Self-Access: The Ways and Means; The Pros and Cons

Carol J. Everhard
Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics
Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece

The road towards self-access could be described as long, steep and hazardous, for many are the pitfalls which await the practitioner of self-access. Those daring enough to follow this route, will undoubtedly find their journey hindered rather than facilitated by the minefield of misconceptions which have come to surround self-access over the years. In this paper, it is hoped with a minimum of injury to clear the field of at least some of those mines and to dispel some of the myths and misunderstandings surrounding the term self-access.

It would indeed be interesting to discover who first coined the phrase “self-access” and take them to task as to the validity and meaningfulness of this expression. While the collocation of the two words “self” and “access” may seem incongruous and even dubious, it has nevertheless gained acceptance in teaching methodology terminology and whether we approve of the term or not, it seems to be here to stay.

What is perhaps even more disconcerting is the fact that in people’s minds self-access has become equated with autonomous learning and learner autonomy, in turn, has become synonymous with learner independence, when these are clearly not at all the same. This point is picked up by Sheerin (1991), who says,

“Self-access” is by no means synonymous with “learner autonomy” or “learner independence” but there can be little doubt that the current widespread interest in self-access has come about largely as a result of educational reform movements which are concerned with a learner-centred approach. (143)

and Sturtridge (1992) also points out confusion over terminology.

The whole area of learner independence, which involves encouraging learners to further their own learning, is cursed by a variety of terminology and also by a variety of objectives. For some the objective is full autonomy for the learner, while for others the objective may be limited to helping learners recognise that they can do some things for themselves.(4)

While the term individualisation perhaps comes closest in meaning to self-access, individualisation does seem to have wider connotations, leading McDonough and Shaw (1994) to state,

To some practitioners, individualisation is a term which is used to cover all topics which focus on the learner as an individual.(243)

Since the term “self-access” is not in itself satisfactory, we must look at the literature on self-access to see if we can arrive at a satisfactory definition for this misnomer. Sheerin (1991) defines it as,
... a way of describing learning materials that are designed and organised in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own (although this does not preclude the possibility of various kinds of support), and obtain feedback... (143)

while Dickinson (1987) says,

Self-access refers to the organisation of learning materials (and possibly equipment) to make them directly available to the learner. (10)

Similarly, Sturtridge (1992) defines it as,

... any system which makes materials available to language learners so that they can choose to work as they wish, usually without a teacher or with very limited teacher support. (4)

Thus, we see a great deal of similarity between those definitions, with their emphasis on materials, their direct availability to learners, with little or no direct intervention on the part of teachers.

In my own definition of self-access, which appears in the abstract of this paper,

... the provision of resources which allow the learner a degree of independence in the teaching-learning process. (Abstract)

The word “resources” is used in its fullest sense to mean materials and any equipment necessary to exploit those materials, human resources which would include other learners, teachers and administrative staff and of course the space required for the storage of both materials and equipment and for the execution of tasks, which could be a classroom or another area designed for that purpose.

However, in the search for a definition for self-access, there is the danger of being led down a path called “Fallacy Lane”, for in beginning to elaborate on what self-access resources might grow into or become, the association between self-access and a self-access centre is formed or reinforced in people’s minds and this would seem to be a fatal mistake. Once established in the mind, the idea that a self-access centre is a prerequisite for self-access and independent learning to be put into practice is difficult or even impossible to eradicate. This fallacy is undoubtedly one of the reasons why many people are discouraged from experimenting with self-access.

In fact, the existence of a self-access centre, however well-furbished or equipped is no guarantee in itself that an institution will produce independent learners. For example, in the United Kingdom, facilities are very often open on a 9 to 5, Monday to Friday basis, so that it is almost impossible for students to use the resource outwith class-time. In addition, courses in private institutions tend to range in length from 3 or 4 weeks to one year at the maximum, so that there is insufficient time to gear the majority of students up to using such a facility.

