

Catering for Tertiary Language Learners: Different Provisions for Self-Access Language Learning Support

Toogood, Sarah¹; Ho, Susanna²;
Pemberton, Richard³ and Jones, Priscilla⁴

¹ lcsally@ust.hk

² lcschiu@ust.hk

³ lcrpem@ust.hk

Language Center,

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

⁴ elpjones@cityu.edu.hk

English Language Centre,

City University of Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a world leader in the provision of both human and material resources to support Self-Access Language Learning (SALL). In line with technological developments and the ever-expanding access to language learning materials via the Internet, broadband broadcasting and mobile media, developments in ways to provide support for SALL are quickly following suit. There are many different ways in which a Self-Access Center (SAC) can be set up so that materials and facilities best suit the needs of learners (e.g., Dickinson 1987; Sheerin 1989; Little 1989; Sturtridge 1992; Esch 1994; Gardner & Miller 1999). In this paper we focus on three types of provision and discuss each in terms of how they cater for different types of learner and learning preference.

To discuss the three provisions, we will focus on two institutions: The City University Of Hong Kong (City U) and The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). Both institutions established SACs with abundant resources and hi-tech facilities over 10 years ago, and both have incorporated SALL into their courses – in the case of HKUST, this has been going on for over 10 years, and in the case of CityU, this has happened more recently, but on a very large scale. Below is an overview of the three types of provision that are available in these two institutions:

- Open-access SACs at City U's English Language Centre and HKUST's Language Center
- An online provision called SASSAD (Self-Access Support System and Database) developed by City U's English Language Centre
- An online provision called VELA (Virtual English Language Adviser) developed by HKUST's Language Center and Computer Science Department

The two SACs are examples of open-access provision of materials and advice at a physical center. To cater for the diverse needs and wants of different learners, both

centers have a wide range of materials for learners to choose from. These include books, worksheets, CALL software, cassettes, videos, DVDs and Internet access. In addition, both centers provide support in the form of a users' guide, and a face-to-face language learning advice service offered at fixed times on a regular basis (see Figures 1 and 2 below).



Figure 1. CityU SAC



Figure 2. HKUST SAC

Naturally, there are differences between the centers. One difference is that the SAC at HKUST also provides general advice on materials and learning strategies in the form of advice sheets. These advice sheets (available in hard copy and online) contain advice about learning strategies and recommended materials for a range of language sub-skills, learning interests and goals (e.g., 'Listening to Movies', 'Remembering Vocabulary', 'Improving Reading Speed', 'Common Pronunciation Problems for Cantonese Speakers' etc). They present a range of strategies for each learning focus, and leave users free to choose those which they think are most appropriate.

On the whole, though, both centers are very similar and suit learners who are motivated, and enjoy the freedom of independent learning. Since the suggested learning strategies are not always directly linked to the materials, learners in these centers must be willing to think critically and make logical links themselves, or be willing to seek help and guidance from an SAC Adviser.

Not all students fall into this category, of course, and it is easy for learners who are too shy to ask for advice to feel lost in a well-resourced center, not knowing what to focus on, what materials or activities to use, or how to use them. One way in which extra help is provided in SACs is through a catalogue, and this brings us to the second provision that we discuss in this paper – the Self-Access Support System and Database for English language learning, or SASSAD, developed at the English Language Centre at City University. This is an online catalogue system designed to help learners understand language sub-skills and terms, and find appropriate materials that address these sub-skills (see Figure 3). To enable learners to find what they need, recommended materials are grouped under six language skills which are in turn divided into sub-skills. Some recommended strategies and language tasks are also included.

