

**PROMOTING LEARNERS' AUTONOMY IN HIGHER
EDUCATION :
THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CENTRO PER
L'AUTOAPPRENDIMENTO OF THE *UNIVERSITÀ
CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE* IN MILAN**

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Mots-clés

Apprentissage en autonomie, centre d'auto-apprentissage, organisation et gestion du centre d'auto-apprentissage, besoins d'apprenants

Keywords

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Résumé

L'article présente la création, les développements actuels et futurs du Centre d'auto-apprentissage (CAP) de l'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. On commencera par un rapide aperçu des conditions historiques et théoriques qui ont conduit à sa création, avant de passer à l'exposé de ses modalités actuelles d'organisation en présentant des aspects pratiques et opérationnels conformes à l'évolution des besoins des utilisateurs. La dernière partie est consacrée à l'identification de propositions et de pistes de révision, et offre matière à échanges avec les personnes agissant dans le cadre de la mise en place et/ou de la révision d'un service analogue.

Abstract

This article illustrates the history of the self-access centre (Centro per l'Autoapprendimento - CAP) of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Starting from the project and implementation phase, it will briefly examine the historical and theoretical framework which led to its opening; it will then analyse the current management and organisational practice and the changes occurred so far in order to meet the new and diverse needs of its users. Finally, future developments and new practices for the centre are identified, offering matter for debate with those working in a similar environment.

Introduction

This paper has a twofold aim: on the one hand the illustration of the rationale behind the establishing and the management of a self-access centre (SAC) in a Higher Education institution; on the other hand, the investigation of the challenges posed to the SAC staff by the contradiction between students' extrinsic motivation and the pedagogical aim of fostering autonomy and lifelong learning.

The analysis will be based on the experience of the *Centro per l'Autoapprendimento (CAP)* of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, and will be divided into three parts.

I will first introduce the mission of the *CAP* and outline its history within the language centre of the university. This analysis will be framed within both the theoretical background, which we referred to in the planning and implementation of the self-access centre, and our institution's attitude toward self-access and lifelong learning. Secondly, I will discuss the present situation at the *CAP*, focusing on the one hand on its organisation and management practice and on the other on the evolutive students' needs and learning styles, and the new learning opportunities offered by technological enhancements. After drawing a balance of our experience so far, the third part of the paper will outline possible future developments for the *CAP*.

A few introductory lines to the *CAP's* setting are needed before starting the analysis: *Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan* is a medium-sized university with around 30,000 students following eight different degree courses (among which one for specialist students: the *Facoltà di Scienze Linguistiche*). The *CAP* is located in the language centre building, which also hosts technical and clerical staff, teachers' offices, language laboratories and classrooms. It was opened in 2003 with the aim of fostering independent learning, so that students would be able to learn a language or improve their language knowledge also beyond a formal classroom setting.

1. Our rationale for the *Centro per l'Autoapprendimento*

1.1. Planning phase

Each self-access centre mirrors and is embedded in the organisational and learning culture of the institution it belongs to, as both Gardner and Miller (1999) and Little (1989) point out, and there is no universal rule to follow for its establishment and implementation. However, all self-access systems should have at least one feature in common: the promotion of autonomy in language learning, when autonomy is considered as one of the most relevant pedagogical goals of education. Following this idea, each SAC should be based upon a learner-centred approach: as Gardner and Miller put it “self-access language learning is an approach to learning the language, not an approach to teaching the language” (Gardner & Miller, 1999: 8).

The promotion of autonomy and a learner-centred approach represented the shared theoretical foundation when planning and establishing the *CAP* within our language centre, along with a more pragmatic need: the realisation of a physical space devoted to individual study, which would allow students more exposure to the language. In line with Gremmo and Riley (1995), the realisation of this space would also mean for the university a “flexible alternative to traditional approaches” (Gremmo & Riley, 1995: 154), as it could help the management of the language centre solve the problem of organising language tuition for a large number of students.

