

# Self-Access Language Learning

---

September 02

Issue 5

## Letter from the President

Last year kicked off with the election of a new committee, the creation of a new committee post (Editor of the Newsletter), a change in venue and a face lift to the HASALD website (<http://lc.ust.hk/HASALD/>).

Thanks are due to the outgoing committee members, Jean Young for giving our monthly meetings a home base at CityU's English Language Centre (as well as a very useful locker to store munchies and wine), Edward Spodick, Carra Kee and Pancy Pang for their help and hard work on the 'new-look' website, all the speakers who presented last year and of course the membership for your active participation in the meetings.

We now have a total membership of 47 people and each meeting last year was very well attended. We focused on a number of themes with presentations leading from theory and the raising of key issues in the work we do, to lively discussions of those issues.

As a result of these discussions and issues raised, the committee has had an easy time of drawing up a list for future talks. We aim to continue with themes relating to the various means we can employ to foster autonomous language learning and provide for our learners. We intend to look more at the theme of 'Secondary School SALL' (involving both local and ESF schools). 'Technology for Developing Autonomy', 'Exit Tests and Implications for SACs and SALL', 'SALL Activities and Getting Learners Involved' are all additional areas that we intend to focus on, as well as taking a closer look at the learners themselves.

We hope you'll find the future meetings as stimulating as the previous ones and we also hope that if any of you have any requests for talks/to give talks or just want to comment on what has been and is to come, you'll contact us.

Yours,  
Sarah

## Happy Birthday HASALD



**We're 10 years old!**

### In this issue...

<b>Editorial</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Features</b>	
Rethinking the relationship of self-access and autonomy Phil Benson	<b>4</b>
"Children really want to take control." Promoting learner autonomy with primary school children: An interview with Jose Lai. Richard Pemberton	<b>8</b>
<b>The year in review</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Centre updates and issues</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Bibliography update</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Contributors to this issue</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Contact Us</b>	<b>38</b>

## Editorial

Welcome to this issue of *Self-Access Language Learning*. We haven't published a newsletter for a few years and are, therefore, excited to bring this one to you. I would like at the outset to thank all those who have contributed and commend every article and report to you.

HASALD has a new website (<http://lc.ust.hk/HASALD/>) and this newsletter is also available there. I thank Carra Kee for her help in getting it there.

This issue is very much focused on what's happening here in Hong Kong. I feel that we can quite rightfully claim that Hong Kong continues to be a hub of activity related to self-access language learning. The schedule of meetings of the association for 2001-2002 and the range of speakers and topics addressed might be seen as testament to this (see 'The year in review').

Phil Benson's feature article in this issue is, as he explains, an account of the development of his thinking about self-access and autonomy as a result of not just his stimulating presentation last year, but 10 years membership of HASALD. We're proud to announce HASALD's 10<sup>th</sup> birthday and Phil's ongoing involvement with the association. We look forward to another thought-provoking talk from him this year.

In our 'Centre updates and issues' section of this issue, the authors (some of whom were also presenters last year) report on recent developments and challenges arising in their own centres. Again, this is testimony to the fact that SAC managers in Hong Kong are not sitting back and resting on their laurels.

I believe that it is due to the activity in the area here that we continue to attract internationally acclaimed visitors. I am very happy to include in this issue Richard Pemberton's interview with Jose Lai (of CUHK) who shares her insight into a very exciting local project that involves also Leni Dam and David Little. Richard also reports on talks given by Leni and David during their visit in April (see 'The year in review').

Having said that our focus for this issue is local, we are confident that our members will continue to make important contributions to international forums. Note, for example, that five of our members will participate in the symposium on 'Learner Autonomy in Language Learning' at AILA in December. We look forward to continuing to report on the activities of our membership locally and internationally.

We would also like to forge and strengthen links with other associations and publications. We are happy to report on continued strong links with the JALT Learner Development Special Interest Group. Richard Pemberton and I took part in their forum at the JALT conference in Fukuoka last year and Phil Benson will take part this year in Shizuoka. Please ask if you'd like to look at the latest issue of their newsletter, *Learning Learning*.

In the meantime, enjoy this issue of *Self-Access Language Learning*, see the back page for details of how you can contact us and contribute to future issues, and have a great year.

Melissa

## Rethinking the relationship of self-access and autonomy

Phil Benson

This paper is based on a talk that I gave at a HASALD meeting in September 2001. In that talk, I wanted to reflect on the ways in which my understanding of self-access and autonomy had developed since the early 1990s. But in preparing the talk, I soon found that it was difficult to do this without also talking about the ways in which concepts of self-access and autonomy had themselves developed in response to what I called the changing landscape of language teaching and learning in the 1990s. The outcome was that my talk focused much more on the changing contexts for work on self-access and autonomy than it did on the development of my own thinking.

A paper based on this talk will be published shortly in *The Kluwer International Handbook of English Language Education*, which means that I have an opportunity to return to my original intention. HASALD is 10 years old this year and I feel this is an appropriate moment for some reflection! So I hope that my story will provoke at least one or two others to tell the story in their own way.

### *Discovering self-access*

I arrived in Hong Kong in September 1991 knowing very little about self-access or autonomy. The University of Hong Kong had decided to set up its self-access centre a year earlier and part of my job was to join a team who would 'make it work'. My main qualification for joining this team was that I had some experience of working in an open-access computer centre at the University of Exeter in the UK, which in retrospect does not seem like much of a qualification at all. But in

those days, few teachers had experience of self-access and in any case enthusiasm seemed to count for more than expertise.

My enthusiasm for self-access was easily explained. My own language learning experiences as an adult had all been self-instructed. I do not particularly enjoy attending language learning classes and for every language I had learned (or more accurately, half-learned), I had gathered together whatever resources I could and taught myself. The idea of gathering together resources in a self-access centre so that other language learners could do the same seemed an attractive one.

Somewhat naively, I thought that learners of English at HKU would respond enthusiastically to self-access. Some of them did, of course, but the problem was that the self-access centre was not only intended for enthusiastic learners. As I became more aware of the complex politics of language education in Hong Kong, I began to understand that we were also expected to make the self-access centre work for those who preferred the 'classroom way', and even for those who preferred no way at all!

One of my first discoveries, however, was that we were not alone at HKU. Several other universities were setting up self-access centres and we soon began to exchange experiences and ideas. It was at this point that the idea of autonomy began to kick in. In 1991 and 1992, we were privileged to share the practical and theoretical wisdom of Philip Riley, who made two long visits to Hong Kong. Ever so gently, Philip made me aware that there was not much point to self-access without autonomy. It was at this point that I began the long, arduous and still incomplete process of understanding what self-access and autonomy mean.

### *Understanding self-access*

The first step was to come to some understanding of what self-access actually was. My first efforts led me to the conclusion that self-access was, in some sense, a 'method' of learning. Practical experience with students at HKU, however, taught me that self-access was little more than an institutional arrangement that had few definite implications for the ways in which students actually learned. They could either take it or leave it, or, if they had no choice but to take it, they could find a hundred ways around the problem of actually learning by themselves.

In my mind, the 'problem' of self-access therefore became a problem of how we – as self-access managers – could communicate our intentions to the students through the ways in which we organised the self-access centre and the services we provided. But in order to do this, we would need to have a clearer understanding of what our intentions were. Did we simply expect them to learn English in the self-access centre, or did we expect more than this? The key intention, I began to understand, had to be that the students would become more autonomous through their use of the self-access centre.

Understanding that using a self-access centre and learning autonomously are two different things took time, but eventually the difference became clear to me. The first simply described something that students *did*, either of their own free will or because their teachers told them to do it. The second described a particular *way of doing it*, which involved both the development of certain skills and attitudes and a willingness to develop them. From this point of view, it seemed clear that autonomy was not only a goal of self-access, it was also an *essential* goal because students needed some

degree of autonomy in order to get anywhere at all with self-access.

I should add to this that I also began to feel that autonomy was something worthwhile in its own right. Autonomy was precisely what many of the students I was working with appeared to lack. In the past, I had read work by Illich, Freire and others advocating freedom in education. But I had not really connected this with my own preferences for self-instruction and my work as a language teacher. I now began to make these connections through the concept of autonomy. I was also beginning to reverse the relationship between autonomy and self-access in my mind. In other words, I was not only thinking of autonomy as a goal for self-access. I was also beginning to think of self-access as one of several ways of working towards that goal.

