

**The self-access center as a social landscape:
the case of a Mexican self-access center**

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Abstract

Self-Access Centers (SACs) have spread all over the world. Particularly in Mexico they have been opened in many public universities in the last twenty years and some research projects have been conducted in this period of time. SACs provide users with learning support structures which are designed to promote language learning and foster learning autonomy. Studies about these facilities report on different aspects that contribute to their success, this paper addresses the self-access center as a social landscape where literacy practices with specific features occur. The theoretical framework proposed by the New Literacy Studies enabled us to approach the research of a self-access center in a Mexican university. This study allowed us to identify the types of literacy events that take place there, to characterize the design of this center as a social landscape (i.e., comprised of visible and inferred resources, participants and artifacts), and explain the affordances it provides to students' language learning and autonomy. The social landscape, its features and the interactions of users and the different elements that comprise the learning structure of this language self-access center will be analyzed in this paper.

1. Introduction

The New Literacy Studies (NLS) is a line of research that conceives literacy as a social practice based on the view that reading and writing can only make sense if it is studied in the context of social and cultural practices (Gee, 2000). Literacy is considered as a social and cultural product (Cassany 2005) instead of a set of skills which are developed in a classroom (Pahl and Rowsell, 2012). In a more general sense, Pahl and Rowsell (2012) define it as a way of making meaning with linguistic stuff in a communicative landscape. For example, early writing with a drawing (p. xvii)

The NLS has allowed the identification of the reality of many literacies and has obtained sustained results of the sociocultural practices in which literacy plays a role (Lankshear, 1999). Researchers have studied the different forms of literacy, its use and learning in different domains such as the school, the family, the office and the community (Jamison, 2007) or in a combination of them (Gee, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 2000). There are some studies about second language learning based on this approach (see Koo Yew Lie & Soo Hoo, 2007; Skinner & Hagood, 2008).

The research project that is described in this paper was developed under this view. In the intent to describe the second language literacy practices that students were engaged in at a self-access center, we could characterize this center as a social landscape where visible and hidden elements interact in the daily practices in order to construct the students' language learning at this a self-access of a public university located on the border with the United States of America.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Self-access centers

Self access centers are learning systems that promote different types of literacies because of its nature. One example is the development of computer based learning that occurs when students interact with educational software or internet web sites, weather to learn linguistic concepts, or to communicate with people who speak the target language. Another example is the promotion of plurilinguism (Castillo, 2011) that happens because of the exposure to materials for different languages and the free access to them these centers offer. The fact that students want to learn another language that allows them to communicate implies by itself a different literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Self access centers have been implemented with two purposes in mind, the first being the learning of languages and the second the promotion of self-directed learning which is considered an important academic goal (Morrison 2008) because students are not under the direct teachers' control and requires the students agency to succeed. According to Gao (2012) agency implies the understanding of the self and the will to achieve goals and objectives, that it allows students to enter learning opportunities in the structures of power and look for different pathways that guide them to their learning.

In Mexico language learning autonomy has been in the academic discourse since the self-access centers were implemented in the 1990's. One example is the next objective of a self access center set at a public university: "The aim [of the self-access center] is that students acquire the linguistic competences of the language (English) and at the same time they incorporate strategies that help them develop an attitude of autonomy" (Herrera, 2010). Most of these centers were open under the same vision that was the British proposal for self-access centers (Castillo Zaragoza, 2006). They have mainly been considered practice centers (Sturtridge, 1992) where students can apply what they have studied in the classroom in a self-directed mode. Each of the centers was designed in a different way; it depended on the available resources. However, most of them included areas for video, audio, computers and spaces for reading and writing. Some also had an area for conversation, tutoring and Karaoke.

