

**PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN SELF-ACCESS
CENTRES: THE KEY ROLE OF MATERIAL**

*Marta Navarro Coy
Imelda Katherine Brady
Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia*

Self-access centres (SACs) have in the abundant literature on the theme been subject to quite a number of definitions and classifications. The many types of so called SACs can all be considered valid within their particular context. However, it is the aim of this paper to study the role that materials can play in this type of learning context and, especially, in those SACs that have been created with the aim of promoting learner autonomy. With this purpose in mind we shall outline the different types of materials usually encountered in a self-access centre in an attempt to reflect their relevance within those centres that aim at helping learners in becoming fully responsible for the learning process and, in consequence, in becoming autonomous learners.

Key Words: self-access centres, learner autonomy, self-directed learning, learning material, non-learning material.

1. Introduction

It has often been argued that the classroom setting poses various obstacles to the development of learner autonomy and that these obstacles are closely related to the lack of opportunities allowing the learner to make decisions regarding the learning process. This situation has given rise to the recent

proliferation of a learning context known as the self-access centre- a facility created with the apparent objective of ‘promoting’ learner autonomy. However, quite often, SACs focus more on providing an abundance of learning material and technological support for the user rather than on actually providing guidance for learners to manage and direct their learning process so that they might eventually reach a certain or full degree of autonomy.

2. What is a self-access centre?

From the use of the term ‘self-access’ we gather that the material provided in these centres is for users to select at their discretion without the guidance of a teacher. This can also be appreciated in the following definitions:

Self-access is a way of describing learning material that is designed and organised in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own, and obtain feedback on their performance (Sheerin, 1991: 143).

The term self-access centre usually refers to a room where learning material is provided for learners to use without direct supervision. The material are arranged in such a way that the students can find what they want easily and quickly. They may then work on these material at their own pace and, through the use of answer keys, evaluate their own work (Littlejohn, 1985: 257).

What is not reflected in these definitions, however, is how the users are to manage without guidance in order to exploit this freely accessible material to its full potential. Even though a SAC may be considered the ideal setting for promoting autonomy in its users, we agree with Sheerin (1997: 54) in that “an autonomous learning centre does not automatically convert its users into autonomous learners”, given that having free access to an abundance of material is far from the only requirement for a learner to become capable of self-directing the learning process.

In spite of certain basic considerations that must be taken into account if the SAC intends to promote learner autonomy, it should not be assumed that there is an ideal type of self-access centre that fulfils all learners' requirements. As Riley (1987: 77) states "every pedagogical situation is unique and requires a specific response", and in the same sense, according to Little (1989: 37) "each autonomous learning system should be exceptional". These systems, in Little's opinion, imply a combination of different factors involving the diversity of learners as well as each institution's requirements and resources.

2.1 Types of self-access centre

SACs vary greatly in nature and there have been several attempts to classify existing centres according to the different features they possess. Based on classifications carried out by three different authors we have distinguished a total of twelve types of SAC. We then carried out a further classification grouping together those centres that share similar characteristics. Consequently, we came up with the following five categories.

Firstly, we find a type of centre conceived as complementary to the classroom. In this case the material provided is closely related to that used for classroom activities and accordingly, the criteria for the classification of this material are similar to those used in that same context: levels, topics, etc. Within this group, the following centres would be included: the 'practice centre' (Sturtridge, 1992), the 'study centre' (Gardner and Miller, 1999), and the 'controlled-access' centre (Miller and Rogerson-Revell, 1993).

The second group is made up of centres created for the practice of only one particular language skill, the most common skill practiced being that of listening comprehension. Two examples belonging to this group are the 'skills centre' (Sturtridge, 1992) and the 'programmed-learning centre' (Gardner and Miller, 1999).

Thirdly, we have a group of centres which normally form part of a library and whose organisation is identical to that of the library itself. Within this

third group, we find, the ‘resource centre’ (Gardner and Miller, 1999) and the ‘open-access centre’ (Miller and Rogerson-Revell, 1993).

The fourth group are a type of centre in which users are provided with a great diversity of clearly classified learning material. They select the material they wish to use and are free to decide when to carry out the respective tasks. The aim of this type of centre is for users to discover their language learning needs and their preferred learning styles. Three instances of this kind of centre are the ‘learning centre’ (Sturtridge, 1992), the ‘drop-in centre’ (Gardner and Miller, 1999) and the ‘supermarket centre’ (Miller and Rogerson-Revell, 1993).