### *Understanding self-access and autonomy*

Autonomy both defined a purpose for self-access and gave a sense of direction to our work at HKU. In self-access management, there were always several ways of approaching questions about the kinds of resources we provided, the ways we organised them, the kinds of support we offered, and so on. In any situation, we could always do things in 'this way' or 'that way' and, since I was fortunate to be working with colleagues who were thinking along similar lines, the goal of developing the students' autonomy would generally determine the choices we made.

One question remained, however: If self-access learning *requires* some degree of autonomy, how can autonomy be achieved *through* self-access? I was reluctant to buy into the idea of learner training, which remains, in my view, antithetical to the idea of freedom in learning and

self-reliance. For a while, I wrestled with the idea that the learners would eventually 'train themselves', or pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, but this idea also seemed to contradict the reality that I was observing at HKU. So for some time, this question of how learners would become more autonomous through self-access seemed to be similar to the question: Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? And it was only by understanding that autonomy is not necessarily born out of self-access that I was able to resolve this chicken and egg question to my own satisfaction.

Having given credit to Philip Riley for introducing me to the idea that autonomy should be the goal of self-access, I should now give credit to David Nunan for helping me understand that autonomy did not necessarily need self-access. His decisive intervention came, perhaps unknowingly, around 1994 when Peter Voller and I were beginning to put together the collection of papers that was eventually published under the title, *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. This book, I have to point out, was originally intended to be a collection of papers on self-access. When we discussed the idea with David Nunan, however, hoping to benefit both from his experience in publishing and the contribution of a paper, his first response was that a collection on autonomy would be a far better idea.

His point was, of course, that self-access can make a contribution to the development of autonomy, but it is not the only route to this goal. Perhaps, this point should have been obvious to me – there were, after all, others such as Leni Dam working for autonomy without self-access. But like many others, I had come to the idea of autonomy *through* self-access work. Autonomy served the practical purpose of defining a goal for self-access in my mind, and it is only with

the benefit of hindsight that I see how far I had confused this goal with one method of achieving it.

#### *Understanding autonomy*

Several critical contributions to the book (by Alastair Pennycook, Bill Littlewood, Michael Breen and Andrew Littlejohn, especially) forced me to think carefully about the contribution of self-access to the goal of autonomy. In particular, it became clear that the well-known problem of addressing productive (as opposed to receptive) language skills through self-access had to be taken seriously, because it influenced the extent to which learners could develop their own 'voices' in the second language.

Like others, I had been aware of this limitation before, but I had tended to think of it as a problem that could eventually be overcome. As an editor, I even urged the more critical contributors to acknowledge this! With hindsight, however, I realise that this was little more than an act of faith. Self-access work can, of course, contribute a great deal towards a learner's autonomy. But there are also things that it typically does not contribute, and we should perhaps be looking elsewhere for these contributions. More importantly, there is no good reason to believe that a goal as complex as autonomy will be achieved through any single method.

The experience of co-editing a book on autonomy was a salutary experience, however, not only because of the doubts it raised about the contribution of self-access, but also because it made me realise how little I had actually understood about autonomy itself. In my own chapter in the book on the philosophy and politics of autonomy, I tried to make sense of this construct by talking about different versions of autonomy (technical, psychological and political) corresponding to different

contexts and different ideological positions. For a while, I thought I had got it right. My confidence, however, was soon undermined by a nagging, post-modern doubt that autonomy could well be, at the end of the day, whatever an autonomous person thinks it is.

#### *Understanding learners' lives*

Other commitments at HKU had, by the late 1990s, limited my work in the self-access centre. I was doing far more classroom teaching and, if I was to maintain my commitment to autonomy, I would have to work out how it could be developed in the classroom. In academic writing courses, this led to a particular interest in project work and process writing as means towards the goal of autonomy.

I had also become interested in research on 'language learning histories'. The motivation for this research was, in part, a feeling that autonomy was something much bigger than anything we could achieve either through our work in self-access or our work in the classroom. Autonomy was, I was beginning to feel, something that could only develop over the course of an individual's life. Reading the interviews that I conducted for a project with David Nunan, in which HKU students described their lifelong experiences of learning English, confirmed this feeling. When we encountered a learner, in the self-access centre or in the classroom, I felt, we were participating in a moment in a long-term process that already had its own trajectory. The problem of helping the learners develop their autonomy became a problem of understanding that trajectory and of creating situations that would allow it to develop freely.

It was in the midst of this work that Chris Candlin asked me to write the book that has recently been

published as *Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning*. Chris helped me to connect ideas together by urging me to 'problematise' the idea of autonomy and its relationship to the various methods and practices associated with it. This I attempted to do by defining autonomy as a capacity to control one's own learning, while at the same time suggesting that learning can be controlled in many ways.

This way of thinking about autonomy makes me feel even more strongly that autonomy is whatever an autonomous person thinks it is. Underlying this feeling is the belief that the language learning process is so multi-faceted and complex that we cannot really say which aspects of control are more important than others, or which combinations of these aspects really constitute 'true' autonomy. Ultimately, this seems to be a question for the learners themselves to decide. We are most likely to recognise autonomy in the learners' overall feeling that they are in control of their learning – a feeling that may be independent of what we actually see them doing.

#### *A tentative conclusion*

The aim of this paper has really been to argue for a particular position on the relationship between self-access and autonomy. I continue to feel that there is little purpose to self-access if it not connected to the broader goal of developing the learners' autonomy. But I also feel that this is a complex and slippery goal that does not tell us exactly what we should be doing when we work with students in self-access.

In sum, then, I am arguing for a much more fuzzy understanding of the relationship between self-access and autonomy than I was prepared to in the past. In the past, I wanted to know exactly what autonomy was

and exactly what self-access could contribute towards it. Now I am prepared to accept that autonomy is something that we can work towards in self-access without knowing exactly what it is or what exactly self-access work will contribute towards it. I would even argue that there is a risk in trying to know these things more exactly. The risk is that we will define autonomy in a certain way – and probably in the way that is most favourable to self-access – by emphasising certain aspects of control over learning over others. We may then push the students towards our definition without really asking them about the particular senses in which they would like to take more control over their learning.

Avoiding this risk, I feel, means paying much more attention to individual learners as people by trying to understand where they have come from and where they are going. In other words, whenever we advise a learner in self-access, we need to maintain a sense that we are participating in a particular moment in a particular learner's life. What the learners say and hear during those moments is dependent on everything else that is currently happening in their language learning and their lives. And for this reason, the effects of our advice and their subsequent actions will always be unpredictable. This advice is likely to be more effective, though, if it is based on an awareness of where the learners are heading and what they expect of self-access at that particular moment in time.

This position can, of course, be justified by theory and evidence, but I have presented it as the outcome of experience because I feel that this is exactly what it is!

## “Children really want to take control.” Promoting learner autonomy with primary school children: An interview with Jose Lai.

Richard Pemberton

In Hong Kong, we are used to a society and education system that places value on the passing of examinations. We are often told that students are not ready to make decisions about their own learning – both at a tertiary, and more commonly, secondary level. In this environment, it seems scarcely credible that a government-aided school could be set up that would found its educational philosophy on the concept of learner autonomy, and not just pay lip service to it. But it is happening. A primary school (yes, a primary school) is being set up that will implement a learning-to-learn approach throughout its curriculum. I talked to Jose Lai, a prime mover behind the school's educational philosophy, to find out more.

### *Proposing a 'learning-to-learn' primary school*

The school, a government-aided primary school run by The Hong Kong Chinese Church of Christ, one of the most recent new primary schools to be approved by the Education Department, is expected to open in 2006 in Tuen Mun. Jose Lai (who many will know as Assistant Director of the ELTU and proponent of self-directed learning at CUHK) has been on the Education Committee of the church's School Sponsoring Body for many years, and managed to convince the committee and the School Sponsoring Body of the benefits of a learning-to-learn approach. To my surprise, she said that this was not a big problem in the current era of educational reform: they were all

behind the idea, business leaders included.

