

SELF-ACCESS CENTRES: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

The last ten years have seen a dramatic increase worldwide in the number of resource centres devoted to independent language learning and in their popularity. Dyson (1993, cited in Hill, 1994, p. 216) quotes annual attendance figures at the University of Oxford's self access centre at nearly 15,000 per year. The popularity of Self Access Centres¹ (SACs) can be traced to recognition of principles of learner-centredness, acceptance of the diversity of learners' needs and, more pragmatically, to the necessity of economising on teaching resources. However, are such centres contributing to learners' mastery of the target language? Are the effort and funds being channelled into such centres producing returns in the form of learning gains? This paper suggests that there is a critical need to raise questions about the use and management of SACs, and to clarify the contribution which self access learning makes to language learning.

The first section of the paper presents some background to the development of independent language learning facilities and identifies different contexts in which SACs exist. It then presents the results of an informal survey of six SACs in Europe and Asia carried out earlier this year, and discusses characteristics of centres which appear to contribute to effective use by learners. The final section raises some questions about the operation of SACs, and proposes a number of research projects for those working in the field. Without a research focus, the paper argues, many SACs may function as no more than hi-tech amusement centres.

BACKGROUND

Definitions and contexts

Before we go any further, what is meant by the term "self access centre"? According to a recent collection of papers (Esch, 1994) on the topic:

Self-access centres can be conceived as places where users can - but do not have to - make use of technology for language learning and where learners are helped in their efforts to learn languages by a variety of learner support systems. (p. 2)

Centres vary markedly in both the technology (type, amount, quality) and support systems they offer learners. Furthermore, learners can use a SAC in a variety of ways: they can use it to fulfil compulsory out-of-class requirements in a formal language programme; they can

¹ The abbreviation SAC will be used throughout this paper to refer to self access centres in general, as well as to the independent language learning facilities at each of the institutions I visited, regardless of the actual name used in each institution.

use it for independent practice or research as an optional adjunct to an instructional programme; or they can use it in total isolation from an instructional programme and an instructor, much as one might use a library for personal study or research. Sheerin (1991) comments:

In many institutions self-access facilities exist alongside conventional classroom-based learning and students are able to take advantage of both modes of learning. It is desirable in such circumstances to consider how the two environments can enrich and 'feed into' one another. (p. 154)

According to Gremmo and Riley (1995, p. 157), the first SACs appeared in the late 1960's and early 1970's. (For an overview of the factors contributing to their development, see Sheerin, 1991). In some cases, the new SACs grew out of existing language laboratories. However, Gremmo and Riley (1995) stress that:

Although the differences in terms of physical lay-out and equipment were minimal, the psychological and educational bases of "labs" and "libraries" could hardly have been more different, as labs were associated with a behaviouristic, lock-step approach whereas libraries were a manifestation - however limited to start with - of the ideas of "autonomous" and "self-directed" learning. (p. 156)

This raises the question: To what extent have the physical modifications involved in the transformation of language laboratories into SACs been mirrored in modifications in the conceptualisation of language learning held by the staff and learners who make use of the new centres? This and other questions about ways in which learners use SACs can only be answered by research.

SACs are potentially rich environments for applied linguistics research, since they are "laboratories" in which language learning strategies can be studied. Many of those involved with the establishment and management of SACs claim that important learning activity goes on there. But such claims need to be proved. Inspection of two recent publications on self access learning (Esch, 1994; Gardner & Miller, 1994) reveals that current research efforts cluster around learner preparation, the role of computer technology, criteria for providing and organising resources, learner support and evaluation of self access learning.

Yet, investigation of each of these concerns is premised on a more fundamental question: What is the model of language learning on which self-access learning is based? Such a model would account for the role of independent study in the language acquisition process, factors which influence language acquisition and learning, and the relationship between independent learning activity and the curriculum (where learners are enrolled in a formal instructional programme of language learning). A central argument of this paper is that the overall organisation of SACs should reflect a coherent conception of the language learning process. Staff of SACs, therefore, should make explicit the assumptions about language learning which have motivated the design and organisation of their centres. It follows that an important objective of every SAC should be to deepen users' awareness and understanding of the language learning process. Such an understanding can only be realised by means of a systematic programme of ongoing research.

