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About the Event

The *International Conference on Self-Access* (Encuentro Internacional de Centros de Autoacceso, EICA) was held at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM) from the 4th to the 5th August, 2016. The conference theme in Spanish was *Nuevos escenarios en torno a la autonomía del aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras* which translates as 'New scenarios in autonomy for foreign language learning' and was attended by approximately 280 delegates. Most delegates were based in Mexico and were mainly working in one of the numerous university or school-based self-access centres around the country. Others were classroom teachers interested in learner autonomy and how it can be fostered in their contexts.

In this short paper, each of the plenary speakers will share a summary of their talks and this will be followed by some brief reflections on the event in general.

The purpose of the event was to provide a venue and opportunity to share experiences and open up the creative dialogue on self-access learning between professionals working in Mexico and overseas (the conference website is http://cele.unam.mx/eica). The official conference themes were:

- Autonomous learning, materials design for autonomous learning,
- Evaluation of self-access - including courses, resources, and advising services,
- Technology for the development of languages,
- Advising and learner autonomy.

Summaries of the Plenary Sessions

Plenary 1: Taking Stock and Moving Forward: Future Recommendations for the Field of Self-Access Learning

Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan

I was honoured to be invited to give the opening plenary talk at the conference and decided to begin by acknowledging some of our achievements spanning the five decades of self-access learning. I then went on to broaden the definition as although those of us in the field understand the recent developments, this does not always get communicated to colleagues not closely involved. My (draft / work-in-progress) definition, drew on definitions by Gardner (2011) and Reinders (2012). In addition, I would like to acknowledge Benson (2016) for the last-minute shift from my original term 'learner-centred' to 'person-centred' which reflects important recent thinking in the field of language teaching and learning. The definition will no doubt change in the coming months, but the one I presented at the conference was:

> Self-access facilities are person-centred social learning environments that actively promote language learner autonomy both within and outside the space. Students are provided with support, resources, facilities, skills development, and opportunities for language study and use.

After suggesting a definition, I presented seven focus areas for the coming years which were: technology tools, social dimensions, learner involvement, names of our facilities (i.e. SAC, ILC, etc.), advising, emotions/affective factors, and evaluation. One question I posed to the audience early on in the talk was "As students can now access anything they like via their own devices outside a self-access centre, are SACs still needed?". The audience and I were in agreement: Yes - more than ever! Although resources can be accessed easily, other aspects of self-access remain crucial and need to be developed in the coming years in order to support learners in their ongoing endeavours, i.e. supporting them in navigating the opportunities, managing the process, and reflecting on their language learning; providing access to social learning environments; and providing the emotional support so that they can persist in their language learning.

Plenary 2: Repensar los Centros de Autoacceso de Lenguas en la Era Digital [Re-thinking Self-Access Centres in the Digital Age]

Marina Chávez Sánchez, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City

In my plenary talk I gave an overview of the present situation of forty self-access centers in Mexico, which I gathered from detailed interviews with their coordinators regarding infrastructure, organization, and academic issues. I included around one third of the centres in Mexico in my sample. As I presented the data I made a comparison between the present state and that of 1998 when SACs were still being established in public universities throughout the country.

Then, I went on to present four ideas that my findings inspired me to think more about. The first one related to how self-access centers have matured especially concerning academic matters. The second idea related to the way SACs in Mexican universities have developed their own identities and varied ways of implementing SALL. The third one, referred to the still scarce presence of digital technologies in the centers as a means to provide opportunities for greater interaction and collaboration in social learning environments. I then elaborated on the idea that self-access centers continue to be valid and beneficial to our learners because of the diversity of services, resources, contents and activities they provide. Above all, they are still relevant because they promote language learner autonomy.

Finally, I mentioned some of what I consider are the present areas of opportunity for self-access centers. Mainly, building a concept that reflects the evolution of autonomy that sees language learning as a social process; increasingly mediated by technology and powered by mobile devices; happening outside the classroom (and the center) in virtual spaces. This updating of the concept should give thought to learner training that meets learners' new habits, needs and interests in the globalized world, and to changes in the physical spaces in order to encourage new study and work dynamics where the learner can produce and co-produce content and knowledge.

To conclude, I presented a preliminary version of a website of self-access centers in Mexico that is intended to incorporate information from the centers. I invited the audience to participate in describing the facilities, the organization and the way they promote learner autonomy. The website will be ready shortly and will include interaction tools that will facilitate collaboration among centers.