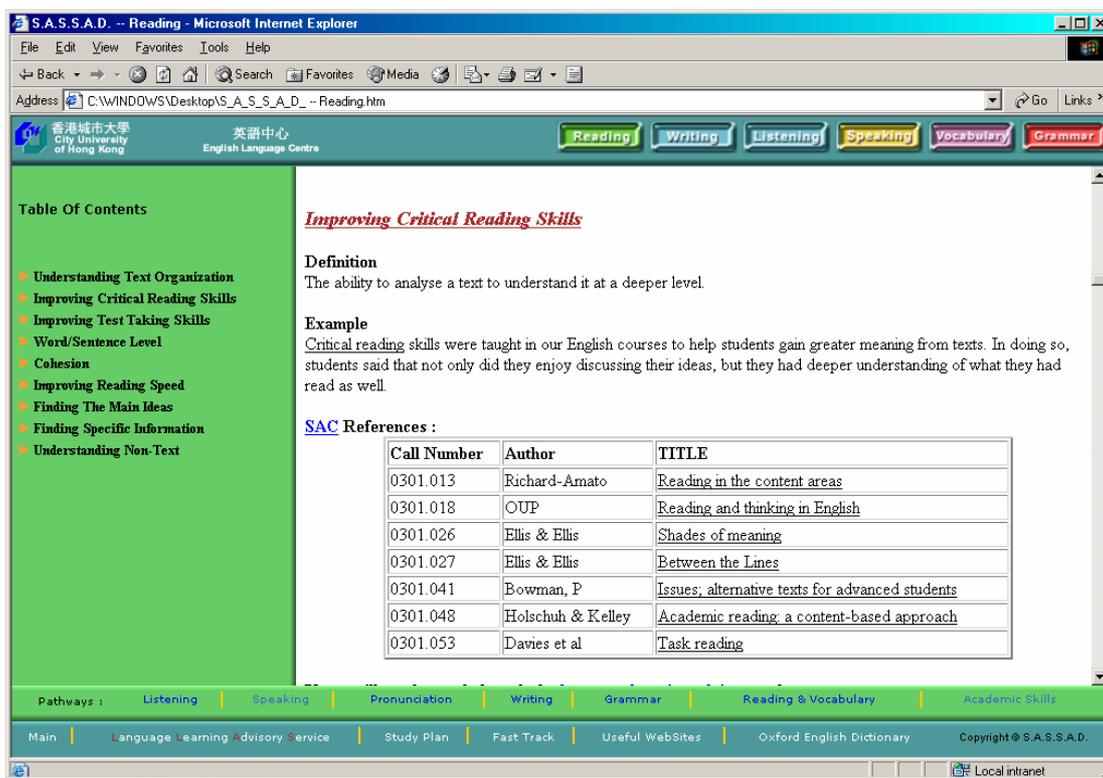


Figure 3. Example screen shot from the CityU SASSAD

SASSAD contains elements of the advice sheets and learning materials mentioned in the first type of provision. It is suitable for learners who want short-term practice on a specific language problem and may not want to research or to reflect too much on their learning. It can also be useful for language teachers who want to direct their students to carry out SALL tasks.

The third provision that we will talk about is the Virtual English Language Adviser (VELA), an interactive online system which is currently under development. This system mirrors the key features found to characterize the initial consultations between advisers and learners in SACs (Voller 1998) and is designed to provide support to both learners and teachers by enabling learners to establish specific language-learning problems. It does this by engaging learners in a dialogue with a virtual adviser and taking them down a path of six specific steps. At the end of their interaction with the program, VELA provides learners with a tangible and practical product: a plan which they can use as a starting point for improving their English. In addition to this very practical and specific approach to helping learners solve their language problems, VELA also aims to develop learners' lifelong learning skills by enabling and encouraging them to make choices, take responsibility and think critically about their choices and actions.

In order to allow learners to address their individual language-learning problems, we have developed a problem-solution approach (Toogood et al 2003). This is represented in VELA in the form of 'Steps'. The first three steps help learners think critically about, understand and establish their language-learning problems. The next two steps provide

learners with solutions (in the form of strategies and materials) which are directly related to their problems. Learners are then guided to select the most appropriate combinations of strategies and materials to act as solutions to their problems. The final step provides learners with the opportunity to reflect critically over their choices (both problem and solution) and edit changes so that they can leave the program with a personalized plan for improving their language.

In Step 1, learners can choose to work on one of the language skills, and combine it with a relevant interest. Normally, language skills are referred to as the 'Four skills', i.e., Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. Our experience over years of writing SALL materials, holding SALL courses, advising in the SAC and conducting action learning research on the successes and failures of the materials, courses and advice given (Pemberton et al 1999, 2001, 2002; Pemberton & Toogood 2001; Toogood et al 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Toogood & Pemberton 2002; Toogood 2003), has shown that it is useful for learners to see skills in terms of what we refer to as the 'Four General Skills' (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) and the 'Three Fundamental Skills' (Pronunciation, Vocabulary and Grammar) (Toogood et al 2002b). We see ability in the Fundamental Skills as being vital for progress in the General Skills. For example, a lack of knowledge or weakness in Reading may be caused by a lack of knowledge or weakness in Vocabulary or Grammar. Students who identify 'Reading Speed' as being problematic will very often say, on further questioning, that the reason why they read slowly is that they do not know enough words. Thus by presenting the skills in terms of General and Fundamental we enable learners to see how the Fundamental Skills could be causing problems in the General Skills and as a result provide them with a clearer picture as well as a direction towards a solution.

