**Language Learning Beyond the Classroom:
Access all Areas**

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Abstract

This paper argues for an environmental view of the relationship between self-access, the classroom and out-of-class learning. The self-access centre (SAC) developed as an alternative or complement to the classroom at a time when classroom instruction was considered the norm for language learning. In the light of increased opportunities for out-of-class language learning and questioning of the importance of classroom instruction to achieving high levels of proficiency, a holistic view of the in-class and out-of-class spaces in which languages are learned is now needed. The idea that languages are learned in 'language learning environments', in which the self-access centres are potentially one of many 'settings' for individuals' language learning, is proposed as a framework for discussing issues of self-access planning and management.

Keywords: language learning environments, self-access, out-of-class learning

Self-Access and Out-Of-Class Learning

The idea of the self-access centre (SAC) goes back to a time in the 1970s when much of what is now taken for granted about language teaching and learning was yet to be conceived of. In particular, the theory and practice of self-access language learning evolved in a context in which classroom instruction was thought of as the norm for language learning and out-of-class learning was considered an optional extra. At this time, self-access was typically understood as an alternative to classroom instruction in which learners could get advice on resources and strategies for self-directed learning, or self-direct their learning of less commonly taught languages (Harding-Esch, 1982; Riley & Zoppis, 1985). Later, more emphasis was placed on the ways in which self-access learning could complement classroom instruction (Gardner & Miller, 1999). In both approaches, self-access and out-of-class learning were treated as being more or less the same thing and it is only relatively recently that attention has turned to the relationship between self-access and broader notions of language learning beyond the classroom.

Much has changed since the early days of self-access, however, especially in respect to the impact of educational mobility on the relationship between the language classroom and the world beyond it. Falling costs of international travel and the growth of international

education mean that students have more opportunities to use foreign languages outside the classroom than ever before. International airport arrivals in Australia increased by more than 50 per cent between 2000 and 2015 and the number of international students more than doubled. While overseas travel remains beyond the means of many language learners, the rise of the Internet has placed a vast array of language learning resources within easy reach of any learner who has access to an Internet-enabled device (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Nunan & Richards, 2015). Internet access grew from around 32 per cent of the world's population in 2011 to 46 per cent in 2015, with much of this growth being due to the spread of mobile technologies in Africa, Asia and Central and South America. At the same time, developments in formal education related to online learning, the flipped classroom, self-study language learning options, and the reduction of classroom contact hours are calling the importance of classroom instruction into question. In the context of these rapid changes, the question of how SACs are located in the broader spaces of language learning in and beyond the classroom has become crucial. This is a local question that has to be asked, separately, of each SAC in its particular sociolinguistic and educational context. In this paper, a broader framework for thinking about the question in its local contexts will be proposed.

In order to do this, two arguments are developed which could be key to thinking about self-access and out-of-class language learning in the present day. The first argument is that adult learners are capable of developing high levels of foreign language proficiency without receiving classroom instruction. The second is that languages are not learned inside or outside the classroom; they are learned in individual learners' 'language learning environments'. The significance of these arguments is that they may move the discussion beyond a dichotomy between in-class and out-of-class learning that has tended to dominate thinking on self-access. Once the assumption is abandoned that classroom instruction is necessary, or even relevant, to achieving high levels of proficiency, attention can be shifted to how language learning proceeds in a variety of (in-class and/or out-of-class) settings. But in order to focus attention on these settings, a conceptual language that moves beyond the alternatives that are implied by the terms 'in-class' and 'out-of-class' is needed. 'Environment' is likely to be a key term in this language.

Is Classroom Instruction Necessary?

This question was once central to language learning research, because it related to theoretical debates on the distinction between 'acquisition' and 'learning'. In recent years, a

balanced view has emerged, which suggests that classroom instruction and out-of-class learning both contribute to proficiency. It is widely accepted that classroom instruction does contribute to language learning, although variations in the forms and practices of the classroom make it difficult to say exactly what this contribution is. Basic levels of proficiency can be achieved either through classroom instruction or self-instruction outside the classroom. It is also widely accepted that out-of-class language use plays an important role for learners who achieve high levels of proficiency. The important question that remains unresolved, therefore, concerns the contribution of classroom instruction to higher levels of proficiency. On this issue, some researchers take the view that classroom instruction may be necessary. Loewen (2015) for example, argues that instruction can improve the rate of acquisition and may even be "necessary to achieve higher levels of ultimate attainment and to avoid fossilization" (p. 7). The argument, here, is a particular one. Instruction does not simply accelerate learning that might be equally well achieved outside the classroom. It may be essential to higher levels of competence, because errors that are picked up outside the classroom may become fossilized if they are not corrected in the classroom (Ellis, 2008). What does the evidence show?

