Making Self-Access Centres More Effective

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A b s t r a c t

This paper reports on a project which set out to measure the effectiveness of a self-access centre and ended up by discovering the richness of variety in definitions of effectiveness in that context. It is difficult to define effectiveness in relation to self-access centres in a way that is both acceptable to stakeholders (teachers and users) and that is measurable. Definitions of effectiveness cannot be imposed on the stakeholders because self-access learning means different things to different people. This paper describes the definitions of effectiveness which have emerged and the ways in which students attempt to measure it. The outcome of the project is a clearer understanding of the complexities of defining and measuring effectiveness and also some clearer definitions from which to move forward

Introduction

Considerable resources have been, and continue to be, invested in self-access learning (SALL) and self-access centres (SACs) around the world. They are sometimes viewed as cheap alternatives to teaching but Gardner and Miller (1999) suggest that this is an erroneous argument since SALL complements, rather than replaces, teaching. In Hong Kong, each tertiary level institution has at least one SAC which offers the potential to significantly enhance the learning of languages for the entire student body. All of them offer support for English, most of them support Putonghua and some support other Asian and European languages. Secondary and primary school teachers are now becoming interested in self-access learning with some funding being offered by the government for teacher training and purchases of materials.

While much has been invested in SACs, and SALL is believed to make an important contribution to language learning, little research has been conducted into their effectiveness. In 1987, Dickinson suggested that there had been very little research into effectiveness and since then not much has changed. However, there have been some attempts to define more clearly *what* to evaluate (e.g. Miller, & Gardner, 1994; Broady, & Kenning, 1996; Karlsson, Kjisik, & Nordlund, 1997; Gardner, & Miller, 1999) and *how* to evaluate (e.g. Darasawang, 1996; Riley, 1996; Gardner, & Miller, 1999) but only a small number of actual evaluations have been made public (e.g. Star, 1994; Dam, & Legenhausen, 1996; Gardner, & Miller, 1997).

In the Hong Kong context it is too early to see research findings in the use of SALL in schools. At tertiary level there has been more research. Some of it as sister action learning projects to the one reported here. Only one large-scale investigation has been conducted into the use of tertiary level SACs (Gardner, & Miller, 1997). This study gave a picture of the practices of self-access centres, their aims, their development plans and the ways in which they were being used by learners. One of the outcomes of that study was a recommendation that "innovative ways must be developed to assess the effectiveness of self-access centres and of self-access learning" (Gardner, & Miller, 1997, p. 122).

Effectiveness is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, resources are finite. Greater effectiveness in the use of SACs will allow a larger number of students to learn more. Secondly, measures of effectiveness will indicate good and bad practices as well as areas needing further development. This will lead to development of new learning materials and activities. Thirdly, if SALL proves to be effective, more teachers are likely to encourage their students to make use of the SACs thus exposing them to a wider range of learning opportunities. Fourthly, if learners see evidence that SALL is effective they are more likely to want to make use of it. Finally, there is currently no clear information on whether SACs are fulfilling their stated roles. It seems pointless to continue operating them without knowing what they are achieving.

Background to the Project

Why Assessment of Effectiveness Does Nor Currently Take Place

It seems strange that effectiveness is not evaluated as a matter of course in the SACs in Hong Kong. However, we discovered in our previous research (Gardner, & Miller, 1997) that most SAC staff in Hong Kong have insufficient time allocated to their work. Thus, they have devoted their energies to establishing and maintaining systems, activities and materials. There has, until recently, been little or no pressure to demonstrate effectiveness so it has, understandably, been given a low priority. The nature of self-access study precludes the measurement of effectiveness merely by adapting the normal taught course evaluation procedures because the characteristics of taught courses and SALL are considerably different (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Characteristics of taught courses and self-access learning (Gardner, & Miller, 1999, pp. 24-25).