The final type of centre is one in which an advisor is available to help users become more independent and discover the learning strategies that best suit them. Within this group, we find the so-called ‘self-directed learning centre’ (Gardner and Miller, 1999).

3. Material in a self-access centre

The material found in a self-access centre usually belongs to one of the following categories: orientation material, published material, authentic material, and material specifically designed for self-directed learning, and our aim is to emphasise the potential of each one of these in helping the user learn how to learn a language. We shall also be referring to what is known as “learning to learn material” - essential in any SAC, given its key role in promoting learner autonomy. First of all, however, it could be helpful to establish a broader distinction between non-learning material and learning material.

3.1 Non-learning material

3.1.1 Orientation material

Orientation material is not directly associated with promoting learner autonomy. It is, nonetheless, essential to the new user in helping him or her

get to know the centre and understand its potential (the organisation, the resources available and the languages provided for). This material most commonly comes either in the form of leaflets or sheets that contain any information considered of use about the centre (e.g. timetables, layout, available resources). The user may also be presented with ‘treasure hunt’ tasks to solve with the aim of finding the necessary information and thus getting to know the layout and organisation of the centre. Some examples of the sort of question these tasks might include are:

- Which CD program would be adequate for your language level?
- Where are the special forms for you to keep a record of your progress?
- What level are the X coloured activities?
- Which code is assigned to written comprehension activities?
- How can you test/check your proficiency level?
- How many magazines are available in your chosen language?

3.1.2 Learning to learn material

For most individuals certain knowledge about learning strategies would be required in order for them to understand how they can learn a language on their own. Barnett and Jordan (1991: 307) make a distinction between cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies that is quite relevant to our concerns here. The former provide learners with the skills necessary to work with learning material and thus enable learning to take place, and the latter aid learners in planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning process.

3.1.2.1 Training in metacognitive strategies

There seems to be some consensus in the literature as regards the type of metacognitive strategies that exist, namely, planning, monitoring and assessment. Therefore we shall now take a look at the type of material that a

self-access centre can provide for the user to become familiar with each of these strategies and put them to practice.

- Planning: the centre can supply needs analysis questionnaires (see appendix 1) which will help users establish their objectives with respect to the language in question. Once this has been completed, the learner should establish a work-plan so as to avoid disorientation at any time during the learning process. The centre can, in this respect, provide standard planning sheets (see appendix 2) or they can suggest working out a “learning contract” where the learner explicitly states the learning tasks he or she is willing to carry out within a given time frame. However, in these cases where learning contracts are used, it is advisable to prepare guidelines on their content in order to ensure that certain specifications necessary for a complete and effective work-plan are included: learning goals, material available for attaining those goals, the level at which the learner will proceed to work, the time to be dedicated in working towards general goals and the time to be dedicated to specific tasks.

- Monitoring: monitoring performance and keeping records of their progress in a diary while carrying out the set tasks will help learners assess the work being done as well as the suitability of the goals initially established. The centre can, as in the above case, provide pre-designed diaries (see an example in appendix 3) or encourage students to design their own.

- Assessment: in a self-directed learning process, self-assessment should take place at two levels: quantitative and qualitative. Learners must, while assessing if learning is taking place, also establish the extent to which they are learning to learn by assessing the diverse aspects involved in the process¹. Apart from making the correct solutions to the different exercises available to users, the centre may also encourage qualitative assessment by means of questionnaires written by the staff of the centre (see an example in

¹ These aspects include setting objectives, organising the learning, selecting material and evaluating results.

appendix 4) or by the learner himself. Questionnaires written by SAC advisors can be of great use at the start of the process, when the learner is still not familiar with the new context; however, once at ease with the system, the learners should be given the opportunity to establish their own criteria in the assessment procedure (what to assess, how to assess and when to assess).

3.1.2.2 Training in cognitive strategies

An understanding of cognitive strategies will help learners become aware of the diversity of techniques that can be put into practice when faced with learning material. They can then discover the most effective ones for themselves as individuals.

