# Effects of Diagnostic Tests on Self-Directed Language Learning Development

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating the language strengths and weaknesses of Hong Kong self-directed learners, their learning needs, and their self-directed learning experiences with the use of diagnostic language test and examining whether the test can help the learners to self-direct their own learning. The test results showed that less than half of the participants reached the satisfactory level of the diagnostic tests in the areas of listening, vocabulary, reading, and grammar, and their weakest competence was vocabulary. The findings also revealed that the learners wanted to improve their communication skills, vocabulary, as well as speaking and listening skills, and that they had a need to learn a series of specific sub-skills regarding the four areas. The results yielded that the diagnostic test provided valuable information on the self-directed language learning and suggested that teacher intervention, learning strategies, and self-evaluation skills are required for the initial development of self-directed language learning.

## KEYWORDS

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the traditional learning process, most of the learning decisions such as what, how and how much learners learn are made by teachers. However, proactive learners learn better when they are responsible for their own learning (Sheerin, 1997) and the best learners should be reflective learners who always look back at their own learning progress, evaluate their own weaknesses and strengths, and then work out their own improvement (remedial) plans. Language learning indeed is "a life-long endeavor" (Thomson, 1996, p.78) and thus self-directed learning, which refers to "taking charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3), plays a significant role in effective language learning.

According to Nunan's model (1997), most learners do not know what is best at the beginning of the learning process and they should be made aware of the need and importance of self-directed language learning. This is where diagnostic tests come into play. Diagnosis tests have long been used in connection with the major purposes (or types) of testing in the field of language testing (Henning, 1987). "Proficiency testing is concerned primarily with assessing acquisition/learning from the past and predicting performance for the future" (Lee, 2015, p.302) and diagnostic language assessment is defined "to be the processes of identifying test-takers' (or learners') weaknesses, as well as their strengths, in a targeted domain of linguistic and communicative competence and providing specific diagnostic feedback and (guidance for) remedial learning" (p.303). Once the learners realize their own strengths and weaknesses through the diagnostic tests, they can devise their learning path and benefit from self-directed language learning.

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Literature in self-directed learning has largely focused on the learning-how-to-learn concepts, the exploration of the motivation drive, and the use of digital devices (e.g. mobile phones, virtual learning platforms, etc.) (Piper, Smith, Jeria & Intrieri, 2018), and few studies examine the relationship between diagnostic language assessment and self-directed language learning. And some Hong Kong Chinese learners have been characterized as passive, dependent, and lacking in initiative (Pierson, 1996). Therefore, the purposes of this study are to examine the language strengths and weaknesses of Hong Kong self-directed learners, their learning needs and their self-directed learning experiences with the use of diagnostic test, and to investigate whether the tests can help lead the learners to direct their own learning effectively. The tools used in this study are the test results and the learners' self-directed learning reports. Their learning reports reflect their own evaluation of self-directed learning needs, learning processes and learning experiences. These not only help more students learn to become reflective language learners but also provide valuable information for educators and teachers when they review their curriculum and teaching plans. Suggestions for the development of effective self-directed language learning are discussed in this paper as well.

## 2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

### 2.1 Diagnostic Language Assessment

Diagnostic language tests provide useful information for learners, researchers, and educators to improve students' learning. Lee (2015) stated that:

*When we refer to the language learners' weaknesses (or deficiencies) in addition to their strengths in diagnostic tests, we implicitly assume that there is some sort of a normally, healthily, or fully functioning state for the learner's targeted competence. The learners' targeted competence can also be further divided into its sub-competencies or constituent components, and such norms can possibly be specified at various levels of granularity, for instance, at the level of an overall language proficiency, a particular language skill (e.g., reading, writing), domain (e.g., lexis, grammar), or task (e.g., general understanding, writing an email). These normally functioning states can serve as reference points (or target goals) against which the learners' current states of knowledge, skills, and abilities are measured to identify the learning gap. (p.303)*

Therefore, learners can review the test items/tasks incorrectly, incompletely, or unsatisfactorily answered, with a focus on their misconceptions, faulty understanding, and cognitive/performance errors and study the relevant sections of resources available (e.g., an online dictionary, a grammar book, a textbook, etc.) that address their weaknesses, misconceptions, and cognitive/performance errors in relation to the items/tasks (Lee, 2015). Indeed, diagnostic feedback, which is a critical component of diagnostic tests, offers a basic understanding of what self-directed language learning should consist of and how it should be structured, and is most effective in facilitating subsequent remedial learning. With the feedback and test results, they can prepare their action/remedial plan to improve their language competence and performance. From that we can see, diagnostic tests place a significant role in the self-directed language learning.

### 2.2 Introduction to Self-directed Language Learning

According to Holec (1981), autonomy, which is often used interchangeably with independence and self-direction, refers to "taking charge of one's own learning" (p.3). This is elaborated in the way that "to take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.: 1) determining the objectives; 2) defining the contents and progressions; 3) selecting methods and techniques to be used; 4) monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.); 5) evaluating what has been acquired" (p.3).

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