

Establishing Self-Access

From Theory to Practice

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Establishing Self-Access
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*David Gardner and
Lindsay Miller*



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Part I Theoretical perspectives

1 Background to self-access language learning

1.1 Introduction

Our intention in this chapter is to provide an overview of issues concerning learner autonomy and other related areas which have an influence on self-access language learning (SALL). We begin by examining the debate surrounding autonomy and identifying the major influences which have contributed to this debate. This debate will not be discussed after this chapter because it is not central to the purpose of the book. It is, however, an important starting point for talking about SALL. The remainder of the chapter focuses specifically on SALL by identifying:

- its characteristics
- the beliefs and attitudes which affect the acceptance of SALL
- the change in roles which is required of both learners and teachers
- the challenges of promoting speaking in SALL
- the differences between self-access centres (SACs) in native and non-native speaking environments
- the kinds of learning environments in which SALL can take place
- possible areas of resistance to SALL.

Finally, we discuss issues related to the costs of establishing and maintaining SALL. Many of the points related to SALL which we touch on in this chapter are developed more fully in the rest of the book.

1.2 Definitions

It is difficult to define concepts like ‘autonomy’ and ‘independent learning’ for three reasons. First, different writers have defined the concepts in different ways. Second, they are areas of ongoing debate and therefore definitions are continuing to mature as more discussion takes place. Third, these concepts have developed independently in different geographical areas and therefore they have been defined using different (but often similar) terminology.

1.2.1 *Autonomy*

The concept of ‘autonomous learning’ stemmed from debates about the development of life-long learning skills and the development of independent thinkers both of which originated in the 1960s. By 1981 Holec (1981: 3) had defined autonomy as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’. He developed this definition further in 1985 by talking about autonomy as a conceptual tool. Holec has been a major influence in the debate about autonomy in language learning and his initial definition has been taken as a starting point in much subsequent work in the area. Dickinson (1987: 11), for example, accepts the definition of autonomy as a ‘situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his [or her] learning and the implementation of those decisions’.

Other definitions of autonomy have situated it within three major schools of thought. Some see it as a personal characteristic, some see it as a political concept and others see it as a definition of educational practices. Two writers who see autonomy as a personal characteristic are Little (1990) and Kenny (1993). Little (1990: 7) sees learner autonomy as ‘essentially a matter of the learner’s psychological relation to the process and content of learning’. Kenny (1993: 436) states that autonomy is not only the freedom to learn but also ‘the opportunity to become a person’. An example of viewing autonomy within a political framework is found in the work of Benson (1997: 29) who defines learner autonomy as representing ‘a recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems’ and, within the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language, as ‘a recognition of the rights of the “non-native speaker” in relation to the “native-speaker” within the global order of English’ (Benson 1997: 29). An example of viewing autonomy as an educational practice comes from Boud (1988: 17) who suggests that, as well as being an educational goal autonomy is ‘an approach to educational practice’.

The above definitions deal with the concept of learner autonomy. In this book, which places the learner at the centre of focus, it is important to identify the characteristics of an autonomous learner. In a colloquium in which an attempt was made to define the characteristics of an autonomous learner, Dam et al. (1990: 102) defined one as ‘an active participant in the social processes of classroom learning ... an active interpreter of new information in terms of what she/he already and uniquely knows ... [someone who] knows how to learn and can use this knowledge in any learning situation she/he may encounter at any stage in her/his life’. In addition, Dam et al. (1990: 102) characterise learner autonomy as ‘a readiness to take charge of one’s own learning’. Gardner and Miller (1996: vii) define autonomous language learners as those who ‘initiate the planning and implementation of their own learning

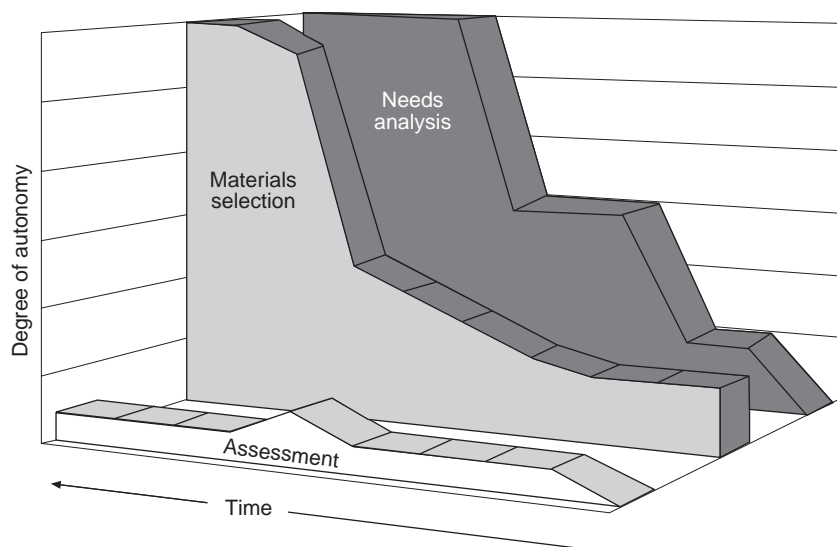


Figure 1.1. Example of changes in autonomy in learner decision-making regarding reading

program'. These definitions go some way towards clarifying the characteristics of autonomous language learners. However, as Nunan (1997: 193) points out 'it may well be that the fully autonomous learner is an ideal, rather than a reality'. He argues for degrees of autonomy and that learners' potential for achieving different degrees depends on factors like their personality, their goals, institutional philosophy and cultural context (Nunan 1997).

In addition to the differences in degrees of autonomy suggested by Nunan, there may also be fluctuations in the degree of learners' autonomy over time and from one skill area to another. For example, a learner may attain a high degree of autonomy in listening but could remain teacher dependent in learning about writing. Levels of autonomy may vary even within single language skills, for example in reading. Figure 1.1 shows an example of the development of a learner's levels of autonomy in three aspects of reading. First, the learner's autonomy in analysing needs has developed rapidly. It should also be noticed that this development went through two stages where each time a plateau was reached and then passed. Second, the learner's willingness to select materials has developed more slowly. However, there is a sudden rise in autonomy in materials' selection which occurs shortly after passing the second plateau of autonomy in needs analysis. Third, the learner's willingness to accept responsibility for assessment of reading has hardly

changed. There was a small increase in autonomy at one point but this was not sustained. This may be due to the learner's lack of confidence in the reliability of self-assessment.

