Self-access: Positioning, pedagogy and direction.

Helen Anderson – Manukau Institute of Technology

Hayo Reinders – The University of Auckland

John Jones-Parry – Manukau Institute of Technology

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 people in fourteen 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 but also suggests that work is still to be done to support development, to set standards and to become established both as an academic discipline and as an organisational entity within tertiary studies.

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 not been recently explored from the researcher's perspective. 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) 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…. (1983, p.1)

In 1990 the findings were reported of 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.). The report 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." (1990, p.74). It 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." (1990, p.74).

As physical entities (a room, a building), SACs grew out of the language laboratories commonly used in the 1960s for drill and language practice. These were strongly based on behaviourist principles of learning (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). In many institutions the SAC is housed in the same room as the former language

laboratory and may look similar, however, its pedagogic underpinnings are very different.

In the 1970s a shift of attention in language teaching pedagogy took place from learning to learner. The learner was seen as actively taking part in the learning process and as responsible for his or her own learning. The concept of *learner autonomy* (LA) became important in the 1970s and has slowly become an explicit goal of language tuition around the world. Although many definitions of LA exist, these share a number of characteristics, emphasising qualities such as awareness, responsibility, and learner control. Holec's definition is often quoted: 'L'autonomie de l'apprentissage est la capacité de l'apprenant à prendre en charge son apprentissage' (1981, p.3) ('Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning'). In this and other definitions (e.g. Little, 1991; Nunan, 1995), autonomy is described as an ability and may be something that the learner either has or doesn't have. It could also be argued that it is something that might or might not occur in certain circumstances, for example, in the execution of certain tasks. Several authors have talked about LA as a continuum (Benson, 2000), and it therefore seems reasonable to talk about degrees of autonomy to explain 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 & Reinders, 2000).

Not all decisions regarding the learning process will be made consciously as even at a metacognitive level some automatised operations can probably take place (Hacker, Dunlosky & Graesser, 1998), however, it appears that many operations are at least available to learners' conscious attention.

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. These opportunities have been given to learners in different ways: by teachers in classrooms, through the teaching of independent learning skills and learner strategies, through national or local curricula (such as in Norway and, to a certain extent, in the Netherlands, by including the development of autonomous learning skills as a specific aim in the national curricula), and most commonly through the provision of self-access facilities. Benson & Voller (1997 p.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."

What exactly is self-access language learning? Some have equated it with self-instruction (learning without the help of a teacher) or self-directed learning (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. Self-access language learning can be self-instructed or self-directed, but it is not necessarily so. Therefore, the following definition was proposed by Cotterall &

Reinders (2000). "Self-Access Language Learning is learning that takes place in a Self-Access Center. 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 (p 38) ". 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) points out that SACs can be used for homework activities or for teacher-directed activities. Further, Benson & Voller (1997) say that learners cannot be forced into learning autonomously and if this is attempted, self-access can work counterproductively. The materials in the SAC can (and often are) of a pedagogic nature (e.g. course books) and leave little room for the learners to make decisions about their learning (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). The approach of Race and Helmore (1983) 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." (1983, p.1).

The issues around pedagogy of autonomy and its iteration in SACs in New Zealand and Australia are apparent in the development, functioning and positioning of the centers which are the subjects of this study. However, it is also evident that there are many other influences at work in the growth of this element of the tertiary learning environment.

Gardner and Miller (1997) carried out a comprehensive study of Self Access Centers in Hong Kong; they considered the rationale, structure, pedagogy, resourcing, perceptions of effectiveness and direction of the centers. The study reported in this paper draws from the work of Gardner and Millar with adjustments for the Australasian context and its findings demonstrate local particularity and a variety of pressures beyond pedagogic debate.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study are the senior managers and/or academics attached to five Self-Access Centers in New Zealand and nine Self-Access Centers in Australia all at the tertiary level and all providing support for learners of English.

Procedure

Each of the Centers in the study was visited by one or more of the researchers. The senior person at the center was interviewed and talked through a questionnaire with the researcher(s).

Analysis

All interview scripts, discussion notes and questionnaire answers were processed using standard electronic qualitative analysis (N4) Themes were established and reported as trends and anomalies.

