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THE STATE-OF-THE-ART OF SELF-ACCESS IN NEW ZEALAND: RESULTS OF A SWOT ANALYSIS

Abstract

Self-access centres form an important part of language education in New Zealand. A recent study (Reinders et al., 2003) showed that all tertiary providers in the country offered some form of self-access language learning facilities. However, little is known about the types of support available and their strengths and weaknesses. As part of the study 13 centres in New Zealand were visited and interviews were conducted with their managers to identify current approaches to self-access and specifically to conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis. This paper reports the results of the analysis and discusses the key issues that emerged.

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Editorial

Lázaro and Reinders investigate the current state of play in self-access in New Zealand. They conducted a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of organisational, pedagogical and external features affecting the success of this type of language provision. They found a number of common issues affecting the operation of self-access centres in New Zealand, especially the provision of materials, the use (or lack thereof) of technology, and the integration between self-access and classroom learning.

THE STATE-OF-THE-ART OF SELF-ACCESS IN NEW ZEALAND: RESULTS OF A SWOT ANALYSIS¹

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Abstract

Self-access centres form an important part of language education in New Zealand. A recent study (Reinders et al., 2003) showed that all tertiary providers in the country offered some form of self-access language learning facilities. However, little is known about the types of support available and their strengths and weaknesses. As part of the study 13 centres in New Zealand were visited and interviews were conducted with their managers to identify current approaches to self-access and specifically to conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis. This paper reports the results of the analysis and discusses the key issues that emerged.

Introduction

Self-access centres (SACs) play an important and increasingly common role in New Zealand language education. A recent study (Reinders *et al.*, 2003) found that all tertiary education providers in New Zealand offered some type of self-access facilities and there are active professional networks like the SACSIG (self-access centre special interest group), that also include many members from the private language school sector. Little research has been done, however, on how these centres operate on a day-to-day basis. What are the key types of support they offer? What are the specific challenges they face? And what are their strengths? Answering such questions can help us better understand the role of self-access in New Zealand language education and identify possible areas for improvement. The study reported here attempted to answer these questions through a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) (Thompson & Strickland III, 2001) of 13 SACs in New Zealand.

Background and literature review

A brief history of self-access

SACs originated in the 1970's and 1980's with the growing interest in learner autonomy. The relationship between self-access and autonomy is highlighted in one recent definition:

A Self-Access Centre consists of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities and help), usually in one place, that accommodates learners of different

levels, styles, and with different goals and interests. It aims at developing learner autonomy among its users. (Reinders & Cotterall, 2000, p. 87).

SACs have a number of potential pedagogic benefits. They can offer a flexible environment where learners of different backgrounds and with different needs can be supported, and offer an opportunity for developing self-directed learning skills. As such they can act as a 'bridge' between 'public domain' learning (that is, learning which is based on shared classroom activities) and 'private domain' learning (that is, personal learning) (Crabbe, 1993, p. 144). Gardner and Miller also discuss the notion of the SAC acting as a "bridge to the outside, unstructured environment" (1999, p. 22). They suggest this can have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand learners can build up their confidence in a supported and safe environment, but on the other hand such an environment can keep them from using the language in authentic contexts.

In addition to the potential pedagogic benefits, there are also practical reasons for institutions to set up a SAC. One of these is to provide more flexibility and greater accessibility to language support. Especially in tertiary institutions, many SACs provide a support service to students who do not need or do not have time for a formal course. In many language schools, the SAC is used for remedial purposes, and also to provide opportunities for less formal types of language learning such as through movies and conversation groups. Some see economic reasons for institutions to have a SAC: "(. . .) such centres can also be seen as providing language learning on the cheap, potentially substituting for direct teaching operations (. . .)" (Aston, 1996, p. 283). Others do not agree with this view. Gardner and Miller (1997) warn:

Implementing SALL should not be seen as a cheap alternative to teaching. It should be seen as a useful complement to teaching which enhances language-learning opportunities and provides learners with the independent learning skills to continue learning languages after they have finished formal studies. In this light it may be judged to be relatively cost efficient. (p. 32)

Whether SACs offer a cost-saving for the school or not, their benefits or otherwise should be primarily determined from a pedagogic viewpoint, something which surprisingly few studies have done.

