

# A Review of the Self-Access Learning Center: Its Importance and Benefits

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What is a SALC? Is it useful? How is it used? How does it affect teachers? How does it help students? These questions will be answered in this paper. Knowledge of the background of learner autonomy will enable a better understanding of it; therefore, a short history will be provided, followed by a discussion on how a SALC, in addition to class work, can be beneficial to English language learners.

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a surge of self-access centers (SACs) around the world, and a mere click of the term “self-access center” on an Internet search provider shows a myriad of SACs at educational institutions. These SACs come under different names such as Self-access English Learning Facility (SELF), Self-access Learning Center (SALC), English Language Self-Access Center (ELSAC), and others; however, they all refer to the self-access learning centers at which learners practice and improve their language skills. With a growing interest in autonomous learning and English education, there has been a proliferation of these self-access centers. This widespread development of self-access centers around the world could be due to pedagogical necessity of this facility for students at academic institutions.

On an additional note, in the 2003 action plan titled *Regarding the*

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*Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate English Abilities* (2003) the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology stated as one of its goals that all English teachers should reach STEP pre-first level, TOEFL scores 550, TOEIC 730 or greater. This ambitious goal is extremely challenging for most Japanese students; however, one way to address this problem is through supplementary English immersion outside of the classroom. This is where the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC), a place where students can work according to their interests and pace, can play a role to help students improve their English language skills. English lessons in the classroom in conjunction with the SALC can accommodate the uniqueness of learner uniqueness. With additional target language immersion at the SALC, students can improve their English language skills.

The inclusion of the SALC in a university's English program can provide additional exposure to the English language. To provide an example, at a university in Tochigi, in the Sports Education Department and Early Childhood Education Department, English, which is a required subject, is offered once a week for a one year course which consists of two semesters, thus, making a total of 28 weeks. One class has 25 to 30 students and is 90 minutes long. It is extremely challenging to become competent speakers of English with merely 90 minutes of language input per week in large classes. Even in other departments where students take multiple English courses per week, they still need more language input to make significant progress with their English, all the more, because they are in a Japanese environment with very limited exposure to English outside of school.

Moreover, because students have to study topics provided by the teacher or from textbooks which may or may not be of much interest to them, it may be difficult to recall what was taught the previous week. With limited exposure to English, unless they engage in supplementary activities outside

of the classroom, it is quite challenging for these students to become competent in English. However, SALCs provide extra input in English language education. Studying English in a SALC helps the learner improve in the target language.

This paper gives a brief background on the development of the SALC, explains what it is and how it is used, what the advantages and areas of concern for teachers and students are, and finally, ends with a discussion on how the SALC can be beneficial to English language learners.

## **2 Background**

SALCs are based on the concept of learner autonomy; therefore, it is necessary to have a general understanding of the theory of learner initiated studies. During the past 30 years, there has been a shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered education with the recognition of the individual as the central figure in the complex process of language learning (Ellis, 1985). Students acquire skills to learn the target language, not per se, the body of knowledge such as grammar or subject which is being taught (Nunan, 1988). According to Gardner and Miller (1999), autonomous learning, which originated in the 1960s, can be roughly defined as the development of independent learning as a life long skill. It is about those who “initiate the planning and implementation of their own learning program” (Gardner & Miller, 1966, p.vii). Eventually, Holec, the “father” of learner autonomy explained that “Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (1981, p.3). Cotterall and Reinders (2001) add that “Autonomous language learning is an act of learning whereby motivated learners consciously make informed decisions about that learning” (p.87). Independent learning is when learners make decisions to take responsibility

for their self-study requirements. In simple terms, learners have and take control over their learning. Students can select the environment to study, and they can be divided into two categories: *controlled* and *uncontrolled* (Gardner and Miller, 1999). The first refers to classrooms, libraries, and self-access centers with resources which are organized with some form of counseling available; and the latter refers to public areas such as an airport or the World Wide Web in an English speaking environment where the information is not controlled by teachers.