	Taught Courses	Self-access Learning
Goals	Very specific;	Specific or vague;
	Restricted in range;	Single goals or extremely wide ranging;
	Established and controlled by educators.	Established by educators, students, both, or non-existent.
Level of learner autonomy	Ranges from none (i.e. complete teacher-direction) to partial group autonomy (e.g. a learner-centred or a negotiated syllabus).	Ranges from none (i.e. students required to do self-access) to absolute autonomy (e.g. students who elect to use self-access).
Learning gain	Relatively easy to measure with pre- and post-course tests.	Difficult to measure because: • learners work independently, thus standardised tests are impossible; • duration and intensity are flexible so tests are difficult to position; • effects may be extremely long-term so true gain may only appear years later.
Duration of study	Limited by length of the course.	From one-off use to life-long learning.
Intensity of study	A feature of the course and therefore controlled by the teacher.	Degree of control varies with the degree of learner autonomy.

Learner motivation	Sometimes evaluated through end-of-course questionnaires; Observation of in-class participation.	Usually not evaluated.
Cost effectiveness	Can calculate the cost per student for: • a specific quantity of teacher input; • the degree of learning gain (in gross terms).	Currently neither input nor learning gain is calculated. Individualisation in self-access makes this challenging.
Teacher attitudes	Teachers' attitudes often stem from the way they learned and from training courses; Taught courses are accepted as the 'normal' way of teaching. No justification is expected.	Teachers' attitudes to self-access can be affected by the following: • they have traditional views of how knowledge should be imparted; • they fear being usurped by SACs; • they think students will not be motivated to study independently.
Attribution	Taught courses are often the only input students are receiving. Learning gain can be attributed to those courses.	Self-access is rarely the only input received. It usually combines with other forms of input making it difficult (or impossible) to isolate attributable learning gain.

Those Who Need to Know about Effectiveness

The stakeholders in an evaluation of the effectiveness of a SAC are the learners, the teachers, the SAC manager and the institution. Students need to know whether SALL is a suitable method for them personally, they need to know if they are spending their time wisely and what changes to make to their learning methodology. Teachers need to know because they also invest their time in the SAC and because it is their professional duty to provide the best opportunities for their students. Managers need to know because they have to allocate resources in the most effective way possible. Institutions need to know because they are ultimately responsible for the quality of education offered and for the use of resources.

Methodology

The project used qualitative methodology based primarily on interviews with teachers and students. There were two cycles of data collection.

Cycle 1

The first cycle began with individual interviews with each of the teachers involved in the Self-Access Team. There were four in total including the SAC manager. They all had part-time duties in the SAC which comprised of the management of facilities, materials development and language counselling (other teachers also participated in SAC activities but were not part of the management team).

A number of points of focus emerged from these interviews which were used to develop a guided interview protocol for use with learners in the SAC. Thirteen SAC users were approached randomly and interviewed on the spot. In the interviews with both staff and SAC users, the main

focus was on exploring their perceptions of SALL and the SAC, the importance of effectiveness, definitions of effectiveness, and ways of measuring it. When all the interviews were complete they were analysed and the findings were presented at a mini-conference to collect feedback from a wider audience of teachers.

Cycle 2

A focus group meeting was held with all four members of the Self-Access Team to discuss the findings of cycle 1 and the feedback gained at the mini-conference. In this meeting, team members were made aware of other members' perceptions and the perceptions of the SAC learners. By the end of the meeting a compromise had been reached on working definitions that were more practical than those emerging from cycle 1.

Following this meeting, a revised guided interview protocol was developed which was then used for 50 random interviews of individual SAC users. As with cycle 1, no attempt was made to restrict these to learners of English. They included postgraduate and undergraduate students, male and female, and Hong Kong, Mainland and foreign students. This range reflected the normal range of students using the SAC and so reflected the range of perceptions with which any measure of effectiveness would have to deal. Interviews were conducted by a trilingual (Cantonese, Mandarin, English) interviewer to allow interviewees to choose the language with which they were most comfortable (usually their mother tongue).

Findings from Cycle 1

Two important areas of focus emerged from cycle 1 of the project. They were the importance of effectiveness to the stakeholders and how they defined effectiveness.

First, it was important to know whether stakeholders perceived a clear distinction between SALL and their SAC. Responses in the interviews showed that all the teachers and most of the learners saw a clear distinction between them. Learners characterised the difference as one of method or personal attitude to learning (SALL), versus place or resources (SAC). Teachers tended to make the same distinction but their definitions were more complex, reflecting their involvement with the philosophy of autonomy and independence in the case of SALL and their concern with justification of resource expenditure in the case of the SAC.

