ELT-26

Self-access: Preparation and Training

Milestones in ELT

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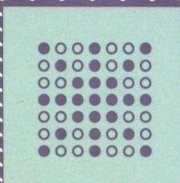
Self-access: Preparation and Training

This practical 1992 booklet, the first in a series, considers ways in which institutions and staff, as well as learners, need to be prepared for self-access learning. The author begins by explaining the purpose and day-to-day functioning of four contrasting types of self-access centre – the 'instruction centre' involving a programme of learning; the 'practice' centre, which directly complements classroom teaching; the 'skill' centre, which typically prioritises listening or computer-based activities; and, finally, the 'learning' centre, where students choose which materials they will work with, supported by a 'librarian' teacher. She then suggests questions to be discussed before a final choice of type of centre is made. Chapters 3 and 4 address teacher and learner preparation, respectively, while Chapters 5 and 6 provide materials for interesting teacher and learner simulation activities.

Self-access

Preparation and training

Self-access

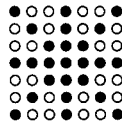## Preparation and training

by
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Chapter 1 Introduction

It does not fall within the scope of this booklet to examine the justification for self-access learning. I have presumed that the decision to enable learners to have access to language learning materials outside the lockstep of the classroom has been taken or is being considered. The term 'self-access centre' I have taken here to cover any system which makes materials available to language learners so that they can choose to work as they wish, usually without a teacher or with very limited teacher support.

The physical environments of self-access systems can vary from the well-staffed purpose-built centre to a small room or cupboard organized by one teacher working alone. In each case the member of staff responsible for establishing such a mode of working must consider the most appropriate use of the physical setting in relation to learners and staff.

The ideologies that underlie such systems are also varied. 'Ideology', you may feel, is a strong term to use, but behind each self-access centre there lie the basic beliefs about learning which are held by those who set up the system. It is these beliefs which inform the overall approach to the setting up of a centre and which determine its success or failure. The approach is as important as the physical setting and materials. Such beliefs may be unspoken. They may not have been debated fully or even discussed by those who set up the centre, but these 'ideologies' are there nonetheless, and have far-reaching effects upon the learners, the learning

environment and the very role which the self-access system is to play.

What is the role of the centre?

Within any teaching-learning situation there are various roles which can be played by a self-access centre. Any decision to set up a centre will have been taken in response to a perceived need and, obviously, its role should be determined by the teaching situation to which it is related. It is essential that both the initiators of the system and the staff involved should take time to consider in some detail what that role should be. I shall discuss some of the options below.

The whole area of learner independence, which involves encouraging learners to further their own learning, is cursed by a variety of terminology and also by a variety of objectives. For some the objective is full autonomy for the learner, while for others the objective may be limited to helping the learners recognize that they can do some things for themselves. The role that a centre plays within the institution is reflected in the way it is organized and equipped, in the materials it offers and in the sort of learning that is likely to go on in it.

I shall describe four types of system and the roles they might have. I shall call them the instruction centre, the practice centre, the skill centre and the learning centre. I am not here suggesting an exhaustive typology, but using these four as a way of considering roles and approaches. The type of system

chosen will have implications for staffing requirements, as well as for the preparation and training of both staff and learners. All four share the characteristic of enabling students to progress at their own speed, and are self-access in the sense that they are available for use when the learner chooses. Readers may recognize their own self-access centre as having all or some of the characteristics described.

The instruction centre

The term 'instruction' here describes the materials and work available to the learner. In this type of centre, which may include a language laboratory or computer room, a pre-planned programme is available for the student. Such a programme may act as a surrogate teacher or as a supplement to taught classes. Testing may be built into the programme to ensure that the learner reaches a particular standard before progressing to a further unit. Such a system is self-access in terms of availability of use, but presupposes a far greater degree of teacher control than is usually associated with the term. Teaching expertise is, or should be, put into the materials and the cost of the latter is often high. This means that the programme is unlikely to change often and is rarely capable of responding to changing student needs. A skilled teacher is not always necessary in such a centre as well-produced materials will have keys and explanations for both staff and students. Centre staff need the appropriate training to

familiarize them with equipment and with the programme.

In some situations the 'instruction centre' may fulfil a useful teaching role by providing accurate tuition where student numbers are high and skilled teachers are not available. It at least frees learners from working at the same speed as their classmates. However, it does not require them to reflect on their own learning and to take responsibility for it. Nor does such a centre see its role as fostering independence in learners beyond the independence of working at their own pace.

