

# How Well Do Self-Access Call Materials Support Self-Directed Learning?<sup>1</sup>

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*Many CALL materials are used for self-study or are offered in self-access centres where students often have little or no access to support from a teacher. Such materials thus have to be very clear, comprehensive, and easy to use. Although more and more publishers now include comments such as 'suitable for self-access' or 'suitable for self-study' in their catalogues it is not always clear on what basis such comments are made. The majority of purchasing decisions is made by individual buyers and self-access centre staff without even such basic comments. This article presents the results of an evaluation of a small selection of materials in one self-access centre at a New Zealand University, using an evaluative checklist developed by the authors. Results from a quantitative analysis show that many materials do not include the types of support needed in a self-study or self-access context. Results from a qualitative analysis of the evaluators' comments show that the features most commented on by teachers (either for their absence or their presence) are ease of access and support for the wider development of students' language learning strategies.*

## Features of self-study and self-access materials

Self-study materials are a very popular means of learning a new language. Although to our knowledge no comprehensive research has been done on this topic, a quick search on a major bookseller's site like Amazon reveals that hundreds of phrasebooks, travel language guides, and do-it-yourself guides and cdroms are available, and that their sales rankings are high. Little is known about the quality of these resources since few formal evaluations appear to have been carried out. One researcher (Jones, 1993) who inves-

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<sup>1</sup> This article builds on an article published earlier this year (Reinders, H. & M. Lewis 2005 'Examining the 'self'' in self-access materials' *RefLections*, 7, 46-53). The results were presented during a plenary address by the first author at the JALTCALL conference at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, on June 5, 2005.

tigated do-it-yourself materials found that many were rather old-fashioned in their pedagogy and methodology with a number in 1993 still based on audiolingual principles. Jones also found that strategy training and the fostering of autonomous learning skills were almost entirely absent. As classroom teachers we may not necessarily have to concern ourselves with such materials but the situation changes in contexts like a self-access centre where such materials often form the bulk of the available resources.

A university self-access centre usually includes a mixture of published and locally produced resources, the latter often based on authentic materials used by all students, such as lecture handouts and audio- or video-clips of lectures. Purchasing published self-access materials is said to be a "quick and convenient" solution (Gardner & Miller, 1999: 113) for setting up a suitable stock of resources, such as would typically be found in a SAC, some of which might be labeled 'self-access' while others would be generic ESL materials. The reality is that self-access materials really do need to stand alone, even when some advisor support is available in study centres. By definition, users who are new speakers of English may not be able to follow complex instructions in English. Therefore the 'access' part of the definition would seem to be the first point for evaluating materials.

Knowing how good your materials are is said to be the first step in stocking a self-access centre. Gardner and Miller (1999: 113) believe these materials "should be constantly open to evaluation". The question then arises, on what basis this evaluation should be done. What distinguishes generic ESL materials from those which claim to be suitable for self-access? Tomlinson (1998: 322-3) lists 11 features of successful self-study materials. In summary, these are:

- authenticity of language
- reading to include listening
- responses include both global responses which develop high level skills and focused, specific tasks
- production tasks situationally based and in the target language
- learning choices should cater for a variety of language levels, learning styles and time available
- some activities involve other students
- feedback through commentaries rather than answer keys
- emphasis on learner training
- suggestions for individual follow-up activities

Despite being listed in a self-access context, many of these are in fact also characteristic of good classroom learning materials.

The Gardner and Miller list (1999: 114) has seven imperatives, the first of which is "people power", meaning the ability of the SAC staff to conduct an evaluation. This point brings attention to evaluative tools. The authors (Reinders & Lewis, forthcoming) have reviewed six previously published checklists for self-access and general (i.e. not language-specific) self-study materials and found that 1) some included only closed questions 'Do the materials provide evaluation options?', 2) some were very general 'Contains meaningful

language input', 3) or subjective 'Has an attractive presentation', or 4) did not leave room for additional comments by the evaluators. As a result, an alternative practical checklist was developed (see Appendix; the questions contained in the checklist are shown in the left-hand column, alongside the results) to allow self-access staff to evaluate a resource quickly while still leaving room for personal comments.