Previous studies on self-access centres

There are few studies that have investigated or compared the operation of self-access centres. One of the exceptions is offered by Gardner and Miller (1997) who report on a study of five self-access centres in Hong Kong. In their study they focused on a wide range of aspects affecting the centres, including: SAC management, the effectiveness of self-access learning, the relationship between the SAC and the classroom, user motivation, users' learning behaviour, their beliefs about self-access, the roles of SAC staff, SAC materials, practical aspects of the SAC (location, opening times, support staff, budget) and institutional attitudes towards self-access learning. This large-scale study was based on data obtained from managers, students and tutors. In their conclusion the authors make

several recommendations for improving self-access provision. These include to promote autonomy, to integrate self-access into the curriculum and to develop more appropriate materials. They also make recommendations around the dissemination of information, which should include users, teachers and institutional stakeholders. Thirdly the authors emphasise the importance of research and recommend that SAC staff pursue research interests related to self-access learning and the use of SAC.

Navarro Coy (2003, 2005) analysed three SACs, one at a university in the United Kingdom, one in a university in Spain and one in a public language school, also in Spain. She focused largely on the ways in which the centres supported the development of learner autonomy. She described the operational characteristics of each centre, such as the extent to which the space promotes group work and offers space for language advising and similar one-to-one support. She also looked at practical matters such as whether a centre offers extended opening times to allow flexible access and a wide range of resources to cater for different learners' needs. She also looked at pedagogic practices in the centres, including whether a centre offered orientations and language learning advice, whether it offered 'learn to learn' materials and whether advisors working the centre were trained in the area of learner autonomy. The results of the study suggested that there is no ideal model of SAC, and that the context should determine its individual characteristics. Nonetheless, the author presents a set of general features that are crucial for the successful operation of a SAC. These include adequate learner support, the development of independent learning skills and the promotion of change in learners' and teachers' roles in the learning process.

Studies of self-access in New Zealand

Also in New Zealand (and in Australia) self-access centres have gained recognition as providing an opportunity for increasing student-centred learning. In the Australasian context, an early study from 1990 survey commissioned by the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs looked at the role and effectiveness of Independent Learning Centres (ILC) (the term for SACs favoured in Australia) in the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP). The report concluded that:

ILC provide a legitimate and valued alternative Learning Activity in the AMEP and contribute to its mission in that they enable a significant number of clients to progress their learning of English according to their own style or at their own pace. (Technisearch, 1990, p. 74).

Not much research has been done on the provision of self-access in New Zealand, except one previous study (Reinders, Anderson & Jones-Parry, 2003; Anderson, Reinders & Jones-Parry, 2004) that investigated the rationale, structure, pedagogy, resourcing, perceptions of effectiveness and direction of SACs in both New Zealand and Australia. The authors interviewed the managers of fourteen centres who also completed a guided survey form. The results of the study suggested that SACs in Australasia show a number of interesting pedagogical developments but also suggested that work was still to be done to support these developments at an organisational, financial and practical level, to set

standards and to become integrated into the institutional contexts in which they operate. The authors reported that there were

(. . .) contradictions and disparities which filter the ability of the centres to focus on developing the language learning environment. These issues occur primarily in the awkward positioning of many centres organisationally, physically and pedagogically resulting in a not yet fully realised search for academic and organisational identity; in their disconnection from institutional policy and strategy development and in the absence or limited leadership of central agencies in integrated budgetary, educational and strategic policy development. (Anderson, Reinders & Jones-Parry, 2004, pp. 24-25).

The present study further builds on these findings by analysing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of self-access in New Zealand.

The study

This study reports on the results of a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of 13 self-access centres in New Zealand. The analysis was conducted on the basis of interviews with their managers. The interviews were recorded and subjected to a categorical content analysis (see below).