2.2 Literacy practices

"Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing [...] language which people draw upon their life...[,] literacy practices are what people do with literacy" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). One example is text messaging in Facebook (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). Hamilton (2000) identifies two types of elements that constitute the literacy practices: visible and hidden. On the one hand, the constituents that can be observed are the participants, the setting, the artifacts and the activities performed. They are all part of the literacy events. The moment of composing a text is considered a literacy event because literacy takes part of it (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012, p. 11). We can observe the person writing the text in a particular place, using specific artifacts (computer, mouse, software, etc.) and performing certain action such as making a list of ideas, writing what he/she know about those ideas, erasing, looking for synonyms in a dictionary, etc.

On the other hand, the non-visible elements of the practice are all those constituents that might be influencing, regulating or giving meaning to the practice. Some of them might be hidden participants, the domain of the practice and other resources such as values, understandings, ways of thinking, and the routines of the participants which might not be seen. In

Table 1, Hamilton (2000, p.17) summarizes her framework for literacy practices in which this study is based on.

Table 1 Basic elements of literacy events and practices (Hamilton, 2000, p.17)

<i>Elements visible within literacy events</i>	<i>Non-visible constituents of literacy practices</i>
Participants: The people who can be seen interacting with the written text.	The hidden participants- other people, or groups of people involved in the social relationships of producing, interpreting, circulating and otherwise regulating written texts.
Settings: The immediate physical circumstances in which the interaction takes place.	The domain of the practice within which the event takes place and takes its sense and social purpose.
Artifacts: The material tools and accessories that are involved in the interaction (including the texts)	All other resources brought to the literacy practice including non-material values, understandings, ways of thinking, feelings, skills and knowledge.
Activities: The actions performed by participants in the literacy event.	Structured routines and pathways that facilitate or regulate actions; rules of appropriacy and eligibility – who does/doesn't, can/ can't engage in particular activities

2.3 Literacy practices in self-access centers

Language schools have implemented self-access centers for different purposes, the most common is to engage students in literacy practices that allow their learning a foreign language and develop self-directed learning. One characteristic of these practices are that they are mediated by texts of different sort which are present in numerous formats. Students might have to read in the target and the mother tongue (if this is part of the methodology). They also have to read rules, books, dictionaries; browse catalogues; and do printed and electronic exercises using worksheets or interactive software and web pages.

Following Hamilton's framework of the literacy practices explained in Table 1, we can identify visible constituents of the practices in SACs. The participants are the students who interact with the texts and are trying to acquire second language literacy, the tutors and the administration staff. The setting of SACs is defined by the underlying principles under which they were conceived. Some might organize areas by technological resources (video, computers, printed materials, etc.); others might pay attention to the type of interaction that wants to be encouraged such as individual work (silence), students-student interaction, working in small groups, whole group activities (noisy). It has been found that there is a wide variety of arrangements as there are needs and approaches, it would (Gardner & Miller, 1999). The artifacts in SACs are the texts materials and technologies which were selected to build meaning (Roswell & Pahl, 2007). Some institutions have named them resource centers (Holec 1981) because they are considered one of the main supports centers provide students with. The selection and inclusion of materials is usually based in the perception people have about the affordances they provide to facilitate learning; however, special attention has to be paid to it. It is evident that students carry out different sorts of activities and it will depend on the resources and services each center provides and encourages.

These activities are then regulated and shaped by invisible elements that influence the way students select materials and perform activities. In SACs there are several hidden

participants, especially if it is part of the language courses offered by the institution. These participants might be the authorities, the designers of the center, the tutors and the teachers. There is a study that supports the idea that teachers and tutors' beliefs about language learning and teaching in the classroom and in the SAC influence the way the center functions (Castillo Zaragoza, 2006). The materials even though are visible elements bring to the center a lot of hidden agendas; they bring meanings and intentions to the practice (Rowell and Pahl, 2007) that were thought by others such as the materials designers (the staff of the SAC or the publishers). The domain of the practice is an important constituent of the practices because it helps the events to take its sense and social purpose. In SACs the domain of the practice is language learning and self-directed language learning. Other hidden elements work are the values, understandings, ways of thinking, skills and knowledge the participants bring to the practice and shape the way they behave in the center. If they do not believe in independent learning they will not feel comfortable in the center if this is to be encouraged, they might not feel motivated to carry out those hours they have to spend there. Routines and pathways are always present in SACs, they are part of the organization. In some centers students are provided with pathways to organize their study, in others there are structured routines to use the different areas of the center, keep the order in the center and know exactly what to do in each area. These routines and pathways help students know how to behave in the center and develop those expected study habits defined in the goals and objectives.