The practice centre

A self-access centre which is concerned with work involving an extension of what is covered in class can be regarded as primarily a practice centre. This is not to say that students may not learn something new for themselves, but opportunities may be limited. Such a system is closely integrated with the institution's teaching programme to the extent that learners are directed to or can easily locate materials which relate closely in grammatical and lexical level to the work covered in class. In some institutions a self-access centre of this type will be catalogued with reference to class levels (for example Intermediate 1, Junior 5), or to units in the textbooks the institution has adopted. It can provide learners with the opportunity to work on skills in which they think they are weak or for which they feel the class work is not providing them with sufficient practice. It can cater for their

personal interests and chosen areas of vocabulary without leading them too far in any direction which may be in conflict with the order of the class programme. It can provide an easily recognizable framework for the learner and gives a sense of direction and security.

The skill centre

This type of self-access provision often focuses on one language skill only, the most common one being listening. Such centres are set up to meet an identified need for improvement in a particular skill. In this case self-access might be seen as providing practice which would otherwise take up valuable class-contact time, or as being able to give more efficient feedback. A good example of this would be the provision of a computer room for writing activities. Similarly, reading centres can provide learners with speed-reading practice or can focus on texts dealing with a particular subject area.

In some teaching situations a self-access centre with a single skill focus may be more desirable than a more general self-access learning centre, or indeed it may be a useful way to begin setting up a more ambitious programme. It can provide a 'toe-in-the-water' for institutions considering making larger provision in a specialist area. If the latter is the case, a single-skill centre can provide valuable experience and training for staff.

In the case of a listening centre or computer centre where cassettes, disks and valuable equipment are involved, a high degree of security may be required and certainly 'good housekeeping' is essential. Staff will need some technical training.

The learning centre

As the name suggests, a self-access of this type allows learners to extend their knowledge of the language. Such a centre may include the type of material that is to be found in the practice centre, but goes beyond providing practice, consolidation and testing of what has been learned in class. Certainly it will contain exercises and tests because motivated learners seek out and wish to do the hard spadework of language learning. Banks of materials for both spoken and written language will enable learners to roam more freely and make their own discoveries. These discoveries might relate to their own needs, to the sort of work they enjoy doing, or to questions they want to ask the teacher. Such freedom can be intimidating or even demotivating and careful learner preparation and on-going support are necessary. Well-prepared and well-trained teaching staff and 'librarian' staff must be available.

In some situations a learning centre may be completely independent of taught classes, and be intended for learners who do not attend classes but who come in to study on their own. In other situations the centre may be more integrated into the teaching

programme and learners may be referred there by their class teacher.

Whatever the role of the centre within an institution, all staff should be clearly aware of its nature. It is even more important that the management of the institution should have a clear idea of this role. A self-access centre is more than just a publicity feature and it is certainly not a way of economizing on teaching staff. Its purpose is to enhance the language learning opportunities of the students. How this is done depends upon the role given to the centre; and this, in turn, depends on the 'ideology' or the thinking behind it.

All innovations need a considered approach and this is particularly true of innovations in education. Where a self-access centre is being introduced for the first time, or being revived, its success depends on the careful preparation of all who will use it, both learners and staff. When confronted by the more urgent and obvious problems of buying equipment, finding materials and producing catalogues, it is easy to underestimate the importance of planning for such preparation. It is, however, perilous to ignore the human element in this innovation.

If you are establishing a centre or some other mode of provision of self-access materials for the first time in your institution then the problems of innovation must be faced. The following questions may help you focus on some potential problem areas.

- Where did the idea originate?

If the idea came from outside the institution – or from the head, director or senior member of staff – then it is useful to consider to what extent and in what way the other members of staff were involved in the decision-making and discussion. To what extent are such discussions still possible?

- How many of the staff will be involved in the day-to-day running of the centre?

The staffing of the centre will vary from case to case; some centres may be staffed by teachers, some by librarians, some by student helpers, others again by a mixture of all these people. 'Good housekeeping' is essential to ensure that everything is where

the catalogue system says it should be, and that the general appearance is tidy and inviting. However, good housekeeping alone is not enough and the job does not stop there. Every member of staff working in the centre should have a clear understanding of what the centre is trying to provide and its role within the institution.

- How many staff will be involved in the development of materials?

Some institutions will wish to encourage all their teachers to prepare materials. As a general principle this is an excellent way of involving teachers in the centre. However, problems can arise if teachers do not have a clear idea of the centre's objectives and the sort of materials that might be suitable. Has adequate provision been made for briefing teachers?

- Will the teaching staff be bringing classes into the centre to learn how to work there?

This is a crucial question to be considered both for the introduction of a new centre, and for the training of new staff and students. A well thought-through training plan for new staff, covering both the thinking behind the centre and instructions on how to use it, may well make the difference between the success and failure of a self-access project.