In terms of interests, we have a range of 13 interests, some of which are further broken down into second and third levels. For example, an interest in 'Magazines' at the first level opens up to a list of second-level choices including: Business, Computers, Fashion, Film, News, People, Science and Technology, Sports, Travel (see Figure 4 below). If the learner chooses 'Sports', s/he is then given a further set of (third-level) choices including: Basketball, Football and General. In this way, VELA aims to provide as wide a range of interests as possible, and thus help motivate learners with their learning.

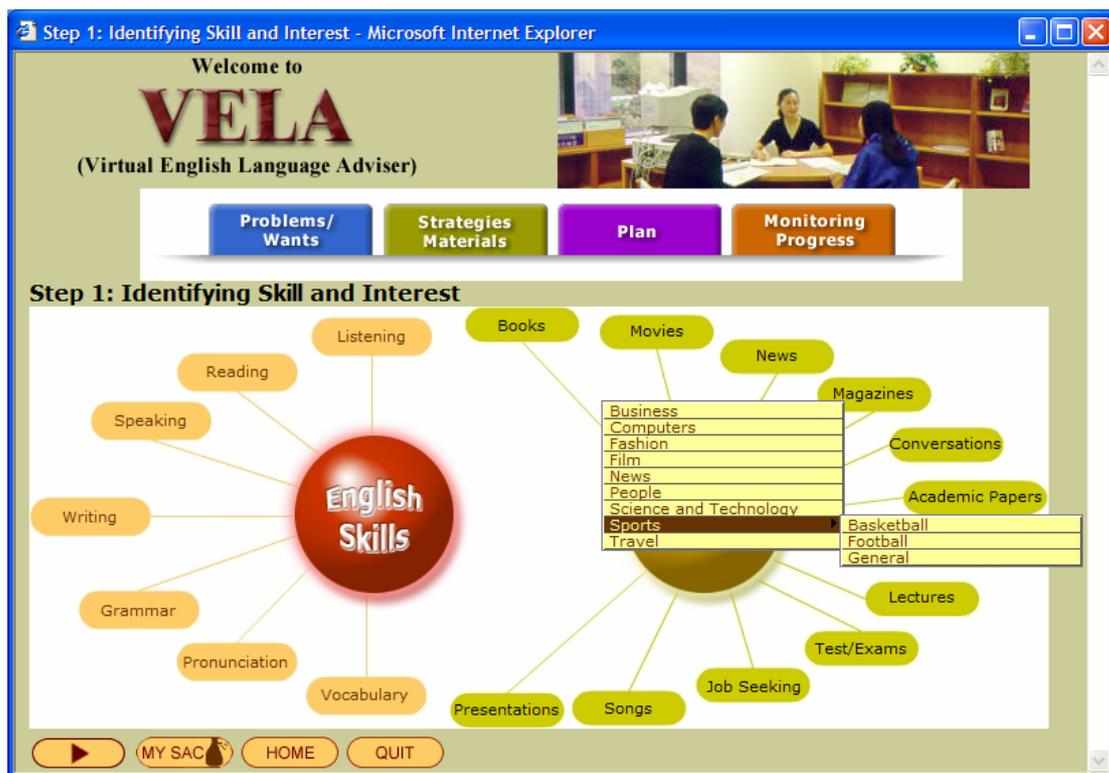


Figure 4: Example of first-level, second-level and third-level interests in VELA (Magazines → Sports magazines → Football magazines)

While Step 2 states language problems for learners, Step 3 helps clarify the cause of the problems. This is an important step where VELA will direct learners to one of the fundamental skills. Our experience shows that when most learners realize they have problems with a particular General Skill, they are perhaps not prepared to link it to the Fundamental skills and, therefore, not able to choose solutions that address the root of the problem. For example, when a learner has problems with Listening, s/he is quite happy to improve the skill by doing Listening exercises only, but neglects the fundamental reason for his/her difficulty in Listening. VELA helps learners see the link by asking them to consider whether the reason for their difficulty with Listening is due to difficulties with Pronunciation or Vocabulary.

