

[Title] Self-access and independent learning centres
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Introduction

Self-access centres are learner-oriented language learning environments that encourage the development of learner autonomy (see LEARNER AUTONOMY). Self-access centres (SACs) provide materials, activities, and staff support to help learners develop the skills necessary for taking control over the content, pace, and method of their learning. SACs do not have to be physical spaces (although in practice they often are); increasingly, learning environments are being designed that either combine a physical space with an online *support* system or that provide all elements of self-access online (see for example the Electronic Learning Environment and My English in the further reading section (Alford & Pachler, 2007; Conacher & Kelly-Holmes, 2007). SACs are especially common at tertiary institutions, although they exist at all other school levels, including in primary schools.

Self-access pedagogy

SACs developed from the early 1970s as one practical manifestation of the development from behaviorist to constructivist and humanist approaches to learning. In many cases, SACs have replaced existing language laboratories to offer an environment where the focus is firmly on the individual learner and on encouraging learners to take responsibility for their own learning process. SACs do not generally offer set materials or a curriculum and teacher involvement is mostly limited to *supporting* individual learners and to *facilitating* the (self-) study process (Lamb & Reinders, 2006).

Self-access centres are therefore not only different from the teacher-controlled laboratories they replaced but are also not simply a specialized type of library. Libraries are repositories of information, and although self-access centres contain a large number of materials and systems for retrieving them, their focus is on the learning process and on supporting this process, rather than merely on the provision of information. Another misconception is that self-access learning is the same as self-study. Although a great deal of learning in a self-access centre is generally done individually, most centres offer spaces and activities for learners to work together. Some organize language exchanges, pair students to work together, or offer materials and activities that require group work.

Although SACs aim to develop autonomy, self-access learning is not necessarily autonomous learning. It is possible for students to simply do their homework there or to follow the teacher's instructions. Self-access centres are often used for remedial purposes where students are given materials appropriate for their level and interest, in order to catch up with the rest of the class. In other words, different types of learning (and even teaching) are possible in a self-access centre.

Elements of self-access centres

The most immediately recognisable element of a self-access centre or (online) system is the provision of materials. The selection, creation and adaptation of materials for self-access is different from that for classroom teaching. As the materials are generally chosen and used by students themselves, they need to be clearly described in terms of their level, their content, and many other aspects, and then recorded in a way that facilitates student access to this information. Commonly this is done through the use of a computer database that students can use to search by using specific parameters. In addition, materials are usually coded by colour or in some other way, and placed together by topic or level so as to provide easy access. Materials also need to be self-contained, meaning that they need to include all the information and ancillary materials necessary to allow learners to use them without the help of a teacher. This means that the instructions need to be comprehensive, that sufficient explanation needs to be given, and that answer sheets and feedback mechanisms need to be included. When evaluating SACs, it is important to determine whether the materials have been successfully adapted for self-learning. It is not uncommon to find materials for self-study (Jones,

1983) or for self-access (Reinders & Lewis, 2006) that offer students little support to work without the help of a teacher and that fail to include advice on analysing needs, setting goals, or monitoring improvement.

Another common element of SACs is the provision of language learning activities. These include pair work such as language exchanges and 'study buddy' programs, as well as group activities such as 'discussion groups', 'movie clubs' and 'reading circles'. Some centres also offer workshops, usually with some focus on improving learning skills (as opposed to the development of language skills only). For example, a workshop on writing skills might focus on ways of proofreading or getting feedback from others, rather than (only) on the elements of a good essay.

Perhaps the most defining element of SACs is their focus on the development of learner autonomy. A range of methods is used to increase students' awareness of the language learning process and their own role therein. Most SACs offer some kind of needs analysis, ranging from self-assessment sheets to large-scale institutional assessments. Most also offer instruments for setting and keeping track of learning goals. These can be in the form of a learning diary or an (online) portfolio and in some cases include computer monitoring of learning activities and improvement. The provision of strategy instruction, either through workshops or through self-study worksheets is also common. In many cases there is some focus on the development of metacognitive strategies, such as those needed for planning one's learning and monitoring progress. Finally, in some centres students' learning is actively monitored by an advisor (see below) or with the help of the computer. For example, the Electronic Learning Environment at the University of Auckland records the amount and type of learning and matches this with the student's language needs. Where a mismatch is detected, the computer will prompt the learner to change either their goals or their learning behavior (Reinders, 2007). Such systems are becoming more common and are in some cases replacing the SAC as a physical centre with a completely online system.

Many centres also include language advising or language counselling sessions (although sometimes these are offered as a stand-alone service) (Mynard & Carson, 2010). A language advisory session is a meeting between a student and an advisor where the aim is on improving the language learning experience for the student. An advisor and a student may, for example, work together to identify the student's learning needs, to identify the most appropriate resources and learning strategies, and the advisor may give feedback on learning progress. The eventual aim of such sessions is to encourage the students to reflect on their own learning, and to gradually ask them to make all decisions of the learning process by themselves.

Benefits of self-access

The purported benefits of self-access include its flexibility in allowing learners to study whenever, however and (in the case of online self-access) wherever they want. Self-access can offer learning opportunities where traditional courses are unavailable or not feasible because of students' time constraints or because institutional language needs are too great or diverse to be met through regular classroom education. The pedagogical benefit of the greater control learners have in self-access is the increased individualisation of the learning process; students can work on those areas that are relevant to them, and may therefore be more motivated to continue their learning outside the classroom, or to see a stronger connection between their classroom and out-of-class learning.

There have also been claims about the potential for self-access to lower the costs of language education. In practice, however, this is often not the case. SACs still need to be staffed with language advisors, need constant updating of their materials, as well as extensive technical support. They are rich in materials and technology and therefore expensive to establish and maintain. Some SACs are established mainly to reduce the number of classroom teaching hours and learners are not given sufficient support. In these cases, the SAC functions more as a computer room or homework centre and the pedagogic benefits are minimised.

The most important potential benefit of self-access is its contribution to the development of learner autonomy. SACs are intended to focus students' attention on the learning *process* and encourage them to become responsible for managing their own learning. Learners can develop the skills to plan and monitor their own learning, find their own resources to support themselves, and learn to work with

other learners. In this way, SACs have the potential to empower and help students prepare for their lifelong learning.

[Cross-references]

Autonomy

[References]

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[Suggested Readings]

Benson, P. & Reinders, H. (2010). *Beyond the Language Classroom*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (1999). *Establishing self-access. From theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[Online resources]

The Bibliography of learner autonomy contains over 1,700 references in the area of autonomy as well as self-access and independent learning. Researchers can add their own publications:

www.autonomybibliography.info

The self-access learning environment 'My English' can be accessed here:

<http://myenglish.kmutt.ac.th>

The University has provided a username and password that can be used as a guest account. Functionality of the guest account is limited.

The AILA Research Network for Learner Autonomy has an active community and a regularly updated website with articles, news and information about conferences in the areas of autonomy and self-access:

www.ailarenla.org

Language advising

<http://ec.hku.hk/1to1/>