In other institutions, such as that of the British Council Direct Teaching Operation in Thessaloniki, the large numbers in classes and the small space provided for the facility, do not make class visits with the teacher very feasible. While the practice, in this particular case, of permitting learners unrestricted access to limited facilities all day, with full facilities available in the evening at peak teaching times, so that students can visit the facility before or after a lesson, is admirable, used in this way self-access does tend to be regarded by teachers and students alike as an optional extra.
There would seem to be four possible ways that a self-access resource can be exploited. One of these is to use a self-access facility only within class time, either using the classroom itself or another specially-designed area. There are, for example, very good reports of self-access being used exclusively within class-time in state schools in Israel. Alternatively, self-access can be used outwith class-time and the example of the British Council in Thessaloniki using self-access mainly outwith class time has just been given.

Combining the two aforesaid and using such a facility both within and outwith class-time seems ideal, but will make demands on space or be difficult to timetable or necessitate a system of pre-booking. Notice, however, that all these variations are combined with conventional teaching and this is one of the problems for teachers and administrators. It is very difficult to prove the effectiveness and efficiency of self-access.

While we can gather statistical evidence of how often students visit a facility and how long they spend there, their choice of materials and their preferred modes of learning, the fact remains that so long as self-access is combined with classroom teaching, it is impossible to judge how much of the learning is attributable to the teacher and how much to the learners' efforts on their own.

Thus, the effectiveness of self-access can be gauged only when its exploitation is divorced from normal classroom teaching. There are, of course, reports of independent learning being achieved among groups of learners out with the conventional classroom, in particular by Riley and Holec at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pedagogiques en Langues, otherwise known as CRAPEL at the University of Nancy in France, where Riley (1982) reports that they have even trained a group of old-age pensioners to be independent learners!

It seems logical that self-access should form an integral part of the work that goes on within an institution, so that both teachers and learners can see the reason for its existence and are committed to its exploitation. Teachers should be encouraged to regard self-access as an integral part of their overall teaching framework. Indeed, the beauty of self-access is that it can be all things to all people, given that such a resource can range in size from something as small as a shoebox, to something as large as a purpose-built suite or complex and can pander to preferred learning styles, be it working alone, in pairs, or in groups, large and small.

Self-access can be something as basic as a cardboard box containing a variety of tasks or worksheets which can be brought to the classroom and selected by students according to their interests or needs. A trolley can hold an even greater range of materials in a variety of forms and formats and it provides mobility within the classroom, from one classroom to another and by means of a lift, from one floor to another.

While a cupboard does not permit much mobility or flexibility, it does provide security for precious materials and equipment. Provided that desks are not fixed to the floor, a classroom can be re-arranged so that different activities can be conducted in different parts of the room. For listening and viewing activities headphones can be used so that other students are not disturbed.

If there is a library within our institution with adequate space, then a corner can be taken over for self-access purposes. If there is no limit on space, then a whole room or suite of rooms can be devoted to self-access.
While the idea of self-access in a shoe-box might seem amusing, there are indeed very strong arguments for starting off self-access facilities on a small scale. There are many arguments for mobility in self-access, especially in the initial stages of a course of learning, so that appropriate materials can be introduced to learners in a familiar environment i.e. the classroom, with the teacher on constant stand-by as guide and mentor.

The relevance of self-access to what normally goes on in the classroom can be seen by both teachers and learners and teachers are given the opportunity to witness experimentation with materials at first-hand. They can then see the reactions of students and gauge the suitability and popularity of particular items. Students can also be coaxed and led gradually towards a more independent frame of mind.

Sceptics will of course, point out to us that libraries have been providing resources for learning and catering to individual needs for years, but self-access goes several steps further by:

a. ensuring that knowledge or information is always available
b. offering knowledge in manageable amounts
c. offering guidance through the knowledge in the form of diagnostic tests, pathways, learner contracts etc.
d. ensuring that knowledge is available in a large number of formats
e. forming a link between what goes on in the classroom and what goes on in the self-access facility

Finding suitable materials to meet the specifications of level, type, range and interest and in sufficient quantities and often within a specific length of time, usually presents formidable problems.

If our institution has been working towards independent learning over a number of years, then we will be fortunate in having a large bank of in-house materials which may simply need replication and supplementation to expand our stock to a suitable size.

If, on the other hand, we have no such bank of materials at the ready to draw on and perhaps only a shoe-string budget at our disposal, it will be necessary to restrict or prioritise use of the facility to particular categories or groups within the institution. It is easy to be over-ambitious as regards targeting and often irresolvably difficult to decide which group, course or level has the greatest needs.

