knutzen & Kennedy, 2012). At the City University of Hong Kong, the SAC uses a "self-serve supermarket" design (Klassen, Detaramani, Lui, Patri, & Wu, 1994). Interestingly, cafes have been integral components of research related to language acquisition (Gao, 2007) but never as the focus of the research, always as a physical location, and never within the context of a virtual self-access space. Some research has been conducted in virtual designs for language arts courses (Gui & AuYeung, 2013), but little to none has been done in self-access learning in virtual environments (Gui & Northern, 2016).

This present research reports on the results of a survey completed by first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language Centre's (ELC) English for University Studies (EUS) subject at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU), regarding their perception towards and interest in using SL to supplement their language learning during school studies (Li, Wong, Gui & AuYeung, 2013). Students were initially introduced to the concept of self-access learning (Morrison, 2008) via a physical tour of the ELC's Centre for Independent Language Learning (CILL). Then, as a practice writing task during class, EUS students were introduced to SL through an in-class SL account creation and orientation of the virtual world, as a means to engage with discursive argumentation on the effectiveness of using a virtual world for English language learning.

The survey comprised four questions, asking participants to consider their experience with CILL, SL and their daily interactions with the university community and whether they would be receptive to the idea of using a virtual mobile or outdoor café to supplement their English language learning. The purpose of such a design would be to

- Share independent language learning resources in an engaging and accessible space where collaborative autonomous English language learning may occur;
- Provide an alternative, space-efficient medium for self-access learning which is available at all times, provided there is internet access; and
- Transform into a cross-institutional and open collaborative space with a strong virtual educational presence.

Additionally, and importantly, this research functions as a) an exploration into the possibility of developing a Virtual Self Access Centre (VSAC) in SL for undergraduate second language learners in Hong Kong, and b) a foundation to propose a virtual presence for the HKPU's English Language Centre. A Literature Review follows, followed by Findings and Discussion and finally, Concluding Remarks. The results of this study are important as this is an area of independent language learning which has been little investigated, particularly in an Asian context.

## 2. Literature review

## 2.1. The history of SACs

### 2.1.1. SACs in Hong Kong

The evolution of SACs has been influenced and informed by various cultural and institutional needs, technological advancements, and financial considerations. However, the outcomes of these autonomous learning spaces have not always been so easily realized or assessed. Gardner (2001), rather than giving a singular definition of SAC effectiveness, examines instead the complexity of defining and measuring effectiveness, noting that its relevance depends on the various members who engage with autonomous learning. Pointing to another study (Gardner & Miller, 1999), the author suggests that while SACs in Hong Kong universities are occasionally observed as being "cheap" replacements to the traditional classroom, they are complementary to classroom teaching, supporting a multitude of languages in addition to English, taken up by secondary and primary schools, and supported by the government with teacher training and resource acquisition.

The idea of a more affordable alternative has been addressed since the formal move in 2012 by Hong Kong's higher education institutes from a three year to a four-year undergraduate curriculum. Nevertheless, with concerns over possible increase in student enrollment, limited physical classroom space, and budget restrictions, the inclusion of a virtual self-access center (VSAC) characteristically familiar to locals might serve as a welcomed complement to the traditional SAC. This kind of a learning environment which features a relaxing atmosphere, opportunities for self-reflection and

communication in multiple languages, and accessibility to necessary resources is also contemplated in Gardner and Yung (2017) in which students perceived self-access language learning (SALL) as flexible, having learning potential and being more student-centric.

Several explanations are given for the significance of investigating effectiveness: 1) limited resources means more students require access to and utilization of SACs; 2) measures of effectiveness help identify the quality of practices which in turn map areas for improvement and materials and activity development; 3) the effectiveness of SACs may encourage teachers to promote SACs to their students; 4) learners, in turn, may be more inclined to voluntary use SACs when witnessing their effectiveness; and 5) since a primary outcome for SAC usage is its effectiveness, the planning, design, and implementation of such a space is crucial. In Hong Kong, time for SAC staff to manage their duties tends to be spread thinly (Gardner, 2017), and it is therefore important not to simply emulate the measurement of effectiveness for taught courses in a space for autonomous learning. This position, while outside of the context of this study, also introduces the possibility that a different set of measurements might be necessary to gauge the effectiveness of a VSAC.

