

‘Better late than never’

Humberto Cervera

This worm had to wiggle quite far to continue its journey, from the University of Nottingham in England to the Autonomous University of Yucatan in Mexico (UADY). After crossing the Atlantic Ocean and finally arriving on the warm coast of the Mayan peninsula, our friendly invertebrate had then to travel in time to the last decade of the twentieth century to learn about the first self-access centre (SAC) established in a state university in this country. This is what it found.

In 1991, while Canada, the United States of America and Mexico were working together to pursue what the following year would become the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Ministry of Education in Mexico, with the support of foreign bodies such as the British Council and the (UK) Overseas Development Administration, put forward a project aimed at upgrading the quality of English teaching and learning at the tertiary level in universities of the country, in order to make English easily available for students of higher education. A select group of ELT experts from various state universities were called to analyse the project. A visionary member of that group, my late colleague and friend, Alicia Gonzalez G. Canton, who had just been in contact with various self-access centres in the UK, suggested the idea of establishing self-access centres as the most viable alternative to achieve the aim of this project in the short term. Her proposal was immediately discussed and subsequently approved with an agreement to appoint her as the person in charge of the establishment and running of the first centre, at her own institution, the Faculty of Education of the Autonomous University of Yucatan in the city of Merida.

The next step was to train the staff and prepare materials to start up the SAC. So, in the summer of 1992, Susan Axbey, from the Polytechnic of West London/Ealing College, travelled to Merida to be in charge of a 60-hour workshop for that purpose. None of us in the teaching staff, except Alicia, had any idea of what self-access language learning was. Nevertheless, we were very enthusiastic and willing to participate in this new experience.

At the beginning of the training sessions, I was in charge of the preparation of the listening materials, which were recorded then on cassette tapes. Later on, I switched to the production of video materials on VHS tapes. Most of my other colleagues were quite busy dismembering brand new books of all kinds so their individual pages could be laminated in order to have every single page available as worksheets, and were also cataloguing and shelving everything. Meanwhile, the Faculty of Education was frantically refurbishing an old building across the street

to accommodate the new centre, which was inaugurated in November 1992 and started formal operations in February 1993, as a new option for UADY's students of English. When it finally opened, there was a certain feeling of claustrophobia because there were no windows anywhere. Luckily, the following year the Faculty moved to a new site, where the SAC has been since then, in a proper space surrounded by enormous windowpanes.

I had been an independent language learner, so I welcomed the new approach in 1992 as a great opportunity for many university students and for me as well. The following was then and still is now the main objective of the SAC:

El objetivo de la creación de este centro fue ofrecer a los estudiantes universitarios una modalidad de aprendizaje de idiomas en forma autónoma, a su propio ritmo, utilizando las estrategias más acordes a su particular estilo de aprendizaje y a sus intereses específicos. (<http://www.educacion.uady.mx/servcodi.php?id=caa>)

The objective in the creation of this centre was to offer university students a mode of language learning in an autonomous way, at their own pace, using strategies in accordance with their particular style of learning and their specific interests. (My translation).

However, within only three months we faced a major obstacle that changed the way the SAC would be run from then on. One of my best students had been working enthusiastically and making extraordinary progress at his own fast pace in the SAC, where he had moved on from the upper intermediate level to the advanced level in half the time it normally takes a student in our regular classroom courses, and had taken and passed the corresponding examinations. However, when he requested the registration office to place him in the new level, he was told that it was not possible because the university regulations did not contemplate the possibility of doing more than one course or level per semester. So much for advancing at your own pace!

Despite a promising beginning in self-directed learning, the SAC has been mainly used as a 'controlled-access' type of centre for practically 15 years; one in which the students are directed by the teachers in the choice of learning materials, which, in this particular case, are the same materials that are used in the regular courses of the foreign languages centre, where learning takes place in the traditional teacher-centred classroom manner. Not only are the same

course books used in both centres, they also share the same dates for the midterm and final examinations, and naturally the same exams; all this for the sake of an inflexible registration control. In my view, this is like having one English course offered in two ways: either in a classroom with a teacher or in a resource centre on your own with the occasional help of tutors; the same product offered in two somewhat different packages.

The original objectives, i.e. to enhance students' achievement through a self-directed approach, to promote a more active involvement of both teachers and learners in the process, and to provide another option to the increasing number of people who cannot attend regular English classes due to restrictions of time imposed by either their work or school, have almost been left behind. The only kind of self-study students can pursue is that aimed to prepare themselves for examinations like the TOEFL, the IELTS, or the University of Cambridge's KET, PET, FCE and CAE. In this case, there are no obstacles from the registration office because these are not regular courses, so they do not have to keep a record of classes and marks.

There are surely various important reasons why in this institution self-access learning is not truly self-access; why students do not have an integral role in the running of the centre; and why it is not a place most learners choose to be. These are significant concerns I have in my current PhD research regarding the functioning of this SAC. Some of the possible reasons I have found might be the following:

- It is a different approach for a culture accustomed to a teacher-centred and test-driven mode of learning.
- There was a lack of previous consultation with the teaching staff and with the students.
- There was insufficient systematic and ongoing teacher training and development for both the staff and the learners in all the areas of concern in the centre.
- There were ineffective means of informing possible users about the system.
- There were incompatible attitudes of some staff and learners towards the principles of self-access language learning.
- There is an inflexible system controlling the registration and progress of the students.

It would not be fair to let the self-access worm continue its long journey with a negative impression. So, I would like to finish its visit with a positive note. UADY is currently launching an ambitious project called "Institutional Programme of English" aimed to provide at least one self-access centre for every single one of the five university campuses, which are spread all over the city: Biological and Agropecuary [i.e. Agricultural] Sciences in the south; Engineering and Exact Sciences in the northwest; Health Sciences in the central west; Social Sciences in the northeast; and Architecture, Art and Design in the central east.

Perhaps the time is finally right to fulfil the original objective in the creation of this centre. There is nothing we can do to change the past, but we can certainly learn from it and try to overcome all obstacles, no matter how long they have been blocking our original goals. As the old saying goes, better late than never.



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