

# Big brother is helping you: Supporting self-access language learning with a student monitoring system

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## Abstract

Self-access and language advising are relatively recent and increasingly common types of language support offered in schools and tertiary institutions around the world. There is a great deal of anecdotal support for the positive contribution of such support to student learning. Self-access and language advising hold strong potential as learner-centred and highly flexible approaches. In addition, there are many sound practical reasons for offering self-access as complementary to or as an alternative to classroom teaching, especially in situations where existing learning needs are too great or diverse to be met by traditional methods. At the same time, there are concerns about the effectiveness (how well they help students learn) and efficiency (how quickly students learn) of these approaches and more research is clearly needed. This article reports how one centre has attempted to take into account some of the challenges reported in previous literature by developing an electronic learning environment that better prepares students for and guides them in their self-directed learning. In addition it reports on the implementation of an extensive monitoring system of student learning, that allows for the provision of more tailored language support than previously possible.

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*Keywords:* Learner autonomy; Self-access; Language advising; Learning environments

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## 1. Introduction

With the increased interest in self-access and language advising as alternative forms of language support, a number of issues have emerged in recent years that challenge their effec-

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tiveness (how well they help students learn) and efficiency (how quickly students learn). Research and experiences from practitioners show that learners are often unprepared for the type of learning they are asked to engage in (Reinders and Cotterall (2001), as are teachers for providing the necessary support (de los Angeles Clemente, 2001). There is little monitoring of student learning, partly as a result of a lack of knowledge of what students actually do in self-access (Sturtridge, 1997), and there is little in the way of assessment against objective criteria (Star, 1994). Materials are often not suitable for self-access (Reinders and Lewis, 2005, 2006), and frequently there are no clear links between students' learning in the self-access centre and their actual language use outside the centre (Cotterall and Reinders, 2001). Evaluating self-access learning is notoriously difficult (Star, 1994, 158) and few firm conclusions have so far been drawn about its success. Yet, self-access and language advising hold strong potential as learner-centred and highly flexible approaches to supporting student learning. In addition, there are many sound practical reasons for offering self-access as complementary to or as an alternative to classroom teaching, especially in situations where existing learning needs are too great or diverse to be met by traditional methods. This article focuses on how one centre has tried to overcome some of the challenges mentioned above by (1) developing an electronic learning environment which guides students in their self-directed learning, and (2) implementing an extensive monitoring system of student learning, allowing for the provision of more tailored support than had previously been possible.

## 2. Background

The University of Auckland is the largest tertiary educational provider in New Zealand. A survey in 2004 indicated that approximately 40% of its 35,000 students self-reported having a first language other than English. As part of an ongoing effort to better understand these students' needs, the University has developed a Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment, now taken by most first year students at the University. The assessment results in an overall score and band scores for listening, writing, and reading skills (ranging from 4 to 9). Scores of 8 or 9 are deemed sufficient to cope successfully in the academic environment. Students with scores of 6 and 7, which indicate some language deficiencies, receive a recommendation to improve their English through self-access or self-study. Students with scores of 4 or 5, indicating a need for 'immediate and intensive language support' are encouraged to enrol for English credit courses offered by the University, in addition to self-access.

Of a total of 2000 students assessed in 2002, only 27.8% scored in bands 8 or 9, the top two bands. This means that 71% of students need to improve their English. Furthermore, 41% of all students scored in the lowest two bands and thus had urgent language needs. Writing skills are the most common problem area, followed by reading and listening. Extrapolating these figures to the 40% of the entire university population who have a first language other than English, up to 10,000 students need some form of language help, clearly an enormous task.

Interestingly, further investigation done through the English Language Self-Access Centre (ELSAC) established that of these students, only approximately 500 enrolled for credit courses, around 800 made use of our self-access and another 500 joined short English courses offered through the university's learning support centre that also offers language support, (especially to first language speakers). This means that (1) only about 18% of all students who need to improve their language seek support, and (2) that flexible support

options are more popular than classroom learning. Students who do not take up available support expect to improve over time, and many indeed do so. However, there is a hidden cost with students taking longer to complete courses or receiving lower marks (Bright and von Randow, 2005). It has also been widely reported by lecturers that students construct pathways through the curriculum that (they perceive to) require the least amount of English. Of course, papers that may seem to students to have little English content often turn out to place considerable language demands on students (see for example Barton et al., 2005, for the case of mathematics).

### 3. Supporting student learning

The figures above clearly highlight the scope of the problem. The need for support is very large and would be impossible to provide through traditional classroom teaching. Even traditional self-access support, which is heavily based on the provision of physical resources, usually in one location, and which is notoriously staff-intensive, would be unable to cope with a sudden increase in demand on its services. The figures reported above also show that there is a large group of students who do not need intensive support (i.e. those in the higher bands); their needs are more limited and their starting level is higher. Clearly, alternative types of support are needed for many learners.

There are also good pedagogical reasons for considering non-traditional self-access support. Crabbe (1993, 447) talks about the need for a bridge between ‘public domain’ learning such as in a classroom, and ‘private domain’ learning, and Gardner and Miller (1999, 156) see self-access as having the potential to provide just such a bridge. Classrooms shelter students from the outside world and provide a safe environment for learning. Self-access centres have the potential to make links with the outside world through flexible access to a wide range of (possibly) more authentic materials and opportunities for practice. In practice, however, this does not always happen. In a study at a University in New Zealand it was found that 60% of all users in a self-access centre only used English ‘sometimes’ outside the Centre and the University (Reinders and Cotterall, 2001). In our case we wanted to take up the challenge of integrating English learning more into students’ academic lives by making study opportunities available more flexibly (see below). I will now turn to a description of ELSAC and its services.