Some institutions will favour the idea of classroom teachers bringing their students into the self-access centre to make them familiar with the layout and ways of using the materials. Clearly, any teacher training

must precede this step. It is essential for the learners to see their own classroom teacher at ease in the centre and adopting a different role from the one he/she has in class.

Even if it is decided that all student briefing is done by the centre staff, it is good policy to provide regular 'updating' sessions for the teachers telling them what is available for learners, and to involve them as much as possible. It is important to avoid a situation where the centre staff are seen as an elite and the sole possessors of information about the centre.

The discussion of learner autonomy and self-access materials is not new. It was given fresh impetus in the 1970s by writers such as Carl Rogers who suggested that the best thing to learn was *how* to learn. The wonder is then that more facilities for enabling learners to learn alone have not been set up. But comparatively few such centres have been established, and indeed in a few places where they were established in the 1970s the centres have closed down. Why should this be when the concept is universally hailed as a great step forward in educational circles?

The answer may well lie in the failure to prepare staff and learners for this sort of approach. Preparing both staff and learners to understand the concept behind free access to learning materials is crucial to the successful use of such centres.

Training courses for staff

As we have seen from my earlier description of possible 'types' of centres, there are different ways in which a centre can be staffed, and this depends on how it is regarded by the parent institution. A centre might be staffed only by qualified teachers or only by administrator-organizers, including perhaps qualified professionals such as a librarian, or there might be a mixture of the two. Whatever the make-up of the staff, at least three types of skills are required: organizing skills, housekeeping skills and the skills involved in facilitating learning.

Organizing and housekeeping

The initial setting up of the centre, the planning of layout and use of space, the establishing of a cataloguing system, etc. will involve close co-operation between planners, teachers and 'librarian' staff, and are dealt with in another booklet in this series, *Self-access: setting up a centre*. I refer here to the every-day organizing and housekeeping skills which might include such chores as the tidying up of materials and equipment after use, the replenishing of stocks of worksheets, the accessing of new materials into the catalogue, and the weeding out of materials which are rarely used. Such skills also include instilling discipline in the users.

This day-to-day organizing and house-keeping is essential if the self-access centre is to be kept running successfully. This means that all the staff must be soundly briefed on the cataloguing systems and rules of use. In addition they should have an understanding of the aims and objectives of self-directed learning.

Thus it may be that centre staff who have a 'traditional' library approach will need to rethink their positions and, for example, select a less conventional system of recording information. A new approach to classification might be needed to deal with a centre that is organized on a language-skills basis or has multi-media packages, or has users who are not fully literate in English. Because a self-access centre should be organic and able to

respond to learners' changing needs, staff must be prepared to be flexible and always ready to re-evaluate their system and their approach. As another example, let us take the all-important briefing document or training session which introduces learners to the centre. One person's 'logical explanation of how the system works' may not be another's; staff who are not accustomed to working with EFL students need to be aware of the verbal barriers that may unwittingly be created for those learners who have few library skills. 'Free' access to shelves, boxes and cabinets may, in fact, cause learners problems if they are not actually able to find materials.

The answer to such problems may be to clarify the introductory guide, or to improve the training session, or it may be to modify the organization of the system itself. Centre staff who are in charge of the organizing and housekeeping need to be able to observe and analyse such problems so that they can make a suitable response.

How can staff be trained for this? An experiential mode of training is probably best for this purpose. A case-study, a simulation, or even simple discussion groups can give participants the experience of recognizing and dealing with issues that they might come across in reality. By setting such issues within the security of a fabricated problem-situation we enable participants to react and later to consider their responses, ideas and suggestions. This mode of training can also give different types of staff such as teachers, 'librarians' and helpers, the opportunity of working more closely together. Suggestions for this type of simulation can be found on p.18.

The preparation of teaching staff once more raises the question of what type of centre is envisaged and how it is to be staffed. Whatever the answer to this question may be, there are likely to be two areas where teaching staff will need preparation. The first is their own preparation for working in the centre itself, and the second is the preparation they will provide for students who will be using the centre, many of whom may not have worked without direction before. In both these instances a change in self-perception may be necessary. The role that the teacher takes on in the centre is very much the role of facilitator and adviser. Similarly, in preparing students to work independently, the teacher raises students' awareness of their own role in the learning process and of the altered role of the teacher.