This explanation of the literacy practices in the SAC helps us visualize it as a social landscape in which different elements interact to make sense and reach the goals set at these centers. We can also perceive the way the visible and hidden elements relate with each other and give meaning to what happens in those centers.

3. Methodology

This is a short scale study in which only 12 university students of English were observed. The research question that guided the study was: How can we describe the self-access center from a social perspective?

We followed a qualitative descriptive interpretative approach (Holliday, 2007), with the purpose to provide a rich account of a range of factors that could help us first identify and analyze the elements that constitute the supporting structure of this self-access language learning environment and then explain the literacy practices in this social context. The findings we present in this article are part of a larger study about the learning affordances of the self-access center.

3.1 Research site

This research project was developed at a self-access facility at a language center of a large public university in Mexico. This center offers courses in several languages (English, French, Italian, German, Chinese and Spanish), English being the most popular among university student who need to be certified in this language as a requirement to obtain their BA diploma. The purpose of the language programs is to develop the four language skills following a communicative approach in six levels. The students enrolled in these courses are expected to attend the self-access center to practice two hours a week what they have studied in class and to develop their language skills in a self-directed mode. The center has room for 200 users and is divided in six areas (video, audio, computers, conversation and reading and writing and

tutoring). It opens from Monday to Saturday and it is staffed with a coordinator and tutors who provide students with different services such as training, advising, activity-organizing, etc.

3.2 Participants

We observed 12 university students who were enrolled in an English course, two students working in each of the self-access center areas: video, conversation, computer, audio, and four in the reading and writing area. Most of them were enrolled in the first or second level of this course, and in the first two years of their university program. Their age ranged between 19 and 24 years old. University students were chosen because they represent half of the users of the center and it is a requirement for them to study a foreign language, most of them choose English. We also interviewed 11 teachers who were the students of those 12 students. Some of them were also tutors at the center.

3.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

To be able to characterize the self-access as a social landscape, it was necessary to use different research procedures that are explained next. To understand the structure and organization of this self-access center, founding documents and regulatory procedures were consulted. To identify and describe the materials of the SAC, we examine catalogues and interviewed the coordinator. To understand the students' activities and strategies regarding their use of materials, the 12 students were observed and video-recorded during his/her visit to one area of the center (e.g. computer room) an observation form was filled out. In this form we registered the length of the activities, the number of participants, a description of the setting, a description of the materials and other artefacts employed, and a description of the activities. All the visible elements were observed and noted to describe the literacy events of this SAC. When it was possible, materials used by students while being observed were collected or recorded. The average length of the sessions was 45 minutes.

After the observation, students were interviewed. We made questions related to opinions, knowledge and preferences about the center. The corpus of the interviews was of two hours and 10 minutes. The answers allowed us to know some of the students' opinions about the center, their preferences when working at the center, and the way they realized the observed activities. This analysis allowed us to listen to the students' voices and understand what they bring to these language learning literacy practices.

Teachers were also interviewed because they were considered important hidden participants who there was no doubt shape the students' performance in the SAC since the attendance to the center was part of the language course they were teaching. A series of questions related to their opinions about the SAC, language learning autonomy were made. The corpus of the interviews was of two hours and 38 minutes.

Both interviews (students and teachers) were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis methodology (Mayring, 2000) which helped us identify the predominant topics of the responses that resulted in categories. To validate these categories, two researchers did the analysis until there was consensus to establish reliability. This categorization of the answers allowed us to make inferences from the responses.

4. Results

In this section we focus mainly on the results related to the conception of this center as a social landscape without detailing each factor studied in this project. The research question we

try to answer in this paper is how can we describe the self-access center from a social perspective?