Participants

A total of 13 centres were included in the study. Eight are part of a tertiary institution and five part of a language school. The centres were selected on the basis of their focus on adult learners (i.e. no primary schools or secondary schools were visited) as these had been the focus of previous research and would thus allow for comparisons to be made. Within this group Centres were selected through convenience sampling (Manheim, 1977). All the included SACs were active Centres; that is to say that they were used frequently and formed a clear part of the larger language teaching and support context. Although it is possible that not all such Centres in New Zealand were identified, it appears that at least most were included in this study. The Centres showed a mix of different types of support, with some operating as drop-in Centres and others providing complementary support to language classes. Some only catered to university students whereas others provided support to adult migrants as well.

The manager of each Centre was contacted in writing and the background and purpose of the study was explained to them. All managers who were approached agreed to participate in the research.

Procedures

In preparation for the research, information about the centres was gathered from the managers and through published research. Individual appointments were made with the managers of all the centres and they were informed beforehand about the purpose of the

study and the fact that a SWOT analysis would form part of the interview. The interview questions were emailed to the managers before the visit. One of the authors of this paper personally visited the SACs. On each visit a tour of the facilities was given by either the manager or a staff member and informal questions about the rationale and operation of the centre were asked, normally before the interview, which lasted from one to two hours.

Instruments

The interviews consisted of 35 questions (most of them open, divided into nine thematic blocs, adapted from Gardner and Miller (1999) (see appendix). Together they cover the main pedagogical and practical issues related to self-access as identified by Gardner & Miller and in the wider self-access literature. The nine themes included: learners' and teachers' attitudes towards autonomous learning in the SACs, a SWOT Analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of the Centre, questions about the counselling service, learner training, learner profiles, materials, activities, assessment and evaluation. The interviews were semi-structured; although each of the topics was discussed, the interviews left plenty of room to the interviewees to bring up additional topics or to move through the questions in a different order.

In this article we focus mainly on the results of the SWOT analysis. A SWOT analysis is a tool originally used for management purposes that looks at strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of organisations. More recently it has been adapted for use in educational contexts (Thompson & Strickland III, 2001). Strengths in this context are the capabilities and resources that are advantages for the operation of the centre. Weaknesses are the aspects that limit or reduce the potential of the SACs. Opportunities are the factors that could be developed to ensure the optimal functioning or future of the centre and threats are the elements that could negatively impact on the centre and even affect its existence. This article draws mainly on the respondents' answers to questions directly asking about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to the SACs, although useful additional information was obtained from the answers on the remaining questions.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed for content and this was analysed by using the categorical analysis model (Bardin, 2003) to extract the key issues that emerged. The content analyses were conducted within an open categorisation framework (L'Ecuyer, 1990), which has no predetermined set of categories, in order to ensure that the resulting categorisation corresponded to the reality as felt and expressed by the managers and not to the prior conceptions of the researchers. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed by both researchers. In four cases there was a discrepancy between the categorisation of the two researchers. In all four cases the categorisations were discussed and a consensus was arrived at. For example, when managers talked about the development of materials, one researcher interpreted this as an organisational issue as it concerned the resources of the centre. The other researcher, however, interpreted it as a pedagogical feature related to the provision of appropriate learning materials. After

discussion it was decided to categorise this aspect as an organisational feature because the data revealed that the participants discussed materials creation in the interviews mainly from a resource provision point of view, and not so much from the perspective of the use of the materials with learners.

The data were analysed through a framework for the pedagogical structure of SACs previously developed by one of the authors (Lázaro, 2006). This framework divides the data into three categories; organisational, pedagogical and external features. These features were derived through a bottom-up analysis of data from prior visits to 33 SACs in other parts of the world and as such had been tested before being applied to the data of the present study. A recent study (Mozzon-McPherson, 2007) uses a similar distinction between the provision of effective organisation and support systems, pedagogical use of resources and promotion of independent language learning, and provision of adequate infrastructure by the institutions.

