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Self-Access Language Learning in Museums: A Materials Development Project

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Abstract

This paper reports on a project carried out at The University of Nottingham to create and evaluate English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) materials with the aim of exploiting the self-access language learning possibilities that museums offer. A series of thematic resources were produced and trialed with ESOL learners in the Lincolnshire area. Feedback from the learners indicated that museums could have an important role to play in providing flexible language learning opportunities for ESOL students. The authors conclude by suggesting that other public facilities such as libraries, art galleries, botanical gardens and even football stadia could be exploited for this purpose.

Introduction

Self-access language learning (SALL) is typically thought of as taking place in bespoke self-access centres, usually in a tertiary or secondary educational institution, where teachers or learning advisors are available to support students in their language learning journey. Self-access centres are usually construed as well-resourced spaces made up of designated physical areas, such as small sound-proofed rooms, large tables for group work, and open areas for discussion. In the centre learners have access to equipment such as televisions, audio players, and computers which they need to use learning materials. Often, learners can choose from a selection of materials designed to facilitate language learning such as books, DVDs, CDs, worksheets, games, newspapers and magazines, and online and computer-based resources. Alternatively, self-access centres might be construed as social spaces where learners can meet and thus create opportunities to use the target language. Within this general framework, there are diverse styles of self-access centres (Gardner & Miller, 1999) and indeed there are well-documented alternatives to physical centres such as the graded reader delivery system described by Imrie (2009). What are less well-documented in the literature are the opportunities for SALL afforded by museums and other non-traditional learning environments. Such spaces are advantageous in that they offer two

features which Cooker (2010) suggests are important for SALL: a “relaxed atmosphere” and opportunities for language learning which are “related to every day activity” (p. 7). This paper reports on a project carried out at The University of Nottingham to create and evaluate resources for ESOL learners to use in the self-access out-of-class learning environment of The Collection, Lincolnshire’s flagship museum of archaeology in Lincoln, UK. Firstly, we will give an overview of the need for ESOL language learning provision in Lincolnshire. Secondly, we describe the process of materials design and the small qualitative study carried out to evaluate the materials.

Background

Lincolnshire is England’s second largest county and is situated on the east coast, between Cambridgeshire and Yorkshire. Since 2000, the population of this rural county has grown significantly, with an influx of migrant workers from countries as diverse as Portugal, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Italy, Turkey, France, Spain, Iran, Iraq, and the Ukraine.

These migrant workers find employment in a variety of industries but mostly in the agricultural sector. They contribute significantly to the local economy and to the cultural diversification of Lincolnshire but language difficulties underlie many of the problems they face, with poor English language skills leading to general misunderstandings and even legal problems (Zaronaite & Tirzite, 2006).

A recent report into migrant labour in Lincolnshire, published in 2006, recommended greater flexibility in ESOL instruction. The authors argued that ESOL provision needs to be more readily accessible and to cater for different working patterns and diverse levels of proficiency (Zaronaite & Tirzite, 2006). To set this within a broader national context, the Independent Committee of Inquiry into ESOL chaired by Derek Grover recommended that the development and planning of the delivery of ESOL should be coordinated across the full range of government policies and the full range of providers (Grover, 2006). In policy statements from 2008 it is clear that ESOL provision designed to promote community cohesion was to be prioritised in a broader policy response to widespread fear of social fragility in many parts of Britain (DfIUS, 2008).

In an attempt to create more flexibility in ESOL provision in Lincolnshire, The University of Nottingham received funding from Lincolnshire County Council to develop a series of resources to be used by ESOL learners at The Collection. The Collection is a multi-award-winning, state-of-the-art archaeology museum situated in the centre of Lincoln, the

capital of Lincolnshire. It receives approximately 70,000 visitors per annum and houses a permanent collection of artefacts spanning 300,000 years from the Stone Age through to the 18th century. Our specific goals were to develop materials to be used in preparation for the museum visit and while-visiting the museum for use by students at proficiency level Entry 1, 2, and 3 of the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (developed as part of the Skills for Life initiative in 2001 (DfEE, 2001)). Learners at Entry 1, 2, and 3 are basic users of English – perhaps comparable to levels A1 and A2 of the Common European Framework.

Literature Review

The review of previous research revealed a tension between the learning emphasis in a museum environment and that in a traditional ESOL classroom. In an ESOL class, the teacher is naturally focusing the learner’s attention on language. Classroom materials provide support in this by focusing on the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as well as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In contrast, in museums the visitor is focused on the artefacts and education staff in museums are concerned with promoting “observation not reading” (Durbin, 1999, p. 95). There was a clear distinction, therefore, between the museums learning literature, which stressed the need for worksheets interpreting museum collections to focus visitors’ attention on objects and not the labels or interpretation panels, and the ESOL perspective, in which interpretation panels and labels combined with real objects are considered a rich language learning resource.

