

# Self-access: Positioning, pedagogy and future directions

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the rationale, structure, pedagogy, resourcing, perceptions of effectiveness and direction of self-access centres (SACs) in New Zealand and Australia. The senior staff in 14 centres were interviewed and completed a guided survey form. The results of this study suggest that the positioning, pedagogy and direction of SACs in Australasia reflect remarkable achievements for a relatively new innovation; however, the results suggest that work is still needed to support the development of SACs and to set standards so that SACs become established both as an academic service and as an organisational entity within post-compulsory education in New Zealand and Australia.

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## Background

SACs have become part of many English language learning strategies in tertiary institutions in New Zealand and Australia. These centres, while numerous and often innovative, have been little researched. Reports such as Helmore and Race (1982), Helmore (1985a) and Helmore (1985b) considered the self-directed learning of small groups and individuals in Australia. Race and Helmore (1983: 1) make a clear distinction between self-access and self-directed learning:

Self-Access is used to describe any kind of material or resources available to a learner to use at his own pace ... Self-Directed learning, on the other hand, is a philosophy and methodology of learning which leads the learner towards autonomy. It is not materials-centred, although materials may play an important role initially ...

In 1990 a survey commissioned by the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs 'to review the role and effectiveness of Individual Learning Centres (ILCs) in the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP)' (Technisearch 1990: Foreword) concluded that 'ILCs 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: 74). The survey found that the role of ILCs in the AMEP 'should be to facilitate self-instruction in language learning and to promote progress towards autonomous adult learning in its clients' (Technisearch 1990: 74).

In many institutions, the SAC is physically located where the language laboratory used to be. However, the pedagogic underpinnings of a SAC are very different from the behaviourist principles of learning that underpinned the drill and language practice of the language laboratory of the 1960s (Gremmo and Riley 1995).

In the 1970s, a shift of attention in language teaching pedagogy took place from learning to the learner, who was seen as actively taking part in the learning process and as being responsible for his or her own learning. The concept of *learner autonomy* (LA) became important and has slowly been established as an explicit goal of language tuition around the world. Although many definitions of LA exist, they share an emphasise on qualities such as awareness, responsibility and learner control. In many definitions (eg Little 1991; Nunan 1995), autonomy is described as an ability, and may be something that the learner either has or does not have; however, it can also be seen as something that may or may not occur in certain circumstances, for example in the execution of certain tasks. Several authors have referred to LA as a continuum (Benson 2001), so it seems reasonable to talk about degrees of autonomy in explaining certain learning behaviour, as in the following definition: 'Autonomous language learning is an act of learning whereby motivated learners consciously make informed decisions about that learning' (Cotterall and Reinders 2001: 87).

Not all decisions regarding the learning process are made consciously: even at a metacognitive level some automatised operations can probably take place (Hacker, Dunlosky and Graesser 1998).

For learners to become conscious of their learning and to make informed decisions, they need to have certain skills or be given the opportunity to develop them. Benson and Voller (1997: 26) point out that 'Self-Access resource centers are the most typical means by which institutions have attempted to implement notions of autonomy and independence over the last twenty years to the extent that "self-access language learning" is now often used as a synonym for "autonomous language learning"'.

### **Self-access learning**

What exactly is self-access language learning? Some people have equated it with self-instruction (learning without the help of a teacher) or self-directed learning (in which the learners have control over the learning process).

However, although these various kinds of learning share some characteristics, they are not exactly the same. To address this ambiguity, the following definition was proposed by Cotterall and Reinders (2001: 38):

A Self-Access Center 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 fostering autonomous language learning.

This definition identifies the fostering of autonomous learning as a crucial aspect of self-access. However, there is not necessarily a direct relationship between self-access and learner autonomy. Sheerin (1997), for example, points out that SACs can be used for homework activities or for teacher-directed activities. Further, Benson and Voller (1997) state that learners cannot be forced into learning autonomously, and if this is attempted, self-access can work counterproductively. Likewise, when the materials in the SAC can be (and often are) of a pedagogic nature (for example coursebooks), they leave little room for the learners to make decisions about their learning (Gremmo and Riley 1995). The approach of Helmore and Race (1982), noted above, is to differentiate clearly between self-access and self-directed learning. 'In summary, we see Self-Access as being a small step in the direction of learner independence while Self-Directed Learning leads the learner further along the path towards autonomy' (Helmore and Race 1982: 1).