1.2.2 *Approaches to encouraging autonomy*

Approaches which assist learners to move from teacher dependence towards autonomy are described in various terms, the most common are: self-directed learning, self-instruction, independent learning, and self-access learning. Although proponents of these approaches may argue for differences between them, there are more similarities than differences. Each of the approaches encourages learners to set and pursue their personal language learning goals. Holec (1988) states that learner responsibility is a necessary requirement for self-directed learning. He identifies two kinds of learner responsibility. In what he describes as *static*, learners, either by themselves or with the help of others, set a programme of language learning and follow it through. He describes this responsibility as a 'finished product' (Holec 1988: 174). The kind of responsibility he describes as *dynamic* is more flexible because learners take on responsibility for their learning as the learning programme develops. Dickinson (1987: 11) sees self-direction as an 'attitude to the learning task' within which learners accept responsibility for decision-making but do not necessarily implement the decisions. He also makes a distinction between self-direction and self-instruction, the latter being a neutral term describing a context where learners are not under the direct control of their teachers (Dickinson 1987).

Independent learning is seen by Sheerin (1997) as an educational philosophy and process, whereas Gardner and Miller (1996) see it as one stage in a process in which learners are moving towards autonomy in their learning. Self-access is probably the most widely used and recognised term for an approach to encouraging autonomy. Sheerin (1991: 144) refers to self-access as 'a means of promoting learner autonomy'. We certainly see self-access as a way of encouraging learners to move from teacher dependence towards autonomy and it is for this reason that we use the term 'self-access' throughout this book.

1.3 **Elements of self-access**

Self-access language learning is an approach to learning language, not an approach to teaching language. There are misconceptions in the literature about self-access. It is sometimes seen as a collection of materials and sometimes as a system for organising resources. We see it as an integration of a number of elements (Table 1.1) which combine to

Table 1.1. *Elements of self-access*

Element	Function
Resources	To provide: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• learning materials• authentic materials• activities• technology• access to authentic language users• access to other language learners.
People	Teachers to perform the roles of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• information provider• counsellor• authentic language user• manager• materials writer• assessor• evaluator• administrator• organiser. Learners to perform the roles of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• planner• organiser• administrator (record keeping)• thinker (about learning)• evaluator of SALL• self-assessor• self-motivator. Other learners to perform the roles of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• partners• peer-assessors.
Management	To provide: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• organisation• overseeing of the system• coordination• decision-making• interfacing with the institution.
System	To organise SALL facilities in a way or ways that best support the needs of the learners.

Part 1 Theoretical perspectives

Table 1.1. (*contd*)

Element	Function
Individualisation	To acknowledge individual differences in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning styles • learning strategies • time and place of learning • quantity of time spent learning • learning level • content of learning • commitment to learning.
Needs/wants analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify learning goals. • To facilitate the creation of study plans.
Learner reflection	To consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language ability • progress in language learning • suitability of SALL for self • goal setting.
Counselling	To provide: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advice on language ability • advice on learning methods • negotiation of study plans.
Learner training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enhance understanding of SALL. • To experience a variety of methods. • To increase effectiveness in learning.
Staff training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enhance understanding of SALL. • To increase effectiveness of services.
Assessment	Kinds of assessments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-assessment • peer-assessment • external-assessment. Purposes of assessment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-monitoring • certification • evaluation of SALL.
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To decide suitability of SALL for self. • To provide feedback about SALL to teachers/manager.
Materials development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To support individualisation. • To improve learning opportunities.

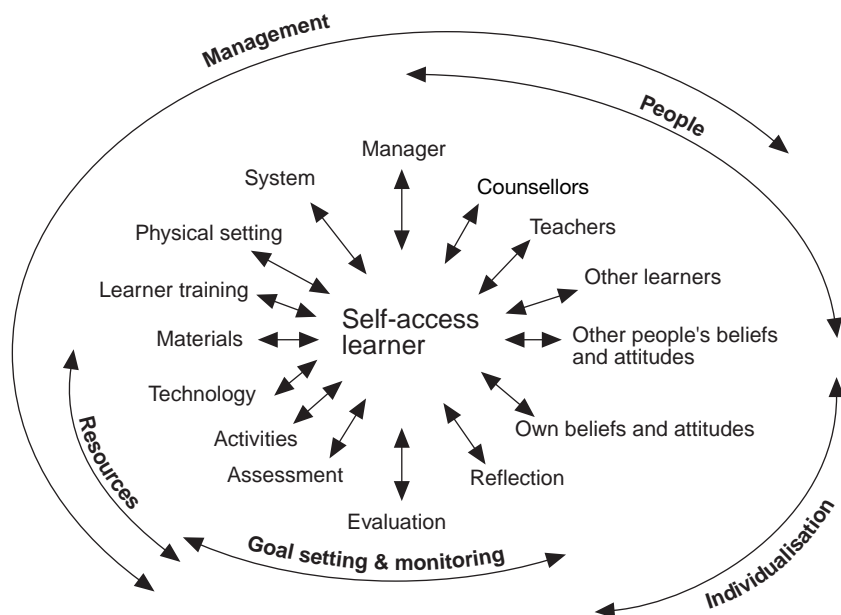


Figure 1.2. Interaction between the learner and the self-access environment

provide a learning environment. Each learner interacts with the environment in a unique way (Figure 1.2). The elements of self-access and the ways in which learners interact with them are dealt with in greater detail in Part 2 of this book.

1.4 Issues in establishing self-access

Self-access is very flexible. It can be used on a large scale or a small scale. It can be conducted in a classroom, in a dedicated self-access centre or elsewhere. It can be incorporated into a language course or it can be used by learners who are not taking courses. It can function at all learning levels. It allows for different levels of independence among learners encompassing both teacher-directed groups of learners and virtually autonomous learners. It allows individualisation but also supports groups. It is not culture specific. It is not age specific. In effect, self-access learning can benefit all language learners. However, for many learners it is a new concept with which they are unfamiliar. Learners' attitudes to SALL are based on their own incomplete knowledge of self-access and may be conditioned by outside influences.