There are strong arguments for starting with freshmen or beginners if we want to instil good learning habits, but if there are no further materials available to them as they progress with their learning, they will become not only disappointed and frustrated, but terribly disillusioned. Many pros and cons must therefore be carefully weighed up and a suitable plan for self-access, with reasonable goals and a realistic pace of development established.

As our collection of materials grows it will require a great deal of organisation and a whole range of management skills. Decisions will have to be made concerning the production of materials, whether they should be produced in-house or be ready-published and they will have to be selected according to certain criteria such as subject, level, skill etc. Then, if the materials are ready-published, we must decide whether to leave them intact as books or whether to disseminate and chop them up in some way. Materials will have to be grouped together and organised in a way to suit our institution, as well as processed, classified and indexed. We may also decide to have pathways which will lead the students from one set
of materials to another, according to their needs. In addition, steps will have to be taken to protect materials from constant wear and tear and to ensure that they are secure.

To facilitate the exploitation of our collection of materials, each worksheet, book or package will require a clear statement of aims and objectives and clear instructions. They will be graded according to difficulty and stored in such a way that they can be found without too much effort. A wide range and variety of materials will be required, with each item having its own intrinsic interest and motivation, an answer-key and built-in self assessment as well as suggestions for further practice.

Hill (1994) tells us that

Whilst the physical aspects of a self-access centre clearly contribute substantially to its overall success, it is also important to examine the underpinning theoretical structure.(217)

This reminds us that not all attempts at putting self-access into practice have met with success.

Sturtridge (1992) makes the interesting point that many self-access facilities which opened in the 70’s have subsequently closed down and asks,

Why should this be when the concept is universally hailed as a great step forward in educational circles?(9)

The resistance which self-access encountered is understandable when we consider how much attention became focussed on the ‘self’ in self-access i.e. the learner, leaving teachers to shrink into insignificance. Some ruthless administrators even exploited self-access as a means of economising on teaching staff. Thus the paradox that Strevens (1980) pointed out in 1979 was forgotten, that

... it takes better teachers to focus on the learner.(17)

He makes the point that,

...greater attention to the needs of the learner ineluctably requires greater sensitivity and understanding, broader technical, pedagogical capability and thus a more comprehensive background of teaching and experience, on the part of the teacher.(17)

He sums up by saying,

... in order to focus more closely and with greater effect on the learner, the teacher has to be yet more sophisticated, better trained, more thoroughly aware of what he or she is doing, and why than before. Above all, what the teaching profession must avoid is the facile assumption that individualisation in some way implies considering the learner instead of the teacher. On the contrary we must realise that it is the teacher who is in fact responsible for doing this focusing on the learner.(28)

It could be that some people latched on to self-access for the wrong reasons e.g. to save money, as was mentioned earlier or as a publicity stunt or some teachers may have imagined that having set up such a facility, they would just leave learners to get on with it and have an easy job. Or it might just be the case that in order to break with convention people often go to extremes. In this instance, teachers were not content with shifting some of the responsibility on to learners, but aimed to make them completely autonomous. Not
only were students ill-prepared to deal with a state of complete independence, but in many cases they did not even desire it.

Sturtridge (1992) points out that,

The answer may well lie in the failure to prepare staff and learners for this sort of approach. Preparing both staff and learners to understand the concept behind free access to learning materials is crucial to the successful use of such centres. (9)

My own opinion coincides with that of Sheerin (1991) who says,

...it is all too often assumed that it is only learners who need support in self-access and self-directed learning, whereas, in fact, teachers also need preparation - psychological and methodological - to raise their awareness of the rationale underlying learner-centred approaches and to equip them with the technical skills they need to implement self-access successfully. (153)

It seems that too many false assumptions were made in the past. It was taken for granted that teachers naturally had the skills to establish and run a self-access facility as well as the skills to train learners to manage their learning more effectively. Both learners and teachers were ill-equipped to deal with the variety and complexity of the new roles assigned to them. Attempts to switch roles were perhaps made too quickly and abruptly and it was assumed that teachers had the know-how to transfer learners from the conventional, prescribed, teacher-dependent state they were used to and prepare them for one of considerable responsibility, freedom of choice and independence.