Although the definitions of SALL and the SAC were clear, when talking about whether the effectiveness of SALL was the same as the effectiveness of the SAC, both teachers and learners were largely unclear. Only one teacher believed unequivocally that the effectiveness of SALL and the SAC were the same. The other three talked about the complexities of the relationship between SALL and the SAC without making a firm decision. The learners were all unclear. However, some also indicated that the relationship between SALL and the SAC was relevant. It seemed that although the majority of stakeholders could make a theoretical distinction between SALL and their SAC, they were unable to separate them when it came to talking about effectiveness. This may be because the two were overlapping in their minds or because they had given little thought to effectiveness. This point is important because when stakeholders come to discuss the importance of effectiveness, and how to measure it, there is no way of being certain whether they are talking about SALL, the SAC or both.

The Importance of Knowing about Effectiveness

What the Teachers Said

When discussing the importance of knowing about effectiveness, all teachers thought it was important to know whether SALL and their SAC were effective. They responded in very affirmative ways. This is, of course, not surprising. It would have been odd to find that the teachers working within SALL did not think effectiveness was important. The teachers gave reasons for the importance of effectiveness which fell into three categories:

1. Related to themselves: these emphasised monitoring the quality of support they offer, e.g.:

    T01: We would also like to know how effective the students have been learning languages, so we know whether our methods of advising … are on the right track. And if not, what can we do? How could we help them to benefit from the learning more … And this is something rather frustrating because we give advice but students never come back and tell us whether it is effective or not.

    T03: We should know whether or not we are doing a good job. We've got certain goals, to what extent are those being met, if they're not being met, then what can we do to try to meet them?

2. Related to the learners: these emphasised monitoring learning and boosting confidence in self-access as a method, e.g.:

    T03: It's certainly very useful for them [learners] to know because that has an effect on motivation, on planning.

    T04: It's [SALL] got to be justified to the students if they are to take the opportunities that are available to them and to create self-motivation to pursue the opportunities well.

3. Related to the institution: these justified the approach and the funding, e.g.:

    T03: we need to see … how effective the programmes we're offering are in terms of the money … being invested in it.

    T04: So that it will be encouraged … and become recognised as a viable means of learning.

What the Learners Said

The learners were asked on two occasions whether they thought it was important to know if SALL or the SAC were effective. On each occasion most learners ignored the question and gave their opinions on the effectiveness of SALL or the SAC. It is impossible to tell what was the cause of the poor response rate. Perhaps the interviewees were bad listeners, perhaps effectiveness was not important to them or perhaps the importance of effectiveness was so obvious that they assumed they had misunderstood. Interestingly, the only two learners who responded accurately were very clear about the importance.

How the Stakeholders Define Effectiveness

What the Teachers Said

Each teacher had a different slant on what effectiveness was and how it should be measured. There were definite overlaps but also significant differences. From such a small team of teachers, a surprisingly large number of variables emerged which seemed to influence the way effectiveness was considered. They were:

- who the demonstration of effectiveness was for;
  (teachers/learners/administrators/non-connected teachers)

- the subject of study;
  (learners/learning/approaches to learning/teachers/teaching/use of resources)

- the purpose of demonstrating effectiveness;
  (justifications/monitoring [learners/teachers]/research[improvement])

- the acceptable criteria;
  (learning gain/learner satisfaction/teacher satisfaction/development of independence).

What the Learners Said

Learners reported a number of criteria for assessing effectiveness. Some coincided with those of teachers but with far less soul searching and complexity. The most commonly reported criterion was perception of learning gain (but no learners reported using objective measures of learning gain). The second most common was access to resources. There was an implication that good resources and frequent use must have a beneficial effect. Two learners referred to freedom of choice as indicators of effectiveness. One learner based his judgement on what he had been told. Two learners had no way of judging effectiveness. There were two interesting things about learners' definitions of effectiveness. Firstly, they were not troubled with multiple variables. Each of them had a particular way of assessing effectiveness for the task currently in hand. Secondly, they all knew who was at the centre of the picture. They were. They were not concerned with how teachers or administrators felt about self-access. They were concerned with evaluating what they could get out of it, and whether it was worth it from their point of view.