We found that this self-access center could be described and analyzed as a social landscape in which self-directed second language learning literacy practices are carried out and are constituted by literacy events and invisible elements that shape the practices and result in the working culture of the center which is described in the next paragraphs.

4.1 The plan for the self-access center

First, we found that the social setting of this particular SAC had a plan. We noticed that the routines, regulations, and expected behaviors that shaped the literacy practices of the center were not fully explained in the documents; instead, the information was completed by the coordinator of the center and the teachers who were interviewed. With their information and the documentation revised, we could characterize the expected social landscape of this learning environment. We acknowledged that the SAC is a space dedicated to the learning of languages that is made up of human and physical resources and when they interact, they constitute a supporting structure intended to favor the realization of self-directed learning activities supported by some guidance. In other words, these two types of resources should allow students to get involved in unguided activities assisted by guided tasks such as tutoring, workshops for self-directed learning training and conversation sessions. The main activities students are expected to develop are the unguided because one of the main objectives of the center is to encourage autonomous learning. Figure 1. Synthesizes the design of the supporting structure of the center (Plan de trabajo, 2003; Reglamento del CEMAAI, n.d.). The regulations document establishes that the students have to attend a two-hour orientation course in which a tutor tries to familiarize users to self-access learning work. Then, students start working independently and are supported by the guided activities.

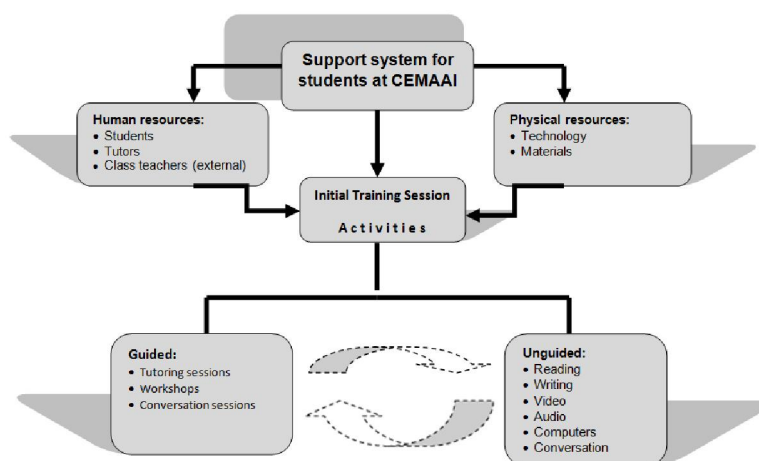


Figure 1. Implicit design of CEMAAI (Domínguez-Gaona, López-Bonilla & Englander, 2012)

We also found that the staff of the center identified access and participation routines which provide a structure for the activities students do shaping the literacy practices of the center. We found these routines are not documented; but surprisingly, the coordinator and the tutors described them exactly the same way, even some teachers knew about them. This agreement shows these routines are expected and planned. Students should follow a routine to access the center when first enrolled in the language course and slightly different routines when

students participate in each area. For the students to be able to work in the center, they have to take a two hours initial training session which will provide users with an introduction to SAC (concepts, rules and regulations, learning strategies, knowledge of the center, etc.). In the next figures we show a summary of these routines.

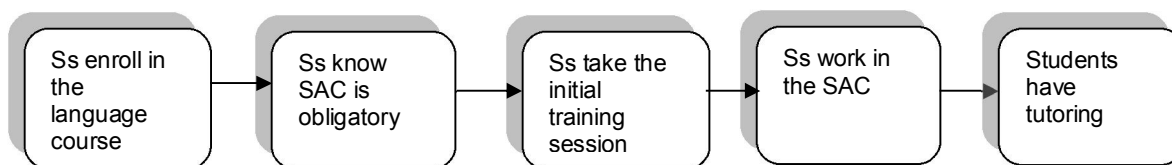


Figure 2. Access routine. This figure explains the routines students follow to attend the SAC.