In the past, one factor that worked against teachers in their attempts to train learners for their new roles was the dearth of information and data available at that time as to how learners actually learn. Although we may now be some way closer to understanding some of the strategies and techniques which learners employ in language learning, thanks to the ongoing research of people such as Ellis and Sinclair in the U.K., Riley and Holec in France and Wendin and Rubin in the U.S.A., there nevertheless remain a large number of 'black holes' in this area.

It seems that once again there has been confusion over terminology, so that the term most frequently used in relation to independent learning, namely 'learner training' has, in some cases, been confused with 'study skills'. While Ellis and Sinclair (1989) confirm that there is a large area of overlap between study skills and learner training, they point out that,

... learner training is more far-reaching .... (4)

This is because in study skills, the objectives are imposed, while in learner-training, learners set their own objectives. Study skills focus on products, while learner training focuses on the process. With study skills, tasks and activities are specific, while learner training encourages reflection on attitudes, preferences and experimentation with different activities. Study skills prepare learners for external assessment while learner training prepares them for self-assessment.

It was perhaps unreasonable of teachers to expect that learners could acquire the skills for independent study without already having acquired basic study skills. These areas, in combination with learner induction and learner counselling have often been treated in a slipshod and haphazard manner. If any satisfactory degree of independence is to be
achieved then what is required is an ongoing learner education programme, with nothing left to chance. Such a programme would contain basic study skills, such as how to refer to a book, a dictionary, a bibliography, a library etc. They will require training for independence which would include needs assessment, awareness-raising, self-assessment. They will need initial and continuous induction in the facilities on offer, ongoing counselling to assess if goals have been achieved or need to be re-set, and training in recording their progress.

If we consider a particular area of study such as vocabulary, then we can see that study skills would consist of training in using a dictionary, whether monolingual or bilingual, while learner training would show students how to organise vocabulary e.g. by using index cards or networks, to memorise and recall vocabulary. Needs assessment would reveal their areas of strength and weakness such as word-building etc. which would help them in setting goals through pathways, a learner syllabus, learner contracts etc. Induction would lead them to suitable exercises in books etc. at their various stages of learning and counselling would help them to recognise their progress achieved and enable them to set future targets.

Let us turn our attention once more to teachers, who must also go through a gradual and ongoing programme of education enabling them to see how to implement self-access in their day-to-day teaching, who know how to teach study skills, who know how to train learners, how to produce suitable and attractive materials, how to select and organise them. They should also know how to train learners in self-assessment, how to counsel learners and how to use all the sophisticated gadgetry which will be of benefit to our learners, particularly computer accessories.

Dickinson (1987) hits the nail on the head when he says,

The term self-access is often used as though it was a method or technique; it is, of course, neither. (10)

Rogers (1969; 1983) highlights the fact that

......a humanistic approach to education is not the product of one person, nor is it implemented in only one way. ...... teachers of different ages, different interests, different personalities, different subject fields, all find distinctive ways of creating in their own groups, classes, courses, or departments, an experience of responsible freedom in which creative learning can take place. (4)

Self-access is an approach to education based on a conviction, an ethos, a philosophy, call it what you will, which springs from a belief in the importance of individuals and their rights to maximise and fulfil their potential as learners and as beings.

Though individual teachers might subscribe to the ideology of learner independence and might try enthusiastically to put self-access into practice, if this is not backed up by a network of technical, clerical and managerial assistance, not to mention the support of learners and colleagues, then they clearly face an impossible task. It would seem that such an ethos has to be accepted, expounded and promoted by everyone within an institution if its success is to be ensured.
Clearly, any attempt at putting self-access into practice has to be a collaborative one and will result in what Sheerin (1991) says.

At its best (it) is a symbiotic and mutually enriching relationship. (154)

This is surely something worth aiming for in the process of education.

References

Dickinson, L.
1987  *Self-instruction in Language Learning*, C.U.P.

Ellis, G. & B. Sinclair,
1989  *Learning to Learn English*, C.U.P.

Hill, B.

McDonough, J. & C. Shaw,

Riley, P.

Rogers, C.

Sheerin, S.

Strevens, P.

Sturtridge, G.