As mentioned before, Steps 4 and 5 provide learners with solutions in the form of strategies and materials. Following the FTG (Focused, Transfer, General) model developed by Sarah Toogood (Toogood et al 2002b), strategies and materials are classified into different practice types, namely, Focused, Transfer and General. Learners are guided to choose from all the three types in order to make sure they use a range of strategies and materials. Using the same example as that in the previous paragraph, VELA will make sure that the learner also does Focused practice on either Pronunciation or Vocabulary on top of his/her General Listening practice.

When it comes to Step 6, where the choices they have made so far appear in the form of a Plan, VELA strongly recommends to learners that they think critically about their choices, and make changes so that the solutions match logically with their learning

objectives. Here, learners can read about as well as listen to other people's learning experiences, and this should help them reflect on the plan they have created.

VELA is suitable for learners who want or need to produce language-learning plans. It also helps learners make links between problems and solutions, in the form of strategies and materials. Rather than taking learners directly to practice, VELA encourages learners to reflect on how and what to practice with. Learners who are willing to think critically about their choices should develop lifelong learning skills.

As we can see from the above descriptions, learners with different learning styles and preferences will find different provisions appealing. Equally, a teacher or learner who prefers one provision to the others may change their preference when the teaching or learning context changes. By knowing the characteristics of each of the three types of provision, language teachers and advisers can find ways to best exploit them.

REFERENCES

Dickinson, L. (1987) *Self-Instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Esch, E. (ed.) (1994) *Self-Access and the Adult Language Learner*. London: CILT.

Gardner, D. & Miller, L. (1999) *Establishing Self-Access: from theory to practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Little, D. (ed.) (1989) *Self-Access Systems for Language Learning*. Dublin: Authentik.

Pemberton, R., S. Ho, J. Lam & S. Toogood (1999) 'Developing a self-directed English language-learning programme for postgraduate students.' In B. Morrison (ed.) *Experiments and Evaluation in Self-Access Language Learning*, pp. 1-24. Hong Kong Association for Self-Access Learning and Development.

Pemberton, R. & S. Toogood (2001) 'Learner and adviser expectations in a self-directed language-learning programme.' In M. Mozzon-McPherson & R. Vismans (eds.) *Beyond Language Teaching towards Language Advising*, pp. 66-83. London: CILT.

Pemberton, R., S. Toogood, S. Ho & J. Lam (2001) 'Enhancing the quality of adviser support for self-directed language learning.' In D. Kember & S. Candlin (eds.) *Case Studies of Improving Teaching and Learning from the Action Learning Project Volume 2*, pp. 143-160. Action Learning Project, Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Pemberton, R., S. Toogood, S. Ho & J. Lam (2002) 'Approaches to advising for self-directed language learning.' In L. Dam (ed.) *AILA Review 15*: 16-25. Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée (International Association for Applied Linguistics).

Sheerin, S. (1989) *Self-Access*. Oxford University Press.

Sturtridge, G. (1992) *Self-Access Preparation and Training*. Manchester: The British Council.

Toogood, S. & R. Pemberton (2002) 'Integrating self-access language learning into the curriculum: a case study.' In P. Benson & S. Toogood (eds.) *Learner Autonomy 7: Challenges to Research and Practice*, pp. 86-110. Dublin: Authentik.

Toogood, S., E. Tsang, R. Pemberton & S. Ho (2002a) 'SALL in courses: how we integrate at HKUST.' Workshop given to City University English Language Centre staff, 27 November 2002.

Toogood, S., Pemberton, R., Tsang, E. & Ho, S. (2002b) 'Assessing SALL – how we do it at HKUST.' Presentation given to the 13th AILA World Congress of Applied Linguistics, Singapore, 17 December 2002.

Toogood, S., R. Pemberton, S. Ho, E. Tsang & C. Wilkins (2003) 'VELA: a Virtual English Language Adviser.' Presentation given to the Hong Kong Association for Self-Access Learning and Development, 26 March 2003.

Toogood, S. (2003) 'VELA: a Virtual English Language Adviser.' Presentation given at the first Annual Conference of the Independent Learning Association, Melbourne University, 13 September 2003.

Voller, P. (1998) *One to One Consultations*. Video and Guidebook. The English Centre, University of Hong Kong.

FURTHER DETAILS

City University Self Access Centre:

http://www.cityu.edu.hk/elc/elc/facilities/sac_index.html

HKUST Self-Access Center: <http://lc.ust.hk/~sac/>

Self Access Support System and Database (SASSAD):

<http://www.cityu.edu.hk/elc/elc/facilities/sassad/main.htm>

Virtual English Language Adviser (VELA):

<http://www.hayo.nl/lapi/project.php?project=13>