

# The perception of a group of Mexican students on the impact of a self-access centre in their process of learning English as a foreign language

Beatriz Eugenia Navarro Ciria  
Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Mexico



Beatriz Eugenia Navarro Ciria is a professor of ELT at Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Mexico. She was a self-access centre coordinator for seven years. She has an MA in ELT from the University of Southampton, UK, where she is currently enrolled in the distance PhD Programme. Her doctoral research focuses on quality at a self-access language centre and how to evaluate the development of learner autonomy. E-mail: [beatrizn.pacal@yahoo.com](mailto:beatrizn.pacal@yahoo.com)

## Introduction

Riegeluth (1994), identified a shift in the educational paradigm from the industrial era to the age of information. This paradigm shift has changed approaches in curriculum design, the instructional process and learning resources. In this information era, learners become the subjects and the instructional objectives and process are designed based on the learners' needs and characteristics. Self-access centres (or 'SACs') fit naturally into this new paradigm, as they are by definition open, flexible environments in which learners select their own pathways, materials, and goals (Cotterall and Reinders, 2001).

Previous studies have shown the importance of the self-learning or 'learning to learn' field and the position that language resource centres or self-access centres have in the process of learning a new language. According to Dickinson (1987), independent or self-access learning implies learning a language in a learning environment which provides an independent study program with accessible materials, counselling, and possibly the latest technology.

To Gardner and Miller (1999), self-access is related to the development of learner autonomy, so being an independent learner involves a series of reflections on the process of learning. Students are not only dealing with learning a new language, but also with the responsibility for their own learning. Furthermore, students need to recognize their language strengths and weaknesses, and develop learning strategies. Wenden (1988) mentions that all learners have different beliefs about what is important in

language learning. Such beliefs may inevitably affect their perception about the usefulness or otherwise of a given system of learning, such as a self-access centre. Gardner and Miller (1999) also point out that learners are the ones who need not only to become more aware of their needs and wants when learning a language, but also to realise the importance of decision-making on their language learning process. In line with this idea, the aim of this article is to describe Mexican students' perceptions about independent learning, the impact of the self-access centre on their language learning process, and the role of the assessor in this process.

## The Background

The self-access centre in the languages department of the State University of Michoacán, Mexico opened in 2000. This centre provides its services to students enrolled in the Languages Department, other university students and the local community as well. In 2008, the SAC was the first Mexican centre to obtain a Certification in Quality based on the International Standardization Organization requirement ISO 9001:2008. The idea behind implementing a Total Quality Management system at this SAC can be described as a philosophy where the goal of the educational institution is to fulfil the clients' (students') needs and expectations (Sallis, 1993).

The SAC can hold more than 150 students per hour. The centre is divided into different areas. One is the multimedia room, where students have access to internet and various digital and interactive language resources. In the reading and writing room, students can find different language resources such as worksheets,

dictionaries, grammar reference books and novels. The lounge room is a space where students can either read a magazine or play games. There are four other rooms where students attend the many workshops the centre organises. There are 6 cubicles for the assessors.

The first contact between students and the SAC is an orientation session during which students are informed about the centre, the facilities, the role of the assessors, and the advantages of becoming independent learners. The SAC also offers a variety of materials and activities such as conversation clubs, study groups, and workshops.

To continue with the idea of making students aware that becoming an independent learner is more than studying on their own, students are encouraged to schedule an individual advisory session. This session may take from twenty to thirty minutes. Here students are led to reflect on their learning experiences, for example, their strengths and weaknesses in the language they are currently studying, and consider how, little by little, they can overcome these difficulties or strengthen the language abilities they have already identified. Students are also encouraged to establish their learning objectives and finally advisors offer guidance on how to plan the first work-alone session at the centre.

### The participants

Fifty Mexican students from different classes, with Spanish as a mother-tongue, were randomly chosen to participate in this study. Thirty of the participants were women and twenty were men; 66% were between 17 to 20 years old, and 34% were over 20 years old; at the time of the study, 64% of this population were studying at college or had already graduated while the other 34% were about to finish Senior High School. All of them were enrolled in the first year course of English as a Foreign Language in the university languages department. For all of the participants, the terms 'self-access centre' and 'learning to learn' were totally unknown before they attended the orientation session at the centre.

### Methodology

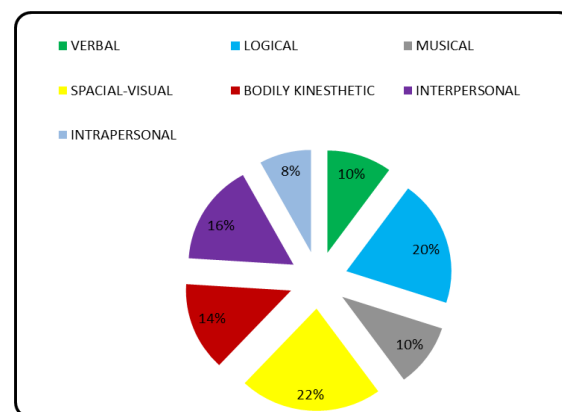
To collect data concerning student's perceptions of the SAC, the study was divided in two parts; at the beginning of the course, a test designed to identify students' learning style was administered (Christison, 1996). As Christison (1996), states, it is important for students to

know how they learn: by knowing this they will have the opportunity to take over some control from their teachers by making choices about what they will learn.

Secondly, a questionnaire was delivered at the end of the course in order to ascertain students' perceptions of the impact of the self-access centre on their language learning process. This latter instrument was divided into three main areas: learning experiences at the SAC; materials and personal perception about the SAC.