In an early study of learning strategies, Bialystok (1981) found that, for French high school students of English, 'functional practice' was the most significant contributor to writing, listening, grammar and reading test scores at intermediate and advanced levels. By functional practice, they meant interest-driven use of informal sources of English such as film, radio, newspapers and music. Wong and Nunan's (2011) study of the learning strategies of Hong Kong university students came to a similar conclusion. High performing students were active and communicative and tended to seek out informal, out-of-class sources of practice such as newspapers, television, and conversations with native speakers. Low performing students were classroom-oriented and tended to depend on instruction and textbooks. These and other studies have established an association between out-of-class learning, especially informal learning involving communicative language use, and high levels of proficiency (Pickard, 1996; Sundqvist & Wikström, 2015). This association is yet to be challenged, even by researchers who argue for the importance of classroom instruction. Caution is needed, however, because this research does not show what or how students learn in and out of the classroom, or that classroom instruction is redundant.

In a series of studies focused on the relationship between classroom and out-of-class learning, Lai has shown that foreign language learners in Hong Kong and learners of English in China allocate different and complementary roles to in-class and out-of-class learning (Lai,

2015; Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2015). Their research also suggests that learners who complement focus-on-form activities in the classroom with communicative activities outside the classroom tend to achieve higher grades. Lai's work suggests that in-class and out-of-class learning play complementary roles for students who take language courses. Hong Kong foreign language students saw the classroom as the place to learn the basics of the L2, while out-of-class learning brought them closer to the L2 culture and supported positive L2 identities, learning efficacy and motivation to learn.

Research has also begun to investigate learners whose learning is primarily out-of-class. In his study of non-English majors at a French university, Sockett (2014), found that 80 to 90 per cent of students reported high levels of English language use through online media and social networking. He also devised tests to examine what the students learned from these activities and found that students who spent time using English language media were able to identify and use frequently occurring structures from such materials. Sockett's research has identified the Internet as a new, and well-used, site for self-directed out-of-class language learning. It has also shown that regular interest-driven use of foreign language materials leads to learning. The question that remains is whether learners who entirely self-direct their learning outside the classroom are capable of achieving high levels of proficiency.

Cole and Vanderplank (2016) investigated the learning of two groups of Brazilian learners of English, who had both achieved high levels of proficiency. The first group had mainly studied at private language institutes and were called 'classroom-trained learners' (CTLs). The second group, who were called 'fully autonomous self-instructed learners' (FASILs), had received little or no classroom instruction and had mainly learned using online resources. Cole and Vanderplank administered a battery of tests to the two groups and found that the FASIL group significantly outperformed the CTL group on a number of proficiency measures. Whereas the CTLs tended to plateau at upper intermediate levels, the FASILs improved through to advanced levels and many achieved native-like levels of knowledge and use.

Two conclusions can be drawn from Cole and Vanderplank's research. It has established, first and foremost, that it is possible to achieve high levels of foreign language proficiency without classroom instruction. This is a robust conclusion based simply on the evidence of the FASILs' performance; they had received little or no instruction, yet they had succeeded in achieving high proficiency levels. Second, the comparison of the performance of the two groups suggests, intriguingly, that classroom instruction may even inhibit high levels of proficiency. This conclusion is less robust, because factors other than the mode of

learning may have been involved. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that the FASILs proved to be stronger than the CTLs on tests of idiomatic usage and common transfer errors from Portuguese to English. In other words, it may be classroom instruction, rather than out-of-class learning, that fosters that kinds of fossilization that Loewen (2015) (cited above) refers to.

To sum up, there is little doubt that out-of-class learning makes an important contribution to high levels of foreign language proficiency. Although there is less evidence on the role of classroom instruction, Cole and Vanderplank (2016) make a compelling case that it is not essential for all learners. Recalling that the argument for the necessity of classroom instruction is largely based on the fossilization of error, their research also challenges conventional thinking by suggesting that it may be in-class, not out-of-class, learning that inhibits the achievement of native-like proficiency. At the very least, their research has re-opened the research agenda on the value of classroom instruction in an era when out-of-class language learning resources are becoming more and more abundant.