Plenary 3: Interest Development and Self-Regulated Learning

David McLoughlin, Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan

The purpose of my plenary talk was to highlight the importance of learner interest as a factor in the initiation and maintenance of self-regulated learning behaviours. As outlined in my introduction, models of self-regulated learning have tended to focus on learner motivation in terms of goals: how much value individuals assign to goals; and the expectations they have of achieving them.

I explained that my interest in interest had come about as a result of a study of how students in a self-directed learning setting at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) stayed motivated (McLoughlin & Mynard, 2015). The results had shown that choosing interesting resources and activities was the most prominent factor helping students maintain motivation. The results were a reminder that not all learners are goal driven and that we need to encourage the development of learner interest as a way of triggering and sustaining motivation.

As I wanted the audience to reflect on the relevance of interest to self-access settings, I raised a question that we returned to throughout the talk: *In your self-access context, how can learner interest be triggered, maintained, and allowed to develop?*

The first part of the talk was about triggering interest. I defined interest as a knowledge emotion. It is one of the positive emotions, but it is distinct from the emotion of joy. I discussed interest in terms of appraisal theories of emotions, which state that our emotions are caused by our subjective (and largely unconscious) evaluations of stimuli. The emotion of interest has its own pattern of appraisals: a novelty-complexity evaluation and a comprehensibility evaluation (Silvia, 2008). At this point I asked the audience to consider whether the resources and activities on offer at their self-access centres are likely to trigger learner interest, either in use of the target language or in topics they can explore further through the target language.

Next, I explored the difference between situational interest (where interest is triggered on a particular occasion) and the enduring trait of individual interest. I talked about the importance of offering learners the opportunity to reengage with resources or activities they have previously found interesting. Do our self-access centres allow learners to reengage with interesting content or activities, thereby maintaining interest?

Finally, I looked at how situational learner interest can develop into an individual interest where interest is largely self-generated rather than simply being triggered by external stimuli (Hidi & Ainley, 2009). Do our self-access centres offer the level of support - through advising, for example - that can assist learners in reaching this phase of interest development?

The motivation to reach goals may not be enough to sustain long-term engagement; the motivation that comes from interest is vital (Sansone et al., 2012). Our self-access centres should reflect this by offering opportunities for learners' interest to be triggered, maintained and developed.

Plenary 4: La Formación del Aprendiente Hacia la Era Digital [Shaping the Learner in the Digital Age]

María de la Paz Adelia Peña Clavel, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City

My main concern when I was invited to participate as a plenary speaker in EICA 2016 was choosing a topic that would be of interest for both experienced advisors and those who have just begun to practice this new role in self-access centres. After thinking about it carefully and reflecting on how technology has become part education and our daily lives, I made up my mind to speak about *learning to learn* since I consider that everything that occurs in a self-access centre revolves around metacognition.

In my plenary talk I used the metaphor of a trip to illustrate the changes of learning to learn through the years from past to present. The tour began with the islands of the past where I pointed out that some activities of learner training had been used even before self-access centres came into the picture. The next stop was to show how learning to learn began its real development as a methodology with the emergence of Self Directed Learning, the establishment of self-access centres, and scholarly interest in developing students' learner autonomy. Then, learning to learn, though still guided by the advisor, started making students gain more awareness in the process of learning, more responsibility for their learning, and therefore, more efficiency in learning.

Finally, I presented my reflections and a proposal about what I considered learner training should become in the digital era. I focused on how emergent pedagogies and technology have changed teaching and learning paradigms. So I discussed three aspects: content, dynamics, and the interaction between the two that should be taken into account.

Content should focus on developing students into critical researchers of content on the web. This way they can cope with the large amount for resources and information offered so that they can choose wisely. Learners should learn abilities and competences that allow them to adapt to the constant growth of knowledge and to deal with unknown and unexpected situations. Above all, we should also focus on the learner as a person and consider emotional factors.

I concluded that learning learner training should be anywhere, anytime and always available so that students can make use of it when needed and allow them to personalize it according to their needs. Learner training, just like self access, should become more social and collaborative, a space where advisors and learners learn from each other. Learner training has not changed its aim to make students become more efficient and autonomous learners, but it has become more important since autonomous students can learn whatever they need so that they can cope with what the future holds for them.

Plenary 5: Language Learning Beyond the Classroom: Access all Areas

Phil Benson, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

As I have not been working actively in self-access language learning for some years, the EICA conference was a great chance for me to catch up on developments in the field and the excellent work that is going on across Mexico. There have been a number of changes over the years among which two stand out to my mind. The first is the way in which so many centres have shifted from an individual language study orientation to much more 'sociable' approaches that favour both spoken language and the use of languages for authentic communication. By 'sociable', here, I am thinking particularly of the ways in which centres make use of space, design activities, and involve students in ways that first and foremost encourage sociability. The second is the way in which language advising has grown to the point where it has virtually become a distinct area of practice that both supports and reaches beyond self-access. UNAM is certainly a leader in the professionalization of language advising in Mexico and the wider world.