### Results

Seven learning styles were identified in the test. As the pie-chart below shows, learners appeared to represent a broad range of different learning styles with a slight predominance of visual-spatial and logical learners. In contrast, only 10% of participants were identified as verbal learners. This predominance might be related to the fields of study students were enrolled in at the time of this research. Most of the students were studying in areas that involve mathematics and/or design, while the rest belonged to the humanities area.



*Distribution of students according to learning styles*

### The centre's impact on students' learning: A perception

#### 1. Learning experiences at the SAC:

- The areas participants liked to work in most at the centre were as follows: 32% of students worked in the audio and video room, 27% preferred to work in the reading and writing room, 18% chose to work in multimedia, and 5% in the lounge area. Students' tendency to use these areas is, on the one hand, because they have easy access to different learning materials such as audio-books, listening exercises, etc.,

and, on the other hand, grammar worksheets and reference books are located in the reading-writing area.

- *Language abilities:* Students were required to rate their personal beliefs about the development of the four language abilities once they had worked with different materials at the SAC. In terms of the four communicative skills, the results were:

a) *Speaking:* Almost all students feel that speaking English is a difficult task. The perception they have is that practicing this ability is difficult at the SAC.

b) *Listening:* 62% of the learners considered that performing this skill was not as difficult as the other three.

c) *Reading:* Due to the wide selection of graded readers, students found that practising reading is not as difficult as speaking and writing.

d) *Writing:* 66% of students found that writing is not an easy ability to perform compared to the other three abilities

- *Hours devoted to the SAC:* Students were required to work at least fifteen hours at the SAC during the eighty-hour course. Forty respondents worked from thirteen to sixteen hours. Seven people worked from nine to twelve hours. Two worked from one to eight hours and one worked more than seventeen hours.

## 2. Materials at the SAC:

- *Materials location and identification:* 82% of the participants agreed that it was easy to identify and locate the different materials. 18% mentioned that accessing materials should be easier than it is now.
- *Quantity of materials:* 98% of the respondents considered that there were more than enough language resources to either learn or practise the language.

## 3. Students' perception:

- *Tutors and autonomy development:* According to Sheerin (1991), teachers have a very important role to play in helping students to become more autonomous. In line with this idea, 78%

of students found that tutors were decisive in this process. It is possible that the other 22% did not fully understand the role of tutors at the SAC. *General perception:* 92% of students found the SAC to be a valuable space to practise their target language or to learn something new on their own.

Generally speaking, students were positive about the support they received from the assessors, the variety and accessibility of learning materials and the suitability of the learning environment. On the other hand, some students suggested that communication with the assessors was poor. The fact is that students do not really seek help from the advisors. They have a first interview and then most of the students do not return for a second or third advisory session. Some of the students have informal chats with assessors if they need a quick help, for example, to locate a specific material, or if they are struggling with grammar or vocabulary issues. The major contact students have is when they attend workshops. This is perhaps the only time when students feel that assessors help them to overcome their learning issues.

## Conclusions

The overall aim of the research study was to provide a description of the participants' perception of the self-access centre as a place to practise and improve their learning skills in a second language in a more independent way. Developing independent learning abilities is not about letting students work alone, it is about assisting them to develop skills which will help them to become good learners; to take responsibility for learning and to be able to apply these skills to any new learning situation (Mynard and Sorflaten, 2002).

The findings of this study revealed that, even though students were not familiar with this new concept of independent learning, they perceived a positive relationship between their language skills development and the centre's resources. Participants' overall evaluation shows that they found this change in their language learning process to be beneficial. Finally, it can be said that this group of students sees the SAC as a place with the necessary human and technological resources to promote independent learning.

Nonetheless, the study brought to light a number of issues which need to be addressed by further research:

1. The SAC claims to care about the students' needs, but no research has been conducted in this area. The SAC infers what students' needs are, taking them for granted.
2. Since the Quality Management System was implemented, much more emphasis has been attributed to the service, rather than to the development of autonomy. Again the SAC takes it for granted that well-controlled services help users to develop autonomy, as if the latter is a natural consequence of the former.
3. Even though assessors do their best, they have a very heavy workload, including adapting or preparing materials, giving advisory sessions and preparing materials for the workshops.

These issues form the basis of my current PhD research.

#### References

- Cotterall, S. & Reinders, H. (2001). Fortress or bridge? Learners' perceptions and practice in self-access language learning. In *TESOLANZ 8*, 23 – 38.
- Christison, M.A. (1996). Teaching and learning languages through multiple intelligences. In *TESOL Journal*, 6(1), 10 – 14.
- Gardner, D. & Miller, L. (1999). *Establishing self-access: From theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mynard, J., & Sorflaten, R. (2003). Learner independence in your classroom. In *Teachers, Learners and Curriculum*, 1(1), 34 – 38.
- Reigeluth, C. M. (1994). The imperative for systemic change. In C. M. Reigeluth & R. J. Garfinkle (Eds.), *Systemic change in education* (pp. 3 – 11). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications
- Sallis, E. (1993). *Total quality management in education*. London: Kogan Page.
- Sheerin, S. (1991). Self-access: State-of-the-art article. In *Language Teaching*, 24(3), 143-157. doi: 10.107/S0261444800006315
- Wenden, A. (1998). *Learner strategies for learner autonomy*. New York: Prentice Hall.



### Information about the IATEFL Conference Birmingham 2016

Our 50th Anniversary Conference will be held at the International Convention Centre in Birmingham, UK.

*The preliminary brochure and online booking will be live from June 2015.*

#### Dates for your diary:

12 April 2016

IATEFL Pre-Conference Events and Associates' day

13 - 16 April 2016

IATEFL Manchester 50th Conference and Exhibition

Find out more here: <http://www.iatefl.org/>