Much has been said about the potential of SACs to foster autonomous language learning behaviour, yet it is not clear how this potential is developed in such centres. In an attempt to clarify this relationship, Benson (1994) proposes: "As a working model, there might be

general agreement that autonomy represents a goal, self-directed learning a means of achieving it, and self-access an environment within which it can be achieved. (p. 8)

Essentially SACs are no more and no less than collections of materials and equipment. They do not, therefore, possess any special relationship to autonomy. It is perfectly possible to be an autonomous language learner without ever setting foot in a SAC. It is also possible that an autonomous language learner will make use of a SAC for certain aspects of her language learning. But what is equally clear is that for learners who do not already know how to make use of the resources and opportunities provided in a SAC, some kind of orientation is necessary. Such orientation is generally referred to in the literature as "learner training" or "learning to learn" activities. Some educators consider learner training to be one of the most fundamental objectives of education. For example, Rogers (1969, cited in Dickinson, 1987, p. 34) states:

The only man [sic] who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of *seeking* knowledge gives a basis for security. (p. 104)

One aspect of many learner training packages is a discussion of underlying beliefs about learning. Cotterall (1995) argues that learner beliefs should be the starting point for anyone wishing to introduce autonomous approaches to learning since, by examining their beliefs, it is possible to gauge learners' "readiness" for assuming the responsibility which self-directed learning implies. Categories of learner beliefs which Riley (1994, p. 14) recommends for investigation include: general beliefs, beliefs about self, beliefs about norms and rules, and beliefs about goals. It is argued here that beliefs about language learning (those of both learners and teachers) should occupy a central position in discussion about and preparation for self access learning.

However, it must be emphasised that neither the opportunity to learn language(s) in a SAC nor access to learner training can guarantee the development of autonomous learners. If we consider autonomy to be primarily an attitude or disposition to learning (see Dickinson, 1995), then it is clear that collections of materials and training in how to use them are more likely to modify behaviours than attitudes. This is not to say that preparation for SAC learning is not necessary. Rather it is to recognise firstly, that not all learners will require such preparation, and secondly, that SACs in themselves cannot promote learner autonomy.

SURVEY OF SACs IN SIX LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

During the period of March - July 1995, I visited the independent language learning centres of the following six institutions:

- 1 Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland
- 2 Université de Nancy II, France
- 3 Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong
- 4 Hong Kong University, Hong Kong
- 5 Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
- 6 Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

The focus of the visits was threefold. Firstly, I intended to inspect the physical layout, resources and facilities of the various centres. Hong Kong offers special rewards to those investigating self access learning, on account of the fact that a number of tertiary institutions there have recently used a generous government grant tagged for the enhancement of language learning to develop or expand their independent language learning facilities. Benson (1995) comments that Hong Kong "probably [has] the highest concentration of self-access language learning facilities in the world." The second aim of the visits was to discuss with staff their experience of managing each centre, in order to identify factors contributing to productive use of the facilities by users. Finally, I wished to identify research questions that were being addressed in relation to self access learning.

In the discussion which follows, no institution is singled out for specific comment. Rather, observations have been synthesised into an inventory of the best features of the institutions visited. (These comments are also informed by reflection on eight years of experience of attempting to integrate into the overall language programme the work done in SAC by learners enrolled on intensive language courses at the English Language Institute.) The five features to be discussed are learner support, materials, technology, management and research activity. Consideration of these features is followed by a brief discussion of the way in which they interact in the operation of successful SACs.