Controlled or uncontrolled, in both environments, the learner can make the decision regarding the content or level to select. This approach to language learning and with the focus on learner's needs and learner taking responsibility has led to the creation of self-access centers. These centers can be made on a small scale in a classroom without computers and with only worksheets and books, or on a large scale with a combination of the library, audio visual room, language laboratory, and computer room. They can accommodate learners of various levels and with different needs and interests. Studies on this self-access learning center, which is exclusively for language learning, show the importance of its integration into a language program (Cooker & Torpey, 2004; Kwan, 2009).

### **3 Definition**

SALCs are language learning centers to facilitate self-initiated language learning by using different media, including audio, video, DVD, computer resources, and different materials. Fouser (2003, p.50) explains, "The computer and the Internet have been the great leveler in bringing the functions of the library, the language laboratory, the computer room together, leading to the emergence of a unified genre of learning space:

‘the multipurpose information access center.’” The SALC is a place with resources ranging from low technology such as books and graded readers, to high technology with computers and the Internet for language learning. It is an information access center and not a place for mainly classroom teaching.

Two major components of a SALC include self-study learning materials for language skills improvement such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and pronunciation; and preparation materials to guide students to become more independent learners by finding strategies which suit them (Gardner & Miller, 1999). As defined by Cotterall and Reinders (2001), SALCs have a number of resources that accommodate learners of different abilities, with different interests and individual goals in the target language. These resources consist of newspapers, magazines, user manuals, leaflets and brochures, videos, lectures and speeches, songs, games, e-mail messages; and specially produced in-house materials for specific learning goals that also meet the requirements of the specific culture.

According to Miller and Rogerson-Revell (1993), the self-access systems can be classified into four groups.

- Menu driven: This system is specifically for language learning and requires little teacher manpower. All materials are classified and information is stored electronically or in catalogues. The student needs to know what type of learner they are and needs to be trained to use this system.
- Supermarket: This system offers learners a wide range of resources and gives them a way to browse around and decide on what to study. Materials for listening, reading, phonology, games, etc. are usually color-coded and labeled according to different levels ranging from simple exercises to more advanced exercises.

- **Controlled-access:** Learners are usually directed by their instructors to a specific set of materials which are related to what was covered in class.
- **Open-access:** This type of center has a wide array of resources and is often in the library or may be separated from the main library with no counselors to help the student. Students must be aware of their needs to be able to select relevant materials.

Quite often, people consider SALCs to be similar to language laboratories; however, Chan, the founder of the SELF at the National University of Singapore, explains that the difference between a SALC and language laboratory is that a SALC is a place where students go on their own initiative to choose materials that suit their level of difficulty, whereas, a language lab is very much part of an established language course with teacher supervision. A language lab is sometimes inside the SALC, but it would come without supervision (Chan, personal communication, September 11, 2009).

In a self-access center, instead of the teacher controlling the material choice for students, as in a traditional language lab, students choose materials that are at their level and of interest to them. There is a wide range of levels for them to work with, and they try to progress to a higher level after completing one level. The system is based on a concept similar to that of the SRA Reading Laboratories with which students learn independently and advance at their own pace. Many of these materials come with answer cards with which students can check their work. Teachers often conduct regular conferences with the students, discussing problems or questions that they may have.

## 4 Advantages

### 4.1 Learners

First, a well-organized and systematic SALC supports language learning, through extra exposure to authentic materials in the target language, since students will have a wide variety of resources from which to select. They can be exposed to real language for communication, to various types of English such as formal, colloquial, and spontaneous language. In particular, a SALC can offer an English language environment where students can interact with authentic materials.

Second, when time available for learning or teaching is limited, SALC complements classroom teaching (Gardner & Miller, 1999). With a SALC, students can immerse themselves in English whenever they wish.

Third, a SALC increases learner autonomy because students select the content and level of difficulty on which they wish to focus and work at their own pace on specific language learning goals. To provide an example, in a regular skill-building listening class, the teacher may play a CD for an activity three times; however, in a SALC, students can play the CD over as often as they like. Most importantly, a SALC gives students a variety of learning opportunities and may provide a sense of empowerment.