1.4.1 *Influences on self-access learners*

Some learners may be predisposed to self-access learning while others may not. Riley (1988) suggests that this applies not only to individuals but also to identifiable groups of learners. He found, for example, that as groups of learners Danes, Americans, Moroccans and Vietnamese each reacted differently from the other with respect to a self-access project. The Danes completed the project satisfactorily and had no problems in accepting their 'new' roles. The Americans, although stating that they were in favour of the project, had difficulty in organising themselves and comprehending the purpose of the task. The Moroccans accepted the theory behind completing a project but were unable to complete the task in practice. The Vietnamese 'said nothing and did nothing' (Riley 1988: 14).

Learners' attitudes towards self-access may be affected by four main influences. These are: their teachers, their educational institution, their peers, and society. Teachers are an important influence because it is they who are most likely to first introduce learners to self-access. Teachers who do this because of their own commitment to self-access learning are likely to have an enthusiastic attitude and are likely to communicate that enthusiasm to the learners. The attitudes of teachers who introduce self-access to learners simply because of institutional policy are likely to be more variable. In a study of learners' and teachers' attitudes to self-access language learning Gardner and Miller (1997) found that learners were, in general, more positive about the benefits of self-access than their teachers.

Institutional attitudes to self-access can be an important influence in the way self-access is introduced, or whether it is introduced at all. In highly structured institutions, the introduction of self-access needs to become a policy issue. In cases where funding is required for self-access resources, the institutional influence becomes even more important.

Peer pressure is recognised widely as an important influence on learners. Where groups of learners have successfully used self-access learning other learners are likely to want to try it. In situations where self-access is a totally new concept it may be difficult to encourage learners to move away from the traditional approaches with which they are familiar. Learners need to be exposed not only to self-access learning but also to information about how it is different and why.

Society can also be an important influence on the up-take of self-access learning. Parental pressure, culture and power hierarchies can all potentially influence the introduction or inhibition of new approaches to learning. Kennedy (1988) suggests that there are multiple levels of influence in bringing about change. He suggests a knock-on effect where wider ranging systems influence those below them, which in turn

influence the next level and so on down from the cultural system at the highest level through political, administrative, educational and institutional levels to the classroom. The introduction of self-access learning may occur at one or more levels of this hierarchy. Gremmo and Riley (1995) have also identified socio-cultural factors as well as institutional, learner and staff characteristics as important influences on the establishment of self-access. They suggest that these influences are so powerful that self-access can only be planned locally and that 'there is no universal model' (Gremmo and Riley: 156) for setting it up.

1.4.2 Changing roles

The introduction of self-access language learning requires changes in the roles of learners, teachers and the institution. Learners need to become more aware of their central role in the decision-making process (see Figure 1.2). They have to learn to take an increasing amount of responsibility for their learning. They have to learn about the importance of reflection on their learning and how it can help them to redefine their goals to make them constantly relevant to their needs and wants. The changing role of learners requires an increase in learner training which should be incorporated into self-access materials, activities, counselling and classroom work rather than becoming a stand alone set of instructional activities.

The roles of teachers change dramatically as their learners engage in self-access learning. Teachers need to relinquish some of their control over learners, even allowing them to make mistakes. Teachers need to learn new skills to take on their new roles (Figure 1.3). Some of the 'new' roles for teachers in SALL may look familiar. Teachers may already be administrators and organisers of learning. However, these roles have to be redefined when the new roles of learners (Figure 1.4) are also taken into account. In order to adapt to their new roles successfully teachers need training.

As learners and teachers change their roles so too must the institution. It needs to move from a directive stance to one of being a provider of learning opportunities. These opportunities may be used by different learners in different ways and the choices about how to use them must lie with the learners and not with the institution.

1.4.3 Speaking as part of SALL

We have singled out speaking as a special issue in the establishment of SALL because it can create special difficulties and because it is the cause of some misconceptions among staff and students. Many teachers, students and administrators have a view of self-access which likens it to

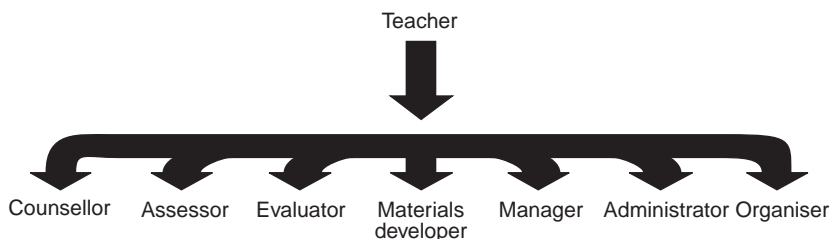


Figure 1.3. Changing roles of staff in SALL

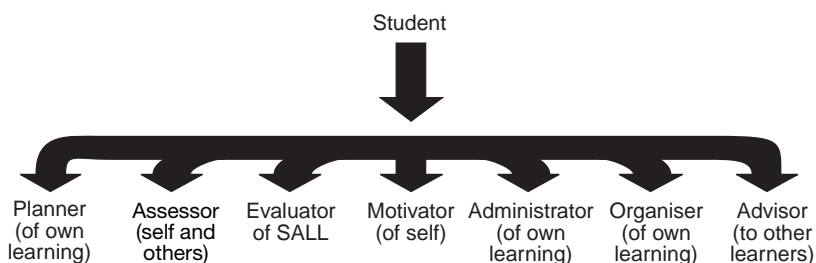


Figure 1.4. Changing roles of learners in SALL

quiet study or library work with learners studying individually and (most importantly) quietly. However, self-access is an opportunity for learners to learn and practise the kind of language they need and want. In many cases this involves speaking and this should be encouraged not stifled. There are, however, two major problems related to self-access speaking. First, it is noisy and, second, it can be difficult to provide opportunities for speaking as part of self-access.

The issue of noise is one which needs to be addressed when planning SALL because of its implications for the rest of the institution. Speaking makes noise and when lots of learners speak a lot of noise is made. If SALL is being implemented in a classroom, the noise may disrupt students and teachers in nearby classrooms. If SALL materials are stored in a library, the noise level created may be inappropriate for a library atmosphere. Even where a dedicated SAC is available, noise may interfere with other users of the SAC and the SAC itself may be too closely situated to other quiet areas of the institution.

