

Self-access and the multimedia language laboratory: designing a resource centre for EFL university students

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Resumen

Presentamos aquí la experiencia desarrollada en el Departamento de Filología Moderna de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha para poner en funcionamiento un centro de recursos como mecanismo de autoestudio para los estudiantes de licenciatura. La experiencia parte de la necesidad de buscar herramientas de compensación y mejora del nivel de inglés de los estudiantes, rentabilizando el laboratorio de idiomas multimedia de la Facultad de Letras y dotando a los estudiantes de herramientas de aprendizaje autodirigido que complementen la práctica docente presencial. Una vez descrito el funcionamiento del centro de recursos – atendiendo a factores como el personal, los materiales y equipamiento y la catalogación de recursos–, se da cuenta de la metodología de autoestudio que guía su utilización. Finalmente, se discuten los resultados obtenidos hasta el momento, y la aplicación del proyecto en otros contextos educativos.

Abstract

The experience undertaken in the Modern Languages Department, University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) to set up a resource centre as a self-access tool for B.A. students, is here presented. This experience results from the need to pursue strategies aiming to compensate for and improve undergraduates' EFL level by making profit of the Faculty of Arts multimedia language laboratory and providing the students with self-study mechanisms complementing face-to-face tuition. Once the functioning of the resource centre is described—considering such variables as personnel, materials and equipment and cataloguing—the self-access methodology guiding its use is accounted for. Results to date are finally discussed together with the applicability of the project in further teaching-and-learning domains.

1. Scope and purpose

This paper presents a case study dealing with the design of resource centres as a self-study tool for EFL university students, taking advantage of multimedia language laboratory facilities. The experience undertaken in this respect in the

Modern Languages Department of the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Faculty of Arts, Ciudad Real) is here described. This contribution will thus be particularly illuminating both for language teachers willing to make full use of laboratory facilities in university departments, and for students seeking self-access strategies helping them to make progress in their language-acquisition process. As is discussed in the end, this experience may also be useful in other teaching-and-learning domains.

This research was triggered by the need to find mechanisms assisting English Philology students in achieving linguistic proficiency in the course of their studies. Given the limited EFL time allocation in the B.A. curriculum and the students' difficulty in becoming proficient in English, two possible compensating strategies were contemplated by EFL teaching staff in order to overcome this deficit¹. Such initial considerations consisted of providing learners with self-study strategies which they might use to complement ordinary face-to-face EFL instruction, and making more profit of language laboratory facilities. A methodology was devised enabling learners to draw upon the language laboratory to develop autonomous work as a supplement to conventional group class work². The result was the establishment of a resource centre where students could accomplish their independent-learning activity.

Thus, in an attempt to account for the establishment of the resource centre and prior to the description of the self-study methodology being used, we will start by presenting its organisation and functioning, focusing on such significant variables as personnel, materials and equipment, and document cataloguing. The presentation of this experience will be completed with a discussion of the results to date and some final corollaries about the project.

¹ Students receive EFL tuition on a three-hour-per-week basis during all five years of their English Philology studies. Although they are assumed to start their B.A. degree with a pre-First Certificate level and achieve Proficiency level on completion of their studies, the actual fact is that the majority of the students neither have the entrance level nor do they reach actual Proficiency level as they graduate.

² This is a basic premise in the self-access literature, where authors like Sheerin consider that "self-access learning takes place in conjunction with classroom learning and is

2. Setting up the resource centre

The language laboratory in the Modern Languages Department is the space for the students to carry out their autonomous work. Following the self-study methodology described below, learners may draw upon available resources to complete their independent-learning activity as a supplement to conventional group class work³. As illustrates the following definition from the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1999: 202), language laboratories have customarily been understood as

a room that contains desks or individual booths with tape or cassette recorders and a control booth for teacher or observer and which is used for language teaching. [...] students can practise recorded exercises and follow language programmes either individually or in groups, and the teacher can listen to each student's performance.