Convincing church members was not quite so easy, though things now seem to be progressing well. Various concerns were expressed. Some were practising teachers, and wondered whether students were capable of making decisions for themselves or were afraid that students would be allowed to make decisions regarding all aspects of their education, including the curriculum. Others wondered whether the large class sizes would be a barrier to implementing the approach. As part of the process of convincing church members, meetings were held and David Little and Leni Dam were appointed as overseas experts on the school's Advisory Board. One of their first duties was to spend a week in Hong Kong in April visiting local primary schools, meeting with the Church's task group, and holding seminars for ED staff, local teachers and principals (both secondary and primary) and church members. In the seminars they explained the philosophy behind the learning-to-learn approach and showed how it had been and could be implemented in schools (see report on p.16). The next people to be engaged in the approach, apart from future staff, will be prospective parents, when the school is about to open.

#### *Implementing a learning-to-learn approach*

The idea is that the approach will be built into the formal curriculum as an integral part of learning. "As we regard *learning to learn* as a central educational goal, our teaching will use techniques that make the learning process visible to learners and teachers alike", says Jose. One important way in which the process will be made visible is through the use of logbooks and portfolios.

#### *Responding to critics*

What does Jose think of the views of doubters – those who believe that learner autonomy is not appropriate for Chinese students, and certainly not for Chinese primary school students? Her answer is simple: "We try to introduce this learner autonomy concept at a tertiary level, but my experience tells me that we are a little bit too late. A few years back I said 'How I wish we could implement this as early as possible!' ... It *is* possible because when you look at how children learn these days, they really want to take control. But we suppress them. They have motivation; we suppress them."

When I called her to check the content of the interview, she added that children not only wanted to take control but are also capable of doing so. As she put it, "Human beings are endowed with the innate ability to explore, to learn and to self-perpetuate. Given the proper support and guidance, children as young as pre-schoolers are capable of directing their learning path. I have witnessed such active learning behaviours in the kindergartens we are running."

#### *Meeting challenges*

Of course, as she acknowledges, the support of parents and teachers will be crucial. But Jose is upbeat about the challenges that lie ahead. The School Sponsoring Body will recruit teachers who support the philosophy, and will provide pre- and in-service training. Teachers in established schools and systems tend to defend their own territory, she says, and to resist new ideas. But with a brand new school, there is no "historical baggage." With a supportive school framework, Jose believes that a new approach to helping children learn can take root, at least in one school in Hong Kong. "If we can implement



things that help teachers to understand and give them *space* to develop, then we have hope.”

#### *Further aims*

But her hopes are not limited to the one school. Although she downplays talk of knock-on effects as being ambitious at this stage, she says that one of the aims of the church’s Education Committee is to promote the learning-to-learn approach more widely, with the support of the ED. Hopefully, she says, other schools will later develop their own ‘Learning-to-learn’ approach, as appropriate to their own situations. A crucial factor, she says, will be government support.

If this happens, the potential for self-directed learning in secondary schools and universities in Hong Kong can be imagined, even within an exam-dominated system. If it does not, then the mass of Hong Kong students will continue to be labelled (despite evidence to the contrary) ‘unready to make decisions about their own learning’.

## The year in review

### Foreword

Melissa Megan

As suggested in the editorial, I believe that the 2001-2 programme of speakers and topics justifies our claiming to be one of the most active associations in this field anywhere in the world. More importantly, meetings such as those held last year help us collectively but also individually to rethink our positions regarding self-access.

The year started with a talk by Phil Benson. It could be argued that Phil’s presentation ‘grounded’ the talks that followed. We look forward to reading a paper based on that talk in

*The Kluwer International Handbook of English Language Education* (forthcoming).

In December, a number of our local SAC managers got together to present and discuss some of the problems and issues that arise in managing SACs. A number of these managers have contributed reports that have been compiled in the following section, ‘Centre updates and issues’.

In February and March, we heard first from Peter Voller and next from Ian McGrath. Peter teaches on the MA TESOL course at HKU and Ian has conducted research with teachers doing an MA in ELT at the PolyU. Both propose a link between the promotion of learner autonomy and teacher autonomy.

In April, David Gardner and Bruce Morrison presented on evaluating SACs/SALL. A summary of their talk follows. Susanna Ho has also written a response to David and Bruce’s talk. As Susanna suggests, any discussion of evaluating SACs/SALL is bound to be thought-provoking and this is certainly an area that we might revisit in the future.

In May and June we heard from our colleagues working in secondary schools. Mark Hopkins, Lindsay Miller, Elza Tsang and Tammy Wong presented on a project being funded by the HK Education Department. Mark Hopkins writes about the project in the report that follows. Finally, Doug Taylor and his team presented on the setting up of a centre for the ESF schools. A report on this process can be found in the ‘Centre updates and issues’ section.

I’m pleased to also include in this section Richard Pemberton’s report on another important ‘event’ last year – Leni Dam and David Little’s visit to HK and their talks organised by the Education Department.

## How do you evaluate an SAC?

David Gardner  
Bruce Morrison

Evaluating a self-access centre (SAC) is a problem that David and Bruce have researched separately. In this presentation they each spoke from the perspective of their own research about how they had approached the problem.

David spoke first about why evaluating an SAC is important. He then explained why he sees it as a problem, showing how evaluating an SAC is different from evaluating classroom learning, that there are many different, and often overlapping, things to evaluate, and that the meaning of the evaluation is different for different stake holders. He supported his points with a brief illustration of the problems taken from his own attempts to evaluate an SAC (Gardner 2001). He then presented four questions which evaluators need to consider when conducting an evaluation.

Bruce began by reviewing four possible approaches to conducting an evaluation. He then argued that to evaluate an SAC it is important to first define it in terms of stakeholder perceptions and he discussed some possible ways of doing that. Finally, he presented an approach based on the notion of using mapping as a metaphor for examining what it is that might define an SAC and might then be used as the basis for an evaluation framework.

This presentation was based on the speakers' chapters in *Learner Autonomy 7: Challenges to Research and Practice* edited by Phil Benson and Sarah Toogood, which is soon to be published by Authentik. These chapters, 'Evaluating self-access language learning' (David Gardner) and 'The troubling process of mapping and evaluating a self-access language learning centre' (Bruce

Morrison) provide a fuller account of the authors' ideas and findings and more detail about their research. In the same volume is also a chapter by Sarah Toogood and Richard Pemberton which provides another interesting perspective on evaluation in self-access and is based on a three-year case study.

The presenters' conclusions at the end of the presentation were predictably tentative given the complexity of the problem, the unfinished nature of their work and the fact that they are not in total agreement about everything. They said:

1. Evaluation of SACs is important but it cannot be achieved by adapting methods of classroom evaluation.
2. A new approach is needed which will encompass:
  - a. Clear definition of what an SAC is.
  - b. Clear identification of all stakeholders.
  - c. Asking key questions.
  - d. Making the findings known to all stakeholders.

The question and answer session at the end of the presentation revealed a general acknowledgement of the problems and some specific worries but no clear answers.

## References

Benson, P. & Toogood, S. (forthcoming) *Learner Autonomy 7: Challenges to Research and Practice*. Dublin: Authentik.

Gardner, D. 2001. Making self-access centres more effective. In D.K. Kember, S. Candlin and L. Yan (Eds), *Further Case Studies of Improving Teaching and Learning from the Action Learning Project* (pp.143-160). Hong Kong: Action Learning Project.

## A response to the talk ‘How do you evaluate an SAC?’

Susanna Ho

David and Bruce revisited the issue of evaluating SACs on 15 April 2002. In the first part of the talk, David pointed out three reasons why there seems to be so little development in the area of evaluation. First of all, teachers are too busy to find the time to carry out any evaluation. Even if teachers have the time and energy to think about evaluation, there is always a problem of focus. Should we evaluate hardware such as facilities and equipment, or should we evaluate learners and learner effectiveness? When it comes to evaluating different SACs, can we use the same procedures for all, or do we need to come up with specific means for each particular SAC?

