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Abstract

The present article describes how the development of the ‘conversation sessions’ in the self-access centre (SAC) fostered a Community of Practice (CoP) as theorised by Lave & Wenger (1991). Our SAC is at a government-funded university in Cancun, Mexico. The conversation sessions were implemented with the aim to offer our EFL students the opportunity to practice speaking on a regular basis to complement their English programme. These peer-run conversations, in turn, are one of the key elements that led to the creation of a CoP where SAC users and personnel share a repertoire of resources and conventions created over time in order to form, transmit and advance knowledge.

Key words: Peer-learning; communities of practice; self-access learning; legitimate peripheral participation; agency; autonomy

The Context

The Self-Access Centre (SAC) at the Universidad del Caribe, Mexico and the English Department are located together. They are managed by the coordinator of the English Department and nine full-time counsellors, who are also English teachers from different undergraduate programmes: International Business and Business Innovation, Sustainable Tourism, Culinary Arts, and four Engineering programmes.

Our SAC is considered to be a great success due to the number of users (around 150 per day). Visitors from other institutions to the SAC generally comment that they wish their self-access centre would be as busy and animated as ours, in which the most popular activities are the ‘conversations’. Nevertheless, it has been a gradual process, not only in relation to how this speaking practice has evolved but also in the development of the whole self-access system since it started 10 years ago.

During the 1990s, as a result of a project between the Ministry of Education and the British Council, 33 centres were opened in Mexico (Grounds, 2002) with the objective of promoting autonomous learning to complement classroom language learning. Founded in 2000, our institution came a few years later to the trend of SAC openings. It was at the insistence of one of the authors of this article, coordinator of the English programme at that

time, that the Academic Secretary and the Dean were gradually convinced of the advantages of a SAC for a university located in the heart of a touristic area. In late 2004, all full-time and part-time teachers took courses on setting up SACs and becoming SAC tutors, instructed by the British Council, and in January 2005 our SAC opened.

The SAC started in an area of 210 m² in a classroom adapted for the SAC. It could service 35 students simultaneously; it had reading and listening resources, televisions for films and videos, computers, a small reception and a small office for the head of the SAC. The station of a full-time teacher was within the SAC. And at that time we did not have any idea about the limitations of our SAC; we were simply delighted because this was an innovation we had fought for so hard. For the time being, that was more than enough. In 2005, the SAC was given an adjacent area, so it could service 50 students simultaneously. In June 2008, the SAC moved to a larger area of 474 m².

By the time we moved to our new premises we had already discovered that one of our strengths was that the full-time teacher stations were placed in the SAC so teachers/counsellors were permanently available for users. Hence, this condition was replicated in our next setting. The new area was big enough for a turnover of 150 students, which was our attendance during peak hours from 1 to 4 pm. During this time, the number of full-time teachers was increased from three to nine.

Looking back on those years, it seems that the gradual growth from a SAC for 35 students to one that could service 150 users gave us the opportunity to develop our own character in accordance with the needs of our users. One of the first decisions was to make SAC hours compulsory for students and consider them a complement to classroom instruction. This was done because of the requirement of spoken English in this touristic destination.

We were taught that establishing a SAC involved giving controlled activities not unlike homework. These included conversation sessions, originally run by teachers and a British language assistant. As a part of this method conversation sessions were initially very structured. The first British language assistant from Southampton (2004-2005) experimented with formal and academic topics such as drug addiction, holidays or English culture, but gradually found that students responded more to unstructured, more personalized conversations. Turn taking was orderly and strict, leading to what one of the

teachers called “predictable boredom”. Initially, there used to be groups of up to twenty students; and after discussions between teachers about the benefits of just listening without participating, the groups were reduced to a maximum of eight. Thus, conversation sessions were gradually shaped by students’ needs and interests. This was very fortunate because the rationale was that the students should have these sessions on a regular basis, in small groups and in a more relaxed environment.

In 2007, part-time teachers began to be paid an extra hour for each group taught, for leading conversation sessions and a chart containing information as to when teachers and assistants were available was posted at the SAC entrance. As a result of the formal introduction of conversation sessions we also overcame a recurrent problem we had witnessed in Mexican SACs: the divorce between SAC counsellors and non-SAC teachers that undermines both SAC work and classroom instruction. Teachers with no contact with SAC work may fail to perceive the benefits of self-access learning (Gardner & Miller, 1999).