One problem that this discussion highlights is that there has, in fact, been relatively little research on the contributions of classroom instruction and out-of-class learning to second language acquisition, so that any conclusions drawn must be tentative. It mainly points to the need for more research, in more contexts, over longer timescales. The tendency in the few studies that have been done, however, is to undermine the idea that the classroom is the key to language learning and that out-of-class learning is supplementary to it. These studies are also beginning to suggest that language teaching and learning has hitherto worked with an impoverished view of the world beyond the classroom. In addition to more research, research is needed that escapes from the dichotomy between out-of-class and in-class learning that has been nurtured by an assumption of the primacy of classroom instruction. Research is also needed that begins from the assumption that there are not *two* spaces – in-class and out-of-class - in which languages are learned, but *many* spaces among which the classroom is just one. The concept of language learning environments is intended to capture this idea of a multiplicity of spaces for language learning, within which issues of self-access can be considered.

Language Learning Environments

The argument that people learn languages in 'language learning environments' is essentially an argument for a holistic approach to understanding the ways in which language

learning is situated in space. This implies an ecological view, although work on the ecology of language learning has tended to theorise environment in social, rather than spatial terms (Menezes, 2011; Palfreyman, 2014; van Lier, 2004). Morrison's (2011) work on 'mapping' self-access and Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka (2014) on the semiotics of place in self-access are exceptions to this rule, and further developments can be expected in Murray and Lamb's (2017) collection of papers on space, place and autonomy in language learning. Here, the argument is for a spatial understanding of language learning environments that extends previous work on settings in out-of-class learning.

In an earlier article, Benson (2011) proposed a provisional framework for describing different types of out-of-class learning based on the concept of 'setting'. A setting was defined as an arrangement for language learning that is marked by dimensions of location, formality, pedagogy and locus of control. A setting such as a SAC can be understood as a particular configuration of these dimensions. In this sense, settings are not only identifiable by their locations, but also by the human and material resources which are made available at these locations and the dynamic relations in which they stand toward each other. As a setting for language learning, a classroom is typically a room in an educational institution, equipped with seats, working surfaces, some kind of display unit (for example, a whiteboard or projection screen) and, often, books, posters and other resources. When a classroom is in use, it is inhabited by people who take on roles (for example, 'teacher' and 'students') that entail certain relationships of formality, pedagogy and locus of control. A SAC is also, typically, a room, or suite of rooms, in an educational institution, that differs from a classroom both in the material resources that it makes available, and arrangements for access and use. It also differs in the people who inhabit the space and the roles that they take on ('teachers' become 'advisors'), and in the relationships of formality, pedagogy and locus of control among them. The dynamic character of settings lies in the changing relationships among people, and between people and things, at different times. A SAC, for example, may be a quite different setting at different times of the day and on different days of the week.

A framework of this kind can be used either to describe a generic setting (a typical SAC) or a specific instantiation of it at a particular location (for example, the SAC at University X). In the first case, as outlined here, the concept of setting and its various dimensions might be useful as an analytical tool to investigate self-access in a general fashion, or in the planning and management of a particular SAC. In the second case, the key questions might be: What kind of setting do we want the SAC to be, and how can we manipulate its various dimensions so that it can be a better setting for language learning?

These are, of course, questions that SAC practitioners constantly ask. Yet there are also the larger questions of how the SAC setting connects to other settings for language learning and how the practice of self-access can help users become more aware of these settings. It is in addressing this question that the concept of language learning environments becomes useful.

Research on the ecology of language learning has established the important principle that language learning, whether inside or outside the classroom, emerges from interaction between people who have the intention to learn and environmental resources that have the potential to support learning. However, it has not yet clearly accounted for the location of these resources in environmental space. My approach to this question draws mainly on Barron's (2006, 2010) work on 'learning ecologies' in the field of learning sciences. Barron (2006, p.195) defines a learning ecology as "the set of contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provides opportunities for learning", in which each context is a unique configuration of activities, resources and relationships. Sustained learning, she argues, typically involves engagement with many such contexts over time. Adapting this view to the terminology used in this paper, a language learning environment is made up of the various settings in which learning takes place. Learning environments also acquire a temporal dimension as they emerge from sustained engagement in learning over time. Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work on the roles that children play in their own development, Barron (2006, p.201) emphasises that individuals "help constitute the very environments that they grow within". Learners are agents who "not only choose but also *create* their own learning activities by choosing to pursue lines of activity that they find worthy and meaningful" (Barron, 2010, p.114). As these lines of activity develop, they form learning 'pathways' (Barron, 2010) or 'trajectories' (Chik, 2014) over medium and long-term timescales. An individual's learning environment is, thus, constituted by the settings that are within their reach, but also by the uses they make of them over time.