Thus, creating noise is a problem; however, not allowing noise is a bigger problem. Self-access learners who are prevented from working on oral skills may lose interest in self-access learning. In addition,

maintaining a quiet atmosphere throughout a SAC excludes many opportunities for pair and group work that focus on other language skills. Imposing a rule of silence is not the solution to the noise problem. The solution is to implement SALL in a way which takes account of the noise. Table 1.2 suggests some practical steps.

The second problem to be faced is that of providing speaking opportunities in SALL. Such opportunities can vary from practice at the segmental level (e.g. vowel and consonant practice) to authentic oral communication (see suggestions in Table 1.3). In Chapter 7 we discuss a variety of activities which can be used to encourage learners to work on their speaking skills. We begin, in Chapter 7, by including speaking as an important part of learners' analyses of their language strengths and weaknesses (Activity 1) and as an element in the process of becoming familiar with SALL (Activity 7). When we suggest learner participation in the administration of self-access facilities (Activity 5) and in the preparation of self-access materials (Activity 12) we envisage this involving communication in the target language. We also suggest a number of activities which will involve learners in oral use of the target language such as: developing descriptive skills (Activity 8), participating in a conversational exchange (Activity 9), using a puppet theatre (Activity 10) and developing oral presentations (Activity 11). These are just examples of the activities that can encourage use of the target language. Wherever possible, learners should be provided with authentic needs for speaking the target language. This may involve inviting native speakers or other authentic users of the target language into the institution to interact with learners; conducting language counselling sessions in the target language where possible; or making a teacher or counsellor available for casual interaction with learners.

Some students feel awkward about using a foreign language, especially with their classmates and friends. Some institutions try to overcome this by establishing rules to encourage a target-language environment in their SACs or classes. However, students need to know what the rules are and understand the reasons for them. They also need to be reminded of them from time to time. Establishing and explaining the rules can be done in a number of ways: through learner training programmes where students can discuss how best to increase use of the target language; by the teachers/counsellors always using the target language, or at least using it as much as possible; and by requiring student helpers in a SAC to use the target language with each other, thus providing a good example to other learners of the rules in action. Flexibility is required in establishing such rules. If students feel uncomfortable they may begin to hate self-access learning or at least stop participating orally. The level to which the rules are strictly maintained could be varied according to the language level of the learners and other

Table 1.2. *Planning for noise in SALL*

Action	Explanation
Accept	Teachers implementing SALL should accept for themselves that noise is important for language learning. Not all teaching/learning is quiet: e.g. sports, woodwork, cooking.
Refuse to accept	Teachers should never accept that SALL is complete without speaking opportunities.
Explain	Colleagues, especially those with no knowledge of language teaching, are probably unaware of the need for noise. They need to understand that noise indicates learning not anarchy. They could be invited to observe a SALL session or they could be shown a video of speaking activities.
Separate	Quiet areas and speaking areas can be designated. In a classroom they may be different corners of the room, in a SAC they could be different rooms or separated physically by bookcases. McCall (1992) suggests for SACs that noisy areas should be near the entrance with quieter areas further in.
Raise awareness	Learners should be made aware of the noise levels they create, why noise is important and also why it needs to be controlled.
Direct	Learners should be provided with speaking activities which direct them towards controlled speaking (e.g. 'take it in turns to comment on . . .', 'First write notes then discuss'). These activities will reduce the overall amount of speaking (and noise) and will encourage learners to think about what they are going to say.
Discourage	Learners should be discouraged from seeing self-access as a time for chatting to friends in their native language. Such chats often lead to an escalation in noise levels.
Encourage	Learners could be encouraged to chat to friends but only in the target language. This will slow down the pace of communication and usually prevents escalation of noise levels.
Allow	Learners should be allowed to use their native language if they need to but only for certain activities, e.g. reflecting on their learning. This 'serious' use of language will probably keep noise levels relatively low.

Table 1.3. *Some suggestions for speaking activities in SALL*

Activity	Methods
Sounds: e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• single vowel/consonant sounds• minimal pairs• sentences containing difficult sounds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide published materials like ‘Ship or Sheep’ (Baker 1981).• Create a list of problem sounds specific to the learners (with tape recording).• Assess as individual or peer assessment.
Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a list and tape for vocabulary groups (e.g. shopping terminology, medical terminology).• Provide a multimedia talking dictionary with record option.• Provide printed dictionaries with pronunciation symbols (e.g. International Phonetic Alphabet).• Select words from a movie in pairs and peer-assess each other.• Use workshops dealing with specific vocabulary (video tape these for use later by other students).
Phrases	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide tapes with tapescripts and self record options.• Provide multimedia materials with record options.• Use workshops dealing with specific kinds of language (e.g. useful phrases for everyday conversations).
Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask more advanced students to teach some vocabulary to less advanced ones; preparing to teach something is a great way of learning about it.• Ask students to prepare self-access speaking materials for other students (for a fuller discussion see Chapter 6).
Discussion groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Run regular discussion groups. Make the topics serious but within reach of the learners’ language skills. A facilitator should be present at least for the first few meetings otherwise learners find it too daunting to get started.• As discussion groups mature teachers/counsellors should withdraw.

Table 1.3. (contd)

Activity	Methods
Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set up conversation exchanges (discussed in Chapter 7) between learners of different languages.• Set up pair/group discussions (provide starting materials).• Invite native or near-native speakers to join SALL sessions.• Provide people for a casual conversation in a SAC (e.g. teachers or student helpers).
Interviewing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invite outsiders in to be interviewed.• Send learners out looking for people to interview.• Learners can interview each other.• Learners can interview counsellors (videotape these for students to use when preparing for interviewing).
Presenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learners can make presentations to each other.• When learners are ready they can present to an invited audience (videotape for other learners to watch).
Debating	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set up a debating competition (provide practice materials for use beforehand).• Encourage competition between different groups of learners (e.g. different classes).• Invite learners from other institutions to compete.• Invite outsiders to attend the finals of a debate to add authenticity.• Ask a native speaker to be the judge.
Poetry readings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invite learners to prepare to read poems to an audience.• In preparation, ask learners to discuss the content of the poems.
Plays	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Involve learners in performing a play.• Provide preparatory materials to help learners understand the play and the language in it.• Invite an audience to the play.• Stage an 'academy awards' session after the play (of course, the session will be in the target language, and everyone should get a prize).

factors which teachers/counsellors deem important, like, for example, self-consciousness of students or their level of motivation.

