
Does ‘Self-Access’ Still Have Life in It?: A Response to Reinders (2012)

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Does ‘self-access’ still have life in it? Absolutely it does! However, I still maintain that it has to be done right. This will, to some degree, vary from institution to institution, but there are some fundamental things to get right when running an institutional self-access learning centre (SALC). It is sad to read about SALCs that are more like homework rooms, but there are plenty of SALCs that focus very carefully on the pedagogic side. Where I work, for example, the SALC is a thriving hub of activity, and that is no accident. This was largely down to the planning of the team led by Lucy Cooker over eleven years ago when it was established. The success is also due to the continued investment on the part of the institution. The university continues to support and invest in the SALC, and it remains a crucial part of the students’ university life. The presence of the SALC is one of reasons why prospective students choose to come to our institution, and the reason why so many lecturers choose to apply for teaching and advising positions here. Cooker has written about some of her principles for self-access (2010):

- Self-access learning should be truly self-access (i.e. optional and not required as part of a class)
- Students should have an integral role in the running of the centre
- Language learning should be fun
- The learning environment is important

I will add a few others, many of which were already mentioned by Reinders in his article. This list has been compiled from various sources e.g. Benson, 2001; Cotterall & Reinders, 2001; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Lázaro & Reinders, 2008; Sekiya, Mynard & Cooker, 2010; Sheerin, 1997; Sinclair, 1996; Sturtridge, 1997; Toogood & Pemberton, 2002.

- A centre needs to cater for different kinds of learners
- Learner training and advising services should be available

- There should be opportunities for target language practice in addition to TL study
- Ongoing action research is essential for continuous development; a centre is never “finished”
- Professional administrative support and efficient systems are needed
- Suitable materials and facilities need to be readily available to students. Also important are the ways in which learners are helped with selecting, using and reflecting on the effectiveness of the materials
- Access to ongoing staff professional development is needed
- A centre should have a clearly defined mission
- A centre should aim to promote language learner autonomy

A centre which has too many of these elements missing is unlikely to be fully successful, so I can understand Reinders when he states in his article “The End of Self-Access?” that “self-access language learning has simply not developed itself as a sustainable pedagogic alternative or complement to formal, and regular education (2012).” To a certain extent, I see his point and this will be the focus of the rest of this article.

Sustainable?

The points that I have listed above clearly take dedication, energy, commitment, and (possibly most importantly from an institutional perspective) money. In order for a SALC to be sustainable, an institution needs to invest fully in the pedagogical idea of self-access and provide ongoing support so that it can operate effectively. Many university decision-makers do see some of the benefits of providing a self-access centre from a business perspective, perhaps as a showpiece to attract future students or as a way to be able to compete with neighboring institutions. Unfortunately, some of these administrators consider the creation of a self-access centre to be a one-off expense, i.e., one that does not need continued investment and support.

Even among fellow language educators, those *committed to promoting* learner autonomy and supporting self-directed learning are still a relative minority (Pemberton, 2011). Until there is a greater understanding of the philosophy and pedagogy from decision-makers and educators alike, it will be difficult for a SALC to be sustainable as self-access may be misconstrued or sidelined. Educators committed to promoting learner autonomy and self-access learning can

help to change these attitudes through various awareness-raising exercises such as talking casually to colleagues, running faculty professional development workshops, conducting and publishing research, and presenting at conferences and events on themes related to self-access. Presentations related to self-access and self-directed learning may have more of an impact if they are presented at events where researchers are not necessarily already involved in the field themselves (acknowledgements to my colleague Bob Morrison for raising this latter point). A good example of this is the forum related to learner autonomy organized by the JALT Learner Development Special Interest Group that was part of the recent JALT CALL conference in Japan. There are also many dedicated professional organizations such as ones listed at the end of this article where language educators can learn more about the field from professionals with similar interests

Of course, many teachers incorporate self-access learning into their classrooms via a self-access *facility*. I deliberately use the word “facility” instead of “centre” here because even institutions with limited resources can facilitate self-access learning (Baba, 2006; Lázaro & Reinders, 2008) be it via a mobile cart, a designated cupboard, a website of resource links, or a cardboard box (all of which I have used with students at one time or another). Learners can also be encouraged to source their own self-access materials (Lázaro & Reinders, 2008).

Pedagogical alternative?

I agree with Reinders that self-access is unlikely to be an *alternative* to regular classroom-based learning. Learners need various forms of support by teachers or learning advisors, ideally as part of a learning community, in order to succeed as language learners. One of the functions of a classroom is to provide that community aspect, and this is more difficult to foster when learners do not necessarily meet other learners at regular intervals. This does not mean that it is impossible, as self-managed groups of individuals are doing just this (see for example the *Language Café* idea initiated at the University of Southampton in the UK). However, this requires dedicated activity and a large degree of motivation on the part of the learners, or support from a teacher or learning advisor.

Interestingly, the borders between self-access and *online* classrooms are becoming blurred. Successful online courses ensure that the community aspect of a course is still present (even if learners might be doing the bulk of their work in isolation) and that the resources that

students need are available easily along with support from teachers. An ideal combination is one where parallel versions of a SALC exist to support learners in both the physical space and the virtual space simultaneously.

Viable complement?

I believe that self-access learning is a viable and necessary complement to regular classroom-based language education. I am sure most language educators would agree with me that (1) it is difficult to cater for each individual student's needs, interests and wants in the classroom, (2) important learning takes place both inside *and outside* the classroom, and (3) we are training our students to be lifelong language learners. By *not* providing learning opportunities and support outside the classroom, we are doing our students a severe disservice. Some might argue that now that we have so many resources available via the Internet, a self-access centre is no longer required. It is true that students can access many more resources than ever before, but this is still taking a very narrow view of self-access. A self-access facility is much more than just a library of resources as the list presented earlier in this article demonstrated. Also, as I have noted elsewhere (Mynard, 2011), this increased choice may actually make things more difficult for learners instead of easier, and they are still very likely to need help with finding and using resources appropriately.

To conclude, I maintain that some form of self-access facility should be available at every institution offering language education. This might take the form of a large state-of-the-art centre, or a shelf in a hallway, as long as there is support for learners and as many of the criteria on the list above are fulfilled as possible. I do not think this is an unrealistic goal or an unsustainable one.

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Resources

Language café, University of Southampton, UK: <http://www.languagecafe.eu/>

Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL): <http://jasalorg.wordpress.com/>

JALT Learner Development Special Interest Group, Japan: <http://ld-sig.org/>

IATEFL Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group: <http://lasig.iatefl.org/>

Hong Kong Association for Self-Access Learning and Development (HASAD): <http://hasald.wordpress.com/>

AILA Research Network on Learner Autonomy: <http://ailarenla.org/>

IATEFL Teacher Development and Autonomous Learning Special Interest Group (TDALSIG), Poland: <http://www.iatefl.org.pl/sigs/tdal/>

Independent Learning Association: <http://independentlearning.org/ILA/>

Learner Autonomy Bibliography (maintained by Hayo

Reinders): http://www.innovationinteaching.org/autonomy_bibliography.php

Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal: <http://sisaljournal.org>

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