Finally, students can find in-house materials that are used in class and review them and study at their own pace. They can also work with materials that have been targeted to their culture and specific needs. Students are likely to be motivated since they have the freedom in their selection of material, and can interact with the target language in a non-threatening environment.

As stated above, “Where learning is taking place in a non-native speaking environment, SACs offer language learning opportunities that would not be

possible in formal lessons” (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p.19).

#### *4.2 University*

A well-managed SALC can become a showpiece for a university, and can be an important asset (Hadley and Brown, 2009). With a SALC, the university shows to the public that by developing its curriculum and student services, it is committed to quality education. Brochures and websites of Kanda University in Chiba and the National University of Singapore proudly display their use of self-access learning centers. In other words, SALC for language training can be prestigious.

## **5 Areas of Concern**

### *5.1 Learners: effectiveness*

The goal of SALC is to have students learn English through self-initiated study; however, it is true that not all may go to the SALC initially. They may not know how to use the facilities nor want to spend time there. Many universities have started guiding learners on how to work in a SALC by having regular classes or scheduling one class period in the SALC in order to have students trained well and understand its benefits. Cooker (2004) points out that students need to have a course of study systematically included in the curriculum to help them become autonomous learners. They should be provided with clear instructions to help them with their self-study and they should keep records of their work so that they can monitor their progress. If teachers prepare them for independent study and encourage students by having them prepare learning portfolios and holding regular conferences with them so as to enable them to see their progress, eventually they can become autonomous language learners.



### *5.2 Teachers' concern*

The SALC does not replace the classroom, nor does it threaten the teacher. Teachers always play an important role in the learning process. There will be new roles for the teacher such as “information provider, counselor, authentic language user, manager, materials writer, assessor, evaluator, administrator, and organizer” (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p.9). A SALC changes the way languages are learned and complements classroom study; it does not eliminate the need for teachers. They will always be necessary to guide the students and to provide materials for students' specific needs. Teachers continue to play a fundamental role in English education.

### *5.3 Administration concern: budget*

When this researcher interviewed professors who had started SALCs in their universities, many of them said that they started on a very limited budget. Chan, at the National University of Singapore, explained that she started in a small room and donated her own books (Chan, personal communication, September 11, 2009). Today it has grown into a language center with computers, listening stations, and resources which consist of commercially published and in-house produced materials. Heigham, director of the Communication English Program and Self-Access Center at Sugiyama Jogakuen University in Nagoya, said that she started by collecting books from teachers and received an initial set-up budget of ¥3,000,000 to purchase materials, audio and visual equipment, and furnish the 80-square-meter room (Heigham, personal communication, February 2, 2005). Now in 2009, an additional room has been added and 5 students run the center (Heigham, personal communication, September 15, 2009). As the examples above show, the size of the room/s, budget, and electronic equipment differ in each institution. Many start small and expand with the increase in number

of students who use this facility. For some universities, a low-cost system is appropriate for the context, and large state-of-the-art facilities are not always necessary. Simply put, self-access systems are flexible.

## **6 How the Program Works**

Even though full learner autonomy is the goal, in most universities learners are not in total control when they enter (Cooker & Torpey, 2004; Heigham, 2004). In the beginning of the English program, students watch a short orientation video that gives instructions about the program and a demonstration on the use of materials, and, as part of the general program curriculum, a learner training course is offered which includes finding out what type of learner they are (visual or aural), learning about time management, and building skills focused on:

- How to ask questions
- How to use context to understand vocabulary
- How to type exercises
- How to use an English/English dictionary
- How to take notes
- How to start a vocabulary notebook

In order for students to get the most out of their self-access opportunities and to begin to take responsibility for their own learning, it is important that they understand the philosophy of the program and its requirements. As a result, extensive orientation is necessary.

When students enter most SALCs, they put their belonging on a shelf or in lockers away from the listening stations, then log in on a notebook or computer (depending on the institution), and choose the appropriate level material and work. They are encouraged to try different topic categories.