Bruce raised some thought-provoking questions in the second part of the talk. After giving a quick review of the four approaches to pedagogical evaluation, he further complicated the issue of evaluating an SAC by raising a fundamental and yet very important question: What is an SAC? It is very often the underlying philosophies an SAC embodies that make it an SAC as such. So in order to evaluate an SAC, one of the best ways to go about it seems to be exploring the perspectives of the different stakeholders in the SAC, and this can be done by means of a case study approach.

If you think that David and Bruce did not give you any concrete answers on the issue of evaluating an SAC, they actually did. Consider your situation, and come up with evaluation methods that best suit your needs, and most important of all, best match your philosophies of SALL. If you missed their talk and want listen to it for yourself, we have an audio recording to share. Contact one of the HASALD committee members.

## Developing SALL in local secondary schools: The EDSALL project

Mark Hopkins

### *Introduction*

Some of you will remember the presentation given by Lindsay Miller, Elza Tsang, Tammy Wong and myself on 30 May this year, in which the EDSALL project was first introduced. I'd like to take this opportunity to refresh the memories of some, and introduce to other readers the background of the project so far. Because the project has been underway, in some form, for over three years, the background is quite detailed. For reasons of lack of space as well as ethical considerations, I have resisted the temptation to make judgements on specific actions and decisions taken when I was a participant in those activities and decision-making processes. Any future attempt at a balanced evaluation will in any case need to assess the project from a number of different, and even opposing perspectives, and include the views of all three (or even four) groups of participants

The project in its present form involves three groups of participants (see Figure 1 below), and their roles are specified in the project plan (Curriculum Development 2002a).

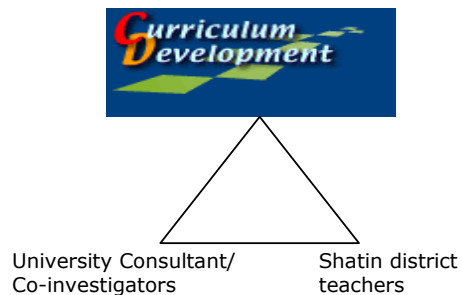


Figure 1: Participant groups in the EDSALL project

Basically the EDSALL project falls into the category of a Collaborative Research and Development ('Seed') Project in the English Language Education Key Learning Area, and the purpose of all such projects is to:

- generate useful experiences for the reference of schools, teachers and the community;
- develop a critical mass of curriculum change agents and leaders in schools (e.g. teachers, school heads, teacher librarians) to enhance the capacity for curriculum reform; and
- act as an impetus to school-based curriculum development (Curriculum Development 2002b)

#### *Phase I (Pilot) Project*

As core team members of the SAC at HKUST, Elza and I take on much of the responsibility for fostering links with the secondary sector. As part of this responsibility, we delivered a paper on SALL activities in May 1999 to teachers attending the HASALD Workshop Day, and were pleased that the response from two teachers (one of whom was Tammy Wong) was extremely positive, and led to invitations to visit their schools. After giving presentations to staff and students at the two schools on the nature, purpose and benefits of SALL in late 1999 and early 2000, we maintained the relationships through occasional meetings and regular email communications, focusing on giving advice on hardware, software and materials purchases and strategies for integrating SALL into classroom teaching. This activity, lasting for nearly two years, was subsequently described as Phase I of the EDSALL project or the 'pilot project'.

In December 2000 we tried to attract funding for our work from UGC, in part to pay for replacement teachers at HKUST so that we could spend more time working with the schools, and our funding proposal for

approximately HK\$1.3 million included recruiting a school-based SALL adviser and part-time R&D project assistant for a further two years. We envisaged focusing on building up working contacts with the original two schools (both in Shatin) in the initial phase, before disseminating our anticipated successes and examples of good practice to other schools in the same district. By July 2001 we learnt that our funding application with UGC had been unsuccessful, but were immediately approached by a senior project manager at the Curriculum Development Institute (CDI) of the Education Department. Although the extent of the funding was not to be finalised until the end of the year, we knew from the summer of 2001 that our project could be continued in some form in partnership with the Education Department and with added support from Lindsay Miller at City University.

In fact, the approach from the CDI was not entirely a surprise since we had cooperated with them in a series of SALL workshops in January 2000, during which we helped participant teachers to design materials for use in the classroom, which were later collated and edited to be published and distributed to all Hong Kong secondary schools (Education Department 2001). What was not clear at the outset, however, was the precise nature of the cooperation which would be expected from each partner in the project.

#### *Project participants*

As stated earlier, the 'seed' or 'collaborative research and development' project was planned by the CDI to involve three groups of participants, all of whom were to be employed on a part-time basis. Each school was to nominate a 'seed' teacher or project coordinator, who would be a full-time teacher at the school (and in one case an English

panel chair), but there was to be no funding given directly to the schools. The effect of this was to make the role of one of the groups, the Shatin district teachers, an unpaid and voluntary one, with obvious implications for the morale and pace of the project given that serving teachers would have no secondment or reduction in their teaching timetables in return for their participation in the project. The university participants were actually unaware of this until the question was asked by the head teacher of one of the schools at a meeting in March 2002. Later on it also became clear that the project had been funded on a 'one-off' basis, with no planned provision for further funding. This is in itself not unusual in the Hong Kong context but it had implications also for the continuity of the project.

According to the published plan (Curriculum Development 2002a), the EDSALL project was to run from October 2001 to August 2002, but we had earlier agreed that it would need to operate for a further year (a total of five school terms); in fact top-up funding has recently been granted to cover the period September-December 2002, with the promise of a further, final top-up to take it to the start of the following financial year (April 2003), thus making its lifespan four school terms. The schools themselves have no control over the project timetable at a macro level, though of course they can choose to opt out of the project (as one has already done), and the involvement of other participants is dependent on the availability of teachers for school visits: an example of this was the necessary pause in the project in June 2002 during the year-end school examination period. We university participants are limited in our involvement by the duration and amount of the funding which determines the amount of time we

have available for the project. The schools are the two with whom we had made initial contact in 1999 (SKH Tsang Shui Tim Secondary School and Baptist Lui Ming Choi Secondary School), plus another two nominated by the Education Department, one of which has since withdrawn from the project. The CDI has seconded four administrators to work on the project on a regular basis, with provision for more if needed.

### *Description of Phase II*

Although Phase I of the project (the pilot) was undertaken on a demand-driven basis without much advance planning by Elza and myself, in retrospect it can be seen to have been extremely useful in that it afforded us immediate and easy access to two secondary schools, and later enabled the project team to build on already established relationships, especially with Tammy. In the context of the introduction of a relatively unfamiliar learning approach such as SALL, one which is arguably inimical to the Hong Kong education system, mutual trust between the advisers and practitioners is very important. We were later heartened to find that the time spent with the three teachers in the two schools during the course of Phase I was recompensed by a much more pro-active participation by these schools compared with the two which joined the project at the start of Phase II.

Phase II has been running to date for nearly nine months and, unlike Phase I, has been characterised by much more activity in schools (as a result of the provision of funding, which effectively released Elza and I from 50% of our teaching between February and May 2002), but also greater input and overall control from the CDI. In addition to our informal contacts with the individual teachers who coordinate the project

in the two schools, in Phase II we have delivered:

- two more whole-school SALL presentations which have been video-recorded then adapted and given again by project teachers to individual year-groups
- two SALL training workshops for all English teachers
- seven skills workshops for students (based on the skills of writing, speaking, vocabulary and listening/reading)
- one public speaking workshop for students preparing for a Hong Kong competition,

and we have also helped to prepare and coordinate a SALL outing, a full-day excursion which involved more than 100 students, supported by their teachers, seeking out and interviewing foreign tourists in three different locations.

The above activities have been mainly undertaken jointly by the three university participants, though in some cases we have been observed by one or more of the CDI team. In addition to preparing and delivering these in-school activities we have also been involved in lesson observations, video-recordings and website design, and have spent time in project meetings and discussions, usually by email or telephone but sometimes face-to-face. Given the number of CDI/tertiary participants in Phase II (7-8) and the fact that they are located in three different areas, inter-group communication was never going to be as unproblematic as in Phase I. Nevertheless it came as a surprise to us just how much project time actually had to be spent in communicating, pre- and post-activity, at the instigation of the CDI team and its leader. This has been the most significant difference between Phase I and Phase II apart from the increased scope of the project, and I will suggest possible reasons for this in the following section.

