Self-Access Language Learning - Challenging Our Views on ELT?

*An Argentine experience in a multinational company*

**Abstract**

The presenter will share the results of her research and experience in the design of a self-access language learning programme - the first of its nature in Argentina. She will cover the various tasks involved and the results obtained. As project leader and co-designer she aims at raising awareness of the implications, advantages and pitfalls of foreign language self-access learning, providing further insights about teacher roles and ELT methodology in order to minimise potential problems and maximise learning.

Why can self-access be an adequate learning strategy for a company?

The new information technologies are renewing interest for distance and self-access learning, fostering the upsurge of varied educational strategies.

Because of the information technology revolution and the rapid changes in business strategies and market policies, a large number of qualifications become outdated in no time, generating the need for continuous education and training. The diversity of competencies required makes it necessary to think about alternatives for those people whose development is not possible through the most frequent systems.

The challenge that most companies face is the adoption of new training models for their Human Resources. This calls for the creation of more varied, flexible and open learning structures that can allow for a faster adaptation to technological changes and a more dynamic assimilation of new information. Therefore, companies need their people to become involved in continuing education.
As time goes by, there are more organisations that adhere to the philosophy of creating learning opportunities that facilitate the continuous personal and professional development of their members.

The Setting

This experience took place in an Argentine multinational company aiming at developing within it a space for employee self-access and self-directed learning (1998-1999). The facilities were the company’s Continuous Learning Centre, which had been set up to offer employees freedom of choice as to the learning strategy they considered the best alternative, thus defining what, when and how to learn it.

The objective of their new Language Learning System was to provide people with more methods and tools to manage their own learning process. Users of the Center would not only have access to materials and resources, but also define their learning objectives and constantly assess their performance. This entailed assisting them on learning how to learn.

Client-company objectives in setting up the Programme

The following objectives geared the design of the company's new Self-access English Learning Programme and of each of the tools, processes and constituent components:

- To foster student-centred learning.
- To maximise the Centre's resources to promote learning autonomy.
- To facilitate the access of regular course students and teachers.
• And, above all, to contribute with the company’s mission of creating a culture that encourages the self-didactism of its members in general topics (business, negotiations, teamwork, etc), languages and English in particular.

How a programme of this kind can challenge our views on ELT

As designers, we were fully aware of the fact that in order to develop a distance or self-access learning programme, it is not enough to count with printed or digital didactic resources. Designing and developing complementary tools and components is instrumental in facilitating the learning process and customising it to the needs, requirements, expectations and profile of the target population.

Developing a programme to allow students’ development in one particular area not only requires knowing the object of study and how it can be learnt, but also devising ways of making this knowledge accessible and clear to the learners. Consequently, to be able to develop the learners' strategies in learning how to learn a foreign language, it weighs to have sound methodological and pedagogical background.

By the time of the company’s request, we had delved into distance education and self-access experiences in Colombia, Spain, Mexico, England, The United States and Argentina, to mention some. We also relied on our own personal experience in other companies both in English and Business topics.

On various occasions, distance learning has been wrongly used by educators who have laid greater emphasis on developing techniques in which "the tail wags the dog" (Dickinson 1994: 2). Thus, they distorted the learning programme and made the underlying objective be the success in the modality
rather than significant learning of the object of study. Taking full perspective of the complex variables involved in any learning process is paramount.

Conventional education is preferably presential, while distance education relies heavily on multimedia. However, both systems should not be so radically contrasted, since the main difference between them is precisely the variety and intensity of the "presenciality" and the use of didactic resources.

In any case, "the distant" and "the presental" are two extremes - the former, a process without any physical contact whatsoever and the latter, a process limited to face-to-face interactions with the teacher. It is quite difficult to get both extremes in their pure form, and surely most experiences could be placed in between these two extremes, where there is an almost infinite number of different alternatives and strategies.

Let's compare two possible examples, each at different places of the distant-presential continuum. Though the situations illustrated are not representative of all learning situations, they can help identify some typical features of each modality. The student should see which system is best suited to his or her personal learning style, preferences and context.
### Regular Course
Characteristics: group of 4 to 5 students meeting in-company, twice a week, 1 1/2 hours each time. Use of varied learning materials.

