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Dauids Still Exist among Goliaths: A Story of Modest Self-Access Centre Establishment and Survival in Times of Economic Decline

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Abstract

In a university setting, self-access language learning centres (SALLC)s are generally created out of the need to support students and other members of the university and extra-mural community to explore and expand their language learning horizons. The nature of SALLCs depends on the needs of each institution and its community. They range from fully self-directed to semi-guided, from virtual online-self-access centres (OSAC)s to real centres, with traditional print, and more contemporary electronic and digital materials.

While much of the research so far has dealt with different aspects of SALLCs, particularly of prominent ones, this article reports on the case of a small-scale SALLC, which was designed and developed, and which has operated, during difficult circumstances. This report describes how despite the administrative and financial constraints faced during the establishment of the host university and language centre, current theories and practices in SALLC were still taken into account. Also, despite these difficulties and the economic constraints being endured by the country as a whole, a number of strategies were implemented enabling the SALLC to be accessible to all students, with a view to promoting both autonomy and lifelong learning.

The data used consisted of field notes collected during the period of operation as well as results from an evaluation of the use of different learning pathways on offer. Finally, the challenges still being faced as the SALLC enters a new period in its development are outlined.

Keywords: modest SALLC design, operational constraints, learning pathways, promoting autonomy

Self-Access Language Learning

Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) is closely linked to learner-centred approaches in language learning and notions of autonomous learning, self-directed learning, as well as learning beyond the classroom. SALL is based on the theory that foreign language learners learn better if they have a say in how they learn, for example, when they independently choose the materials or methods from among different resources that are available (Klassen, Detaramanni, Lui, Patri & Wu, 1998). SALL focuses on student responsibility for and active participation in one's own learning (Carter, 1999), but requires the appropriate "learning environment" (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 11) in which this can be promoted.

Self-Access Language Learning Centres (SALLCS)

SALL is most often conducted in a self-contained learning environment or Self-Access Centre (SAC) (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001), or a SALLC. Fouser (2003; 2005) outlines five different categories of SALCs:

- (a) language-laboratory-based: Developed from out-dated language laboratories
- (b) computer-room-based: Developed from open-access computer rooms or computer classrooms
- (c) teaching-unit-based: Developed inside a department or programme that offers mainly traditional classes
- (d) virtual SACs: Developed for use on the Web with no physical location
- (e) newly-developed: Developed separately from existing facilities to meet a variety of language learning needs.

At the same time, Miller & Rogerson-Revell (1993) describe four types of self-access systems: menu-driven SACs (where learners are trained and are capable of using classification systems, catalogue listings, menu-lists or drop-down menus to plan and implement their learning), supermarkets (where a wide range of materials are displayed for users to browse through and choose from), controlled access (where students are “directed to a specific set of materials”, with restricted choice and the focus is on activities which supplement work covered in class) and open-access (where use is not restricted and learners of their own accord find material by using the library or SAC classification system, or by generally browsing in the separate EFL or Foreign Language sections, if there are any). These different types of centre and centre systems have different aims, target different end-users and require different human resources for SAC establishment and management purposes. Miller & Rogerson-Revell suggest that the type of SAC or particular self-access system selected should be based on the aims and rationale (whether financial, pedagogical, ideological, prestigious, or a combination of any of those) for setting it up. Decisions also have to be informed by factors such as the way the SAC will affect classroom teaching or vice versa, the type of materials that need to be bought and / or produced for use in the SAC, the sufficiency of resources, the type of layout the centre will have (*ibid.*), and the form that student self-assessment will take.

