Part 1 Theoretical perspectives

1 Background to self-access language learning

1.1 Introduction

Our intention in this chapter is to provide an overview of issues concerning learner autonomy and other related areas which have an influence on self-access language learning (SALL). We begin by examining the debate surrounding autonomy and identifying the major influences which have contributed to this debate. This debate will not be discussed after this chapter because it is not central to the purpose of the book. It is, however, an important starting point for talking about SALL. The remainder of the chapter focuses specifically on SALL by identifying:

- its characteristics
- the beliefs and attitudes which affect the acceptance of SALL
- the change in roles which is required of both learners and teachers
- the challenges of promoting speaking in SALL
- the differences between self-access centres (SACs) in native and non-native speaking environments
- the kinds of learning environments in which SALL can take place
- possible areas of resistance to SALL.

Finally, we discuss issues related to the costs of establishing and maintaining SALL. Many of the points related to SALL which we touch on in this chapter are developed more fully in the rest of the book.

1.2 Definitions

It is difficult to define concepts like 'autonomy' and 'independent learning' for three reasons. First, different writers have defined the concepts in different ways. Second, they are areas of ongoing debate and therefore definitions are continuing to mature as more discussion takes place. Third, these concepts have developed independently in different geographical areas and therefore they have been defined using different (but often similar) terminology.

1.2.1 Autonomy

The concept of 'autonomous learning' stemmed from debates about the development of life-long learning skills and the development of independent thinkers both of which originated in the 1960s. By 1981 Holec (1981: 3) had defined autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. He developed this definition further in 1985 by talking about autonomy as a conceptual tool. Holec has been a major influence in the debate about autonomy in language learning and his initial definition has been taken as a starting point in much subsequent work in the area. Dickinson (1987: 11), for example, accepts the definition of autonomy as a 'situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his [or her] learning and the implementation of those decisions'.

Other definitions of autonomy have situated it within three major schools of thought. Some see it is a personal characteristic, some see it as a political concept and others see it as a definition of educational practices. Two writers who see autonomy as a personal characteristic are Little (1990) and Kenny (1993). Little (1990: 7) sees learner autonomy as 'essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning'. Kenny (1993: 436) states that autonomy is not only the freedom to learn but also 'the opportunity to become a person'. An example of viewing autonomy within a political framework is found in the work of Benson (1997: 29) who defines learner autonomy as representing 'a recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems' and, within the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language, as 'a recognition of the rights of the "non-native speaker" in relation to the "native-speaker" within the global order of English' (Benson 1997: 29). An example of viewing autonomy as an educational practice comes from Boud (1988: 17) who suggests that, as well as being an educational goal autonomy is 'an approach to educational practice'.

The above definitions deal with the concept of learner autonomy. In this book, which places the learner at the centre of focus, it is important to identify the characteristics of an autonomous learner. In a colloquium in which an attempt was made to define the characteristics of an autonomous learner, Dam et al. (1990: 102) defined one as 'an active participant in the social processes of classroom learning ... an active interpreter of new information in terms of what she/he already and uniquely knows ... [someone who] knows how to learn and can use this knowledge in any learning situation she/he may encounter at any stage in her/his life'. In addition, Dam et al. (1990: 102) characterise learner autonomy as 'a readiness to take charge of one's own learning'. Gardner and Miller (1996: vii) define autonomous language learners as those who 'initiate the planning and implementation of their own learning

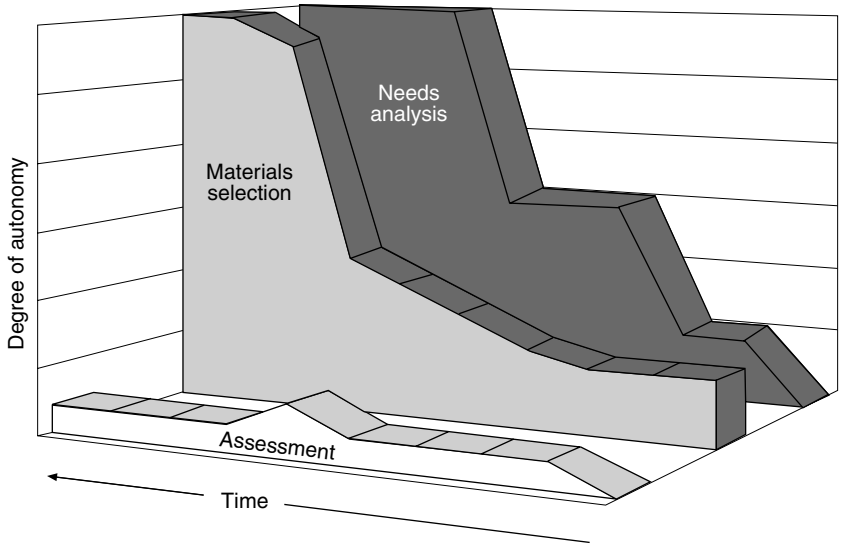

Figure 1.1. Example of changes in autonomy in learner decision-making regarding reading

program'. These definitions go some way towards clarifying the characteristics of autonomous language learners. However, as Nunan (1997: 193) points out 'it may well be that the fully autonomous learner is an ideal, rather than a reality'. He argues for degrees of autonomy and that learners' potential for achieving different degrees depends on factors like their personality, their goals, institutional philosophy and cultural context (Nunan 1997).