- Fixed time
- Group learning pace
- Learning objectives based on group needs
- Direction and management set by the teacher
- Both acquisition and use of grammar, linguistic functions and vocabulary.
- Development of receptive and production skills.
- Group motivation
- Continuous and immediate feedback on language recognition and production.

### Self-Access System
Characteristics: student attending a Learning Center, core work based on analysis of CD-Rom’s, individual tutorship twice a month, no communicative activities.

- Flexible time
- Personal learning pace
- Personalised learning objectives
- Self-direction and self-management
- Acquisition of grammar, vocabulary and linguistic functions. (Actual "use" would be fostered if the programme specifically comprised complementary activities)
- Development of receptive skills (unless the programme contains other instances for the development of production skills)
- Individual motivation
- Continuous and immediate feedback on language recognition (from the CD’s).
- Late feedback from tutor.

As mentioned above, there are various ways of making up a distance or self-access system, depending on the special components and tools designed.
What linguistic abilities can be developed?

Language being a social event, there are abilities whose development is conditioned to the characteristics of the distance learning or self-access programme designed. Learning a language involves two main processes: knowledge acquisition and skills development (i.e., putting that knowledge into actual use in interaction with others).

Knowledge acquisition involves input of grammar, vocabulary and linguistic functions. CD-Rom’s or other didactic resources can allow the student to increase knowledge of these language areas. But meaningful learning of a language - the development of linguistic as well as of communicative competence - implies putting this knowledge into actual use through speaking, reading, listening and writing. Even though developing speaking ability necessarily entails speaking - and likewise with the other skills -, it is important that students grow aware of the process involved in skills development, in particular if they are engaged in a distance learning modality.

Thus, CD-Rom’s basically help to develop receptive skills (listening and reading). Although much software offers voice recognition devices, these are centred on the repetition of fixed phrases, limiting the creative aspect of the language and its communicative value. This is why whole language development would be restricted if there lacked some complementary work in the production areas (speaking and writing).
Some principles underpinning a learner-centred methodology

Hutchinson and Waters (1991:128) have provided a clear synthesis of the "theoretical models that outline some basic language learning principles" underlying a learner-centered methodology.

Since language learning is a developmental process, students construct their learning gradually as they are presented with new information. Therefore, they need to develop further autonomy in decoding this new flow of information, resorting to their existing knowledge.

Since learning a language is an active process, we need to know in which particular way students make use of that knowledge, how they process the information and what strategies they use.

We also need to enhance students’ decision-making strategies. Students need to perceive that making mistakes is not evidence of failure but a valuable part of the process of acquisition and integration of new concepts into existing ones. Students need to understand that it is not only through their correct utterances but also through the incorrect ones that the construction of this new corpus of knowledge will be based on.

Learning is an emotional experience, so we need to develop positive emotions. If in teacher-directed courses this is primary, then it is of utmost importance in systems in which students are expected to take responsibility for the process.

Lastly, it is important to consider we cannot develop communicative ability if we are not, to some extent, engaged in true communication.
A self-access programme: differential characteristics of the components

The didactic resources

Their objective is to create a product that is open enough so as to make all users feel personally addressed and motivated to participate. Behind distance learning as well as conventional courses, there are teachers that design the programmes, guides and activities and that select base and ancillary materials. A good design enhances the language learning experience.

The teacher / tutor

It has already been pointed out that the teacher is present, partly, through the didactic resources. This teacher or tutor is not the only source of information for the student, but the agent that organises and creates situations and learning experiences, in order to stimulate and coordinate a group of proceedings that he or she will carry out.

In this way, tutors guide students' learning through counselling and encouragement, so that they resort to varied sources of information. Communication is no longer lineal and descendant, shifting considerably from from teacher to student. This implies placing greater focus on the central role of students in the educational system and reshaping the traditional expectations they possess.

The student

Much in the same way as materials and teachers acquire, in this learning modality, special characteristics and new roles, there are also implications for students.

This modality calls for self-discipline to manage learning time, commitment with oneself and with others, responsibility, organisation, motivation, perseverance and a strong sense of objectives.