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A Reflection on the Relationship Among Self-Access, Classroom Learning, and Self-Regulation at National Preparatory #2 in Mexico

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Abstract

This reflection paper explores the necessity of creating a link between the classroom and self-access center ('Mediateca') activities based around a gradual process of developing self-regulation. The context is a secondary and high school which is part of the *National Autonomous University of Mexico* (UNAM). One of the main goals of the Mediateca at UNAM is to create a language learning space and this is difficult to achieve if the center is used by students who have a misconception of it as a cybercafé. A change of perspective can be made by connecting classroom activities to the sessions students spend at the self-access center with the objective of raising their learning awareness.

Keywords: self-regulation, learning awareness, gradual process, classroom, self-access center, misconceptions

Context

Self-access centers (SACs) at secondary and high schools are a fairly recent academic project at the *National Autonomous University of Mexico* (UNAM) and were launched by the main University office "Rectoría". The project was established in all nine UNAM high school buildings across Mexico City with the intention of providing students in middle public education opportunities to succeed at language studies. The SACs established at the high schools were based on the CELE —*Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjera [Center of Foreign Language Learning]*— model which was a project started in 1995 (Groult, 2006). CELE staff now offer a certification program for SAC counselors and they also support the language learning needs of university students.

At the high school level —specifically at *Preparatory #2 "Erasmus Castellanos Quinto"*— two SACs named "Mediatecas" were created. The first one was founded in 2009 for the high school section of the school and then the second one in 2012 for the secondary section. The separation of the Mediateca into two sections was intended to give both student populations a different space to achieve language learning, i.e. a place

to practice language learning at flexible hours besides classroom time. Another objective was to provide different opportunities to students according to the education system and age. The average age range of the users at the secondary section is between 12 and 14 years old, while in the high school section, the users' ages are between 14 and 18 years old. The languages offered at the secondary section are French and English, both of them connected with the school programs. This reflection will focus on the high school section, where the offer of languages extends to German and Italian, following the school programs as well. Students are mostly asked by their teachers to use the Mediateca as part of their evaluation process in class with compulsory attendance through a number of hours each period. Thus, the basis of the project for high schools, from the University perspective, shows a strong intended connection between the classroom, the school program and Mediatecas so as to achieve proficient language skills.

However, despite the potential of the Mediatecas to support language learners, there are many things that have to be done to achieve the intended goals for a SAC. Mediatecas and their role in the development of autonomous learning are still unknown to many teachers and learners. Furthermore, there has not been a connection between the activities proposed in the classroom and the ones in the center as the project requires, regarding the student profile.

Self-Directed Learning

It is important to mention that the aims of both Mediatecas have foundations in adult learning models that are linked to the concept of Personal Responsibility Orientation (Gutiérrez Zuloaga, 2003). This model highlights the individual role learners have in their development process. Nevertheless, this model has not only focused on adult learning but has brought about a paradigm shift in language, teaching and learning research. There have been several terms used to refer to self-directed learning, some of them are "autonomous learning", "continuous learning" or "self-education"; however, the most important one is the concept of self-directed learning which covers different aspects of the learning process. Cázarez González (2009) defines self-directed learning as a multicomponent concept, since it comprises the following components which require metacognitive and affective processes:

- **Planning and implementing learning strategies.** The student identifies his/her needs and establishes objectives and goals; the student also determines the

resources that will be used and the appropriate strategies to achieve these goals.

- **Use of experience and critical consciousness.** The student makes use of cumulative experience to solve problems.
- **Internal potential.** This aspect allows the student to express an interest in acquiring skills and knowledge.
- **Social and technological interdependence.** The student shows skills to relate to different individuals in physical or virtual spaces.

Self-directed learning is a model which can be helpful not only in specific areas of language development, but also in developing skills and abilities that allow learners to cope with different learning situations. One of the developed abilities is self-regulation; this refers to the awareness and control that the student has over activities of thought and learning. Self-regulation favors the acquisition of autonomy through different strategies that help students analyze their learning processes and decision making. Through these strategies, students become aware of what they are learning, how and why, and if they do not get the desired results, they make adjustments. There are four specific strategies that benefit the development of the self-regulatory process:

- **Setting goals.** To establish what is consciously attempted to be accomplished. A goal must always be specific and achievable. It can be modified when necessary. Teachers can introduce activities that help students to establish goals related to their learning and to the content to learn, as well as raising awareness of whether these goals are achieved and how they are being achieved.
- **Planning activities.** After setting goals, it is important that students make a plan and decide the actions and strategies that they will carry out. This step can include obstacles that may arise, materials and instruments to be used, and the time needed for certain activities.
- **Monitoring of learning.** The learning process is continuously monitored through instructional strategies that allow the evaluation of cognitive actions according to the achievement of a particular goal. If the progress is not satisfactory, modifications can be made to the goal or procedure at this point.
- **Self-evaluation.** Students compare their learning with the previously established goals through strategies that allow them to see what has been learned and how it has been achieved.