### 4. The English language self-access centre (ELSAC)

ELSAC was set up in 2000 by the Department of Applied Language Studies & Linguistics with a grant from the Vice Chancellor’s Teaching and Research Infrastructure Fund (i.e. not out of a departmental or faculty budget). It only caters for English as a second language, although calls have been made by various foreign language departments to extend its services to their students and this is being considered for future implementation. Large additional grants were obtained in 2002 and 2003 from the Ministry of Education to expand especially our advisory services. In 2004 the Centre organisationally moved to the Library but continues to maintain academic ties with the Department. The Centre was also physically relocated to become part of an Information Commons which integrates a wide range of support services (learning support, language support, computer support, health & counselling, etc.) in one centrally located building. These services are strongly integrated; staff in each of the different departments are fully aware of other services and able to refer

students if necessary. Staff frequently take shifts in other departments to familiarise themselves with the services on offer and for example ELSAC and the Student Learning Centre offer a number of workshops together.

## **5. Staffing and staff development**

A total of six staff worked in ELSAC at the time of writing, either as assistants or consultants, some part-time and some full-time. Assistants provide day-to-day support to students and administrative assistance. They are the first point of contact for the students in ELSAC. Consultants provide advisory sessions and facilitate workshops. All consultants have an MA or PhD in Language Teaching or a related area. Assistants all have language teaching backgrounds but may still be working towards completing their degrees. As a result of the formal ties with the Department of Applied Language Studies & Linguistics, ELSAC recruits most of its staff from their students and graduates.

Despite their qualifications and experience in language teaching, most new staff do not have experience with the special environment of a self-access centre. For this reason each new staff is provided with a training programme offered by the Centre director. This consists of six phases:

- (1) In preparation for their work the staff member is requested to read a number of key papers and books on the topics of learner autonomy and self-access and is encouraged to ask questions or discuss their thinking about those texts with their trainer (the Centre director). These texts draw on current literature in the field and research conducted in ELSAC and are selected based on the new staff member's previous experience and interests. An introductory text by [Gardner and Miller \(1999\)](#) on self-access and by [Benson \(2000\)](#) on learner autonomy are required reading.
- (2) Formal training. This consists of
  - (a) Practical training. Staff receive training on the practical operation of the Centre. This involves becoming aware of all the duties of the assistants so that advisors understand their role and are able to take over when needed. (In the past a number of staff have started out as assistants and have moved on to become advisors).
  - (b) Informal workshops (usually one-to-one) with their trainer discussing the various aspects of advising, such as how to identify needs, select appropriate resources, monitor progress, etc. Much time is spent on identifying the differences between facilitating and teaching. Use is often made of a video with samples of advisory sessions as a starting point for discussion. Usually audiorecordings of previous advisory sessions held in ELSAC are also used and the staff member is asked to comment on them noting anything of interest, and is encouraged to ask questions. New staff members are requested to prepare for a mock advisory session with their mentor. The practice session is recorded and discussed afterwards. One exercise is to identify which of the advising speech acts suggested by [Kelly in her 1996](#) article have been used. Another is to look at question types: are the questions used open or closed, suggestive or directive?
- (3) Observations: staff are encouraged to observe advisory sessions by their colleagues (with the students' consent) and to take notes and discuss those with either their mentor or their colleagues. They are encouraged to draw up questions to present to their trainer at their next meeting.

- (4) Guided advising: staff begin to take on a small number of students of their own and record their sessions for commenting by their trainer. Regular meetings or email discussion ensure that the staff member is comfortable and a desired quality level is attained.
- (5) On-going training. Staff have access to three types of on-going training: (A) courses run by the University's Centre for Professional Development, that runs workshops on teaching-related topics as well as computer training. (B) Workshops offered by the Centre director and colleagues. These are offered depending on time available and specific needs. For example, when money was made available for additional materials development a workshop on that topic was offered. Other workshops have included for example 'using authoring software to create electronic learning materials', and 'assessment in self-access learning' among others. (C) Access to conferences and research. ELSAC has a small budget to facilitate conference attendance. In addition all staff are encouraged to participate in research and to suggest topics they are interested in pursuing. The offering of support for staff to enrol for specific courses such as the Certificate in Language Advising has been considered but so far not implemented.
- (6) Peer-feedback. Consultants meet once every 4–6 weeks to discuss common issues and to give feedback on each other's advising and workshop facilitation.

Assistants mainly receive practical training and are also given a limited amount of introductory reading to do. Those who show an interest in the advisory side of work in ELSAC may be enrolled for the more extensive training programme. Staff meetings are held every 6–8 weeks and issues relevant to both assistants and consultants are discussed there.

## 6. Research

Research in ELSAC is ongoing, with MA and PhD students from the University conducting research projects in ELSAC. Because of the available expertise from staff at ELSAC and also because of research opportunities offered by the Electronic Learning Environment, ELSAC attracts students interested in topics such as learner autonomy, learner strategies, self-access, computer-assisted language learning, etc. The findings of such research are sometimes directly relevant to ELSAC, for example in the case where one student investigated the degree of peer-feedback in self-access language learning, and another investigated students' use of different parts of the Electronic Learning Environment. Our own research has focused on the effects of learning support on students' learning behaviour (for example, does encouraging them to analyse their needs result in them doing this? (see [Reinders, 2006](#)). Other research has specifically investigated consultants' perceptions of advisory sessions ([Reinders et al., 2004](#); [Reinders et al., forthcoming](#)), students' perceptions of the usefulness of such services ([Reinders, 2005](#)) and the evaluation of self-access materials ([Reinders and Lewis, 2005, 2006](#)).