The role of the teacher in the self-access centre

Where a self-access centre is designed as a full learning centre then the role of any teaching staff present must be examined carefully. In a true learning centre there is little justification for a traditional lesson on a one-to-one basis where the student is 'being taught' in the traditional sense. (Such lessons might be considered desirable in some circumstances, but in general it must be said that it is not the purpose of a self-

access room to enable teachers to give such individual tuition.) Where a teacher may wish to work on a one-to-one basis it will be to help students recognize their needs and to advise on an approach, a work programme or materials. Thus a teacher-facilitator might be doing some or all of the following:

- helping learners to recognize their own responsibility for their own learning

- helping learners to know their own individual language levels on entry

- helping learners to decide upon their own individual objectives

- helping learners to recognize their own individual learning strategies and to make suggestions

- directing learners to particular materials or activities

- helping learners to become aware of what particular exercises are really teaching them

- making suggestions about more efficient ways of practice or monitoring

- making ratings of progress and comparing them with the learners' own ratings.

In this way the teacher's expertise is directed to the learning process rather than to content, though obviously no teacher is going to refuse to answer a learner's question *about* the language if asked. Indeed the teacher is a useful 'resource' in the form of an informant. In this role then the teacher is similar to the 'librarian-organizer' and has to be familiar with the working and organization of the centre.

However, unlike the 'librarian-organizer', the teacher must also be familiar with the material from a professional viewpoint. This involves not only knowing the linguistic level, vocabulary content or skills practised in particular material, but also knowing how the material relates to an individual student's preferred style of learning. The teacher should also be able to advise particular learners on which materials might suit them or to encourage them to experiment with something different. The teacher as facilitator, then, requires skill in questioning learners in a way which will help them become aware of what they need to do to help themselves. For example, it may involve the teachers in consciously increasing their use of divergent questions[1] to encourage learners to discover their own best way of working. How and when to interfere with the way a student is working must be considered carefully by the facilitator, and it is often best to get students to recognize for themselves what is not going well.

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[1] Divergent questions and convergent questions

A convergent question is one where the answer requires the listener to answer by working with given or remembered information, e.g. 'can you sum up what was said in the first paragraph?'

A divergent question will involve the individual's own ideas, e.g. 'There are three ways of learning vocabulary here, can you think of any other ways?'

The role of the teacher in class

A teacher who has in class some students who use a self-access mode of learning outside the regular class should regard this as a bonus not as a threat. They are likely to make more progress than other students but it is unlikely that they will 'work ahead' in the class textbook and cause what the teacher might see as disruption. A useful approach is for the class teacher to show an interest in the work such students are doing and to encourage others who are not going to the centre to do so.

Where a whole class has time allocated for self-access work then the teacher can prepare learners carefully, perhaps working with the centre staff. Learner preparation is discussed in the next section but there are certain aspects of that preparation that we should consider from the teaching viewpoint.

Many teachers and textbooks now provide material to help learners identify their own learning strategies and to improve their own learning skills, but this awareness becomes even more important when the learner is working alone. How can the teacher help?

Firstly the classroom teacher can help learners to see their classwork and their work in the self-access centre as being complementary. For example, a learner with spelling problems may be directed to spelling games or books, relevant computer work, picture dictionaries, or simply vocabulary lists to learn. The teacher can suggest objectives but should not impose them.

Language learning is hard work and the self-access centre can provide that work and usually also provide feedback. Some learners, in fact, actually work harder on a self-selected task.

Secondly the teacher has the role of motivator. Many students become disillusioned with working alone, sometimes because they cannot think of what to do next or because they feel they are not making progress. The class teacher can provide motivation by enquiring about objectives and progress, or making suggestions about areas where work could be done. Some younger learners may become bored or even disruptive in a self-access centre; not all learners fit the idealistic picture that is painted here. In such cases it may be necessary to talk to the student to try to identify why interest has flagged. It may be that the student is allergic to hard work but it is more likely that he/she is disillusioned with the type of work on offer. Efforts can be made to respond by finding materials that may suit particular needs and interests. It should also be pointed out that staff are open to ideas for material to include in the centre. Maintaining motivation in a self-access system is an on-going problem with some learners; but no more so than in the classroom.

The preparation for working in the centre may take place in the class or it may be carried out in the centre itself. Classroom teachers must see themselves as an important link between 'public' work carried on in

class and in class-set homework and 'private' work done in the centre. It is equally important that students are conscious of this link.

Discussion should precede the first working session in the centre so that students have a chance to think about their own needs and objectives and even to have a programme of work in mind for themselves. For some students who come from a very 'traditional' educational background, it may be a giant leap into the unknown to find themselves expected to select their own tasks from a seemingly amazing selection. Even to have the responsibility of identifying their own needs may seem new. This is something to discuss in class but care should be taken not to imply an 'ideological line'. The students must be allowed to work in their own way initially, even if the teacher thinks that their strategies are wrong.