In Barnett and Jordan's (1991) opinion, also shared by Bosch (1996), cognitive strategies can be 'advertised' in the same way as metacognitive ones; i.e. by means of information leaflets or sheets in which different ways of dealing with activities can be suggested, such as advice on various ways of working with vocabulary, written language, reading comprehension, etc. This can also be done in an integrated fashion as Ellis & Sinclair have done with the activities presented in their book *Learning to Learn English* (1994).

3.2 Learning material

The learning material that a SAC provides generally falls into one of the following categories: published material, authentic material and material that has been specifically designed for self-directed learning. All of these can be of enormous potential to the learner.

3.2.1 Published material

Some researchers claim there are disadvantages to using published material in a SAC. However, we shall try to show how some of these negative aspects can actually prove beneficial when it comes to promoting learner autonomy.

Advantages of published material

a) It enables the SAC to gather a substantial amount of material in a relatively short time. (Dickinson, 1987; Bosch, 1996; Gardner and Miller, 1999).

b) It provides a high standard of variety and quality. It is also probably the type of material the learner has used in the classroom context and, consequently, the type he or she is most familiar with (Gardner and Miller, 1999).

The disadvantages stated in the literature are somewhat more numerous

Drawbacks of published material

a) Purchasing published material can be quite costly and issues of copyright have to be taken into account (Dickinson, 1987) if it is the intention of the centre to elaborate worksheets photocopied from this material.

b) Rarely can it be considered apt for 'self-directed' learning. Although published material is sold in many cases under this label, this merely means that the solutions to the different activities are provided.

c) Most published material presupposes the presence of a teacher and is usually used in a classroom context, which is reflected in the activities it contains.

d) With regard to the above, Gardner and Miller (1999) claim that while the activities designed for group or pair work can be effective for work in a SAC, they are not effective for those who choose to work individually.

e) Published material contains open-ended activities for which subsequent feedback is not available.

Points d) and e) above could actually be considered among the positive aspects of published material. On the one hand, a SAC must offer a high degree of variety in activities in order to satisfy the many demands of its potential users. Although many learners may prefer to work alone, it is likely

that others will opt for working in pairs or groups and this possibility must be accounted for. On the other hand, we believe that the range of open-ended activities, mentioned in the final point, can in many cases, encourage learners to experiment with the language and thus involve them in more complex mental activities which are vital to promoting learner autonomy (Littlejohn, 1997).

We do agree with Gardner and Miller in that a total lack of support in dealing with these activities can be extremely frustrating for some learners, and to avoid this the staff of the centre can adapt these material with the objective of “providing the learner with the kind of help, advice and encouragement given by a teacher who uses the same material in the classroom” (Dickinson 1987: 77). One way of adapting this material is through the incorporation of support material containing the information the learner needs (aims of the activity, different possibilities of carrying out the activity, answers to the exercises, comments on the reasons for given answers and even reasons for incorrect answers, etc.)

3.2.2 Authentic material

Authentic material can also be very useful in a SAC setting, even though, as was the case with published material, it is considered to have some drawbacks. Again, taken from the perspective of promoting learner autonomy, we shall see how these may be seen in a more positive light.

Disadvantages of authentic material

- a) Authentic material can contain complex language that makes it unsuitable for learners at an elementary level of the language (Gardner and Miller, 1999).
- b) Authentic material is not easily available (Gardner and Miller, 1999).

- c) Authentic material is time-consuming. It must be frequently replaced as a large part of its appeal lies in the fact that it is 'up-to-date' (Bosch, 1996).
- d) The frequency of certain elements (e.g. lexical) can be quite low in many cases (Gardner and Miller, 1999), which may have a negative influence on the learner's motivation.

Advantages of authentic material

a) On the point of availability, internet resources now facilitate easy access to relevant and interesting authentic material and also make replacement of this a relatively easy task. Likewise, access to internet enables learners to carry out their own search for material and select what *they* consider most interesting or appealing.

b) Learners who become accustomed to working with authentic material from the start develop greater confidence in dealing with authentic situations that require the use of the target language without worrying about incomplete comprehension (Little, 1997: 231).

c) A key aspect in promoting learner autonomy is motivation which authentic material can contribute to as it is the type of material they will have to deal with in the real world.

d) In working with authentic material the learner is more directly involved in the design of related activities². Designing activities for all the authentic material in the centre would not seem viable if the material is to be replaced with certain frequency. What can be done, however, is have general activities prepared that can be carried out with any particular genre of authentic material, or even a list of suggestions on how the material could possibly be exploited. One example of this, often found in a SAC, is a range

² Involving the learner not only in the question of designing activities, but in other aspects such as the layout of the centre, its organisation, etc. is a factor that is rarely taken into account in Self-access centres and may be vital to the success or failure of the same.

of activities designed for use with T.V. news programmes (see an example in appendix 5).