### 2.1.2. SACs globally

A further insight into the history of SACs purports that the introduction of and changes in SACs originate from the disciplines of Applied Linguistics and Education. Research by Morrison (2008) examines the role of SACs over thirty years in tertiary education, believing that the focus has moved from teacher to learner, and – very much in line with the preceding study discussed (Gardner 2001) – is complementary to classroom learning and is global in scale, spanning across Europe, South American and South-east Asia. These sentiments are also echoed in studies by Benson (2017), where SACs are one of many platforms for individual language learning; and Richards (2015), where language learning has evolved towards external and non-physical spaces. Morrison's study, however, tackles the definition of a self-access center, suggesting that SACs 1) bring together both language and independent learning, 2) help learners improve both language and independent learning skills, and 3) provide necessary resources for learner support.

The study, furthermore, identifies several factors possibly slowing the effectiveness and efficiency of SACs, resulting in the emergence of The Natural Approach (Terrell, 1977) and Community Language Learning (Curran, 1976) – more humanistic approaches to teaching – a greater recognition of the learner as an autonomous individual, a more learner-focused approach to language education, and development of effective learning strategies. In a more current examination of learner autonomy and independence, Benson and Voller (2014) postulate group versus individual autonomy, positioning the former within the political construct of self-rule, while the latter a European construct "associated with the formation of the individual as the core of a democratic society" (p. 4). This form of social awareness is evident in the replies of student participants of this present research, evincing a grounded familiarity of Hong Kong culture.

Other developments have surfaced, offering alternative goals of a self-access learning space, including

- A worldwide increase in the demand for, and commercialization of, the learning of English as an international language of commerce and technology (Smith, 2015; and Canagarajah, 2014)
- Responding to certain revolutionary factors (Sturtridge, 1997; and Toffler, 1970), institutions have set up resource centers to bring together an increasing variety of informational and technological aids (Cullingford & Haq, 2016; Drew & Ottewill, 1998; and McDevitt, 1996)
- The SAC has been designed to potentially meet the needs of institutions facing an increasing number of students (Choi, 2017) and their learning needs (Lyon, Steele & Fraser, 2016)

This last point regarding SAC design (as well as Morrison's intimation that autonomous learning requires both human and nonhuman support and that SAC teachers should collaborate as learning guides) is important to this study, as physical spaces may not be able to provide the same kinds of psychological or psychosocial affordances possible with virtual spaces. The following segment of the Literature investigates this idea further.

## 2.2. SAC designs

### 2.2.1. Design theories and frameworks

A natural next step from the antecedents of the SAC is the design of the SAC itself. Although outside of the scope of this present research, it is intended that the VSAC mentioned will be developed and maintained by a team of ELC staff with extensive experience in the field of language education and design in virtual worlds, with the assistance of a technician experienced with building in Second Life. It is understood that connecting to Second Life requires heavy bandwidth and so not all mobile devices or older desktops will be able to connect; however, at least while students are on campus, they will be able to access Second Life at any of the main computer labs stationed at the HKPU.

In this regard, Gui and Northern (2016) propose a Virtual Self-Access Language Centre (VSALC) design framework aimed at supporting tertiary level language centers (notably in Asia) in "developing complementary channels of language acquisition" (p. 197). Observing the gap in work conducted on design frameworks for self-access facilities in Massively Multi-User Online Environments (MMUOEs), the authors point to the educational affordances availed through Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs), Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs) and Integrated Development Environments (IDEs). They further consider the potential applicability of such a design framework on VSALCs situated in three specific MMUOEs – Second Life, World of Warcraft and the Unity game engine – selected for their popularity and population.

The VSALC design principles synthesized from the various theories, methods, and matrices relevant to Second Language Acquisition (SLA), SACs, and MMUOEs (Cooker, 2010; Li & Wang, 2014; Noh et al., 2011; Peterson, 2010; Peterson, 2010; and Gee, 2005) serve as recommended guidelines for SAC platform developers and non-technical university educators working within virtual environments. Subsequently, the design constructs of such a framework (which include Technology and Society) could provide the foundation for building a mobile/outdoor café in Second Life (see Figure 1.).

**Figure 1: Second Life – Outdoor dining and socializing**

Credits: "Meeting with Friends" by Linden Lab (2016), CC BY-NC-SA 2.0;
https://www.flickr.com/photos/lindenlab/24924197330/in/album-72157633789899717/

### 2.2.2. SAC designs in Second Life

While it can be argued that Second Life is, in its own rights, a massive Self-Access Centre where users can retrieve and interact with multifarious learning tools and materials, performing a word search in Second Life for "self-access" yields few results (as demonstrated during a search conducted by this present author.) Thomas Jefferson University provides "self-guided" exhibits and a showcase home to help children with different learning abilities; the Centering Place affords "self-help" information for those suffering from depression, and the Particle Laboratory Learning Center uses "self-paced" classrooms for scripting.