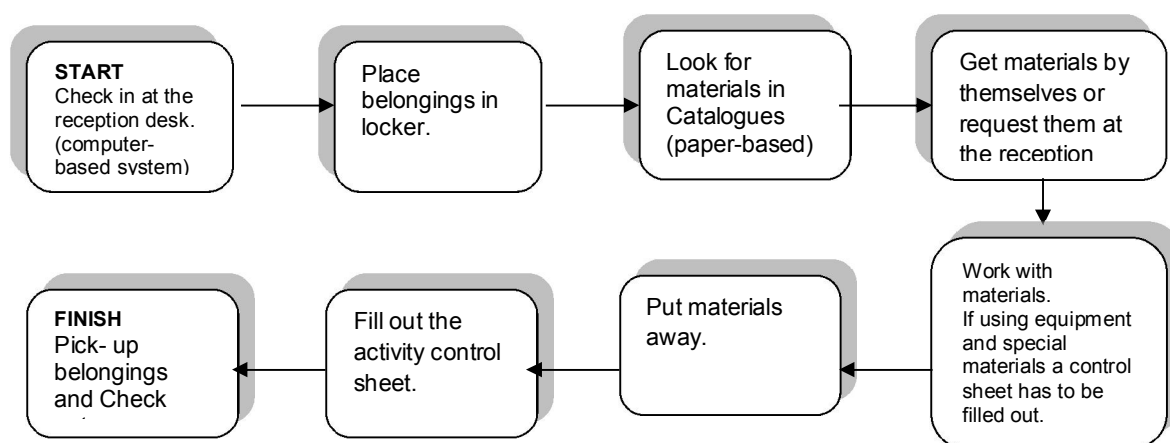


Figure 3. Participation routine. This figure illustrates the expected participation routines.

4.2 The policies that regulate the SAC

The history of the center found in the Project of this center and the interview with the coordinator let us understand that the SAC is regulated by internal and external institutional policies. First, the center has been conferred a role in the language center which is to support the language courses offered at this institution and the place to encourage language learning autonomy. Second, it was open because the Secretariat of Public Education encouraged the implementation of these centers as a national project with certain characteristics in order to support the increasing demand of English learning in higher education in the 1990's (Hubbard 2007); the command of this language at a low intermediate level has been a requirement since then. This explains why they are the most frequent users of the self-access center (They represent the 50 % of all the students in the language courses. This was the population who was researched to identify the needs of the SAC users before this center was implemented (Domínguez, 1997).

4.3 The literacy events

The observations allowed us to identify events of different nature depending on the resources and the work area that was selected by the participant. Four student did exercises using printed materials (notes and worksheets), or digital materials (educational software for language learning). Two of them read, one read a novel and the other a didactic magazine. A friend read a pronunciation book following the recording, reading and repeating the exercises in the book.

Two watched a movie, one listened to music and sang, and another played a board game. Most of them spent 30 minutes in the work area doing these activities. They worked without the direct support of a tutor, except one who received help from a tutor who was passing by. It is important to highlight that tutors were not seen in the SAC except in the conversation room in which tutors guides the sessions. These sessions were organized following a traditional methodology in which teachers selected materials and managed the class. In Table 2 we show a summary of the literacy events; the code to identify the students refers to the areas of the center: RW (reading and writing are), V (video), A (audio) C (computer room) Conv (conversation).

When observing the students at the center we found that the access and the working routines were different from the ones established by the staff. We found that not all students participate in the initial training session and very few decide to attend tutoring sessions which are optional. We also perceived that if students want to watch a video, they use the catalogue because they need the cataloguing code because the receptionist has to include it in the records format. In the rest of the areas students did not use the catalogue (in the interviews we found out that students and teachers thought catalogues were confusing) and obtained the materials from the book shelves and the wall trays; then they also explained that they usually used the same materials because those are the ones they need or prefer or their teachers recommended: *“The exercises in the folders are very interesting... yes the worksheets”*., *“because these are the ones I like the most [the grammar exercises, worksheets]... because they make think”*. We also realized that some students do not use materials from the center; they utilize either their notebooks or textbooks, even though they are not allowed to (see Table 2, it includes detailed information about this). It seems students accommodate the routines to their convenience and do all that they understand or have been recommended to; and what it is not clear or has not been perceived, is ignored, such as the tutoring service about which they said have heard of but they do not know exactly what it is all about.