Staff are given time to support such projects and are also encouraged to engage in research themselves. They may be invited to participate in longer-running programmes (such as one that looks at the degree to which students respond to prompts by the Electronic Learning Environment), or it could be entirely based on their own choice. If it in any way is related to ELSAC, staff are given time to conduct such research.

## 7. Services offered

There are three main types of support offered at ELSAC. These include workshops, advisory sessions, and language learning materials. Not all students make use of all three. Many students only come to make use of the materials. Those with more complex learning needs are encouraged to meet with a consultant and all are encouraged to consider joining one or more of the workshops. There is no predetermined order in which students make use of these services. Some students only come to the workshops and never use the materials, some use the materials first before meeting with a consultant, and others only ever meet with a consultant.

### 7.1. Workshops and short courses

Most days during semesters workshops are offered, focusing on a range of topics. These have in common that they do not involve the teaching of content, but rather focus on skills for language learning. Workshop titles include:

Using peer-feedback to improve your writing;  
Practising presentation skills;  
Proofreading your own essays;  
Strategies for listening to lectures.

A common format for the sessions is as follows:

- (a) Participants are informed of the purpose of the workshop and that it is not intended to teach them the language but rather point them in the right direction to improve the skills at hand by themselves. (Although we try to make this clear in the information we provide students beforehand we have found it beneficial to emphasise this point so that students know what to expect).
- (b) Participants discuss their current approaches to learning the topic. For example in the case of 'proofreading' students report how they currently go about proofing their work.
- (c) The importance of reflecting on one's own preferences in learning and previous experience is discussed.
- (d) Alternative approaches, for example the use of peer-feedback techniques in the case of proofreading, are offered and explained.
- (e) The importance of selecting the right approach depending on the task demands is highlighted.
- (f) Various tools that students can use to complete the task are introduced/demonstrated (e.g. in the case of the proofreading workshop these could include proofing tools in Microsoft Word, electronic dictionaries, online word processors that students can use together, etc.).
- (g) Students practise, either individually or in pairs/groups.
- (h) The practice part is evaluated by the consultant facilitating the workshop who gives feedback on the students' work. It can also include a request by the consultant for the students to provide peer-feedback on other students' work.

- (i) An important final part of each session is that consultants encourage students to put what they have learned into practice. Most workshops include (a) handouts with practical tasks for students to practise further, (b) a follow-up by the consultant via email with a request for feedback on the session or with additional information on the subject.

Workshop titles are decided on the basis of our own experience, questionnaires that ask students about their preferences, and in response to requests from other departments. For example, we have recently offered workshops on English for doctors' consultancies, academic writing for Pacific Island students and others. Most workshops last either one hour or one and a half hours. Students can sign up through an online booking system and the consultant can see beforehand who has signed up and contact the students. The workshops are advertised through the Library's course booking system, on the ELSAC website, on posters and through occasional mailouts. Groups are usually fairly small (around 10 students).

## *7.2. Advisory service*

Students can book to see a consultant for one or more advisory sessions. Advisory sessions mostly follow a specific format, based in part on the way the Electronic Learning Environment is structured (see below). An initial session usually lasts around 45 mins and looks like this:

1. The consultant explains the purpose of the advisory sessions and (if the student is relatively new to ELSAC) the purpose of self-access language learning. Although we make it clear to students when they sign up and through information we provide about the service in general (e.g. on posters) what the purpose of the advisory session is, we have found it beneficial to explicitly outline what the students can (and cannot) expect from the consultant.
2. The consultant elicits from the student their main reasons for coming to ELSAC and their main areas for improvement.
3. Consultant and student then work together to complete a Needs Analysis on the computer to determine priority skills and subskills to work on.
4. Consultant and student work out specific problematic areas for each (sub)skill and discuss options for working on them. Information is provided on how to go about identifying problems and generating possible solutions.
5. Materials and activities (e.g. workshops offered in ELSAC) are recommended. Information on learning strategies is provided, usually in the form of a reference to the information sheets available on the Electronic Learning Environment.
6. In most cases a follow-up appointment is then made. For subsequent sessions students are requested to bring samples of the work they have done.

In subsequent sessions, consultant and student:

1. Discuss progress made and problems encountered. This includes discussing ways of assessing progress. The consultant could, for example, show how the learner can employ peer-feedback or self-assessment techniques to know how they are doing.

2. Look at how the student has gone about working on one or more specific subskills.
3. Discuss alternative strategies to working on those skills.
4. If necessary, revise learning goals.
5. Discuss possible resources (materials, workshops) to draw on.

Over time the support becomes less frequent and sessions become shorter. Mostly, face-to-face meetings are then replaced by email follow-ups. Additional support is available through the Electronic Learning Environment and is described below. The number of sessions differs; it depends on the students' wants and needs. On average students see their consultant just over three times in a semester.

### *7.3. Language learning materials*

ELSAC offers access to approximately 1400 (mainly academic) English language learning materials. Most of these resources are available electronically (see below).