While the six institutions listed above are all tertiary educational institutions, many differences exist in their contexts and in the characteristics of the populations they serve. In Hong Kong for example, English (the language most widely studied in SACs) is generally accepted to be a **second** language, in the sense that English is a medium of instruction in Hong Kong, and is used for a range of official purposes. On the other hand, the languages studied at Trinity College in Dublin (predominantly German and French) and at the University of Nancy (predominantly English) are, in terms of formal definitions, **foreign** languages (see Moag, 1982 for a discussion of the FL/SL distinction). This distinction implies differences in opportunities for exposure to the target language and for practice. A second difference relates to the history of the respective SACs visited. Whereas the centre at the University of Nancy has been in existence since the early 1970's, the centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong opened as recently as 1993. In spite of these differences however, the characteristics of those SACs which appear to most successfully meet the needs of their target populations can be summarised in one inventory.

1 Learner support

In the most successful² centres, learners are supported before, during and after each visit to the centre in a variety of ways. Support before visits to the SAC revolves around psychological and methodological preparation. According to Dickinson (1987):

Psychological preparation is concerned first with persuading learners to try self-instruction, secondly with facilitating a change of attitude about language learning ... and thirdly with helping learners to build their self-confidence in their ability to work independently of the teacher. (p. 121)

This kind of learner support is crucial if learners are to successfully adapt from a teacher-oriented learning mode to that required in a SAC. But this is no superficial change, for it involves fundamental shifts in thinking, particularly in relation to "ownership" of the learning "problem". Gremmo and Riley (1995) put it this way:

Training learners to become competent as learners therefore means working on and with ... *representations* [about language and language learning] ... Obviously, learner training must include improving learners' methodological resources ... but experience indicates that even when this aspect of learner training seems to advance rapidly, its success will be limited if there is no real change in conceptualization. (p. 158)

Methodological preparation, on the other hand, involves developing learners' awareness of and ability to use a range of learning tactics such as analysing needs, setting objectives and monitoring progress. (See Farmer, 1994 for examples of needs analysis documentation worked through by learners and staff of the Study Centre at Hong Kong Polytechnic University.) But methodological preparation also involves the acquisition of a certain level of technical understanding of language learning. For example, learners who wish to improve their pronunciation need to develop some sophistication in their understanding of features of spoken language such as word stress, sentence stress, features of connected speech and intonation. However, they do not necessarily need to learn the metalanguage associated with these features.

Once learners have completed their preparation for self access learning and are actually engaged in learning activities in the SAC, the nature of learner support diversifies. Support during SAC visits includes the provision of **staffing** (the manner in which staff listen, interpret and respond to users' requests or inquiries; the extent to which staff of teacher-fronted language programmes and SAC staff share and articulate a common view of the language learning process; options for counselling etc), **documentation** ("user-friendly" catalogues, sample learning contracts, flow charts on needs analysis and suggested pathways for solving "model" learning problems, diaries or logs for recording work completed or in progress), **materials** (arranged according to optimally "transparent" categories, accompanied by users' guides to possible ways of using the materials, including suggestions for obtaining feedback on performance etc), and **ongoing training** (one-to-one counselling, workshops in tactics for goal-setting, progress monitoring etc). All the centres visited offered ongoing, user-friendly access to both pedagogic advice (either on demand or by appointment) and technical assistance.

² Criteria for evaluating the "success" of SACs included both objective data such as the number of users per week, as well as subjective responses to in-house evaluations and anecdotal evidence from centre staff of client satisfaction.

However, effective learner support also extends beyond the physical confines of the SAC, in the form of ongoing dialogue and awareness-raising about the language learning process. The most common way of providing this kind of support, is by means of documents such as learner logs (see, for example, Martyn, 1994) or diaries, which encourage learners to reflect on the process and to manage and monitor their learning activities. However in a number of centres I visited, learners' efforts at language learning were also supported by additional activities including language exchange networks, e-mail discussions of learning problems and conversation "corners". Clearly the quality of the support SAC users receive will have a significant impact on their learning and on the perceived value and relevance of the centre.