Anecdotal evidence reveals, additionally, that much of the ESL / SAL presence in Second Life manifests as virtual Groups, as opposed to Destinations (or places). A possible exception includes the SL HKPolyU educational islands representing the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (see Figure 2.). The Virtual Department of English, also known as "The Tree of Knowledge" was designed and built by staff from the Department of English, the English Language Centre and the Department of Applied Social Sciences in 2010, with Gui and AuYeung (2010) delineating design and construction of the teaching and learning platform. Theoretical underpinnings were borrowed from Salmon's (2004) Tree of Learning concept, whereby extensions of university learning encompassed branches of distance, blended, campus-based and communities of practice literacy all nourished by a "techno shine" (2010, p. 3).

Students of English approached this space as a self-access learning environment that was home to such activities as poster exhibitions showcasing the recreation of movie advertisements using multimedia (text, visuals, color, spacing, audience) for a technical writing course. Since the writing of this research, however, two of the HKPolyU's islands (the Tree of Knowledge being located on one of these) have been taken offline due to financial reasons. Contractual obligations to Linden Lab (the parent company hosting Second Life) and unreliability with financial support from institutional administration is an unfortunate reality facing educational builds in Second Life, even though it continues to remain one of the most frequently visited virtual worlds with an educational presence.

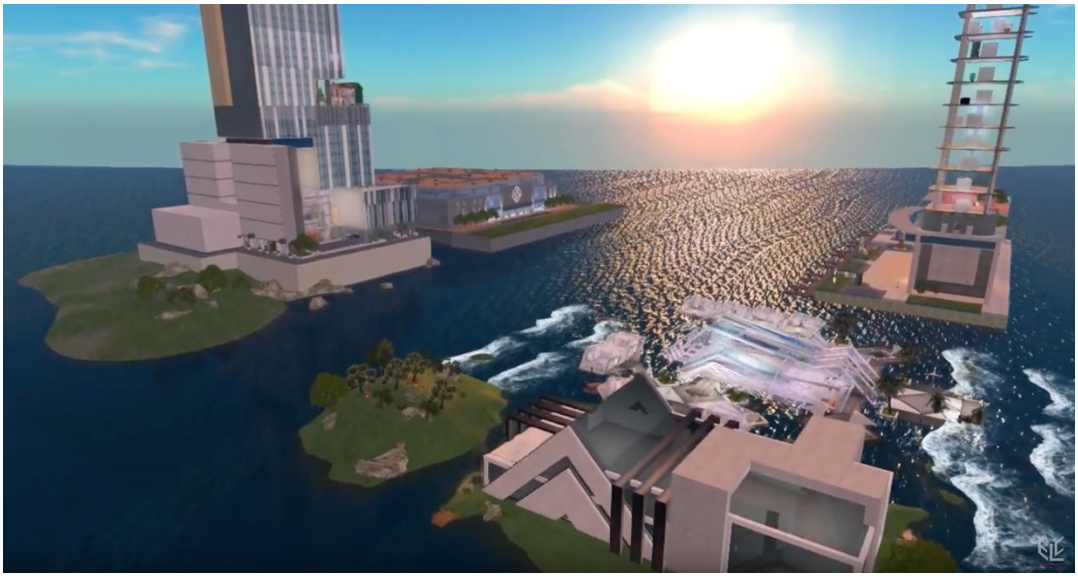

**Figure 2: The HKPolyU Virtual Campus**

Credits: VCE3i HKPolyU Virtual Campus Promotional Video by the English Language Centre (2018); https://youtu.be/p2VwV-MC1kE

## 2.3. Use of Dining Concepts in (e)Learning

### 2.3.1. Dining concepts in traditional e-learning and face-2-face mediums

Research into the use of cafe designs for self-access center usage (either physical or virtual) seems to be lacking. In fact, little – if any – research seems to be put forth into the emotional or psychosocial effects of designs for independent learning spaces. However, cafes have been included in several studies as gathering places where learning has taken place, including Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and an Adult and Community Education (ACE) center in Australia (Ferguson & Seddon, 2006). Gao (2007) describes a study involving members of an English learning club in China who participated in language learning through online interaction and physically, at a location called the Blue Rain Cafe; collaborative learning in this community was sustained through the creation of self-images, development of self-identities and recognition of a sense of belonging.

One of the goals for these language learners was to initiate a learning community and, importantly, "to maintain its cohesion on an ongoing basis" which is also an important distinction for the VSAC proposed in this study . Moreover, particular qualities which made the cafe a "dynamic place" for learning included

- A European design
- A space which encouraged contributions to the online discussion
- An alternative meeting space

This last point is interesting when placed within the context of a VSAC. Another way to consider it is that online communities, by and large, remain online communities that can shift from one medium (static online/email communications) to another (immersive, three-dimensional virtual worlds) which resemble a familiar but creative environment, without concerns over English language proficiency, code-switching or turning language learning into an isolated, lonely experience.