Table 2. Literacy events and demographic information of students

Student	Level in English program	Attended Initial training session	Attended Tutoring Sessions	Artifacts used	Literacy events	Human (Staff) support	Time spent (minutes)
RW1	2 nd .	No	No	English course notebook	Completed written exercises requiring yes/no response	No	30
RW2	2 nd .	Yes	No	English course notebook; Grammar worksheets; Cell phone translator	Completed grammatical exercises; Worked in a group; Corroborated answers with classmates. A teacher passing by helped him with an answer.	YES	30
RW3	4 th .	No	No	Novel abridged and adapted with pictures; Dictionary	Read novel Consulted dictionary	No	90
RW4	2 nd .	No	No	Game of Scrabble; Bilingual dictionary	Played game in Spanish; Formed 15 English words, all monosyllables	No	30
V1	2 nd .	No	No	DVD of movie in English without subtitles	Watched movie; Listened to movie.	No	25
V2	1 st .	Yes	No	DVD of movie in	Watched and listened to	No	30

				English with subtitles	movie and read subtitles in Spanish		
A1	2 nd .	Yes	No	Book with related spoken-aloud CD	Read book while listening to recording of the text and repeating sometimes.	No	40
A2	5 th .	No	No	Didactic magazine with related spoken-aloud CD	Read magazine while listening to recording of the text and repeating sometimes.	No	30
C1	2 nd .	Yes	No	Educational software	Completed pronunciation exercises. Listened and repeated songs	Asks for help 3 times to exit program; receives none.	53
C2	2 nd .	No	No	Educational software Commercial music album	Completed listening comprehension, reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary exercises.	No	40
Conv 1		Yes	No	Text book	Ask and answer questions	Yes	30
Conv 2		No	No	Text book	Ask and answer questions Reading aloud Narrating and exemplifying	Yes	33

4.4 The participants of the center: the students

In these literacy events, we observed 12 university students of English doing activities in the center, but we could not see their ideas and perceptions about language learning and the SAC, which are important constituents of the literacy practices. The interviews allowed us to identify the users of the center who studied English motivated by their vision of themselves as speakers of other languages in their future (Dörnyei, 2009) and some external situations like the requirement to obtain their university diploma. Their motives are related to their professional and personal development and their proximity to an English speaking country. We also identified their ideas about how a language should be learned which, in some cases, it was evident guided the way they did the activities. One example was student RW3 (Table 2) who said: *“Well, when you are reading, for example, if you read aloud, well, you can practice... how do you say? Pronunciation.”*, *“...improve pronunciation and identify the difference between one word and another, and their meaning”*.

Furthermore, we found they select materials a) to facilitate the development of their language skills (75%), b) to have a good time (33%) c) to fulfill the required time at the center (25%), d) to explore new materials (8%) and e) to follow my teachers recommendations. By interviewing both the student and the teacher we noticed the second had influenced this students' choice of materials. They both coincided in their belief that if reading, vocabulary could be developed. These are their voices:

S: *“when you are reading and find words that you might have not seen in the vocabularies with the teachers and so you get a dictionary and you look them up, so that you increase [your vocabulary].”*

T: *“Well, I always recommend my students to read, they have to start reading so that they can acquire vocabulary”*

Another example is the case of a student who played a board game because his classmates had chosen it: *“Well, my classmates said Scrabble and I played with them, that's all.”*

The rich data of interviews also allowed us to know students perceive the SAC as a practice center that it is part of their English course and facilitates learning by means of their various resources. They do not perceive the appropriacy of the materials; instead, they perceive the number, they mentioned there are many resources. We found most of the materials offered by the center were not adequate for self-directed learning (Domínguez, López-Bonilla & Englander, 2012). They also perceived the lack of tutors that supports their learning.

