

Self-Access Language Learning: An Overview of Key Concepts and Approaches

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1. Introduction

Gardner and Miller's *Establishing Self-Access – From Theory to Practice*, published in 1999, is commonly recognized as one of the most influential contributions to the field; a foundational text aiming to, as its name implies, “bridge the gap between theory and practice in self-access language learning” (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 1) for those new to the practice. Since its publication, more than two decades ago, the field has advanced, leading to the incorporation of novel approaches and perspectives, while some of the earlier ideas and concepts were naturally phased out.

The main objective of this study is to examine the transformations and pinpoint the prevailing trends, while isolating and defining the essential principles and key theoretical and practical concepts within the present-day self-access language learning (SALL) field. SALL grew out of the autonomy movement in the 1970s and has developed through various stages, which will be explored through the roles of self-access centers (SACs) and the people therein, and also in connection with the type of resources and support provided, directiveness, and the degree to which different SALL approaches are language-focused. Apart from definitions of the most prevalent SALL-related conceptual terms coming from well-established scholars in the domain, other various interpretive perspectives and different scholarly viewpoints as documented in the existing body of relevant academic literature will also be provided.

The structure of the study follows the natural evolution of SALL while exploring the characteristics of three major forms of learner-educator interactions in the SALL context: advising in language learning, tutoring, and language practice. Throughout the discussion, I will also offer my

personal perspectives and insights derived from my practical experience working as a self-access educator and interacting with learners in all three forms for the past four years. Upon reviewing the emergence and advantages of advising in language learning, an introductory framework for tutoring, an approach that has been relatively under-explored in the SALL context, will also be presented. Finally, the study will argue that there is enough evidence in the present literature to consider language practice as another significant form of learner-educator interaction.

Through a comprehensive examination of the central concepts and major approaches, coupled with an in-depth analysis of the history and significance of SALL, this study, ultimately, aims to function as a foundational introduction for those approaching the field anew.

2. Self-access language learning

The term ‘self-access’ represents a contraction of the terms ‘self-access learning’ or ‘self-access language learning’ (SALL), and can be understood as an umbrella term to broadly define the activity of language learning as taking place in a self-access context. As I consider it to be the most comprehensive of the three, the term ‘self-access language learning’ in its acronymic form ‘SALL’ will be used for the remainder of this paper.

Since the terminology seems to differ among institutions and self-access facilities, but the practice and, most important, the purpose are ultimately similar, for the rest of the paper I shall use the generic term ‘self-access educator’ to refer to myself or any other education professional working in a self-access environment whose responsibilities, among others, involve one-on-one interactions with learners, unless the context requires being specific about the nature of their role.

2.1. Background

Apart from political instability and transformations at a societal level, the 1960s were also defined by radical innovations and transforma-

tive theories disrupting the academic field, like the dismissal of Skinner's 'behaviorism' (Skinner, 1957/2014) in favor of Chomsky's 'cognitivism' (Chomsky, 1957), a pioneering idea which led to new theoretical perspectives and transformative practical applications in the field of education. A relevant development arising from this shifting academic landscape was the establishment of the Modern Languages Project in 1971 by the Council of Europe (Benson, 2011, p. 9), dedicated to embracing the diverse European linguistic scenery by promoting language acquisition among the adult population. The project culminated in the founding of the *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues* (CRAPEL – Center for Research and Applications in Languages) at the University of Nancy (now University of Lorraine), France, by Yves Châlon, "considered by many to be the father of autonomy in language learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 9).

Stemming from the changing dynamics of the academic field in the previous decade, the late 1970s saw the communicative approach to language teaching (CLT), owing to its focus on communicative purposes, challenging and ultimately displacing the audio-lingual method's dominance in the field of language learning (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). In 1979, Henri Holec, Châlon's successor as the director of CRAPEL, published a report on autonomy in language learning, as a means of contributing to the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project (Little, 2015), which, together with the aforementioned factors, can be recognized as paramount in facilitating the advent of 'self-access' as an unconventional approach in language education.

2.2. What is self-access language learning?

Susan Sheerin, a founding figure who explored the field starting from its early stages, argues that "the term 'self-access' refers to learning materials and organizational systems (designed for direct access by users)" (Sheerin, 1997), a view later challenged by Gardner and Miller who believed this to be a 'misconception', since they saw 'self-access' "as an integration of a number of elements (Table 1.1) which combine to provide

a learning environment. Each learner interacts with the environment in a unique way (Figure 1.2)” (Gardner & Miller, 1999, pp. 8-11).

Table 1 *Summary of Table 1.1 – Elements of self-access (Gardner & Miller, 1999, pp. 9-10)*

Element	Function
Resources	To provide learning materials, activities, technology etc.
People	Teachers to perform the role of information provider, counsellor, etc. Learners to perform the role of planner, organizer, etc. Other learners to perform the roles of partners and peer-assessors.
Management	To provide organization, coordination, etc.
Individualisation	To acknowledge the individual differences in learning styles and strategies, etc.
Counselling	To provide advice on language ability and learning methods, etc.
Learner training	To enhance understanding of SALL, etc.
Assessment	Self-, peer-, and external-assessment.

While it is common in the literature to rely on definitions of ‘self-access’ from well-known researchers in the field of SALL, since we are now living in a world that relies on digital solutions for problems ranging from the most complex to the most trivial, and most of us carry a mobile device that has the same functionalities as a computer with constant internet access, I believe it is worthwhile to also look at the definition of ‘self-access’ as listed in some of the most common modern online dictionaries.

A quick search revealed that five out of the eight online dictionaries accessed (see References - Online Dictionaries for a complete list) do not list the term ‘self-access’, most notably the highly popular Dictionary.com and Merriam-Webster, with the latter being quite unexpected, as it proclaims itself to be “America’s most trusted dictionary”, a country in which many universities offer self-access services to their students. The

Collins Dictionary sees ‘self-access’ as an adjective and in its definition associates it with ‘self-access center’, which is simply defined as a place in a school or college “where students can choose and use books, tapes, or other materials.”