These basic components are commonly found in self-access centres around the world. In addition, two additional features characterise support at ELSAC: (1) the Electronic Learning Environment, and (2) a student monitoring system, both designed to support the provision of the support, and aimed at dealing with some of the challenges in self-access highlighted in the introduction. I will briefly describe these two features below.

## **8. The electronic learning environment**

The Electronic Learning Environment (ELE) is a computer programme developed by ELSAC to (1) provide access to language learning materials, and (2) support students in their self-access learning. The programme is potentially available from anywhere on campus and (in a limited version) from students' homes.

### *8.1. Access to materials*

Materials created by ELSAC staff and commercially available materials are digitised and included in the programme. Students can search for materials by using an electronic catalogue (see Fig. 1 below) by keyword, required level, skill (e.g. writing), and subskill (e.g. writing expository essays). A search brings up the available materials and allows students to click on and immediately view the associated resource. In addition, extensive descriptions, practical advice on how to use the resource, the skills and subskills the resource helps with, and its level are shown, and students can view other, related resources that help with the same skill(s).

A tools page gives students access to dictionaries, wordprocessors, encyclopaedias, and a hovering notepad which remains visible while students use other materials.

### *8.2. Supporting self-access learning*

In addition to easy access to materials, the main aim of the ELE is to support students in their self-directed learning. It does this by (1) structuring self-study through the provision of a recommended sequence of steps, (2) by providing information about learning strategies, and (3) by electronically monitoring students' work and providing prompts



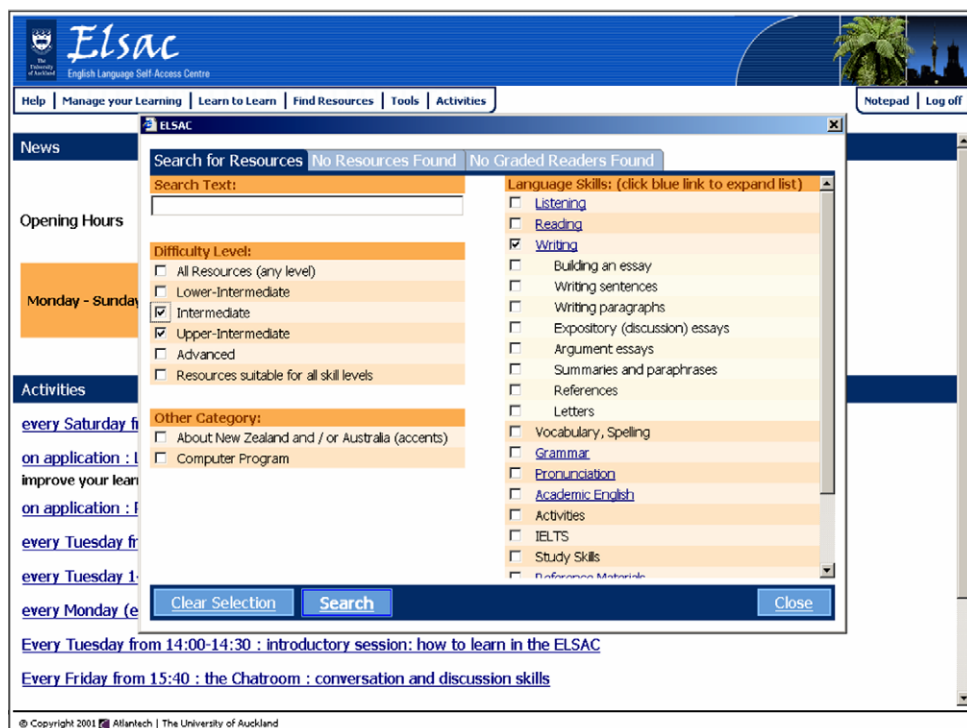



Fig. 1. The electronic catalogue.

where necessary. In addition the information stored by the ELE is drawn on by ELSAC staff to provide further support (see further below). It is important to point out that the computer does leave the final choice with the student. The suggestions are intended to encourage students to reflect on their language needs and language learning behaviour, not to direct students to a pre-determined set of resources or to stop students from studying in a certain way (even if that way may not seem useful).

When students log on to the ELE they are taken to a screen which guides them through several steps. These include (1) determining (or altering) their overall learning goals, (2) determining their learning goals for the current session, (3) identifying appropriate resources, (4) considering learning strategies and (5) reflecting on progress.

In order to determine learning goals students are encouraged to complete a Needs Analysis (see figure). They are asked a number of questions about their learning and their current and goal levels for various language skills and subskills. This input is used by the computer to generate a list of priority skills by calculating the difference between goal and current level and by multiplying this by the level of importance the student has attached to the skill. Students are then encouraged to write a problem statement about their difficulties and the specific skills or situations they want to practise and tasks they want to complete, all in the order of importance as determined with the help of the computer. Texts on how to write such statements are provided with examples. If a student selects too many skills to work on a prompt provides information on the importance of setting priorities and information on how to do this. It is important to note that at all times students have access to



Help | Manage

Needs Analysis

Needs Analysis

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ELSAC

What are your Goals ?

Please identify your current and goal skill levels for each of your Important and Very Important Skills.


Click [here](#) to get a list of IELTS scores and their meaning. As you will see IELTS has 9 levels whereas we only use 7.

We did not include the first two levels because all our students are at least on a lower-intermediate level.

