

Integrating a self-access system in a language learning institution: a model for implementation

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Abstract

This paper presents a model designed to integrate a self-access system in a language learning institution. This model is based on the different tasks that need to be accomplished for such a system to work efficiently. It is argued that the links between the pedagogues (teachers and counsellors), the self-access centre staff (librarians and technicians) and the language institution are of central importance for the effective functioning of the self-access system. For this purpose, this paper introduces the figure of a 'self-access system co-ordinator', whose function is to ensure the interaction and co-operation among the different parts that make the self-access system. The model presented in this paper has been designed for language learning institutions that want to promote autonomous learning through the use of self-access facilities, and it can be applied to institutions that offer classroom-based language learning, as well as for self-instructional language learning contexts.

Key words: Learner Autonomy, Self-access Centre, Self-access Learning, Self-instruction, Staff.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4. Conclusion
2. Self-access and learner autonomy	Acknowledgements
3. Building up a model to integrate self-access systems	References

1. Introduction

Recent developments in technology have brought about the possibility of providing learners with a rich variety of language learning resources. Learners can now practise modern languages using language learning CD-ROMs, watch-

ing satellite TV, communicating with other students through e-mail, and using learning tools such as word processors or concordancers; they also have the possibility of searching for language learning materials using numerous databases or the World Wide Web. This, together with the growth in the number of students who take up learning a language, has contributed to the emergence —especially in higher education— of new approaches to language learning programmes which include forms of self-access learning (Gremmo & Riley, 1995).

However, although such programmes may be increasing in number, a coherent approach in their development seems to be lacking (see Sturtridge, 1997, for further discussion on this matter). Whereas new resources, such as those mentioned above, may be incorporated in self-access centres¹, it seems that often few changes are made in order to integrate these new learning facilities in the learning structure of the institutions. As a consequence, although the use of self-access facilities may be encouraged, it is seen as part of the learner's 'extra' work, the result being that these resources are only used by a few, highly motivated, students.

The major problem seems to be that emphasis is put in the first place on setting up the resources and purchasing the learning materials, rather than on re-adapting learning structures so that self-access resources and materials can be effectively integrated and used. There is the need, therefore, to research on how language learning institutions can be restructured in order to fully exploit these new learning resources.

This paper, therefore, presents a model for the successful integration of a self-access system in a language learning institution. This model is based on the different tasks that are to be accomplished for such a system to work efficiently. For this purpose, a description of the jobs that would *ideally* constitute a self-access system is provided. This does not mean, however, that only institutions with such a complete staff can set up a self-access system. Every institution —according to its nature, needs and constraints— should consider how the tasks discussed in this paper can be integrated in their learning structure, and decide whether new staff and resources are necessary for that purpose.

2. Self-access and learner autonomy

'Self-access' is a way of describing learning materials that are designed and organised in such a way that students can select and work on tasks on their own (although this does not preclude the possibility of various kinds of support), and obtain feedback on their performance, for example by compar-

1. The term 'self-access centre' is used in this paper to refer to the places in language institutions where learning resources and materials are organised and displayed for students to work in a self-access mode.

ing their answers to a key which accompanies the material (Sheerin, 1991:143).

'Self-access' cannot be equated with 'learner autonomy'. As Sheerin points out, self-access refers to materials that are made available for learners to work on their own. However, this does not imply that learners who use self-access materials are autonomous. Likewise, learners who choose to have lessons with a teacher are no less autonomous than others who learn a language using self-access materials.

As several scholars have pointed out (Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991; Sheerin, 1997; Sturtridge, 1997), being autonomous is not synonymous with learning a language in a particular way (i.e. either with a teacher, or in a self-access mode, or interacting with native speakers), but it means taking active responsibility for one's own learning. This implies, for example, defining one's learning objectives, identifying one's progress in language learning, selecting and implementing learning strategies, identifying learning styles that do not seem to work and trying others, monitoring one's learning, etc. It is not the aim of this paper to dwell on the debate about the definition and implications of learner autonomy; for a study of the theoretical grounding of the concepts connected to learner autonomy, a good up-to-date description is given by Benson (1997) and Pennycook (1997). What is important here is to bear in mind that self-access resources do not automatically make learners autonomous, because it is possible that such resources are used in an autocratic mode, without allowing learners to take an active part in the decision-making process. Ultimately, "[it] is the way teachers and learners *use* self-access facilities which determines whether independent learning takes place" (Sheerin, 1997: 54).

