

# *Chapter 1*

## **Introduction to the Management of Self-Access Language Learning**

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Self-Access Language Learning—Learning in which students take more responsibility for their learning than in teacher-directed settings. This term does not refer exclusively to learning that takes place in a self-access centre. Ideally SALL offers varying degrees of guidance but encourages students to move towards autonomy.

Gardner and Miller, 1997, p. xvii

Self-access language learning (SALL) has been in use around the world for a number of decades. It is promoted across a range of institutions from primary to tertiary levels and in support of the teaching of a range of foreign languages. Much has been written about SALL both in its own right and as a means of fostering autonomous learning and a considerable quantity of research has also been directed to this and associated fields (see, for example, Benson's (2011) analysis of the exponential growth of the related literature). However, relatively little has been written and almost no research conducted about the management of SALL.

Understanding the management of SALL is not only important for those closely involved with SALL but is of importance to a much wider range of stake-holders. With the wide-spread implementation of SALL and its increasing integration into taught courses and other avenues of language learning, SALL impacts in a broad sense on students, teachers and institutions. The content of this book is, therefore, of relevance to institutional and departmental managers, classroom-based language teachers, teachers more directly involved in providing SALL opportunities and, of course, SALL managers.

In many contexts, the management of SALL is considered simply as a coordination role that can be added to a teacher's portfolio; and in other contexts it is not considered at all. Seen as a coordination role, the management of SALL is frequently equated with running a language course and there may be some similarities. But, as will become clear in this book, the effective management of SALL is a bigger and more challenging task which involves both management

and leadership. The former is required for efficient and cost-effective use of resources. The latter is important for ensuring SALL continues to meet the needs of its users by making effective use of resources and constantly looking ahead for new needs, challenges and opportunities.

This chapter will begin with a clarification of terminology and a brief justification for SALL and for its effective management. It will then outline how the rest of this book will provide an understanding of SALL management and leadership by situating them within the well-documented field of educational management and leadership; and by drawing on a set of case studies conducted by SALL managers.

## 1.1 Terminology

It is important at this point to make a brief comment about terminology. The terms *management* and *leadership* appear frequently in this book and are not used interchangeably. They are separate concepts which are defined and contrasted in considerable detail in Chapter 2. In some contexts, both within education and business, they are roles which can be performed separately. However, it is clear from the discussion in this book that the effective operation of SALL requires both roles and that most commonly they would be combined into the duties of a single member of staff. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 3, it is not uncommon for middle management roles in education to combine aspects of both management and leadership. In the case of SALL, this combination of roles is crucial as will be explained in Chapter 3 where it will also be shown that the leadership role may be the more important part.

In terms of terminology, therefore, it is clear that the ideal SALL manager is actually a manager and a leader; and there may be some arguments for prioritising the leadership part of the description. It may be tempting, therefore, to refer to this role as one of SALL leadership-management and the holder as the SALL leader-manager; or if that sounds too unfamiliar then perhaps the SALL manager-leader. There are also good philosophical arguments for avoiding the term SALL manager altogether. Gardner (2011) suggested that it is the self-access learners themselves who should be managing their own learning and are thus their own SALL managers but, by his own admission, failed to find a suitable alternative title for the educator who has commonly become known as the SALL manager. And it is this recognisability of terminology that has resulted in the term SALL manager being maintained throughout this book even though our intention is that it refers to the joint roles of management and leadership.

## 1.2 The Need for SALL

Historically, language teaching was largely teacher-directed and self-contained in the sense that educators made all the decisions about the curriculum, the delivery, the learning strategies and how language proficiency was assessed. Students were passive participants in the learning process and were not encouraged to take responsibility for their learning. This traditional mode of teaching and learning required only a teacher, a textbook and a classroom. As communicative language teaching methodology developed with its emphasis on involving learners in real language use and a subsequent focus on student-centred learning encouraged learners to participate in making decisions about their learning, a need arose to provide a range of opportunities for them to use and explore language, and to develop their own learning strategies.

