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The Crucial Role of Peer-Learning in Language Learning Spaces

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Welcome to the second instalment of the Language Learning Spaces: Self-Access in Action column. While the first instalment examined the process of establishing facilities, this second instalment focuses on the role learners themselves play in the ecology of a self-access centre. When the self-access movement first started, many facilities were labelled Resource Centres and centred around providing physical resources (mainly books and audiovisual materials) for self-directed learning for individuals. In recent years, the rise of the Internet, which provides easy access to learning materials and authentic audio and visual from target language countries has challenged proponents of physical self-access spaces to assert their relevance to learners (Reinders, 2012). These technological advances, in addition to the growing recognition of the social dimension of both language learning and learner autonomy (Murray, 2014), have stimulated a shift from a resource-focused approach to self-access language learning, to one which emphasises the social aspect of learning. In some cases, the term self-access has been rejected altogether, in favour of social learning spaces (Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, 2014). The previous column in *SiSAL* documented one such reinvention of a resource-based self-access centre into a social space (Allhouse, 2014).

A successful language learning space has always been a community of learners, not only a place where individuals access materials to improve (although there is a place for this more traditional function too). Learners who come together in self-access centres fulfill a myriad of roles, and make lasting contributions which enrich the experience of those around them. They share ideas and learn from each other, act as role models and motivate others to keep learning, provide opportunities for target language interaction and intercultural communication, and may act as peer-advisors or teachers.

The three papers in this instalment focus on three different initiatives, a tandem learning exchange, a peer-mentoring scheme, and a peer-conversation service. In the first paper, Marie-Thérèse Batardière and Catherine Jeanneau from the University of Limerick, Ireland, describe the tandem learning exchange at their Language Learning Hub, which brings together home students and internationals

students for the purpose of providing target language practice. In the second paper, Carol Everhard gives an account of a peer-mentoring programme she ran with two classes of students at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, and the benefits gained by both mentors and mentees, and also the centre itself, which did not have the staff or funding to provide such a service. The final paper, from Elvira del Carmen Acuña González, Magdalena Avila Pardo and Jane Elisabeth Holmes Lewendon at the Universidad del Caribe in Mexico, focuses on a peer conversation service run by Mexican learners studying English, and describes the way in which this initiative has helped to nurture a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in their self-access centre. I hope these practical accounts of peer-learning initiatives will prove stimulating and useful for SiSAL readers.

The next instalment in this column continues the emphasis on a community of learners, focusing on the ways in which student staff, often the centrepiece of this community, can be trained and supported.

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