Following Little (1989) a thorough analysis of our users and their learning needs was carried out during the planning phase to provide the right balance of equipment, resources, materials, activities, and, finally, to define the necessary roles within the *CAP*. Two main trends emerged: specialist students needed more exposure to authentic language (such as videos, films, and tv programmes), as well as pronunciation and listening comprehension practice, so that more class time could be devoted to oral interaction activities. The *CAP* would also offer the possibility to practice dictations (part of the internal exam) on a self-access basis. Non-specialist students needed to acquire the soft skills which would enable them ‘learning to learn’ a foreign language in order to move from a totally class-based approach to a more independent one, in line with both the theoretical and the pragmatic approach discussed above.

Two ideas were then identified as the basic principles of the *CAP*: accessibility and flexibility. Different levels of accessibility were considered and discussed: location, visibility, layout, equipment and resources, opening times, and staff accessibility, focusing in particular on the role of language advisors. As for flexibility, the rationale behind was twofold: to cope with future technological changes, so common and rapid in the language learning world (the “multi-system dimension” of a SAC proposed by Gardner and Miller, 1999: 58), and to cater for various learning styles and different levels of technological ability.

The ideas of accessibility and flexibility were therefore meant as the common core of the *CAP*, permeating its structure and organisation. These, in turn, as discussed among others by Gardner and Miller (1999), Little (1989), Sheerin (1997), and Cembalo (1995), would play a major role not only in focusing on the various learning needs of the students but also in fostering their autonomy. At the same time, they would mirror the culture of the language centre and the university itself representing a concrete answer to questions about the level of ‘openness’ and ‘self-direction’ (Riley, 1995) of our centre.

1.2. Implementation phase

1.2.1. Structure and organisation

In November 2003 the first seat of our self-access centre was opened to students. Unlike other similar structures, it did not evolve from an existing language laboratory (Gremmo & Riley, 1995), but it had been specifically designed for self-study. Despite being relatively small, especially if compared with the number of potential users (20 workstations altogether), the *CAP* mirrored the multi-functionality discussed above and could offer students the possibility to choose among different activities and resources. It contained both audio and video stations, stand-alone computers with internet and intranet access, as well as open-shelves and paper-based materials. In contrast with the declared mission of accessibility, however, it was situated on the fifth floor of the language centre building and, due to limited staff, was open only three days in the morning and two in the afternoon.

In March 2006 the *CAP* moved from fifth to third floor (thus becoming more accessible) and was enlarged from 20 to 40 workstations to meet the needs of an

increasing number of users. Opening hours were also increased, moving towards a 9.00 to 17.00 approach, five days a week during term-time and exam sessions, reduced to 9.00 to 13.00 from mid-July to end of August. Consistency in opening hours was furthermore achieved, so that users would know when they could find the *CAP* open, thus enhancing both accessibility and visibility. Related to visibility, since 2006 the *CAP*'s mission statement, together with practical information on its use, have found their collocation in all documentation of the language centre as well as in the webpages of the university.

The *CAP* continued to offer an open-access scheme in one big room, which was structured in four different blocks:

- 14 computer stations with internet and intranet access;
- 10 tv with DVD players and cable TV;
- 8 audio booths
- 8 desks for individual or small group study and advising sessions.

Multi-functionality thus continued to be the characteristic feature of the *CAP* : no extreme emphasis was laid on cutting-edge technology or computer-assisted language learning, and various kinds of equipment still found their place there to cater for different learning preferences. As Little puts it, "technological sophistication for its own sake" (Little, 1989: 45) was avoided, and all technical and technological equipment had to prove transparent and accessible to everyone without the intervention of a technician.