#### *Tentative evaluation of Phases I & II*

Feedback from the three schools has been uniformly positive: one school which submitted a report on the effectiveness of Phase II commented that "both teachers and students have learned a lot more about SALL than we could have imagined" but added that as a result of a "lack of funding from the school to build up a SAC, the SALL core team has to apply for the Quality Education Fund". The decision to invest in an SAC, a permanent location and focal point for SALL activities within the school, is one indication of how far the 'culture of SALL' seems to have penetrated in a relatively short time. Feedback from students at the schools has also been encouraging: at the HASALD presentation on 30 May 2002, Tammy reported some of her students' impressions of the SALL outing, for example, "I have learnt how to interview the tourists and have more confidence to speak with foreigners. I have also learnt to be cooperative with my group members."

For the other two groups of participants the benefits of working collaboratively have been less clear-cut. The increased number of participants in Phase II (from two to seven) has, as previously mentioned, led to much more time spent on communication. Our perception of 'fitting in' to a different project model has led us to become more conscious of how differing working styles and practices impact upon the running of the project on a day-to-day basis. Though more on this issue will have to wait for a more comprehensive evaluation of the project, a significant difference which has emerged is how to manage relationships with the schools. Rather than focusing on teacher training workshops the aim of which is to produce an easily replicable set of 'deliverables', Elza and I have tended to view the ultimate goal of

the project in terms that reflect (we believe) more closely the general purpose of 'seed' projects, to 'develop a critical mass of curriculum change agents' (Curriculum Development 2002b) by effecting changes in teachers' attitudes. As Thavenius (1999) remarked, 'the crucial issue of learner autonomy training in a school context is teacher autonomy training...[which is] not just a matter of changing teaching techniques, it is a matter of changing teacher personality'. This is a relatively common view in the literature on SALL, but one which cannot hope to be addressed by too much emphasis on training teachers to produce materials.

One way we have recently attempted to address this goal has been through the development of an online discussion forum using WebBoard software (available at *SALL in Secondary Schools 2002*, via the pull-down menu 'SALL chat'), but it remains to be seen whether this will have the same desired team-building effect as face-to-face or telephone conversations.

To summarise then, evaluation of the success of the EDSALL project has to take into account not just what has been achieved in terms of activities planned and carried out and materials produced, but also the intangibles, the extent to which the individuals implicated in the project feel that progress is being made towards the end goal of establishing a SALL culture or greater learner autonomy in the three schools. Such an evaluation will have to wait for a full report on the project, but should also address the different concerns of the three main groups of participants and even the end-users, the students in the schools.

### *Conclusion*

Any attempt to promote SALL within the rather closed and inflexible

curriculum framework of the Hong Kong secondary education system is to be welcomed, but in the wider picture of the heated debate over standards and policy in language education in Hong Kong it is a bold step. Funding is relatively little (less than HK\$700,000) and heavily constrained, but the nature of the project suggests that financial resources, except insofar as they buy the time of participants, will not be the deciding factor in the success or otherwise of the project. Rather, as a collaborative venture between three very different groups of participants, it is the synergy between them or lack of it which will determine the outcome.

In general, attempts at collaborative research and development between the ED and secondary schools are greeted with some cynicism by teachers themselves, because they are perceived to involve increased workload with no immediate benefit to them or their students (though some accrues to the head teachers of their schools in the form of increased prestige, as documented by Poon 2000). In the case of the EDSALL project however, the provision of a part-time consultant and two co-investigators from tertiary institutions holds out to the teachers at the chalkface the promise of genuine expert and logistic (if not financial) support; in addition, the goal of the project (promoting learner autonomy and a culture of SALL) should require a change or at least a re-examination of the roles of teacher and learner and a shifting to the learner of more of the responsibility for his or her own learning, which may imply a reduced workload for the teacher. If these two factors, the *interdependence* and synergy between the three groups of project participants and the ultimate goal of greater learner *independence* or autonomy, are kept firmly in view, there is every chance for the project's ultimate success.

## References

- Curriculum Development. 2002a. *Collaborative Research and Development ("Seed") Projects for 2001-02*. Available at [http://cd.ed.gov.hk/curr\\_framework/seed/ee3/ee3.doc](http://cd.ed.gov.hk/curr_framework/seed/ee3/ee3.doc)
- Curriculum Development. 2002b. *English Language Education: Key Learning Area Curriculum Guide*. Available at [http://cd.ed.gov.hk/cla\\_guide/enghtml/chapter01/ch06-5.html](http://cd.ed.gov.hk/cla_guide/enghtml/chapter01/ch06-5.html)
- Education Department. 2001. *Self-Access Language Learning for Secondary Schools*. Hong Kong: English Section, Education Department.
- Poon, A. 2000. *Medium of Instruction in Hong Kong: Policy and Practice*. Maryland: University Press Of America.
- Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) in Secondary Schools 2002*. Available at <http://lc.ust.hk/~sac/activities/nonhkust/edsal/>
- Thavenius, C. 1999. Teacher Autonomy for Learner Autonomy. In S. Cotterall & D. Crabbe. (Eds). 1999. *Learner Autonomy in Language Learning: Defining the field and effecting change*. Bayreuth Contributions to Glottodidactics, Vol 8. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Introducing a learning-to-learn approach in schools: a report on talks given by **Leni Dam** and **David Little** at the Kowloon Regional Education Office, 25 April 2002  
Richard Pemberton

Leni Dam and David Little gave a talk in April this year to local primary and secondary teachers and principals. This was as part of a visit to Hong Kong in connection with the new primary school to open in Tuen Mun (see interview with Jose Lai on p. 7).

In the first talk, **Leni Dam** gave the audience guidelines on 'How to implement the learning-to-learn approach in our schools'. The talk was packed with insights and examples from her extensive

experience of developing learner autonomy in schools. Most HASALD members will be familiar with Leni Dam's work but there was much that was fresh and new to me (and indeed some was drawn from a new chapter in an upcoming book edited by David Little and to be published by Authentik).

How did she come to believe that the purpose of teaching is to help students to learn for themselves? On her first day of teaching, her well-prepared lessons had been met by yawning from the bored and inattentive teenagers in the classroom. On the second day, she tried to improve her teaching in order to 'activate' the students, but met with the same response. So far, so far familiar, to many secondary teachers. After two days of this, though, rather than reverting to teacher-directed mode, she finally banged the desk, got their attention, and said, "OK! So what do YOU want to do?" These were her first steps in a new direction, and led her on a career-long path of school teaching and teacher education that has had as its central theme the development of learner autonomy.

She said that there were a number of important issues in implementing a learning-to-learn approach: a shift in focus from teaching to learning; changes in the roles of teacher and learners; seeing the classroom as a rich language learning environment (she prefers to use the learners' own resources and interests rather than asking them to perform simulated L1 interactions – "Stop pretending you are in the L1 environment!" as she puts it); and an acknowledgement of the important role of reflection and documentation. In the latter regard, she highlighted diaries as being very useful tools not only to organise and evaluate learning (her students and her teachers' students use them to plan work for the lesson, report what was done and evaluate progress),



but also to actually learn the language (by providing a place where students can write about and learn what they want and for their own purposes). Leni keeps a diary herself, with lesson plans on the left-hand page and comments on the right – in this way, like the learners, her plans for the next day are based on the results of the previous one; and the learners can see that she practises what she preaches.

She outlined four steps as vital in the process of developing autonomy: experience → awareness (of options/ways of organising and evaluating etc.) → decision-making → responsibility. To illustrate how this process can be implemented, here is a possible lesson plan that she presented:

*Stage 1* - Teacher-directed activities promoting awareness raising about the learning environment, responsibilities and useful activities.

*Stage 2* - Learner-directed activities (e.g. learners share homework in pairs or groups; learners choose activities in groups, pairs or individually; learners plan homework/next step; learners evaluate work carried out – again in groups, pairs or individually) – at this point, she says, the teacher has to just step back and let students take responsibility (even if they don't).