From an ecological perspective, learning emerges from interaction with environmental resources, but in order for settings and the resources they make available to be integrated into an individual's environment they must be recognised as affordances for learning. The extracts below, from interviews with university students in Hong Kong, suggest that this can be a highly subjective matter. In the first extract, Student 1 is talking about television and films as resources for language learning:

Student 1: Um, but watching, watching tapes is just like watching, but is just like, quite entertainment.

Student 2: Do you think we can learn different things from entertainment?

Student 1: Yes, yes, but it's quite strange to me and er

Student 2: Do you like to see Western films?

Student 1: Well, of course. But I'm afraid I'll learn nothing from it because I enjoy watching too much

In the second extract, Student 3 is talking about her approach to learning English:

Student 3: For example, when I learn English, now I won't deliberately open a grammar book and memorize all the things. On the contrary, when I am free, I may read the *South China Morning Post* to see the English, such as 'bid a piece of land' means put in a tender for land. But you won't deliberately look up 'bid' in the dictionary and then memorize its meanings. It's a lively method. You see the things around you. Whenever you see something you don't know, you will be sensitive to remember it and you will ask others.

While Student 1 struggles to see how resources that are intended for entertainment can also be affordances for learning, Student 3 appears to be sensitive to the potential for everything that she sees around her to be an affordance for learning.

An Environmental View of Self-Access

What might the concept of language learning environments contribute to SAC planning and management? As noted above, self-access practitioners constantly ask questions about how they can improve SACs as settings for learning. From an environmental perspective, two more questions might be added.

First, in terms of the framework proposed, a SAC is not a 'learning environment' in and of itself. It is, instead, one among many 'settings' for language learning that potentially make up the language learning environments of its users. Although language learning environments are individuated, learners who share a particular setting, such as a SAC, are also likely to share other settings. In this respect, it makes sense to think of both shared and individual environments. Viewed from the perspective of a SAC, a shared environment would be made up of all the settings that are available in the area in which the SAC is located, including language classrooms and a variety of out-of-class settings such as libraries,

leisure facilities, shopping districts and the home, in addition to various online settings. The key question to ask from this perspective would be: How does the SAC connect with other settings in the shared environment, and how can the various dimensions of the SAC setting be manipulated so that it complements not only the classroom, but all of the settings in which learners potentially engage with language resources?

Second, returning to the idea of individuated learning environments, each user will come to the SAC as a different setting in a different environment, depending upon their experience and agency in creating learning opportunities within the shared environment. This highlights the importance of language advising within the pedagogical dimension of self-access as a means of focusing on individual experiences (Kato & Mynard, 2017). It may also call for an approach to advising that focuses on learners' awareness of resources, both inside and outside the SAC, and provides a bridge to the wider environment. The interview extracts cited above suggest that learners vary in their capacity to see learning resources in their environments. The key question from this perspective may be: How can the SAC help its users' expand their language learning environments by enhancing their awareness of the potential for learning in resources beyond the classroom and SAC?

Conclusion

The main argument of this paper has been that the changing landscapes of second language teaching and learning must inevitably influence the ways in which we think about the activity of SACs. When this author first became involved in self-access in the early 1990s, there was a definite feeling in the air that SACs might one day replace language classrooms. This has not proven to be the case, but social and educational changes are, nevertheless, leading to a shift in emphasis from the classroom to the world beyond the classroom. In consequence, we can no longer think of SACs in terms of a dichotomy between classroom learning and self-access learning, in which self-access learning fills the space of out-of-class learning. The idea of language learning environments is proposed as a possible way of thinking and talking our way out of this dichotomy, and conceptualizing the many ways in which SACs might be situated in the complex worlds of students' lives and learning.

Note

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Notes on the Contributor

Phil Benson is Professor of Applied Linguistics and coordinator of the Multilingualism Research Group at Macquarie University. His main research interests are in the area of multilingualism and include informal language learning beyond the classroom, language learning environments and the language experiences of migrants and international students. He is the author of Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning (Pearson, 2011) and co-editor of Beyond the Language Classroom (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

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