Nevertheless, there clearly exists a close relationship between self-access and learner autonomy: autonomy aims at giving learners the possibility of making choices and taking charge of their learning, whereas self-access provides learners with manifold ways of learning (Littlewood, 1997; Sheerin, 1997; Sturtridge, 1997). Thus, self-access can be seen as one context in which autonomy can be developed. Autonomy can also be enhanced inside the classroom (Dam, 1995), communicating with native speakers (Lewis et al., 1996), or working with other learners (Carpenter, 1996; Marshall, 1996), to take the most common examples.

If self-access refers mainly to materials that are put at the disposal of learners to work on their own, a 'self-access approach' has a much broader sense, implying the whole learning institution working towards promoting learner autonomy through the use of self-access learning materials. In other words, a self-access approach is a *means* to develop learner autonomy. Accordingly, the term 'self-access system' refers to the implementation of a self-access approach in a language learning institution. The aim of this paper is to study how such an implementation can be effectively carried out.

3. Building up a model to integrate self-access systems

Integrating a self-access system in a language learning institution is not an easy task. Firstly, a self-access centre needs to be set up². This implies selecting and purchasing various kinds of learning materials (books, worksheets, dictionaries, magazines, software, video and audio materials, etc.), selecting and buying the necessary equipment (cassette recorders, audio booths, video players, computers and televisions, among others) and providing the staff to ensure the smooth working of the self-access centre (counsellors³, librarians, technical staff and secretarial staff). Secondly, teachers need to be involved in new tasks, such as organising activities that imply self-access work, creating self-access language learning materials, and participating in projects aimed at promoting self-access work amongst their students. Thirdly, the institution needs to provide the necessary infrastructure so that all the parts of the self-access system work efficiently as a learning scheme.

A key point that greatly determines the success or failure of a self-access system is the coordination among the different parts that form the system: 1) the pedagogues: teachers and counsellors; 2) the self-access centre staff: librarians and technicians; and 3) the institution: the manager/s. In order to organise their respective tasks in the self-access system, the figure of a 'self-access system coordinator' — a new figure in the literature of self-access⁴ — can be very beneficial. The role of the self-access system coordinator (hereafter referred to as 'coordinator') is assessing whether the self-access system is working properly as a learning scheme. For this purpose, the coordinator will be in close contact with the institution, with the self-access centre staff, and with teachers and counsellors, as illustrated in the following model:

The tasks involved in each of the three job areas, as well as their relationship with the coordinator are illustrated in Figure 1 below and will be explained in what follows.

3.1. *The pedagogues*

A pedagogue is someone who teaches or facilitates the learning of a particular subject, in our case, language learning. In a self-access system, this task

2. Useful guidelines about the organisation and development of self-access centres are given in the British Institute series about 'Self-access': McCall (1992), Moore (1992), Sturtridge (1992) and Carvalho (1993). Also see Dickinson (1987), Sheerin (1989), Little (1989) and Esch (1994).
3. The term 'counsellor' is used to refer to an expert in language learning whose job is to help students working in a self-access mode. Other related terms are 'language adviser', 'helper', 'assessor' and 'facilitator'.
4. Useful references on self-access that include management issues are: Riley (1985), Dickinson (1987), Little (1989), Sheerin (1989, 1991), Sturtridge (1992) and Esch (1994).