However, as a result of the impact of the new technologies on education, traditional use of audio and video cassettes in the EFL classroom has led to a progressive incorporation of computer programmes, online resources, DVDs, satellite TV, and any other pedagogical applications of the new technologies. As Gousie (1998: 55) states,

In the fast-moving 1990s, a variety of new technological tools appeared on the scene. No longer were we swept by a wave of methodology; we were swamped by a tidal wave of computer-assisted technologies. Suddenly the capability of incorporating laserdiscs, hypertext cards, CDs, CD-ROMs and the Internet into our syllabi became a reality. Instructors of foreign languages are now faced with a myriad of new multimedia tools unheard of just a few years ago.

In the case of language laboratories as an auxiliary tool for EFL teaching and learning, more and more institutions happen to be setting up or updating laboratories so that they become provided with such multimedia facilities. Consequently, the notion of *multimedia* tends to recur to refer to the use of various computer applications in combination. As Pérez Guillot and Gimeno Sanz (1999: 519) point out,

el término multimedia significa literalmente *Múltiples Medios* [...] Combinando una serie de periféricos, como pueden ser vídeo, CD-ROM, altavoces, micrófonos, etc. con

complementary to it" (1989: 3).

³ The invaluable possibilities of the language laboratory for self-study have been acknowledged since the introduction of such an auxiliary tool for the teaching practice in the early seventies. Reflecting upon such beneficial effects within autonomous-learning processes, Dakin (1973: 2-3) claims in this respect that "each learner can work all the time [...] each learner can work at his own pace [...] each learner can work on his own materials [...] each learner is responsible for his own performance".

las herramientas de software necesarias para controlarlos, el ordenador tradicional adquiere enormes posibilidades que aportan al usuario métodos de trabajo mucho más efectivos⁴.

The multimedia language laboratory allows students to draw upon not only such computer facilities, but also other resources like DVD's, satellite television, video and cassette player in an independent way. Nonetheless, given the prominent role of computers and their fundamental "integration" (Brickman and Manning 1995: 65) of CD-ROMs, audio, video and microphones in the language laboratory, the term *multimedia language laboratory* tends to be taking over in the EFL literature.

The increasing demand for learning spaces where students can satisfy their various language-learning needs has meant that many language laboratories are becoming authentic *resource centres* which enable self-students to access their multiple resources which they can draw upon to fit in with their specific requirements: As Gremmo (1995b: 10) puts it,

A l'heure actuelle, on assiste à la mise en place de nombreux centres de ressources, espaces-langues ou autres médiathèques de langues, parce qu'on y voit, à juste titre, un moyen dynamique et souple de répondre à des demandes de formation en langues qui se font de plus en plus variées [...] les centres de ressources sont donc conçus comme des centres multilingues, où le lieu de travail et l'équipement servent à des apprenants pour apprendre des langues différentes⁵.

As it is, not only are resource centres often designed so that more than one language may be learnt, but also so that a single language may be learnt in view of the learners' different purposes, for example, preparing for international examinations, learning the language of business or tourism or just developing specific letter-writing skills.

⁴ "The term *multimedia* literally means multiple media [...] By combining a series of peripherals such as video, CD-ROMs, loudspeakers or microphones with the necessary software for controlling them, traditional PCs acquire enormous possibilities providing users with far more effective working methods".

⁵ "We are currently witnessing the establishment of many resource centres, language-learning spaces and multimedia language-reference libraries, for we can rightly see in such spaces a dynamic and flexible means of responding to language-learning demands which are becoming more and more varied [...] resource centres may thus be conceived of as multilingual centres, where the working space and the equipment provide learners with the possibility of learning different languages".

Thus, in an attempt to account for the design of the resource centre, a number of significant variables will be attended to, including personnel, materials and equipment, and document cataloguing.

2.1. Personnel

The resource centre includes a technician and a counsellor—or a team of them, if the number of self-students and the school resources permit it. Given the technological complexity of modern multimedia language laboratories, the technician has a key role in the installation of apparatuses and programmes, maintenance of equipment, copying of materials, etc. On the other hand, considering the centre's demands and availability, the team of counsellors will perform various roles associated with the self-study approach followed in the resource centre, namely familiarising and introducing learners to self-access patterns; carrying out counselling interviews with the self-students; selecting the materials and resources available in the resource centre; completing reports for funding institutions; etc. Since financial support does not allow recruiting an employee to carry out cataloguing and filing tasks, in practice, it is commonly counsellors who catalogue and classify materials, which are subsequently logged onto the database by the technician⁶. Considering the same subsidization constraints, secretarial work—including financial and administrative tasks—and hosting—i.e. reception of students or registration—are normally shared by the personnel available in the resource centre as supplementary roles. Depending on economic availability, the resource centre must include staff satisfying the students' speaking-practice demands and assessing their written work. Teachers' and counsellors' collaboration will be essential if enough personnel is not available to perform such tasks.

