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Marina del Carmen Chávez Sánchez, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

María de la Paz Adelia Peña Clavel
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Corresponding authors: mccs@unam.mx /
adelia.pena@cele.unam.mx

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María de la Paz Adelia Peña Clavel, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Abstract

This paper describes the creation and evolution of the self-access centre (mediateca) at the Foreign Language Teaching Center at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, since its establishment in 1996, and its present profile as a learning space in the context of the university language center. It addresses the organization of the self-access system and describes the services it provides to foster learner autonomy, as well as the problems encountered in the process. It mentions some future directions.

Keywords: self-access center, autonomy, advisor training, learner training

Background to Self-Access Centers in Mexico

During the 1990s self-access centers for language learning were established in public state universities and in the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) with the intention of providing a learning modality that would help students take responsibility for their language learning (Holec, 1979) and self-direct their learning (Dickinson, 1992). The setting up of these centres was performed in two ways.

On the one hand, the Board of Education (SEP), the public state universities and the British Council, as a consultant, developed a national program, and after an intense process of establishment, which lasted a decade, the self-access model was incorporated as part of the provision of language education (Contijoch Escontria, 1998) across the country. Currently, there are over 250 SAC's with this origin. On the other hand, in the same period but independent of the SEP-British Council program, the Foreign Language Teaching Center (CELE-UNAM) developed its own center and called it mediateca.

The Origin of the Mediateca at CELE-UNAM

The mediateca at CELE-UNAM was the result of a research process conducted in 1995 by professors in the Applied Linguistics Department, who studied the theoretical

principles and practical aspects of self-directed learning (Holec, 1979). They held seminars and gathered expert advice, in addition to attending academic events (Groult, 2006). The group wrote a project proposal including what was needed to set up the center: learning materials, equipment, furniture, signage, layout, language advisors and technical staff; as well as the general guidelines for the introduction to the system and basic usage policies.

Immediately after the mediateca was set up, a two-month-pilot was conducted with 180 volunteer participants from language courses. The main purpose was to introduce the self-access system and topics related to learner training and self-direction. The instruction was organized in ten-hour-workshops and the students were expected to learn about cognitive and metacognitive strategies and to have a general idea of how to plan their study. The feedback from the students suggested that the workshops were useful and in 1996 the academic group decided to open the mediateca to the entire university community for learning English and French (Cámara et al., 2006).

Marina Chávez first joined the project in 1996 as a material developer. Then she was the academic coordinator of the mediateca from 1998 to 2012, and at present is a language advisor. Adelia Peña also joined the mediateca as a material developer and has been a language advisor since 1996.

Physical Establishment

In order to build the mediateca physical adjustments were made to an already existing site. The aim was to set up an inviting space where people would want to spend time, and the arrangement of the areas – study, audio, video, multimedia, language advising, the front desk and the coordination office – would reflect openness and flexibility. Soft colors and their combinations in walls, signage and furniture were used.

Good quality furniture for heavy use and with modular features to facilitate the redesign of the areas when needed was purchased. After two decades, these decisions have proved to be adequate because replacements have been minimal. The original dimensions of the space remain the same, but changes in the physical layout have been necessary to fulfill new needs related to the inclusion of other languages and the increased flow of users. Over the years, the equipment has been replaced to suit new digital formats.

Operational Design

During the first decade, an academic group made up of four advisers, two technicians, and the academic coordinator defined how to operate the self-access system. The process was complex because it had to take into account many necessary aspects of building a new conceptual structure: the institutional context, the beliefs of CELE's community and their attitudes towards a new space; the profile and knowledge of those involved in the project; the students' motivations and needs and the availability of instructional materials, among others.

The mediateca was conceived as an integral system of academic and operating elements (Rowland, 1999) which, when combined, provides an environment that facilitates autonomous learning. Three lines of action were defined:

- a. The academic or conceptual base, integrating all the services and resources as a unit, for advising, learner training, and for providing learning materials.
- b. The operating base, which organizes the resources and services, and defines the policies and procedures to run the center.
- c. The infrastructure base, including the physical and human resources.