Encouraging positive attitudes towards working in the self-access centre

For many students the idea that they can *learn* without a teacher is an alien one and therefore part of the preparation should be to get them to examine their own ideas about learning languages and their own role in the learning process. Attitudes obviously vary according to the learners' cultural backgrounds, and this must be taken into account in any orientation process. While taking it into account, however, teachers must be aware of the danger of cultural stereotyping. It should be remembered too that the idea of working on one's own personal language difficulties has a universal appeal.

What is common to nearly all learners is a readiness to practise. They are particularly happy when they are given the opportunity to practise what they see as being useful to them personally, and it is in terms of a 'practice centre' that most learners first see the self-access provision. This can provide a highly motivated beginning to working in the centre. However, the concept of being responsible for their own learning in a far wider sense than practice must be presented to learners either before they begin to work in the centre or very early on. If this is not done, then students may have the attitude that 'it is very nice to study in the centre and do different activities', but never develop a framework for their own work programme. If we are hoping to produce 'teacher-learners' or 'self-teachers' then we must try to encourage all students to develop their own working programmes. To undertake this new role of 'self-teacher' the students will need to be aware of the following.

What are my own needs?

This may entail students recognizing their own weaknesses at this particular point in their language learning development. They may also recognize a long-term need which may be job-related; for example, they may need to be able to listen to a wide range of accents. Most students are quite able to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses when presented with a checklist to consider and are able to identify and add needs to that checklist.

How to identify achievable objectives

Many students are over-ambitious or too general when asked to describe their objectives. 'To improve my English' is too wide an objective to be of any use at the planning stage; it must be broken down into component parts, for example, 'to improve my listening'.

Neutral but well-directed questions from a teacher can help students to form a clearer picture of what language learning involves and from this point they are more able to identify what work needs to be done. The teacher can help by pointing out that when a specific objective has been identified, then a 'staged' work programme should be followed. It must be planned and constantly reviewed by the students themselves.

Objectives should be small enough to be achievable and work should reveal progress of some kind. This is crucial to motivation when a learner is working independently. When a student has been using the self-access centre for a time, then the teacher can offer support through careful questioning.

Asking questions such as 'What sort of progress do you think you are making?' 'What makes you think that?' or 'What makes you think you are not improving?' can sometimes help students to verbalize their ideas about their own achievements. Verbalizing their ideas can help them to rethink both the objectives they have set themselves and the strategies they are using.

How to monitor their own performance and how to give self-appraisal

I am using the term 'monitor' here in the widest sense to embrace all types of observation and analysis of one's own use of language. All students observe their own performance and that of others to a certain extent in class. Any child can tell you who is 'the best in the class at English' and they are not making their judgement on teacher approval or marks alone; they can, for example, hear when one of their classmates pronounces a word well or badly. So most learners already have the skill of monitoring, but they will need to focus it on their own performances. Let us take the example of monitoring one's own spoken language under practice conditions. Students can be helped by being encouraged to look for elements in their own spoken language to compare with the recorded model; they might break down the task by deciding to focus on intonation or rhythm or pro- nunciation. It is the teacher's job to make the student aware that intonation, rhythm and pronunciation exist and can be focused on separately.

Students must also be aware of different levels of performance and decide what level of performance they are happy to accept for themselves. We can all aim for perfection but we may be prepared to accept a lower standard. If there is no outside examination to set such a standard then the students themselves have to return to their needs and objectives to see how 'good' they wish or need to be.

Students can also be made aware that if they are in the role of 'teacher' looking at their own performance they should recognize their own successes as well as their own errors. Self-appraisal also means giving praise for work well-done. Self-motivation plays an important part in independent learning.

If a student has chosen to work on listening skills using Book X at the low- intermediate level, how does he/she plan to assess progress? Getting all the answers correct is the traditional 'teacher's way' of judging performance and is very satisfying when one is learning alone. However, what may be even more satisfying is the learning which comes from looking carefully at a transcript when listening for a second time, and being able to identify words or phrases that had been an inexplicable mumble before. This is not testing what is known already but gaining new ground. So 'finding out new things about the language' is something that students should be able to recognize as a valuable type of achievement.

How to be aware of their own learning strategies and to assess the success of those strategies

Looking at learning strategies is becoming more and more a part of classroom work and is an activity which features in many English language textbooks. All learners have strategies which they apply, but they

often have a very limited repertoire. Before working in a self-access centre, students may need to be made aware of a wider repertoire of strategies and to be shown that not everyone 'learns' in the same way. This is best revealed in discussion with other students and through the discovery of other people's different strategies for working. Materials and ideas for strategy training are now available. G. Ellis and B. Sinclair, R. Oxford and K. Willing have all produced practical books on learning to learn (see bibliography on p.28).