Surprisingly, while the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary does not have an entry for ‘self-access’, the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary (OLD) does provide a definition, which is very similar to that provided by the Cambridge Dictionary (CD). Both dictionaries see ‘self-access’ as a noun and define it as ‘a method of learning’ in which students can “choose their materials and use them to study on their own” (OLD) or simply “use books, videos, etc. to study on their own” (CD). It is important to notice that while both OLD and CD maintain the cultural-historical connection of ‘self-access’ with the concept of ‘autonomy’ by mentioning that students have to “study on their own”, their definitions are rather limited and do not fully encompass the true nature of modern SALL.

Apart from the above-mentioned, according to Gardner & Miller, SALL “allows maximum exposure to a wide variety of language-learning opportunities for a large number of learners in the least time-consuming and least costly way” (1999, p. 25). In my own view, one of the most basic functions of self-access is to provide help and support to students in their foreign language learning, regardless of their abilities, proficiency, or goals. The distinction between the concepts of ‘help’ and ‘support’ will be addressed in the Conclusion.

Based on my research and experience over the past four years as a self-access educator, I see ‘self-access learning’ and SALL as terms that ultimately refer to an alternative approach to studying and learning a language in which students are most often viewed and referred to as ‘learners’. The learners are encouraged to use available language learning resources and human resources, on a voluntary basis or as part of a curriculum, to deepen their knowledge and understanding of a target language and explore new methods which can be used in the learning process. The ultimate goal is for them to become autonomous learners. The last part of my defi-

dition is there because, due its cultural-historical background, promoting learners' self-directed language learning behavior is a goal that lies at the foundation of SALL.

2.3. Self-access languages learning centers

According to Gardner & Miller (1999, p. 20), SALL can take place in a variety of places, including: classrooms, libraries, and self-access centers (SACs). But the more common view in the field is that "Self-Access Language Learning is the learning that takes place in a SAC" (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001).

As mentioned above, one of the first SACs was CRAPEL at the University of Nancy in France, founded by Yves Châlon in 1971. According to Little (2015), the socio-political circumstances coupled with the academic developments of the 1970s, which led to a strong reaction against behaviorism, had a tremendous impact on how universities perceived the very popular language laboratories of those times, which used the 'audio-lingual method' based on the behaviorist theory elaborated by Skinner.

Little concludes that under these circumstances universities had no choice but to make the language laboratories "available to students for self-instructional use", giving birth to the first university 'resource centers' (Smith, 2008), or as they are more commonly known now 'self-access centers' (e.g. Mayeda et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2021).

At the core of the idea of self-access language learning are self-access centers (often called 'language resource centers' or 'independent language learning centers') which often function as quasi-independent units within language teaching departments with their own philosophy and routines for engaging learners in language study. (Benson, 2011, p. 128)

The idea of SACs as 'language resources centers', that is places where students can easily have access to language learning resources, has

been a characteristic that defined these spaces ever since their early days. This notion is embedded even in more modern definitions of SACs, spanning more than two decades: Gardner and Miller's (1999) perspective is that a SAC's major function is "the provision of self-study language-learning materials (grammar, listening, etc.) which independent learners can use to satisfy their own needs and wants" (p. 19); Cotterall and Reinders (2001) view a SAC as consisting "of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities and support) usually located in one place;" Benson (2011) suggests that a SAC "can be broadly defined as a purpose-designed facility in which learning resources are made directly available to learners" (p. 128); from Kato and Mynard's standpoint, SACs "are usually physical spaces offering resources and support for language learners" (p. 258); finally, according to Tassinari and Martos Ramos (2021), "in the last four decades, self-access language centers (SALCs) have been established as learning environments providing learners with materials and resources, learning support, and opportunities for social learning." While Benson (2011) argues that "in many institutions, self-access centers have been established without any strong pedagogical rationale" (p. 11), I will further suggest that providing access to language learning resources of various kinds still continues to be one of the main motives for which many institutions establish a SAC.

Over the decades, one of the primary factors that defined the evolution of SACs is the nature of the resources. Beginning in the initial phases and continuing through the mid-1990s, the focus was predominantly on paper-based resources:

In the mid-1990s there were strong beliefs in the need for an extensive range of materials in SACs which were tailor-made for the target users. These beliefs provided motivation for the investment of considerable time in materials production. Worksheets were produced to promote learner training and to provide language learning materials both in standalone mode and

as support for authentic materials. (Gardner & Miller, 2010)

Gradually, “there has been less production of paper-based SALL materials” (Gardner & Miller, 2010) and, following technological advances, many SACs either added, or switched completely to materials in electronic format that could be accessed through “audio-visual equipment such as cassettes players, videos, and later satellite TV and computer software” (Thornton, 2021).

The 1990s also saw rapid advancements in the development of personal computers, making them more affordable for personal use. The dot-com bubble of the late 1990s and early 2000s led to the rapid growth of the internet, followed by a significant expansion of the online environment; many SACs adapted by digitalizing their resources and moving them to online platforms, like websites or virtual learning environments.

Over time, many SACs have adapted to changes that new technologies have brought, and modern centers are less likely to have a bank of computers in a room, but often offer online advising or provide access to online learning materials, either through website links or virtual learning environments. (Thornton, 2021)

Moving on to the next decade, the 2010s witnessed even more sophisticated technological advancements, including the proliferation of mobile devices with touchscreen interfaces, like smartphones and tablets. Developments in the mobile operating systems these devices used led to the birth and widespread use of mobile software in the form of applications, offering even more complex functionalities compared to personal computers. Mynard (2021) identified this as a new phase in the evolution of SACs: the social and mobile learning phase, that, as in the previous decade, mirrors the technological trends of that period. As a result, with learners now having access to a plethora of learning resources straight

from their mobile devices, the need for them to visit the SACs for access to resources has been gradually eliminated. Therefore, many SACs either closed or they “had to reinvent themselves to become more social spaces” (Mynard, 2021), encouraging learners to make use of their own mobile devices while interacting in the social learning communities created around the centers. This is further elaborated by Thornton:

In recent years, constructivist theory and sociocultural theory have emphasized the importance of social interaction in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). This has led to a shift in SALL to what have been called social learning spaces (Allhouse, 2014; Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2016), where the emphasis is less on physical materials, but rather on the interactions which take place in a physical learning environment. (Thornton, 2021)

This particular aspect is also evident within Mynard’s (2021) own definition of SACs as “person-centered social learning environments that actively promote language learner autonomy both within and outside the space”, a definition which also better reflects the current phase in the evolution of SACs having a deeper focus on furnishing “conditions that help people to thrive: competence, autonomy and relatedness [–] inner motivational resources,” all in the hope of supporting the learners’ “emotions, basic psychological needs and wellbeing” (Mynard, 2021).