2.2. Materials and equipment

As far as equipment is concerned, together with traditional cassette and video playing-and-recording facilities, the resource centre contains multimedia applications including the various uses of computer programmes, access to Internet resources (e-mail, chats and newsgroups, distribution lists, videoconferencing, etc.). Satellite television and radio, together with DVD and hi-fi are also available.

⁶ In actual fact, in cases of extremely limited financial support, teachers will have to act both as counsellors and technicians as well. This may be the case in the early functioning stages of resource centres in various institutions.

Interaction is facilitated by the use of microphones and headphones. Individual booths provide access to multimedia computer facilities, audio, video, television and DVD facilities⁷. In addition, a slide projector, a photocopying machine and even a microfilm reader have been incorporated in the resource centre to be used if necessary. Storage of written materials such as textbooks, newspapers or magazines has likewise been contemplated.

The materials available in the resource centre are therefore of various types, for instance, traditional textbooks, print media, videos, cassettes, DVDs, language-learning software, websites, etc. Admittedly, the resource centre incorporates as many kinds of didactic documents as possible (e.g. general language-learning and ESP methods, skill-practice materials, pronunciation courses, film- and documentary-exploitation video activities, teacher-created exercises and documents, etc). In addition, the laboratory stocks various kinds of authentic material, which, despite not being originally designed for didactic purposes, may eventually serve learners for their specific learning objectives if employed under the appropriate tutoring of the counsellor (e.g. radio and TV recordings, films, songs, theatre plays, press articles, brochures, etc.). A number of supporting documents are also available, for example, level tests, learning-needs' questionnaires, self-assessment tests, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, grammar books, and various other categories of reference material. Methodological documents informing learners of the utilization of the resource centre and self-access techniques have also been considered.

2.3. Cataloguing of documents

In order that the resource centre may be used by the students, a cataloguing process is regularly carried out for the documents available in the language laboratory by means of a computerized database⁸. The database includes individual records of every single document available in the resource centre. Nonetheless, a parallel paper record of every document also exists conforming a loose-leaf binder catalogue for manual use, which is updated regularly on the basis of new loggings

⁷ As proves Brickman and Manning's (1995: 65) trade research, major international manufacturers in the field such as Tandberg Educational Inc., Sony Corp and ASC Telecom of America, Inc. integrate all such facilities into every single booth.

⁸ The database is operated on the basis of Microsoft-ACCESS. Nonetheless, alternative database programmes may be similarly effective.

in the computerized database⁹. Information about every record is as detailed as possible, and, whenever relevant, incorporates the following parameters:

- Reference information
 - Title
 - Code and reference of the document and any accompanying material
 - Format (book; cassette; video, DVD; CD-ROM; online resource)
 - Author
 - Publisher
 - Type of document (authentic material; didactic material; test; reference material; theoretical work; film; documentary; etc.)
- Contents
 - Type of exercise (drill; comprehension exercise; repetition; cloze test; translation; dictation; free activity; guided activity; etc.)
 - Level (beginners; (pre-/upper-)intermediate; advanced)
 - Field (general English; business English; English for tourism; medicine; etc.)
 - Communicative objectives (greetings; inviting; interviewing; etc.)
 - Learning objectives (speaking; listening; writing; reading; grammar; vocabulary, culture)
 - Genre (film; documentary; news; soap opera; western; comedy; book review; etc.)
 - Summary
- Further linguistic information
 - Accent (British/American English)
 - Register (formal; neutral; informal; colloquial; slang)
 - Speed (fast; medium, slow)
 - Duration
 - Quality of recording

In order to allow access to specific materials satisfying the student's learning needs, the database also allows exchanging the cataloguing variables of all the

⁹ As McCall points out, "one of the main advantages of using a computer to record accessories is that it is easy to generate printed stock lists or catalogue cards, which also serve as a manual back-up to the computer records" (1992: 33).

documents available in accordance with relevant categories from the learning point of view.

