



Self-access

Laying the Foundations for a Self-access Centre

Alex Ding

This piece is an attempt to map some of the challenges I am facing in setting up a new self-access centre (SAC) for international students at Nottingham University.

The Centre for English Language Education (CELE) at Nottingham University leads a number of (EAP) teaching and research activities: preessional and inessional teaching; running a Business foundation course; organising post-graduate teacher training courses; creating tailor-made courses; and teaching modules on courses run by other departments. Research activities include exploring aspects of: academic writing skills; academic literacy; spoken English; turn-taking; quality assurance and standardisation; language policy; needs analysis; faculty liaison, and emerging technologies in EAP. Nottingham University has also set up a campus in Ningbo China and CELE has been at the heart of developing EAP and language support programmes there. CELE, across campuses, employs around 60 full-time teaching and research staff and teaches thousands of students every year across continents. New projects include a 2+2 BA in English Language and Applied Linguistics (two years in Ningbo followed by 2 years in Nottingham) and discussions are being held on setting up an EFL section within CELE.

I have been asked to set up a SAC in our new state-of-the-art building. This centre must cater for all these students on all these programmes. I have 45m²! Space, more than funds, is the hardest asset to acquire at Nottingham. I have until this autumn to map out the philosophy, design and organisation of the centre, decide on furnishing and equipment, as well as budgets for staff and resources.

My main concern at the moment is to consult with colleagues and try to establish a common philosophy for the SAC. Without a common understanding of and joint commitment to self-access it is highly unlikely that the SAC will flourish. Yet discussions of autonomy and how

learner autonomy could/should (if at all) be promoted within CELE entail discussions and decisions that impact on all aspects of teaching, learning and assessment.

The first challenge then, is to establish a philosophy for the SAC. To date discussions with colleagues have led to some interesting ideas but generally the focus has been on resources and practicalities. It is challenging for all of us to state clearly 'our philosophy' in the midst of busy lives teaching, developing, researching, marking, as well as carrying out tutorials and administrative duties. So my strategy is to present my vision as a starting point for negotiation. It is easier to respond to an idea than to start from scratch.

The underlying vision for the SAC I wish to convey is to promote collaborative autonomy (see Ding 2005 for detailed discussion of collaborative autonomy). By this I mean a SAC which is primarily, though not solely, concerned with fostering the autonomy of students working not only together on projects and tasks but also in collaboration with tutors in running the centre. SACs are often designed with the individual, atomised learner in mind, yet I see no reason why many of the individualised activities normally associated with self-access learning cannot be profitably carried out in pairs and groups. Language learning tasks, defining needs and objectives, assessments, portfolios, project work and consultations could all be carried out in groups for the benefit of both the individual and group. I would argue that promoting autonomy necessarily and primarily involves complex relations of interdependence and SACs should seek to promote collaboration rather than atomise both students and the language tasks they undertake.

The second challenge is to translate a vision for the SAC into a structure. The semiotics of the centre must reflect the philosophy. The design, layout, signs, and tasks all send important messages to students regarding expectations and

roles (see Benson 1997 for more on this). If students are addressed individually and work spaces are for one person, for example, then it is hardly surprising if students think the SAC is for individualised, isolated work. So the design will incorporate clusters and work spaces for group work.

The third and perhaps most difficult task will be to incorporate the SAC into the teaching and learning activities of so many students and tutors. 45m² certainly won't accommodate many students. The solution lies in deciding how we distribute activities within the SAC and on-line (and the difficulty lies in making this coherent). I have already developed a VSAC (Virtual Self-access Centre) for students at Nottingham (<http://vsac.cele.nottingham.ac.uk/>) and I have also led projects to develop blended materials for writing (<http://vsac.cele.nottingham.ac.uk/alex/writing/start.php>) and reading (<http://vsac.cele.nottingham.ac.uk/alex/reading/start.php>). Many tutors are also using VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) to provide support materials and handouts for students as well as using podcasts, e-portfolios and collaborative wikis. Web (2.0) technologies can effectively facilitate many collaborative activities.

Given that so much can (and by necessity will have to) be achieved collaboratively using technology, why bother with a SAC at all? There's no straightforward answer to that! I think a central meeting place for students and staff is essential for cohesion and also as a (not *the*) focal point for advice, information, conversation, and discussion. The types of activities I'd like to see taking place in the SAC include: student-led debates/discussions; student/tutor led workshops on aspects of academic English; peer writing review sessions for PhD students; seminar presentation practice; informal conversations with (non-)native (MA ELT) students; lunch-time drop-in question and answer sessions with tutors; cultural evenings (e.g. films, food), as well as students working quietly on improving discrete language skills. In addition, I'd also like to see the SAC as a place for staff to find out about what we do, discuss issues relating to academic literacy and, if they need it,

language support. In short, a SAC that encourages discussion, sharing, collaboration, innovation and experimentation to enhance autonomy and academic literacy.

Here I have not mentioned all the difficult questions regarding budgets, staffing, training, systems, and evaluation. I haven't forgotten them; I am hoping that for at least two years senior management will let the SAC become a centre of experimentation and innovation. Over this period, working alongside colleagues and students, I would like to explore different pedagogical options in enhancing collaborative autonomy in order for the SAC to establish more clearly what students and tutors enjoy, need and use before committing the SAC to a more rigid framework.

As a final remark, there's still a long way to go in discussions with colleagues and students – perhaps the SAC will become something very different from what has been vaguely sketched here. The important thing I hope for is, I suppose, that all tutors and students will have collaboratively exercised as much control as possible in establishing the SAC at Nottingham.

PS If you would like to discuss self-access issues I can be contacted at: Alex.Ding@nottingham.ac.uk I will also be setting up a collaborative blog to discuss self-access and autonomy. Contact me by e-mail if you are interested in participating.

References

- Benson, P. (1997) The semiotics of self-access language learning in the digital age. In Darleguy, V., Ding, A. and Svensson, M. (eds.) *Educational technology in language learning: Theoretical considerations and practical applications*. Lyon, France: INSA (National Institute of Applied Sciences), pp. 70-78.
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Alex Ding is Head of New Technologies in EAP at the Centre for English Language Education, University of Nottingham. He is also researching for his PhD on teacher education and autonomy.