In my own view, a SAC, also sometimes referred to as a self-access learning center (SALC; e.g. Knight, 2010; Yamaguchi et al., 2019; Ohara & Ishimura, 2020), or even self-access language learning center (SALLC; e.g. Mehran et al., 2016; Kiyota, 2021), can be defined as an educational facility, usually operating inside a bigger academic institution, which provides students/learners with access to language learning resources and often *human resources*, with the purpose of supporting them to engage in self-directed language learning. For a brief summary of the evolution of SACs based on the nature of the language learning resources

provided, please refer to Table 2, below.

Table 2 *Evolution of SACs based on the nature of the language learning resources*

Decade	Resources	Characteristics
1970s 1980s	Paper-based	Production of tailor-made, paper-based language learning resources;
1990s	Electronic format	Transfer to language learning resources in electronic format that could be accessed mostly through audio-visual equipment;
2000s	Internet-based	SACs digitalized their resources and made them available through online platforms;
2010s	Mobile devices	Previously available language learning resources are rendered obsolete; SACs shift focus to social interactions;
2020s	Human resources	A revised emphasis on human resources: SACs place refocused attention on language conversation, advising in language learning and/or language tutoring services.

While the recent technological progress challenged the need for SACs and jeopardized their continued presence within academic institutions (Thornton, 2021), I would argue that, except their focus on social interactions between learners, the immediate availability of *human support* facilitated by the actual presence of one or more professional SALL educators (conversation partners, tutors and/or language advisors) is the fundamental element that still justifies the existence of many of them, with this being one of the main factors that differentiates a SAC from a university library. The human support component of SACs will be further detailed in the Learner Training part of this paper.

3. Autonomy and self-directed learning

As illustrated previously in the section dedicated to the background of SALL, from its initial stages the concept of SALL shares a strong connection with the concepts of ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-directed

learning’, which have become increasingly popular since the late 1960s. It is thus imperative to address them in this section.

2001 is the year in which the first edition of Phil Benson’s *Teaching and Researching Autonomy* was published. The second edition was published in 2011. For many working in the field of SALL, a plausible perspective is that Benson’s work in the field of autonomy is analogous to Gardner and Miller’s contribution to the field of SALL, mainly due to the former’s elaborate analysis of the connection between autonomy and SALL. Benson (2011) argues that at CRAPEL, in the 1970s, “self-access was seen as a means of facilitating self-directed learning” (p. 11). He further explains that the large increase in the number of SACs in the 1990’s led to the term ‘self-access language learning’ being “often treated as a synonym for self-directed or autonomous learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 11), a view common in the 2000s.

While Yves Châlon, founder of CRAPEL, is considered to be the father of autonomy in language learning (Benson 2001), Henri Holec is said to have coined and first used the phrase ‘learner autonomy’, in 1979 in his famous report on adult education, *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Holec’s clear and concise definition of ‘learner autonomy’ as the learner’s “ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3) is by far the most popular.

A widely accepted definition of ‘self-directed learning’ is that of Malcolm Knowles who defined the concept in 1975 in his famous book ‘Self-directed Learning: A Guide for Learners and Teachers’. He sees ‘self-directed learning’ as:

In its broadest meaning, ‘self-directed learning’ describes a process in which individuals take the initiative with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (cited in Benson,

2011, p. 36)

Smith (2008) explains that Holec saw ‘self-directed learning’ as a “desirable learning *situation or behaviour*”, and ‘learner autonomy’ as the “*capacity* for such learning” (italics in the original); in Holec’s own words: “‘Autonomy’ is thus a term describing a potential capacity to act in a given situation – in our case, learning – and not the actual behaviour of an individual in that situation.” Holec offers additional insight on this particular facet:

Although ‘self-directed learning’ implies an ‘autonomous learner’, the latter does not necessarily involve ‘self-directed learning’. In other words a learner may have the ability to take charge of his learning without necessarily utilizing this ability to the full when he decides to learn. Different degrees of self-direction may result either from different degrees of autonomy or from different degrees of exercise of autonomy. (Holec, 1981, p. 4)

Judging by Holec’s own interpretation of the two concepts, in my own view, learner autonomy can then also be defined as *learners’ capacity to exhibit self-directed learning behavior*.

‘Learner autonomy’ and ‘self-directed learning’ are two of the most common but widely misunderstood concepts, not only in self-access, but in the field of language learning in general. Benson’s own interpretation of the two concepts makes the distinction between them even clearer and I believe further supports my own interpretation and definition of learner autonomy as the learners’ capacity to exhibit self-directed learning behavior:

Perhaps the most important distinction to be made in the field of language learning is between autonomy as an attribute of the learner and self-directed learning as a mode of learning, in

which the learner makes the important decisions about content, methods and evaluation. Autonomy can be considered as a capacity that learners possess to various degrees. Self-directed learning can be considered as something that learners are able to do more or less effectively, according to the degree that they possess this capacity. (Benson, 2011, p. 37)

In short, learner autonomy is a characteristic of the learner – a capacity and willingness to control their learning. On the other hand, self-directed learning represents the actual process of the learner controlling their learning, ultimately: a kind of learning; or as Gremmo & Riley (1995) suggest, “the only kind of learning there is.”