Organisational features refer to easily observable aspects of SACs, such as their physical setting and the materials they offer. Organisational features are of primary importance, as they affect the implementation of the pedagogical aspects of the Centre. Pedagogical features relate to aspects of the Centre designed to support learning. These aspects are not directly observable. They include such learning and teaching activities as language advising, learner training, introduction session, etc. In the literature, organisational features of SACs have been measured in terms of their efficiency, i.e. 'the relationship between output and cost' (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 228) and pedagogical features in terms of their effectiveness, i.e. 'the meeting of pre-set [learning] goals' (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 228). Finally, external features describe elements that depend on external agents but that affect the SAC, such as financial and institutional constraints. In previous studies conducted by the authors in other countries (Germany, Hong Kong, Spain, Switzerland) these three categories were found to correspond closely to the observed operation of SACs. They were also found to be interrelated, as shown in the examples in figure 1 below.

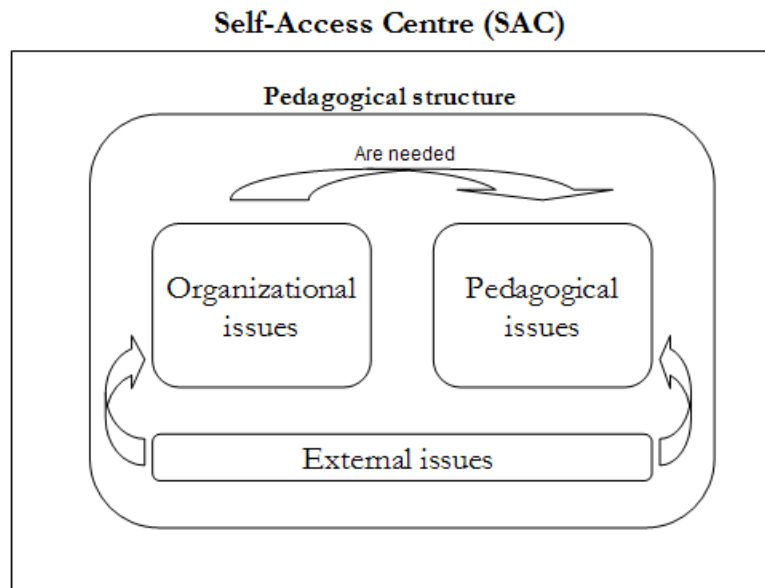


Figure 1: A model for SAC operation (Lázaro, 2006, p. 364)

Results

The results section describes the organisational, the pedagogical and the external features identified through the interviews, related to the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the SACs. Twelve out of 13 interviewed managers responded to all the questions relating to the SWOT analyses of the centres, whereas one manager answered only the questions related to the strengths and weaknesses.

Organisational features

Organisational strengths

Five of the 13 SACs in the study mentioned the wide range of resources they offer to students as one of their key strengths. Another strength identified by several of the SACs is that they offer a comfortable and supportive learning environment. In most SACs, both in New Zealand and overseas, learning in the SACs is largely a voluntary activity and creating a comfortable environment is thus important. The location of the SACs is an important organisational feature for many centres that is seen to heavily impact on its success. Some centres were located in the institution's library, which was felt to have advantages, as this makes the centre easy to find and access. In the case of some private schools, being close to a tertiary education provider was perceived to have the advantage of giving the centre more academic credibility. Four of the participants in this study acknowledged that having long opening hours was a major strength of their centres.

Further highlighting the importance of resources in self-access, three participants pointed to the systems they had in place for facilitating access to language learning resources, ranging from online catalogues to digitised materials and various coding mechanisms. Several centres regularly create in-house materials to meet the needs of their students and

cater to their specific levels, backgrounds and preferences. This level of individualisation was seen as an important strength by three of the participants. Other strengths mentioned include the integration of the SAC into a larger support structure, experienced management, its benefit to marketing the institution, the fact that use of the centre is voluntary and open to the community, and in one centre, that a variety of languages is supported.

Organisational weaknesses

Again, resources were the most common category. Where having good resources is an obvious advantage, not having sufficient or appropriate resources is seen as a definite drawback. Several SAC managers complained that suitable materials are not available to cater to the wide range of learners that use their centre.