## **The present study**

The issues around the pedagogy of autonomy and its various interpretations in SACs in New Zealand and Australia are apparent in the development, functioning and positioning of the centres surveyed in this study. However, it is also evident that there are many other influences at work in the growth of this element of the post-compulsory education learning environment.

Gardner and Miller (1997) carried out a comprehensive study of SACs in Hong Kong and considered the rationale, structure, pedagogy, resourcing, perceptions of effectiveness and direction of centres. The study reported in this paper draws from the work of Gardner and Miller, with some modification for the Australasian context. Its findings illuminate local particularity and a variety of pressures beyond those of pedagogic debate.

## **Method**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

The participants in this study are the senior managers and/or academics attached to five SACs in New Zealand and nine SACs in Australia, all

providing support for adult learners of English. (Their anonymity has been preserved for ethical reasons.)

### **PROCEDURE**

A questionnaire was developed for use as a guide in each interview, and was trialled in one SAC with a group of nine staff who participated in a discussion to validate the questionnaire. Each of the centres in the study was visited by one or more of the researchers (ie authors of this article), who conducted the interviews. The senior staff member at the centre was interviewed. All interviews were recorded, and notes were made where feasible.

### **ANALYSIS**

All interview scripts, discussion notes and questionnaire answers were analysed using the QSR Nud\*ist (N4) program. The analysis included identification of recurrent themes, the reporting of themes and the identification of evidentiary quotes.

### **Findings**

Three major themes were identified from the qualitative data. The first theme relates to the establishment and positioning of the centre and its 'identity'. The second theme relates to the pedagogical goals of the centre and the pragmatics of implementation. Some interesting strategies were revealed, as were some driven by goals not linked to learning. The last theme arose out of discussions around future planning. It identified approaches to policy and strategic development, which suggested that there is some uncertainty around the balance of intent with regard to academic development on the one hand, and the provision of a marketable and economic facility on the other.

### **IDENTITY**

#### **Impetus for establishment and continuation**

One of the most common threads influencing the establishment of SACs was that of pragmatism. Often the present managers were unaware of the original reasons for setting up the SAC, but almost all regarded it as a positive tool for learning.

Self-access is one of those things that underpin what we do. We're very much geared towards students being independent learners in everything that we do.  
(SAC Manager)

It was accepted that such learning is beneficial and therefore it was desirable to provide the service. There was, however, a distinct difference

between New Zealand and Australian centres in terms of present motivations for continuing the centres. New Zealand centres were regarded as generally beneficial, and had sometimes been set up after research into overseas centres (such as those in Hong Kong and Great Britain) had suggested the value of such resources. The Australian situation was influenced by government funding of up to five hours per week of course content through self-access learning (guided self-study). It was noted by Australian managers that this was useful as a means of cost-saving.

SACs in both countries were run on very pragmatic lines, and most effort went into the day-to-day running, rather than into debating philosophies or educational theory. This was underlined by the fact that almost all managers and staff interviewed were not formally trained in SAC methodology or in the theory of independent learning.

Associated with this practical approach was the influence of competitors. SACs are seen as attractive to students and, therefore, as a marketing tool by some institutions.

... the students do take more control of their learning. There is a more individualised focus on each of the students and the ILC is one way of being able to meet their particular learning needs ... it's also another delivery option ... In particular, in the migrant program we have here, we try to set up other ways that people can access learning other than just access formal classrooms, because not everyone can access formal classrooms at the times we are delivering, so we're trying to broaden out ... the independent learning thing is the other really big push – that people can take more control of their learning and also focus on particular needs in their language learning.

(Centre Coordinator)

The subjects of the study commented on the potential usefulness of the centres for learning. However, it was interesting to note that in both countries some centres felt that unrealistic demands were made upon students and centres simply because the students had been accepted into courses for which their English was insufficient in the first place.

You know, the PhD student whose supervisor says, 'Well, I've just discovered that his work's unreadable, so I'll send him to you'. And we say, 'What do you want us to do with him, shoot him? Too late, baby'. So there's that attitude happening.

(Centre Manager)

In any case, all centres seemed convinced of the worth of the contribution they were making to student learning and, although some were under-funded, they generally believed that they had established their worth and were seen as a long-term student service.

The students and staff who are aware of us are very positive about us, and use us. But there's still a lot of ignorance.