In addition to the academic literature, the research team also surveyed similar initiatives taken across the museum sector to support the language development of non-native English speakers and ESOL learners visiting public museums and galleries. Whilst there were a few excellent examples available, we aimed to address what we considered to be the two main weaknesses in some of the materials we found: an over-dependence on teacher-controlled activities and a lack of authenticity of task. Tomlinson (1998), for example, has argued for materials which engage the learner in the language and the task and which demand emotional responses. Cooker (2008) makes the case for greater ambiguity in the feedback given to learners working on materials designed for SALL: dealing with ambiguity is integral to the human language experience but can be uncomfortable for the learner who has been trained to expect that clear “right or wrong” answers will always be provided.

In summary, our survey of ESOL museum materials encouraged us to aim for the following:

- Interactive materials which require learners to both question and make links between the artefacts and stories within the museum.
- Creative materials which allow the user to contribute their favourite/most important elements of the museum visit.
- Materials which are not “passive” worksheets but give the user an opportunity to add their own views.
- Authenticity in terms of text and task.
- Materials which allow for ambiguity in the interaction to reflect everyday user experiences.
- Materials which make explicit the links with the ESOL core curriculum.

The other clear distinction we wanted to make with the materials we surveyed is that we wanted the materials for The Collection to maximise the self-access possibilities of the museum. In other words, we wanted them to be used by un-mediated, casual visitors to the museum, as well as by teachers and students in ESOL classes. Whereas the materials we surveyed from other museums were almost entirely focused on supporting classroom-based learning, we aimed to develop resources which could be accessed and used by learners independently and not just within a classroom context. This would go some way towards meeting the varying requirements of migrant workers who would be able to access the resources whenever the museum was open.

Materials Development

(Examples of the materials can be downloaded from <http://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk/section.asp?catid=23891>)

Given the need to provide a focus on language (from the ESOL perspective) and artefact (from the museum perspective), we decided on a two-part format: pre-visit materials to provide a general introduction to the museum and while-visiting materials with a content-based theme.

Pre-visit Materials

For each of Entry 1, 2, and 3 we developed pre-visit materials which introduced learners to The Collection and helped them plan for their visit. The materials gave learners opportunities to interact with authentic texts, such as the website and museum leaflets, to support the discovery of practical information that would be useful in preparing for a museum visit (e.g. opening times, directions, museum layout). Further pedagogical aims were to build

schema about museums in general and provide guidance as to what kinds of artefacts they might expect to find in an archaeological museum; to introduce useful vocabulary for a museum visit (café, exhibition, find out, information, object); and to introduce learners to some basic learning strategies such as prediction, skimming and scanning, and guessing meaning from context.

The pre-visit materials were made available online for downloading and were distributed to local ESOL providers to use in class or to distribute to students to use independently. Copies of these leaflets were also made available in the museum. While this may seem counter-intuitive for the pre-visit materials (why do learners need pre-visit materials if they are already visiting the museum?), it was felt that this was a cost-effective way of advertising the materials and might encourage visitors to take them to give to friends and family.

While-visiting Materials

The while-visiting materials were based around six themes with two for each level:

ESOL Entry 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clothing• Food & Drink
ESOL Entry 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Money• Death
ESOL Entry 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Animals• Beauty

These thematic materials focused on the archaeological artefacts in ways that were relevant and meaningful to the learners' lives. For example, in the Food & Drink resource one activity directed learners towards ancient eating utensils and asked them which modern utensils they would use to eat particular contemporary British foods. The materials also focused on language in that they provided scaffolding and support for the language inputs in the form of labels and interpretation panels available in the museum. By incorporating picture dictionaries into the leaflets and including basic context building activities and alternative explanations of the interpretations, learners were able to use the museum as a rich self-access centre to develop their language proficiency.