The Purpose of the High School Mediateca

Both of us, professors Arabel and Atenas, have been part of the team of counselors at the Mediatecas for four and three years respectively, as well as being classroom teachers. As counselors, we have undergone a process of learning about Mediatecas / SACs which enables us to offer our learners an experience that not only connects to their language learning, but also guides them to be more involved with the center and their learning. This role requires achieving the objectives that converge at our Mediateca, both the self-direction objectives and the University ones. On the one hand, autonomy and self-direction aims are supposed to be the core of any SAC to raise students' awareness of their way of learning. This perspective also assumes that students are in the center because they have chosen to be there and study on their own. On the other hand, the institutional objective is to prepare students to go to University following goals given by school programs.

According to some studies, individuals can start incorporating self-direction in learning at any age (Guerra Larrazábal, 2008; Hiemstra, 1998; Montalvo Apolin, Hernández, & Gil Rendón, 2011). This perspective supports the idea that all learners can take advantage of a SAC and they can begin their journey as continuous learners for life, taking into consideration their contexts and ages. It is then understood that to make a SAC valuable to a high school and secondary school community, the differences and particularities that separate them from university students have to be regarded as focal starting points for projects and materials offered there. In our context this means considering that not all teachers know the purpose of a SAC, students do not always feel comfortable with the language they have been assigned, and that institutional goals should be met. Therefore, what would be one of the objectives to reach in a high school Mediateca if the ultimate goal is not autonomy?

The Connection Between the SAC and the Classroom

According to the Centre for Open and Distance Education at UNAM (CUAED - Coordinación de Universidad Abierta y Educación a Distancia in Spanish), a Mediateca is a place that aim to develop self-learning and autonomy in the learners by means of learning to learn techniques and strategies as well as bibliographic and technological resources. This approach is the ideal objective of a Mediateca and its core. Nevertheless, there are also different needs and situations that have to be considered in a center

because not all of them are equal. This is shown by Gardner and Miller's (1999) typology of centers. They mention that "systems can incorporate learner support at a variety of levels from complete guidance (structured) to little or no guidance (unstructured)" (p. 65). In UNAM's high school level, the Mediatecas are considered by the Institution as one of the pillars that represent the graduate profile regarding languages. This situation asks for a joint effort between all languages departments and the Mediatecas to promote language learning in order to generate this profile in the students. In the UNAM high school context, the Mediateca and the class are not divided as they pertain to the same department of foreign languages, rely on the similar authorities, and are requested to work on the same focus towards students' goals.

Revisiting some of the objectives of self-direction, we suggest that there be a focus on an introduction to learning responsibility as well as an opportunity for students to understand what they are learning in their programs, what material they can learn with, and why they are learning. Cázares González (2009) does not reject the role of the teacher in the development of self-direction. Likewise, Carson (2012) makes the point of how a classroom-SAC connection can give students the opportunity to reflect on their learning processes. Our role as teachers can be to help students with establishing goals oriented both to language content and learning awareness. As counselors we can help them realize the importance of material selection, learning strategies, and organization of their work in the time they spend in the Mediateca. The Mediatecas' objective in high school can give students an insight into their learning content, material and reasons to study certain aspects of the language so as to build the basis for a future university autonomy.

Challenges

One of the main challenges of introducing a SAC into a high school context is that the concept of "self-access" has been misunderstood as a place where learners can use different online and printed language resources as its only purpose. This has created the idea that a Mediateca is a combination of a library and a computer laboratory; thus, provoking a separation of the classroom and the center because it is considered that the Mediateca is only a repository of materials. Most of the time, the function of the Mediateca is unknown. Consequently, students demonstrate confusion, a sense of unease or indifference towards counseling and other activities offered at the center, such as workshops, the use of resources to enhance strategies, etc. Considering that online

resources, apps and Youtube courses are now available to students, the question that they have is: What are the differences between those materials on offer and the materials and services already offered by a self-access center? Teachers and students from our learning community do not know how important the human element is, nor understand the role of the counselors. They are taken aback when offered a discussion, a workshop, or help with material selection or strategies, because they “only go to study the language”. This misunderstanding forms the basis of students’ beliefs of what learning entails. Carson (2012) mentions that “student’s existing knowledge structures and schema pertaining to learning and teaching may negatively affect their understanding of and engagement with the advising process” (Carson, 2012, p. 251). In our case, it also relies on teachers’ beliefs of what the center can offer to students and its role in their students’ learning process.

Another issue at hand is the systematization of the so-called “Mediateca hours”. A system that was used at the beginning of the project to make the Mediateca known by the language community was to ask teachers, especially English teachers, to send students for an amount of hours to the Mediateca and to count the fulfillment of these hours as part of students’ grades. This hour system emphasized the quantitative aspect of the Mediateca’s purpose. As a consequence, the other learning-based objectives get lost and the Mediateca’s role in the language learning process is misunderstood or overlooked.