Findings

Three major themes were identified from the qualitative data. The first theme relates to the establishment and positioning of the center with varying forms of "identity" emerging. The second theme relates to the pedagogical goals of the center and the pragmatics of implementation. Some exciting strategies were revealed as were some driven by goals not linked to learning. The last theme arose out of discussions around future planning and identified approaches to policy and strategic development which suggested that there is some uncertainty around the balance of intent with regard to academic development and the provision of a marketable and economic facility.

Identity

Impetus for establishment and continuation.

One of the most common threads influencing the establishment of self-access centres was that of pragmatism. Often the present managers were unaware of the original reasons for setting up the Self-access Centre, 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 to provide the service was desirable. There was, however, a distinct difference between New Zealand and

Australian centres in present motivations for continuing the centres. New Zealand centres were set up as generally beneficial resources, sometimes after research into overseas centres in e.g. Hong Kong and Great Britain .The Australian situation, while being researched and being seen as beneficial, was influenced by the government funding of up to 5 hours per week of course content through self-access learning (guided self study). Some managers stated that this was useful as a means of cost cutting.

Most Self-access Centres in both countries were running on very pragmatic lines with most effort going into the day to day running, rather than into philosophies or educational theory. This was underlined as almost all managers and staff were not formally trained in Self-access Centre methodology or in the theory of independent learning.

Associated with this practical approach was the influence of competitors. Self-access Centres are seen as desirable by students and 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 programme 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 Co-ordinator)

The subjects of the study commented on the potential usefulness of the centres for learning. It was interesting that in both countries some centres felt that unrealistic demands were made upon students and centres simply because the students had been accepted on to courses with insufficient English 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)

However, 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 Co-ordinator).

Positioning issues (Internal)

The physical location of self-access centres provides some clues to "positioning". Usually the centres are located either within or near a library suggesting an academic support role. Others were located in a school of English/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 self-access centres were part of a wider group in terms of budget and didn't operate as separate cost centres, being funded by the school of English of which they were 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 learners 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, its 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

centers. It's just a learning center for our students

to access. So we're not opening to outsiders at

this stage. (Manager, Independent Learning

Center).

When the self-access centre 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 some

institutions the self-

access centre would be unknown to many institute staff members.

 It was, however, usually 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.

The governments of both countries have overt input or opinion on the desirability of

centres. Neither is there any code of practice covering set-up and running. In

Australia language courses can provide up to 5 funded hours per week in a self-access environment. This has supported the development of SACs. In both countries the development of self-access centres has been driven by pragmatism rather than policy. In addition, in Australia the provision of 510 hours English language tuition for new migrants 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 Center.
> (Director of Center).

External positioning is influenced by organisational and funding issues and of course by the state of national policy with regard to 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 noted:

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 *** 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. (Manager of Centre).

In this centre, then, it seems the SAC plays a remedial role. This impression is reinforced when the manager says:

…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 points out that the reason for setting up the SAC could well
have been a money issue:

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's its one
way in which centres can save money, putting
teachers to supervise students. (Centre Co-
ordinator).

The manager of one New Zealand Center sees independent learning/lifelong
learning skills as being the main goal. Helping learners develop the ability to set
goals, find and access resources. Some teachers, however, use it as a homework
center or as a classroom.

What I do find is a great deal of resistance from
the teachers actually using the self-access
center. They use it - some of them want to use
it as a homework center or as another
classroom hour where you

just carry on teaching but in a different place.

(Centre Manager)

For some centres the articulation of pedagogical goals grew out of more pragmatic intentions.

Originally our role as a learning advisor 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. (Manager of Self-Access Centre).

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

... helping the students independent life long 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.

(Manager, Self-Access Centre).

In a significant shift from the behaviourist approaches of the precursor language laboratories many interviewees talked about the importance of the social function of self-access centres and the links between language learning and the social context.

One interviewee saw the SAC as a powerful option for people who can not go into the mainstream classes for various reasons, for learners needing remedial work and for learners who choose not to attend class because they only need to work on specific competencies, rather than sit in class. There is 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 its 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 emotional support angle where it is appropriate …
> (Center Co-coordinator).

Thus, organisational pragmatism sits beside the intent to meet learning needs for a variety of students with independence and autonomy as the recurrent theme and some conflict evident between institutional goals, center goals and the goals of some of the staff using the centers 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 center 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 degrees of encouragement and support.

While no center 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 centers for academic leadership, management and technical support. This is reflected in the number of respondents who were unsure of their official role but who were carrying out multiple functions to keep the center running.