2 Materials

The second characteristic identified as contributing to the effective functioning of the centres visited was the wide range of interesting, up-to-date language learning materials (pedagogic³ and authentic) and activity types. Gremmo and Riley (1995) explain why authentic materials are required alongside pedagogic resources:

Systems which offer only pedagogical materials cannot really be called "self-directed" as they do not in fact allow learners to use the selection criteria which they developed in counselling and training sessions to build up their personal work programmes. (p. 160)

The SAC can be thought of as a mediating environment, half-way between the language classroom and the "real world". Learners will only learn to prepare themselves for the "real world" by facing authentic learning challenges in the documents and situations they encounter. Satellite television, newspapers and pre-recorded radio and television programmes provide excellent sources of authentic language material.

The materials found in the centres visited typically included CD-ROM collections, CALL⁴ software, interactive video programmes, audio tape libraries, video tape libraries, book collections (textbooks, reference works, literature, graded readers), newspapers, periodicals and grammar and vocabulary worksheets. However, an over-abundance of materials can prove intimidating for centre users. This possibility is acknowledged at the University of Nancy's SAC where first-time visitors are able to listen to a 45-minute foreign language "tape of the week", played continually into headphones and accompanied by a transcript. Such an option both familiarises learners with some of the centre's materials, and introduces them to a non-threatening activity. This example provides evidence of the staff's appreciation of the importance of providing an adequate amount of high quality material, and of presenting that material in "user-friendly" ways.

In most centres I visited materials were freely accessible by learners, although certain resources could only be issued on presentation of an identity card. Cataloguing systems were streamlined and, in the main, transparent. Furthermore, the resources provided for learners included not only language learning materials but also a range of "learning to learn" documents (see "Learner support" above) which aimed to increase learners' expertise as language learners, and to encourage them to make the best possible use of the language

³ The term "pedagogic" is used in this report in its technical sense to mean "specially adapted or prepared for a language learner".

⁴ CALL = Computer assisted language learning

learning facilities provided. The provision of materials alone cannot ensure that learning will occur. But where materials are accompanied by appropriate learner support, there is a much greater chance that they will be used in a way that enhances learning of the target language and awareness of the learning process.

3 Technology

The third characteristic of the SACs I visited, was the high calibre and excellent range of technology provided. In almost all centres visited, facilities included individual satellite television viewing facilities, individual video viewing booths, individual audio listening booths, group video viewing (or seminar) rooms, group audio listening facilities, computers dedicated to the use of CALL software, computers dedicated for wordprocessing, computers with CD-ROM drives, computer and video networks dedicated to interactive video technology and computers dedicated to electronic mail and Internet use.

However, the technology available in a SAC is only as useful as the learner support mechanisms in place in that institution. Gremmo and Riley (1995) warn:

It is vital, in self-directed learning systems, that technology be at the service of the learners and not vice versa; many new devices have yet to prove their usefulness in language learning. For this reason, "hi-tech" facilities are not a high priority in setting up self-access systems. Although some resource centres are very impressive in technological terms, no technology has ever in itself helped anyone learn anything. (p. 160)

This principle should be borne in mind when institutions are making decisions about the purchase of new technology. Wherever possible, new equipment and resources should form the object of special research projects to identify and evaluate their contribution to language learning. An excellent example of the integration of self access learning and research exists at the Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity College, Dublin where staff are investigating the language learning possibilities of interactive video (Little, 1994).

In addition to the hardware available in the centres, a number of other features in each centre combined to make the atmosphere efficient and comfortable for centre users. These features included excellent physical design and layout, including: clear signposting; spacious placement of work stations; colourful, informative posters and orientation documents; and attractive notice boards, publicising a host of language-related activities within the institution and beyond. Such features combined to create an atmosphere in which language learning was clearly valued and encouraged. In all the centres visited, the total space was divided into more than one area to give users a sense of privacy, as well as to emphasise the existence of multiple configurations for SAC study.