In line with this, the layout of the new *CAP* wanted to be different from that of a traditional language laboratory or a classroom, with the aim of "instilling and maintaining learner motivation" (Gardner & Miller, 1999: 139). The four blocks had the purpose of immediately communicating the different learning opportunities offered by the centre (Cordisco, 2002). As for activities and learning materials, a "user-friendly, 'supermarket' approach" (Dingle & MacKenzie, 2001: 106) was followed: open shelves for books and CD-ROMs; big tables to invite learners to work individually or in small groups on writing or translation activities, choosing among reference books (for instance dictionaries or grammar tests); videos with cable TV and DVD players to offer entertaining language learning activities; computers to practice the language with CD-ROMs or websites.

1.2.2. *Materials*

Following Gardner and Miller (1999), the *CAP* offered both published and authentic materials (such as films or magazines). Some language learning materials were also supported by specific worksheets (the distinction proposed by Carette and Holec (1995) between language-learning materials and aid-to-learning materials). Worksheets (to be produced in-house) could be language or skill specific, or generic: for example, how to read a newspaper article, watch a video, or finally be targeted to specific learning needs. Their ultimate and common aim would be working as learning support structures, thus contributing to fostering students' autonomy.

As for the accessibility of materials, the *CAP*'s specific aim was not only to offer a wide variety of learning resources in terms of media, language, level, or skill, but also to make them both physically and cognitively accessible to learners (Sheerin, 1997) through a specific cataloguing system and arrangement. When entering the *CAP* for the first time our students would probably be unaware of "how to use the system" (Little, 1989: 42). Therefore, the catalogue had to give them the right amount of information and be arranged according to immediately comprehensible criteria, in order to avoid having costly materials lying unused in a cupboard. At the same time information overload had to be avoided, so as not to discourage users or even hide materials from them (Sheerin, 1997). Following Cembalo (1995) the *CAP*'s catalogue should have both a formative and an informative aim and give learners the opportunity to discover new materials through an accurate guidance, which would stimulate a metacognitive reflection.

We opted for a colour-coding system to distinguish among the six languages offered (French is blue, English yellow, etc.), and common cataloguing criteria for all languages in terms of skills (listening, reading, etc.) and sub-skills (grammar or vocabulary), with a few notes on how to use the specific resource and its characteristics (even pragmatic ones, such as: the provision of answer keys, local edition, or contrastive elements). The catalogue was produced only on paper and could be easily found at the reception's desk.

1.2.3. Staff

In the implementation phase, three roles were identified as necessary for the correct management of the *CAP*: following Little (1989), these were the librarian, the helper (in our case basically a front-office role aimed at welcoming users and showing them the facilities and their use as well as where to find resources) and the technician. Organisational and budgeting constraints made it then necessary to use the same technicians of the language centre (who were also responsible for the management and the equipment of the language laboratories), and to combine helper and librarian in one role. Facilitators of learning would be the language advisors, who were chosen among the teachers of the language centre. A language specific scheme was followed with the idea of combining advising skills with a thorough knowledge of language specific resources, as solution which, as it will be discussed again below, posed the risk of making the distinction between true language advising with a counselling approach and individual teaching unclear. A different person was therefore appointed for each of the six languages offered at the centre (two advisors were dedicated to English, due to the high number of students). Two out of six teachers had a post-graduate certificate in language advising (Postgraduate Certificate in Advising for Language Learning of the University of Hull), the others had no formal training but had already been researching topics of autonomy in language learning. A scheme of exchanging good practices was furthermore established as informal training. Each advisor was assigned a weekly workload of two hours, on top of their teaching workload (4 weekly hours for English). Advising sessions would take place directly in the *CAP*, next to the students' workstation and to the helper, in order to make advisors immediately accessible to students.

Soon after the enlargement of the *CAP*, a first distinction between helper and *CAP* manager was made: the helper (at the beginning a graduate student of the university, now a full-time member of administrative staff) would mainly have front-office and reception tasks, whereas specific management roles, such as the responsibility for the resources and the coordination of the advisors, were assigned to a manager. This position was meant to be part-time, as the manager (chosen among the language centre staff) also maintained the role of English language co-

ordinator. Other management functions (budgeting and staff responsibility) continued to reside with the manager of the language centre.