Of course, there are limitations to the realness of experience in a place like a virtual café. One cannot truly see the human quality in an avatar with little to no facial movement, and a virtual cup of

coffee is never truly consumed. But, a virtual learning space that is designed well and is planned properly affords the independent language learner an immersive, safe, and familiar learning space without the constraints of opening and closing hours, (de)registration or food/phone policies.

#### 2.3.2. Dining design applications in Second Life

The Caddy Shack is a large, non-traditional language learning facility developed in Second Life, in the style of a 1950's American diner on a private island, complete with Cadillac booths, traditional diner booths and tables, and outdoor campfire settings to facilitate conversational groupings. A paper by Knutzen and Kennedy (2012), perhaps the only scholarly study on Hong Kong SLA SACs in Second Life, reports on the progress of the Caddy Shack, a collaborative TESOL pilot project (with over 200 participants) exploring the integration of Second Life with the instruction of English courses at Lingnan University in Hong Kong.

Coordination of online activities was done using the Moodle learning management system. Additional considerations regarding the cyberscape surrounding the diner included visually appealing objects to "attract the students to spend some time exploring the environment with their conversational partners" (p. 93). Interestingly, student participants in this present research indicated both a preference for creativity and familiarity in learning space design, the latter criteria of which was not directly addressed in Knutzen and Kennedy's study.

Finally, the British Academy (Knutzen & Kennedy, 2012) and LanguageLab (Chen, 2016) are two additional examples of successful virtual language projects with the latter being cited as providing hands-on learning scenarios such as going to the grocery store, reserving a seat on a flight or visiting a doctor. As discussed in the following sections, participants in this present research were also asked to consider the extent of their own material and social consumption in independent learning, and its potential effectiveness within a virtual mobile cafe.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Context and Participation

Over the course of the 2012 – 2013 and 2013 – 2014 academic years, students from English for University Studies (EUS)—a profession-specific subject under the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's English Language Centre (ELC)—were initially introduced to the concept of self-access learning (Morrison, 2008) via a standard Week-one tour of the University's Centre for Independent Language Learning (CILL), a self-access learning space overseen by the ELC (see Figure 3.) Then, as a practice writing task around Week 10 of class, EUS students convened in a multimedia computer lab (with the Second Life viewer pre-downloaded on both teacher and student computers) and were introduced to Second Life (SL) through the lesson, "Language Learning in Second Life." (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rAADULgBjaYkvRDdVB8UN_bPIZqV5RXU/view?usp=sharing)

The objectives of the lesson required students to interact with virtual residents and the surrounding cyberscape, via i) account creation, ii) orientation, and iii) visiting self-selected destinations to communicate with other virtual residents using text and/or voice chat. The culminating activities included an invitation to write a discursive essay on the effectiveness of using a virtual world for English language learning. The writing task was optional but aided as practice and preparation for a discursive essay writing assessment. Students who participated in this task received feedback from the instructor.

**Figure 3: Centre for Independent Language Learning (CILL)**

Credits: CILL Orientation Video by the English Language Centre (2016);
https://elc.polyu.edu.hk/cill/cillorientationvideoquiz.aspx

## 3.2. Instruments

Subsequently, students were encouraged to complete an online Google survey, https://goo.gl/forms/oXgWddLzleg5bQqp1 (see the Appendix), which asked participants to consider their experience with CILL, SL and the communities they frequent for relaxation or socialization, and whether they would be receptive to the idea of visiting a virtual mobile or outdoor café to supplement their English language learning.

## 3.3. Incentives

One bookstore voucher was offered as a raffle-drawn winning prize for students who participated in the survey.

## 3.4. Theoretical Underpinnings

Students responded to four statements, addressing some of the educational benefits sought after in autonomous learning, and also informed by existing research on technology-enhanced learning (Eady & Lockyer, 2013; and Pacific Policy Research Center, 2010): (i) Encouraging students to develop autonomous learning strategies and explore the potential of emerging technologies (Godwin-Jones, 2011); (ii) Preparing students for future courses and the modern workplace where virtual world

technology may already be used (Salmon, 2004); (iii) Exploring the potential for experiential learning through interaction with other virtual world users and in-world problem-based tasks (Gregory et al., 2016); and (iv) Building social awareness and networking skills by collaboratively navigating through an innovative learning platform (Bonk, Lee, Kou, Xu & Sheu, 2015; and Ferguson & Seddon, 2006).