Although SACs are increasingly making materials available online, they still require considerable space; support staff need to be on hand, personal language advisors need a private workspace to meet with students, computer workstations need to be available and of course, books, tapes and other hard copy materials take up room. For three of the SACs visited, lack of space was a clear concern. Computer problems, issues around an unfavourable location, problems with security (theft of materials) and poor physical facilities were all mentioned once.

Organisational opportunities

The most often mentioned organisational opportunity is the acquisition or development of resources. Four centres mentioned they felt their user numbers could be increased to reach more of the students in their school/institution. Two centres mentioned opportunities in offering support in languages other than English and the ability to lend out materials, like a library.

Organisational threats

Few of the threats mentioned were organisational in nature. A lack of self-developed materials was mentioned once. This could be seen as an organisational issue as a lack of commercial materials for example for advanced level or specialised student groups may lead to such students not receiving the necessary support. Another threat mentioned is in the area of security, with resources being stolen. One centre mentioned a possible relocation as an organisational threat.

Pedagogical features

Pedagogical strengths

The promotion of a strong link between the work in class and the SAC is the most often cited strength. For the centres it is important that tutors use the SAC with their classes, as

this motivates students to come in their free time. Integration is also important in the sense that the different types of support such as advising, workshops and programmes are coordinated and offer the students a follow-up. A pedagogical strength mentioned in three of the studied centres is that the programmes offered by the SACs offer a strong alternative for the learning of languages based on a learner-centred approach. Other pedagogical strengths mentioned include the availability of counselling services, strong professional development which positively affects the service offered to students, the level of personalisation of the service, and the fact that the centre encourages and facilitates collaborative work.

Pedagogical weaknesses

Due to the lack of integration between language classes and self-access learning, managers point out that learners often come to the centre unprepared. This separation between classroom and self-access learning also leads students to see the centre as a last resource, for example when an essay is due or an exam coming up, rather than as a learning centre to visit regularly. One important factor is the lack of teachers' involvement, often for want of training or because of preconceptions about the role of self-access. A lack of integration with a Languages Department or similar can also negatively impact the service and degree of collaboration between classroom teachers and self-access staff. Three centres mentioned a lack of advisors and their inability to offer advisory services in the centre at all times.

Pedagogical opportunities

Opportunities are seen in the further integration of self-access into the institution's curriculum, for example (as mentioned by one manager) through the provision of more teacher-led activities in the SAC. One centre was about to implement the use by classes of the centre under the supervision of a teacher, at least once per week. This could lead to increased collaboration with the teachers for the development of needs analysis and assessment materials. The use of technology was seen as an opportunity by three of the participants. One example given included the setting up of an LMS to make needs analyses and materials more widely accessible and to better manage student learning. Others included the provision of a counselling service as a way to offer more tailored student support and to better monitor progress, increased teacher development to allow staff to offer higher quality support, the hiring of additional staff, integration with the general learning centre and the use of portfolios.

Pedagogical threats

The only pedagogical threat mentioned (twice) was the possibility that departments would not integrate self-access learning into their courses and that the centre would therefore rely on voluntary use, possibly leading to under-use and less motivated students missing out.

External features

External strengths

One external strength mentioned was the integration of the SAC into a larger support structure that included other support services (e.g. counselling, learning support). Integration within a library was said to have advantages in the areas of materials purchasing and central funding. Strong institutional support was mentioned by two managers as an important reason for the centres' success. It was felt by these managers that the institution believed in the principles of autonomy and actively supported its implementation in the SAC.

External weaknesses

Four managers mentioned financial constraints as an important weakness, undermining the success of the SAC. As mentioned in the literature review, self-access has sometimes been seen (by administrators) as a way of reducing costs in the provision of language support (Gardner & Miller, 1999). In practice, self-access can be costly and insufficient funds may thus be available.