4 Management

Out of the day-to-day running of a SAC arise a multitude of questions which concern policy matters. To help deal with such matters, staff in many of the centres I visited were guided and supported by an inter-departmental committee devoted to the management and planning of language-related issues within the institution. This committee's brief generally encompassed a wide range of functions including making recommendations on SAC developments, discussing language curriculum issues and formulating policy on language support for international students. Such committees typically comprised staff members from language departments, representatives of professional development units, Applied Linguistics

researchers and other staff members with an interest in language-related issues. As such, they ensured an ongoing dialogue between staff at the "chalk-face" of SAC activity, and faculty staff involved in the teaching and administration of language courses. All parties were recognised as bringing an essential perspective to the discussion of matters relating to SAC developments.

5 Research activity

The final characteristic of all the successful SACs I visited was the existence of a programme of active research into aspects of self access learning. In some cases, SAC staff were involved in the projects; in some cases, the projects were jointly undertaken by language teaching staff and SAC staff; and in some cases, the projects were undertaken by graduate students at the request of SAC management. Research projects I learned of included investigations into patterns of student attendance and use of learning resources, the evaluation of learner training programmes, collaborative self access learning activities, the use of "learning to learn" documents (such as log books and needs analysis documents), the analysis of learner-counsellor discourse, the definition of learning problems and learners' diagnosis of their needs. In some institutions, staff research projects were complemented by a programme of staff development involving workshops on materials development, counsellor training and other relevant issues.

TOWARDS AN EFFECTIVE SAC

The five characteristics identified in the previous section exist in balance in an effective SAC. All five characteristics of the operation of the SAC - the support given to learners, the materials provided, the technology available, the centre's management structure and its research activity - depend on a shared understanding of language learning. This understanding functions as a "manifesto" of language learning, indicating, for example, when and how learners might need assistance, and highlighting areas in which research is required. Hill (1994:217) provides support for this idea:

Whilst the physical aspects of a self-access centre clearly contribute substantially to its overall success, it is also important to examine the underpinning theoretical structure. As Sturtridge reminds us (1992:4-7) it is the ideology, the beliefs about learning which inform the overall approach and which determine its success or failure. (p. 217)

Those centres which were seen to function most effectively were those where a philosophy of language learning was clearly formulated in staff and students' minds, in such a way that it informed all aspects of the SAC's management and operation.

However, where an agreed view of language learning does not exist as the foundation of a SAC's activity, problems can occur. Perhaps the most common problem observed in self access learning results from an over-dependence on technology and materials to help learners learn the target language. Essentially, technology and materials are tools for language practice. However, most learners require orientation and training if they are to make good use of the tools provided in the SAC environment. For example, a beginning level learner who borrows a cassette player to listen to a recording of two native speakers conversing in the target language, is unlikely to learn much from listening to the recording unless 1) she has a realistic expectation of her ability to understand native speaker speech and 2) she uses the pause and rewind functions of the machine, as well as a transcript of the conversation, to

help make the input comprehensible. Given the input-rich, technologically sophisticated environment provided by most SACs today, users' biggest handicap may well be their methodological naiveté. An over-emphasis on the contribution of technology and materials, to the exclusion of learner training, is likely to inhibit the effectiveness of SACs.

A second problem often arising in SACs which lack an agreed philosophy of language learning is that of poor liaison between SAC staff and those teaching languages within the same institution. Where the goals of SAC activities are at odds with the goals of activities promoted in language classes, confusion is bound to result. This may occur, for example, where class time is devoted to accuracy activities in the target language at the expense of fluency work. Learners visiting the SAC may subsequently appear reluctant to engage in activities with a fluency focus. However, a coherent philosophy of language learning recognises the need for both accuracy and fluency-focused activities if language proficiency is to develop.