In a situation where students study exclusively in the self-access centre and do not attend classes, it is worth the effort to organize group discussions on learning strategies in the centre itself, or at least to build some awareness raising exercises into the orientation programme.

How to recognize the value of a language learning task

Task recognition is perhaps the key strategy for the independent learner. What does a particular activity or exercise do? How does it help learners to achieve the objectives they have in mind? Is it a sensible exercise or activity to spend time on? Task recognition is very much a teacher's skill (though, alas, often under-used). If learners are to be 'self-teachers' then they have to develop an awareness of the value of a task or activity.

This sort of training is something that many teachers are now building into their classwork by asking students about the work they have just completed in class. 'What was the point of doing the exercise?' 'What have you learned from doing that?' 'What have we been practising here?' The replies can be depressing for the teacher at first, for they often reveal that students are quite unaware of the purpose of a lesson. Persistence, however, brings results.

When learners are working independently they have to choose how they work and what they work on. Task recognition, then, is the key that can open the door to useful and relevant learning in the self-access centre.

Preparing learners to use the centre

Students will need a practical orientation programme before they can work efficiently in a self-access centre. In some teaching situations much of the attitudinal preparation we have considered earlier can also be included in this orientation programme. In this way students will be prepared up to a point to work alone, so that the process can continue as they work.

An initial orientation programme is essential both for the students and for the centre itself. Students who know their way around are more confident and more efficient learners and are less dependent on the centre staff. A student who has been well-briefed is more likely to be a careful user of the centre. Centre staff, who must help the student feel at ease there, often have a difficult path to tread between ensuring a disciplined use of the facilities and the

security of valuable resources and creating a relaxed atmosphere. A successful orientation programme has much to contribute here. Students who feel that their opinions on materials or on the organization are valued will feel that they have a stake in the centre too.

Initially such a programme must concentrate on training students how to use the centre's facilities and on how and where to find what they want. A guided tour by a member of the centre staff helps establish a good rapport and make learners feel that there is at least one face they know. However, a guided tour can be bewildering even if it is in the students' first language and must therefore be followed up by some first-hand experience. A guided tour may give an overall impression of a centre but a worksheet setting out tasks for locating certain items will give practical experience of finding material. Different worksheets can be prepared so that different members of a group can work at the same time.

Many students come from backgrounds where there is no open access to libraries or indeed they may never have used a library on a regular basis. One orientation session with a worksheet will probably not be sufficient, and so the orientation programme should be spread over a period of time. In one institution where a class is brought to the centre by the teacher, competitions are run in the first few weeks at the beginning of the session to see which teams can find certain materials first.

In some centres students are asked to keep a record of the materials they use and the work they do. Such records have a dual purpose. Not only can they provide information on which materials are popular but they also record a working pattern for each learner which can form the basis for discussion with a teacher. Students sometimes forget to review their objectives and can fall into a rut, using the same type of material or activity time after time. There may, of course, be no reason for them to change, but on the other hand they may need to be made aware that other materials might meet their needs better. If record cards are used, then an explanation of their value and use must be built into the orientation programme.

If helping the student to work well in the self-access centre is seen as a continuing process, motivation is maintained and a high drop-out rate can be avoided. It must be recognized that for learners the road to autonomy is a long one. However magnificent the self-access provision may be, they will need a great deal of support and help to develop their own independence.

Simulation for staff preparation

The following outline for a simulation could be used in the early planning stages of setting up self-access provision in an institution. Its purpose is to introduce the idea to staff and make them stake-holders from the beginning. Here an imaginary school is used.

What shall we do with C22?

Trainer's notes

Objective
To make staff aware of possibilities of setting up a self-access room and to consider the issues involved.

Procedure
Time: minimum two hours

Look at the points that come up in Alison's letter and decide which issue you want the participants to focus on. You can either direct them towards the more practical problems of setting up a centre or towards discussion of how to prepare learners and teachers for a different role. You may want some groups to look at some issues and some at others.

Divide the participants into groups of four or five.

Each participant has:

- a role-card

- Dr Watson's memo to Alison

- Alison's letter to the staff

Each group has an in-tray or file with:

- a copy of TELI's advertisement

- an outline of the classroom, preferably enlarged

- the list of books and equipment already in TELI

Make any changes you wish to the input data, such as changing the amount of money or books available. Add a brochure for TELI if you want to put in more background information, or you can describe the type of students that are there – for example, for a high number of Arabic and Japanese students.

Give out the role cards, memo and Alison's letter and allow everyone to read them. Check that everyone understands the task.

Tell them each group has to give a five-minute report of their plans, ideas or problems.

Set the deadline and get everyone to write the time on their own role card!

