

## **Tutor support for technology users in the Self Access Centre (SAC)**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports a case study of the use of educational technology in a self access centre in the Universidad de Quintana Roo, Mexico. The objective of the study was to find out how computer, video and audio resources were used by learners, for what purposes, and how far these activities were supported by tutors. The data collected suggested that it may be possible to improve student access to and benefits from using electronic resources by suitable tutor actions. A second element of the study involved developing a framework for a fully professional tutor service with appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes. The framework was based on the principles of accountable professionalism and developed using the literature on general English Language Teaching, self access, and educational technology.

It was found that the professional service proposed fully covered the needs identified in the case study and suggested further knowledge skills and attitudes which may be beneficial in self access tutoring generally as well as in the use of educational technology. It is suggested that taking a professional approach benefits both tutors and users in self access, leading to better use of the literature by tutors and better access to meaningful learning activities for users.

### **1. Introduction**

This paper reports an action research project carried out in the Self Access Centre (SAC) at the Universidad de Quintana Roo, Unidad Cozumel, in 2003. It was observed that the computer, video and audio equipment and materials in the SAC were under used. The objective of the study was to propose feasible actions by tutors which would improve student access to and benefits from Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) materials as well as video and audio resources.

### **2. Theoretical background**

The field of self access is closely linked to the study of autonomy in language learning. Many scholars (Dickinson 1987, Gardner and Miller 1999, Riley 1997 and

others) have compared the roles of tutors in self access with those of teachers in classrooms in order to highlight the differences. However, Ramsden (1992:45) states: "The aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible." As the objectives of support for learners in both self access and the classroom are clearly the same, this study takes the view that in all circumstances students do in fact practice some degree of autonomy and in all cases will need appropriate support for their learning.

Expert support for clients is provided by professional services. The type of professionalism which guides the analysis presented here is represented in the UK by the practice of architecture and medicine. In these professions, individual practitioners are legally responsible to their clients for providing an adequate service. The courts have taken the view that an adequate service is one that does everything possible to give the desired result and avoids preventable undesirable outcomes. A professional service differs from other service industries in that it is not hedged around by conditions and small print. Professionals are not judged by whether they delivered the service they promised, but rather by whether they delivered the service the court considers (after the event) they should have promised.

### **3. Method**

Information about how SAC users make use of technology in the SAC for language learning was obtained by:

- a) observations by 6 tutors over a three week period.
- b) documentary evidence from the SAC log containing student records of what they were working on during the period.
- c) guided interviews with 44 users.

Information on what the 6 participating tutors were doing to support learning was obtained through a guided group interview with the tutors. The information collected about users and tutors was analyzed to diagnose the possible reasons why resources were not being fully exploited. Those reasons were translated into specific

remedial actions and knowledge areas needed to support learning in self access contexts from a professional standpoint. The full research is reported in Farmer (2006 183-212)

The knowledge, skills and attitudes are linked to specific actions under seven general headings derived from analysis of the characteristics of professionalism:

Language

Diagnosis

Prescription

Referral to specialists

General practice

Administration

Professional development

#### **4. Results**

A direct approach to matching problems to solutions was taken, and a list of things tutors could do to facilitate learning was developed to meet specific problems reported by users and tutors. This list is given in 4.1, together with the knowledge needed to support the action.

However, isolated actions are not really what is required in the delivery of professional services. Each area of service was then examined in relation to the ELT literature to develop lists of actions and knowledge areas that would give tutors a complete view of their service to users. A profile of the ideal tutor is given at 4.2, and the complete list of actions and knowledge is given at 4.3.

##### **4.1 Training needs identified**

***The actions needed to deliver the service are:***

- Make learners aware that materials in print, audio tape, video cassette or on CD ROM are available for facilitating learning.
- Make learners aware of what each kind of material and activity can do and that there are other resources to complete what each may not be able to do.

- Select or adapt tasks set in print, audio tape, video cassette or CD ROM materials to focus on the kind of activities and learning experience that can be offered.
- Select or adapt tasks set in print, audio tape, video cassette or CD ROM materials to complement the previous activities and learning experiences.
- Agree with learners the timing, taxonomy and purposes of learning style and needs descriptions, and the roles of learner and tutor.
- Agree with learners the medium, materials and tasks they would like to try.
- Agree with learners how the activities selected are to be complemented
- Agree with learners their programme and objectives.
- Agree with learners how task achievement is to be evaluated, what kind of feedback is expected, and the roles of learners and tutor.