The self-access concept was further evident in the design and availability of the materials. The resources were all self-access in that they were available to take freely inside the museum so that learners could use them outside of class, on their own, or with friends or family. The inclusion of clear navigation tools in the form of specially made maps and

symbolic icons and the scaffolding of language, mentioned above, meant users could navigate their way through the materials without the direct support of a teacher. The materials were also “access-self” (Tomlinson, 1998) in that unlike most self-access materials they included some open-ended questions without a single, clear answer. These required learners to invest their own knowledge and personal experiences into the activity. Some of these access-self activities demanded some creative input from learners too, as they were asked to draw objects in the museum, or to make their own “collections” of objects that they found personally appealing. The inclusion of such activities, as well as the detailed structure outlined earlier, helps learners who are used to traditional language materials transition towards increased autonomy and the critical thinking that museums traditionally promote. Finally, it is important to point out that answer keys were made available at the museum reception desk and this was advertised on the leaflets themselves. The answer keys indicated correct answers where this was possible. For those open-ended, ambiguous, and access-self type questions discussed above, it was made clear that answers to these questions would vary and in some cases an example was provided.

Materials Evaluation

The evaluation of the materials was concurrent with the development process and ensured that the views of ESOL learners were incorporated into the final design for the materials. Despite the small-scale, context-specific nature of the research, we could claim the outcomes are illuminative and might well contain data which is relevant to those organisations working within a similar context.

Research Questions

Despite the relatively low numbers of ESOL learners involved in the project the evaluation followed a themed approach focusing on the following key issues:

Is the language level of the resources appropriate for target users?

Are the materials helpful in terms of language development?

Are the materials helpful in terms of motivation to engage with the museum and its artefacts?

Do the materials enhance the museum visiting experience for ESOL learners?

Participants and Method

Two classes of ESOL Entry 3 students (n=22) attending a Lincolnshire college were involved in the evaluation - one class of 13 students and the other a class of 9 students. The

students participating in this study were from Poland, Thailand, Hungary, Lithuania, Iran, Turkey, and Oman.

The trialling sessions took place over two days (one day for each class of students) in the college and the museum and replaced one scheduled lesson. All ethical procedures were followed. The first half of each session was spent in class doing the Entry 3 pre-visit activity. The first author ran the session and the class teacher was present throughout. The second half was spent in the museum doing one of the thematic while-visiting materials. Although the classes involved in the trial were Entry 3 level, both the ESOL Entry 2 and ESOL Entry 3 while-visiting resources were trialled. Commensurate with SALL theory, students were able to choose which resource they wanted to use. The numbers of students choosing each resource is shown in Table 1 (please note that here n=19 due to three students needing to leave after the first half of the session because of their work commitments).

After the pre-visit activity and the while-visiting activity the students completed a questionnaire giving feedback on the materials in closed and open ended question format.

Table 1

Numbers of Students Who Chose Each of the Thematic Resources for Trialling

Thematic resource	ESOL level	Number of students in trial
Money	Entry 2	4
Death	Entry 2	1
Animals	Entry 3	10
Beauty	Entry 3	4

Findings and Discussion

Appropriacy of language level.

In writing the materials, we aimed to follow the language appropriate for each level as set out in the ESOL Adult Core Curriculum. The materials for the three proficiency stages used text at increasing levels of difficulty and amount. When asked about their perceptions of the English level of the materials, the students gave ratings of between “very easy” and “a little difficult” for both the pre-visit resources and the while-visiting resources. No “very

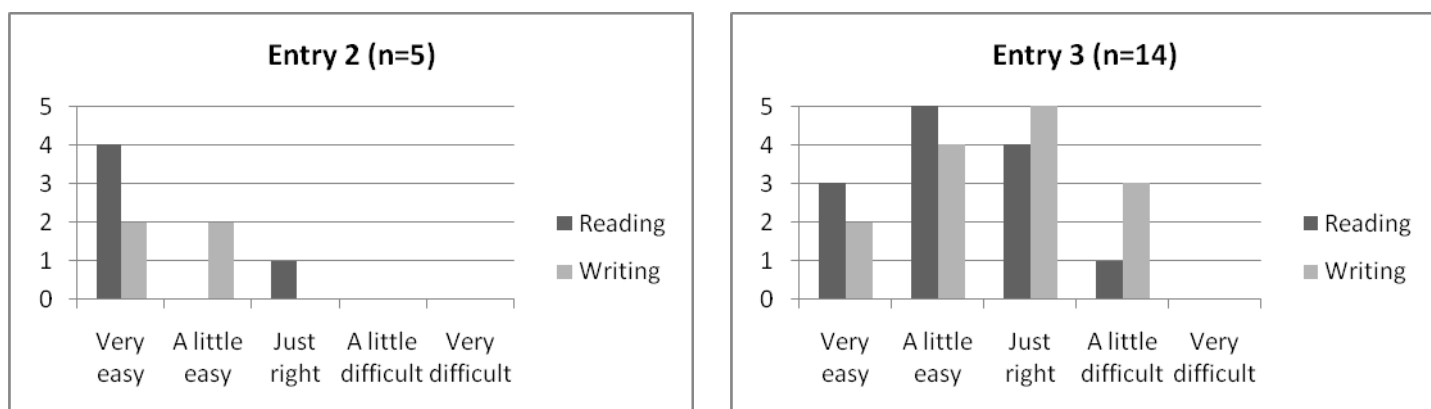
difficult” ratings were given. More ratings of “a little difficult” were given to the writing components of the resources and more ratings of “very easy” were given to the reading components. The range of responses indicated that the resources were providing a balanced amount of support and challenge (Mariani, 1997) to learners without being overly demanding.