Factoring in Holec’s own clarification that *‘to take charge of one’s own learning’* implies the learner being able “to have, and to hold, the responsibility for *all* the decisions concerning *all* aspects of this learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3; emphasis added), from a personal perspective, this seems to point to the possibility that the concept of a ‘fully autonomous learner’ is closely aligned to Piaget’s constructivist theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1952), a stance also echoed in Candy’s perspective, who portrays constructivism as ‘a cluster of perspectives’ asserting that “knowledge cannot be taught but must be constructed by the learner” (Candy, 1991, p. 252; also cited in Benson, 2011, p. 38).

Piaget’s constructivism emphasizes the active role of the individual in constructing their own knowledge through personal inquiry. Although this is consistent with the concept of a ‘fully autonomous learner’ that takes charge of *all* their learning processes, it also appears to be in contradiction with the principles put forward by Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1934/1962), which places greater emphasis on the role of social interaction and guidance from more knowledgeable others in the process of learning. While Holec’s definition of ‘learner autonomy’ seems to exclude the idea of a more knowledgeable other scaffolding the learning process, the notion of ‘self-directed learning’ offers more leverage in

this regard, as also observed in Knowles' definition: "individuals take the initiative *with* or without *the help of others* (emphasis added)." In other words, while engaged in self-directed learning the learners do take responsibility for their learning; nevertheless, they can still benefit from the help and support provided by teachers or peers. In contrast, the notion of 'learner autonomy' seems to imply a degree of self-reliance that potentially excludes the role of external support.

To summarize, the idea of 'self-directed learning' can be viewed as integrating sociocultural principles by allowing social influences in the process of learning; the concept of 'learner autonomy' may be interpreted as being more closely aligned with the individualistic perspective of constructivism. In my opinion, this is an important nuance that further highlights the distinction between these two related, but often misunderstood concepts.

4. Learner Training

As we have already seen, the first SAC was CRAPEL which was designed and implemented based on the premise that allowing students to engage in self-directed learning would lead them to becoming autonomous learners. At CRAPEL it was argued that in order to carry out effective self-directed learning, a student must possess a set of skills which can be grouped into three major categories: self-management, self-monitoring, and self-assessment (Benson, 2011, p. 12). Benson (2011) also states that "according to Holec, teaching learners how to carry out self-directed learning training would be counterproductive, since the learning would by definition no longer be self-directed. Instead learners need to train themselves" (p. 12). However, David Little argues that:

The concept of learner autonomy may have seemed tailor-made for university language centres. But on the whole university students didn't rush to make use of self-access facilities and resources; and when they did it usually turned out that they

were not well equipped to be autonomous learners as defined by Holec. (Little, 2015)

Also, according to Smith (2008), it wasn't long before they discovered that most students didn't have the full capacity to take charge of the decision-making process in all these areas. In other words, they didn't possess the skills needed to become Holec's 'ideal' autonomous learners, or 'fully' autonomous learners. In time they were left with no choice but to offer learner-training services inside the resources center to train students to become autonomous learners.

The major lesson which has been learnt from resource centers is that if they are to be successful, they must provide some sort of learner-training. A conceptual framework was developed in the late 1970s (Holec, 1980; Abé et [sic] Gremmo, 1983) and since then learner-training has been the subject of intensive observation and research. (Gremmo & Riley, 1995)

'Learner training' is also one of the self-access elements identified by Gardner and Miller, and therefore it is appropriate to consider it as one of the basic concepts of SALL.

4.1. Counseling

Building on Gremmo and Riley's (1995) prior perspective, "historically speaking, counselling was the first form of learner training to appear: it was based on the desire and necessity of devising forms of learner-training that are not teacher-controlled." Even though more research is needed to point to the first mention of the term 'counseling' and the concept behind it, I would argue that it naturally evolved as a more structural form of learner training derived from Holec's initial concept of 'learner training' introduced in the early 1970s. The term 'counseling' gained popularity throughout the 1990s, reaching a peak with the publication in

1999 of Gardner and Miller's aforementioned popular book 'Establishing Self-Access'; the authors being two of the most important figures in the field of SALL associated with the 'counseling' approach.

Even though a great amount of specialized literature has been devoted to the study and understanding of 'counseling' in relation to SALL, some researchers still think it is rather difficult to clearly define 'counseling'.

Much of the disagreement as to what counseling 'is' (really is) is due to the fact that the term is employed as referred to a simple, uniform activity, whereas even the most cursory examination shows it to be a complex and variable discourse type which overlaps with a number of other types and situations. (Riley, 1997)

To provide a better understanding, my proposed definition of 'counselling' merges the views and interpretations of a few prominent researchers in the field: counseling is a kind of language support (Reinders, 2008), usually offered in the form of a therapeutic dialogue (Kelly, 1996, p. 94; also cited in Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 182) providing advice on language ability and learning methods, and often involving negotiation of study plans (Gardner & Miller, 1999) with the objective of helping learners develop their learning competence (Gremmo & Riley, 1995).

In 2012, Carson and Mynard introduced a series of arguments against the term 'counseling' and its derivatives. They raise three significant concerns regarding the use of the term, two of which will be covered in this section and the last one at the beginning of part 6: 'Directive vs. non-directive approaches'. First, in their view, the term 'counseling' commonly evokes an image of addressing "conflict, pain, and personal struggles", and it also conjures the idea of "working with a trained and certified counsellor." Nevertheless, "in our mind language learning is a complex, lengthy process, but it is not usually associated with the same kinds of dif-

faculties or inner conflicts” (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 8).