If sharing the technicians with the language centre did not cause any problems (also due to the initial low incidence of technology on the *CAP* and its users), having helper and advisors share the same room and work next to students, and using teachers as advisors did raise some concerns: on the one hand a possible overlapping of roles between helper and advisor and on the other some confusion in students' identification of the two specific roles. This will be analysed in more details in the next sections.

2. Present

In line with both the theoretical framework and the working practice, the *CAP* can be rightly considered as a 'state two' implementation of the autonomy approach, where "learning is neither placed under the guidance or control of the teachers [...] nor bounded by constraints imposed by pre-constructed learning materials, nor even controlled under subsidiary status" (Holec, 2009: 26-27). Since its opening in 2003 the *CAP*'s aims have been to develop "the learner's ability to self-direct their learning programme" and "to produce autonomous learners [...] by providing learners conditions integrating language learning and learning-to-learn environments" (Holec, 2009: 27).

According to the same author, however, in formal educational settings (as it is our case) self-directed learners in the 'state two' implementation of the autonomy approach may be free to decide how to organize their study as for time-management and distribution of learning objectives although these last cannot be freely chosen as they may be pre-determined by the curriculum (Holec, 2009: 28).

These two considerations help us shed light on the present situation of the *CAP*, where both specialists and non-specialists students are looking for methods and resources to prepare and practice language exams (either internal and credit-bearing or internationally recognised), which would allow them to study individually and without the time constraints of a taught course. Therefore, the current challenge is to find a balance between the pedagogical aim of maintaining a learning environment aimed at the development of autonomy, and at the same time the pragmatic needs of students. The next sessions will illustrate how resources and

materials, organisation, management practice and roles within the *CAP* have adapted or need to adapt in order to meet this new need.

2.1. Resources and materials

Besides new aid-to-learning materials, new “How to” worksheets have also been provided upon students' request, such as guidelines on exams format and content, as well as collections of past papers and exam practice. If the guidelines want to propose students a learning path towards a specific exam or a specific task (for instance sentence restructuring in English) at the same time they also want to be a bridge between students' pragmatic needs and the development of autonomy. In case of exam preparation, each worksheet gives an overview of the exam format and proposes a list of useful online and on-site resources to prepare for each of the exam sub-skills, so that students can decide where to focus on and make a reasoned choice about materials.

Manager and advisors are also working together to guide students to a fruitful use of internet websites through ad hoc learning pathways. These pathways are meant to have a dual aim: on the one hand they represent an immediate response to students' requests about more opportunities of distance learning, on the other hand they want to stimulate reflection and foster exploration and evaluation of different resources so as to enhance awareness as for language level and progression towards individual learning objectives.

As for the organisation of resources, the catalogue is no longer produced in-house: due to a university-wide policy, since 2012 all acquisitions have been managed by the central library service, with the consequent need of organizing all university's resources according to the same cataloguing system. The *CAP* catalogue thus had to merge into the library catalogue and to be aligned with it in order to go online, so that students could access it from everywhere. If this can be seen as an advantage as for materials accessibility and visibility, an undoubted disadvantage is represented by the fact that our catalogue is no longer specifically designed for self-access resources: the colour coding system has been maintained, but the cataloguing system itself has become more technical and less user-friendly in order to merge into the system used by the university. Each resource is now labelled according to: the language, the level following the Common European Framework

and the skill or sub-skill it is aimed at (such as “L” for Listening – “R” for Reading and so on), with the risk of making the labelling more obscure, and consequently the resources less accessible to the learners, who are probably not acquainted with the CEFR levels.