A systemic process of planning and development allowed the academic base, fostering learner autonomy, to become the principle that guided most decisions about the other bases (Aragón, Chávez, & San Juan, 2001), since the services and resources coexist and are combined into a space by means of physical resources. The following three elements were designed:

Pedagogical structures, like learning to learn workshops, the language advising methodology, the adaptation of a course text for each language, and the design of various types of worksheets (language, learning to learn, descriptions of materials); the criteria for materials selection, adaptation and design.

Patterns of activities, like the guided tour of the mediateca, introduction talks, organization of the language advisory timetable, and group activities (conversation circles and tandem sessions); material classifying and cataloging systems, and technical processing. Materials borrowing was not considered because they were available for the autonomous learner to use within the system as described.

Physical objects, like materials catalogs, equipment user guides, database information architecture, the arrangement of chairs, tables, shelving and signage, among others.

We also designed parameters for internal and external communication in order to maintain a stable profile – for example, the idea of the mediateca as an autonomous learning center – which helped it to adapt to changes, keeping its identity without preventing its constant evolution. Eventually, this prevented the mediateca from being confused with a library or a simple resource center.

To put this operational design into action, the whole academic group always presented, analyzed and discussed all work proposals. After changes and improvements were made, the proposals were piloted and revised until we had the best versions of resources, materials, worksheets, etc. Although agreement was not always easy to reach, we kept in mind the definitions made for the self-access system we were offering. On many occasions, we had the direct participation of learners who provided feedback on the decisions made and evaluated the efficiency and effectiveness of the center. Initially, they used an automated activity log and later a suggestion box, but we also carried out surveys.

Over the years, most of the conceptual structures, patterns of activities and physical objects were consolidated and became part of the model we reproduced when establishing new centers at UNAM.

The Mediateca at CELE-UNAM

The mediateca offers support for German, French, English, Chinese, Italian, Japanese and Portuguese language learners. Users are 18 to 26-year-old-students, who study in various undergraduate programs. They spend at least seven hours in their disciplinary studies and 1-2 hours learning a foreign language at the mediateca every day. Previous research has revealed that they choose self-access for any of the following reasons: lack of time and conditions to enroll in a course; they need extra help with a language course; preparation of language certification for graduation or for scholarship eligibility; and interest in learning autonomously (Bufi & Chávez, 1999). The annual population ranges between 800-1000 active learners. Registration is open throughout the year and is renewed every six months for a fee of four dollars.

Since its establishment the mediateca has offered a flexible system that incorporates an academic support structure (Gremmo, 1998) consisting of personalized language advising, learner training and a variety of materials and learning resources, as well as physical resources in order to support university students who, according to their interests, needs, purposes and personal possibilities, undertake a self-directed language learning process at their own pace. Therefore, attendance has always been voluntary and there is free access to all the services and resources. There is room for 65 students at a time in the 180 m² space. In accordance with the principle of complete independence, there is no explicit link between the mediateca and CELE's language courses, but we agree with Gardner & Miller (1999) that both modalities can be complementary. The mediateca is an alternative learning space¹ to language courses.

Human resources

The language advisors are full and part-time language teachers, with special training. They give advice, select, adapt and develop materials, and provide learner training². The technicians are graduates in related areas: literature, language teaching, communication, computing, and education, who support the work of the advisors, help users, and take care of the proper functioning of resources and services. The coordinator is a language professor trained as an advisor, who directs the work of the group and trains the technicians. This training consists of informing them about self-directed learning, as well as the self-access system.

Pedagogical practices

The aim of learner training is for learners take responsibility for their own learning and develop a level of autonomy (Nunan, 1997; Dickinson, 1987), so that they can learn a foreign language efficiently and effectively. It is integrated in workshops and worksheets, as well as in the advising sessions.