In addition to the differences in degrees of autonomy suggested by Nunan, there may also be fluctuations in the degree of learners' autonomy over time and from one skill area to another. For example, a learner may attain a high degree of autonomy in listening but could remain teacher dependent in learning about writing. Levels of autonomy may vary even within single language skills, for example in reading. Figure 1.1 shows an example of the development of a learner's levels of autonomy in three aspects of reading. First, the learner's autonomy in analysing needs has developed rapidly. It should also be noticed that this development went through two stages where each time a plateau was reached and then passed. Second, the learner's willingness to select materials has developed more slowly. However, there is a sudden rise in autonomy in materials' selection which occurs shortly after passing the second plateau of autonomy in needs analysis. Third, the learner's willingness to accept responsibility for assessment of reading has hardly

changed. There was a small increase in autonomy at one point but this was not sustained. This may be due to the learner's lack of confidence in the reliability of self-assessment.

1.2.2 Approaches to encouraging autonomy

Approaches which assist learners to move from teacher dependence towards autonomy are described in various terms, the most common are: self-directed learning, self-instruction, independent learning, and self-access learning. Although proponents of these approaches may argue for differences between them, there are more similarities than differences. Each of the approaches encourages learners to set and pursue their personal language learning goals. Holec (1988) states that learner responsibility is a necessary requirement for self-directed learning. He identifies two kinds of learner responsibility. In what he describes as *static*, learners, either by themselves or with the help of others, set a programme of language learning and follow it through. He describes this responsibility as a 'finished product' (Holec 1988: 174). The kind of responsibility he describes as *dynamic* is more flexible because learners take on responsibility for their learning as the learning programme develops. Dickinson (1987: 11) sees self-direction as an 'attitude to the learning task' within which learners accept responsibility for decision-making but do not necessarily implement the decisions. He also makes a distinction between self-direction and self-instruction, the latter being a neutral term describing a context where learners are not under the direct control of their teachers (Dickinson 1987).

Independent learning is seen by Sheerin (1997) as an educational philosophy and process, whereas Gardner and Miller (1996) see it as one stage in a process in which learners are moving towards autonomy in their learning. Self-access is probably the most widely used and recognised term for an approach to encouraging autonomy. Sheerin (1991: 144) refers to self-access as 'a means of promoting learner autonomy'. We certainly see self-access as a way of encouraging learners to move from teacher dependence towards autonomy and it is for this reason that we use the term 'self-access' throughout this book.

1.3 Elements of self-access

Self-access language learning is an approach to learning language, not an approach to teaching language. There are misconceptions in the literature about self-access. It is sometimes seen as a collection of materials and sometimes as a system for organising resources. We see it as an integration of a number of elements (Table 1.1) which combine to

Table 1.1. *Elements of self-access*

Element	Function
Resources	To provide: • learning materials • authentic materials • activities • technology • access to authentic language users • access to other language learners.
People	Teachers to perform the roles of: • information provider • counsellor • authentic language user • manager • materials writer • assessor • evaluator • administrator • organiser. Learners to perform the roles of: • planner • organiser • administrator (record keeping) • thinker (about learning) • evaluator of SALL • self-assessor • self-motivator. Other learners to perform the roles of: • partners • peer-assessors.
Management	To provide: • organisation • overseeing of the system • coordination • decision-making • interfacing with the institution.
System	To organise SALL facilities in a way or ways that best support the needs of the learners.

Table 1.1. (*contd*)

Element	Function
Individualisation	To acknowledge individual differences in: • learning styles • learning strategies • time and place of learning • quantity of time spent learning • learning level • content of learning • commitment to learning.
Needs/wants analysis	• To identify learning goals. • To facilitate the creation of study plans.
Learner reflection	To consider: • language ability • progress in language learning • suitability of SALL for self • goal setting.
Counselling	To provide: • advice on language ability • advice on learning methods • negotiation of study plans.
Learner training	• To enhance understanding of SALL. • To experience a variety of methods. • To increase effectiveness in learning.
Staff training	• To enhance understanding of SALL. • To increase effectiveness of services.
Assessment	Kinds of assessments: • self-assessment • peer-assessment • external-assessment. Purposes of assessment: • self-monitoring • certification • evaluation of SALL.
Evaluation	• To decide suitability of SALL for self. • To provide feedback about SALL to teachers/ manager.
Materials development	• To support individualisation. • To improve learning opportunities.