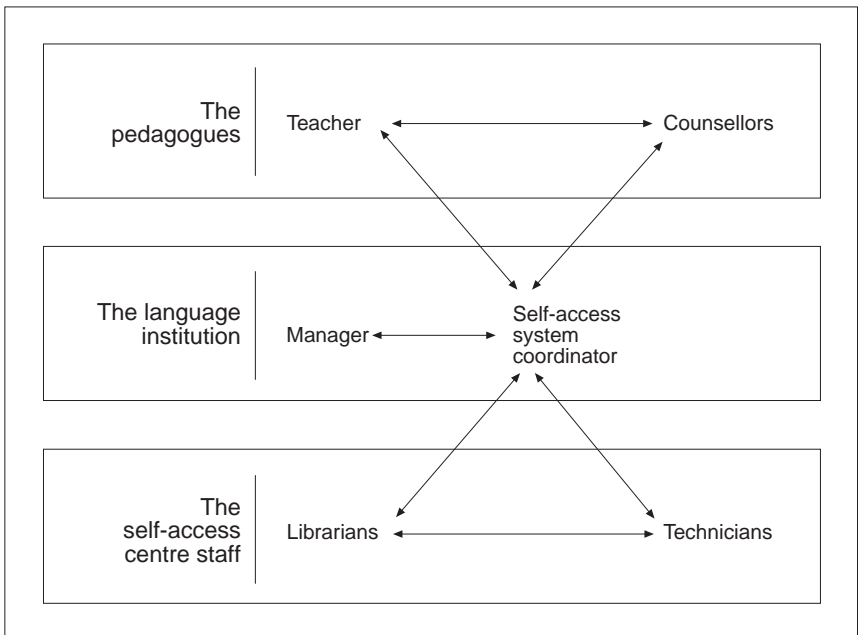


Figure 1. The self-access system scheme.

can be done either by language teachers or by language learning advisers, here referred to as counsellors. In a classroom-based context the pedagogue is a teacher, whereas in a self-instructional context⁵ the pedagogue is a counsellor. The roles of teachers and counsellors, together with their relation with the coordinator, are the main focus of this section.

3.1.1. Teachers

Ever since the implementation of the first self-access systems, there has been an ongoing debate over what is to become the role of the teacher in language learning systems involving any form of self-access. Dickinson (1987) claims that teachers should change their role into that of counsellors. Similarly, Little and Singleton (1989: 31) reach the conclusion that the role required of the teacher should be similar to “the person whose task is to set up and manage a self-access system”. On the other hand, Riley et al. (1989), in their

5. A self-instructional context is a learning context where learners practise a language using self-access materials, without the direct help of a teacher, but with the possible guidance of a counsellor (an expert in language learning who guides students in their learning process).

description of the different roles involved in running a self-access system, the role of the teacher is not discussed. Altogether, it seems that classroom teachers—in the conventional sense—do not quite *fit* in a self-access scheme, often because self-access systems have been developed without taking into account classroom learning.

In the model presented here, classroom learning is considered as a part of a self-access system. Accordingly, rather than a change in the teachers' role, what is argued is an *extension* of their role. Teachers have a set of skills that, regardless of the approach they have used, help learners to learn. In a self-access system, teachers need to shift their focus and, apart from teaching linguistic knowledge, they need to promote autonomous learning through the use of self-access resources. According to Gremmo and Abé (1985: 239), the role of the teacher moves "...from knowing everything and explaining everything to showing where the information can be found and how to obtain it: he is no longer the sole linguistic model; he is a guide to different types of discourse".

However, we cannot expect teachers to suddenly acquire the expertise that facilitating learning requires. Also, it cannot be expected from all teachers to show an open attitude towards this change of approach in their job. Beeching's results (1996:93), after evaluating the implementation of a self-study system, are quite relevant to this point:

Tutors were variously suspicious, sceptical or uncommitted to the principle of self-study. They did not have previous experience of what is involved in preparing students to set objectives, select materials and evaluate their own progress within the objectives they have set for themselves. Many continued to regard themselves as teachers, not as facilitators of learning, and resented time spent on developing autonomy in learners.

It seems clear, therefore, that time and support are needed to make teachers more confident about the assumption that self-access learning can be beneficial for their students. However, for the time being, a feasible approach is needed, one that can work within the learning structures of most language learning institutions⁶, and does not involve a major breakdown for the teachers.

In this regard, Sheerin (1989), Lonergan (1994) and Hurd (1994) suggest that teachers should provide links between the classroom and the self-access centre. In doing so, apart from helping students to familiarise themselves with self-access materials, teachers can also see the potential that such materials have for their students as learners and for them as teachers. Sheerin (1989) gives two practical examples of how these links can be created. One of them is "theme-based pathways", which imply classifying self-access activities according to different topics, so that learners can work through the different mate-

6. See Beeching (1996) for an account of a self-study system which was originally based in classroom learning, but which gradually shifted into self-study.

rials according to their favourite topic. The second example is “investigative quizzes”, which imply looking for information using self-access materials, in order to get the answers to specific questions. The purpose of these activities is to give students the *means* by which they can be introduced to self-access resources, with the aim that this may promote their use in the long term.