According to Cotterall & Reinders (2001), a SAC consists of a number of resources, in the form of readily-accessible materials, activities, and support or

guidance, provided either through answer keys, or through counselling and the use of technology (Dickinson, 1987). SACs are usually located in one place, and are designed to accommodate learners of different levels and learning styles, and who vary in terms of pace of learning, goals and interests. The aim is usually to develop learner autonomy among its users. SALLC learning ranges from fully independent to semi-guided, and can also be online (Klassen et al., 1998). In such an environment, students are given the opportunity to actively participate in their learning rather than receive teaching passively. This environment can provide varied and appropriate modes of assessment. Gardner & Miller (1999) suggest four main modes of administration of assessment of self-access learning (p. 219). They talk about assessments that can be administered externally by instructors, both in printed or online form or as public examinations, for example diagnostic and summative assessments, collaboratively, by both an instructor and the learner, by learners themselves, or by peers, in which case the learners are encouraged to play a central role in the process of their assessment, for example by awarding themselves scores or grades, and in a form which promotes reflective learning and self-management (Wenden, 1999). According to Klassen et al. (1988), in these student-centred environments, students take responsibility for their own learning, but in order to enable this to happen, Kell & Newton (1997) suggest introducing learning pathways and discuss the important role that pathways can play in self-access centres. In their opinion, pathways or routes guide learners in their use of the centres and support students appropriately with regard to level, pace, learning style, interests and goals and they are important in the design and planning of the centre.

Research in Self-Access Language Learning

Although the concept of Self-Access Learning and SACs have existed since the late 1960s (Gremmo and Riley, 1995), SALL has, more recently, experienced a burgeoning of interest, but it has taken a while for relevant research to filter through. This has been evident through the recent publication of conference papers, journal articles, the production of a dedicated journal (*SiSAL*), as well as books and book chapters which seek to explore and better understand this type of learning and investigate different aspects of SALL and SALLCs. Some examples of research areas have been: different types of learner preparation and support (Esch, 1994), methods of monitoring learner progress (Martyn, 1994),

materials design and evaluation (Gardner and Miller, 1994), the role of technology (Morrison, 1999) and, more recently, advising for SALL (see for example Ludwig & Mynard, 2012; Mozzon- McPherson & Vismans, 2001; Mynard & Carson, 2012; Rubin, 2007; Thornton & Mynard, 2012). Research has also considered students' attitudes towards learning in self-access mode (Klassen et al., 1998), learners' perceptions of their learning gains (Richards, 1999), efficiency and effectiveness of self-access centres (Gardner, 1999; 2001), improvements in effectiveness through learner training (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001), definitions and measurement of self-access centre effectiveness (Gardner, 2001), approaches to assessment in SALL (Gardner & Miller, 1999; Reinders & Lázaro, 2007); ongoing support in using SACs (McMurry, Tanner & Anderson, 2009), and change in stakeholders' beliefs in SALL operations (Gardner & Miller, 2010).

The study of existing SALL centres has also revealed that, on the whole, although such centres bear the name 'self-access', which implies learner independence, they often serve simply as computer labs or libraries (McMurry & Anderson, 2010). Some are organised in a way that does not go beyond word processing access or other casual use. Many of them tend to provide activities of a traditional nature, such as grammar, vocabulary and sentence formation exercises. They do not provide systematically designed programmes for students' specific needs. Students are mainly invited to use materials on their own, often without systematic guidance and training in independent and autonomous learning. Aims and expected outcomes seem to be general, and difficult to evaluate. Moreover, in many cases, facilities or technologies may be out-dated. Another characteristic is also the lack of sufficient and suitably-qualified personnel.

Although many aspects have already been researched, it is evident from a review of the literature that it is mostly the prominent or 'state-of-the-art' SALLCS that have been subject to scrutiny (Fouser, 2003, p. 49). It is clear that there is a need for further experimental research in SALLC development and management in less privileged contexts, including what they come up against and how they find ways to survive.

The discussion in this article concentrates on the main characteristics of SALLCS found in the current literature and how and to what extent it was possible to implement elements from them in a small-scale SALLC which was not

only developed during the establishment of its host university and language centre, but also during an economic crisis. Bearing this in mind, the objective of exploring strategies to achieve this task was set. The discussion is based on field notes and on the evaluation of the results from specific learning pathways selected by students during a one-and-a-half year period.

Research and Cooperative and Interactive Language Learning Centre (ReCILLC)

The language centres in various universities worldwide are supported by centres of / for autonomous learning that operate and provide services to students and / or academic and administrative staff and the general public. Such centres exist primarily in Europe, North America, Asia and Oceania (for a few indicative examples, see Appendix). In the Republic of Cyprus, only the Cyprus University of Technology (CUT) has a SALLC, the Research and Cooperative and Interactive Language Learning Centre (ReCILLC).