(Centre Coordinator)

### **Positioning issues: Internal**

The physical location of SACs provides some clues to 'positioning'. Usually the centres were located either within or near a library, which suggested an academic support role. Others were located in a school of English or 'international' centre, which was physically removed from the main university campus and in a marginal position. Three of these centres were also separate financial businesses, operating for profit and contributing funding back to the institution. Staff in these cases did not have any regular contact with the parent institution.

Some SACs were part of a wider group in terms of budget and did not operate as separate cost centres; they were funded by the school of English of which they were a part. In New Zealand, whether or not the centre was part of a wider school of English, it was generally funded from a separate budget line. Most did not charge their students fees.

No, they don't pay. We do have a few paying clients, but we actually don't charge them. That's a great thing, actually: it's one of the areas where we could have, if we liked, picked up more business but we decided it should in fact be a part of our centres. It's just a learning centre for our students to access. So we're not opening to outsiders at this stage.

(ILC Manager)

Where the SAC was part of a central campus, it had closer relationships with other teaching departments. However, some operated in relative isolation and only with English language students. It seemed likely that in those institutions the SAC would be unknown to many institute staff members. It was, however, reported by centre managers that SACs were widely known to international and permanent resident students.

### **Positioning issues: External**

The bulk funding of tertiary institutions in New Zealand means that the provision of services such as SACs or independent learning centres is in the hands of individual institutions, without any code of practice covering set-up and operations. In Australia, as previously noted, language courses can provide up to five funded hours per week in a self-access environment. This has supported the development of SACs. In both countries, the development of SACs has been driven by pragmatism rather than policy. In addition, in Australia the provision of 510 hours English language tuition for new migrants through the AMEP has provided a funding base.

Not all the students are using their 510 hours so we tried to look at strategies for increasing the number of hours they studied when they've actually enrolled. So, for instance, if they do a full-time course it will be 20 hours per week, but we've extended that to 22 hours per week and one of those is so they could spend an hour a week at least in the self-access centre.

(Centre Director)

To sum up, external positioning is influenced by organisational and funding issues and by national policy concerned with international and migrant students.

## **PEDAGOGICAL GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Goals**

The establishment and articulation of pedagogical goals grows out of a range of conceptualisations of the functions of SACs. In one Australian centre, the manager articulated the goals as being:

To coach students to work on areas which they have perceived through their learning in the classroom situation to need more attention. That would be one. To allow them to get access to teacher supervision, teacher advice and guidance on those areas, because we have a supervising teacher in there. So we encourage them to go to the [\*\*\*]<sup>1</sup> and talk to that teacher about a particular problem when it becomes obvious. To enable them to broaden their knowledge of culture and background of the community they are in because there are materials in there for them to look at. Australiana type material, videos.

(Centre Manager)

In this centre, then, it seems the SAC plays a remedial role. This impression is reinforced by a manager at another centre who said:

... when students go into the ILC here I see them consulting teachers, doing homework, learning vocabulary lists, going and finding books and taking them away. Looking at Readers, listening to tapes ...

(Centre Coordinator)

This manager also pointed out that the reason for setting up the SAC could well have been financial:

But I would say possibly it saves on teaching, for one. I mean, to be blunt, I would like to say that's absolutely what people say – that it's one way in which centres can save money, putting teachers to supervise students.

(Centre Coordinator)

The manager of one New Zealand centre saw the development of independent or lifelong learning skills as being the main goal, that is to help

learners develop the ability to set goals and to find and access resources. Some teachers, however, use it as a homework centre or as a classroom.

What I do find is a great deal of resistance from the teachers actually using the self-access centre. They use it – some of them want to use it as a homework centre or as another classroom hour where you just carry on teaching but in a different place.

(Centre Manager)

For one centre, the articulation of pedagogical goals grew out of more pragmatic intentions.

Originally our role as a learning adviser was to do a lot of one-on-one interviews with students. One thing that we noticed was that to get into this independent self-directed learning stuff there was no place for them to go.

(SAC Manager)

This manager says the purpose of self-access language learning is:

... helping the students' independent lifelong learning strategies. Certainly with us, and especially with our students, the student has been comfortable to identify their needs and to see that they are independent in solving those needs.

(SAC Manager)

In a significant shift from the behaviourist approaches of language laboratories, many interviewees talked about the importance of the social function of SACs and the links between language learning and the social context.

One interviewee saw the SAC as a powerful option for people who cannot participate in mainstream classes for various reasons, for adults needing learner support, and for those who choose not to attend class because they only need to work on specific competencies, rather than a whole syllabus. This flexibility underlines a strong social role.