My own plenary did not directly address these issues, but instead focused on issues in recent research on out-of-class learning that I believe are largely supportive of self-access and language advising. The presentation was organised around two arguments. The first argument

was that adult learners can develop high levels of foreign language proficiency without classroom instruction. This argument is not widely accepted in the second language acquisition research community, and indeed the counter-argument has often been used as evidence of the necessity of instruction. However, there has been a steady trickle of research over the years that has shown that language learners who do achieve high levels of proficiency often attribute this to out-of-class learning. I also highlighted two recent studies that present compelling evidence on this point. Sockett's (2014) study shows that large numbers of French university students who are not formally learning English, are actively engaged in informal use of English online and learn English through informal use. Cole and Vanderplank (2016) is a particularly compelling study because it shows how Brazilian adult learners who had learned English informally outside the classroom not only achieved very high levels of proficiency, but also outperformed a comparable group of classroom instructed learners on a number of tests of proficiency.

The second argument was that people do not achieve language proficiency 'in the classroom' or 'outside the classroom'; instead, they develop it in language learning environments, in which classrooms and sites outside the classroom often play complementary roles. Although the language learning environments for individuals studying at a university in Mexico are likely to have much in common, each individual constructs their own particular environment based on their perceptions of environmental affordances and their own agency in learning. From this perspective, a self-access centre may be *one* site among the many that make up an individual's language learning environments and the challenge for the centre is to organise its resources, activities and advice such that they offer affordances that complement those offered elsewhere in the environment. This is a challenge that, on the evidence of the EICA conference, self-access in Mexico is very well equipped to meet.

Conference Cultural Program

In addition to almost 60 presentations, participants enjoyed some excellent and varied cultural events. The conference opened with a performance by opera singer Vanessa Velasco Martínez who was accompanied by pianist Alejandro Ramírez. At the end of the first day, there was a musical performance of pieces from around the world by *Ensamble de Cuerdas ECO*. On day 2, delegates were invited to participate in a tour of the famous UNAM campus which is a UNESCO site built on volcanic rock and full of fascinating architectural gems and murals. There were also two gastronomy demonstrations.

General Reflections

Jo Mynard

I thoroughly enjoyed the conference and came away feeling inspired and energised by the many conversations I had and connections I made over the two days. For me, some common themes emerged. Firstly, there was a general sense of transition; as if we have reached an important turning point in the field. Many colleagues in Mexico are involved in updating their centres, many of which were established in the mid 1990s. This poses many challenges and hard work ahead, but I was inspired by the enthusiasm and energy that people shared. Secondly, social processes came through in almost every conversation I had. Students and advisors are no longer satisfied with a SAC as an independent study space and many colleagues are reconceptualising their centres as social learning spaces. Thirdly, I was impressed with the creative use of technology tools being used in self-access in Mexico. Colleagues are using technology tools to offer self-access courses, provide a 24/7 space, run *teletandem* (virtual language exchange) sessions, manage portfolios, and track learner progress. Finally, I really liked the focus on multilingualism. In Mexico, SACs include support for many languages and support not only students majoring in those languages, but also those students who are learning another language as a "luxury" (Benson, 2016) and are often extremely motivated to seek out opportunities in a SALC. All in all it was an excellent event and hopefully one that I will have the chance to attend again in the future.

About the Contributors

Phil Benson joined Macquarie University as Professor of Applied Linguistics in 2014 after more than 20 years as an academic in Hong Kong. His background is in TESOL and he has taught English in Japan, Malaysia, the Seychelles, Kuwait and Algeria.

Marina Chávez Sánchez is an associate professor and a language advisor in the language center (CELE) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Her research interests are self-access language learning and educational technology.

David McLoughlin is an associate professor in the School of Global Japanese Studies at Meiji University in Tokyo. Among his research interests are causal attributions in language learning motivation and affective factors in language learning motivation.

Jo Mynard is an associate professor and the Director of the Self-Access Learning Centre at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. She has been involved in the field of self-access language learning for 20 years and has worked in Ireland, the UK, Spain, the UAE and Japan.

María de la Paz Adelia Peña Clavel is an associate professor and an advisor at the self-access center in National Autonomous University of Mexico. She has been working in self-access for about 20 years. Her research interests are learner training, autonomy and teletandem.

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