Speaking has a special status in SALL because it is a problem and it creates a problem. The former because it is sometimes difficult to find activities which promote speaking, and sometimes even more difficult to persuade learners to try them; the latter because speaking creates noise which can disrupt the work of other learners and colleagues. The easy solution is to prohibit speaking but this is not a good solution since it leads to very dull SALL and may demotivate the learners. The best solution is to plan for speaking from the start by making sure it is optimally located and encouraged through well-constructed materials and activities.

1.4.4 SACs in native-speaking and non-native-speaking environments

Some of the functions of self-access centres vary according to whether the commonly used language of the world surrounding the learning environment is the target language or not. In other words, a SAC supporting a foreign language may be different to a SAC supporting the language of the host country. Before discussing differences we should clarify two of a SAC's major functions which remain the same in each case. First, the provision of self-study language-learning materials (grammar, listening, etc.) which independent learners can use to satisfy their own needs and wants. Second, the preparation of learners for greater independence in their learning by encouraging the development of individualised strategies, reflection on learning and taking responsibility. Where a SAC's functions will differ most, depending on whether it is located in a native or non-native speaker context, is in relation to authentic uses of the target language.

Where learning is taking place in a non-native-speaking environment, SACs offer language-learning opportunities that would not be possible in formal lessons. In particular, SACs can offer some kind of simulation of a native-speaker environment where learners can choose to immerse themselves in their target language, interact with authentic materials and perhaps also talk to native, or near-native, speakers. We discuss more fully the issue of using authentic materials in Chapter 6 and give an example of a conversational exchange in Chapter 7.

In native-speaking environments in which learners are surrounded daily by authentic language opportunities and native speakers, these attributes of a SAC become less important. This does not mean a SAC loses its function but simply that the function changes. In a native-speaker context a SAC takes on a bridging role. Its job is to help learners gain the confidence to move out from the classroom into the native-speaker environment. This is important at all language levels but is

particularly crucial for lower-level learners. The learners can use their SAC to prepare themselves for authentic interaction. They can also return to the SAC later to understand more about what happened in their interactions. Once they have had an authentic language experience, the support materials of the SAC are invaluable in helping them to gain from the experience and prepare for the next.

Because some of the purposes of SACs differ according to the learning environment it is not surprising to find that a comparison of SACs in native-speaking and non-native-speaking environments shows variance in the advantages and disadvantages of SACs. These differences are listed in Table 1.4.

1.5 SALL environments

The environments in which self-access learning can take place fall into two categories, these are *controlled* and *uncontrolled* environments. The former includes classrooms, libraries and self-access centres. These are places in which self-access materials and activities can be made available in an organised way. These environments may also provide counselling services and may encourage (or sometimes compel) self-access learners to keep records, submit to assessments and participate in evaluations.

The other category of environments is labelled uncontrolled because the environments are beyond the control of teachers/counsellors. These are environments in which self-access learners see potential for language learning and take advantage of it. Such environments include public environments, like airports and the World Wide Web, semi-private environments, like student clubs and student residences, and private environments, like a learner's own home. The best use of uncontrolled environments may be when learners make use of them in conjunction with controlled environments, thus maintaining the integration mentioned in Section 1.3 which we see as an essential feature of self-access.

1.6 Justifying SALL

There are some major differences between the characteristics of classroom teaching/learning and those of self-access learning (Table 1.5). The appropriateness of classroom teaching is rarely questioned. It is a time-honoured approach which is generally accepted because it is traditional. Self-access learning does not have the same seal of approval and may be questioned by those who are unknowledgeable about it or hostile to it. There are a number of grounds on which educators,

Table 1.4. *A comparison of SACs in native speaker and non-native speaker environments*

	Native speaker environments		Non-native speaker environments	
	Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Authentic target language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students will have greater access to native speakers of the language authentic target language materials will be readily available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> dealing with native speakers may be frightening especially for lower level learners authentic materials are unlikely to have bilingual support 	where native speakers and authentic materials are scarce they will probably be supported to ensure maximum benefit	students may not have much access to native speakers or authentic materials
Counsellors	students may have more confidence (rightly or wrongly) in taking advice from a native speaker of their target language	counsellors probably will not be able to speak students' native languages. This is a particular problem for beginner students	counsellors who work in the SAC may be able to speak the mother tongue and so appear more approachable to weak students	counsellors may not be native speakers of the target language. This may reduce students' motivation to use them
Language of communication	the SAC environment is usually multi-lingual, therefore, students have to use the target language with other students	students may have difficulties and feel frustration when working with other learners who have different pronunciation/accents	lower level students could choose to communicate with their peers in their own language to solve learning problems	students may not use the target language much as they will feel more comfortable speaking with the counsellor and classmates in their mother tongue

Table 1.4. (contd)

	Native speaker environments		Non-native speaker environments	
	Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
The real world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the SAC may act as a bridge to the outside, unstructured environment learners can build up their confidence in the SAC before trying the real world it is possible to blur the lines between a SAC and the real world by inviting the real world in and sending the learners out the SAC can protect lower level students from the real world until they are ready for it 	<p>students may continue to use the SAC instead of the real world, i.e. they may spend all their time in a SAC practising the language and rarely take advantage of the English-speaking environment around them</p>	<p>where access to a target language real world is impossible a SAC can provide a simulation</p>	<p>a simulation is never as good as the real thing</p>
Learner involvement	<p>a SAC provides support while learners are adjusting to the environment</p>	<p>students may never become fully involved because they tend to be on short courses and because there are other attractions outside the SAC</p>	<p>if the SAC is in a school where the student spends several years, students may become involved in developing materials and/or decorating the SAC and have a greater sense of ownership</p>	<p>if learners do not see the benefits of SALL they may not become involved in the SAC</p>

Table 1.4. (contd)

	Native speaker environments		Non-native speaker environments	
	Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Materials	there may be greater access to up-to-date material obtained from the native speaking environment	usually the materials in the SAC cater to mixed nationalities and cultures and therefore cannot cater fully to the specific needs of particular groups of learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the SAC can cater to the specific language learning needs of the students materials can be developed with a focus on the local environment which the students are familiar with 	it may not always be possible to obtain authentic materials
Culture	the culture of the host country can be expressed in the SAC	learners' cultures may be ignored in the quest to cater for a large number of different learners. Therefore the style of self-access may not be what the student is used to	the SAC can be oriented to the cultural values of the local society	if the local culture does not value autonomy in learning, a SAC may be considered of no value
Motivation	learners have an immediate need for the target language	the 'protected' world of the SAC may seem less attractive than the real world	opportunities to interact with the target language and culture demonstrate the utility of language learning	if it is difficult to obtain authentic materials, or if the range of materials is restricted, the SAC may appear boring and students may prefer not to go there