Advising offers the three types of support proposed by Gremmo (1998), psychological, conceptual and methodological. During the interview in Spanish the learner

¹ The mediateca is open Monday to Friday from 8:30 am to 7:30 pm.

² It has been found that is appropriate for each advisor to collaborate at least 10 hours per week so that he or she shows involvement in the project.

and the advisor hold, as much as possible, an equitable dialog to exchange ideas towards the establishment of a work plan to tackle the learner's needs, interests, and goals. Tracking progress and self-assessment are also addressed during the sessions³.

The instructional materials are selected taking into account the learners' needs, viability for self-access, design and potential to foster autonomy, and content. Although collections are constantly updated, in recent years they have not been able to grow due to new university policies for the acquisition and protection of library collections. In addition, changing from analog to digital formats is slow.

Advisor training

We believe the conceptual and practical training of language advisors is very important. Therefore, the project that has been a cornerstone of the evolution of the mediateca is advisor training, which we have provided through courses in different universities and through an online diploma course that was first issued in 2004⁴. This project has involved continuous updating of the academic team and the revision of the mediateca experience.

Challenges

During the early years, the project was challenged by a number of parties. For example, the university authorities questioned the cost-benefit relationship of the mediateca: how many students, in what time frame, learned a foreign language, or achieved a certification. Furthermore, the students believed that the mediateca was an advanced technology center; they often expected the advisors to give them private lessons. Most CELE teachers possibly felt the threat of being displaced by this type of space that offered technology, a variety of learning materials and a pedagogical approach that they did not fully understand.

In response to questioning, we made strong efforts to convey the idea that the mediateca was a space that supported the language learning process, not an evaluation nor a

³ A learner file is kept for further reference.

⁴ <http://cad.cele.unam.mx/formasesores>. This ten-month diploma course is entirely online. It offers six modules; three are theoretical and three practical. Until 2015, 464 teachers from 52 higher education institutions have enrolled and 283 of them have received a diploma.

certification department, and we emphasized that it could complement classroom learning rather than threaten it. We stressed that it was a modality suitable for language learners who possessed or were willing to develop the characteristics of an ideal language learner (Cotterall, 1999; Rubin, 1975), with the intention to invite students to try out the system. We continually communicated this through brochures and posters distributed on campus and visited classrooms to invite students and teachers to use the mediateca, and to raise awareness of the benefits that this space could deliver to language learning.

It took approximately eight years to build the appropriate image of the mediateca. We believe that at present, although there are still teachers and students who do not believe in self-direction, the mediateca has a clear presence within the institutional context of CELE. We have found out from learners' comments that now some classroom teachers encourage them to use the center to do remedial work, or to get extra practice, but also, that many students decide to use it because it suits their expectations and serves to achieve their language learning goals.

Final Reflections and Future Directions

The mediateca project has always been important to CELE because from the beginning it represented an innovation in language learning. This alternative modality became an institutional model that has been fully or partially reproduced at UNAM and in fifty seven other schools and universities in Mexico.

The academic group has continuously kept a proactive attitude towards our own development as advisors and professionals. Since advisor training became a stepping-stone in the consolidation of the academic structure in the mediateca, all the advisors gained comparable instruction and background knowledge about learner autonomy and self-directed learning. In this way, it was possible to reach agreement on what kind of autonomy we wanted to foster. At the same time, we have explored related areas like educational technology and online education, which has led to the development of several projects that have enriched our practice (See the Appendix).

In operating the mediateca it was useful to define clearly the profiles and the roles of each of the members (advisors, technicians and coordinator) in order to avoid confusion,

especially to the users. Apart from that, involving all the members of the project was important in the decision making.

Although our practice has been fruitful, it is necessary to keep finding ways to improve. For instance, we believe that the systematization of a learner training methodology is perhaps the best contribution made in almost twenty years of operation because it is the result of a permanent assessment of activities and materials implemented. However, at present this methodology requires further updating in order to meet the demands of young students who hold a greater mastery of a foreign language and are more aware of their ways of learning, in addition to using technology for learning.