What the Cycle 1 Data Show

- Definitions varied significantly between teachers and students;

- Definitions varied significantly between teachers;

- Teachers' definitions tended to be complex and all encompassing;

- Teachers' definitions varied depending upon who they were constructing the definition for (e.g. themselves, learners, administrators);

- Everyone thought that effectiveness was important;

- Acceptable criteria for judging effectiveness varied between teachers and learners;

- Learners' criteria were far less complex but lacked sophistication;

- Learners' criteria of effectiveness only partially coincided with those of the teachers.

Cycle 2

Staff Focus Group

The members of the Self-Access Team had been present at the presentation of the findings from cycle 1. The focus group meeting served two important purposes leading on from that presentation. Firstly, the SAC counsellors were concerned that the level of disagreement amongst them had been misunderstood in cycle 1. The issues were discussed and clarified and a better understanding emerged, not so much of disagreement but of alternative interpretations. Amongst themselves during the discussion, they also resolved some of the 'disagreement'. Secondly, an agreement was negotiated of one working definition of the effectiveness of self-access in order to create

something measurable. This view related to learners' perceptions of learning gain. It was only a part of the teachers' collective definition of self-access, but they agreed that it was a good starting point for assessing effectiveness.

User Interviews

These interviews (a total of 50) yielded a large amount of data which were focused around a few key questions used as talking points. These data related to learners' views of the issue of effectiveness of self-access learning and represent a range of views of the SAC users. A few preliminary questions were used to establish the level of experience shared by these users and the uses to which they put the SAC. These data will be presented first. Then users were asked to talk about effectiveness and the criteria they use, or would use, to measure it. These data are presented second.

The Findings from Cycle 2

Amount of Use

In order to get a sense of the authority with which interviewees were making statements about the SAC and SALL in general, they were asked to talk about how much they used the SAC. Eight of the students were unable or unwilling to make statements which indicated clearly the amount of use they made of the SAC. Of the remaining 42 students, it is possible to divide them roughly into three categories according to what they said about how much they used the SAC (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Categories of users

New Users	Committed Users	Casual Users
10	19	13

The first category is defined easily and consists of those who had started recently to use the SAC. Predominantly they were on their first visit. Defining the other two categories, however, is more difficult. A committed user is defined as one who used the SAC on a regular basis and/or frequently. It has been defined this way to include students who went to the SAC regularly but not often (e.g. once a month all year round), and also those who went to the SAC frequently during short periods, and then less at other times (e.g. every day in the vacation but not during the semester). This category causes some problems as the students themselves had varying perceptions of what constituted regular or frequent use. Some students also qualified their use of the SAC in terms of their workloads, and even though they might not have been regular users, they tended to indicate a relatively high frequency of use and were certainly committed users. Other committed users related their use of the SAC not to workloads, but to specific parts of the year. Casual users are categorised as those who did not make frequent or regular use of the SAC but were also not new users as they had been using the SAC on an unplanned basis for some time.

Most of the casual users tended to fall into a 'just-in-time' category. They saw their need for the SAC as something that arose from time to time, perhaps when they needed help with a particular assignment or needed to learn something specific. The committed learners, on the other hand, tended to see their language needs in the long term. Many of them talked about the frequency or regularity of their use of the SAC. This seems consistent with a notion of maintaining exposure to language and learning on a regular basis. It is impossible to know into which of these categories (if either) the new users will eventually fall.

The comments in the interviews from each category of users were equally valid but for different reasons. It is important to know what new users think about the SAC and SALL because it is, after all, largely their first impressions which will influence whether they will become committed, casual or non-users. The views of committed users were important because they are the majority of users which the SAC serves, and because they are the ones most likely to progress through a range of materials and activities, make most of the services provided (e.g. advice), and act as an information transfer to other potential users. Finally the perceptions of casual users were also important because they may reveal ways in which the SAC can attract them to become committed users.

Is it Enough?

While talking about the amount of time they spent in the SAC, some users also talked about whether they considered it enough (Figure 3). It is not surprising to note that in a system which encouraged individualisation, there was considerable disparity between what individuals considered to be adequate for their language needs.