Table 1.5. *Characteristics of taught courses and self-access learning*

	Taught courses	Self-access learning
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • very specific • restricted in range • established and controlled by educators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • specific or vague • single goals or extremely wide ranging • established by educators; students; both; or non-existent.
Level of learner autonomy	Ranges from none (i.e. complete teacher-direction) to partial group autonomy (e.g. a learner-centred or a negotiated syllabus).	Ranges from none (i.e. students required to do self-access) to absolute autonomy (e.g. students who elect to use self-access).
Learning gain	Relatively easy to measure with pre- and post-course tests.	Difficult to measure because: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learners work independently, thus, standardised tests are impossible • duration and intensity are flexible so tests are difficult to position • effects may be extremely long term so true gain may only appear years later.
Duration of study	Limited by length of the course.	From one off use to life long learning.
Intensity of study	A feature of the course and therefore controlled by the teacher.	May be controlled by the teacher or the individual depending on the degree of learner autonomy.
Learner motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes evaluated through pre-course and/or end-of-course questionnaires. • Observations of in-class participation. 	Important for establishing level of learner support.
Cost effectiveness	Can calculate the cost per student for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a specific quantity of teacher input • the degree of learning gain (in gross terms). 	Currently neither input nor learning gain are calculated. Individualisation in self-access makes this challenging.

Table 1.5 (contd)

	Taught courses	Self-access learning
Teacher attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers' attitudes often stem from the way they learned and from training courses. Taught courses are accepted as the 'normal' way of teaching. No justification is expected. 	<p>Teachers' attitudes to self-access can be affected by the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> they have traditional views of how knowledge should be imparted they fear being usurped by SALL they think students will not be motivated to study independently.
Attribution	Taught courses are often the only input students are receiving. Learning gain can be attributed to those courses.	Self-access is rarely the only input received. It usually combines with other forms of input making it difficult (or impossible) to isolate attributable learning gain.

students or administrators (the stakeholders) may question the introduction or continuation of self-access learning (Table 1.6). In Table 1.6 we have also suggested ways in which these questions can be answered. These are general answers on which more detailed answers relevant to individual contexts can be built.

To summarise our justification of SALL we would say, although it is difficult or impossible to show that SALL alone is directly responsible for learning gain, this is also true of most other language-learning activities. There is, nevertheless, some evidence that learners find SALL useful (and sometimes enjoyable), and our informed common sense as teachers leads us to believe that extra exposure to language is beneficial. If SALL is organised and systematic it 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. Quality control can be undertaken through an active counselling service and through the monitoring of learner behaviour and feedback, for example through the use of learner profiles (see Chapter 5).

In addition to supporting language learning, SALL can result in increased learner autonomy; however, this depends to an extent on the way in which it is organised. SALL may favour certain skills over others but this can also be true of classroom teaching. In the case of SALL an imbalance in the focus on skills is largely a result of individualised learners responding to their own needs and wants. SALL is appropriate

Table 1.6. *Grounds on which the use of self-access language learning (SALL) might be questioned*

Grounds	Questions	Some Answers
Efficiency	Time available for learning/teaching is limited. Is SALL the best way to spend this time? Is it faster or slower than classroom learning?	SALL exposes learners to a wide variety of language learning opportunities which stimulate them, meet their individual needs, suit their individual learning styles and promote autonomy. If it does these things in an organised and systematic way which complements classroom teaching then it is probably an efficient use of an institution's resources and of learners' time. Evaluation of the efficiency of learning in SALL is, however, an area where more research is needed (see Chapter 12).
Cost	SALL will incur additional costs. Is self-access learning the best use of the institution's finances?	Some implementations of SALL are high cost especially some dedicated self-access facilities. However, there are also many examples of low cost SALL in operation (see Chapter 9) including some dedicated facilities (see Case Study 1). Nevertheless, institutions should not see SALL as a cheap alternative to teaching.
Effectiveness	The goal of SALL is to encourage learner autonomy while learning a language. Does SALL actually result in increased autonomy? Does SALL result in learning?	There are different stages of autonomy in learning (see Section 1.2.1). Students and teachers need to be realistic about what can be achieved by learning in SALL environments especially as the benefits may not be immediately apparent. Sensitisation needs to be built into learner training. It is usually impossible to evaluate exactly how much SALL has contributed directly to learning gain; however, this can also be said of other parts of the learning environment, e.g. group work, projects or homework. All of these, including SALL, are part of the teaching/learning toolkit.

Table 1.6. (contd)

Grounds	Questions	Some Answers
Quantity of learning	Self-access learners may make their own decisions about how much to learn. How can an institution determine whether students have learned enough? How do institutions usually define ‘enough’ learning?	<p>We rely on a number of sources to evaluate effectiveness including teacher and learner perceptions, observations of behaviour and general evidence of learning gain (see Chapter 12).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers who work in SALL need to be prepared to justify what their students are learning via SALL. They can do this by encouraging their students to prepare Learning Portfolios (see Chapter 11). • It may be appropriate to define ‘enough learning’ in relation to individual needs and wants.
Quality of learning	Some self-access learners may make decisions which result in them not fully mastering their chosen topics. How can quality controls be implemented to ensure the quality of learning is consistently high? How do institutions usually ensure the quality of learning is high?	As with all language learning, students need to be allowed to make mistakes and to learn from them. The key to quality control in self-access learning is counselling (see Chapter 10). Accountability (or self-accountability) can be introduced through the use of learner profiles (see Chapter 5).
Coverage of skills	SALL may be perceived as favouring some language skills over others. Are some skills easier to deal with in self-access than others? Do self-access learners favour working on certain skills and, if so, why? Does classroom teaching give all skills equal treatment? How much practice with particular skills do individual students get in classroom teaching and in SALL?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many self-access centres begin by offering materials for the receptive skills: listening and reading. These skills are easier for individual students to deal with, in terms of not having to find others to work with, and they can often check their work easily with answer cards. As self-access matures in institutions, productive skills are often added. This is often at the request of students who want to develop their oral or writing skills. It also develops from teachers’ desires to produce a wide range of activities which cater to their students’ needs (see Chapter 7).

