

Setting up a Self Access Centre/ Student Library

Most English teachers sooner or later come to the mixed disappointing/ reassuring conclusion that what students do outside the classroom has more influence on their language learning than what you do in it. The reassuring bit is that it takes the pressure off a bit and saves you trying to change their lives in 90 minutes a week. The disappointing bit can be that the whole thing can seem out of your hands. Until, that is, you spend a little time looking at tactics to control their minds outside the classroom too!

As well as classes discussing and teaching self-study techniques, tips for students on how to be exposed to English outside the classroom and useful and inspiring homework, your school can cheaply and easily supply students with the materials they need to spend more time more usefully on their English every week. The heart of that effort is a Self- Access Centre and/ or Student Library. Below are some tips on how to set one up in your school without too much effort and expense, covering the three main areas of possible difficulty: finance, space and administration.

Financing a Self-Access Centre/ Student Library

Raising the money

If cash flow is a problem and you can't afford to invest too much before some money comes in, you could try taking deposits from all students who want to take materials home. A good level for a deposit is around twice the price of one new textbook. These deposits would be kept at the school until the student returned all materials and decided to leave the school or stop taking things home, with money taken off for lost or seriously damaged materials. Some of the money deposited could be invested in materials for students to borrow, but you must also of course be ready for a rush of refunds at times like the end of the academic year. Please note that unlike a real library, having a system of fines for late returns is likely to create ill feeling that will not be good for your business in the longer term.

One way of turning the self access materials into a revenue stream is to have similar materials available for sale, e.g. only three graded readers in the Student Library and further ones available in reception to buy. A similar system with less space and less initial investment involved is to have links to booksellers such as Amazon on your school website for each recommended book, for which you can arrange a small payment for each click. Alternatively, the whole Student Library could be a glorified second hand bookshop, where students are allowed to use the materials in the school or buy them to take home.

One further possibility is to turn the self-study area of the school into a relaxing café and have food and drinks available to buy from reception or vending machines.

Doing it on a budget

The very cheapest way of giving students extra materials they can use is simply to use things you already have. For example, if there is a computer with Internet access that is not always being used, you can simply add some recommended sites to the Favourites section of the browser and allow students to use it. Extra books from the teachers' room can also be put in reception for the students to use, maybe keeping one copy for use in the school only so teachers can use it if they need to and letting the students take the other ones home. Free books can sometimes be obtained from

publishers and used for this purpose, especially if you can convince them that students temporarily using their books and being impressed will be a stimulus to sales, e.g. by selling their books in reception or having details of how to do so and other advertising stuck to the cover of the book.

Another way you can provide materials for free is to provide folders with articles printed out from the internet or pages from newspapers and magazines. Depending on copyright laws, these should probably be the original articles rather than photocopies. You can also collect free English language entertainment magazines, tourist brochures etc.

The main problem that could occur with the freebie materials above is a lack of clear grading for students and the difficulty of using textbooks etc. for self-access. For those reasons, you really need at least some graded readers and grammar and vocabulary books that are designed for self-study if you want your student library to be used and useful. The best way of getting these cheap is of course to get them second hand (something the students can hardly complain about if they are borrowing them for free). One easy way of obtaining cheap second hand copies is to offer to buy books back from the students as long as they haven't written in them.

Finding Space for a Self-Access Centre/ Student Library

In a perfect world you would have a selection of materials in an obvious place where everyone could see them (e.g. reception) next to another selection of materials for sale, a computer lab, a language lab, an area with desks for serious study, and a more relaxed café-like area for browsing the books and group study. For the rest of us, the main tip is to find ways of using the space we already have for double or even triple uses including self-study.

As suggested above, moving some of the books out of the teachers' room into the bookshelves in reception can help free up some space for other things there, as long as you make sure the teachers can still easily find the books when you need them. This should hopefully mean you can use the reception area for students to relax and browse the materials in as well. You can also use classroom space for self-study between classes, for example by asking teachers to set up the desks round the edge of the room at the end of the class, having laptop computers and portable listening lab machines for recording voices that can be taken in and out of the classrooms, and allowing students to book spaces and times in those rooms.

Administration

The main jobs of the forms, posters, leaflets etc you design to make the self-access materials system work are: to keep track of the materials; to persuade the students to use the materials; and to guide them to the right ones.

To keep track of the materials you will need to very clearly mark which ones can be borrowed and which cannot, as well as where they should be put when they are not being used, e.g. marking textbooks "Teachers' room" or "Student library". There will also obviously need to be a record of which students have taken which books out from when, which should be easy to refer to when looking for a particular student, a particular book that has gone missing, or for all the books that should be back on a particular day.

Ways of persuading the students to use the materials include one free trial before they pay the deposit, being prompted to borrow something then they buy their textbook and posters and leaflets



advertising the service. All these can also be used to guide them to the right materials, as can a form where their teachers recommend them something to use, a book of recommendations from students, stickers and posters advertising highly recommended books, and clearly marked levels.

Other admin you will need to think about include a contract when you take a deposit, (with very clear explanation of what students will lose if they don't return a book or return it damaged) and stickers and stamps in the book with the name of school, contact details in case it is lost and someone else finds it, and warnings not to write in the book