Tell them that you are the Educational Adviser mentioned in Dr Watson's memo (wear a badge if you wish!). Explain that you can supply any extra information they feel they need to make their decisions. Always give the *same* information to each group!

What shall we do with C22?

You are a teacher at the Torenia English Language Institute. You and your colleagues are meeting to discuss what can be done with Room C22 which is no longer needed as a classroom.

Your popular Director of Studies, Alison Wade has gone abroad suddenly to deal with a problem and will not be back for six weeks.

Dr Watson, the Director of TELI and your boss, is very keen to go ahead with the self-access centre this term. He wants your plans and ideas as soon as possible.

Consider the situation in TELI with your group and be ready to report your ideas and proposals at the end of this session.

Your deadline is: ?

Torenia English Language Institute

To   Alison Wade
From   Sidney Watson

Date   Monday 21 April

Memorandum

Self-access centre in C22

Sorry I missed you this afternoon. I have thought about your suggestions with regard to Room C22 and I feel that the experiment with self-access is well worthwhile and something that TELI should really be considering. I'd like to hear what the rest of the teachers think about it before we go further.

Here are some brief answers to the questions you raised.

1   I can only allow you £700 for this financial year.

2   I cannot see my way clear to provide a full-time librarian for the centre. I would be ready to consider paying staff extra for supervisory duties over and above their teaching load.

3   I would be prepared to budget for minor alterations to C22 such as re-decoration and extra sockets, but I mean *minor*!

4   I would be prepared to finance a staff training day or materials workshop.

Is this room going to cater for all levels from beginners upwards or are you going to start in a small way?

I need your plans next week so that I can present them to the Board.

Torenia English Language Institute

Wednesday 23 April

Dear everyone,

I'm so sorry to have to abandon you at this time in the term, and to leave you with the problem of Room C22. Dr Watson is really enthusiastic about a self-access centre and if we can come up with some good proposals I'm sure he will support us. Here are some points that I wanted to discuss with you so please talk them through at the meeting.

How can we transform C22 into a self-access centre at a reasonable cost?

What sort of centre do we need? Would a listening centre be sufficient? We have the language laboratory, don't forget.

Do you think our students could work well in a centre like this? How could we prepare them? Do we need a training programme for them? How would we introduce them to the centre?

And what about us as teachers? Do we really know enough about this sort of learning? Does it mean that we have to change too?

There are a hundred and one other questions I wanted to bring up, but maybe you will raise them at the meeting. Do try to come to some down-to-earth proposals – Dr Watson won't accept airy-fairy suggestions or anything that is astronomically expensive.

Thank you for all your kind messages!

Good luck

Alison Wade

Torenia English Language Institute

Park Road
London NW6
Telephone 071-624 0000

Director: Dr Sidney Watson MA Ph.D.

We offer English language courses over three terms: January–March; April–July; September–December; Summer courses available July–September

- Age: 18 and over
- Minimum enrolment: one term
- All levels of language ability
- General English: twenty-five hours per week
- Preparation for Cambridge examinations, RSA and TOEFL
- ESP courses on request

- Highly qualified and experienced staff
- Modern student accommodation in the Institute
- 12 students per class
- 250 students in the school
- Mixed nationalities
- Sixteen-booth language laboratory

Furniture

17 small rectangular tables
18 stacking chairs
 1 wooden bookcase, 1m high, 1.5m wide
 1 armchair

Equipment available

 6 audio cassette recorders with headsets

Books

15 graded readers of all different levels left over from class sets
 2 copies of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary
 1 crossword puzzle book with key
 3 grammar practice books with keys.

Odd copies of course books we don't use any more.

Here's a quick sketch I made of C22 to remind you of the layout.
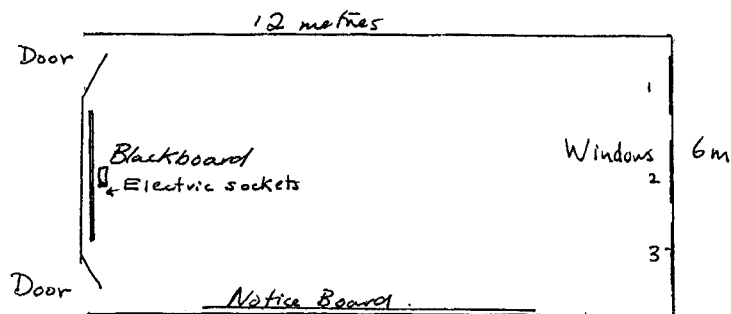
Simulation for learner preparation

Your orientation programme to help students find where materials are and how they use them obviously must be devised for your own centre. The following outlines here are suggestions for *awareness-raising* for students to help them work more effectively.

What do you advise?

