

GROWING PAINS OF A SELF-ACCESS CENTER IN MEXICO

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Self-access centers are becoming an increasingly important component of educational institutions throughout the world, but are still relatively new in Mexico. An impulse to increase the number of these centers in language schools of Mexican public universities began in the early 1990's through the efforts of the British Council, the Mexican Secretary of Public Education, and the individual schools. After the initial setup of equipping and training by the British Council, each of the now more than 100 centers has developed in different ways, taking its own particular approach. These centers have pioneered the process of putting the theoretical principles of independent learning into practice. Self-access centers offer a myriad of opportunities for these applications, and can often create room for fascinating learning experiences. Such is the story of the Self-Access Center at the University of Guanajuato. During its development in the last few years, experimentation and innovation have brought about interesting changes in its physical layout, materials, and educational focus.

The concepts of self-learning have been around for various decades, but were quite novel for the University of Guanajuato when the Self-Access Center was originally created in 1993. The program had a slow start, but after 5 years the results are more encouraging, in terms of increased user-numbers, hours per user and higher student motivation. The actual learning outcomes are more difficult to determine, and this measuring stick has yet to be looked at in order to give a complete picture of the success of our center. This factor is important when we consider the future development and incorporation of the Self-Access Center within the academic language program of the Language Center.

Because self-instruction requires skills and awareness which are rarely emphasized in traditional classrooms, there is often a certain lack of understanding and acceptance by students and often teachers. As a result, the opportunities for learning available in a self-access mode are often not perceived as such. One of the solutions taken at our center was to "jump start" student motivation by creating an interesting, colorful and inviting environment with an emphasis on authentic materials.

While enjoying an interactive CD-ROM or watching a movie (without subtitles), students may not be aware that they are actually acquiring language, but stimulated by their own interest in the material, the valuable language is absorbed. Only when later reflecting on what was heard or done does the student consciously recognize what learning had taken place. This reflection

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may occur spontaneously, or as a learning strategy in a better-prepared student. For most students, though, authentic materials provide a different dimension of the language, where the learning outcomes are secondary to the cultural and entertainment factors. In short, the student benefits from some type of training or development of learning skills.

At our university a permanent program has been developed to teach students how to consider and understand some of the factors that affect their learning, and how to discover strategies that help them become more effective and independent learners. In short, the training is to help students take on the responsibility of their own learning. This training is offered when students first enter the Self-Access Center either in groups or individually, with talks about self-learning, the different work areas and materials, and alternative ways of using them according to their needs. Emphasis is put on their freedom to use any material they choose and in any way they prefer. Likewise, at the beginning of each semester, presentations are given to all first-level groups, from all of the languages offered at the Language Center, where the students are given a tour of Self-Access as well as an interesting talk about how learning can be self-directed and successful.

The use of our Self-Access Center is completely voluntary, and there is a small fee (\$60 pesos per semester). To encourage students to sign up it is very important that students understand what it offers and how it can be used. The most important drawing factors are the quality and variety of its materials and the constant support of friendly counselor.

Along with the training program and on-going personal support, the Language Center as a whole has been evolving toward a learner-centered classroom language program. This has brought about a greater alignment between the focus of the Self-Access Center and the educational objectives in the classrooms. From all sides, the approaches being used help the student toward greater learner autonomy.

Like a developing infant with growing pains, the Self-Access Center has had to overcome diverse problems and to cross barriers in order for it to grow and expand. It has not been an easy task, but now with our own reflection, we see growth, change and progress.

When we first started, "low-tech" materials were predominant. Grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening exercises were created by teachers or taken from published material. Many of the audio and video materials were stored away in cabinets, difficult to find, or out of student reach. In order to access these materials, the learner had to open files, remove exercises from folders, or ask for the material. Many materials were not in view and thus the learner was often not even aware of their existence. Tapes were kept behind the reception area and accompanying materials like workbooks were confusingly kept apart in other areas. Contradictingly, it was a self-access center without self-access.

The impact of placing a center for self-directed learning in the heart of a university with long-standing traditional philosophies of education also produced quite a shock. A logical reaction to this was to try to control and protect the materials. This did not make the Self-Access Center a popular place for the students and therefore it was seldom used. It became clear that a revolution was needed in order to survive.