But apart from providing links with the self-access resources, teachers may be expected to take an active role in the development of the self-access system. Thus, they can be involved in the creation of new learning materials, adapted to the needs of learners, which can be re-used by other teachers or allocated as self-access work. In the same way, they may be encouraged to carry out ‘action research’ in any area of their interest within second language acquisition or language teaching methodology, a task which is increasingly being recommended in current pre- and in-service teacher training courses.

3.1.2. *Counsellors*

There are institutions which offer their students the option of learning a language in a self-instructional mode with the help of a counsellor (see Dickinson, 1987, for some examples). However, what the role and function of the counsellor should be is not always that clear.

The counsellor’s job is quite different from that of the teacher, as counsellors are not expected to be proficient in the learner’s foreign language, but in language *learning*. Their function is to help learners to *learn* a language, which implies, according to Sturtridge (1992: 11), fulfilling the following tasks:

- helping learners to recognise their own responsibility for their own learning
- helping learners to know their individual language level on entry
- helping learners to decide upon their own individual objectives
- helping learners to recognise their own individual strategies and to make suggestions
- directing learners to particular materials or activities
- helping learners to become aware of what particular exercises are really teaching them
- making suggestions about more efficient ways of practice or monitoring
- making ratings of progress and comparing them with the learners’ own ratings.

Other tasks involved in counselling imply keeping records of every learner, and assessing their progress. Riley et al. (1989) suggest that counsellors should also be closely involved in the selection, processing and production of materials. For this purpose, counsellors need to have a broad knowledge of self-access materials, since their job implies advising the learners on the kind of materials which are more appropriate to their specific needs.

As suggested for teachers, the counsellors' experience in helping students *learn* a language, can be very valuable to carry out research projects on learner autonomy and self-access learning. Riley et al. (1989: 56), for example, suggest some topics on which counsellors may focus their research, such as on "learner-helper discourse; self-direction in institutional settings and for large numbers of students; cross-cultural variation in learning style and attitudes; learner-training; materials development, including computer, assisted learning, or needs analysis".

Finally, it is important to comment on the *attitude* of the counsellor as regards the students. The counsellor works in an environment of self-study, where there are students working with self-access materials who may require varied pedagogical assistance. The problem is then for the counsellors to decide which degree of monitoring the students need. A consistent approach to this issue is given in Riley (1997), who argues that the counsellor and the learner should explicitly negotiate and clarify their role before any counselling is given.

3.1.3. *Links with the coordinator*

The communication between teachers, counsellors and the coordinator is the key to a successful functioning of the self-access system. Teachers and counsellors are those who are in closer contact with learners, and know their needs better than anyone in the system. Therefore, it is essential that they inform the coordinator of the learners' needs, so that the latter can use such information to gear the self-access system towards the needs and interests of learners.

In the same way, the coordinator is to inform teachers and counsellors of the self-access materials available and also of the management constraints on its use. This implies identifying materials that are not well known or properly used and organising sessions to explain the use of such materials. Also, the coordinator needs to make sure that teachers and counsellors are informed of the new language learning material purchased by the institution, in order to assure their use by the students.

The coordinator can also be involved in the organisation of the language learning material —print, audio, video and multimedia activities— created by teachers and counsellors. This implies having access to these activities, classifying and indexing them, and displaying them for their use in the self-access centre. These activities can then be used by the students to work in a self-access mode, or by the teachers themselves in the classroom.

In a similar way, the coordinator can be involved in the research carried out by teachers and counsellors. This implies being aware of current research, studying ways by which students can benefit from this research, and suggesting topics of research which are considered important for the self-access system⁷.

7. C.R.A.P.E.L., at the University of Nancy 2, is an excellent example of a group research scheme in language learning. See the introduction to Riley (1985) for an account of how this organisation works.

3.2. The self-access centre staff

3.2.1. Librarians

Librarians are in charge of the daily management and supervision of the self-access centre. Their main function is making sure that materials and resources are ready for the users of the self-access centre. Some of their tasks are classifying and indexing materials, as well as acquiring materials for the self-access centre. Also, librarians are involved in what Sturtridge (1992: 9) calls “everyday organising and housekeeping skills”, which implies the following:

- tidying up materials and equipment after use
- replenishing stocks of worksheets
- accessing new materials into the catalogue
- weeding out materials which are rarely used
- recording statistics of use
- introducing new learners to the centre
- instilling discipline in the users.

Altogether, the skills required from the librarian are quite varied, regarding knowledge about indexing and cataloguing, organisation of self-access centres, and even transcription techniques.