A second concern is that language educators, unlike trained therapists, have not received the same level of specialized training:

The second problem we have with adopting the term ‘counsellor’ within the field of SALL is that although language educators may at times draw on some of the skills of counseling, they are not trained therapists and cannot be expected to be able to offer the same kind of specialist help that counsellors do. (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 8)

4.2. Guidance

For the sake of completeness, I will briefly mention the term ‘guidance’, as defined by Bond. Bond thinks guidance is “like a signpost, pointing out different possible routes and helping someone to select their own destination and way of getting there” (Bond, 2000, p. 26; cited in Carson & Mynard, 2012, p.10). Carson and Mynard believe that:

The use of the term guidance has become well established in some fields of counselling, for example, in educational settings. It is possible that the term developed as an alternative to counselling when there is a need for intervention, as counselling is mainly seen to be non-directive. (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 10)

5. Advising in language learning

It is interesting to note that Carson and Mynard (2012) oppose not only the term ‘counseling’ but also the term ‘language advising’, used by some authors in the field, on the grounds that it “risks being interpreted in a very narrow sense,” that is “being limited to the mechanics of language” (p. 4). They propose instead ‘advising in language learning’ because, in their words, “the advising process may incorporate attention to factors that

are not only related to *language*” (p. 4; emphasis in original).

Advising in language learning involves the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths so as to become more autonomous language learners. (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 4)

In 2012, Jo Mynard proposed the ‘Dialogue, Tools and Context Model’ for advising in language learning (Mynard, 2012, p. 33). To construct her model, she drew on the theoretical perspectives of constructivism and sociocultural theory. According to Mynard, and others, three of the common beliefs about learning are:

(1) dialogue is crucial for knowledge construction; (2) tools facilitate reflective processes which in turn promote cognitive and metacognitive development; and (3) the learning environment and contextual factors play a role in the learning process. (Mynard, 2012; p. 26)

Mynard also emphasizes that these three concepts (or beliefs), as they are interpreted mostly in constructivism and to a lesser degree in sociocultural theory, are also relevant in advising in language learning, and, obviously, they constitute the base for the ‘Dialogue, Tools and Context Model’ (Mynard, 2012, p. 36).

Through the lens of constructivism, dialogue in advising in language learning is seen as a means through which personal knowledge is constructed. In constructivism there is the concept of disequilibrium (Knight, 2002; cited in Mynard, 2012, p. 27), a state in which individuals, who already possess pre-existing knowledge, are presented with new information. Next, through interactions with others, individuals, by reconstructing the ‘pre-existing knowledge’, try to assimilate the ‘new information’ (Adelman Reyers & Vallone, 2008; cited in Mynard, 2012, p. 27). When

an individual is able to assimilate and understand the new knowledge, it is widely accepted that a state of ‘equilibrium’ is achieved (von Glaserfeld, 1989; cited in Mynard, 2012, p. 27). The outcome of this process is the ‘construction of new personal knowledge’. Thus, in the advising in language learning context, dialogue is one of the means through which personal knowledge is constructed (Mynard, 2012, Mozzon-McPherson, 2012; McCarthy, 2012).

The model was revised by Mynard (2021), and the concept of ‘dialogue’ was subsequently developed into ‘Intentional Reflective Dialogue’, proposed by Kato in 2012: “In 2012, Kato proposed the term Intentional Reflective Dialogue (IRD) and the concept has been strengthened since this paper [Kato, 2012] was first published.” Therefore, the initial concept of dialogue maintains its central role in ALL: “Dialogue between an advisor and a learner is central to the process of helping learners to reflect (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 1). Its more developed form, IRD, is defined by Kato and Mynard (2016) “as a conscious discourse with learners with the purpose of engaging them in transformation in learning (p. 6),” leading to the emergence of a more enhanced form of advising: transformational advising. According to its proponents, Kato and Mynard (2016), in transformational advising “IRD often results in fundamental shifts in the nature of learning” (Mynard, 2021, p. 50).

The main aim of advising presented in this book is to eventually result in transformation on the part of the learner and we termed it ‘Transformational Advising.’ In the process of Transformational Advising, an advisor supports a learner in going beyond improving language proficiency. The learner’s existing beliefs are challenged in order to raise awareness of learning, translate the learner’s awareness into action, and finally, make a fundamental change in the nature of learning. (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 9)

The practice of Transformational Advising is governed by the following three basic principles: (1) Focus on the Learner, (2) Keep an Open Mind, and (3) Take a Neutral Position (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 18).

‘Focus on the Learner’ is often interpreted as meaning ‘It’s not about you’, with ‘you’ pointing to the advisors themselves: “an experienced advisor focuses on the learner rather than on himself. (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 18)” ‘Keep an Open Mind’ is commonly taken to imply ‘Leave your assumptions at the door’, because despite the fact that “as humans, we naturally have biases and make assumptions about all aspects of life”, it is important to note that “experienced advisors do not let their own biases interfere with the learner’s issues and do not make assumptions based on personal experience” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 18). Finally, ‘Take a Neutral Position’ is simply perceived as ‘No judgment’; the underlying rationale being that “an advisor is not a teacher who evaluates a student”, and of utmost importance is the premise rooted in the understanding that, ultimately, “the learner decides what is good and not good for her and an experienced advisor does not judge” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 18).

In their practice, advisors employ a series of strategies aimed at facilitating the transformational advising process. In *Reflective Dialogue* (2016), Kato and Mynard present a comprehensive array of strategies serving different purposes in the advising process. In the paragraph below, I will offer a brief overview of the strategies.

Repeating, mirroring, restating, and summarizing “are important for communicating understanding and empathy to a learner”, so the advisors “are more likely to use them in the first five minutes of an advising session” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 20). Giving positive feedback, empathizing, and complimenting “focus on the affective domain” and when advisors use them properly, these strategies “can help a learner to feel motivated and positive” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 22). Metaview and linking are used “when a learner is encouraged to take a step back and see the bigger picture” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 23); the use of metaphors “helps learners to visualize and express their thoughts and feelings in different

ways” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 24). Powerful questions and intuiting are two strategies that “can be effective at triggering major leaps in awareness and/or action” but usually they “tend to be used by more experienced advisors when they have already established rapport with their learners” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, pp. 24-25). Next on the list are: challenging, “used to help learners move beyond their self-imposed limitations;” sharing, which basically means “providing some ideas, examples, and models” which can be beneficial to “help a learner get started;” and finally, accountability compels the learners “to take action and be accountable to someone other than themselves” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, pp. 26-27).