4.5 The participants of the center: the teachers/tutors

The tutors in this SAC are visible participants of SACs. They are meant to guide students in their development as self-directed learners; however we found that they are not always present and become hidden participants. Language teachers are invisible participants in the SAC but as the students' language teachers they are relevant for this landscape. We interview 11 teachers, three were also tutors and materials designers of the center, one was the coordinator of the center, and was the coordinator of the language center too. They all had had language teaching training, seven of them had more than 15 years of experience teaching English and the rest had been teaching at least for 5 years. Additionally, they had also taken training courses to work in a SAC.

They were made questions about different aspects such as language teaching, autonomy and SAC. We found these teachers think the main factor to learn a language is the practice, especially if the practice is oral. This opinion might be explained by the setting (university located on the border with an English speaking country). They also said that the development of the skills, vocabulary and grammar was important. However, only three of them mentioned the importance of fostering learning autonomy through a strategic formation of the students. When they were asked about autonomy, they could define it easily. They said that autonomy implies responsibility, decision making, self-development and that it facilitates learning but only the same three provided with ideas to develop autonomy. We could perceive they have a good image of the SAC. They thought it was innovative, useful and flexible, and provides students with all the resources to encourage language learning. They acknowledged that students needed their guidance when they started using the SAC. They commented that the initial training session and its content coverage was not enough to train students and that more workshops on learning strategies should be implemented. Another important topic was the tutors' development; they said they needed more training.

5. Discussion

The center can be characterized as a social landscape in which foreign language literacy practices take place. The elements of the literacy events are shown in Figure 4 in the inner circle. We can identify the expected relationship among the visible elements of the center (the human and physical resources the guided and the unguided activities, the participants and the areas of the SAC) which is intended to afford foreign language learning and autonomous learning. The solid lines indicate the expected functioning of the center as described in the plan of the self-access center in section 4.1 and the desired relationships.

However, it was found that things occur in a different way according to the description we presented in the results. The curved dotted arrows indicate that the relationship of support between the guided and the unguided activities were broken. For example, only one of the 12 students observed (RW2) had enrolled in the tutoring sessions. When one of the students was asked if he had been informed about this service (tutoring) during this initial session, he said:

“They just gave us a booklet and said there were tutoring sessions but I never asked what they were about”. Additionally only one of the students received some guided support, and in this case, it was a tutor passing by who answered the student’s grammatical question. Another example was C1 who did not received the support expected, she did not know how to exit a computer program and there was nobody to help her; it is indicated with a dotted line between her and the tutoring service of the center. In figure 4, there is a student located outside this inner circle showing that there are students who do not use any resources offered by the center and attend it because it is a requirement not because it is providing them with useful learning tools.