Figure 1. ESOL Entry 3 Students’ Ratings of English Level (Pre-visit and While-visiting Resources)



Figure 2 shows the same responses for the while-visiting materials in Figure 1 divided into responses for Entry 2 and Entry 3 materials. The majority of the Entry 3 students who rated the Entry 2 while-visiting resources indicated that they found them “very easy” or “a little easy.” None of the students rated the Entry 2 resources as “a little difficult” or “very difficult.” In contrast the Entry 3 while-visiting resources were mostly rated as “a little easy” or “just right” with some ratings of “very easy” and “a little difficult.” This was reassuring as it suggested that higher level learners found the lower level materials easier than the materials written for their level. This indicated that the language level of the resources was appropriate for the target users.

Figure 2. ESOL Entry 3 Students’ Ratings of English Level (Entry 2 and Entry 3 While-visiting Resources)



Further evidence for appropriacy of language level was found in the comments left by students in the open-ended section of the survey. One respondent said of the Entry 2 leaflet on *Money*:

Reading the questions was just right for me and writing the answers a little easy

One respondent said of the Entry 3 pre-visit resource:

Questions was a little easy to understand, so with English-English dictionary we can do it very well. Can be a bit more difficul[t].

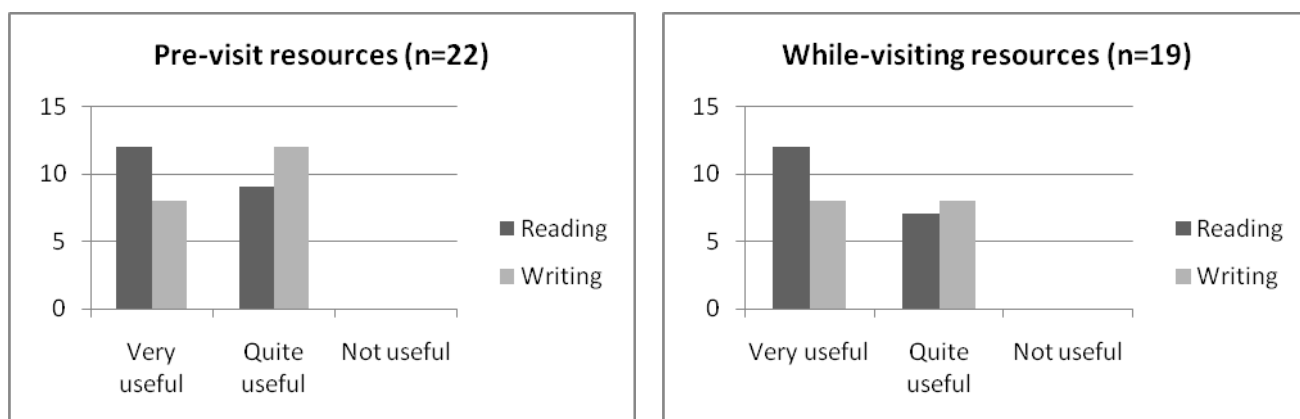
and one user of the Entry 3 thematic leaflet on *Beauty* wrote:

I think this leaflet is suitable for E3 because there still has some new vocabulary and some grammar.

Perceived usefulness for language development.

Figure 3 shows very similar patterns of rating by survey respondents of the pre-visit and while-visiting resources in terms of their usefulness for language development. None of the participants considered the resources not to be useful in terms of improving their language ability. Slightly higher ratings were given to the reading activities in terms of their perceived usefulness.

Figure 3. ESOL Entry 3 Students' Ratings of the Perceived Usefulness of the Resources for Language Development



Given the somewhat specialist nature of the learning environment, the relatively low proficiency level of the student respondents, and the positive response to the reading

activities, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the student comments in the open-ended section related to vocabulary development:

I can practise by reading. I find out some new words.

Reading was very useful, because I found a lot of new words, words order in the sentences.