These sessions have helped part-time teachers experience what working in self-access conditions is both for students and teachers. As a result, we have been able to witness beneficial changes in the attitudes of teachers within the classroom. For example, a very distant and authoritative teacher, through experiencing the less hierarchical atmosphere that conversations often imply, became more accessible and even started to include humour in his teaching. In other cases, teachers who had not previously given proper follow-up to students covering their SAC hours became convinced of their benefits and devised links between SAC activities and their teaching.

Establishing the Peer-Learning Programme

The conversations soon became so popular that at certain hours we could not cope with the demand. Thus, students were required to attend from 12 to 18 twenty-minute conversation sessions, as well as 28 hours of independent work in the SAC over a 16-week term. The number of conversation sessions and SAC hours depend on the students’ level and teachers’ criteria.

At the beginning, only full and part-time teachers and British language assistants ran the conversations. However, after a couple of years, as the demand grew with the

increasing student population, the counsellors started appointing more advanced students to lead and SAC staff would monitor them. Soon, it became customary for students to volunteer. Now the conversation sessions are led either by a teacher, British language assistant or a peer-student.

The Peer-Learning Programme in Action

In this scheme, the students arrive at the SAC, check the conversation chart or simply join an ongoing session. In the case that there is nobody available to facilitate a conversation, they ask for permission to have a session among themselves. Thus, either the leader, usually an ‘old timer’, decides what to do, or they negotiate what they want to do (have small talk, play a board game or use cue cards). All the material is within reach. When the conversation session is over, the students have their records signed. Before signing, the teacher may ask some questions about what they talked about or did. This characteristic of students self-organizing and volunteering to lead conversations, termed as engagement by Wenger (1998), is one of the elements that led us to consider that a Community of Practice (CoP), “a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”, was in the process of being formed because the SAC dynamic shows the three features that, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), define CoPs:

- 1) mutual engagement; doing things together, in our case, talking, playing, practicing English or helping peers
- 2) joint enterprise, improving the speaking skill
- 3) shared mutual knowledge on the procedures to do things; in our SAC, the logistics for conversations or just the sharing of knowledge on different levels.

How the students approach the counsellor and the freedom they are granted depends on each staff member’s personality and teaching style. There are some who control the activities the students do and monitor them very closely, while others let the students free to happily talk about things they would not before a teacher.

It is a gradual process to reach the point in which the students feel confident enough to approach an ongoing conversation or ask for conversation sessions. At the beginning, some new students find it hard. Sometimes they just stand near our stations with their conversation records but they do not dare ask, whereas later in the semester, they seem to

be pretty confident to make requests, even if they see that the staff is busy. This has happened perhaps because a CoP has been formed and one of the characteristics of such communities is that they develop a shared repertoire of routines, ways of doing things, tools and actions (Wenger, 1998) and have learnt that it is their right.

Willing students from higher levels often lead conversation sessions with students from lower levels. The students arrive individually or in small groups and one from a more advanced level may address the teacher in English asking for permission to lead a conversation. Sometimes the conversation leaders are not more proficient than their peers but students who, through their sustained participation in the SAC community, have become either more fluent or confident. Thus, the students' agency may come to life spontaneously in the on-going interactions acting collectively in the social formations of our SAC (Block, 2014).

As for materials to help professionals and amateurs to lead conversations, several options have been created: there are conversation cards such as Cathy's cards (Seitchik Diaz, 2002) and the Chat Pack (two sets of cards containing each over 150 questions to stimulate conversations) (Chat pack: Fun questions to spark conversations, 2007) games produced by teachers who have generously shared them with the SAC, worksheets with conversation topics downloaded from the internet, and games produced by students working in the SAC. Most importantly, students often surprise us with imaginative ways of using material from the SAC to create conversation activities. For instance, they may use a set of cards containing occupation images to play a game of guessing the job by means of asking questions or they use headbands to take turns guessing what their card depicts.

Furthermore, the SAC has had students as helpers for the last four semesters. They are students doing their *Voluntary Service*, and we encourage them to offer suggestions to optimize the service. They are often extremely enthusiastic and creative. They lead conversation sessions, help with homework, and organize activities for special occasions, thus providing another source of peer-learning in the SAC. Their work greatly enhances the atmosphere, bringing to our community social energy, engagement and imagination (Wenger, 1998).