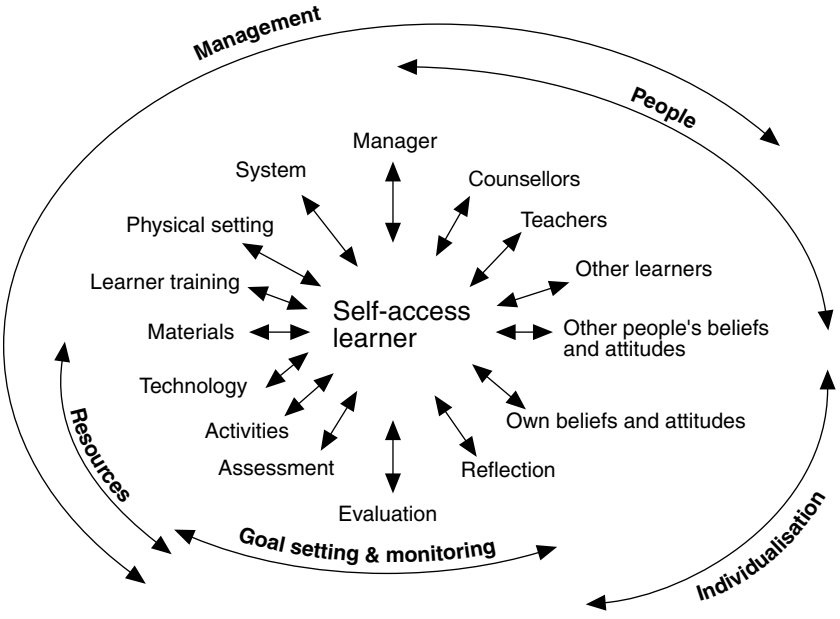

Figure 1.2. Interaction between the learner and the self-access environment

provide a learning environment. Each learner interacts with the environment in a unique way (Figure 1.2). The elements of self-access and the ways in which learners interact with them are dealt with in greater detail in Part 2 of this book.

1.4 Issues in establishing self-access

Self-access is very flexible. It can be used on a large scale or a small scale. It can be conducted in a classroom, in a dedicated self-access centre or elsewhere. It can be incorporated into a language course or it can be used by learners who are not taking courses. It can function at all learning levels. It allows for different levels of independence among learners encompassing both teacher-directed groups of learners and virtually autonomous learners. It allows individualisation but also supports groups. It is not culture specific. It is not age specific. In effect, self-access learning can benefit all language learners. However, for many learners it is a new concept with which they are unfamiliar. Learners' attitudes to SALL are based on their own incomplete knowledge of self-access and may be conditioned by outside influences.

1.4.1 Influences on self-access learners

Some learners may be predisposed to self-access learning while others may not. Riley (1988) suggests that this applies not only to individuals but also to identifiable groups of learners. He found, for example, that as groups of learners Danes, Americans, Moroccans and Vietnamese each reacted differently from the other with respect to a self-access project. The Danes completed the project satisfactorily and had no problems in accepting their 'new' roles. The Americans, although stating that they were in favour of the project, had difficulty in organising themselves and comprehending the purpose of the task. The Moroccans accepted the theory behind completing a project but were unable to complete the task in practice. The Vietnamese 'said nothing and did nothing' (Riley 1988: 14).

Learners' attitudes towards self-access may be affected by four main influences. These are: their teachers, their educational institution, their peers, and society. Teachers are an important influence because it is they who are most likely to first introduce learners to self-access. Teachers who do this because of their own commitment to self-access learning are likely to have an enthusiastic attitude and are likely to communicate that enthusiasm to the learners. The attitudes of teachers who introduce self-access to learners simply because of institutional policy are likely to be more variable. In a study of learners' and teachers' attitudes to self-access language learning Gardner and Miller (1997) found that learners were, in general, more positive about the benefits of self-access than their teachers.

Institutional attitudes to self-access can be an important influence in the way self-access is introduced, or whether it is introduced at all. In highly structured institutions, the introduction of self-access needs to become a policy issue. In cases where funding is required for self-access resources, the institutional influence becomes even more important.

Peer pressure is recognised widely as an important influence on learners. Where groups of learners have successfully used self-access learning other learners are likely to want to try it. In situations where self-access is a totally new concept it may be difficult to encourage learners to move away from the traditional approaches with which they are familiar. Learners need to be exposed not only to self-access learning but also to information about how it is different and why.