One of the most obvious and widespread outcomes of this need for learner choice was the development of self-access centres (SACs) which are dedicated facilities “in which users can study independently with varying degrees of guidance” (Gardner & Miller, 1997, p. xvii). These centres typically provide self-access language learning opportunities which may be linked to taught courses but are also available to independent users. Over time, SALL has started to move beyond the confines of the SAC by integrating more fully into taught courses and also by becoming part of the virtual world. Indeed, a recent debate has questioned the need for the continued existence of SACs (Mynard, 2012; Reinders, 2012). But that is a debate about the location of SALL rather than its usefulness in providing learning opportunities.

## 1.3 The Need for SALL Management

There has been a significant financial and human investment in SALL including the development of dedicated facilities containing materials, technology and personnel. This investment reflects the importance attributed to SALL by the funding institutions. They believe that SALL contributes to the overall development of the educational experience and is consistent with their institutional mission statements. It seems clear, therefore, that conceptually SALL is recognised as of importance to the learners, the teachers and the host institutions. Given the financial and conceptual investment in SALL, it follows that some emphasis would be placed on its management both as a way of protecting and nurturing the financial investment, and as a way of ensuring maximal benefit for the users.

However, there is an evident contradiction between, on the one hand, the resources devoted to SALL and the emphasis placed on its pedagogic importance; and, on the other hand, the minimal effort made to define its management and provide relevant training for its managers. This is not a contradiction that can be easily found when looking at other areas of education. Educational libraries, for example, are also well-resourced and are supported on sound pedagogical grounds, however, they have clearly defined systems of management based on research and documented practical experience; and they provide training programmes for their staff. A similar relationship between resourcing and management can be seen in the management of classroom teaching, admittedly this is clearer in primary and secondary education where well-structured management hierarchies ensure layers of management from the principal down to classroom teachers. Nevertheless, even in tertiary education, where management in certain areas may have been slower to develop, the increasing emphasis being placed on quality teaching is being matched by an emphasis on management of teaching.

The lack of attention to the management of SALL frequently leads to it being considered as a relatively low-level coordination role and in it being allocated insufficient time. As a result, SALL management is often added to a language teacher's existing duties. This may be detrimental to the development of SALL in an institution and to the potential for SALL to promote autonomous learning among the institution's students. While experience as a teacher is an important attribute for SALL managers it is not, of itself, enough to ensure good SALL management. Just like libraries or classroom teaching, the full potential of SALL can only be achieved when managed and led by professionals who have sufficient relevant experience and training. Currently, the only form of training for SALL managers appears to be on-the-job self-training. This situation needs addressing.

As will be seen later in this book, there is an important distinction between management and leadership. Both are important and both need to be practiced by a SALL manager. As will become evident in Chapter 2, the widely held belief that management can be taught but leadership is inherent to the individual is a fallacy, or, in the words of Palestini (2013) "leaders are made not born" (p.32). While certain personality types may adapt better or more quickly, both management and leadership can and should be taught to SALL managers.

## **1.4 Case Study—A Practical Perspective**

This book relates theory to practice in Chapter 5 by offering a detailed analysis of six case studies of SALL management (see Section 4.7 for a description of the

methodology used in the case studies, and Appendices 1 to 6 for the case study reports). A case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (Yin, 2009, p.18) and in those reported here the focus is on the phenomenon of management of SALL within the context of six tertiary institutions all in Hong Kong. Each case study was written by a single SALL manager following a collaboration with the authors which brought together observation, reflection and interpretation to elucidate the managers’ context.

The use of case studies is not uncommon in education as a way of understanding a specific situation and they are common in studying business management but they have not previously been applied in the context of SALL management. Our analysis of the case studies (Chapter 5) shows considerable differences between implementations of SALL management but it also shows important similarities. It is these findings that reveal the principles of SALL management (Gardner & Miller, 2011a) and allow an image of the future to emerge.