*Stage 3* - Together-sessions' e.g. joint events related to the topic in questions (songs, story-telling etc.); presentation and evaluation of work done at stage 2; joint overall evaluation.

Naturally, anyone trying to implement such an approach is likely to face problems, and Leni listed several, including: parental and student expectations; the difficulty of dealing with large numbers (interestingly, her answer to this was that with large classes, you *have* to hand over control, with peers supporting each other's learning); worries about weak learners; the

teacher's fear of letting go; difficulties for the learners in taking hold and being responsible; administration difficulties; the potential for chaos (her reply: "It's not a chaotic event. It's a very structured event in which the learners know what they can do." – that is, choice must be there, but it is restricted); and the demands of the curriculum and tests. However, she feels the problems of the approach are outweighed by the successes: learners who are motivated, engaged, socially responsible and linguistically competent; increased insights into the learners' individual needs and ways of learning; and the satisfaction gained from becoming a co-learner (or even "a human being" as one of her teachers commented).

Finally, she gave a useful checklist of questions we can ask ourselves if the approach fails. These included asking whether: the learners were aware of what was expected of them; the teacher supported the learners in setting up their objectives; the learners had gained both experience and awareness of what to do and how to do it; the teacher had introduced tools such as logbooks, portfolios and posters to support the learners' awareness-raising; the teacher had entered into a real dialogue with the learners (supportive but not directive); and the teacher had established an environment that supported the self-esteem of learners and teacher alike.

**David Little** then explained 'Why we need a learning-to-learn approach in our schools'. He said that he had first become involved in this area after a visit by Leni Dam to Dublin in 1984, which had made him think, "We have to engage with this. What are the principles behind it?" He outlined the assumptions of a learning-to-learn approach as being that:

- knowledge is always changing;

- learning depends on complex interaction between social mediation and individual reflection;
- the process of education should be continuous with the rest of living (Barnes 1976); and
- education should equip us with skills that we can use and further develop for the rest of our lives.

As an example of how schools often fail to develop skills that we can use for the rest of our lives, Professor Little told a story about his son. He had recently been given a project by a young (and apparently enthusiastic) teacher. The task was to create some sort of timing device – in theory, a very practical project, and something that no doubt the teacher thought would have real-life relevance. What's more, the learners had total freedom in planning and implementing their designs. At this point, memories of various projects I have set over the years were starting to come back to me and I was thinking "Uh Oh". Sure enough, any initial enthusiasm that David Little's son may have had for the project and the teacher soon started to disappear. There was freedom – but no support or involvement with him as he set about designing the device. He was just left to get on with it. The deadline for presenting the finished products approached and he had not even made a start. Finally, he got together with his brother-in-law, who happens to be an engineer, and spent an entire day working together with him on the project. He told his brother-in-law his initial idea for the device, and they worked through that and various modifications, until they finally produced a working timing device (based on his own specifications) late in the night. I have forgotten the details of the story, but the point was clear: the intrinsic motivation, the learning of useful real-life skills, the experience of going through a learning process from start to finish,

the evaluation of and learning from initial mistakes – all those things that teachers would love to see – only happened when a mentor interacted with the learner, starting where he was, questioning his ideas, acting as a resource and enabling him to work towards his own solution.

The story nicely illustrated the key ways that David outlined for us to help our pupils to learn how to learn:

- by focusing on their learning rather than our teaching;
- by repeatedly asking them questions about the content, purpose and process of learning and helping them to evaluate its outcomes (Dam 1995);
- by involving them, whatever their age, in
  - planning learning: setting short-, medium- and long-term goals and criteria for success
  - monitoring learning: watching the progress of learning at a micro and a macro level
  - evaluating learning: measuring learning outcomes against goals and criteria.

It also exemplified the features of a learning-to-learn approach that he outlined, in which:

- the development of learning skills is inseparable from the content of learning;
- learners are fully involved in their learning, so that what they learn becomes an integral part of what they are;
- learning is collaborative and individual; and
- there is no barrier between school and the rest of life.

Where such approaches have been implemented, David told us, not only have they developed responsibility and self-esteem within the students as individuals, but they have also increased the cohesiveness of the school population as a whole. As a worried parent, I was impressed to hear of a case where the incidence of

bullying in a school had markedly decreased after the introduction of a learning-to-learn approach.

As we are well aware, such cases are unfortunately the exception rather than the rule, and in the next stage of David Little's talk he highlighted links between the learning-to-learn approach and the literature of management, making the point that vast amounts of money are spent on management training simply because the job hasn't been done in schools. A quote that he read out from Charles Handy says it well:

I have often said that I remembered only one thing from my schooldays, the implicit message that all problems in the world had already been solved, that the answers were to be found in the head of the teacher or, more likely, at the back of his textbook; my task being to transfer those answers to my head ... When I joined my corporation I assumed it was the same: my superiors, or some consultant, would know the answer. It was a shock to realize that I was supposed to come up with my own solutions and that many problems were to do with relationships, where there was no textbook answer.

(Handy 2001: 11, 13)

David next drew from work on child development to argue that, as with learning to speak our first language (we learn to do it only by doing it), so with any skill (including learning how to learn): "You can only *become* autonomous by first *being* autonomous. And you gradually become better at it." And he cited Vygotsky's work on the role of interaction in learning, as having these implications for a learning-to-learn approach:

- What we learn depends on what we already know

- The mechanism that delivers learning is interaction.
- The goal of all learning is autonomy ("independent problem solving").

Overall, the two talks were an excellent combination of theory and practice. I left invigorated, with a sense of wonder at what is possible in primary and secondary schools, and with a sense of the many more things I need to do in my own university teaching. My thanks to Leni Dam and David Little for the inspiration, and to Jose Lai for letting me attend.

### References

- Barnes, D. 1976. *From Communication to Curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Dam, L. 1995. *Learner Autonomy 3: From theory to classroom practice*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Handy, C. 2001. *The Elephant and the Flea*. London: Hutchinson.
- Vygotsky, L.S. 1978. *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## Centre Updates and Issues

### Foreword

Melissa Megan

We are pleased to publish here reports from six local self-access centres.

We start with a report from the most newly established centre. The ESF team outline the process of setting up a new centre and talk about initial successes as well as a few challenges. In anticipation of one of our themes for the coming year 'Technology for Developing Autonomy', I encourage you to visit the SALLY's Place website at <http://www.esfsall.net>.

In her report, Lizzie Reilly describes the initiatives carried out at HKBU in an attempt to promote a culture of SALL there. We look forward to hearing more from Lizzie on these initiatives in her talk to the association this year.

In her very candid reflections on the effectiveness of SALL programmes at Lingnan, Rebecca Pang raises questions and issues that I would suggest have troubled us all at some point in time. Assessment of our students' language proficiency in the form of an exit test and the implications of this for SACs and SALL is yet another topic to be addressed at a future HASALD meeting.

Richard Pemberton talks about problems (or 'challenges?') and solutions that are being tried out at HKUST. His 'going the extra mile' lesson, is really, I think, what HASALD is all about.

The final two reports come from the managers of two well established local centres. Eva Lai reports on how the Independent Learning Centre at the ChineseU continues to operate and evaluate its effectiveness, while Alison Wong of CityU tackles two major issues that continue to challenge proponents of SALL worldwide: How to motivate students and how to define the roles of those involved in SALL.

### The ESF Self-Access Language Learning Centre

Geneviève Pivetta, Leonor Clares,  
Fu Xianling and Doug Taylor

#### *Introduction*

The English Schools Foundation (ESF) Self-Access Language Learning Centre (SALLY's Place) opened in November 2001. We currently have

just under a hundred learners enrolled and hope that this number will increase during the coming academic year. We are still tinkering with many aspects of our system and are very much enjoying the continual challenge of developing to better meet our learners' needs.

#### *Why Self-Access Language Learning in ESF?*

Our aim is to support and enrich all areas of language learning in ESF schools. In particular we try to address the following:

- **Catch-up for new students**

Student turnover in our schools can be as high as 25% per annum. This means that a significant number of students arrive at various stages during the year needing help to catch up with the rest of their language class. SALLY's Place is able to remove this burden from the shoulders of classroom teachers and support learners during this initial period.

