

Examining the ‘self’ in self-access materials

Hayo Reinders and Marilyn Lewis

University of Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract

Self-access centres (SACs*) are an increasingly common form of support for language learners. Self-access learning, by its nature, is heavily dependent on the availability of sufficient and relevant materials of a high quality, since students often have little or no access to further support from a teacher. The materials thus have to be very clear, comprehensive, and easy to use. Although more and more publishers now include comments such as ‘suitable for self-access’ in their catalogues, it is not always clear on what basis such comments are made. The majority of purchasing decisions are made by SAC staff without even such basic comments. This article presents the results of an evaluation of a random selection of materials in the SAC at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, using an evaluative checklist developed by the authors. Results from a quantitative analysis show that many materials do not include the types of support needed in a self-access context. Results from a qualitative analysis of the evaluators’ comments show that the features most commented on by teachers (either for their absence or their presence) are ease of access and support for the wider development of students’ language learning strategies.

Features of self-access materials

A university SAC usually includes a mixture of published and locally produced resources, the latter often based on authentic materials used by all students, such as lecture handouts and audio- or video-clips of lectures. Purchasing published self-access materials is said to be a “quick and convenient” solution (Gardner & Miller, 1999: 113) for setting up a suitable stock of resources, such as would typically be found in a SAC, some of which might be labeled ‘self-access’ while others would be generic ESL materials. The reality is that self-access materials really do need to stand alone, even when some advisor support is available in SACs. By definition, users who are new speakers of English may not be able to follow complex instructions in English. Therefore the ‘access’ part of the definition would seem to be the first point for evaluating materials.

Knowing how good your materials are is said to be the first step in stocking a SAC. Gardner & Miller (1999:113) believe these materials “should be constantly open to evaluation”. The question then arises, on what basis this evaluation should be done. What distinguishes generic ESL materials from those which claim to be suitable for self-access? Tomlinson (1998:322-3) lists 11 features of successful self-study materials. In summary, these are:

- authenticity of language
- reading to include listening

- responses include both global responses which develop high level skills and focused, specific tasks
- production tasks situationally based and in the target language
- learning choices should cater for a variety of language levels, learning styles and time available
- some activities involve other students
- feedback through commentaries rather than answer keys
- emphasis on learner training
- suggestions for individual follow-up activities

Despite being listed in a self-access context, many of these are in fact also characteristics of good classroom learning materials.

The Gardner & Miller list (1999:114) has seven imperatives, the first of which is “people power”, meaning the ability of SAC staff to conduct an evaluation. This point brings attention to evaluative tools. The authors (Reinders & Lewis, forthcoming) have reviewed six previously published evaluative checklists for self-access and general (i.e. not language-specific) self-study materials and found that 1) some included only closed questions ‘Do the materials provide evaluation options?’, 2) some were very general ‘Contains meaningful language input’, or 3) were subjective ‘Has an attractive presentation’, or 4) did not leave room for additional comments by the evaluators. As a result, an alternative practical checklist was developed to allow self-access staff to evaluate a resource quickly while still leaving room for personal comments. (See Appendix for the evaluative checklist; the categories are shown in the left-hand column, alongside the results.)

Gardner (1999) suggests that a SAC’s effectiveness (the extent to which it meets its goals) and its efficiency (the relationship between the cost and the outcomes) are largely dependent on the quality of its resources. Resources take up a large part of the budget and, if they are not carefully chosen and are inappropriate for the student body (e.g. they are not suitable for self-access or the level is wrong), then they should be identified and replaced. Reinders & Cotterall (2001) investigated the borrowing and use of materials within one SAC in New Zealand. They found that especially listening materials were popular and also certain computer programmes, but only those that were easy to understand. ‘Learning to learn’ type resources were the least favourite. Interestingly, many students said that, although they were generally satisfied with the range and quality of the resources, they had difficulty locating items which were appropriate for their level and needs.

Evaluating self-access materials

Our study investigated 25 randomly chosen examples of materials which had been purchased for the university’s SAC. The materials included both books (several including audio materials) and CD-ROMs. They also included generic as well as ‘self-access’ labeled resources. The analysis was carried out by three staff members (all of whom were language consultants in the SAC) using the evaluative checklist designed by the authors (see Appendix).

The checklist included 1) yes/no/unsure questions, 2) room for additional notes, and 3) open questions about the best and most difficult aspects of the resource.

Results

The results from the evaluations are first presented quantitatively; next, a qualitative analysis presents common themes in the evaluators' comments.

Quantitative analysis

The quantitative results are presented by category as they appeared on the evaluative checklist (see Appendix for a summary) and consist of counts of the number of responses to each question.