A particular focus is placed on ‘silence’, with its occurrence during an advising session having one of the two following meanings: “either the learner has not understood the meaning of the question, or the learner is thinking through the answer” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 27).

In the former case, advisors need to help the learner understand what the question means. In the latter case, learners are probably taking time to think until they are ready to say their thoughts out loud. (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 27)

Initially, mirroring and silence were viewed as ‘strategies’, with strategies, in general, being regarded as having a more crucial role in advising. More recently, that is after the publication of Kato and Mynard’s *Reflective Dialogue* in 2016, mirroring and silence were reclassified as ‘techniques’, following Kelly’s (1996) micro and macro skills, which will be also discussed in the ‘Tutoring’ part of this paper. Together with back-channeling, nodding, eye contact, and prompting, they complete the portfolio of strategies and techniques advisors can employ while engaging the learners in intentional reflective dialogue during transformational advising.

6. Directive vs. non-directive approaches

Now that we know what ‘advising in language learning’ is, and having covered the first two reasons at the end of section ‘4.1 Counseling’, we can introduce the third, and last, reason why Carson and Mynard (2012) think it is not appropriate to use the term ‘counseling’. According to them, “mainstream theories of counseling tend to advocate a non-directive approach,” but “advising in language learning sometimes requires the explicit giving of information or of interventions such as strategy training” (p. 8).

What they mean by ‘a non-directive approach’ is the degree to which different approaches provide or share information and the different amount of advice offered in assisting learners with their language learning. Approaches can be understood here as one-on-one, or sometimes group, interactions between a self-access educator and a learner, and they can be ‘non-directive’, meaning the self-access educator offers little to no information and advice, or they can be ‘directive’, meaning a high degree of information and advice is shared with the learner.

Assuming that counseling evolved naturally as a form of learner training, then judging by Holec’s own interpretation, we can consider his initial ‘learner training’, introduced in the 1970s, as the least directive of all approaches. In Holec’s own words: “The basic methodology for learner training should be that of discovery; [...] By proceeding largely by trial and error, he [i.e. the learner] trains himself progressively” (Holec, 1980, p. 42; cited in Benson, 2011, p. 12).

7. Tutoring

Carson and Mynard (2012) state the following: “While ‘guidance’ is a more directive term than ‘counselling’, the term ‘advising’ is usually interpreted as being more directive still.” From this we can deduce that ‘counseling’ follows ‘training’; ‘guidance’ is more directive than ‘counseling’ and, so far, ‘advising’ is the most directive of them all.

From my own perspective based on practical experience, I am of the opinion that ‘tutoring’ can also be considered as a standalone alterna-

tive SALL approach with an even higher degree of directiveness in assisting students with their language learning.

As we have already seen, ‘counseling’ and ‘advising’ are well researched and understood approaches in the field of SALL, but, during my research, I have found that the term ‘tutoring’ is not very often found in the literature, occasionally being used only in the context of ‘peer tutoring’ (e.g. Manning, 2014; Takeuchi, 2015; Ruegg et al., 2017; Howard, 2019; McCrohan & Caldwell, 2021) and ‘writing centers’ (e.g. McKinley, 2010; Matsuda & Cox, 2011; Andersson & Nakahashi, 2016; Harwood & Koyama, 2020).

Most importantly, there is no definition of tutoring within SALL, which often leads to misunderstandings, as the different terms are sometimes even used interchangeably.

While it might be tempting to view ‘tutoring’, ‘counseling’, and ‘advising’ as having a similar meaning in the SALL context, Carson and Mynard (2012) see ‘counseling’ and ‘advising’ in a very different light, and Reinders (2008) argues that ‘tutoring’ is different from ‘advising’ (or ‘counseling’) in the sense that in the latter the “the focus is not directly on the language, but rather on how to learn the language.” (Ristea, 2022)

I assert that “tutoring also maintains a focus on *how to learn the language*, while also adding the extra element of discussing *the language* itself,” and “while more research is necessary to prove it, it could be argued that, even in the self-access context, maintaining a certain amount of focus on the language is in the best interests of students, especially beginners” (Ristea, 2022; italics in the original).

7.1. Theoretical framework

A rudimentary theoretical framework for tutoring in the SALL context can be built around Oxford’s (2011) Strategic Self-Regulation (S²R)

Model and Kelly's (1996) macro and micro skills for counseling/advising.

In *Teaching and Researching Language Learning Strategies* (2011), Oxford defines strategies in the S²R Model as follows:

In the S²R Model, *self-regulated L2 learning strategies* are defined as deliberate, goal-directed attempts to manage and control efforts to learn the L2 (based on Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris, 2008). These strategies are broad, teachable actions that learners choose from among alternatives and employ for L2 learning purposes (e.g. constructing, internalizing, storing, retrieving, and using information; completing short term tasks and/or developing L2 proficiency and self-efficacy in the long term). (Oxford, 2011, p. 12; italics in the original)

In her widely cited publication 'Language counselling for learner autonomy: the skilled helper in self-access language learning', first published in 1996 in the book *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning*, Rena Kelly defines macro and micro skills for counseling/advising as follows:

The macro skills category describes particular strategies by a self-access helper that can facilitate learner self-management of a self-access project. Forms of language counseling include initiating, goal setting, suggesting, supporting, etc. [...]

Whereas the macro-skills can be seen as strategies that are sequenced and based on the process stage of the learner's project cycle, the micro skills of language counseling are component behaviors that come into play in a variable way during any interaction with the learner. For instance, a helper will always try to fully 'attend' to a learner (give the learner their undivided attention), and will always be striving for empathy (identifying with the learner's experience and perception). Similarly, the skills

of reflective listening (restating, paraphrasing, summarizing, reflecting feelings) will always be in action during communication with a learner. (Kelly, 1996, pp. 94-95)

7.1.1. Language learning strategies

Mynard (2021) considers that in the Dialogue, Tools and Context model “language learning strategies may be the main kinds of theoretical tools, for example, ways of learning vocabulary, or ways of developing language skills proficiency” (pp. 54-55); but in the tutoring approach ‘learning strategies’ can be interpreted from a more practical point of view.