3.2.2. Technicians

Technicians are in charge of the technological equipment of the centre. Their main function is confined to the maintenance of computers, televisions, video and audio recorders, and any other technological devices available in the self-access centre. However, in a self-access system, the tasks of the technician go further than assuring the correct functioning of the technological equipment. Thus, technicians can give their advice on the suitability of new equipment (prices, features, compatibility) and recommend what is best for the needs of the centre. Furthermore, they can provide training in the use of technological equipment. This may go from designing worksheets explaining the functioning of the equipment, to organising workshops for teachers and counsellors, or for particular groups of students. Another task is to make sure that facilities for recording and copying material, such as radio and TV programmes, are available for teachers and students.

Riley et al. (1989) and McCall (1992) suggest that the self-access system can benefit enormously if technicians are also involved in the field of educational technology. This implies having a good knowledge of the potential of media technologies in language learning and keeping up to date in recent developments in the area. The technicians can then apply this knowledge to solve problems related to the centre, rather than just helping on the purely technical side.

3.2.3. *Links with the coordinator*

The self-access system is also in need of a constant dialogue between librarians, technicians and the coordinator. Furthermore, the system will also benefit from communication between the 'pedagogues' (teachers and counsellors) and the self-access centre staff (librarians and technicians), so that the development of materials, projects and research is encouraged.

As has been remarked above, one of the functions of the coordinator is to consult teachers and counsellors on what the needs of their students are. Once these needs are defined, the coordinator can work with the librarian in order to organise the materials in the self-access centre according to the specific needs of the students. This affects issues regarding the classification, indexing, and display of self-access materials.

On their part, the technician and the coordinator can work together in the organisation of sessions to demonstrate the use of new equipment, or equipment that is not used properly. This will imply setting up workshops for teachers, as well as demonstrations for students should they be necessary.

Also, the coordinator is to be informed of the number of learners using the self-access centre, as well as the statistics of use of the different self-access resources. This information can then be analysed in order to evaluate the functioning of the self-access resources, and on a broader level, of the self-access system.

Finally, librarians and technicians can offer their help in the creation of learning materials and the development of research projects. The experience of the librarian may be very useful, for example, in a project regarding a database index system for the self-access materials, whereas the experience of the technician would be very valuable in the development of multimedia projects. The aim here is not to restrict this staff according to their 'everyday duties', but to encourage the creation of projects by getting contributions from all the people working in the system.

3.3. *The language institution*

If the relationship between the self-access scheme and its wider context is not hammered out explicitly...then the system simply will not be used. (Riley et al. 1989: 35)

The approach adopted by the language institution regarding the self-access system is fundamental to its success or failure as a learning scheme. Thus, it is very important that the institution play an active role, which does not only imply setting up the self-access centre and hiring appropriate staff, but also being constantly involved in the progress of the self-access system. In other words, the institution has to ensure that the self-access system works in both pedagogical and administrative terms.

If, as it is common, the self-access *system* includes classroom-based learning, the institution can then provide the means by which self-access use is

encouraged. This implies allotting some time for self-access work, which may go from scheduling lessons in the self-access centre, to promoting information-gathering activities where students have to use self-access materials. Whichever the mode, the institution needs to make sure that self-access work forms part of the general curriculum, so that teachers can integrate self-access activities in their classroom planning.

For this purpose, teachers need to be given the time to develop the necessary skills to promote self-access learning amongst their students. This necessarily implies reducing the number of *teaching* hours, so that they can have time to carry out the tasks implied in the self-access system scheme. As was commented above, these tasks include providing links between the classroom and the self-access centre, creating new language learning materials, and participating in research projects.

Finally, the institution needs to make sure that the self-access system is supported economically. The investment in self-access resources does not amount solely to the initial capital required to set it up. Budgets are needed for the further development of resources, which include acquiring new self-access material, such as books, tapes, software and stationary; and new equipment, such as computers, video and audio recorders, etc. Also, a considerable amount of money needs to be invested in the staff working in the self-access centre. Restricting money in this area may be an unfortunate decision, as McCall (1992:40) warns:

Given that the salary costs are often a high proportion of any organisation's budget, the temptation to economise on staffing levels may be great. This would not only be a pity but could be disastrous for the centre. If the centre is to run efficiently and to develop a full program of services, various levels of staffing will need to be provided.