Also the levels may not always correspond. The IELTS scores are only shown to give you some idea of the different levels.

Listening	Very Important	Current	Goal	3. Pre-Intermediate	4.	5. Intermediate	6.	7. Upper-Intermediate	8.	9. Advanced
Speaking	Very Important	Current	Goal							
Writing	Very Important	Current	Goal							

OK



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Log Off

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Fig. 2. Needs analysis – rating current and goal levels.

help from ELSAC staff, either through an online help function or by coming to the Centre (see Fig. 2).

In addition to the above, students set goal dates for all high-priority skills, and determine the number of hours per week to spend on each skill (see Fig. 3).

Next phase students are encouraged to consider goals for their current session, choosing from their overall learning goals. They are then taken through similar steps as above and are asked to determine specific areas to focus on that day. Next they are asked to identify appropriate materials using the catalogue itself (if they have not already received recommendations from a language consultant or in a workshop).

Students are then (i.e. before they actually work with the materials) directed to a ‘learn to learn’ page which contains extensive information on how to learn effectively and includes easily accessible texts and examples on effective learning strategies, sample worksheets, peer-feedback forms, and a range of other materials. Links to these are also made from within the catalogue. For example a vocabulary workbook will contain links to dictionaries and information on strategies for learning vocabulary. Appendix A includes a sample of one such information sheet.

When students finish working with a particular resource the computer prompts them to reflect on their progress, the suitability of the resource, and encourages them to write down any ideas they may have for working on the related skill the next time. The information they fill in is available to them on their subsequent visit and is included in the sequence of steps they are always encouraged to complete, as described above. The information is also added

Make a Plan

The skills below are your priority skills. They are in order of importance so you should work on the first skill on the list first. In the box you write what exactly you find difficult about the skill. You can write down certain situations (for example, speaking in public, writing under time pressure) or certain aspects of the skill (for example, speaking on the phone with native speakers or learning new vocabulary). In the second box you write down any ideas you can come up with to improve the skill. For example, for speaking you could write 'I will improve my pronunciation and learn New Zealand English expressions and vocabulary to feel more confident when speaking with other students in class'. If you are not sure, you can get advice from the staff in the ELSAC.

Next, choose a goal date and a number of hours to work on the skills per week. The computer will remind you if you don't reach your goals!

If you want to learn more about how to set goals, you can [read a short text by Marilyn Lewis](#), a colleague of ours from the University of Auckland.

Reading: Intensive reading

What I find difficult  
How I will try to improve it  
By When ? 16/8/2005 [Clear Date](#) How much time per week will you spend on this skill? 1 hours

Vocabulary, Spelling:

What I find difficult  
How I will try to improve it  
By When ? 18/11/2005 [Clear Date](#) How much time per week will you spend on this skill? 45 minutes

Print

OK

Fig. 3. Needs analysis: setting learning goals.

to their Record of Learning which automatically records all materials they have used and lists them with the student's current and goal level for the associated skills. It also lists the date the resource was used. In addition to their reflection on the learning *process*, students are also encouraged to think about their *progress*. Insofar as individual materials they use do not include an assessment component, students are referred to and encouraged to make use of alternative sources of feedback such as peer-feedback and self-assessment, and through small practical tasks ('English Takeaways'; see below) that let them try out their new skills.

### 8.3. Monitoring students' learning

An important aim of the ELE is to encourage critical reflection on the learning process. This is done by making individual suggestions on the basis of students' Needs Analyses and subsequent usage of the ELE. For example, students' priority skills as identified through the Needs Analysis and their subsequent use of the materials are matched. If a student does not work according to his/her list of priorities then the mismatch is fed back through a prompt that might say something like

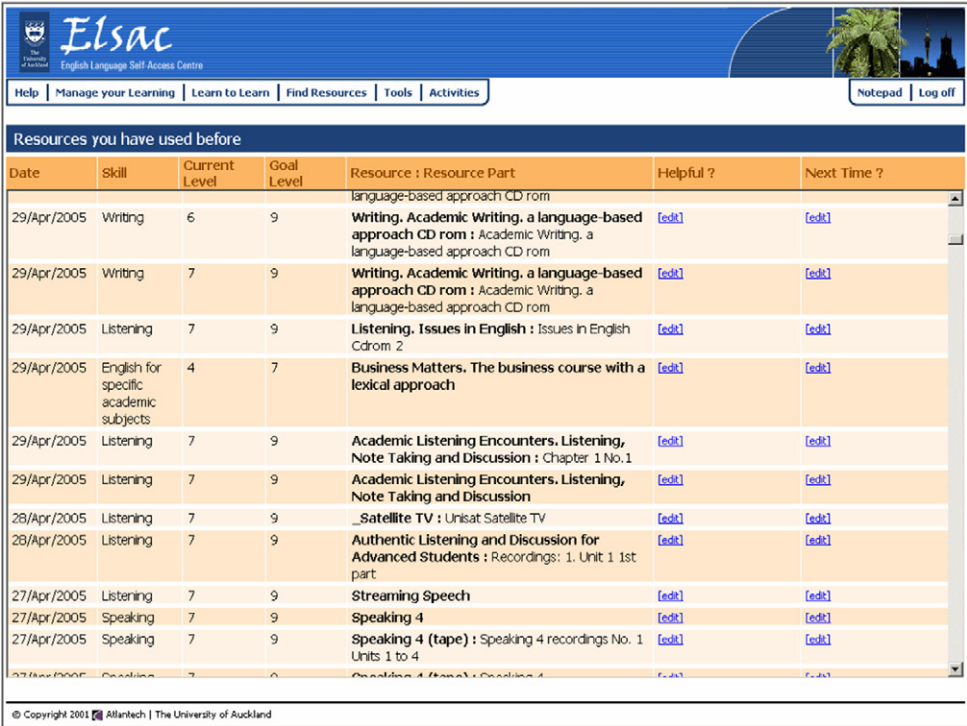
*'Dear Student X, your top priority skill is Listening but you have not used many resources that help you to improve this skill. You have used many resources that help to improve Grammar but this is not one of your top priority skills. Please look at your Needs Analysis and think about what skills to work on and what materials to use.'*