This, in turn, has led to a boost in SAC attendance and popularity. Even though the conversations sessions were compulsory, they soon became very popular and it was

discovered that conversations with peers were often preferred and the only requirement was to have them in the proximity of a teacher station in order to ensure the interaction was kept in English. This last trait, conversation among students, has proved to be the most enriching; it has become a source of lively, informal and much sought for interaction among peers. The students enjoy meeting people; they report looking forward to visiting the SAC, which in the surveys has always been the favourite space in campus. There are also students who have completed their English courses and keep attending as conversation leaders, hence exerting their personal agency. This is only one example of how “learners actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 145).

The popularity of conversation sessions, has led to another characteristic of our SAC. Unintentionally (because we had to make do with the location we were given, which did not have private areas or small cubicles for group work) through the momentum the situation gradually gained, our SAC became very noisy. However, we have also observed that those students who want to do listening, TV viewing and work on computers use headsets to isolate themselves and there have never been complaints from students wanting to concentrate on their reading or studying. Moreover, in the SAC you can see how students promote and benefit from peer-learning, for example, it is common to see students working collaboratively: reading from the same book, doing homework, or developing projects together. This suggests that the cooperative style of engagement that has developed in the SAC extends further than the peer-conversation sessions.

Examining the Peer Conversation Sessions

These benefits have been formally documented in the MA dissertation of one of the authors on the perceptions of the actors involved (Avila, 2013). The subjects of the study were the participants in conversations, students and leaders alike. The method was mixed research, based on observations, questionnaires and a focus group. The overall results showed that the conversation sessions can be considered an asset because they are perceived as successful and useful by both students and teachers. The different types of conversations and leader styles cater for the different learning styles and students’

personalities, thus providing students with the opportunity to practice their own English in a personalized atmosphere.

The research highlighted that the SAC is not only a place for practising English but it is also a place of meeting amongst students from different majors, the English teachers and the language assistants. The students repeatedly express that it is through these conversations that they gain confidence and improve their English. These conversation sessions offer users the opportunity to be constantly engaged in the pursuit of practicing speaking, interacting with each other and with the world, leading to what in the words of Wenger (1998, p. 45), is “the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise”.

On the other hand, data gathered in this research suggested a path for improvement mainly related to administrative matters, such as a change of the maximum number of students in the conversation groups and the frequency of conversations. Conversation sessions are limited to one per day in order to meet the demand of students and the availability of conversation leaders. As for mixed level groups some conversation leaders suggested that lower levels require more attention so it would be better not to mix them; however, the consensus was that mixed levels are an enriching factor of the speaking practice experience as it is closer to reality, thus mixed conversation sessions remained.

A Final Reflection

In our SAC the value is that the expert and the non-expert are fully accepted and both have a meaningful role in our community that gives them a sense of belonging and engagement. This is why we consider that a Community of Practice has evolved where knowledge is formed, maintained and transmitted (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition, its practices have become the property of this community to the extent that it is considered normal to use English in the SAC and a domain has developed which promotes language practice among a Spanish-speaking population.

However, it is worth mentioning that neither students nor teachers were familiar with this style of working, and it has taken time to break the boundaries between teachers and students to form a community. Nor did we set our style of working drawing on Lave and Wenger’s idea of CoP; it was more like a gradual discovery of approaches leading to a better system of working that has led to developing a CoP. Accepting this idea, learning is

fundamentally experiential and social (Wenger, 1998) and CoPs can be springboards for the learning process. In fact, we have witnessed how the students have been drawn into the environment and how legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) happens naturally once the correct conditions are given. That is, through LPP the newcomers integrate into our community of practitioners, adopting group language, practices and identities by virtue of their informal membership.

If there is any practical advice to be given from our experience, it is that the notion of the SAC as a social centre overrules other methodological considerations. Listening to users so as to learn what they want, granting them the freedom to bring up the topics of their interest, encouraging less structured activities and roles, encouraging mixed-level participation and, in general, emphasising less enforcement and administrative procedures and more creativity and resourcefulness. Self-access language learning has dramatically shifted, so it is up to every self-access centre to discover what works from trial and error rather than trying to follow a particular paradigm. Murray (2014) asserts that autonomy has been lately associated with interdependence. He agrees with Huang and Benson (2013), who identified ability, desire and freedom as the key components of the capacity to control learning. Thus, allowing learners the freedom to choose when, how and who they want to practice their English with can help foster the development of autonomy of language learners in the self-access centre space.

Notes on the Contributors

Elvira del Carmen Acuña González is founder of the SAC at Universidad del Caribe. She holds a MA in English Language Teaching from Southampton University. She is currently a full-time professor and SAC counsellor at Universidad del Caribe. Her areas of interest are reading and discourse analysis.

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