***The knowledge needed to inform the actions may be:***

- Hands on practical experience of using all the types of equipment and types of task available.
- A working taxonomy of media and activity types.
- A working taxonomy of feedback types.
- A working taxonomy of learning styles
- Principles of task design
- Principles of evaluation of task outcome.
- Awareness of current issues and their application to general practice, including the norms of procedure in the items above.

## **4.2 The ideal tutor**

Tutors offering professional services in the SAC are general practitioners in ELT with a speciality in Self access. This means that they know how to deliver the services of language, diagnosis, prescription, referral, general practice and responsibility, but the tutor must know how these are catered for in the system, student for whom they are responsible, it is the tutor who must identify the problem and take appropriate action.

Tutors are not experts in designing learning activities using educational technology, nor are they technicians, responsible for the functioning of machines and programmes. Gardner and Miller (1999:195) rightly warn that this is an abuse of the tutor's time. What they should be expected to do is deliver their normal service in relation to all the activities and materials in the SAC, including the educational technology at the disposal of students.

#### **4.3 The professional approach to self access tutor support in the use of educational technology:**

Lists of services were derived from the literature of ELT in each of the seven areas of professional service proposed, and although they incorporate all the training needs identified in this case study, are not intended to be final or definitive. Actions and knowledge that were identified in this case study are marked with an asterisk in the lists that follow:

##### ***Language***

The actions needed to deliver the service are:

- Make learners aware that answer keys in print material or on CD ROM are of different types: exercises may have only one answer, or a range of possible answers, or no right answer. Feedback can be formative or summative in intention.
- Make learners aware that apart from language content, written and oral texts, especially video, contain information about the target culture.
- Select or adapt tasks set in print or CD ROM materials to focus on the cultural information which may be contained in written and oral texts.
- Select or adapt tasks set in print or CD ROM materials to ensure that all users have access to open ended language production tasks using authentic materials.
- Agree with learners the medium, materials and tasks to be used\*.
- Agree with learners how task achievement is to be evaluated, what kind of feedback is expected, and the roles of learners and tutor\*.

### ***Diagnosis***

The actions needed to deliver the service are:

- Make learners aware that evaluation may be of several types: for placement, for measuring achievement, for understanding what they know about learning languages, and that all of these are to help the learners not to judge them.
- Make learners aware that descriptions of learning styles and learning purposes are also non-judgmental.
- Evaluate learners' current level of linguistic competence in an appropriate manner.
- Evaluate learners' learning achievements in an appropriate manner.
- Evaluate learners' metacognitive knowledge about language learning in an appropriate manner.
- Agree with learners the timing, type and purposes of evaluation and the roles of student and tutor.
- Agree with learners the timing, taxonomy and purposes of learning style and purposes descriptions, and the roles of learners and tutor\*.

### ***Prescription***

The actions needed to deliver the service are:

- Make learners aware of how the diagnostic process helps to make decisions about learning activities, planning learning and adopting appropriate learning strategies.
- Make learners aware that their tutor is not able to choose activities, prescribe learning strategies or programme learning, but will make recommendations if learners wish.
- Make learners aware of the specialities offered by colleagues which may fit better with their diagnosis.
- Recommend suitable learning strategies.
- Select or adapt tasks set in print or CD ROM materials to ensure that all users have access to activities focused on their needs.

- Lead the learners through study planning and objective writing in accordance with their needs.
- Refer learners to colleagues where diagnosis has shown that this may be in the students' best interest.
- Agree with learners the medium, materials and tasks to be used\*.
- Agree with learners the participants in the task, if any.
- Agree with learners their programme and objectives.
- Agree with learners how task achievement is to be evaluated, what kind of feedback is expected, and the roles of student and tutor\*.
- Agree with learners who is to be their tutor, and the role of any other specialist who may be consulted.

### ***Referral to specialists***

The actions needed to deliver the service are:

- Make learners aware that some specialities that may help them cannot be offered by you, or by your institution.
- Make learners aware that they have the right to change their tutor.
- Describe the characteristics of specialities that may help, and assess the advantages and disadvantages of seeking that service elsewhere within and outside the institution.
- Recommend that learners should use their right to change their tutor if you believe that a colleague could provide a better service.
- Agree suitable action with the learners.

### ***General practice***

The actions needed to deliver the service are:

- Make learners aware that materials in print, audio tape, video cassette or on CD ROM are available for facilitating learning\*.
- Make learners aware of what each kind of material and activity can do and that there are other resources to complete what each may not be able to do\*.