Similar prompts are generated when learners’ current levels do not approach their goal levels quickly enough to reach the target level by the goal date set by the learner. A prompt might appear that reads something like

*‘Dear Student Y, your current level for Listening is 6. Your goal level is 8. Your goal date to reach this level is only 4 weeks from now. You may not reach your goal level on time. Perhaps you need to spend more time on this skill.’*

Other prompts encourage students to update their Needs Analysis or review prior learning (see Fig. 4). All these prompts draw on a bank of possible texts and are generated by looking up and inserting certain variables such as the student’s name, the skills they are working on, and others. It is important to note that all the prompts *suggest* rather than *direct*, leaving the final choice with the learner. The aim is to point out that language learning is a process that needs attention and maintenance and encourage the learners to take responsibility for this.

It is important to point out that the ELE does not monitor or provide information about the use of individual materials or recommend specific strategies relevant to the material they have selected. The reason for this is twofold: (1) many materials include such information themselves, and (2) the ELE contains approximately 1400 commercially published materials, each of them in a different format and with different content. At present there is no way for us to link students’ use of such materials with tailored prompts specific to the content of those materials. However, cross-links to appropriate additional information are made from within the catalogue. For example, a student using a listening resource



The screenshot shows the Elsac English Language Self Access Centre interface. At the top is a navigation bar with links: Help, Manage your Learning, Learn to Learn, Find Resources, Tools, Activities, Notepad, and Log off. Below this is a section titled 'Resources you have used before' which contains a table with the following columns: Date, Skill, Current Level, Goal Level, Resource : Resource Part, Helpful ?, and Next Time ?. The table lists various resources used by a student, including writing and listening materials, with dates ranging from 27/Apr/2005 to 29/Apr/2005. Each row includes a 'Helpful ?' and 'Next Time ?' column with links to edit the information.

Date	Skill	Current Level	Goal Level	Resource : Resource Part	Helpful ?	Next Time ?
29/Apr/2005	Writing	6	9	language-based approach CD rom <b>Writing. Academic Writing, a language-based approach CD rom : Academic Writing, a language-based approach CD rom</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
29/Apr/2005	Writing	7	9	<b>Writing. Academic Writing, a language-based approach CD rom : Academic Writing, a language-based approach CD rom</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
29/Apr/2005	Listening	7	9	<b>Listening. Issues in English : Issues in English Cdrom 2</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
29/Apr/2005	English for specific academic subjects	4	7	<b>Business Matters. The business course with a lexical approach</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
29/Apr/2005	Listening	7	9	<b>Academic Listening Encounters. Listening, Note Taking and Discussion : Chapter 1 No.1</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
29/Apr/2005	Listening	7	9	<b>Academic Listening Encounters. Listening, Note Taking and Discussion</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
28/Apr/2005	Listening	7	9	<b>_Satellite TV : Unisat Satellite TV</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
28/Apr/2005	Listening	7	9	<b>Authentic Listening and Discussion for Advanced Students : Recordings: 1. Unit 1 1st part</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
27/Apr/2005	Listening	7	9	<b>Streaming Speech</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
27/Apr/2005	Speaking	7	9	<b>Speaking 4</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
27/Apr/2005	Speaking	7	9	<b>Speaking 4 (tape) : Speaking 4 recordings No. 1 Units 1 to 4</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>
27/Apr/2005	Speaking	7	9	<b>Speaking 4 (tapes) : Speaking 4</b>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>	<a href="#">[edit]</a>

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Fig. 4. Record of learning.

would see a reference to general information about listening strategies. Also, students' way of working with materials is discussed in their advisory sessions and general information is given in the workshops.

## **9. SMS: the student monitoring system**

The ELE records a tremendous amount of information about students' needs and actual learning; the resources they access, the skills they work on, the amount of time they spend, and whether or not their learning matches their goals are all part of the data now available to us. This information is drawn on in three ways: (1) to support self-study, (2) to support consultants in facilitating workshops, and (3) to support consultants in conducting the advisory sessions.

### *9.1. Supporting self-study*

Every time a student accesses ELSAC resources online this is recorded. Similarly when a student visits ELSAC in person, attendance is recorded and staff talk to students to establish and then record their 'learning focus' for that day (i.e. the main skill or subskill they will focus on). Staff can see all the student's previous visits in a database and also have access to the student's Needs Analysis (see above) and Record of Learning. This allows us to make specific recommendations. For example, if a staff member notices that a student's long-term goal is to improve discussion skills, she may wish to alert the student to a workshop on that topic.