External opportunities

Four managers saw opportunities for the centre in attracting more users either from within the institution or outside, as a way to raise the centre's profile and to attract more funding and several managers (3) spoke of the potential of SACs to provide a model for teaching and learning in other contexts. Some spoke of self-access providing opportunities in developing countries where its philosophy of fostering autonomy and its focus on easy access to resources and support could provide a cost-effective means of implementing language education.

External threats

The greatest external threat for the majority of SACs is the lack of funding and the financial constraints for staff, materials and resources. SACs may be seen as an 'extra', a type of support that can easily be dispensed with. Almost all managers felt acutely aware of this possibility. In other centres managers (4) felt that the resources were not used as intensively as their managers wanted, often because students do not have time to use the centres in out-of-class time. Obviously, this constitutes a threat to the viability of the centres. There is also a risk (3) that institutions see SACs as a cost-cutting alternative to classroom teaching, and not as a pedagogical alternative in their own right. This can lead to negative attitudes among teachers and negatively impact the services available in the centre where there may no longer be funding for counselling services, workshop facilitation or other staff-intensive types of support. The centre may be reduced to a resource centre.

Summary of the results

The table below shows a summary of the results from the SWOT analysis.

Table 1

Results from the SWOT Analysis

	Strengths (n= 45)	Weaknesses (n= 24)	Opportunities (n= 37)	Threats (n= 23)
Organisational features	60%	46%	32%	13%
Pedagogical features	31%	37%	46%	9%
External features	9%	17%	22%	78%

The results show that the main strengths and weaknesses, as perceived by the managers, are organisational. Although this may be considered a reflection of the managers' concern with administrative issues, it needs to be pointed out that all managers interviewed were actively (and often for most of their time) involved in teaching and supporting students in the Centre. In some cases they were the only full-time staff members and would thus be responsible for most of the contact with students.

The main opportunities are seen at the pedagogical level, with also a substantial number of weaknesses reported. Conversely, the number of pedagogical strengths mentioned is considerably smaller than the number of organisational strengths. By far the largest number of threats is seen at the external level.

It is interesting to note that the number of strengths mentioned was high compared with the number of weaknesses, and the number of strengths and opportunities outweighs the number of weaknesses and threats by roughly 2:1, showing a generally optimistic view of the centres.

Discussion

The results of the SWOT analysis highlight a number of key issues that affect self-access centre operation in New Zealand. Although the results were obtained from different Centres, we could not find any systematic differences between them; all seem to grapple with similar issues. The first and most commonly reported is the provision, creation and, in some cases, lack of language learning materials. This is perhaps no surprise given the nature of self-access, which is built around the provision of a wide range of varied materials to cater to different language needs. Many definitions give resources a key role in self-access:

The constructivist re-orientation in the methodology and didactics of teaching second/foreign languages has made it clear that a rich learning environment is a prerequisite for successful (language) learning. For this reason, the issue of suitable learning materials is of the utmost importance for integrated learning centres (...). (Langner & Prokop, 2003, p. 65)

Although this concern with materials was expected, it seemed to be limited to practical questions around purchasing and provision. Pedagogical concerns, often mentioned in literature on self-access, were not mentioned in the interviews. It is possible that this is a result of the interviews having been conducted with the managers, who could have been expected to be more concerned with the practical aspects related to resources. However, all managers in the study also actively worked in the centres and offered language support using the available resources. Previous studies such as those cited in this article have also reported the results for both managers and other staff together and have not found any noticeable differences between the two groups. As the interview questions were open in nature, it could have been expected that more attention would have been given to pedagogical issues. One is left with the impression that more attention could be paid to the support mechanisms and procedures in place for ensuring the materials offer the type of support required by students, in the way that is most beneficial to the students.

A second observation is that there was little discussion of the possible roles of technology in self-access. This was somewhat surprising considering the increasingly important role of technology in self-access worldwide. A previous study by the authors (Reinders & Lázaro, 2006) reported that 72% of 46 self-access centres surveyed in five countries (Germany, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Spain and Switzerland) offered internet-based resources to students and much has been made of the potential for computers to provide flexible access and to offer more individualised learner support (Langner & Prokop, 2003).

