

## Self-Access

## Some self-access principles

Lucy Cooker

The self-access worm has not had to wiggle very far on its first journey from one office to another at the University of Nottingham. However, for both Richard Pemberton and myself, our views on self-access centres and self-access language learning were informed by our experiences in the Far East, rather than the East Midlands. As Richard wrote in his worm piece (in *Independence* 42), he was based in Hong Kong and part of the strong network of practitioners in the self-access centres that developed there through the 1990s. My experience at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Chiba, Japan was quite different. Here I will describe how the self-access learning centre (the SALC) at KUIS was established, and discuss some of the personal philosophies of self-access centres and self-access learning that I have developed over the eight years of being associated with this centre.

The idea for the SALC was born during my first semester teaching at Kanda in 1999. I had become frustrated with conferencing my students, and giving them advice about what they should be doing to improve their English, and not being able to direct them to any particular place where they could go to work on these skills. I was also frustrated by the fact that the English Language Institute (ELI) where I worked had many wonderful resources for learners such as graded readers, videos, and computers, but there was no system for maintaining these. This meant that the graded readers were often irretrievably missing, whilst the videos and the computers were locked away and students had to get special permission to access them. Having experienced a self-access centre for studying Italian at the University of Edinburgh, I felt that this was what was required at KUIS for our students. However, whereas in Hong Kong many self-access centres were established around the same time, I knew of no other self-access centres in Japan, and there was certainly no network of professionals working in other centres from whom novices in the field, such as myself, could receive advice.

Not to be deterred I purchased a copy of *Establishing Self-Access* (D. Gardner and L. Miller, 1999, Cambridge University Press) read it cover to cover, and then drafted a proposal to establish a self-access centre which was submitted to the university at the beginning of 2000. In November of that year, after many meetings and a lot of stubborn determination, we heard that the initial proposal had been accepted, funding had been allocated, space had been provided and we could start buying the equipment and resources to fill our space.

The SALC opened on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2001 and went from strength to strength. We were frequently full as learners came in to work on their listening or speaking skills, or to practice for tests, or to borrow graded readers. Our first formalised learning programme was BASIL – Be A Successful Independent Learner. This took learners through the stages of assessing their needs and developing a learning plan. The SALC was so frequently full that the University decided to construct a new building in part to house a new SALC. Together with the ELI management, many of the SALC team were involved in designing the new building, which allowed us to incorporate into the construction some specific features to enhance this space for the language learning purposes. We watched the new building grow and moved in at the beginning of the academic year in 2003.

Over the intervening years, the operation of the SALC has again gone from strength to strength. It continues to have the strong research foundation that existed from the very beginning and the large purpose-built space has allowed the development of the wide range of resources now available to learners. In 2003 we started offering the SHM – the SALC Homework Module – an optional module of SALC-based work which learners could take to gain extra credit for their Freshman (first year) English class grade. The limited success of this led us to develop the First Steps Module, a learner-training programme which takes learners through the first steps towards learner autonomy with the sequel being the Learning How to Learn Module. In which learners use the individual learning plan they wrote for themselves at the end of the First Steps Module. In addition, four content-based Modules in Grammar, Media English, Writing and Speaking are now offered to Sophomore (second year) students.

As the SALC is concerned with meeting individual needs of learners and working towards offering something close to a personal curriculum, such Modules require an intense amount of one-on-one work with learners. Thus, these developments required extra learning advising support. The SALC now boasts a team of eight full-time learning advisors, plus four full-time administrative staff, and approximately thirty part-time student staff.

Over the course of my work in developing the SALC I have formulated a personal philosophy of self-access centres and self-access learning, the main tenets of which are as follows:

**1. Self-access learning should be truly self-access.**

Many institutions *require* students to use their self-access centre as part of a course of study. I believe that self-access learning should be truly self-access, and whilst a certain amount of guidance is necessary for learners to be able to use the centre and understand how it operates, at no other time should they be required to use the facility. In the SALC at KUIS, use of the centre is completely optional. Despite this, in the first semester of 2007 over 500 Freshman students signed up to take the optional First Steps Module. This is just one indicator of how a truly self-access system can successfully foster motivation for learning.

**2. Students should have an integral role in the running of the centre.**

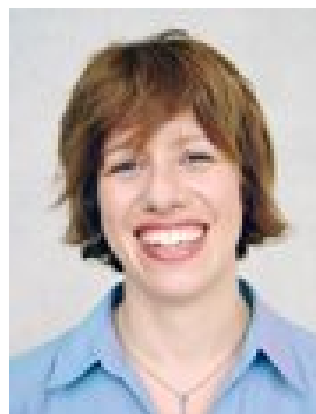
From the very beginning students have had an important role in the development of the SALC. Three of our student part-time staff are now full-time administrators, and students continue to play an important role not just in staffing the SALC, but also in selecting and trialling materials and in promoting the centre.

**3. Language learning should be fun.**

If a self-access centre is truly self-access, then learners need to be enticed into the centre, and the most effective way of doing this is to make language learning fun. The SALC is stocked with materials which aim to engage learners in ways which are fun and entertaining. For example, music and movie-based activities, and the interactions between Learning Advisors and fellow students allow learners to see that effective language learning should be related to everyday pastimes, rather than something which is confined to classrooms and grammar textbooks. In Japan, where English language classes are traditionally very teacher-centered and grammar-oriented, encouraging learners to understand that language learning can be enjoyable *and* worthwhile has always been one of the biggest challenges

**4. The self-access centre should aim to be a place where learners choose to be.**

From the very beginnings of the SALC, we aimed to create an environment which didn't feel like a typical university classroom or library. Through careful choice of colour schemes, furniture, physical layout, displays, and décor, we succeeded in creating a space which felt "different". Learners commented that it felt like a "little piece of America" or that it was like a "reverse home-stay". Through this relaxed ambience we aimed to provide a place where students would choose to hang out, and thereby encourage them to use the facilities and materials.



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