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Thirty-one students responded to the survey. Table 1 shows the students' open-ended responses (40 total) to three questions asking for elaboration (left column), and sorted into the adapted four educational benefits of autonomous and technology-enhanced learning (top row). Only responses (whether negative or positive) that specifically reflected one of the four educational benefits were included; consequently, 26 comments were removed, ranging from vague (e.g., "Second Life", "It makes me feel more relax"); possible misunderstandings (e.g., "You can['t] stay in the mobile cafe for too long. Otherwise, it may disturb others while running business" – these are addressed in the detailed discussion that follows); complete rejection of the idea of a mobile/outdoor café (e.g., "It may be work for others. But absolutely not for me"); to one student who asked "What is a mobile café?" (this comment is also considered in Limitations).

**Table 1: Table 1. Open-ended student responses to 3 survey questions, categorised by educational benefits of autonomous and technology-enhanced learning**

| | **Encouraging students to develop autonomous learning strategies and explore the potential of emerging technologies** | **Preparing students for future courses and the modern workplace where virtual world technology may already be used** | **Exploring the potential for experiential learning through interaction with other virtual world users and in-world problem-based tasks** | **Building social awareness and networking skills by collaboratively navigating through an innovative learning platform** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *I have used self-access resources in my learning* | Indi-work, second life, Englishtown<br>Extra-curricular books; the Internet<br>E-portfolio, ELC e-Learning platform<br>I used the Second Life as a self-access resources at home.<br>I get some reading exercises in CILL.<br>Online tutorial which teach me how to deal with questions, even indi-work is one kind of self-access resources.<br>The Books and study Notes as well as exercise papers that provided are helpful.<br>The majority of self-access resources in my learning is some videos containing knowledge and teaching materials on the websites about self-access. | | I recall I have engaged in a virtual maze organised by other cyber user, during the game all the cyber user have to solve the problem together and definitely in English. | I have chatted with foreign users in English.<br>The most interesting part is chatting with different people and build relationships. |

| | **Encouraging students to develop autonomous learning strategies and explore the potential of emerging technologies** | **Preparing students for future courses and the modern workplace where virtual world technology may already be used** | **Exploring the potential for experiential learning through interaction with other virtual world users and in-world problem-based tasks** | **Building social awareness and networking skills by collaboratively navigating through an innovative learning platform** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| *How do you feel about the idea of using a "virtual" mobile cafe or outdoor cafe as a self-access space for language learning in Second Life?* | Students can be relax in the circumstance and put every potential to learn English.<br><br>It can attract more students to learn.<br><br>This new format of learning can attract people attention and motivate them to take a look on it. Also this will be more interesting than just sitting in the classroom.<br><br>I think these two environments can provide a comfortable atmosphere for learning.<br><br>It can provide a comfortable environment, making Leander's [sic] find it easier to relax and easy to be absorbed in study.<br><br>It serves as an open area for interacting with others<br>Because these kinds of places are really great platforms to provide people there with relaxing atmosphere. People there are willing to speak to others casually,and it is really a good chance to improve language skills.<br><br>These place usually are quiet. I am relaxed. It is easier for our brain to learn language. | There are already laptops and tablets and they are quite popular. More, there are lots of wifi spots in HK which browsing the internet is never a problem. People visiting net cafe in HK usually for entertaining, because the cafe could provide speedy computers and stable network which could be costly. I don't see mobile cafe for self-access learning could work because it requires neither the speedy computers nor the stale network.<br><br>Maybe the environment is not suitable for studying. | Getting in touch with different people must be fun!<br><br>Students can find information or sources about what they want to know or do not familiar with. Also, students can discuss with classmates if they found any difficulties in the class.<br><br>It can provide a casual place for users to learn language by interacting with other users.<br><br>I'm not sure how this will help. Maybe I can talk more with the native English speakers and this will help me improve my English. But if I can't find a topic and have no words to say, then this won't help at all.<br><br>Enable users to communicate and chat there. | |
| *If you could design a different kind of virtual self-access centre, would you?* | A place which is access to all people, wanting to learn in the area. 24 hour accessiable.<br><br>A self-access centre in each building. It would be just simple. No need for grandiose decoration, just a quiet environment is enough. As a nearby self-access | | | I would just provide a platform for the centre. Then I will invite other users to build their own sub-centre. However, it should be user-friendly and should never requires coding or programming. Like "Minecraft", the admin construct the program(game) and hold a server while other |

| | **Encouraging students to develop autonomous learning strategies and explore the potential of emerging technologies** | **Preparing students for future courses and the modern workplace where virtual world technology may already be used** | **Exploring the potential for experiential learning through interaction with other virtual world users and in-world problem-based tasks** | **Building social awareness and networking skills by collaboratively navigating through an innovative learning platform** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | centre would increase the motivation of language study. | | | users could build their own stuff. |

The majority of open-ended responses (70%) were evident in the elaboration of the question "*How do you feel about the idea of using a "virtual" mobile cafe or outdoor cafe as a self-access space for language learning in Second Life?"* while the category "**Encouraging students to develop autonomous learning strategies and explore the potential of emerging technologies"** received the most relevant feedback (14 out of 26; over 50%). It should also be noted, however, that the remaining three categories received feedback that conveyed the most detail and insight.