3. Choosing a self-study methodology

Following the establishment of the resource centre, a self-access approach was chosen so that students could perform their autonomous-learning activity in a systematic fashion. Self-study may be conceived of as “the capacity of materials to be used independently by learners” (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992: 326)¹⁰. In the EFL literature, there has been a wide range of attempts to devise systematic strategies and techniques allowing learners to develop their language-learning process in an autonomous fashion (cf. Dickinson 1992; McCall 1992; Moore 1992; Carvalho 1993; Cleary 1994). A basic premise in all of them is that “self-directed learning usually implies that learners take responsibility for their learning process, such as command of goal-setting, instructional design or evaluative procedures” (Nah 2000: 18).

As Sheerin stresses in discussing the role of supervision and counselling in self-access centres, “students will need guidance and counselling to help them analyse their own needs and set their own targets [...] They also need help evaluating and monitoring their own progress” (1989: 33). The self-study methodology for the students’ use of the multimedia language laboratory is based on the experience of the CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d’Applications Pédagogiques en Langues [*Centre for Research and Pedagogical Applications in Modern Languages*]), at the University of Nancy-2, France. As developed by Gremmo and Riley (1995a, 1995b), Holec (1996) and Riley (1995) at the CRAPEL, this approach shares with many other self-access methodologies a reliance on the students’ definition of their own independent-learning process. Holec (1996: 3) accordingly defines this form of self-directed learning as an autonomous process of which the learner’s is in charge: “Apprentissage autodirigé. Aussi nommé autoapprentissage, c’est un apprentissage dans lequel toutes les prises de décision menant à la définition d’un programme et à sa mise en oeuvre sont de la responsabilité de l’apprenant lui-même”¹¹.

¹⁰ The term *self-access* is usually found in the literature as well.

¹¹ “Self-directed learning—likewise called self-study—is a type of learning where of the decisions leading to the definition of a learning programme and its implementation are the learner’s responsibility”.

Nonetheless, what makes the CRAPEL's approach a distinctive one is the fundamental role of counselling for the self-students to be able to complete their autonomous language-learning activity. This self-access approach is not unique in considering the presence of a teacher assisting students in becoming autonomous learners, so that "on the teacher's part, the objective of conducting self-directed learning is to help learners to become skilful in those processes independent of teachers" (Nah 2000:18). However, as Gremmo (1995a) makes it clear, within the CRAPEL's self-study methodology, teachers are rather envisaged as counsellors helping students to learn by themselves¹². Given that scarce subsidization has not yet allowed the Modern Languages Department to recruit a team of professionals exclusively devoted to the practice of counselling in the resource centre, it is language teachers who usually perform such functions. As it is EFL students who usually draw upon the resource centre to enhance their knowledge of English, language teachers are available during their tutorials to assist students in planning their self-study so that it serves as a compensation for individual weaknesses.

Therefore, the students embarking on self-access programmes commit themselves to going through a series of periodical interviews with a counsellor in charge of monitoring their self-study activity. Initial counselling sessions aim to define the scope of the student's personal self-study programme. The counsellor and the learner negotiate a number of working variables which will enable the successful accomplishment of the student's autonomous-learning programme. According to Gremmo (1995b: 11), such variables will include¹³:

- defining learning objectives
- choosing contents and supporting materials
- selecting working procedures and techniques
- organising personal work in terms of time, timetable and length
- assessing one's self-study activity, both the achievement of learning aims and the procedures employed.

¹² Rather than on *teaching* students, within the CRAPEL approach to self-access the focus will be on the development of abilities and strategies whereby the students are able to *learn to learn* by themselves (cf. Holec 1990). Thus, what Ur (1991: 296) has come to label a "counsellor-client" relationship is established in these self-access situations.

¹³ The CRAPEL's methodology to self-access is consistent with other self-study approaches. By way of example, Sturtridge assumes that the role of the so-called teacher-facilitator will be "to help students recognize their needs and to advise on an approach, a work programme of materials" (1992: 11).