2.2. Organisation and management

Linked to the new cataloguing system, a new logging system to record resources and activities being used at the *CAP* has further helped us identify students’ needs. Besides recording students’ preferences in terms of paper-based learning materials, this allows staff to know what students do at the *CAP* (such as working on reading or listening comprehension skills, or focusing on grammar or translation activities - mainly for specialist students of the *Facoltà di Scienze Linguistiche*) and also to record the number of advising sessions. The system thus helps the staff to monitor the need of new resources (as it is the case for IELTS preparation courses compared to TOEFL: 357 users compared to only 39 in 2018), to know which activities are predominant in the *CAP*, and how the advising service is going in terms of numbers (see Table 1 and 3).

Activity	# of users
Translation activities (online & on paper)	2138
Grammar exercises	2068
Film viewing	1664
Practice tests for internal exams	831
Preparation for international exams	756

Table 1. Users’ top five main activities at the *CAP* (2018 till end of November)

Activity	Online	On paper
Grammar exercises	1123	945
Practice tests for internal exams	654	157

Table 2. Use of online and on paper resources at the *CAP* (2018 till end of November)

2017	328
2018	312

Table 3. Language Advising Sessions at the *CAP* (2017 vs. 2018 – January to end of November)

Though quantitatively biased, the logging system represents a mean to evaluate the *CAP* as a whole and in recent years it has contributed to statistically identify a number of significant new trends. These include the reduction in the use of printed books in favour of computer-based and now online resources, pragmatic requests of practice tests or exam-related activities (even film viewing, still quite popular, is often a mandatory activity, as films are part of the class syllabus, for instance in the case of French, with 567 users in 2018), as well as the slight decrease in language advising sessions in 2017 and 2018. Taking into consideration the double role of advisors in our centre, this is possibly due to a new perception of the advising service itself: sometimes students come to the *CAP* not so much to talk to an advisor, but rather to look for their teacher and ask her for advice on a specific language problem or on an issue emerged in class, tutorials which we agreed not to include in the advising sessions count.

All this is obviously impacting on both the organisation and the management of the centre itself. The shift from paper-based to computer-based materials, which can be seen as a consequence of the pervasiveness of computers and online facilities for educational and non-educational purposes, is posing more than a challenge to the organisation of the *CAP*, not only in terms of blurring our physical boundaries (Gardner, 2011), but also because it is radically changing the role of a SAC manager (Gardner, 2011, 2017; Gardner & Miller, 2014). We are currently beyond the shift from SAC to Self-access Language Learning management (Gardner, 2011), as the *CAP* manager is becoming responsible for both physical and virtual learning resources. The manager's role, however, is still 'evolving' and not 'devolving' (Gardner, 2017), as new responsibilities are still being assigned to a single person: firstly, a new technological expertise is needed in order to evaluate and provide the right kind of technology to users. Secondly, the changing needs of the *CAP* must be negotiated with senior management and constantly communicated to other teachers within the university, in order to maintain and share the same pedagogical vision.

Finally, teachers must be supported in the current re-definition of their roles as both advisors and tutors: on the one hand helping them not to assume a dominant, teaching-like approach in their practice, on the other clearly separating the two functions in two distinct moments. The advising practice needs to go beyond the mere request of ready-made solutions to pass the exam, which is what students are asking for, especially during the first, and in a few cases, the unique advising session. Advisors therefore need to find the right balance in order to co-create an individualised path with the advisee aimed at preparing a standardised test or exam, and at the same time they need to suggest different ways to approach the study according to different learning styles, individual characteristics, and assumptions and beliefs towards language learning. This is not an easy task, especially with the concomitant emergence of two interrelated factors: first, the absence of a dedicated space for the advising sessions, which makes advisors too accessible (Wilczynski, 2001), and makes it difficult for students to understand the difference between the different roles in the *CAP* (advisor, helper, manager); secondly, and notably, the teaching background of advisors, which poses the risk of transforming the advising session in a 'private lesson', with the advisor/teacher tending to replicate the top-down, dominant features of the teacher's discourse in the advising dialogue.