The following discussion expands on some of the more interesting and challenging responses:

1. I have used self-access resources in my learning

A majority of students (47%) who responded indicated that they had used self-access resources prior to completing the survey; two students (11%) had never used self-access materials, while eight students (42%) were not sure.

Most of the comments (50%) referred to resources overseen by the ELC: CILL, resources available on the subject learning management system (LMS), and the E-portfolio; two students (16%) indicated they used materials (including videos) found on the Internet; while two students (16%) specifically noted that they sought out English speakers to interact with, and considered them to be "self-access resources." Lastly, two students (16%) claimed they used Second Life, with one student using SL at home.

2. A virtual self-access center (VSAC) should include the following

The VSAC project would combine emergent technologies and theories in self-access language learning to create a collaborative autonomous learning space. One of the questions would be how the deliverables might be used in the actual teaching and learning process by the students.

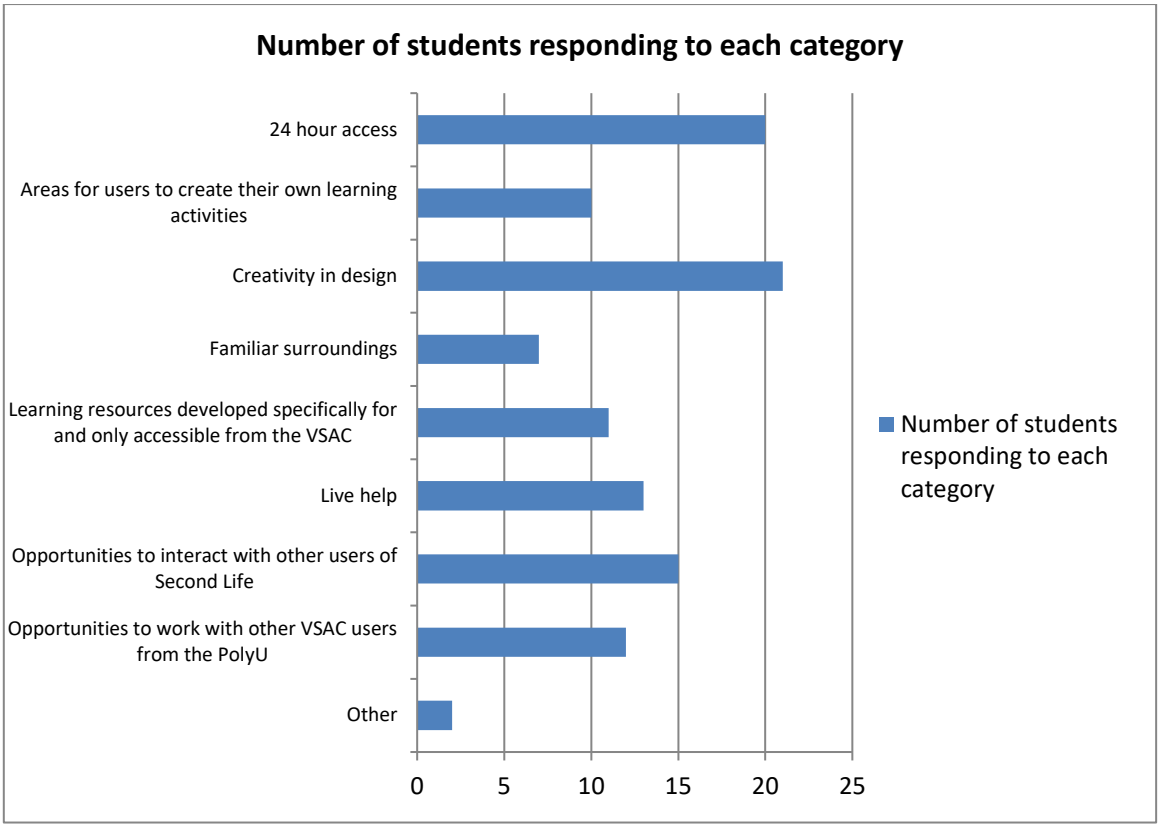


**Figure 4: Student response to VSAC criteria**

As seen in Figure 4, those categories with the highest response rates included Creativity in design (21%), 24-hour access (20%), and Opportunities to interact with other users of Second Life (15%). The lowest response rate came from Familiar surroundings (7%). Even though this last finding is interesting in that it is out of line with established research claiming that students prefer virtual designs which are familiar (Minocha & Reeves, 2010; Mkrttchian, Kataev, Hwang, Bedi & Fedotova, 2014; and Steils, Tombs, Mawer, Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2015), it nevertheless reveals that certain students were interested in a learning design that was perhaps both creative and familiar.