In the course of subsequent counselling sessions, the initial objectives, materials and procedures may be renegotiated on the basis of the learners' independent activity and their self-assessment. Interviews will continue until the student's learning objectives have been successfully achieved.

One major function of the resource centre is to provide the students with reference material of various kinds. However, the resource centre is mainly aimed at giving learners opportunities to practise different language skills. Materials in the language laboratory offer learners enough autonomy for the practice of reading and listening skills. On the other hand, until staff is not recruited exclusively dedicated to satisfying the resource centre requirements, language teachers collaborate in providing learners with speaking practice during tutorials and correcting their written work. Nonetheless, self-students have access to alternative writing and speaking practice by using different documents in the resource centre (interactive CD-ROMs, Internet chats and forums, etc).

4. Results and corollaries

One of the main concerns when setting up a multimedia language laboratory so that university students would be able to reach linguistic proficiency in English was to allow learners to do their work in an autonomous way,

encouraging and supporting greater student independence in the learning process and taking advantage of technology to do so [...] Students will learn how to find and use learning materials that meet their own individual learning needs, abilities, preferences, and interests; they will learn how to learn. (Twigg 1995: 25).

They have been using it on a regular basis, voluntarily committing themselves to going through counselling sessions to have their autonomous-learning process monitored. After spending a session in the resource centre, students can voluntarily hand in suggestions or comments assessing this form of self-access. According to such judgements, their motivation increases as they are able to cover individual deficiencies or expand upon different learning areas in an independent way, which increases their feeling that they are completing a made-to-measure learning process. On the other hand, counsellors keep a personal record of each of the students attending interviews regularly, writing a final report at the end of every year. Results thus confirm a steady increase in the communicative competence of the students following this self-study approach on a regular basis. By and large,

students undertaking regular and monitored self-access work in the resource centre have proved to achieve academic results between 1.3 and 2.2 points above the average in the different EFL subjects groups.

These positive results –including the positive feedback on the part of the users– is leading the staff involved in the implementation of this learning approach to institutionalise the use of the resource centre by incorporating the students' self-access activity within the B.A. curriculum of EFL¹⁴. As a matter of fact, this lack of institutionalisation results in deficient financial support which, as stated above, obliges committed teachers to perform tasks which should be carried out by other professionals¹⁵. In addition to using part of their tutorials to carry out counselling tasks and giving speaking practice to the self-students, teachers have to dedicate their time to other secretarial tasks. Full institutionalisation of the programme would mean that this activity would be acknowledged. In addition, a resource centre with an independent status in the university would attract extra funding to compensate for such staffing deficiencies¹⁶.

Although this research is the result of work with university students of EFL, the encouraging results of the experience may also recommend it as highly enriching for other language-teaching institutions aiming to benefit from language laboratories as a supplementary self-study resource for EFL learners, including official language schools, secondary schools and other privately-funded institutions.

¹⁴ Teachers of EFL subjects are currently working on the project of requiring students to complete as much as one third of their tuition in the form of independent-learning activity in the resource centre. Counselling sessions would accordingly be considered as official tuition. This self-study work would allow students to achieve individual learning requirements which might otherwise be difficult to tackle through group work as developed conventionally with all students attending lectures at the same time.

¹⁵ This is a common hindrance in the early stages of many resource centres where various staffing levels have to be performed by the same professionals: "Given that salary costs are often a high proportion of any organization's budget, the temptation to economize on staffing levels may be great [...] Academic staff will almost certainly be involved in the running of self-access facilities" (McCall 1992: 40).

¹⁶ This independent status would signify that, like many other university institutes, the resource centre would not be directly dependent on a Department—in this case the Modern Languages one. Thus, although students from language departments would almost certainly be a major category of users, other external users would draw upon the resource centre facilities, including users not directly linked to the university: professionals needing to learn ESP, school teachers doing refreshment courses, institutions collaborating with the resource centre, etc.

Moreover, although the project was carried out with intermediate and advanced EFL students, the experience may likewise be adapted to students of other modern languages, and of different levels. Resource centres in university departments may thus open up a more direct contact between university and society, being used not only by degree students but also to satisfy the wide range of specific-purpose needs of other learners.

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