Not all high school students will react positively to a center that requires them to take responsibility when they have been used to learning passively by listening to teachers. The gradual guidance of teachers, from their classrooms, and counselors, in Mediatecas, with clear and step-by-step objectives go hand-in-hand with the successful development of autonomous and self-directed learners who get their first approach to this kind of learning at this age. In other words, Mediatecas at a high school level might better use their resources focusing on a small goal regarding self-direction and autonomy. This goal should allow students to feel more comfortable in their language learning process and to achieve their graduate profile with specific and teacher selected goals. In addition, setting goals should also allow them to become more conscious about ‘how’, ‘why’ and ‘what’ they learn by means of counselors’ support at the center when doing their content centered objectives.

Solutions to the Challenges

The connection between the classroom and the Mediateca has never been more crucial than at this stage of learning when we are changing students' views. Although this gradual process of training and awareness raising may begin in the classroom or the Mediatecas, it has to be reinforced and promoted in both places and also ideally by other areas of the school. Carson (2012, p. 249) also supports this gradual process calling it a "bridging learning process" where "a combination, rather than a separation of these advantageous elements may produce a more optimal autonomy outcome for the learner than that one or the other."

Drawing on Cázares González' (2009) definition of self-regulation, we can focus on the points that can link the classroom and the SAC: the process of establishing learning objectives, and the approach of teaching and learning metacognitive strategies. Objectives are essential for students to understand the reasons for spending time at the Mediateca. If they do not know what to do when they arrive for the first time to this space, it is because the objectives of being there and its correlation to their learning are unclear and therefore they feel they can do the same things at a cyber-café. Well-established objectives help students organize their time and select their material. According to their cognitive maturation and their previous school experiences, students of this age are unable to start their self-regulation process if they do not count with a strong guide and precedents of a way to organize their time and activities at the self-access.

This planning should take into account students' needs, language level, ages and knowledge of strategies. It is the teacher within the classroom setting who is able to make ongoing observations related to students' participation, exam scores, and homework completion, and can identify students' weaknesses as a group. For example, teachers can observe that students need to reinforce the concept of temporal and permanent actions or weak writing skills. From this perspective, teachers have valuable information about the content or skill their groups have to work with that can impact the time students spend at the SAC. A proposed first step is to create a file card (Figure 1) with content objectives based on students' needs shown as a group inside classroom. Teachers can help students to understand the purpose of using the SAC in connection with classroom learning. This will help students to reevaluate their beliefs about the time they spend at Mediateca as valuable study time. The shift in students' perceptions of the SAC as a place to study, reinforce, ask questions, etc., can give counselors

opportunities to work with them on the identification of individual weaknesses and learning of strategies.

Mediateca Study Sessions

Topic to study at Mediateca	Objective	Resources and materials you can select	Observations and reflections

Figure 1. An Example of a Card File

Students have to be aware that sometimes their failures or weaknesses do not always come from not understanding grammar rules or specific vocabulary but from a lack of strategies and self-knowledge. The link between the classroom and the self-access center should rely on the steps given to students to become better and more efficient in learning. Harris (2001) makes the point that this kind of learning should give students tools to face their learning consciously and independently. This approach is closely connected to motivation as far as it concerns maximizing students' abilities in an objective manner. A lot of the students we receive at this age are sure that they are not good at learning languages because they see others do it easily or because other people have told them that the subject is not for them. Thus, this link between classroom and the SAC can also boost their confidence and kindle their interest for learning.

Plans for the Future

Mediatecas undergo constant development in order to tailor their services to the context and students' needs. When we presented the proposal outlined in this paper specifically to English teachers, the new school year hadn't started yet. Some of the teachers showed interest in starting to work with card files with objectives. Additionally, senior administrators in charge of Mediatecas also decided to stop obliging teachers to count students' Mediateca hours towards class grades. This year we have started implementing changes with some teachers and students and the response has been positive so far. Students are now beginning to have a better understanding of

the time spent at the Mediateca and the importance of selecting suitable resources. A proposal for the future could be to invest quality time in the counseling aspects of the Mediateca such as learning to learn workshops and communication with students about their difficulties, decisions and steps in solving learning problems so as to start a platform for metacognitive awareness.

Conclusion

The first step in making a difference on how the Mediateca can help in the Institution's goals is to create a joint effort among teachers and counselors to help students achieve their graduate profile but also to become aware of themselves as learners. Both teachers and counselors should have common goals, to complement and support each other. Teachers, who understand Mediateca's main objective, looking beyond technology and resources, are better prepared to understand the challenges that students face and are enabled to guide them to their development. Counselors who work with students to achieve their goals in the classroom can be in the position to engage in a learning awareness dialogue with them, thus, promoting students' independence in a gradual manner.

Notes on the Contributors

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