The CUT Language Centre (2007) offers a variety of language programmes: Greek as a mother-tongue course for Academic Purposes; Greek as a foreign language intensive foundation course; foreign language courses in English, Greek, German, French, Italian, Spanish and Russian, at various levels for CUT and visiting Erasmus students.

The need for a SALLC soon became evident. However, this proved to be a difficult goal for two reasons: first, because this had to be accomplished during the early days of operation both of the university and of the Language Centre (LC) (2007); second, because the whole effort was also affected by the financial constraints imposed following the economic crisis, of which the effects, in Cyprus, began to be felt in the year 2012. Due to these constraints, the LC had to produce some strategies in order to make the establishment of the ReCILLC possible, regardless of the aforementioned difficulties.

The first strategy was to include the ReCILLC establishment within the CUT LC director's 'Start-Up' research programme. This meant that the design, implementation and operation of ReCILLC was financed for the first one-and-a-half years of its existence (January 2011-December 2012) by the 'Start-Up' grant received in April 2010. Its aims were to:

- (a) offer autonomous learning programmes tailored to the needs of students, academic and administrative staff, and community members;
- (b) offer access to diverse language learning material in printed, electronic and digital form, in different languages, at various language levels, practising skills (oral, listening and reading comprehension, writing), vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc., on topics of personal, social and educational relevance to learners;
- (c) support students needing extra attention in their language learning;
- (d) create additional material and establish a digital language learning activity database for the needs of the LC and ReCILLC;
- (e) establish an applied linguistics research article digital database;
- (f) provide teacher training;
- (g) conduct research on related topics.

The second strategy used during the difficult time towards establishing a SALLC was to accommodate it in existing premises. Since January 2011, the ReCILLC has been housed in the CUT LC office building, in a small room and an adjacent office. This area also includes storage and studio facilities for editing and creating multimedia and digital content for the specific needs of the ReCILLC and the LC in general.

The third strategy was to collaborate with the Main University Library. The outcome was the setting up and maintenance of a small Library 'Annexe' in the ReCILLC. This consisted of printed, audio and digital material, organised according to (a) printed and digital language teaching material and (b) material for research in applied linguistics, including the use of new technologies in language teaching. The former were classified thematically, by languages, level and skills and the latter by research areas. An online language teaching material bank for languages taught at the CUT LC was also established and digital activities for all language courses were created by two research assistants in cooperation with LC lecturers. Moreover, an online database of articles from major journals related to language learning (Computer Assisted Language Learning, etc.) was generated and classified thematically by the research assistants. This aimed to facilitate language staff training and research. The database is used and updated by the LC's academic staff.

The fourth strategy was to equip the ReCILLC from existing funding, namely: (a) LC funding and (b) ‘Start-Up’ funding. A number of computers (PCs and Apple computers) of different types catering for different learning styles and degrees of digital literacy (workstations, laptops, iPods, iPads, netbooks) were provided, from both funds, for student use and materials production. Furthermore, existing LC equipment such as a TV set, furniture (chairs and desks) accommodating up to 15 students, storage and book-shelves, a scanner, a printer, message boards, digital cameras and camcorders were used for the different ELVIICS pathways. There was Internet access and, hence, access to online dictionaries, to digital language learning material databases, to wiki and to Dropbox.

The fifth strategy was to staff the ReCILLC without additional funding. The administrative and academic supervision of the ReCILLC was carried out by the CUT LC’s director. ReCILLC was operated by the two ‘Start-Up’ research assistants. One acted as the student mentor and the other offered ICT support. The former was a language teaching expert with knowledge of at least two languages, expertise in second language (L2) curriculum development, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and experience in SALL. The latter was an expert in developing multimedia educational materials, and in running and setting up SALLCs. These two were systematically supported by the CUT subject librarian on issues of material storage, cataloguing and use, and by the LC director and teaching staff for materials development, ReCILLC operation, etc.