We have worked hard to consolidate the correct functioning of all the elements of the self-access system and have made a permanent effort to communicate its existence and its benefits, but we feel we should now find more creative ways to link the mediateca practice to the classroom in order to attain a better understanding of the modality.

In terms of space design, when the mediateca was built we did not consider the need for an area to hold group activities, and that has been a permanent lack that causes inconvenience. Eventually, a new design might be needed as more languages are incorporated into the center causing an increase in the number of users.

During the first decade of the present century, when the Internet started to take a significant presence in the education field, we lacked vision and did not take into account a strong incorporation of virtual learning environments and resources. We feel that now we have to double efforts in order to maximize the mediateca project.

To conclude, in the setting up and development of a center we believe the following advice will be helpful. First, the involvement of all the members in the decision-making process and extensive communication to the rest of the community. Second, a proactive attitude towards the project, encouraging the academic growth of all members. Third, the design of a model where the academic principles permeate the rest of the organization. Finally, in the current digital era, the focus should be on how we are going to foster learner autonomy considering the new forms of communication and new ways of learning that are taking place.

Notes on the contributors

Marina Chávez Sánchez was the chief editor of *LEAA Lenguas en Aprendizaje Autodirigido*, an electronic journal. She led the establishment of 14 mediatecas in UNAM high schools in 2010. She received an MA in Educational Technology through the Latin American Educational Communication Institute (ILCE) and an MA in Virtual Learning Environments through Virtual Educa and the University of Panama. Her research interests are self-access, ICT, and language learner advising.

María de la Paz Adelia Peña Clavel is responsible for an Advisor Training Online Diploma Course at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She is in charge of a Teletandem (etandem) project at the mediateca. She received her MA in Educational Technology through the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education (ITESM) in México. Her research interests are Teletandem, language learning strategies and autonomy.

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Appendix

Related Projects Developed by the Mediateca

Period	Name
1997- 1999	Colección Aprendizaje autodirigido Vol. 1 and Vol. 2 [Self-directed works collection. Vol. 1 and Vol. 2] [Collected works on self-directed learning]
1998- 2000	Directorio descriptivo de los CAA en México. [Self-access centers in México descriptive directory]
1998- 2004	Diplomado Formación de Asesores de CAA [Online Diploma Course for SAC language advisors] http://cad.cele.unam.mx/formasesores
2001- 2002	Establecimiento del Centro de Apoyo a la Docencia, CAD. http://ditel.cele.unam.mx/ [Establishment of the Language Teacher Support Center]
2003- 2006	Sitio web de apoyo para los aprendientes Consultamediateca [Consultamediateca. Mediateca Web-site] http://cad.cele.unam.mx/consultamediateca .
2003- 2006	LEAA Lenguas en Aprendizaje Autodirigido. Revista electrónica de la mediateca del CELE-UNAM [LEAA Self-directed language learning. CELE-UNAM Mediateca electronic journal] http://cad.cele.unam.mx/leaa
2008- 2010	Establecimiento de 14 mediatecas del bachillerato de la UNAM [Establishment of 14 mediatecas in UNAM high schools] http://cadtest.cele.unam.mx:8081/medi/
2008	Proyecto de Teletandem [Teletandem Project] http://cad.cele.unam.mx/leaa/cnt/ano04/num01/0401a03.pdf

2011	Proyecto Rutas de aprendizaje. [Pathways Project] Pathways http://cad.cele.unam.mx/leaa/cnt/ano04/num01/0401a04.pdf
2011	Proyecto Facebook [Facebook Project] http://cad.cele.unam.mx/leaa/cnt/ano05/num01/0501a06.pdf
2010- 2012	Proyecto Aprendizaje autónomo de lenguas: italiano, inglés y español con el Centro Lingüístico de la Universidad de Padua, Italia [Autonomous Language Learning Project: Italian, English and Spanish in collaboration with the Linguistics Center at Padova University, Italy]