Table 1.6. (contd)

Grounds	Questions	Some Answers
Language level	SALL may be perceived as too difficult or unnecessary for certain levels of language learners. Is SALL suitable for learners at all levels?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The skills self-access learners favour will vary according to institutional requirements (e.g. examinations) and availability of appropriate materials but also largely because of individual needs and wants. The same influences may apply in the classroom but without learner individualisation. SALL allows learners to decide for themselves how much practice they need. <p>SALL is beneficial for all kinds of learners although, as with other kinds of learning, it needs to be adapted to its users. There are successful implementations of SALL at all levels of learning and in all age ranges. Throughout this book we discuss SALL for a variety of learners. We describe self-access facilities for all age groups from young learners to adults (see Chapter 3 and the case studies in Part 3), we give examples of self-access activities which span the range from beginners to advanced learners (see Chapter 7) and we discuss issues related to learner levels of self-access materials (see Chapter 6).</p>
Culture	SALL is sometimes considered to originate from western culture (although there are also counter-claims). Is it appropriate for learners who traditionally learn by rote? Is it appropriate for learners whose culture does not emphasise individualism?	Each implementation of SALL is unique and should be tailored to the cultural context (see Section 2.5). There are many successful implementations of SALL in non-western cultures, some of them are described in this book.

Table 1.6. (contd)

Grounds	Questions	Some Answers
Autonomy	SALL encourages learners to make decisions. Is the encouragement of autonomy consistent with the goals of a particular institution?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To answer this question for a specific context it would be necessary to look at the goals of the institution. However, in most cases one goal of education is to create independent thinkers which is consistent with autonomous learning. • Where the concept of ‘autonomy’ is difficult to accept a rewording of the term may go some way to solving the problem. ‘Self-direction’ or ‘self-study’, for example, may not sound so worrying as ‘independence’ or ‘autonomy’. Perhaps even the introduction of ‘good’ or ‘modern’ language teaching practice would ensure some degree of autonomy in all language classes (see Chapter 9 for ways of doing this).
Organisation versus anarchy	Self-access learners are encouraged to customise their plans of study so that each learner may have completely different objectives and methods to all other learners. Can such diversity be organised to prevent anarchy? Does orderliness enhance learning? Does anarchy prevent learning?	There is no evidence that being organised enhances learning. However, it is reasonable to assume that a total lack of organisation might decrease efficiency and possibly effectiveness. Thus, self-access systems need to encourage an organised approach without stifling diversity. This can be achieved through learner profiles (discussed in Chapter 5).
Maturity level	SALL encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning. They make lots of decisions about what, when, where and how to learn. Does this increased level of responsibility require a level of maturity that only exists in adult learners?	A number of studies we refer to in this book and in particular Case Studies 1 and 2 in the final part of the book demonstrate that SALL can be implemented successfully with pre-adult learners.

Table 1.6. (*contd*)

Grounds	Questions	Some Answers
Devaluation of teachers	SALL encourages learners to be less teacher-dependent. Does this undermine the status of teachers? Does this mean SALL will eventually make teachers redundant?	It is true that SALL tends to diminish the traditional teacher role but this is replaced by a range of new roles (see Chapter 1, especially Section 1.4.2) which require a new range of skills (see Section 2.7, Section 4.5, Chapter 9, Chapter 10). Teachers are as integral to SALL as they are to classroom teaching; however, their presence is less immediately obvious. It would, therefore, be wise to make sure administrators and managers know about the new roles undertaken by teachers and their unique qualifications for undertaking these roles (e.g. knowledge of language learning, student behaviour, learning styles and strategies). In addition, SALL should not be viewed as a replacement for teaching but as a complement to it which allows greater individualisation and a wider range of learning opportunities.

to all levels of learners and to all ages of learners. This is supported in the literature by examples of successful SALL implementation in all categories. SALL is not suitable only for students from western cultural settings and this is demonstrated, for example, by the many successful implementations in Asia. 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.

In cases where justifications for existing SALL implementations must be made it is wise to find ways to record: what activities, materials and resources learners have used; learning gain (even if it cannot be directly attributed to SALL some responsibility can be claimed); and perceptions of learners and teachers of the usefulness and enjoyability of SALL activities and materials. This data will provide some evaluative evidence to justify SALL; for a more detailed discussion on evaluating SALL, see Chapter 12.

1.7 The costs of SALL

It may be tempting to present SALL as a cheap alternative to teaching, especially when looking for arguments to justify funding. However, this would be erroneous, partly because SALL does not replace teaching but complements it and partly because SALL is not cheap (although it may be an efficient use of resources). The cost of SALL varies considerably according to the system implemented and the extent to which it is implemented. In Chapter 3 we suggest a typology of self-access systems some of which clearly cost less than others (see Table 3.1). Institutions get what they pay for and in some cases a low-cost system is suitable for the context.

There are two kinds of costs involved in SALL; the start-up costs and the recurrent costs (see Section 8.4 for more details). The former are easy to calculate and often become the focus of attention in making decisions about SALL. Recurrent costs are less obvious but if funding is not forthcoming they can lead to the failure of SALL. A key element in successful SALL is pedagogical input and this is relatively expensive. Only teachers can adequately perform many of the roles created by SALL, like, for example: selecting materials (Chapter 6), writing materials (Chapter 6), creating learning activities (Chapter 7), running workshops (Chapter 7), language counselling (Chapter 10), creating links with the curriculum (Chapters 7 and 9), designing and implementing assessment (Chapter 11), and evaluating (Chapter 12). (These roles are further discussed elsewhere in this book; the respective chapter numbers are given above.) SALL involves teacher time on an ongoing basis and that costs money. The costs may be hidden (e.g. where SALL

happens in the classroom) or they may be obvious (e.g. in a SAC which provides a counselling service). Pedagogical support is what makes SALL different from what could be provided in a library.