This section has suggested that a coherent philosophy of language learning provides the most reliable foundation for the effective functioning of a SAC. This philosophy should, it is argued in this paper, be invoked when decisions about the direction and development of the centre need to be taken. The extent to which staff wish their conceptualisation of language learning to be captured in a formal document will vary from institution to institution. But without agreement on their central philosophy, SAC managers run the risk of mounting an operation which offers rich possibilities for learning but which lacks the theoretical understanding to guide decisions about learning.

RESEARCH AGENDA FOR SACs

The discussion so far has stressed that the effective functioning of SACs depends significantly on the centre's ability to articulate and disseminate to its public a coherent philosophy of language learning. Naturally, any such view of language learning will be incomplete and provisional, and will, in turn, raise questions about the language learning process. It is these questions which should then be fed into the centre's own research agenda, however modest in scale. This research agenda would seek to develop both the broad understanding of language learning held by centre staff and users, and to develop insights into specific learning problems and challenges faced by its learners.

The following suggestions serve as an indication of the type of research projects which SAC and language teaching staff might wish to undertake. However, as learning contexts differ, so too do research priorities. This list can only therefore serve as a guide.

- 1 Explore with learners and teachers their beliefs about the purpose and role of a SAC in a language course. Identify instances of match and mismatch.
- 2 Formulate users' visits in a problem-solving framework and collect data on learners' perceptions of their needs, their means of solving their problems, etc. (For example, learners could be asked to document the decision path they followed in solving a given language problem.)

- 3 Collect learners' reactions to learner training interventions; use "think-aloud" protocols to examine learners' understanding of key ideas associated with independent learning. Document changes in learners' beliefs about language learning.
- 4 Investigate learners' levels of self-efficacy and self-confidence. Monitor changes in the levels of each, and seek learners' insights into factors which cause these elements to fluctuate.
- 5 Document the cognitive processes involved in working independently in a SAC i.e. goal-setting, selecting resources, evaluating performance etc. Ask learners to explain the criteria they use for doing all (or some) of the above and to identify the way in which they formulated those criteria.
- 6 Explore with learners their view of various learning resources, and their reasons for believing that some resources are more helpful or more appropriate than others. Seek to understand, from the learner's point of view, what he or she thinks is required in order to "learn".
- 7 Investigate the effect of collaborative modes of self access learning and compare these with individualistic modes. Do individualistic modes of self access learning encourage dependence on authority? Do collaborative modes of self access learning empower? (Benson, 1995)
- 8 Analyse the discourse used in counselling sessions to identify "those discourse strategies which are appropriate to the negotiation of learning decisions and outcomes in asymmetric discourse" (Gremmo & Riley, 1995, p. 161)
- 9 Analyse the discourse used in counselling sessions to identify learners' and beliefs about the roles of teachers and learners.
- 10 Develop criteria for evaluating the success of individual learners' experiences in SAC. (Sheerin (1991) suggests that an appropriate criterion might be "signs of change in the learner over and above any improvement in his language skills. Has he become a more aware and effective learner? Have his attitudes towards learning and language learning changed? Will he continue to learn independently?". (p. 154))

CONCLUSION

SACs offer great potential to language learners and instructors, but only if that potential is properly exploited. This paper has identified five characteristics associated with SACs which were judged effective in terms of user satisfaction and staff evaluation. It has also proposed two additional questions for measuring the vitality of a SAC. The first of these is: Is activity in the centre based on a coherent philosophy of language learning? The philosophy articulated by those responsible for the centre need not be highly elaborated, but it must enable users (learners and staff alike) to adequately explain to themselves the role that a particular type of language activity might play in their language learning. This theory can then become part of the backdrop against which learners can discuss (with their peers, teachers, SAC staff or counsellors) the problems and achievements they encounter in their language learning. The second question is: Are those associated with the centre involved in

an ongoing programme of research aimed at increasing their understanding of the way in which self access learning opportunities contribute to learning gains? Where SAC staff can answer "Yes" to both of these questions, we can be confident that learners will benefit from the self access learning opportunities provided in the centre. In such an environment, theory and practice can be relied on to inform and enrich each other.

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