A third issue that emerged was the lack of integration between language classes and self-access learning. It was both cited as strength in those centres where collaboration took place between teachers and self-access staff and as a weakness or even a threat in the majority of centres where there was no integration. At one level these concerns are somewhat surprising. The issue of integration has been central to the field of self-access for many years now. Numerous suggestions have been made in the literature on integrating self-access into the wider language support context, either at the course level (Cotterall 1995), by integration in a wider (online) language support network (Reinders 2007), or through language advising (Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans, 2001). A recent publication brings many of these suggestions together (Gardner, 2006). Clearly, at a practical level, barriers exist (quite possibly those mentioned in this article) that prevent practitioners from implementing the integration.

Finally, financial constraints were reported by 11 out of 13 centres. Budgetary issues were also found to be of primary concern in the studies by Reinders *et al.* (2003) and by Gardner & Miller (1997) (see above), who, in referring to the Hong Kong context emphasise the importance of institutional and financial support.

Implications

What then are the implications for others working in or with self-access resources in New Zealand? At a practical level the results reported here suggest that for self-access to make a meaningful contribution, several, pedagogic, financial, and organisational, conditions need to be met.

The results suggest that one of the key pedagogic implications is that SACs should work towards further integration with the broader curriculum, for example by giving students credit for their learning. Where there is integration it is seen as a strength or opportunity, where there is not, it is seen as a weakness. This integration may involve organisational, pedagogical, institutional and financial challenges, but is a crucial way for bringing self-access into the mainstream and to ensure acceptance of independent learning as a viable complement to classroom learning.

The use of technology in SACs has been shown to be less common than expected. SACs are learning environments that have the potential to greatly benefit from the use of technology and should be at the forefront in developing innovative ways of tapping the potential of technology for increasing flexible access to learning support and for individualising learning, both prerequisites for successful self-access learning and both with implications for broader learning and teaching practice.

A key organisational feature is the provision of materials. While the importance of materials in the self-access context cannot be denied, it is crucial that sight not be lost of the pedagogical questions around the suitability and possible adaptation of those materials. Previous studies have found that self-access materials are not always adequate, and as such SACs have an important role in revising, or developing alternative materials for use in the centres, and to support out-of-class learning in general. This requires SACs to take on an active and pedagogically critical role in the area of materials, not one of a passive consumer.

Adequate funding is a financial condition that has been found both in this and in other studies. Previous studies in the Australasian context (cf. Reinders *et al.*, 2003), have already identified cases where self-access facilities were seen as a kind of exotic library, without any clear pedagogical underpinning and without the necessary learner support. The authors called for self-access to be recognised as a valuable pedagogical approach to language learning and teaching in its own right, not a substitute for, supposedly more expensive, classroom teaching. The findings from this study indicate that a similar situation still exists. Both initial and ongoing costs need to be met to ensure there is sufficient funding for the purchasing and creation of high-quality materials, the training of staff, and the development of new approaches to student support. If regular funding is not available, the SAC may quickly deteriorate to the point where it is no more than a resource room.

Finally, any review of SACs in practice can benefit from considering the organisational, the pedagogical and the external features affecting the operation of the centre, as suggested in this study, as these are interrelated and need to be considering together to better understand the challenges that are faced.

Conclusion

In summary, this study has shown that self-access managers are generally optimistic about the operation of their centres. The number of reported strengths and opportunities far outweighs the number of reported weaknesses and threats. Nonetheless, there clearly are a number of issues that may affect the long-term prospects for self-access centres in New Zealand. Of obvious concern are the financial constraints reported by most of the centres. Other concerns are more subtle. Self-access centres still largely seem to focus on their role as providers of materials and there are challenges around linking self-access to classroom learning and teaching. Increasing such links and offering pedagogical support to complement the provision of resources, for example through advisory sessions or workshops, often involves additional staffing or the development of online support mechanism. Both of these may be difficult to realise in a financially challenging environment.

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Appendix

Interview questions

What are in your opinion the learners' and teachers' attitudes towards autonomous learning in the Self-Access Centre (SAC)?