While working, they use clear plastic sheets to write their answers and check their answers with the answer sheets. Finally, students write their names, student numbers, English classes, and the titles of their material on their self-access record. When finished, they return the material to the original location and leave their color-coded worksheet with the instructor.

### *6.1 Staffing*

Many SALCs have full-time staff in the room and others have student volunteers who work in shifts. To give some examples, at the University of Victoria in Melbourne, a full-time English lecturer has her desk in the room and is there from 9:00 to 17:00. At the National University of Singapore, the SELF committee (faculty members) supervise the center, and student workers help language learners who come to study in the facility. At Sugiyama Jogakuen University, third- and fourth-year university students work part-time to assist students. These assistants are paid on an hourly basis. Depending on the situation and requirements of each university, the SALC is staffed in a different way.

### *6.2 Materials*

When students enter the SALC, they can choose from a variety of resources: general listening, audio books, announcements, news, travel, cultural information, and TV programs. Usually the SALC is divided into skill-based sections. The writing area has writing exercises and additional assignments that have been given in class for students to work on problem areas. The grammar section has worksheets to help students improve areas where their grammar needs improvement. For example, if they have problems with articles, they can find the corresponding worksheet and work on the grammar exercises. In the listening area, students can improve by listening

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to music, watching films, or reading graded readers while listening to corresponding CDs. In the speaking section, there are a variety of tutorials to assist students with presentation or pronunciation skills. In the center, there are many different titles, with multiple copies, with all materials divided and color-coded into different levels: pre-intermediate through advanced. Students are encouraged to read and listen to all categories that may help them achieve their goals.

### *6.3 New trends*

The use of Internet technology is a new trend for SALCs. At the National University of Singapore, the Internet Technology Self-access English Learning Facility (ITSELF) is the new direction for SALCs. It is the online version of SELF, and students are given links to useful external English learning websites that are categorized under skill areas. Class handouts, copies of worksheets developed by CELC lecturers, activity tutorials, and a database of articles are also accessible on line. There is also the Opposing Viewpoints Resource Centre (OVRC) database, with a database of articles on a wide range of topics. On an additional note, Ying mentions that a merit of ITSELF (Ying, personal communication, September 12, 2009) is that it can be accessed by students from on and off campus. A good example of this need is when the SARS virus infected many students and classes were cancelled, the ITSELF enabled students to work from outside the university and keep in touch with their teachers.

## **7 Discussion**

A SALC has many advantages; however, for students to go there and take charge of their learning, they must be guided and gradually learn to become

autonomous learners. They must understand that the process in becoming independent learners is important. Cooker and Torpey (2004) state that when learners realize that they play a key role in the success or failure of their learning process, they become more motivated to study on their own. There may be perceptual barriers for teachers too, as they will find that they must modify their roles. However, each faculty member can contribute in different ways. Just conducting a class in the SALC or donating worksheets that were used in class to the SALC catalog or box of activities is a crucial way for teachers to guide students in becoming autonomous lifelong learners.

The SALC is not equivalent to technology. Technology is useful to have, but it does not automatically create fluency in English communication. More important than a state-of-the-art center, are the skill-based resources with which students begin to become responsible and take the initiative in their lifelong studies. Helping students become autonomous learners will be challenging, but it will be worthwhile.

## **8 Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to give a brief introduction to the SALC, and show that a well-equipped and well-managed SALC can help to provide and foster learner-centeredness and learner autonomy. By studying in SALCs, in addition to working in the classroom, students are able to improve English communication skills, and they can gain a sense of empowerment. Many educators who work in universities (Kwan, 1999; Hadley & Brown, 2009; Fouser, 2005) have also said that students acknowledge the value of SALCs and that the benefits by far outweigh any perceived challenges. Miller and Rogerson-Revell (1993) believe that it is the best way for learners to improve their language skills on a remedial or developmental basis. With a SALC,

and supportive and trained instructors, students can tailor the course to their needs, advance at their own pace and level, and become independent learners. In short, self-access centers for English language learners in universities seem to help students become more proficient in English. More universities in Japan should have SALCs to help students develop their English language skills and become lifelong autonomous learners.

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