- **Equality of provision across our five secondary schools**

Not all languages are offered in all our secondary schools. If students go to a school where a language they are interested in is not offered, they have the opportunity to study it at Sally's Place.

- **Increased language learning opportunities**

Students are able to learn a language in addition to those they take in school.

- **Individual support**

Some of our learners are referred by their teachers because they have fallen behind in their language studies and are felt to need extra support.

- **Enhancement**

Students are able to come to us to do extra work, in preparation for public examinations for example.

### *Process*

**Languages offered** We currently offer Chinese, French, German and Spanish but hope to be able to increase the range in the future.

**Materials** We have tried to collect a wide range of learning materials, including course books, worksheets, computer programs, audio and video tapes and web-based materials, in order to cater for individual learning styles.

**Registration** Learners can be referred by their language teacher or they can fill in an online registration form. We then contact them to arrange an initial meeting.

**Initial contract meeting** In theory each language is allocated a day for conducting contract meetings, although in practice there is some overlap. At the initial meeting we explain to learners how our system works, help learners establish their short and medium term language learning goals, select appropriate materials and activities, and fill out their first learner contract. We also set a date for the first contract review meeting. This is invariably two weeks after the initial meeting.

**During their contract** we are in regular contact with learners through email, *MS Messenger*, *NetMeeting* and sometimes by phone. If they need to, learners can also arrange a meeting with us at the centre. Some learners are also regular visitors to our virtual reality world. They send written work to us via email and we use the *Markin* program to correct it and provide error analysis. They also send spoken language in .wav files, which we comment on, also in a .wav file. There are language activities on the website which they can complete and submit to us. Learners have their own homepage on our website, on which we publish their work.

**At the end of the contract** learner and adviser meet again, either at the centre or online. Their portfolio is discussed, their contract is reviewed and they are assessed on the areas that they have chosen. They then discuss their learning objectives for the next contract period, select materials and agree on a second contract.

**Programme evaluation** At the end of each contract learners are also asked to complete a programme evaluation form. They rate various aspects of the programme and add comments if they wish to. We use this evaluation in our programme development planning.

### *Successes*

**Induction programme** This was conducted by Sarah Toogood and Richard Pemberton, HKUST, and set us off in the right direction.

**Professional development** The learning curve for our advisers has been very steep and we are pleased with the progress we have all made. We have all taken full responsibility for developing our own area of the website, and now have a good working knowledge of *FrontPage*, *PowerPoint*, *Markin*, *MS Messenger*, *NetMeeting* and the language learning programs we have purchased. We also feel more comfortable now with the change of role from teacher to adviser.

**Language improvement** Although we have not conducted formal assessment, we are confident that learners' language is improving at an acceptable rate. Our view is based on learners' reports of improved performance in classroom tests, portfolios, homepages, comments from teachers, parents and learners and our informal assessment at the end of each contract. After the summer we will also have the results

from the public examinations our learners have entered.

**Website (www.esfsall.net)** We are relatively pleased with the way in which our website has developed in terms of content and greater interactivity, although we are aware that there is still much to do in this area.

**Learner motivation** We are generally satisfied with levels of learner motivation. Our dropout rate so far is below 20%, and requests from learners to continue working with us next year have been encouraging. We have also noticed a tendency for learners to become more adventurous in the learning tasks they set themselves.

**Language days** We have run one day in each language. Learners' comments were generally positive and we feel that they have helped to raise our profile in the schools.

#### *Challenges*

**Location of the centre** There is often initial concern about the centre being inconveniently situated for students from Hong Kong Island and Shatin and a small number of learners have withdrawn because of travelling time. Other learners (mainly from King George V School) visit us regularly, both at lunchtime and after school.

**Autonomous learning** Many learners and their parents initially expect a one-to-one tutoring service and there has been confusion and reluctance on the part of some learners to take responsibility for their own learning, preferring to let themselves be guided by their adviser. Even later the development of autonomous learning skills remains a relatively low priority.

**Relations with classroom teachers** In the European languages

we feel that we are accepted by classroom teachers and they refer learners to us readily. However, we feel we still have quite a long way to go in Chinese. Developing closer collaborative links with classroom teachers is an area that is ripe for expansion.

**Contract forms** These have been through a number of incarnations since November and we are now happier with a simpler and more manageable format.

**Time delay in meeting newly registered learners** Under our present arrangements it becomes increasingly difficult to arrange appointments for new learners once numbers registered for a language rise above 30. This is clearly an issue we will need to address during the coming year. It is compounded by the next two points.

**Online contract reviews** These have not proved as popular as we expected. Once they are familiar with the system, most learners prefer to come to the centre for a face-to-face meeting.

**Contract length** Our original plan was that the length of contracts would increase as learners became more experienced in autonomous learning. Although they are offered the opportunity to increase the contract period by a week in each successive contract (up to a maximum of seven weeks) a large majority have opted not to, preferring to stay on a two-week cycle.

#### *Plans for the next academic year*

We feel that we can continue broadly along the same lines as this year. Our development plan is not yet finalised but we anticipate including the following:

- **Moving to an entirely online application system**

This will remove a further burden from classroom teachers and administrators in schools.

- **Revisiting the area of online contract renewal**

If we can increase the popularity of this option we will free up time for face-to-face meetings with new learners

- **Increasing advertising**

Our intention for this year was to start quietly and gain acceptance within schools. Our advertising has therefore so far been targeted at students and teachers. However, for next year we aim to approach parents directly and through the schools' Parent Teacher Associations.

- **Opening the centre during the day**

We aim to make the centre and its materials available on an experimental basis two days a week for family members of ESF students.

- **Planning for the introduction of a two-tier system if numbers require**

Learners in the first tier would continue as above and those in the second tier would be welcome to come and use our resources, have a homepage on our website and access to our virtual reality world and would also be able to send us work for comment and correction.

- **Continuing the development of our website**

We want to investigate ways of making the site more interactive, as well as increasing the amount of material available for learners.

- Developing our virtual reality world to cater for all our languages.

*SALLY's Place Virtual Reality World*

This can be visited by going to our downloads page and opening the SALLY's Place Virtual Reality World browser.

([www.esfsall.net/downloads.htm](http://www.esfsall.net/downloads.htm))

**Hoped-for benefits for our learners:**

Increased interactivity; an attractive front end to our website; improved motivation; opportunities for contact with learners in the target language country.

**Features:**

- **Purpose-built premises for each language**

These will include an area, room or house for each learner.

- **Avatars**

These are very popular with learners and provide good topics of conversation.

- **A target language environment**

The rule that learners may only type in the target language (helped by 'whispered' support in English) when they are in that house has so far been generally accepted by learners.

- **A safe, controlled international meeting place**

We are able to limit access to the world and/or eject undesirable visitors.

- **Native Speaker parent helpers**

Initial response has been positive.

- **Bots**

These can be programmed so that they will interact with learners using, for example, language posted on our website.

Self-access language learning resources at Hong Kong Baptist University  
Lizzie Reilly

Our situation at HKBU is unusual among the tertiary institutions in Hong Kong in that we do not have a designated self-access centre in our university. There is a collection of SALL materials which was formerly owned by the Language Centre but which was moved into the main library some years ago. This collection is housed, alongside resources for many other disciplines,

in the Multimedia Learning Centre (MLC) of the library and is administered by the library, in consultation with the Language Centre. It includes print, audio-visual and multimedia software materials. In addition, there is a range of worksheets designed for self-study, located within the Language Centre, which is in a different building. It is felt that this lack of a specific physical space associated with SALL has many implications for the successful use of resources by students.

At the beginning of this academic year, the particular problems generated by this situation could be summarized thus:

- a) Material resources are fragmented and scattered across two campuses;
- b) Work space in the library area where the SALL collection is housed is rather limited;
- c) Student access to multimedia (MM) resources for language learning is extremely limited due to the heavy usage of the computers for other, non language-learning applications;
- d) The lack of a multimedia lab for either teaching or self-learning purposes means that software and online resources for SALL cannot even be introduced to students through classroom teaching. Consequently students have no exposure to the learning possibilities of SALL multimedia material;
- e) The lack of SALL programmes involving contact between teaching staff and students severely limits the ways in which students can be supported in their use of SALL resources.