Selecting the resource

The first category on the checklist was labelled 'selecting the resource', and included three questions related to the initial selection (or rejection) of a resource by self-access staff. The first of these asked whether the materials had been classified as suitable for self-access by the publisher. This could be determined either from the cover of the book/CD-ROM or from the introduction. Out of 25 materials, a total of 13, or just over half, made claims to this effect. For four others, it was not possible to tell; in these cases, the words 'self-access' were not used but comments about their usefulness for individual students were included.

The second question asked whether there was a clear description of the student level the material was aimed at. This turned out to be the case for most of the samples (19 out of 25). In reply to the third question, only five resources had to be used sequentially; the others could be 'dipped into' by the students, depending on their needs.

Accessing the parts of the resource

The second category was to do with finding and accessing specific information. Arguably, this is an important feature of self-access materials, where the topics and order are not determined by a teacher.

Almost all materials included a table of contents (23) but only just over half (13) had an index of some sort. Additional 'tools', in the form of detailed 'maps' (3), glossaries (6), and chapter previews or summaries (7), were provided by fewer materials.

The learning process

Where no teacher is present, self-access materials need to be more comprehensive. Therefore this category contained four questions about support for the learners' learning process. The first of these asked whether information was routinely summarised. This turned out not to be the case in 16 out of the 25 materials. Most materials included examples for tasks, but a fair number (9) did not. Two-thirds of the materials (15) did not provide guidance for the learners by providing objectives for tasks. Surprisingly, nine materials did not include answer keys or criteria for tasks.

Learning to learn

The final category was to do with learning skills. The majority of the materials (16) included notes on the learning process, but only two provided information on goal-setting.

Interim summary: quantitative results

Some features were very common, being shared by the majority of materials – most publishers now include clear information about the intended student level. Most of the sampled materials had a table of contents, and many included notes on how to improve one's learning. At the same time, many aspects particularly useful for self-access materials were not equally present. Many books and CD-ROMS did not include (chapter) previews, or summaries, objectives, or even answer keys. It appears evaluations such as those carried out here are useful to identify which materials may either have to be rejected or enhanced in some way.

Materials labelled self-access

In order to find out if materials labelled as suitable for self-access included more of these types of support, a separate analysis was carried out. All except one of the 13 resources clearly described intended student level. However, only five resources included chapter previews or summaries, and only six summarised key information within chapters. Despite being labelled as self-access resources, four of these did not include examples for tasks and seven did not include objectives. Interestingly, and perhaps worryingly, five did not even include answers keys or criteria for evaluation. Eight out of 13 included notes on the learning process but none gave information on how to set goals.

It appears that the 'self-access' materials were not very different from the regular materials, lacking some important features.

Qualitative analysis

Next, we turn our attention to the comments made by the evaluators in response to each question as well as their overall comments on the resources. These were in the form of additional notes in the right-hand column of the checklist or as sentence completion statements reported below. Three features were mentioned repeatedly: authenticity, learner training, and the 'stand-alone' nature of the materials. In addition, one of the three evaluators mentioned the chance for group learning.

Authenticity

Authenticity has been listed by many, including Tomlinson (1998), as an important feature of ESL materials. One teacher commented favourably on materials with this feature:

The best aspect of the resource was the naturalness of the activities because it helps the students feel that they are in real life situations and gives practice in listening to native speech.

However, this same feature could be viewed negatively:

The most difficult aspect was (sometimes) the speed of the recordings, because though they are naturally varied in real life, it becomes difficult for the students to understand the words and comprehend the situation without the help of a teacher.

The most difficult parts were the exercises towards the end of the book because students may not be able to speak fast enough when they practise the 'relaxed (fast) pronunciation' exercises which are more complex than those at the beginning of the book.

The most difficult parts were those parts that a student needs to pronounce long sentences because he/she may find it challenging to speak a long sentence as 'fast' as the narrator does.

Learner training

Another important feature of self-access materials is learner training. Again, this was mentioned both positively and negatively. Two features which would assist learners were:

'Notes on the learning process' (mentioned twice)

'Learning Strategies' because students can think through their learning process and modify it prior to or after doing their work.

However, these notes were also criticized:

The most difficult part was also 'Notes on the learning process' because sometimes it is difficult to apply a strategy, without being given an example or the chance to practise it with an opportunity to get feedback from someone more experienced. E.g. on page 51 under 'Listening Strategy', students are recommended: "...you need to be aware of a logical, implicit cause-effect relationship" but are not given tips on identifying this 'implicit relationship'.

The most difficult parts were also Notes on the learning process because sometimes it is difficult to apply a strategy even if a student understands how to do so. E.g. page 51, 'Listening Strategy'—It states that "...you need to be aware of a logical, implicit cause-effect relationship". It may be difficult for a student to find out the cause-effect relationship which is implicit.