An important area we have tried to work on is to encourage students to visit our Centre to learn and practise, and then *use* the language outside the Centre. To this end we have created a number of 'English Takeaways' (see [Appendix B](#)), short, practical tasks for a wide range of subskills that students can complete without the need for language learning materials. These help students to get an idea of their progress in different skills areas or simply encourage them to apply their newly learned skills. Adding a student's attendance and their learning focus into the Student Monitoring System can be used to generate an email (based on a number of templates) with such a task and, where appropriate, a reminder to complete and hand in the task for feedback from the staff.

### *9.2. Supporting workshop facilitators*

Students sign up for workshops online. Facilitators can access the list of participants before the workshop and can email all at the click of a button, for example to ask them to bring a sample of their writing. Facilitators can also view individual students' learning history. How often have they been to ELSAC? Are most of them new or seasoned self-directed learners? Do most of them want to improve the skill which is the topic of the workshop or are most interested in other skills too? Are many for example from the School of Business and thus likely to share similar interests?

Facilitators add to the database by recording student attendance into the Student Monitoring System. This allows self-access staff, for example to identify students with similar interests (who could be paired up as part of our 'study buddy programme') or to notify students of new workshops or materials on the same topic.

### 9.3. Supporting language consultants

For those students who have begun working in the Centre before having their first appointment with a language consultant, the Student Monitoring System provides consultants with a wealth of information about the student's goals, their learning styles and even the materials they have worked with. The consultant can thus much better prepare for the advisory session, for example by looking up specific materials beforehand.

Consultants keep detailed records of each session. They record information on issues students have brought up, on solutions suggested and on materials used. All this information (and much more) is available to the consultant for the next session. Over time the consultant builds up a comprehensive picture of a student's learning. If another consultant has to take over a student (for example if the original consultant is absent), (s)he has detailed information available on what has been covered before.

## 10. Day-to-day support for students

The type of support students receive on a day-to-day basis is the result of a tight integration of the various components described above. When a student returns to ELSAC, staff already know a lot about them and can support them better. Their first point of contact, the assistants who work at the reception desk, will be able to alert them to new workshops or materials of interest to their learning goals. They then log on to a computer to access their previous work and set their goals for the current session. The ELE monitors their progress and prompts them when necessary. At all times they have access to the assistants for help with practical matters or straightforward questions about their learning. For expert help on strategies for learning and to obtain feedback on their overall progress they can book to see a consultant. To get new ideas for working on their target skills they can join any of our workshops. All their activity is recorded and helps us to understand and help the student better.

## 11. Other forms of integration

Of course no self-access centre operates in isolation. A number of links with other departments exist and some recent developments at our University are worth briefly mentioning here.

### 11.1. Integration into ESOL courses

A number of ESOL courses are offered at the University of Auckland. Classroom teachers now routinely set assignments in ELSAC and make materials available through the ELE catalogue. The ELE lets us record student attendance and the type of work they engage in (e.g. did they mainly watch DVDs or did they use academic writing materials?) and we provide reports back to classroom teachers. ESOL teachers can also set specific tasks in ELSAC which they have to hand in at the end of the course, and which they get assessed on. Students can use the resources in ELSAC to complete such tasks.

### 11.2. Collaboration with academic courses

A number of departments and individual teachers have raised concerns about language issues and are keen to support students with their language development. Several courses



now have a language component where the content is taught by the lecturer and in a tutorial an ESOL teacher goes over specific language related to the topic. A number of departments now also routinely *require* students to run their work past us before handing it in. We do not proofread but make recommendations on the aspects of students' (mainly) writing and presentation skills they need to work on. Some departments ask students to attend our workshops and complete self-access work in exchange for a 10% credit for their courses. The ELE helps us track the type of work students do and the workshops they attended in order to allow the department to decide on whether or not to credit the students for their work.

### *11.3. Diagnostic assessment*

The assessment has been described above. This year a consultant has been appointed who invites students with low scores to come and pick up their results in person and guides them to appropriate support. That service is now also offered from within ELSAC. The advantages are clear: students learn about the available support and can be shown relevant resources on the spot.

### *11.4. Roaming support*

The ELE provides an important role in supporting self-directed learning but is not intended to operate in isolation. Staff support remains crucial. However, not all students are able to come to ELSAC. We now offer a 'roaming support' service. This involves one of our consultants visiting different campuses and departments, and offering drop-in hours and similar services.

## **12. Conclusion**

The ELE and the Student Monitoring System go some way towards addressing the concerns I raised in the introduction to this article. The ELE monitors students' progress and encourages reflection. It thus provides ongoing learner training, both through the materials and through the prompts it provides learners based on their individual learning choices, in addition to the monitoring done by our consultants. This alleviates some of the problems reported with students' lack of prior experience with self-directed learning (Reinders and Cotterall, 2001; Sturtridge, 1997). The electronic catalogue allows us to provide a range of additional comments and suggestions, complementing commercial resources where they do not contain all the necessary information and guidelines expected in a self-study environment; a real concern with many available materials (Reinders and Lewis, 2005). The Student Monitoring System furnishes self-access staff with a very comprehensive picture of the type of work individual students engage in, facilitating and improving the quality of the support. The increasing integration of a language component in academic courses and collaboration with ELSAC, results in support that is more tailored to individual students' needs and more integrated into their overall learning experience than previously. In addition, we are potentially able to support many more students as part of job is taken over by the monitoring features of the ELE.