In Oxford’s (2011) S²R Model, strategy assistance is defined as “any type of help (a) that is appropriate to the learner’s culture and relevant to his or her needs and (b) that the learner receives to improve the use of self-regulated L2 learning strategies” (Oxford, 2011, p. 176). In addition, “the goal of strategy assistance is to help students become more effective L2 learners and take greater control over their learning through self-regulated learning strategies” (Oxford, 2011, p. 176).

Carson and Mynard (2012) argue that “ALL sometimes requires the explicit giving of information or of interventions such as strategy training, however this information may be provided in non-directive ways” (p. 8). In tutoring as a directive approach, the notion of ‘directive’ should be understood less as the degree to which different amounts of advice are offered in assisting learners with their language learning (Carson & Mynard, 2012), but more as what Oxford (2011) describes as ‘direct strategy instruction’ “as part of separately-taught ‘learning-to-learn’ courses and training programmes,” not “integrated into regular L2 instruction” (Oxford, 2011, p. 177); in other words, ‘directive’ should be more appropriately interpreted as ‘explicit’, that is: “said, done or shown in an open or direct way, so that you have no doubt about what is happening” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2005).

7.1.2. Skills

Many authors in the field, including Gardner & Miller (1999) and Carson & Mynard (2012), have used in their studies Kelly's (1996) skills for counseling/advising. According to the latter: "The ways in which practitioners perform their work through the use of discourse are commonly known as 'skills' in the advising in language learning literature" (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 16). In Voller's (2004) view, ALL requires "an overlapping, but fundamentally different, set of skills from those employed in classroom teaching" (cited in Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 16).

Kelly (1996) defines language counseling as "a form of therapeutic dialogue that enables an individual to manage a problem" (Kelly, 1996, p. 94; also cited in Carson & Mynard, 2012; Mozzon-McPherson, 2012). According to Carson & Mynard's (2012) analysis, in the advising dialogue, advisors might make use of counseling skills, but the purpose is not therapeutic, that is the purpose is not to manage or solve problems. The purpose is to facilitate the overall development of learners and the advisor might make use of a variety of skills including teaching skills.

Learning advisors need to draw on a range of skills in order to appropriately address the concerns of a particular learner and are unlikely to be able to prepare in advance for an advising session. They may draw on some counseling skills, but are not trained as counsellors. They may draw on teaching skills, but they are not employed as teachers (although they are likely to be trained language teachers). (Carson & Mynard, 2012, p. 17)

Adopting a more focused perspective, we could assume that an educator to be able to manage or solve learner's problems would need problem '*solving*' skills, and the overall development of the learner undeniably requires '*teaching*' skills. These skills match with the macro and micro skills that, in my view, are necessary for tutoring: '*teaching*', on the macro side, and '*solving*' on the micro side. The skill of '*demonstrating*',

understood as the ability to unconditionally share one's knowledge and experience and to "explain and illustrate" using "experiments, examples, or practical application" (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2022) is what would complete the set of skills necessary for a tutor in a SALL context to successfully establish a relationship with learners.

7.2. Summary

Previously, I have defined learner autonomy as the learners' capacity to exhibit self-directed learning behavior, and Benson (2011) defines 'learner development' as a "behavioural and psychological change within the learner" (p. 154). Therefore, from a broader perspective, tutoring in the SALL context can be interpreted as a directive approach aimed at supporting development by shaping the learners' self-directed learning behavior through strategy assistance.

While in a cram school a tutor's objective may be to ensure learners successfully pass school and/or admission examinations or achieve a target score on evaluation and/or language proficiency tests, in the SALL context, apart from sharing language-related knowledge, the tutor's goal is to assist the learners in practical tasks by offering help and advice aimed at enabling them to be able to carry out those tasks on their own; contrary to cram school tutoring, which might create and encourage the learners' dependence on the tutor for financial gain, the SALL tutor discourages dependence by actively combining teaching and ALL strategies and techniques to encourage and develop the learners' self-directed learning behavior.

Overall, SALL tutors must themselves be successful language learners who have tested and accumulated a wealth of language learning strategies that, coupled with good teaching skills, could lead to a better understanding of what learners need in their language learning journey.

8. Language practice

In this paper, so far, I have introduced counseling, as the first

form of learner training in SALL; advising in language learning, as a way of supporting students towards becoming autonomous language learners; and tutoring, as a directive approach aimed at developing the learner's self-directed learning behavior through strategy assistance. These can all be considered different forms of learner-educator interactions in the SALL context.

We have previously observed that, as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, technology started to play an increasingly important role in the evolution of SALL, though it would probably be fair to say that it was always just one element, rather than the main driver (Mozzon McPherson, cited in Thornton, 2021, p. 166). Alongside technology, another key element became evident:

From the narratives it is clear that language practice itself was a driving factor in the establishment of some self-access facilities. Both David [Gardner] and Jo [Mynard] spoke of their initial experiences of a form of self-access arising from a desire to provide students with language practice opportunities and both took initiatives to facilitate this. (Thornton, 2021, pp. 166-167)

Examining the changes and developments in SALL that have taken place over a 15-year period, between 1995 and 2010, Gardner and Miller (2010) observe that in an attempt to boost learners' motivation to use the SACs, many of them, in addition to support in the form of advising, have also started placing an emphasis on *language practice* activities.

[David] Little's concept of autonomy (2007, 2015) is very much linked to giving students opportunities to both interact and reflect in the target language, and this is particularly important in foreign language environments where learners have very little chance to use their skills outside the classroom. In such contexts, provision of target language practice opportunities is a

strong driving force for development, as can be seen in the current growth of SACs in Japan (Mynard, 2016, 2019a, 2019b) and the persistence of English-only language policies in some facilities (Thornton, 2018). (Thornton, 2021, p. 167)

The growing trend of services aimed at allowing learners to practice their target language can also be observed from a quick analysis of the activities or other, in some cases separate, social learning spaces institutions choose to include in their SACs.

