

Book Reviews

On Autonomy in L2 language learning

David GARDNER and Lindsay MILLER. *Establishing self-access: from theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, xvii + 276 pages.

Self-access language learning (SALL) comes in many different forms. It has reached varying stages of development and is applied in diverse ways in a wide range of circumstances. *Establishing Self-Access* succeeds not only in providing a useful theoretical basis for SALL, in whatever its manifestation, but also in offering practical ideas that are easily adaptable for use in any particular set of circumstances.

The book is organised into three parts: Theoretical perspectives, Practical perspectives and Case studies. *Theoretical perspectives* looks at the pedagogic background to self-access learning and it examines teachers' and learners' attitudes to language learning in a more independent fashion. It also provides an original typology of self-access centres and considers management issues in relation to such facilities. The most extensive of the three sections is *Practical perspectives* and this looks at a range of issues, connected both with establishing a centre and with running one successfully so that it can be of most benefit to learners. In the final *Case studies* section, the book describes five specific centres of quite different types.

The book is helpfully designed for anyone who may be using it for practical teacher training purposes as each chapter concludes with the same three sub-sections: a summary, a set of tasks and some additional pointers for discussion. The chapters are also convenient for the student in that they are organised under informative sub-headings and in their provision of a range of clear tables and diagrams.

For academic courses, the initial theoretical part of the book is likely to be most heavily drawn on. A particularly interesting aspect of this part of the book is the typology of self-access centres (SACs). This uses a shopping metaphor and categorises different types of self-access centre as being, say, a supermarket, a cash and carry, a department store, a mobile shop, a market stall, a boutique or a bring-and-buy sale, among others. It is an interesting metaphor although it seems a little laboured at times as one or two of the 15 types of SACs identified make less neat matches with shopping venues than the majority do. This shopping metaphor is referred to throughout the book and serves as a useful reminder of types of self-access provi-

sion which are very different from those we may have personal experience of.

However, the book is not just for the teacher trainer or post-graduate student with an academic interest in self-access. It is full of practical suggestions for those who are involved in the provision of self-access language learning. There are many ideas which I should like to be taken on board in my own institution, the private language school dealt with in the final case study. These include a range of tasks to help students to assess their own work in the self access centre, a methodology for conducting an evaluation of the work of the centre and some worksheets for staff development seminars.

The sub-title of the book is *From theory to practice* and it is particularly apt. Throughout, I feel this book gives useful illustrations of how theory and practice can combine to lend weight to each other. One example of this is a section in Chapter 1 which deals with justifying self-access. This will be of much use to organisations considering the establishment of self-access resources and will be especially helpful for those staff who have to justify expenditure on self-access centres to their management. As in many sections of the book, the aspects of this topic are laid out in tabular form presenting the advantages and disadvantages of self-access centres under various headings such as Authentic target language, Materials, Learner involvement and Motivation. The table also makes the clear and important distinction between SACs in native and non-native speaker environments.

Another section where there seems to be a particularly happy marriage between theory and practice is that which focuses on materials in self-access centres. The advantages and disadvantages of commercially available resources and specially produced in-house materials are similarly weighed up in concise charts. These are followed up by suggestions as to how

any in-house production of materials can be as cost-effective as possible.

Discussion of self-access centres often centres on resources and how they are organised. Yet issues relating to staffing are possibly of even greater importance. My own main experience of self-access centres has been largely limited to that of one UK private language school. Having worked in the self-access centre there more or less since its inception in 1984, I have become convinced of a couple of principles behind the successful provision of self-access centres. The first of these is that it is essential for there to be proper management of the centre. It is not enough for the centre to be managed by someone who has a range of other duties within the school. I find it reassuring that my own inevitably subjective attitude to management is borne out by Gardner and Miller who maintain, on the basis of their much greater experience and research, that institutions which fail to staff their self access centres adequately have effectively wasted the money that they spent on resources.

The increasing competitiveness of TEFL as a business –in the UK at least– has led many organisations to feel that it might be enough just to provide the resources. SACs can, then, be left to run themselves with minimal management. While the need for management may to some degree decline once a SAC is established, it is certainly not removed altogether. Cutting back on management and staffing may help with short term financial problems but should not be undertaken without an awareness of other consequences. *Establishing Self-Access* deals with such issues in a detailed and convincing way.

My other favourite staffing principle is that the class teacher has a key role in the successful exploitation of self-access centres and an institution needs to pay attention to teacher training in this area so that teachers can adequately carry out

this role. On the importance of the teacher's role, Gardner and Miller point out that teachers can do a great deal in the classroom to initiate discussions and activities which will help learners to make the most of time later spent in the SAC in self-access mode.

On this issue too, Gardner and Miller follow their theoretical discussion with practical suggestions. Thus, they discuss the ways in which attitudes may need to change and skills may need to be learnt and they have many recommendations as to how to prepare students successfully in class for self-access work.

The authors of this book are clearly proponents of self-access language learning. Yet, it must be emphasised that this is an objective study. The authors do not shy away from dealing with the limitations and difficulties of self-access work. They tackle thorny issues like costs, learner expectations and work on the productive skills and, where possible, suggest ways of minimising the problems associated with these. Once again, there is an appropriately close relationship between theory and practice in the treatment of such issues.

There have been many good books and articles on self-access language learning in the twelve years since Leslie Dickinson published his seminal *Self-instruction in Language Learning* in 1987. However, most of these have focused on one particular practical or theoretical aspect of the field, inevitably tending to concentrate on problems arising and solutions found in individual sets of circumstances. It would not, of course, have been possible to write a book like *Establishing Self-Access* without the insights provided by such individual or smaller-scale studies. Yet, in my opinion, this book takes the field of self-access language learning a major step forward. Its theoretical perspectives give depth and its practical perspectives offer breadth and together they make this volume satisfyingly complete as a state-of-the-art reflection of self-access language learning at the start of the twenty-first century.

Felicity O'Dell
Freelance scholar,
formerly at Eurocentre Cambridge
United Kingdom

Andrew D. COHEN. *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1998, xii + 295 pages.

Much emphasis has been put on learner autonomy in the field of English Language Teaching in the past 15 years or so. This has been apparent at teaching conferences, in teaching journals and in the attempt by text book writers to include some kind of learner training in the materials they are producing. The volume under review is aimed at teachers, administrators and researchers into second and foreign language pro-

grammes. In his short introduction in chapter 1, the author sets out his aim: to bring together different themes concerning strategy use in language learning by including in the same volume previously published studies along with themes which are in print for the first time.

In chapter 2, Cohen makes the distinction between second language learning strategies and second language use