Opportunities for group learning

Self-access does not mean learning only on one's own. One teacher supported Tomlinson's point about practice in groups:

Recommends group discussion based on topics relevant to listening activity

Independence from teacher

To be truly self-accessible, materials must be able to be used without a teacher. One evaluator noted a weakness in the teaching of oral language:

The least satisfactory aspect were the parts about 'stress', 'Intonation' etc. (e.g. page 198) because students may not get the right or accurate message from the author if there is no teacher to explain to them the parts that they are not clear about.

Others noted poor or missing explanations and examples:

The least satisfactory aspect was the absence of explanation of grammar rules, which are taught through examples only. The student may not understand why and just understands how the rule works.

Examples are provided for some tasks only.

The most difficult parts were the 'Consolidation Exercises' because unless a student understands very thoroughly the vocabulary items taught in a chapter, these exercises can be difficult for him/her.

In contrast, some materials had positive comments for the explanations, including feedback:

The best aspect ... was clear instructions because it makes it easier for students learning on their own. Also the diagrammatic representations of intonations.

The best aspect of the framework was the additional exercises - the feedback glossary and recording option because they make it a complete self-access tool.

Other comments praised the stand-alone nature of the explanations in some materials; specifically, they listed:

- the letter of explanation unit after each exercise title because it makes it easier for students to go back if they make mistakes (mentioned twice);
- the speaking practice because a student can practise speaking after listening to a sentence and the narrator repeats the sentence (for the student to check);
- 'Progress' because students can plan and check their progress (e.g. there are sub-topics called "All exercises up to now", "Progress graph") (mentioned twice);
- the table of contents because each unit is subcategorised into subtopics like listening, vocabulary, etc. The setting is clear and it is convenient for students to choose the ones they want to practice;
- 'Information summarised' because students know clearly the focus of learning at the beginning of each chapter (in fact, there are about 12 vocabulary items to be learned in each chapter, so one's learning can be really focused but essential);
- chapter previews and summaries because, by doing these parts, students can be actively engaged in the listening tasks before and after doing them.

Discussion

The books available for this study had already been purchased. Therefore the exercise was to survey materials in general, rather than to make pre-purchasing decisions. Our results suggest that purchasing books for self-access purposes involves more than reading the publishers' publicity. Materials that may be perfectly suitable for use in a classroom environment may not be in a self-access context. Not all materials we surveyed included the support learners in a SAC are likely to need. While it was not surprising to find that this applied to general materials, interestingly, it was also a feature of some materials labelled as suitable for self-access. It is then up to staff to decide whether to keep the materials or make adaptations.

How realistic is it to expect staff, employed for their advisory role, to take the time needed for such a survey? The time investment needed for an evaluation such as the one presented here is relatively small and probably well worth it in ensuring learners have the most appropriate resources available to them, and to increase overall efficiency of the SAC, as suggested by Gardner (1999).

We look forward to reading of any other evaluative checklists which have been developed for the same purpose as ours and also the outcome of any evaluations of self-access materials that have been carried out.

References

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* Different terms are used in the field, such as Independent Learning Centre (ILC), Language Support Centre (LSC), self-study centre, etc. Sometimes, Self-Access Centres are part of the Learning Support or Student Learning Centre. Here, we will use the term Self-Access Centre, abbreviated to SAC.

Appendix: Evaluative checklist

Categories	Yes/No/Unsure
<i>Selecting the resource</i>	
Claims to be suitable for self-access	Yes 13 No 8 Unsure 4
Clearly describes student level	Yes 19 No 6
Needs to be used sequentially	Yes 5 No 19 Unsure 1
<i>Accessing the parts of the resource</i>	
An index	Yes 13 No 12
A table of contents	Yes 23 No 2
A detailed 'map'	Yes 3 No 22
A glossary	Yes 6 No 19
Chapter previews or summaries	Yes 7 No 18
<i>The learning process</i>	
Information summarised	Yes 9 No 16
Examples provided for tasks	Yes 16 No 9
Objectives provided for tasks	Yes 10 No 15
Keys/answers/criteria for tasks	Yes 16 No 9
<i>Learning to learn</i>	
Notes on the learning process	Yes 16 No 9
Shows how to set goals	Yes 2 No 23

Hayo Reinders is the director of the English Language Self-Access Centre at the University of Auckland. He is co-editor of PacCALL Journal and manages the learner autonomy project inventory. His interests are in learner autonomy, self-access, and computer language learning. (See www.hayo.nl.)

Marilyn Lewis has recently retired as senior lecturer at the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics at the University of Auckland, where she taught teaching methodology and academic writing. Previously, she worked in staff development for New Zealand tertiary teachers from a range of disciplines and also taught in Asia.