Figure 3: Level of satisfaction with time spent in the SAC

Student	Amount of time spent in SAC	Level of satisfaction
Student-04	One hour per day	It's OK
Student-11	One hour per week	Not enough
Student-12	Once a month	Never enough
Student-13	Once a month	Only time available
Student-16	Twice a week	That's enough
Student-20	Once a week	Enough time
Student-36	Once in two weeks	It's enough
Student-37	Variable	Not adequate

Reasons for Using the SAC

Students were asked why they used the SAC. Their answers can be summarised into nine areas (Figure 4). Some students gave answers which fell into more than one of these areas. Given that all the materials in the SAC relate to language learning, it is perhaps not surprising that about half of the students spoke about language learning as the main reason for using the SAC, although it is surprising that half of them did not. However, this may be accounted for by the large number of students who mentioned convenience as a reason for using the SAC. In discussing convenience, they often seemed to have assumed that the purpose was language learning and they were giving a reason for using the SAC instead of a language class. This is also true of the students who gave answers indicating that individualisation was a reason for them. In talking about how the SAC helped them, they appeared to have been making the basic assumption that the purpose was language learning. In addition to these three main categories of reasons, students also mentioned curiosity and relaxation. Other reasons for a small number of students were practical issues, such as access to materials and consultants, as well as being assigned to complete self-access language work. In this section we will look in some detail at how students talked about these reasons.

Figure 4: Students' reasons for using the SAC

Reason for using the SAC	Number of students
Language learning	30
Convenience	14
Student individualisation	10
Relaxation	6
Assignments	5
Came to take a look	5
Materials	2
Consultants	1

Language Learning

In their self-access work some students had very specific skills in mind while others mentioned a target language but with no particular skills focus. A considerable number of students ambitiously targeted more than one language but with little skills precision. Two of the students saw clearly the SAC as a supplement to their usual language learning activities.

Convenience

Students' comments about the convenience of the SAC included a wide range of areas. A number of them commented about the long opening hours and the flexibility the SAC allowed users in arranging their studies. A number of comments related to availability of resources in the SAC. Two students recognised the amount of money they were saving by being able to use the facilities without charge, while others appreciated the easy access to TVs, computers, tape recorders, books, magazines, dictionaries and the Internet. Other comments concerned the environment, praising its comfort, welcoming the quiet area and comparing the SAC favourably with the difficulties of studying at home.

Student Individualisation

A number of students recognised the potential for individualisation in the SAC. Some talked about this in quite general terms, which may reflect an appreciation of individualisation rather than practical experience of implementing it. Other students were already working at an individualised level, using the SAC to personalise their study. Only two students seemed to have reflected on the learning strategies involved in SALL. There were also students who found the opportunities to individualise threatening.

It is encouraging that students took into account the individualisation potential of self-access learning. However, it must be acknowledged that many of them talked about it at a fairly superficial level and some preferred not to take the responsibility of making choices, opting for teachers and instructions. Probably of most significance is that the majority of students did not talk about individualisation.

Relaxation

A small, but significant, number of students stated that relaxation was their main reason for using the SAC. Activities cited revolved around listening to music, reading magazines, watching TV, and using computers.

Assignments

A number of students stated that their purpose for using the SAC was to complete homework assignments.

"Came to take a look"

A surprising number of students were interviewed while they were on a fact-finding mission. Five of the interviewees were only there to "take a look" at what was available. It is difficult to know whether they represented the proportion that would be found on any normal day, but as the interviews were spread over a period of time, there is no reason to believe otherwise. It is important to know if this number remains constant throughout the year, since they form a group which needs special attention. What these students were looking for varied, but they were all there to "check it out".

Consultants

Considerable resources are invested in providing language advisors in the SAC. They are available at various times in the day and can give advice on six languages. It is therefore surprising that only one student cited them as a reason for using the facility.

Measuring Effectiveness

When asked whether it was important to know if SALL is effective, almost every student answered affirmatively. The others did not answer negatively, but seemed unable to grasp the question. It seems logical that if the majority of students thought that effectiveness was important, they would have, in some way, attempted to measure it. In fact this proved to be untrue for the majority of students. In most cases, when asked if they had attempted to measure the effectiveness of self-access learning, students replied negatively. Often students gave reasons for not attempting measurement. These included: difficulty, lack of understanding, uncertainty about procedure, lack of tools, and with one student even declaring an intention not to evaluate effectiveness. A much smaller number of students felt that they had made attempts to measure effectiveness, all seeming to translate into attempts to monitor their progress. This is not surprising because, as we will see later, for most students, language gain was the main criterion for measuring effectiveness. It is important to note that not all of those who attempted to measure effectiveness felt that they were successful.