3.2.3 Material specifically designed for self-directed learning

‘Material specifically designed for self-directed learning’ can mean either material that has been published with the intention of helping a person learn how to learn³, or material that has been designed following criteria that render it apt for self-directed learning.

There is some consensus as to the essential features of this material. Dickinson (1987), Sheerin (1989) and Bosch (1996) in particular have pointed out in detail what these features should be. The following is a synthesised version of the same:

Goals: the activities must explicitly state the goals intended in each, which enables the user to decide on their appropriateness according to his or her particular needs.

Input: in self-directed learning situations most of the input comes from material (Dickinson, 1987); thus, it is essential that this input be meaningful and useful to the learner.

Motivation factors: material must have a positive effect on learners’ motivation. This can be encouraged in two ways: on the one hand, making sure the material is as attractive as possible (presentation, illustrations, even distribution of activities, etc.) and on the other, as Sheerin (1989) points out, the activities should result in the learning of ‘something’ worth learning and so inspire the same confidence that published material do.

Flexibility: it would be rather contradictory in a situation where the principal objective is to promote learner autonomy to provide learners with activities so rigid they have no choice about their execution. It is advisable,

³ An example of this type of material is Ellis & Sinclair’s (1994) *Learning to learn English*.

therefore, to provide guidelines rather than instructions so learners may also discover other possibilities.

Feedback: this may come in different forms, depending mainly on the type of activity in question. In the case of closed answer activities, the feedback we usually find comes in the form of an answer key; this, however, would contribute to the idea that “self-access material are self-corrective” (Bosch, 1996: 41). In actual fact, it would be much more useful for learners to have access to more than just the right answer. For instance, if the activity merits it, an explanation of a discrete language item would perhaps be appreciated. In the case of more subjective activities, the feedback could be supplied in the form of commentaries or users could request the help of an advisor with whom they could exchange ideas about the tasks in question. Likewise, it is important for users to receive feedback with suggestions of a more qualitative than quantitative nature on how to assess the learning process.

Variety and balance: a self-access centre that does not provide a reasonable variety of activities is ignoring the diversity among its potential users and risking their losing interest in the material (Dickinson, 1987: 81). There should be a certain balance in the number of activities provided with respect to levels, skills, languages, etc, so as to avoid false assumptions as to the importance of each, such as a learner thinking that more practice is needed at a certain level or with a certain skill, etc.

Support material: users will find extremely helpful the incorporation within the actual learning material of references to additional support material, either in the form of supplementary activities or of dictionaries, grammar books, etc.

Technical information: this term refers to information on activities which learners would not normally have access to, but which, at times, may be the decisive factor in selecting or discarding a particular activity: information on the time needed to complete the task, the accents and language involved, the question of authenticity and register on audio or video tapes. For instance, learners that have access to this information may

choose not to do a particular task based on factors of time or complexity and so can avoid the frustration that may otherwise have occurred.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to reiterate on a point made at the beginning of this paper – the fact that there is no one ‘ideal’ self-access centre; the diverse settings and contexts of each pose demands that will, ultimately, determine their design and content. However, it is true that those in charge of the organisation of these centres can take certain criteria into account with respect to the material to provide for the user, criteria which we have outlined in this paper and which will have a positive influence on the attainment of a primary objective: helping the user to learn how to learn languages.

Material constitutes the main body of a self-access centre and is therefore the resource learners resort to spontaneously. However, it is very often the case that users whose only learning experience has taken place in a classroom setting make use exclusively of that material considered, strictly speaking, learning material. It is also common to find that learners use this material in the same way as they do in the classroom. When this is the case, the potential of SAC with regard to the exploitation of learning material is wasted.

Learners who wish to reach a certain degree of autonomy must acquire those essential skills in order to manage their own learning. Making ‘learning to learn’ material available in a SAC constitutes a clear indication of the extent to which the centre really aims at helping users to become better language learners

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