Trainer's notes

Objectives
To make learners more aware of their responsibility for their own learning, to try to help them recognize their own needs, to prepare them to plan their own work programme and to consider the problems of assessment and loss of motivation. The texts are ostensibly an input to discussion and this session can be presented as oral practice.

Procedure
Time: Thirty minutes minimum

If the discussion develops this session could take far longer. Do not be afraid to let the students use their first language if interesting points are coming up that they cannot express in English. This is a learning preparation session primarily, not a language class.

Divide the class into groups of two or three. If you are using both case studies nominate half these groups to look at Case-study 1 and the rest to look at Case-study 2.

Give the student a short time to read the case-study and discuss language problems, if any, then refer them to the questions. Go through the questions with the class, expanding on what is to be discussed. For example, when considering what Tony or Diana need to practise, the class should think *how* they are going to practise. Are they going to listen to a recording and transcribe and check it? Are they going to listen and then check the transcript or are they going to listen and take notes or answer the questions? How would each way help them and what would be best for their purposes? How could they best use parallel texts?

The class may need to ask you questions about the materials available in Tony and Diana's centre. Give them extra examples of the sort of materials if you wish.

Allow up to ten minutes (more if it is going well) for the students to work through the questions in pairs or threes before centralizing the discussion and asking the class to exchange their ideas. If you wish, keep a list of Tony/Diana's needs and the students' suggestions on the board.

You may wish to personalize the discussion by getting the students to go through the same questions for themselves and to report back or write up their own programme.

After the discussion, allow time at the end of the class to ask what the students think was the purpose of the activity.

What do you advise?

Read the text below. Note any new words
you do not know and ask your partners or
the teacher.

Case-study 1

Tony Mann

Tony is a twenty-seven year-old salesman for a clothing
manufacturing company which sells jeans. He travels for his
company to Spain and Mexico and he wants to improve his
Spanish. He is not a beginner but he is not very fluent and he
wants to be able to understand and take part in Spanish
conversations. He is going to Spanish lessons for two hours a
week and he is in a class of twelve students. Tony thinks his
teacher is good but he is in a hurry and plans to spend an extra
two hours a week in the self-access centre. How can he use his
time well? He often gets the wrong structure in Spanish and his
grammar is not very good but he hates grammar books. He wants
to practise his spoken Spanish and his listening. He is rather shy
and does not like making mistakes in public.

Discussion

With your partner decide how you can advise the learner in your
case study.

1   Think of the places he will need to use Spanish. List three.

2   What sort of conversation will he want to have in Spanish?

3   What does he need to practise?

4   What sort of work could he do in the centre to help himself?

5   How can he be sure he is making progress?

6   What can he do when he is not motivated to continue working
    alone?

The self-access centre

The following materials and equipment are available. Read the list and check that you understand any new words.

Video of Spanish and South American TV programmes/some with transcripts in Spanish

Tourist guides and phrase books

Easy reading books in Spanish, newspapers and magazines and comics

Plenty of articles from magazines with a parallel text in English

Spanish grammar books and dictionaries

Plenty of exercises from Spanish language course books with answer keys

Games to play alone or with partners

Vocabulary games, picture conservations games to play with a partner

Scrabble, Crossword puzzles

There are audio cassette recorders and learners can use a language laboratory where they can record their own voice and listen to check and compare it with the cassette.

Audio cassette recordings of:

Lectures on general subjects (one with transcripts and some with questions and answer keys)

Interviews and conversations with questions to answer and transcripts of the Spanish

Questions always have answer keys available.

There are two computers with Spanish word-processing programmes and some vocabulary learning programmes.

There is a Spanish-speaking teacher there most of the time.

What do you advise?

Read the text below. Note any new words
you do not know and ask your partners or
the teacher.

Case-study 2

Diana Banks

Diana is a student of food technology and she is going to Spanish
lessons for two hours a week because she wants to study in Spain
for three months under a European exchange scheme. She is not
a beginner and she is making good progress in her class but she
wants to learn the sort of Spanish that will help her to study. Her
teacher is not teaching her Spanish for academic purposes so she
is going to spend two hours a week at least in the self-access
centre. She wants to improve her listening, note-taking and
her writing but she wants to improve her spoken Spanish too. She
has a very outgoing personality and she is happy to practise
Spanish whenever she can.

Discussion

With your partner decide how you can advise the learner in your
case study.

1   Think of the sort of places she will need to use Spanish when
    she is studying in Spain. List three.

2   Will general Spanish conversation be enough or will she need
    special practice in particular language skills?

3   What does she need to practise? Give three examples.

4   How should she work in the centre to help herself?

5   How can she be sure she is making progress?

6   What can she do to keep up her motivation when she is
    working alone?

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