Additionally, students (whether participating in the survey or participating in the general blended component of the subject) were given a brief introductory workshop on using Second Life and were offered assistance through instructional videos and directions on the ELC website. A VSAC would complement the existing self-access facilities offered by the ELC, utilizing the current HKPolyU Virtual Campus in Second Life as its foundation. There are also practical benefits in terms of finding alternative methods to cope with increases in student numbers due to changes in the university curriculum.

3. How do you feel about the idea of using a mobile cafe or outdoor cafe as a self-access space for language learning?

Results indicated that most students (54%) liked the idea of learning in a virtual cafe because of its relaxing and comfortable atmosphere as well as the potential to interact with other virtual learners (Gao, 2007); 17% (4 students) did not believe the design idea would work, suggesting the environment would not be suitable for everyone, and 29% (7 students) were not sure. However, about one-fourth of the respondents (16%) noted that they would consider a different design for the learning space (see question 4).

Some comments, however, are of particular interest:

> "This new format of learning can attract people attention and motivate them to take a look on it. Also, this will be more interesting than just sitting in the classroom."

Here, the student seems to have substituted the classroom with the VSAC rather than supplement it (see Gardner, 2001).

> "Students can find information or sources about what they want to know or do not familiar with. Also, students can discuss with classmates if they found any difficulties in the class."

Here, the student does indirectly suggest that the autonomous learning can be collaborative in nature, rather than an isolated process (see Ferguson & Seddon, 2006).

The following three comments seem to suggest that the students have either not understood the question or have difficulty imagining design concepts in a virtual space:

> "You can[n't] stay in the mobile cafe for too long. Otherwise, it may disturb others while running business."

> "I think it is quite relaxing for students to study in cafe and students can release themselves from the pressure of learning. However, students might not only concentrate on their study in cafe because students would like to enjoy food and coffee at the same time."

> "There are already laptops and tablets and they are quite popular. More, there are lots of wifi spots in HK which browsing the internet is never a problem. People visiting net cafe in HK usually for entertaining because the cafe could provide speedy computers and stable network which could be costly. I don't see mobile cafe for self-access learning could work because it requires neither the speedy computers nor the stable network."

It can be suggested that the idea of a café design – albeit virtual in nature – does instill some preconceptions about what is expected in this type of potential learning environment e.g., "real" food and drink, and (at least in a Hong Kong context) the idea that wifi is conveniently accessible everywhere and not just at cafes; that time is money – therefore, insinuating that cafes are businesses focusing on profit and not a learner's needs (see Ferguson & Seddon, 2006,) or a place for relaxation.

4. If you could design a different kind of self-access center, would you?

While 8 students (42%) indicated they would not design a different VSAC if they could, and 8 students (42%) indicated they were not sure, 3 students (16%) considered a different design approach. One of the responses was located in the physical space, suggesting that situating a quiet, simple self-access center in each University building would be a convenient alternative; and another recommendation was for a 24-hour accessible space. However, the third comment pointed to Minecraft – a virtual object-building world – believing that an administrative/technical team should provide the initial Centre platform – the *tabla rasa* – and "invite other users to build their own sub-centre."

The reaction to this question perhaps deserves further investigation since some of the major outcomes for the VSAC include (i) providing HK PolyU ELC students with an alternative, mobile platform to access independent learning materials; (ii) developing a collaborative, knowledge-based community between students, and between students and university faculty/staff; (iii) keeping students at the frontier of emerging technology and acquiring technical skills through a process that might be considered invaluable in their future career; and (iv) cultivating a community of young academics and researchers in line with the mission and vision of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (https://www.polyu.edu.hk/web/en/about_polyu/motto_vision_mission/index.html). This is especially important for visual and experiential learners, and the current generation of students, many of whom have engaged in online gaming and find online virtual role-play activities stimulating.

## 5. Limitations

There are three distinct areas potentially problematic for this study:

### 5.1. Support to Develop and Maintain the VSAC

- Taking over and maintaining one of the three Second Life islands once PolyU's contract with Linden Labs is terminated.
- Faculty, staff, and student training to use both Second Life and the VSAC.
- Training for the ELC's IT office staff with the technical expertise to develop and maintain projects in Second Life.
- The purchasing of pre-built items in Second Life – these are items built by other Second Life users who sell them to other uses through business transactions via the Second Life currency, Linden dollars. The ratio of Hong Kong dollars to Linden dollars is estimated at 1 to 32.