I had a lady the other day who told me that it's the first time she's been able to sleep since she's been studying here. So it's that social support that you can give here that you can't give in a class, and the pace of learning again that she can just pop out and have a coffee and see some friends; it's a social network but I think there is [an] emotional support angle where it is appropriate ...

(Centre Co-coordinator)

Thus, as these observations have shown, organisational pragmatism must co-exist with meeting the learning needs of a variety of students for independence and autonomy. This is a recurrent theme, and some conflict is evident between institutional goals, centre goals and the goals of some of the staff using the centres for their classes.

## Implementation

The student groups participating in the SACs that were part of this study fell into two main categories: mainstream students using the centre to support their studies in a range of disciplines and new migrants whose primary focus was on language development. Within these groups, access strategies varied from inclusion of attendance at the SAC as a course requirement through to voluntary attendance based on personal initiative, with teachers providing various degrees of encouragement and support.

While no centre indicated any lack of 'customers', many discussed the problems of getting support to expand the service to meet needs apparent in the student population. This is reflected in the tenuous arrangements described in some centres for academic leadership, management and technical support. This, in turn, was evident in the number of respondents who were unsure of their official role but who were carrying out multiple functions to keep the centre running.

The interviewees identified the skills and training of the centre staff. While many had considerable experience in a variety of fields including language teaching, there was little evidence of qualifications directly relevant to self-access learning and its management. This undoubtedly reflects the absence of such programs or qualifications in both countries. Similarly, a research component is not built into staff job descriptions as is common in other academic positions, and the very limited amount of research being conducted in SACs reflects the stretched resourcing in many centres. While a high degree of interest was expressed, time to carry out research was not built into budgets. A small number of studies were identified but most interviewees expressed the need for a more active research culture to support development.

Well, our language teaching staff are not employed on the same basis, for example, as a university lecturer, so they don't get ... there's no research requirement on them.

(Centre Manager)

The centres studied have a range of resources from the simplest pen and paper exercises through to complex computer-based systems. Many of the interviewees expressed discontent at the datedness of resource materials, the lack of development time and the minimalist approach to providing computer-based resources and support. In contrast, there are centres that are resource-rich and exemplify the most current equipment and approaches. It is evident, therefore, that issues of academic leadership, research, training and resource development do impact on the implementation of pedagogical goals in SACs.

## **FUTURE PLANNING**

Throughout the findings noted above, there are indications of some confusion and disagreement within institutions regarding future planning in terms of policy and strategic intent. This is, in part, a function of the organisational tier where the research was conducted. The centres studied were generally part of a larger organisational structure and the centre leaders were not necessarily part of the decision-making process. Some, indeed, indicated a degree of frustration at being too far removed from the seat of power.

... and we could create some pressure, but I don't know where that pressure would go on ...

(SAC Lecturer)

The confusion may also have stemmed from the disparate intentions of different groups. Those working 'hands-on' in the centres (such as the interviewees) may be more focused on the day-to-day processes of the centre and the management tier may be more interested in the strategic issues.

... yes, it was more a budgetary and marketing pressure and this was a pedagogically sound way of responding.

(SAC Lecturer)

There is also a sense that the culture of self-access (or 'autonomy' from the pedagogues' point of view) is innovative and requires a change in the more traditional approach of academic management. In the view of the organisation, even though its staff may be unsupported by appropriate training, the SAC is seen as a useful solution to the diversity of need among paying students.

Management have a different view of self-access; in fact it's been renamed [\*\*\*]<sup>2</sup> or something, because management say that if it's self-access, then students don't need a teacher or any kind of supervision.

(SAC Academic)

## **Summary and conclusions**

This research began with the intent of describing the key issues confronting SACs in Australasia. The study identified a resource which has extraordinary strength in its drive towards providing opportunity for students to develop their language skills and to develop their capacity to learn within the paradigm of autonomy. There are, however, contradictions and disparities which weaken 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.

The face validity [of self-access learning] comes from the fact that individualisation represents a pragmatic solution to the diversity of need, but the changing roles for teachers and learners that this situation entails, calls for an ideological change in the way the education process is viewed.

(Sheerin 1997: 55)

This review of the positioning, pedagogy and direction of SACs in Australasia has identified burgeoning expertise in place in SACs and remarkable achievements to date, as well as a need for strategic recognition and development within institutions and across the post-compulsory education sector.

#### NOTES

- 1 Name omitted to preserve anonymity.
- 2 Name omitted to preserve anonymity.

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