- Select or adapt tasks set in print, audio tape, video cassette or CD ROM materials to focus on the kind of activities and learning experience that can be offered\*.
- Select or adapt tasks set in print, audio tape, video cassette or CD ROM materials to complement the previous activities and learning experiences\*.
- Agree with learners the medium, materials and tasks they would like to try\*.
- Agree with learners how the activities selected are to be complemented\*.
- Agree with learners how task achievement is to be evaluated, what kind of feedback is expected, and the roles of learners and tutor\*.

### ***Administration***

The actions needed to deliver the service are:

- Make learners aware of what information is held on their file, who is responsible for the security of the information, who will have access to it, and why the information is being recorded.
- Record all aspects of a learner's progress, diagnoses, prescriptions and referrals, with written communications where necessary.
- Take responsibility for the security and use of the information recorded.
- Evaluate the service the client is receiving according to the standards of the profession, and take appropriate action.

### ***Professional development***

The actions needed to deliver the service are:

- Make learners aware of whether an activity selected has been shown to be useful in similar circumstances, or is experimental.
- Analyse professional knowledge from first principles.
- Apply professional knowledge for the benefit of learners.

### ***Knowledge requirements***

The knowledge needed to support these actions was in many cases the same in different parts of the service. A concentration of the knowledge areas identified as follows:

1. Principles of task design
2. Principles of evaluation of task outcome.
3. Some understanding of one of the cultures of the target language.
4. A working taxonomy of learning strategies.
5. A working taxonomy of learning styles
6. A working taxonomy of media and activity types.
7. A working taxonomy of feedback types.
8. Procedures for needs analysis.
9. Theory and practice of formative and summative evaluation.
10. Procedures for criterion based assessment
11. Parameters for syllabus design and course planning.
12. Knowledge of materials and equipment available
13. Knowledge of the special interests of colleagues
14. Knowledge of specialities that exist and may be available in the SAC or elsewhere in the institution suited to learning needs or styles diagnosed.
15. Knowledge of specialities that exist and may be available outside the institution suited to learning needs or styles diagnosed.
16. Knowledge of the institutional provisions with regard to recording and releasing client information.
17. Knowledge of the target language grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions and notions.
18. Hands on practical experience of using all the types of equipment and types of task available.
19. Awareness of the effects of professional actions: who may be helped, who may be harmed, how much, and under what conditions.
20. Awareness of current issues and their application to general practice, including the norms of procedure in the items above.

21. Know about knowledge, evaluate validity.

Of the twenty-one knowledge areas identified above, only nos. 14 and 20 relate specifically to SAC, and only nos. 6, 12 and 17 relate to the use of technology. The remaining sixteen knowledge areas are general, and according to the view of professionalism developed here should be part of general language teacher education. They constitute a first step towards defining what a self access tutor should know in relation to the use of technology and how that knowledge should be used.

The concept of professionalism cannot be separated from service to the client, and the development of a professional approach in this study reflects the focus on service. The appropriate use of technology naturally forms part of that service. Oxford et al. (1998:14) point out that there is no shortage of information on the appropriate use of technology, and suggest that teachers be trained to use a whole range of technology appropriate to the cognitive styles of learners, as advocated in this study.

## **5. Conclusions**

The growing literature on ELT in general, self access, technology in language education and tutor roles makes decisions on designing a syllabus for self access tutor training increasingly difficult. This study has shown that although educational technology has been made available to learners in the SAC, the support learners have received has not resulted in an appropriate use of the technology. It is suggested that the support learners may need can be provided on a principled basis by appropriate tutor training, not as a separate specialist service, but integrated with general ELT as well as self access services.

The objective of this study was to identify knowledge skills and attitudes that tutors can bring to the learning situation. In this paper, knowledge and skills have been clearly identified, and the attitude required is the disposition on the part of tutors to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills in order to deliver the actions required.

Perhaps one of the most attractive features of the proposal for tutors is the reply it may offer to evaluators, while learners may expect to feel the benefits of taking their own decisions with suitable professional support. The principles developed here may help to reduce some of the uncertainties that drain the energies of able and willing tutors and learners without giving clear benefits to either.

Tutors have now been trained in supporting learning in line with the outcome of this study. Although the use of all the facilities is now near maximum capacity, it is not possible to attribute the increase to improved tutor services.

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