### 5.2. The General Approach to the Study

- Better training of what a mobile or outdoor café is.
- Survey participation was voluntary so numbers were low. Additionally, reservation of classrooms with multimedia capabilities was dependent on availability.
- Language in the survey itself needed to be adjusted after starting to remind students at all stages, that they were answering questions related to a "virtual" self-access center.

### 5.3. Student Perception of the Study

- Students tend to find design in virtual worlds a challenging concept to envision and articulate.
- Few students noted that they wished for familiar surroundings in a VSAC and most preferred an environment that was creative in design and content. Yet, the latter students were not able to articulate this in later survey questions, and those who did respond seemed to bring the idea of a VSAC back to a physical, familiar environment.
- There is a general understanding that in places like Hong Kong, cafes are not necessarily spaces for relaxation and socializing. Rather, they tend to be viewed as places which are part of the financially-motivated fabric making up most of the Hong Kong business landscape.

Part of the challenge of this research was trying to persuade and encourage students to approach the outdoor café idea creatively and from varying perspectives.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

If you build it they will come – but will they come because they want to or because they're told to (Lee, 2016; and Benson & Voller, 2014)? Also, should they come… will they learn (Lai, Shum & Tian, 2016; and Gardner & Miller, 2014)? These are additional considerations when planning, designing and building a virtual self-access center. This research served as an exploratory investigation into the possibility of developing a Virtual Self Access Centre in Second Life for undergraduate second language learners at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, with the design and construction of a language learning space that is both creative and familiar – a mobile/outdoor café.

By no means is a mobile café the only possible design option when engaging with initial exploration; however, it seems that combining the creative with the traditional (or the familiar) are challenges that designers and builders of virtual language learning spaces should try to meet (Godwin-

Jones, 2016; Bonk, Lee, Kou, Xu & Sheu, 2015; and Richards, 2015). Yet, the idea of introducing the café design as a self-access space for learning is an innovative and interesting one: while the *mobile* café manifests metaphoric embodiments such as "mobility"; "taking away" knowledge, having a "choice", the *outdoor* café manifests those of "space," "sunlight," "casual and relaxing". The hybridity envisaged here could serve as a foundation or springboard for further research into and practice in self-access learning in virtual environments.

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# Appendix

## Second Life Self-Access Centre Survey

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|---|
| Second Life self-access centre |
| This survey is intended to gauge students' initial interest in using the virtual world, Second Life as a space for self-access language learning ("self-access" is defined as a learner's ability to visit, any time, a location to independently search for resources, develop language skills or seek help relevant to their learning), and may be used for research purposes. Only students whose name is included together with a contact email address will be entered into the HK$100 book coupon drawing. |
| Note: To help answer these questions, think back to your time with ELC1012 / 1013 - remember we took a tour of CILL at the start of the semester and visited Second Life while preparing for a practice discursive essay - and also think about places in Hong Kong you might go to for relaxation or socialisation. |
| Your name (both English and pin yin) |
| Email address |
| 1. I have used self-access resources in my learning<br><br>Yes<br>No<br>Not Sure |
| If you answered "yes," please explain what self-access resources or activities you have engaged with. |
| 2. A virtual self-access centre (VSAC) should include the following:<br><br>Creativity - in design and content<br>Familiar surroundings<br>24 hour access<br>Live help<br>Learning resources developed specifically for the VSAC, and which can only be accessed from the VSAC<br>Opportunities to work with other VSAC users from the PolyU<br>Opportunities to interact with other users of Second Life<br>Areas for users to create their own learning activities<br>Other |
| 3. How do you feel about the idea of using a mobile cafe or outdoor cafe as a self-access space for language learning?<br>(Type "mobile cafe" or "outdoor cafe" under Google or Yahoo images if you're not sure what these are.)<br><br>Great idea<br>It will never work<br>Not sure |
| Please explain your answer here. |

| |
|---|
| 4. If you could design a different kind of self-access centre, would you?<br><br>Yes<br>No<br>Not sure |
| If you answered "yes" please describe your idea. |
| Thank you for your responses! |
| Additional enquiries about the survey may be emailed to me, Dean A. F. Gui, English Language Centre Instructor at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University: dean.a.f.gui@polyu.edu.hk. Questions regarding the Code of Ethics for Research can be obtained by contacting the Hong Kong PolyU Research Office at roro@inet.polyu.edu.hk. |