Following Holec again (2009), if this vision coincides with the 'state two' implementation of the autonomy approach, with the aim of "producing "autonomous learners capable of self-directing their learning" (Holec 2009: 27), the learning environment alone is not enough and three "necessary conditions" have to be taken into consideration: learner-training, teacher (or advisor)-training and the provision of adequate resources. The next section will outline which steps are now being taken in order to achieve this goal.

3. Possible new directions

In 2011 Gardner claimed that "a good SAC manager must be a very busy person", having "a wide range of tasks which are all geared towards serving the fundamental goal of promoting independent learning" (Gardner, 2011: 195). A further evolution of the *CAP* manager's role is therefore no longer sustainable, even more so if we consider that the position is still part-time. Devolution could therefore represent a viable solution to balance the increased workload, that is to say shared

management and sharing responsibilities not only with senior management but above all with the language advisors.

After fifteen years of practice, a new phase of training for the advisors, however, is needed in order for them to fruitfully conduct the advising session, to maintain their role of mediators between users and resources (regardless whether paper-based or digital) and of facilitators of learning. Peer observation and recording and reviewing of sessions may offer an opportunity of raising awareness on the practice of advising through the analysis of the advisor's discourse and the identification of their skills (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001, 2012). Specific training on the use of different technologies may also be needed, whereby the most experienced advisors can train colleagues on a peer-to-peer basis. Last but not least, advisors can also become managers of change (Holec, 2009), both in their teaching practice (being both advisor and teacher within the language centre) and with their colleagues, sharing with them the advising discourse and practice. This could also mean a better integration between taught courses and the *CAP*, with the provision of learning-to-learn training offered in class in a lifelong learning perspective.

Alongside with practical tutorials and the advising service, other activities are currently under evaluation in order to socially engage learners and to allow them to maximise their possibilities of practising the language, such as on-site or online conversation exchanges, debating activities, and language cafés.

As for materials, the *CAP* will continue to aim for a transparent, user-friendly and formative organisation of resources, even if it means having to produce a parallel cataloguing system besides the one currently in use, as it is the case of the new learning pathways helping students choose online learning resources. Following Tomlinson (2010), the implementation of materials and resources will continue to be driven by both students' needs (that is to say local principles) and universal principles on language acquisition, agreed and shared by materials developers (in our case the language advisors). Current projects include purchasing and updating materials to prepare for our internal exams, producing worksheets with study tips, suggesting the use of different strategies to complete a task, scaffolding materials according to level and skill, and also making learners more acquainted with the CEFR levels, so as to enhance a more independent choice both within and outside the *CAP*'s resources. Finally, more emphasis will be given to "access-self" materials and activities (Tomlinson, 2010: 79), not only in terms of allowing learners to use them whenever

needed, but also of being adaptable to the learning needs and of providing a formative feedback to stimulate learning, if all resources in SALL “should have the role teaching materials play in other-directed instructed learning” (Holec, 2009: 42).

A concluding reflection is needed on the future of our physical location, either on the need for a new expansion to accommodate a larger number of students, or on the modernization of the technological equipment offered. As Gardner stated (2011: 186-187):

The technological development now allows users to go (virtually) into the outside world and the outside world to come (virtually) into the SAC. [...] The use of technology in self-access learning is not new but it is beginning to have an impact on how we think about SACs. This may lead to downsizing of the physical space allocated to SACs and possibly the reconfiguration of resource allocation.

This is even truer today, with the fast development of mobile technology and social media. A larger space no longer represents a prerequisite for the development of the CAP, and technology alone is not enough if not sustained by a reasoned use and if not included in meaningful learning paths.

Fifteen years after its opening, there is still life in our self-access centre (Mynard, 2012), but the CAP needs re-vitalising. However, in line with its theoretical framework, re-vitalisation will have to maintain as prerequisite and distinctive feature the offer of a form of pedagogical support to our learners in terms of both learning-to-learn and language specific help.

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