Altogether, setting up and running a self-access system requires a considerable level of finance. However, this does not mean that only wealthy institutions can afford such learning schemes, but that a careful projection study of needs has to be done before a self-access system is set up.

3.3.1. *Managers*

The function of the manager in a self-access system is to make sure that the institution maintains an appropriate and coherent policy regarding the self-access scheme. McCall (1992:40) provides a good description of what the "senior management" job involves:

- relating the self-access provision to the organisation's overall policy
- planning materials development programmes, setting objectives and time scales
- overseeing the staffing arrangements for the centre
- receiving feedback and reports on patterns of use to guide future development.

Another task of the manager is making sure that the self-access system is financially *working*. This implies verifying that the self-access system has enough funding, evaluating its cost-effectiveness as a learning scheme and balancing needs within the budget.

Considering the similarities in the nature of the manager's and the coordinator's work, it is very likely that for many institutions the manager and the coordinator will be the same person. For these institutions, the following section can be read as a discussion on issues regarding the managing of a self-access system.

3.3.2. *Links with the coordinator*

The manager and the coordinator can work together in the monitoring and evaluation of the self-access system (for useful guidelines on how to evaluate a self-access system, see Esch, 1989). This process may involve several steps. Firstly, the data that the staff is supposed to gather according to their respective tasks is collected. Secondly, this data is analysed in order to evaluate the state of the system and identify problematic areas, such as, for example, a decrease in the use of video materials. The next step is to find the reasons that may have caused a specific problem. Taking this last example, it may be that students are not using video materials because such materials have not been renewed for a long time, or simply because students do not have enough time to view them in the self-access centre. Once the problem is tackled, the manager and the coordinator can plan intervention, for which it would probably be advisable to consult other members of the staff and/or learners in order to receive feedback. Finally, a course of action may be taken (i.e., purchasing new video materials, setting up a borrowing service for videos, etc.).

A final issue that involves the manager and the coordinator is the policy of the institution regarding the self-access system. There may be a period, for example, when the institution's budget for the centre is limited or reduced. In such a case, the task of the manager and the coordinator is to discuss what measures can be taken to minimise the potentially harmful effects of a reduction in finance. However, not all changes are for the worse. It may well be that the centre is allocated further funds, for which the discussion will result in how the increase in funds can best be used.

4. Conclusion

In presenting such an elaborate model in this paper it was my intention to emphasise an element which is often neglected in the setting up of self-access systems: the staff. If self-access resources make a self-access centre, only human resources can turn the self-access centre into a self-access *system*, where learners are offered the *means* by which they can take control of their learning. Therefore, the main aim of language learning institutions should be to develop their self-access scheme in terms of staff, tasks and coordination, before huge quantities of money are spent on self-access resources. Institu-

tions should also consider that a shortage in the number of resources may not have such a marked effect on the overall functioning of the self-access system, whereas an unjustified shortage in the number of staff may have important consequences for the (mal)functioning of the self-access scheme.

Nevertheless, I do not want to imply here that a self-access system can only work efficiently with the model proposed. Every institution will set up its self-access scheme according to its needs and constrictions, and will structure the staff accordingly. This model must therefore be seen as a representation of the *tasks*, rather than the *jobs*, which are to be carried out in a self-access system.

Thus, not all the language learning institutions may have the figure of a 'counsellor', but they should provide the means by which learners can be guided in a self-instructional mode. In the same way, only large institutions with many staff and language students will be able to introduce the figure of a self-access system coordinator. This cannot be expected, though, from smaller institutions. These should, however, make sure that there is continuous communication between the different staff working in the language learning institution, an issue which is of paramount importance for the success of the self-access system.

Finally, it is worth remarking that the success or failure of a self-access system will be ultimately determined by the attitude of the institution towards self-access and learner autonomy. As has been shown, setting up a self-access system involves an investment in resources and staff; however, if this investment is not accompanied by a positive attitude towards self-access and learner autonomy by the institution, the system will simply not work. I would like to finish by quoting Esch (1989: 83), whose words may cast further light on this issue:

Clearly, self-access systems can achieve their widely varying purposes only if they have sufficient staff, equipment and other resources. But in order for this to happen, those responsible for the allocation of funds must understand not only what it takes to set up and run a successful self-access system but also why self-access is a fundamental requirement of language learners at all levels and in all learning environments.

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