The two ‘Start-Up’ research assistants ran the ReCILLC from January 2011 to December 2012. Further funding for staff could not be obtained, as envisaged earlier, because in December 2012, the general economic crisis in Cyprus worsened, and affected the university budget. However, the LC came up with a sixth strategy in order to ensure the ReCILLC’s smooth operation. This was possible, with the unpaid voluntary work of two academic researchers until the end of the spring semester 2014.

The final strategy was to involve LC academic staff in the development of the ReCILLC and its different pathways. This was considered crucial in (a) the linking of classroom and SALLC practice, (b) the promotion of feelings of ReCILLC ownership by the teaching staff, and (c) its development and operation without extra funding.

The general strategy of including the ReCILLC design, trial, implementation and functioning in the ‘Start-Up’ research project and involving the LC academic staff as amongst its shareholders made its existence and operation possible. While the ReCILLC design was based on current theories in SALL, it was, at the same time adversely affected by the realities and constraints imposed by the severe economic situation in Cyprus. While the design took into account the Cypriot users’ perceived need for a teacher, it was hoped that, eventually, they would all be able to use the centre independently on a self-access basis, according to their CEFR level, related topic, and preferred medium. It soon became apparent that students felt most at ease with a topic-based approach more than any other, so this approach was further explored and exploited since it had proved most successful with students. Based on the theories and practices studied and the context in question, the ReCILLC proceeded in the development of a number of pathways, described below.

The ELVIICS Programme

The first pathway was the English Language Voluntary Independent and Intensive Catch-Up Study (ELVIICS). It was tailored to meet the needs of the first-year CUT students placed at a language competence level lower than the level expected for their compulsory courses. The researcher, research assistants and a language lecturer developed, piloted and evaluated the pathway. The ELVIICS followed a hybrid SA model. It consisted of a digital Pak, containing suggestions for the use of a large number of relevant printed, electronic and digital materials as input, and many accompanying CEFR A1 and C2 activities, all systematically put together. Apart from the resources and the activities, which took into consideration the students’ needs, levels, learning styles and preferred pace, interests and goals, the pathway was also supported by human and High-tech resources (in the ReCILLC using laptops, iPads, iPods and notebooks, or off-campus, using their own devices). The theory and practice of exploiting high-tech and human resources were used to promote autonomy. Students could independently choose to work on the number and type of activities that would help them achieve the required language level. The pathway encouraged them to monitor and be responsible for their own learning, and work at their own pace. The pathway included appropriate forms of assessment. Classroom lecturers and the ELVIICS

team cooperated in order to follow the students' progress and support the link between their compulsory course and the ELVIICS pathway. In that way, all stakeholders gained some kind of ownership. The pilot data (2011-2012) revealed that students managed to (a) fill the gaps they had in their knowledge of English and attain the levels expected for their compulsory courses, and (b) pass their compulsory English courses. As suggested by students in the programme evaluation, the programme continued to be offered.

ESAP students ORF improvement, with the use of iPod Touch

This pathway was designed to improve English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and, more specifically, students' oral reading fluency (ORF), with the use of iPod Touch, thus exploiting High-tech resources and promoting autonomy. This pathway followed the controlled access SA system. The ORF iPod programme was based on students' needs. It was preceded by training and accompanied by continuous support from their lecturer and the ReCILLC staff. It involved Repeated Reading activities with the autonomous use of iPod Touch. The content and type of activities were derived from the ESAP course and targeted the students' needs, level, learning pace and style, interests and goals. Results indicated that the students' ORF, in terms of reading pace, accuracy and expression, improved.

Students with Special Learning Difficulties (SpLD) ORF improvement, with the use of iPod Touch

The third pathway modified the ESAP ORF iPod Touch pathway, previously discussed, to cater for the particular needs of students with dyslexia. This involved Repeated Reading activities which catered for specific SpLD students' needs related to specific phonemes. Apart from the resources and the activities, which derived from their compulsory SpLD English courses, students received support from their SpLD lecturer and the ReCILLC team. The aim was to cater for the students' special needs and also to link their special SpLD compulsory course with extra SALL activities. Although this proved to be a more challenging endeavour, which required greater flexibility, because of the particular type of needs, it was successful in catering for the particular ORF needs of these students, including the pronunciation of specific phonemes.