Although most students reported not attempting to measure effectiveness, many of them later identified criteria which they felt were appropriate, and a considerable number reported behaviour which demonstrated clearly the measuring of effectiveness. It seems unlikely, for two reasons, that this contradiction was due to a misunderstanding of the terms being used. The first reason is that the students were interviewed in the language in which they were most comfortable (usually their mother tongue). The second reason is that they made clear statements about the importance of knowing about effectiveness which indicated a familiarity with the concept. The inexplicable contradiction, therefore, is that many students said that they did not measure the effectiveness of SALL but actually they did attempt it.

Criteria for Measuring Effectiveness

In discussing criteria for measuring effectiveness, the students made some general statements about measurability, but they also made some detailed comments about ways in which they monitored progress. As can be seen above, progress in language learning was seen by almost all as equating to effectiveness of SALL. Their methods of monitoring, however, varied taking in one or more of: self-reflection, peer-review, and expert feedback.

Measurability

A considerable number of students were concerned about the apparent impossibility of measuring progress either because of time problems, or simply because they did not know how to measure it. For example:

Student-02: We cannot measure nor see benefits in the short period of time.

Student-10: Indeed, it is hard to measure your progress in whatever method because this stuff cannot be expressed in numbers.

Student-34: I don't know how to measure my progress.

Other students took a more subjective view of measurement, for example:

Student-03: I think there is no special method nor a standard to measure how much I have improved. I myself am the criterion.

Student-22: I have been told by other classmates that after a certain stage I will experience a sudden change in my learning but I haven't experienced it yet.

Student-41: Maybe I think I have improved … this progress is purely based on my feeling.

Self-reflection

A majority of students (35) said that they relied heavily on self-reflection to determine whether they were making progress. Their criteria differed wildly from the solid and measurable, for example:

Student-04: I know more words now.

to a range of "if" statements such as:

Student-08: If you can understand the weather forecast … then there is an improvement.

Student-15: [If] you can write what you have in your mind immediately.

Student-18: If I can understand the TV programmes without relying on the subtitles.

They also based their criteria on feelings about their progress, such as:

Student-20: [I] just walk in the street in Hong Kong, and [I] can read more signs and I feel better.

And there were those whose criteria were global and not measurable in any practical sense but with which they were comfortable, almost like an act of faith:

Student-33: [about Cantonese] It is very obvious … now I understand it.

There were also a few equally sweeping but negative criteria:

Student-31: I don't think I have made any progress at all.

Peer Review

Some students liked to use peer feedback to measure their progress and seemed to be using it successfully for both writing and speaking. Representative of these ideas are the following extracts:

Student-01: [talking about a peer group] I write a small research article and then I discuss [with] them.

Student-11: After writing a letter, I let my friends read it and comment.

Student-13: What I tend to do is sometimes I converse with my friends in the language that I am learning and then have my performance judged by them.

Student-29: But … I think the only way to know my progress is that people understand mutually when you communicate with each other in a language.

Student-43: I talk to Mainland Chinese students in Putonghua and I notice I can apply what I have learned to conversation [with them].

Expert Feedback

There are some students who want feedback from those they perceive as experts. This can be used in conjunction with other criteria. For example, Student-01 who, as we see above, liked to submit research articles for peer feedback, also liked, as a secondary stage, to discuss them with his academic advisor. Other students had similar ideas, for example:

Student-13: The ones who are trained can tell my improvement by listening.

Student-23: I believe the teacher will be able to tell you whether or not you have made progress.

Student-24: I can check how many questions I get correct when I write the TOEFL test.

Student-27: [talking about his professor] If I talk with him more often, he may know that I have learned Putonghua here and that I have improved.

Student-28: An organisation has arranged [for] us to have a chance to chit-chat … We can understand more German … then we know we have improved German a bit.

