



Self-access

## Self-Access: Starting off

*Richard Pemberton*

As this worm sets out on its journey, I will start with my own beginnings along the self-access path.

My first experience of language learning was heavily influenced by fear. As I write this, on a Sunday afternoon, there is in some part of my brain a trace of those Sunday afternoons long ago when the pleasures of listening to the Top 20 countdown would be overshadowed by the knowledge that Monday morning would inescapably bring with it the Latin translation lesson – and the shoutings or back-thumpings we would receive if we made a mistake. The headmaster's approach to teaching often induced a sense of panic and foreboding:

"What's the first person future simple of *moneo*, boy?" "*Monebit?*" a boy ventured hopelessly. This was greeted by a thump on the back. "Er ... *Monebat?*" Thump! "Um ... er ... er ... *Monebam?*" Thump! "*Monebo*, boy. The first person future simple of *moneo* is *monebo!*" barked the headmaster, thumping even harder at each 'bo'. "See me tomorrow morning." The rest of us kept our heads down, knowing that a caning awaited the unfortunate, and praying that the headmaster's anger wouldn't seek us out too.

Despite this intimidatory approach to grammar translation, I did progress, with fear gradually giving way to achievement as my main motivator. But it was not until I left school and began teaching in Lesotho that I discovered the joys of learning a language in the target community. From then on, with varying degrees of success, my language learning has been largely self-taught, away from the classroom.

My approach to teaching, however, was for many years very much teacher-led and classroom-centred, despite half-hearted nods in the direction of Illich, Freire and Holt. Whether following the prescribed secondary textbook in Zimbabwe or teaching project-based ESP courses in Papua New Guinea, I considered myself the key to my students' linguistic or communicative progress. What first started to open my eyes to the idea of self-access was reading Leslie Dickinson's (1987) *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*.

With my liking for self-instruction and my experience of using individualised learning routes with Primary Maths and Secondary SRA reading programmes, it wasn't surprising that the parts of Dickinson's book I most connected with at this time were the parts describing the physical provision of materials/task sheets to learners. Reading about Leni Dam's approach at that stage was for me still a question of taking on board something similar to what I'd been trying to do before. I hadn't realised what a fundamental shift was required.

Moving to Hong Kong in 1991, I soon became involved in self-access, working with David Gardner, Lindsay Miller and others on the committee of the Hong Kong Association for Self-Access Learning and Development. In those days, many of us were focused on the nuts and bolts of setting up self-access centres, so practical concerns were to the fore – shelving, cutting up books and making them available as worksheets, publicity, copyright, etc. The visits of Philip Riley in 1992 and 1993, though, were crucial in helping us to see the link between the practice of self-access and the theories of individual differences and learner autonomy ("There is nothing more practical than a good theory," he liked to quote from Kurt Lewin). As Phil Benson (2002) points out, it was Philip Riley who helped us to see the bigger picture – the reason why we were doing self-access in the first place. It was at this stage, over several years in the early to mid-1990s that I did begin to see what a shift was required in our roles if we were to implement a form of self-access whose aim was to support, but not direct, our students' learning.

In those early days I was still very much focused on the running of a physical SAC. But from 1997 onwards our SAC team at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology started to set up self-directed language-learning courses, modules and strands within courses, with the explicit aim of developing learner autonomy. At around this time, more and more material, including audio and video, was also becoming available on the web, so the physical presence of the SAC as the repository for all our language-learning materials became less important to us, and we devoted more energy to developing courses and support structures for self-

directed language learning. The SAC was still an important place for learners to access physical and human resources (materials, technology and advisers), but increasingly, such resources were being provided and accessed outside of the SAC as well.

Looking back on nearly 15 years in self-access, I have been incredibly fortunate to be working alongside colleagues such as Sarah Toogood, Phil Benson, David Gardner, Lindsay Miller and Peter Voller; to be living in a city at a time when so many cutting edge SACs/CILLs/ILCs/LRCs were developed; and to be educated by pioneers such as Leni Dam, Edith Esch, David Little, Philip Riley and Barbara Sinclair at both the 1994 and 2004 conferences at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (and in between).

The highs have been working with self-access/learner autonomy colleagues in Hong Kong and elsewhere and hearing the reactions of students to being given the freedom to make their own learning choices within a structured and supportive framework:

- *I think LANG 106 [a compulsory course for first-year Engineering students based around a self-access project] gave me a totally new inspiration on learning English. I am so please with the introduction of the SAC which I could learn in a very interesting way. Totally different from college life.*
- *I learnt most from my attitude toward learning. I think my attitude has changed, not only in English but in other subjects. And I find learning is interesting.*
- *I get inspire from this programme that learning the process of getting success is more valuable*



*Richard Pemberton teaches at the University of Nottingham. Before that he spent many years at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, where he was responsible for setting up and coordinating the Self-Access Centre, and helping to integrate self-access language learning into the first-year course.*

*and important than achieving the aim that I set for it.*

There have also been lows, of course, and my abiding regret (and one that I suspect applies to all the ‘worms’) is that self-directed learning and learner autonomy are still the province of the committed minority and not part of normal everyday practice.

However, as this self-access worm sets out on its slow journey around the world, I will not attempt to set any agenda or highlight any particular issues. It will be clear from my very brief ‘story’ that my view of self-access is that it is a way of supporting self-directed learning, and that its aim is to develop the learners’ ability to take control of their own learning. I look forward to further contextualisation, clarification, enlightenment and debate as the self-access worm continues on its (agri)cultural way – not brainless, but cross-fertilising, enriching and life-supporting.

#### References

- Benson, P. 2002. Rethinking the relationship of self-access and autonomy. *Self-Access Language Learning* 5: 4-8. Hong Kong Association for Self-Access Learning and Development. Available online: <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/elc/HASALD/newsletter/newsletters.html>. Accessed: 29 April 2007. Reprinted 2006 in *Independence* 38: 3-6.
- Dickinson, L. 1987. *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.