Use many new words (differents)

For me this worksheet to help me with my English because I learn new words.

But for others, the opportunity to use and practice English in general was commented upon:

Leaflet makes me English found everything

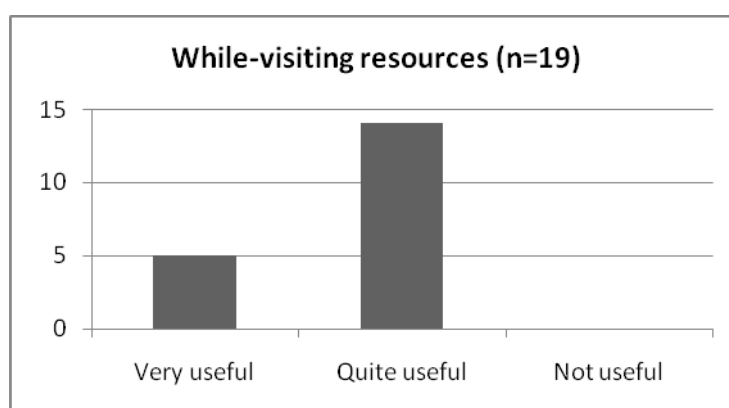
It was very helping for my English

Although the sample of survey respondents was very small, we could conclude that the resources were helpful to these students in terms of language development.

Perceived usefulness for engaging with the museum and its artefacts.

Figure 4 shows how survey respondents rated the theme-based while-visiting materials as either “very useful” or “quite useful” in helping them engage with the museum and its artefacts. None of the respondents rated them as “not useful.”

Figure 4. ESOL Entry 3 Students’ Ratings of the Perceived Usefulness of the Resources for Engaging with the Museum and Its Artefacts



Comments from the respondents also suggested that the resources had added to the visitor experience for these non-native English speakers:

THIS LEAFLET WAS VERY LEARN ABOUT THE COLLECTION

This leaflet is very exciting and interesting mabe [make] kinds like this.

leaflet learn about The Collection quick and easy

Just quiet useful, because we found some information about some things. I would like to know more about everythink not just about few things :)

Limitations

As mentioned previously, this was a small-scale materials development and evaluation project and the materials were designed for one museum site and were thus very context-specific. Only two out of three levels of materials were trialled and a small number of students, from only one ESOL level, were involved in the evaluation. The small number of participants was a result of the logistical difficulties in bringing ESOL learners from colleges around Lincolnshire to the museum and the fact that ESOL providers work to a tight exam-driven schedule and thus were reluctant to sacrifice class time for research purposes. Despite these limitations, we feel that these data may still be illuminative for those involved in similar small-scale projects.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that the aims of the materials development project were met in that learners were provided with an engaging resource for language development and for learning more about The Collection and the artefacts within. Furthermore, learners' reactions to the materials were positive. In informal discussions with the researchers, some students reported that, compared to earlier visits to the museum, their experience as museum visitors had been enhanced by the materials.

Other scholars have advocated the use of museums, libraries, and police and fire stations as places that can bring a "motivating reality into ESOL learning" (Davies, 2008, p. 17) but, to our knowledge, the potential for these environments to be used as ESOL self-access learning environments for adults has not been fully recognised or exploited. In particular, ESOL learners who have a need for cognitively engaging, flexible, English language learning opportunities are able to make use of the linguistic features available in such spaces if they are given the right amount of support and challenge. As reported in this paper, such support and challenge can be offered in the form of learning materials which can be made available to students on a self-access basis with the materials made freely available

for learners to use independently within the alternative learning space or, alternatively, as part of existing teacher-mediated learning opportunities. It is our recommendation that other out-of-class self-access learning environments such as botanical gardens and even football stadia could provide equally motivating learning opportunities and should also be investigated as potentially enriching spaces for second language self-access learning.

Notes on the contributors

Lucy Cooker is studying for a full-time PhD in learner autonomy in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham, UK. Previously, Lucy taught at Kanda University of International Studies where she set up the award-winning self-access learning centre (SALC). She has been involved in materials writing for self-access language learning for several years and has co-written seven editions of *BBC Understanding the News in English* for Kinseido.

Richard Pemberton is Associate Professor in TESOL in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham, UK, where he teaches and supervises MA and PhD students. He previously taught ESL at secondary and tertiary level in the UK, Hong Kong, Zimbabwe, and Papua New Guinea. He co-edited *Maintaining control: Autonomy and language learning* (2009, with Sarah Toogood and Andy Barfield). His other research interests include L2 listening and vocabulary acquisition, and technology-enhanced language learning.

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