Society can also be an important influence on the up-take of self-access learning. Parental pressure, culture and power hierarchies can all potentially influence the introduction or inhibition of new approaches to learning. Kennedy (1988) suggests that there are multiple levels of influence in bringing about change. He suggests a knock-on effect where wider ranging systems influence those below them, which in turn

influence the next level and so on down from the cultural system at the highest level through political, administrative, educational and institutional levels to the classroom. The introduction of self-access learning may occur at one or more levels of this hierarchy. Gremmo and Riley (1995) have also identified socio-cultural factors as well as institutional, learner and staff characteristics as important influences on the establishment of self-access. They suggest that these influences are so powerful that self-access can only be planned locally and that 'there is no universal model' (Gremmo and Riley: 156) for setting it up.

1.4.2 Changing roles

The introduction of self-access language learning requires changes in the roles of learners, teachers and the institution. Learners need to become more aware of their central role in the decision-making process (see Figure 1.2). They have to learn to take an increasing amount of responsibility for their learning. They have to learn about the importance of reflection on their learning and how it can help them to redefine their goals to make them constantly relevant to their needs and wants. The changing role of learners requires an increase in learner training which should be incorporated into self-access materials, activities, counselling and classroom work rather than becoming a stand alone set of instructional activities.

The roles of teachers change dramatically as their learners engage in self-access learning. Teachers need to relinquish some of their control over learners, even allowing them to make mistakes. Teachers need to learn new skills to take on their new roles (Figure 1.3). Some of the 'new' roles for teachers in SALL may look familiar. Teachers may already be administrators and organisers of learning. However, these roles have to be redefined when the new roles of learners (Figure 1.4) are also taken into account. In order to adapt to their new roles successfully teachers need training.

As learners and teachers change their roles so too must the institution. It needs to move from a directive stance to one of being a provider of learning opportunities. These opportunities may be used by different learners in different ways and the choices about how to use them must lie with the learners and not with the institution.

1.4.3 Speaking as part of SALL

We have singled out speaking as a special issue in the establishment of SALL because it can create special difficulties and because it is the cause of some misconceptions among staff and students. Many teachers, students and administrators have a view of self-access which likens it to

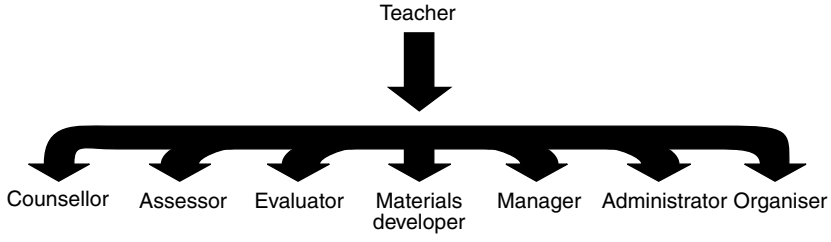

Figure 1.3. Changing roles of staff in SALL

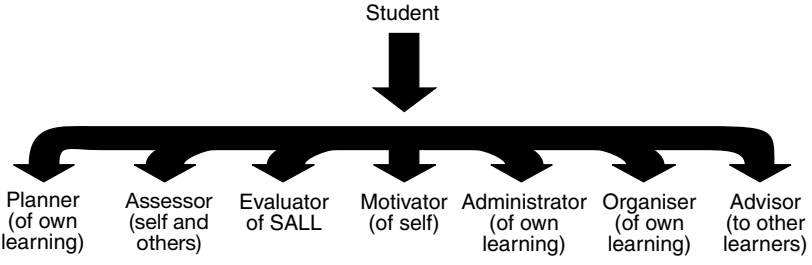

Figure 1.4. Changing roles of learners in SALL

quiet study or library work with learners studying individually and (most importantly) quietly. However, self-access is an opportunity for learners to learn and practise the kind of language they need and want. In many cases this involves speaking and this should be encouraged not stifled. There are, however, two major problems related to self-access speaking. First, it is noisy and, second, it can be difficult to provide opportunities for speaking as part of self-access.

The issue of noise is one which needs to be addressed when planning SALL because of its implications for the rest of the institution. Speaking makes noise and when lots of learners speak a lot of noise is made. If SALL is being implemented in a classroom, the noise may disrupt students and teachers in nearby classrooms. If SALL materials are stored in a library, the noise level created may be inappropriate for a library atmosphere. Even where a dedicated SAC is available, noise may interfere with other users of the SAC and the SAC itself may be too closely situated to other quiet areas of the institution.

Thus, creating noise is a problem; however, not allowing noise is a bigger problem. Self-access learners who are prevented from working on oral skills may lose interest in self-access learning. In addition,