Croker and Ashurova (2012), in a study looking at approaches to introduce their SAC to first-year university students, describe the English Conversation Lounge, a type of pull event aimed at attracting learners:

English Conversation Lounge: Learners dropped by to chat with the Assistants and other learners about light topics. Serving as the core of World Plaza community-building, this event created opportunities each day for learners to talk to each other without worrying about their proficiency. A special event called ‘Beginners’ Paradise’ was arranged for elementary-level learners. (Croker & Ashurova, 2012)

Gillies (2010), reporting on the learners’ use or non-use of their institution’s SAC, found that “the learners, whether regular or irregular SAC users, seem to see the conversational lounge as the focal point of the SAC (though officially it is separated from the SAC),” and that “familiarity with the native-speaker teachers and exchange students in the SAC (including the conversation lounge area) is a major factor determining the frequency and type of use of the SAC.”

Similar reports come from Rowberry (2010), the current director of the SILC (Sojo International Learning Center) at Sojo University in Kumamoto, who states that “at the heart of the SALC is the Conversation Lounge, where students can talk informally to teachers and to each other.”

Reinbold (2018), in her Report on the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) Conference, 2017, gives the following details concerning the use of conversation partners in SACs:

Richard Hill and Robert Primeau of Meijo University explained the value of the conversation partner (CP), the “active facilitator of conversation” with students in SACs and tips on how to work with language learners. When speaking with students, CPs usually covered various parts of conversations: first, introduction and greetings; second, small talk; third, conversation on two topics; and finally, conversation endings. Hill and Primeau stressed that CPs should be aware and reflect upon themselves as CPs. (Reinbold, 2018)

Based on the key insights accounted for by the evidence presented in this part, we can therefore conclude that, apart from advising and tutoring, another important type of learner-educator interaction in the SALL context is taking place in the form of language practice, outlining the dynamic role of the SALL educator, which spans from advisor to tutor, and finally conversation partner.

9. Conclusion

Let us now take stock and summarize the key takeaways of this short study.

One key point, since SALL typically provides learners with the necessary language learning resources and tools aimed at developing their self-directed learning behavior, is that, as Gardner and Miller (1999) put it, ultimately SALL is “an approach to language learning, not an approach to teaching language” (pp. 8-11).

Sometimes, people who are not familiar with the concept of SALL believe that it is a threat to traditional forms of education, in which the teacher acts as the compass in the language learning journey, and that

its goal is to gradually eliminate teachers from the process of learning. These are two of the most common misconceptions about SALL and they are obviously not true. Again, echoing the words of Garner and Miller (1999): “SALL does not replace teaching, but complements it” and “SALL does not threaten teachers’ jobs: it creates new and important roles for teachers to which they have to adapt. Teachers remain an integral part of the learning process” (p. 31).

As two of the concepts most closely associated with SALL, a distinction was made between learner autonomy, as a characteristic of learners which enables them “to take charge of [their] own learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3), and self-directed learning, as a kind of learning “in which the learner makes the important decisions about content, methods and evaluation” (Benson, 2011, p37). Holec’s view, developed in the 1980s, of *fully* autonomous learners who are able to take responsibility “for *all* the decisions concerning *all* aspects of [their] learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3; emphasis added), is echoed more than four decades later in Little’s (2022) interpretation of ‘language learner autonomy’ as “a teaching/learning dynamic in which learners *plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning*” (emphasis added). Nevertheless, the notion of an ‘ideal autonomous learner’, still, “may lend support to the criticism that autonomy is a western concept inappropriate for ‘non-western’ students (ibid.)” (Smith, 2020).

In the beginning of my own journey as a self-access educator, I was confident that ‘help’ was all that the learners needed: as long as I could provide ‘help’ in one form or another, I was satisfied with my performance. But this was all before I understood the intricate and complex distinctions between the three main SALL approaches discussed in this paper: advising, tutoring, and conversation, derived from a clearer understanding of the concepts of ‘help’ and ‘support’.

We have seen that advising in language learning centers on the process of assisting learners in steering their own individual learning trajectories towards becoming more self-directed and independent language

learners. Therefore, advising in language learning can be associated with the notion of ‘support’, implying the idea of a more indirect guidance, often sustained over longer periods of time, as in ‘I will *support* you in your language learning *journey*’.

My investigation has also pointed to the approach of tutoring, as a directive approach which employs strategy assistance in the process of supporting the learners’ self-directed learning behavior. In this regard, tutoring can be viewed as having a meaningful correlation with the concept of ‘help’, implying a more direct, hands-on assistance, with more of a short-term connotation, as in ‘I will *help* you with your *homework*’.

Simply put, while ‘help’ in tutoring could mean aiding a learner in understanding a grammar point, ‘support’ in advising can be viewed more as providing the necessary tools for learners to help themselves in the long run. In other words, the tutors and conversation partners’ role imply helping the learners understand the structural intricacies of language, priming them for its real-world practical application; the advisor’s role, on the other hand, entails supporting the learners to venture beyond their familiar experiences to reframe their vision of language learning in general. Nevertheless, both the advisor and the tutor discourage dependence and are actively encouraging and reshaping the learners’ self-directed language learning behavior.

While the available literature makes for a great source of knowledge, it is my own personal view that ultimately it is from their own successes and failures in language learning that self-access educators, irrespective of the type of learner-educator interactions, can draw the essential knowledge “to enable the learner to focus on a manageable goal”, “help the learner develop alternative strategies”, and “to provide examples of knowledge and skills that the learner desires” (Kelly, 1996, p. 95). Having gone through one’s own transforming experience of trying to successfully learn at least one foreign language, it will be much easier for SALL educators in general to “create trust” and “to help learners persist” by “acknowledging and encouraging [their] effort” (Kelly, 1996, p. 96).

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