Usefulness of Criteria and Procedures

Many of the students interviewed had quite a clear idea about what they considered to be acceptable criteria for judging their progress in language learning. Such progress was their main, and usually their only, way of judging the effectiveness of self-access learning. It is not surprising that students related effectiveness of SALL to measures of learning gain as this was by far the highest rated reason for using the SAC (Figure 4). Also the criteria and methods students used should not be underestimated. They are highly individualised and thus pertinent to students' learning goals. However, the confusion students demonstrated in talking about measuring effectiveness and the reasons they stated for not doing it (centring around difficulties with procedures and lack of appropriate tools), suggest that more could be done for them.

The ways these students monitored their progress (detailed above) have frequently been encouraged both in SALL and in classroom contexts. The uses of self- and peer-assessment, for example, are widely documented. They have been used successfully, but usually only in situations where pre-assessment learner training has been provided, and sometimes with monitoring by teachers. The students in this study when engaging in self- and peer-assessment had no objective

standards to measure against and had received no training in assessment procedures. The methods they reported are more akin to self-reflection than to self-assessment.

It appears that many students want to monitor their progress in SALL and are doing what they can. Given a set of tools to choose from, they might find the process less difficult and confusing and more productive. In addition to helping them assess learning gain, which is currently the only criterion they use for determining the effectiveness of SALL, such tools might also facilitate their evaluation of the effectiveness of individual activities in which they engage while in the SAC, the materials they use, the goals they set for themselves, and the way they plan their work.

Conclusion

The teachers in the Self-Access Team appeared, at least initially, to have very complex criteria for judging the effectiveness of SALL and their SAC. The SAC users, on the other hand, appeared to have very simple criteria often boiling down to the one simple criterion of whether they had made progress in language learning. The ways in which they judged their progress varied and were often subjective. After further discussion the teachers were able to accept simpler criteria which focused on learning gain as a partial solution which would help the users measure the effectiveness of their use of SALL. The learners, conversely, never compromised on their criteria regardless of how much discussion they entered into.

It seems that the main reason for the divergence between teachers and users in the criteria they wished to apply, lay in the different perceptions of what SALL is. Teachers were much more aware of issues of autonomy, independence and life-long learning. Users were largely naïve in this sense, although some did have a notion of freedom of choice. Most importantly, almost all users had little or no interest in developing learning strategies or pursuing autonomy. This lack of interest may be a fact which teachers have to accept or it may be something which can be overcome through learner training.

These findings may present a dilemma for teachers, not only the ones participating in this study, but all those who include elements of SALL in their teaching, and those who work in SACs. The dilemma of judging the effectiveness of SALL and/or a SAC is whether to use teachers' criteria (which are inevitably complex) or students' criteria (which may be over simple and which relate only partly to the goals of SALL). Perhaps the real answer is that teachers and students have different realities in judging the effectiveness of self-access and thus need multiple criteria for multiple realities.

Probably the next stage in the quest to make self-access more effective is two-fold. Firstly, users need better ways to judge their learning gain. They could benefit from guidance in establishing measurable criteria and applying suitable techniques. These could be achieved through a learner training process which makes learners more aware of the ways in which they can make their use of the SAC more effective. Most importantly, this process should offer learners choices and counselling, not compulsion, constraint and conformity. Probably the easiest first step would be for the SAC to provide individual tools for self-assessing gain in each of the language skills. Eventually these might build into a system for assessing learning gain which might also contain tools to help learners think about the parts of self-access learning in which they are currently not interested (e.g. developing learning strategies).

Secondly, teachers need to work on their definitions of what effectiveness means to them and their institutions. There is a great diversity in the literature on all aspects of self-access learning. For that diversity to be manifest among the teachers attached to a SAC maintains a

certain freshness in their approach. Nevertheless, it may prove to be beneficial for those teachers to clarify for themselves and for each other, their priorities in SALL.

This second task may well be more difficult. The diversity among teachers may prove to be greater than that between teachers and students. The first task is more achievable although at times more time consuming. It can be achieved through a number of simultaneous developments which include bringing awareness of self-assessment to more self-access learners, incorporation of self-assessment into main-stream self-access and the development of a flexible system of assessment which self-access learners can use to monitor their progress.

Acknowledgements

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