A simple change on the surface, yet complex in its underlying approach, came to pass. The materials were placed out in the open with minimal restrictions or officious procedures to hinder learner selection. Obviously, since learners could now see, touch and play with the materials, little by little inhibitions were replaced with an urge to explore. An emphasis was put on acquiring authentic materials, which as they require little preparation or explanation, are fast to put out. Very rapidly a sizeable video and music library was built up. There are now more than 600 films in six languages, (mostly English, and without subtitles). The materials were made as attractive as possible. Video and audio course materials were copied into "bite-sized pieces" to help students make the best use of their time and make the materials seem less daunting. To improve accessibility and user-friendliness, shelves were knocked out of bookcases and replaced with steel rods from which materials were hung in transparent plastic bags.

Slowly, the multi-faceted nature of the Self-Access Center began to take shape. Computers were connected to the Internet (at present 9 of the 14 computers are online). This has become an important learning tool for us. The Internet is the ultimate authentic material as it provides an interactive window to the real world. Students are allowed to freely surf the net, as long as it is in the language that they are studying. Learners are taught cyberworld basics at weekly Internet workshops and shown how to use e-mail. There are now more than 60 CD-ROMs available, most of general interest, such as games, "movie books", encyclopedias, etc. Two computers have Microsoft Word, for students to prepare and print-up homework projects. Daily writing workshops are offered in English and French. Very popular conversation "cafes" sprang up, (9 to 12 sessions a day in six languages at present) with teachers and foreign volunteers.

At present our Self-Access Center has materials in nine languages (English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Latin, Greek, Russian and Japanese). There are eight work areas including a 10-station listening area, a computer area divided in two sections for Internet and CD-ROMs, a library, a "videoteca" with 8 TVs and VCRs, two comfortable conversation rooms, a reading area (also used for the writing workshops), and the main study area.

For the first three years of its existence our center was cost-free for language students. In the fourth year a 20 peso fee per semester was introduced. This was subsequently raised to 50 pesos (\$5 U.S.), then to its present cost of 60 pesos (\$6 U.S.) per semester. This fee includes all workshops, conversation groups and the use of the Internet. During our last semester about 550 students became members of the Self-Access Center. This represents approximately one third of the 1,900 students enrolled in the Language Center. This semester it appears that numbers will be higher. An all-time high in user-visits occurred last November (1998) with 3000 students signing in during that month. Although encouraging, this has rapidly, and ironically become the principal problems faced by the center: insufficient space and personnel.

Although the Self-Access Center is largely self-financed by membership fees, its limited budget has not restricted growth and development. Through innovation, creative problem-solving and intense teacher involvement, materials have been found and created, sometimes out of almost nothing. Many of the authentic materials, such as magazines, board games, movies and music, have been donated to the Center, or copied, and then given user-friendly and eye-catching presentations.

Also, the learners themselves have gradually become more involved in the placement and selection of specific materials. They offer us feedback on what they want to see and use. Often students loan their own music or films. Sometimes they bring in visiting foreign friends to offer conversation. They can also submit recommendations through our suggestion box or Internet bulletin boards. Slowly, what started out as a quest to steal forbidden fruit, has been transformed into an Eden of learning experimentation, with students beginning to open up to the possibility of participating, and even becoming responsible for many aspects of their linguistic development. We feel we have progressed down a long challenging road.

The fundamental changes in approach, materials, presentation and layout, as well as the underlying reason for the recent popularity boom of our Self-Access Center, has been the conceptual shift from a more content, task-based focus, with structured exercises, towards a more experiential learning model with an emphasis on authentic materials. Apart from improving learner motivation, this approach provides the opportunity to explore the language in a real-world context, allowing the student to become more subjectively involved in the learning process.

In all of these ways the learning environment has become more personal, social, and unfettered, resulting in a greater empowerment of the learner. Now students go to the Self-Access Center and make their own choices. Dependence is a natural part of the Mexican culture, so a paradigm shift where students take control or participate actively in their learning process requires time and patience. Learner training is present, but slow results sometimes make progress difficult to recognize. As a result, even teachers can become disheartened. Moving towards this long-term goal of establishing learner autonomy is a fundamental part of the academic project of the Language Center at the University of Guanajuato.