The interviewees identified the skills and training of the center 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 programmes/qualifications in both countries. Similarly, research is not built into staff job descriptions as is common in other academic disciplines. Reflecting the stretched resourcing available to many centers is the very limited amount of research being conducted in Self-access Centers. 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. (Center Manager).

Most centers 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 currency 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. Thus it is evident that issues of academic leadership, research, training and resource development impact on the implementation of pedagogical goals.

Future Planning

Throughout the findings noted above there are indications of some confusion and "within institution" disagreement regarding future planning as seen in policy and strategic intent. This is in part a function of the organisational tier where the research was conducted. The centers studied were generally part of a larger organisational structure and the center leaders were not necessarily part of the decision making process. Some, indeed, indicated that they felt quite frustratingly removed from the point of power.

> …and we could create some pressure, but I
>
> don't know where that pressure would go
>
> on…
>
> (SAC lecturer)

This confusion may also have stemmed from the disparate intentions of different groups. Those working "hands on" in the centers (interviewees) may be more focused on the day to day processes of the center 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. (Lecturer, SAC).

There is also a sense that the culture of self-access or "autonomy" from the pedagogues point of view is innovative and requiring of a change in approach which may yet be unsupported by appropriate training, but in the view of the

organization it is seen as a useful solution to diversity of need among paying students.

> Management have a different view of self
> access, in fact its been renamed (***) or
> something, because management say that
> if it's self access, then students don't need
> a teacher or any kind of supervision.
> (Academic, SAC.)

Discussion

This research began with the intent of describing the issues regarding the self-access centers 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. Alongside this strength are contradictions and disparities which filter the ability of the centers to focus on developing the language learning environment. These issues occur primarily in the awkward positioning of many centers organizationally, physically and pedagogically resulting in a not yet fully realised search for academic and organizational 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)

This review of the positioning, pedagogy and direction of self access centres in

Australasia suggests that work is still to be done to support development, set

standards and to become established both as an academic discipline and as an

organisational entity within tertiary studies. Progress on these elements will support

the burgeoning expertise and remarkable achievements already in place.

References

Benson, P. (2001) *Autonomy in language learning.*. Harlow: Longman.

Benson, P. and Voller, P. (Eds.) (1997) *Autonomy and independence in language*

learning. Harlow: Longman

Cotterall, S. & Reinders, H. (2000) Fortress or bridge? Learners' perceptions and

practice in self-access language learning. *Tesolanz*, 8, 23-38.

Gardner, D,. & Miller, L. 1997. *A study of tertiary level self-access facilities in Hong Kong.* Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong

Gremmo, M-J. & Riley, P. (1995). *Autonomy, self-direction and self-access in language teaching and learning: the history of an idea.* System, 23(2), 151-164.

Hacker, D., Dunlosky, J., & Graesser, A. (Eds.). (1998). *Metacognition in educational theory and practice.* Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Helmore, H.(1985a) *Self-Directed Learning – Part One. A joint project of the NSW .Adult Migrant Education Service and the Institute of Technical and Adult Teacher Education, Sydney College of Advanced Education.* AMES Program Development project No. 24, 1984.

Helmore, H.(1985b). *Self-Directed Learning – Part Two. A joint project of the NSW Adult Migrant Education Service and the Institute of Technical and Adult Teacher education, Sydney College of Advanced Education.* AMES Program Development project No. 24, 1984.

Helmore, H., & Race, E. (1982). *Self Directed Learning. A report to the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs on Stage 1 of the Project: English for Nurses.* Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, English Language Teaching Unit.

Kaltenböck, G. (2001). Learner autonomy: a guiding principle in designing a CD-ROM for intonation practice. ReCall, 13(2), 179-190.

Nunan, D. (1995). *Closing the gap between learning and instruction.* TESOL. Quarterly, 29(2),133-158.

Little, D. (1991) *Learner autonomy: definitions, issues and problems.* Dublin: Authentik.

Race, E., & Helmore, H. (1993). *Self-Directed learning.* Paper presented at the Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages – Third Summer School. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, English Language Teaching Unit.

Sheerin, S. (1997) An exploration of the relationship between self-access and independent learning. In: P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.) *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp54 – 65). Harlow: Longman.

Technisearch (1990). *Adult Migrant Education Program. Review of Individual `Learning Centres - 1989. Final report.* Technisearch Ltd: Melbourne.