Institutions may be able to benefit from economies of scale when introducing SALL. Thus, although low-cost classroom-based SALL appears to be cheap it may be more cost efficient (and perhaps also more pedagogically effective) to provide a SAC as a central facility which would reduce the quantity of materials required, to centralise the use of teacher time and to enhance the opportunities for interactions between learners. When an institution commits itself to providing a SAC it may still opt for a relatively low-cost implementation. Pedagogical staff would still be required for counselling and some decision-making but much of the administrative work could be undertaken by student helpers. In addition, teachers could be asked to volunteer their time or they could be asked to accompany their classes to the SAC and help out with counselling or other duties. The cost of updating and improving materials would still occur but this could be reduced to a minimum in a number of imaginative ways (e.g. by providing laminated worksheets instead of take-away copies, by asking teachers and publishers for donations of materials, by asking learners for a subscription). One large area of expenditure is technology. A low-cost solution is to do without technology. There is a tendency in some parts of the world to think of SACs as high-tech environments; however, this is not the only option as is demonstrated by some of the examples of successful low-tech SACs in this book. In deciding about technology it is important to consider the expectations of teachers and students.

It is not easy to secure funding for SALL, especially adequate funding which covers the costs of pedagogical support. Ways of securing funding will vary in different contexts; however, in all contexts a well-grounded proposal which draws on all available evidence is essential. In Table 1.7 we suggest the kind of documentation that could be used to support a proposal. In addition, it is useful before making a proposal to find ways to enhance awareness about SALL. Awareness-raising should aim at staff as well as students of an institution but can also be conducted on a more public level where this will bring benefits. Table 1.8 suggests some ways in which awareness-raising exercises can be conducted. Teachers proposing SALL should also be aware that there are often alternative sources of funding or alternative ways of looking at the funding issue. Table 1.9 suggests some techniques for actively seeking funding.

Implementing SALL should not be seen as a cheap alternative to teaching. It should be seen as a useful complement to teaching which enhances language-learning opportunities and provides learners with

Table 1.7. *Documents to provide in support of a proposal for SALL*

Provide	This Demonstrates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a rationale for the introduction of SALL • a literature review showing the arguments for SALL • a list of countries and kinds of institutions where SALL has successfully been implemented • a report on local implementations of SALL • a review of new skills required of teachers (see Chapter 10) • an explanation of language counselling • results of a staff survey • results of a student survey • a management plan • the results of a pilot study (e.g. an implementation of SALL with one class) • a projection of numbers of SALL users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • benefits to learners which cannot be gained any other way • academic support for SALL • that SALL is in widespread use and at a variety of levels and with a variety of age groups • that SALL is applicable within the cultural setting and within local funding possibilities • the professionalism required of teachers in SALL • how the funding needed for pedagogical support will be spent • the benefits to students • level of support from colleagues • level of interest among students • understanding of management issues (see Chapter 4) • the practicality and validity of SALL • the hidden costs (like teacher time) • cost efficiency

the independent learning skills to continue learning language after they have finished formal studies. In this light it may be judged to be relatively cost efficient. SALL can be implemented at different cost levels and institutions need to decide what is appropriate for them. Where implementation is to be widespread it may prove to be more efficient to provide a SAC than to implement small-scale SALL in each classroom. There are a number of ways in which the success rate of funding applications can be improved. Many of these are context specific; however, in general, applications have a greater chance if they are well supported by documentary evidence and if the proposers take the trouble to learn about specific funding systems and their alternatives.

Table 1.8. *Ways of raising awareness about SALL*

Way	Effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce some simple but effective self-access materials which meet widespread learning needs in the institution. Make them widely available to students and also to colleagues. • Offer workshops which introduce students to some easily applicable self-access ideas. • Reproduce testimonials from satisfied SALL users. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical demonstrations of SALL will help learners and colleagues to see its value. They will also provide feedback which can be summarised in a document to the funding body. • ditto
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce a focused article for an institutional publication (e.g. staff magazine, student magazine, parent–teacher newsletter). • Produce a general newspaper article about SALL. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are more likely to pay attention to accreditation of SALL which comes from their peers. Teachers and administrators might also be influenced by it. • Raise awareness among relevant people about the potential of SALL in the institution. • Raise public awareness (institutional administrators also read newspapers and are often sensitive to public opinion).

1.8 Summary

In this chapter we have laid out the background to self-access language learning. We have shown how it is an approach to language learning which has as its ultimate goal the moving of learners from teacher dependence towards autonomy. We have given a brief review of the debate about autonomous learning and how it is defined. We have also mentioned other labels for approaches similar to, but not synonymous with, self-access language learning. We have also provided an overview of self-access language learning, discussing: its characteristics, the issues related to establishing it, sources of influences on learners, the changing roles of those involved, the kinds of environments in which it takes place and, finally, its validity.

Table 1.9. *Techniques for actively seeking funding*

Technique	Explanation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find out how to acquire the right information. • Find out about existing funding. • Reorganisation. • Find out about special funding. • Be creative. • Talk to other proponents of SALL. • Talk to local SALL researchers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library staff are often good at knowing where to look. • Knowing how current funding is calculated and distributed can help in discussions with administrators. • Look at current funding for ways of reorganising distribution of funding to allow some SALL. • Ask in your own institution (head and financial administrators), public authorities (local and central government officials), foreign government sources (e.g. embassies, educational missions), private educational funding bodies (e.g. charities, educational trusts), other private sources (e.g. company sponsorship). • Find alternative ways of wording funding requests to suit the occasion, e.g. ‘self-access learning’ for educational funding, ‘evaluating self-access learning’ for research funding or ‘raising linguistic and cultural awareness through self-access learning’ for cultural funding. • If SALL is already working in a similar institution ask how they got their funding. • They often know a lot about what other institutions are doing and how they do it. They sometimes also know about funding opportunities. Occasionally they have some funding which they might share in exchange for research collaboration.

1.9 Tasks

1. Define in your own words one of the following terms and give an example:
 - Self-access language learning
 - Autonomous learning
2. Identify the influences on learners (and perhaps also teachers) within your own context which would most likely inhibit the establishing of self-access learning.

3. Select the new role your learners would have most difficulty accepting (see Figure 1.4). Then list the ways in which you would help them adapt to that role.

1.10 For discussion

1. Discuss why the terminology in the area of autonomous learning is so confusing.
2. If you were establishing self-access language learning which of the elements from Table 1.1 would you prioritise and why?
3. Which of the arguments in Table 1.6 is most likely to be raised in your institution? How would you respond to this argument?