Extended Language Learning

In an effort to extend language learning beyond the classroom, link classroom work with SALL, and develop autonomous lifelong learning, a series of activities were developed for the English for Communication and Internet Studies (ECIS) students. These activities constituted online reading and listening comprehension activities, which were created using the Moodle platform, thus exploiting High-tech resources and promoting autonomy. The activities included text and video material accompanied by digital exercises such as multiple choice, true /false, matching, and cloze. Students worked on these activities at home in their own time. This pathway was based on the controlled access SA system. Three language lecturers and an IT officer from the CUT IT services worked with the ReCILLC team on this project. They all implemented this pathway with the students and provided continuous support to them. The results showed improvement in the students' reading and listening comprehension in English.

Speaking

Based on students' requests, speaking sessions were organised for students to practice in groups. The sessions were facilitated by a mentor, a qualified language instructor who worked on a voluntary basis. The sessions focused on topics covered during students' regular language classes or other topics of interest to them.

Conclusions

SALLCs vary tremendously from university to university in terms of scope, manner of functioning, type of premises, staff involved, materials used, infrastructure and pathways. In the linguistics literature, the SALLCS that are most frequently discussed are the prominent or state-of-the-art facilities (Fouser, 2003). This is an indication of the rarity of research carried out in smaller and more modest SAC operations.

The aim of this article was to contribute to the research conducted in SALLCS and, more particularly, in less prominent or modest ones. The paper has aimed to describe the case of ReCILLC, a small-scale SALLC, the only university SALLC in the Republic of Cyprus. It presented the way ReCILLC was created, and operated, during difficult times: the establishment of the university and that of its LC, which hosted ReCILLC, as well as the broader financial crisis in Cyprus; it

described the strategies followed to overcome administrative and financial constraints and how the CUT LC ReCILLC managed to meet some of its expected outcomes. It describes the ReCILLC's design and operation, and the systematic development and evaluation of a number of pathways, based on current theories and practices in SALL.

The future is still full of challenges: the ReCILLC's developing profile, its use by more students, the staff and members of the public, the need for more materials, the continuous developments in technology, the growing requirements for its ability to operate on a day-to-day basis, the increasingly demanding overall role of the Centre: all these are issues that need to be further explored. Another issue is that of the relocation of the ReCILLC within the new Language Centre premises in September 2013. Other issues include the continuing enrichment, as well as the security, of the materials residing in the ReCILLC; further involvement and cooperation of LC English lecturers with ReCILLC staff and links with LC programmes; the appointment of two full-time staff when the voluntary staff scheme elapses (June 2014); the systematic and research-informed development of more SALL pathways. These plans reflect the importance given to the LC, the ReCILLC and independent learning by the CUT community. The Republic of Cyprus will continue to go through an economic crisis for the foreseeable future; therefore, the mere existence of the ReCILLC, let alone its growth and development, will continue to be a challenge, and further strategies will need to be found in order to continue SALL within the ReCILLC.

Notes on the contributor

Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous is an assistant professor in Applied Linguistics. Her areas of interest and her research and publications are related to second language teaching, curriculum design, development, implementation and evaluation, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Assessment and Online Testing, Autonomous Learning, Teacher Education, and Language Programme Quality Control.

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Appendix

Self-Access Centres

Europe

Open Learning Centre, Kings College:

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/mlc/olc/index.aspx>

Virtual Self-access Centre Nottingham, University of Nottingham:

<http://vsac.cele.nottingham.ac.uk/introduction/>

Virtual Self-Access Centre, London Global University:

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/language-centre/Self-Access-Centre/>

USA

Interactive Language Resource Center, University of Miami:

<http://ilrc.cas.muohio.edu/about/>

Language Resource Centre – University of Harvard: <http://lrc.fas.harvard.edu/>

Asia

Centre for Independent Language Learning – The Hong Kong Polytechnic

University: <http://www2.elc.polyu.edu.hk/CILL/default4.htm>

<http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/CILL/>

City University of Hong Kong. <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/elc/SAC.html>

Australia and New Zealand

http://www.ameprc.mq.edu.au/docs/prospect_journal/volume_19_no_3/19_3_2_Anderson.pdf

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