## 1.5 The Purpose of This Book

This book has been written primarily because not enough is known about how SALL is managed. Clearly SALL is being managed, and that management must be being judged as successful because SALL continues to be promoted to learners. However, because there is little documentation of the elements of successful SALL management, little is available for new or less experienced SALL managers other than what can be attained by word-of-mouth or the ever-popular institutional visits. By bringing together some of what is known about SALL management, this book may start a dialogue about approaches to that management. It is also hoped that although this book is not a manual for SALL management, it may provide some insights for those looking for practical support for SALL management.

A second reason for the book is that SALL has reached a pivotal moment in its history. Having spent a few decades becoming increasingly popular and being supported in an approximately static manner, SALL has reached a turning point where its potential to become mainstream and the impact upon it of accessibility through the Internet have started to change the way SALL is promoted and supported. This is an exciting time to look at how SALL is managed because it has become a much larger and certainly more complex job. SALL has for many years been largely associated with self-access centres but it is rapidly breaking out of those confines in two major ways. SALL is becoming integrated into taught courses and at the same time is linking its learners to resources and other learners

spread across the globe. These changes have increased the management and leadership demands on the SALL managers and, it may be argued, have raised the level within an institutional hierarchy at which SALL management needs to be situated.

Perhaps a third reason for this book is to convince readers that the management of SALL is important and something that needs to be approached in a coordinated manner, although it seems likely that readers may already be of this opinion if they are reading this book. The existing literature demonstrates that provisions for supporting SALL consist of many overlapping components which interact with each other in complicated ways to form a SALL system which is unique in each institution. Changing any single component in that system will have a ripple effect throughout the system. Thus the task of managing SALL should not be seen as a set of small independent tasks but as the management of the whole system in all its complexity. This involves interacting with various groups of people; taking responsibility for materials, facilities and environments; defining, developing and meeting expectations; developing knowledge and expertise in a range of fields; understanding and participating in relevant research; and ensuring consistency with the institutional vision.

## **1.6 The Focus of This Book**

In order to understand what management and leadership are and why they are important for SALL, this book starts with a look at the wider field of management (Chapter 2). By looking at the development of management; the difference between management and leadership, which has become increasingly clearly defined over time; and the application of management to educational settings, it is possible to define key areas of relevance to the management of SALL. By then looking more closely in Chapter 3 at SALL and how it is managed, it is possible to see the extent to which it is consistent with the lessons learned from the wider field.

In addition to looking at what has been learned elsewhere, this book makes use of a research approach to investigating the application of management in SALL. Chapter 4 suggests approaches to researching SALL management. Most importantly, that chapter also details the methodology used to conduct a series of six case studies undertaken specifically to understand how SALL is managed in six similar but different contexts. The studies were conducted in higher education institutions in Hong Kong, all of which make considerable use of SALL. These institutions were chosen because of their similarity in terms of learners, location

and vision. The authors of this book initiated the research but the SALL managers of the six institutions became co-investigators by participating in the data collection exercises and then each providing a case study report based on the data from their own institutions. These individually authored reports are included in the appendices of this book. The authors have since conducted an analysis of these case studies to understand what they show about the management of SALL in those institutions. This analysis forms the basis of Chapter 5 of this book and is arguably the most important chapter of the book because it brings together theory and practice.

This book ends by taking one step beyond the theory and the existing practice to look at implications for the future. Chapter 6 considers how SALL is likely to develop both through a process of mainstreaming by its integration into taught courses and through its embrace of rapidly developing technology. Both trends have started, both have encountered successes and some set-backs, both need further research and both are certain to continue. Although this final chapter can only speculate, it demonstrates equally as well as the previous chapters the need for trained, specialist managers of SALL who will enhance the potential advantages of SALL for learners.