Gardner (1999) suggests that a Centre's effectiveness (the extent to which it meets its goals) and its efficiency (the relationship between the cost and the outcomes) are largely dependent on the quality of its resources. Resources take up a large part of the budget and if they are not carefully chosen and are inappropriate for the student body (e.g. they are not suitable for self-access or the level is wrong), then they should be identified and replaced. Reinders and Cotterall (2001) investigated the borrowing and use of materials within one self-access centre in New Zealand. They found that especially listening materials were popular and also certain computer programmes, but only those that were easy to use. 'Learning to learn' type resources were the least favourite. Interestingly, many students said that, although they were generally satisfied with the range and quality of the resources, they had difficulty locating items which were appropriate for their level and needs.

### **Evaluating self-study and self-access materials**

We were interested to identify to what extent the CALL materials available in our self-access centre could be said to be suitable for the (largely) self-directed learning which our students are expected to engage in. To this end we decided to investigate all our CALL materials available on CD-ROM. Reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, encyclopaedias) were left out as were web-based language learning materials as the latter are made available through a custom programme designed by our centre to give students access to self-study resources. This programme also provides additional learning support (for a description see Reinders, 2005) and it would therefore be impossible to investigate the websites in isolation. This left a total of 18 materials to be evaluated, all of which had been bought by the Centre in the last three years (some within the last few months) and all of which are still readily available through commercial publishers. The analysis was carried out by three staff members (all of whom were language consultants in the Self-Access Centre at the university) using the checklist designed by the authors (see Appendix).

The evaluation form included both yes/no/unsure questions as well as 1) room for additional notes, and 2) open questions about the best and most difficult aspects of the resource. The results from the evaluations are first presented quantitatively by counting the responses to the closed questions. Next, common themes in the evaluators' comments are discussed.

### **Results**

The quantitative results are presented first by category as they appeared on the evaluation form (see Appendix for a summary) and consist of counts of the number of responses to each question. This is followed by a qualitative discussion of the evaluators' own comments in response to each question, as well as their overall comments on the resources.

## Quantitative analysis

### *Selecting the resource*

The first category on the form was labelled 'selecting the resource', and included three questions related to the initial selection (or rejection) of a resource by self-access staff. The first of these asked whether the materials had been classified as suitable for self-access by the publisher. This could be determined either from the cover of the book/CD-ROM or from the introduction. Out of 18 materials, 5 made claims to this effect but it was not clear from the information provided for the other 13 resources. When asked, the evaluators said that the information for some materials said that they could be used independently or in addition to classroom learning, but it was not always clear whether this meant that the material was designed for self-study.

The second question asked whether there was a clear description of the student level the material was aimed at. Disappointingly, this turned out to not to be the case for two thirds of the resources (12 out of 18). In reply to the third question, all but one cdrom was advertised as being able to be 'dipped into' by the students, depending on their needs.

### *Accessing the parts of the resource*

The second category was to do with finding and accessing specific information. Arguably, this is an important feature of self-access materials, where the topics and order are not determined by a teacher.

Most materials included a table of contents (15) but only four had an index of some sort. Additional 'tools' in the form of detailed 'maps' (2), glossaries (7), and chapter previews or summaries (5) were provided by fewer materials.

### *The learning process*

Where no teacher is present self-access materials need to be more comprehensive. Therefore this category contained four questions about support for the learners' learning process. The first of these asked whether information was routinely summarised. This turned out not to be the case in two-thirds of the 18 materials. Surprisingly few materials included examples for tasks (seven out of 18). Most of the materials (15) did not provide guidance for the learners by providing objectives for tasks. Surprisingly, five out of 18 did not include answer keys or criteria for tasks.

### *Learning to learn*

The final category was to do with learning skills. Only three of the materials included notes on the learning process, and only two provided information on goal-setting.