Learners' attitudes	
Teachers' attitudes	

What are in your opinion the strengths, the weaknesses, the opportunities and the threats of your Self-Access Centre?

Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Opportunities	
Threats	

About counselling service in the centre

Is a counselling service offered in the centre? What type of counselling sessions do you offer?	
<input type="checkbox"/> none <input type="checkbox"/> individual face-to-face interviews <input type="checkbox"/> learner-groups interviews <input type="checkbox"/> e-mail-counselling <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
<input type="checkbox"/> obligatory counselling sessions <input type="checkbox"/> free sessions <input type="checkbox"/> learner asks for it <input type="checkbox"/> counsellor does	
Learners' attitudes	
Teachers' attitudes	
Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Other comments	

About learner training

Is there any learner strategy training in the centre? What type of training?	
<input type="checkbox"/> none <input type="checkbox"/> integrated training <input type="checkbox"/> in workshops <input type="checkbox"/> in counselling sessions <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
Learners' attitudes	
Teachers' attitudes	
Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Other comments	

About learner profiles

19- Are any learner profiles used? What do they look like?	
<input type="checkbox"/> none <input type="checkbox"/> obligatory <input type="checkbox"/> free <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
Learners' attitudes about the profile	
Teachers' attitudes about the profile	

Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Other comments	

About materials

- What type of materials is used most by learners?	
<input type="checkbox"/> published language-learning materials <input type="checkbox"/> adapted published materials <input type="checkbox"/> authentic materials <input type="checkbox"/> special produced materials <input type="checkbox"/> generic materials <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
<input type="checkbox"/> print <input type="checkbox"/> audio <input type="checkbox"/> video/TV <input type="checkbox"/> Computer programs <input type="checkbox"/> Internet <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
Strengths of the centre's materials	
Weaknesses of the centre's materials	
Other comments	

About the activities in the Self-Access Centre

What skills do you think your students practise most?	
<input type="checkbox"/> reading comprehension <input type="checkbox"/> listening <input type="checkbox"/> writing <input type="checkbox"/> speaking <input type="checkbox"/> phonetics <input type="checkbox"/> grammar <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
What work forms are in your opinion most used?	
<input type="checkbox"/> individual activities <input type="checkbox"/> pair and group activities <input type="checkbox"/> tandem (native-speaker contacts) <input type="checkbox"/> e-mail-tandem <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
Strengths of the centre's activities	
Weaknesses of the centre's activities	
Other comments	

About the assessment

How are the learners assessed?	
<input type="checkbox"/> not <input type="checkbox"/> self-assessment <input type="checkbox"/> collaborative (with counsellor/ teacher) <input type="checkbox"/> external <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Other comments	

About the Centre's evaluation

How is the efficiency (use frequency of materials, resources and services, of the quality of management, value for money of materials and equipment, value for money of staffing, the deployment of resources (material and human) throughout the academic year, the return on the overall cost of self-access, the responsiveness of self-access to student needs) evaluated?	
<input type="checkbox"/> none <input type="checkbox"/> questionnaires <input type="checkbox"/> interviews <input type="checkbox"/> observations: record behaviour <input type="checkbox"/> use and user statistics <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
How is the effectiveness (self-access' facilitation of learning, appropriate learning practices in self-access learning, changes in learning strategies, changes in attitudes and behaviour of learners and staff over a period of time, learners' and teachers' attitudes to self-access learning, learners' motivation, consistency with which students return voluntarily to self-access learning, the development of autonomy in learners, role of self-access in enhancing classroom learning) evaluated?	
<input type="checkbox"/> none <input type="checkbox"/> questionnaires <input type="checkbox"/> interviews <input type="checkbox"/> observations: record behaviour <input type="checkbox"/> discussions with groups of learners <input type="checkbox"/> language tests <input type="checkbox"/> other:	
<input type="checkbox"/> none <input type="checkbox"/> internal evaluations <input type="checkbox"/> external evaluations	
Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Other comments	

Other comments	
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Adapted from: Gardner, D. & Miller, L. (1999). *Establishing Self-Access*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Notes:

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