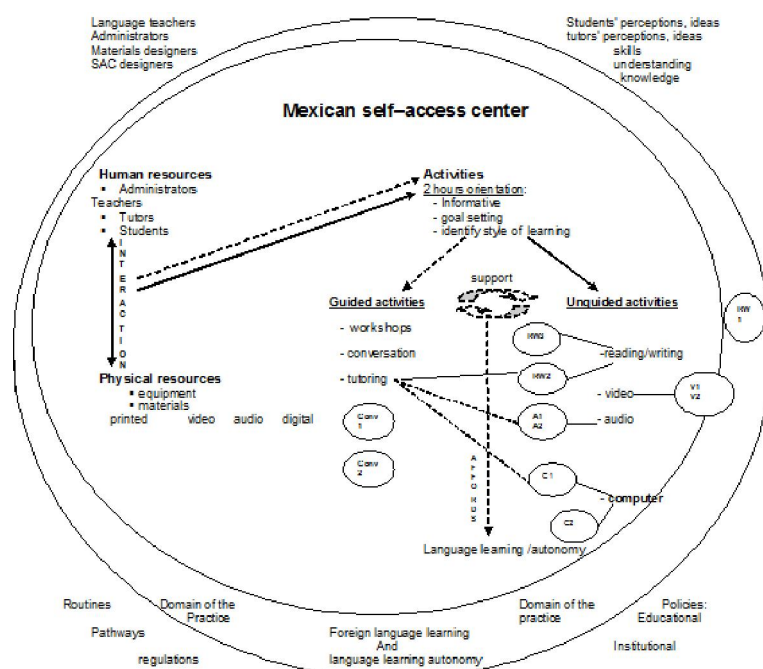


Figure 4. The social landscape of the SAC

In the outer circle, we see the domain of the practice which is represented by foreign language learning and language learning autonomy. They define the type of practice that occur in the center such as reading a book aloud and using a dictionary to learn vocabulary because the students’ teacher recommended it, and the student believed it was true; or using a computer educational software because the resource was available and the student felt she should try it, but that when she tried to exit, she got trapped and there was not help, and then she felt frustrated. Outside the circles we see in the left corner, other hidden elements of these practices. They are all those people who cannot be seen but who participate actively in the decision making of everything that happens in the center at the planning, implementation and evaluation stages.

In the right corner we see those perceptions, opinions, skills, knowledge students bring to the practice and make a difference on the way they perform in the SAC. Visible and invisible participants might share understandings. One of the understandings we identified in these practices is that the center fosters language learning autonomy. Dickinson (1987), Sheerin (1997) and Benson (2011) described these centers as ideal places to develop self-directed learning because of their features and possibilities. Our teachers, tutors and administrator share this idea,

what is not clear for some of them is the way they could support their students to develop self-directed learning skills and that there is need for this support. However, our students do not pay attention to this matter, instead they center their thought in the development of language skills and in all the resources the center offers and that allow them to practice the language. This is another clear understanding that is shared with their teachers and the institution; they all think this is a practice center where students are going to practice what they have seen in the class.

Teachers have their own ideas of what happens in the center and about the reasons the students have not to develop independent learning. For example, one of the teachers justified the poor exploitation of the resources of the center with the idea that teachers had not understood the philosophy of SACs, learning autonomy, and the intended function of the center, then, it was the teachers' fault. Others justified it with the idea that students were not ready to learn independently, that there was need of promotion of the center and that students need guidance. This last idea is shared with students; they ask for help in the center and do not receive it. However, all they want is that tutors clarify their linguistic doubts; they have not perceived the role of tutors in this SAC and the importance of being guided to become independent learners. Cooker and Torpey (2004) and Logan and Moore (2004) report in their studies that one factor for the success of a center is the preparation of users.

In the bottom corners of Figure 4, we included all those routines and rules that norm and provide with a structure what happens in the center. We also placed there the policies that have had an impact in the way the center is used and perceived by the users and teachers of the center. Attending the center is obligatory in this center. This policy has been observed in many self-access centers in México (Chávez, 1999). Studying a language as a requirement to obtain the university diploma is an institutional policy. It is necessary to identify to what extent these two policies affect the students' motivation to study the language, to attend the SAC and to develop self-directed learning. Our concern is if students are benefitting from the center or not.

6. Conclusion

With this New Literacy Studies approach, we obtained rich data about this self-access center that allowed us to conceive it as a social landscape where visible and inferred elements interact to shape the literacy practices of this SAC which has its own particularities that make it unique. We were able to analyze the literacy events that the students performed and we could also identify their relationship with some inferred elements (the opinions and understandings of the students and teachers about the SAC, language learning and learning autonomy, policies, routines, language learning as the domain of the practice, and other participants).

We could understand that this is the social setting in which university students of English participate in social interactions to learn a foreign language using the structure provided by the center in a flexible way, used at their convenience. The center is perceived as an ideal space to promote self-directed language learning, as a facility that offers a lot of materials that promote language learning. The main motivations of students to attend the center are policy-driven. They go to the center because they have to learn a foreign language, they have to study what was seen in class and because it is a requirement to pass the course. The practices in the center are shaped by the administrators, teachers and students' decisions, beliefs, skills and knowledge. We observed a social setting supported by self-directed learning in which users and teachers need training, materials should be revised and not all students fit in there because of their lack of self-regulation skills and lack of accompaniment in this academic journey.

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