### *Interim summary: quantitative results*

Some features were very common, being shared by the majority of materials – many publishers do not include clear information about whether a resource is suitable for self-study

and do not include information about the intended student level. Most of the sampled materials had a table of contents, but chapter/part previews were less common. Useful answer keys or criteria were missing in five out of 18 cases. Most materials did not include notes on how to improve one's learning or information on how to set goals. These are all crucially important features for a resource to be useful for self-study or in a self-access context. It appears evaluations such as those carried out here are useful to identify which materials may either have to be rejected or enhanced in some way.

### ***Comparison with print materials***

A similar evaluation as presented here was carried out recently on a total of 25 print materials. The results have been presented in detail elsewhere (Reinders & Lewis, 2005) but some of the main differences with CALL materials will be reported here. A comparison shows that print materials were considerably clearer in their description of whether the resource was intended for self-study<sup>2</sup>. Many were specifically marketed for the self-access context, unlike CALL materials. This is perhaps surprising in that one of the rationales for CALL materials is their potential for easy access and immediate feedback; in other words they are ideal for self-study. Print materials generally provided more information about the intended student level compared with the cdroms. As may have been expected, CALL materials were more 'open' in that only one out of 18 resources had to be used sequentially, a percentage that was higher than that for print materials. In terms of support for the learning process and learning to learn, CALL materials did not fare well compared with print materials. Fewer examples were provided for tasks, fewer objectives, and fewer cdroms contained notes on the learning process.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Next, we turn our attention to the comments made by the evaluators. These were in the form of additional notes in the right hand column or as sentence completion statements reported below. Three features were mentioned repeatedly: authenticity, learner training, and the 'stand-alone' nature of the materials. In addition, one of the three evaluators mentioned the chance for group learning.

#### ***Authenticity***

Authenticity has been listed by many, including Tomlinson (1998), as an important feature of ESL materials. One teacher commented favourably on materials with this feature:

- *The best aspect of the resource was the naturalness of the activities because it helps the students feel that they are in real life situations and gives practice in listening to native speech.*

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<sup>2</sup> However, despite being labelled as self-access resources, these materials were not found to be different in the level of support they contained compared with other materials.

However, this same feature could be viewed negatively:

- *The most difficult aspect was (sometimes) the speed of the recordings, because though they are naturally varied in real life, it becomes difficult for the students to understand the words and comprehend the situation without the help of a teacher.*
- *The most difficult parts were the exercises towards the end of the book because students may not be able to speak fast enough when they practise the 'relaxed (fast) pronunciation' exercises which are more complex than those at the beginning of the book.*
- *The most difficult parts were those parts that a student needs to pronounce long sentences because he/she may find it challenging to speak a long sentence as 'fast' as the narrator does.*

### **Learner training**

Another important feature of self-access materials is learner training. Again, this was mentioned both positively and negatively. Two features which would assist learners were:

- *'Notes on the learning process' (mentioned twice)*
- *'Learning Strategies' because students can think through their learning process and modify it prior to or after doing their work.*

But these notes were also criticized:

- *The most difficult part was also 'Notes on the learning process' because sometimes it is difficult to apply a strategy, without being given an example or the chance to practise it with an opportunity to get feedback from someone more experienced. E.g. on page 51 under 'Listening Strategy', students are recommended: "...you need to be aware of a logical, implicit cause-effect relationship" but are not given tips on identifying this 'implicit relationship'.*
- *The most difficult parts were also Notes on the learning process because sometimes it is difficult to apply a strategy even if a student understands how to do so. E.g. page 51, 'Listening Strategy'—It states that "...you need to be aware of a logical, implicit cause-effect relationship". It may be difficult for a student to find out the cause-effect relationship which is implicit.*

### **Opportunities for group learning**

Self-access does not mean learning only on one's own. One teacher supported Tomlinson's point about practice in groups:

- *Recommends group discussion based on topics relevant to listening activity*

### *Independence from teacher*

To be truly self-accessible, materials must be able to be used without a teacher. One evaluator noted a weakness in the teaching of oral language:

- *The least satisfactory aspect were the parts about 'stress', 'Intonation' etc. (e.g. page 198) because students may not get the right or accurate message from the author if there is no teacher to explain to them the parts that they are not clear about.*

Others noted poor or missing explanations and examples:

- *The least satisfactory aspect was the absence of explanation of grammar rules, which are taught through examples only. The student may not understand why and just understands how the rule works.*
- *Examples are provided for some tasks only.*
- *The most difficult parts were the 'Consolidation Exercises' because unless a student understands very thoroughly the vocabulary items taught in a chapter, these exercises can be difficult for him/her.*

By contrast, some materials had positive comments for the explanations, including feedback:

- *The best aspect ... was clear instructions because it makes it easier for students learning on their own. Also the diagrammatic representations of intonations.*
- *The best aspect of the framework was the additional exercises - the feedback glossary and recording option because they make it a complete self-access tool.*

Other comments praised the stand-alone nature of the explanations in some materials; specifically, they listed:

- *the letter of explanation unit after each exercise title because it makes it easier for the student to go back if he makes mistakes. (mentioned twice)*
- *the speaking practice because a student can practise speaking after listening to a sentence and the narrator repeats the sentence (for the student to check).*
- *'Progress' because a student can plan and check his/her progress. (E.g. There are sub-topics called "All exercises up to now", "Progress graph" etc.) (mentioned twice)*
- *the table of contents because each unit is subcategorised into subtopics like listening, vocabulary etc. The setting is clear and it is convenient for students to choose the ones they want to practise.*
- *'Information summarised' because students know clearly the focus of learning at the beginning of each chapter. (In fact, there are about 12 vocabulary items to be learned in each chapter. So, one's learning can be really focused but essential.)*

- chapter previews and summaries because by doing these parts, students can be actively engaged in the listening tasks before and after doing them.

## Discussion

The CD-ROMs available for this study had already been purchased. Therefore the exercise was to survey materials in general, rather than to make pre-purchasing decisions. Our results suggest that purchasing CD-ROMs for self-access purposes involves more than reading the publishers' publicity. Materials that may be perfectly suitable for use in a classroom environment may not be in a self-access context. Not all materials we surveyed included the support learners in a self-access centre are likely to need. It is then up to staff to decide whether to keep the materials or make adaptations, for example in the form of additional notes on the learning process, by adding objectives for different parts of a CD-ROM, providing more information on the intended student level, or even just writing answer keys.

It is perhaps disappointing that the CALL materials surveyed here did not contain all the features listed in the evaluation and that in some cases there were fewer of these present than in print materials. However, the number of evaluated resources was small and the results need to be seen in this light. At the same time, the CD-ROMs used in this study are very popular, widely available and in use in many self-access centres as well as in self-study. Perhaps writers of such materials can benefit from the use of evaluative checklists such as the one drawn on here, to ensure that their materials are optimally suitable for use both within and outside the classroom.

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\* Different terms are used in the field, such as Independent Learning Centre (ILC), Language Support Centre (LSC), self-study centre etc. Sometimes Self-Access Centres are part of the Learning Support or Student Learning Centre. Here we will use the term Self-Access Centre, abbreviated to SAC.

## Appendix: Evaluation form

FEATURES	Yes / No / Unsure		COMMENTS
<b>Selecting the resource</b>			
Claims to be suitable for self-access	5		13
Clearly describes student level	6	12	
Needs to be used sequentially	1	17	
<b>Accessing the parts of the resource</b>			
An index	4	14	
A table of contents or similar	15	3	
A detailed 'map'	2	16	
A glossary	7	11	
Previews or summaries of the different chapters or parts	5	13	
<b>The learning process</b>			
Information summarised	6	12	
Examples provided for tasks	7	11	
Objectives provided for tasks	4	14	
Keys/answers/criteria for tasks	1	5	
<b>Learning to learn</b>			
Notes on the learning process	3	15	
Shows how to set/get goals	2	16	
Other features			

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