The area of assessment remains a challenging one (cf. Star, 1994) where self-access practitioners are often asked for evidence for the benefit of self-access learning compared with

classroom-based learning. The comparison is flawed, however, as self-access is not intended to replace classroom-based learning but to provide additional learning opportunities, or to provide support where classroom teaching is either unnecessary (in the case of students with limited and specific learning needs), difficult (in the case of very diverse student groups) or impossible (in case of extremely large numbers). Also, often such comparisons rely on language gains but some of the key concerns in self-access are to develop students' ability to learn autonomously, to raise their awareness, to motivate them, and a range of other outcomes that cannot easily be measured. The systems described in this article help us to get a more comprehensive picture of the work students do in a flexible environment like a self-access centre. By looking at how students respond for example to the prompts they receive from the ELE and whether or not their learning behaviour changes over time, we can gauge changes in how students approach their independent language learning. By looking at how the students complete and revise their Needs Analysis and plan their learning we can identify changes in their awareness. Although much progress has been made, much exciting work still lies ahead.

## **Appendix A. A sample strategy information sheet**

### *A.1. Learning vocabulary: Using flashcards*

Learning words is one thing; remembering them is another. Flashcards (little paper cards) can be of great use as a way of keeping track of words you want to learn. The clever system that you'll learn here also gives you a very effective way to learn them as well.

How does it work?

Word

Expression  
or Sentence

Definition

Sentence with that word

collocation

translation

pronunciation

any other information

On one side of the card you write the new word, expression or sentence you want to remember. On the other side you write a definition, an example of its use (perhaps as you encountered it yourself), a translation, collocations and any other information you want to remember about that word (e.g. pronunciation, where you heard it etc.).

*The cards should be written in such a way that if you look at them again after a long time, you know what the word means and how to use it.*

Here's an example:

To be fed up with something or someone

Definition: "If you are fed up, you are unhappy, bored or tired of something, especially of something you've been experiencing for a long time" (Collins Cobuild)

Collocation: fed up with something or someone



“We’re fed up with having to clean up behind the tourists” (police officer in the Herald)  
Translation: *ergens zat van zijn*

Here’s a good system for using the flashcards to help you learn new words: put all the new flashcards in one pile. The next day, practise them again. Put the ones you know into a new pile, number two. The ones you don’t know stay in pile number one. The next day, do the same thing. The words you know from pile one should go into pile number two, the ones you know from pile two should go into a new pile – number three. Words you don’t know stay in their original pile. If you learn any new words in the meantime, put these in pile number one. Do this until you have five piles. Practise all the words every day until they are in pile number five. The good thing about this method is that words that are very difficult take more time to get to pile number five, whereas you don’t spend a lot of time on easier words.

After a word has arrived at pile number five and you still know it, put it into pile number six. This is a special pile because you only practise it once a month. If you practise these and you still know them, put them into pile number seven. This one you only practise once every six months. If you still know a word then, you will probably remember it forever.

## *A.2. Other ways of learning vocabulary*

### *Grouping words*

It is often difficult to remember a large number of words, especially when they don’t have anything to do with each other. Therefore it can help to keep words that have something in common in one place. For example, all the following words would be in one group :

football, tennis, golf  
because they are all sports

psychology, geology, biology  
are all scientific disciplines

shout, scream, yell  
all have to do with talking loudly

### *Making associations*

By associating words with pictures in your mind or by using that word to form a funny or interesting sentence, you will more easily be able to recall that word. For example : the word *bumblebee* (an insect). ‘The bumblebee sat on the minister’s nose and read the newspaper.’ Or you can think of the image of a bumblebee when learning the word.

### *Making stories*

By making up a story with new words, it will be easier to remember the words, because part of the meaning will be clear from the story. Imagine for example that you go on holidays and you want to visit a number of places and try to write up or think up a story using the words you just learned. It doesn’t matter how silly the story is ! You will find it easier to recall these words.

## Appendix B. English takeaways tasks



### English Takeaways!

The purpose of the English Takeaways is to give you a small task that you can work on at home or at university or whenever you have a bit of time. Some tasks are very small and only take a few minutes per day, others are a bit longer but not should take too much of your time.

*The key is to practise more often, not necessarily longer!*

#### 2. Speaking Kiwi English

Speaking a local dialect like New Zealand English is not easy. There are many different words and expressions. One way to sharpen up your skills is to draw up a list of expressions you hear when talking or listening to Kiwis. This will make it easier to understand people and will make your own speech sound more natural.

- (A) Take 5–10 mins every day to listen to New Zealand English. Either listen to people's conversations at the bus stop, watch a New Zealand TV programme like *Shortland Street* or the news, or read a local magazine.
- (B) Focus on a specific aspect of Kiwi English you are interested in, like how people greet each other, how they interrupt each other, or how they ask personal questions. Focus on this one point when reading or listening to people.
- (C) Write down the new expressions and words you heard and also write down the situation you heard them in. Was it a formal situation (like during a lecture) or informal (like at the Rec Centre)?
- (D) If there are any words or expressions you don't understand use one of our online dictionaries or take a note and ask at Elsac.
- (E) Now choose three of the new words and expressions and find a situation to use them in, at least once per day. Try it out on your friends, your class mates, your lecturers, anyone! Because you wrote down the situation in which you heard the expression initially, you know when to use which one.

We have many resources in the Elsac to help you with your speaking and pronunciation skills.

Have a look on the catalogue. We also regularly run workshops on speaking – check our website or the noticeboard for the latest times. See [www.elsac.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.elsac.auckland.ac.nz)

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