The problems outlined above presented us with a situation that was not conducive to fostering a culture or 'presence' of SALL within the institution. The areas of development over this past academic

year therefore aimed to address this situation. In prioritizing areas of work, the context of SALL at HKBU was considered carefully, and the particularities of our situation were assessed in relation to the comparable resources available at the other tertiary institutions. We also considered areas that were within our control and targeted them for improvement. The work in SALL this year has therefore focused on upgrading facilities, promoting existing resources and initiating programmes with teacher-student contact.

Within the context outlined above, the following initiatives were carried out this year.

**Multimedia lab** Funding was requested and granted for a MM teaching and learning lab. The lab will allow us to introduce software and online resources to our students and have them use the resources in classes on a self-paced, individual basis. We also hope to be able to open the lab to students for SALL work. The project is almost completed and the lab should be ready for the start of the coming semester.

New materials were purchased with the MM lab in mind and a good range of software was selected to kick start usage of the new lab.

**Virtual SAC** Bearing in mind the lack of a real location for SALL, we are also working to build up a 'virtual SAC' on the web. Work in this area has so far included the mapping out of material resources on campus and consolidating resources available on the web. In addition, various multimedia materials projects are currently being developed and one course has trialled an independent study module involving web-based technology.



### **Improvements in Multimedia Learning Centre**

Liaison with the MLC library staff who administer the SALL collection has enabled us to offer improved services there. Initiatives this year include orientation sessions for students in language classes, a more flexible loan policy to encourage greater usage of materials and the development of guides to SALL software to help students use the materials more effectively when there is no teacher guidance available.

**SALL programmes** One of the most significant moves made this year towards increasing the profile of SALL involved setting up the first programme with an emphasis on independent learning. The programme, Supported English Conversation (SEC), targeted students weak in oral fluency. It aimed to provide a teacher-led forum where students could not only practise conversational English but at the same time also learn how to continue this kind of practice independently. It was felt that this would be useful to students as it is difficult to practise speaking skills with only material resources. In addition, there is a reluctance among students to practise oral skills without the presence of a teacher. Student response to the programme was very favourable and the SEC will be run again next semester.

A programme of language advising is now being planned for the coming semester and it is hoped that this will enable us to provide more individualized support to students who wish to set up their own study plans.

Overall, it is to be hoped that the improvements made this year can be built upon in the coming academic year and that the culture of SALL at HKBU can gradually become more mainstream than marginal.

### **The Pathway to Successful Self-Access Language Learning at Lingnan University**

Rebecca Pang

Much has been written about the merits of self-access language learning in the past decade, and a self-access learning component has been included in many English language enhancement courses at local tertiary institutions. While it is generally understood that self-access learning helps develop students' independent language learning strategies, I often ponder how we should define the 'success' of SALL programmes.

Should we simply do a head count of the number of students using the Self-Access Centre? Should we feel satisfied that students can produce a beautifully packaged self-access portfolio, which includes a neatly typed vocabulary logbook or a number of book/article reports or a taped conversation with a peer? If we feel a SALL programme has helped to motivate our students to learn the language on their own, to what extent will they maintain that interest when they are no longer required to submit a portfolio? If, as is generally accepted, the ultimate goal of SALL is to enhance students' language standards, can we actually measure this 'improvement'? If so, how? Most importantly, perhaps, with regard to whichever yardstick we decide to use to measure the 'success' of a SALL programme, will our students use the same yardstick?

Over the past few years at our University, we have run various forms of SALL programmes. At the end of each academic year, time is set aside to review the current version of the SALL programme in some depth. At this time, we ask ourselves the sorts of questions given above, but each year we are unable to come up with definitive

answers. This article therefore takes a closer look at these issues.

#### *SALL at Lingnan*

In 1997-98 a SALL component was first incorporated in the first-year compulsory English course, *English for Communication*, a course that combines elements of English for Academic Purposes and English for Professional Purposes. The self-access project was a voluntary part of the course available to those who were interested in doing extra language work in an area of their own choice under the guidance of the course teacher. Student work was not formally graded. In view of the deeply rooted exam-oriented culture here, the students' lukewarm response to SALL in the first two years of the programme was not surprising.

When the Supported Self-Access Module (SSAM) was introduced in 1999-2000, it was therefore decided that this would be a compulsory component for all first-year students. At the same time, the students' self-access work was to be formally assessed by the teachers, making up 20 % of the total marks on the *English for Communication* course. Half of the marks (that is, 10 % of the total course marks) were given for task completion and half for task analysis. One obvious difference between the voluntary and compulsory modes of SALL at Lingnan can be seen in the significant increase in the number of students using the Self-Access Centre, which was incorporated in the University's main library and renamed the Multi-Media Language Learning Centre (MLLC) in 2000-2001. Thus, when SSAM was first introduced as a compulsory component of the course in 1999-2000, the total number of students who visited the Self-Access Centre that year was 12,735. This contrasts with the final year of the voluntary

era, 1998/99, when the number of visitors was 9,064.

#### *"With" or "without" assessment?*

The increase of approximately 40% in the number of students using the MLLC testifies to the powerful role of assessment in our SALL programme. This is, of course, in line with perceptions about the predominantly 'pragmatic' motivation of local students. We may conclude with a reasonable degree of certainty that if the assessment element were removed, a sizeable number of students would not take the initiative to do any extra language work on their own. Thus, our decision to incorporate a compulsory SALL component into the curriculum and to formally assess the self-access work took account of students' concerns that time spent doing extra work would not be rewarded in terms of marks.

A likely criticism of this action is that it contradicts the autonomous spirit of SALL. I remember a particularly 'smart' student in one of my classes giving an oral presentation about SALL a couple of years ago. In his talk, he strongly attacked the compulsory nature of our SALL programme. Referring to our stated objective of 'training our students to be independent learners', he argued that the 'compulsory' nature of the programme took away his 'independence'. Actually, his input has led to changes in the way we talk about the programme, so that we now highlight in our notes the 'freedom' students have when making choices regarding 'what materials to use, how to use them, when to do the work and where to do it'.

There are also problems with using assessment as 'bait' to try to enhance students' interest in SALL. Although some students are able to produce a portfolio that documents

meticulous work, I often wonder if their enthusiasm for the work would be sustained if the promise of a good grade for a good portfolio were not there. This is why, when my students show me their beautifully presented vocabulary logbooks at consultations, I often ask them how they will use the words in the logbook, when not required by assessment criterion to 'keep a vocabulary logbook'. They usually either respond with a smile or appear to think I am trying to be difficult. When I ask them if they were also asked to keep a vocabulary logbook when they were at secondary school, most of them answer in the affirmative. And when I further ask them where this logbook is now, again they smile in embarrassment.

If students' predominant motivation for learning stems from assessment, it seems reasonable to assume that most of them will not continue to produce similar kinds of self-access work in future when they have become 'independent' language learners, even if the quality of the assessed work they previously produced was rated very highly.

#### *Is SALL a 'chore'?*

We have revamped or revised the self-access component of our course every year since it was introduced in September 1997 in order to cater better to our students' interests and needs. Besides reducing student workload (the major complaint in the first two years of SSAM), we have provided them with more choice with regard to both structured and less-structured tasks. We have also asked Visiting Tutors from the English Department to help by making one of the speaking tasks the holding of a 'casual' conversation with one of these tutors. Since these tutors are mostly native English speakers and of similar age to the students, feedback from the students on this task has been generally positive.

In terms of the overall programme, when first-year students this year were asked for their views on the SALL project, only 26% agreed or strongly agreed that the project was enjoyable. When they were asked which of the topics offered in the second semester should be removed from the *English for Communication* course, about 48% of them thought the SALL project should be taken away. The students' dissatisfaction with the SALL programme could be due to their disliking the extra workload, and, therefore, their perceptions of the project as a 'chore'. Such indeed has been the feedback that I have frequently received from my students in consultations over the years. A common complaint has been that the time they spend on the project is not proportional to the number of credits they obtain from the course in comparison to other major subjects they are taking.

All of this leads us to ask ourselves two questions: 'Are we going to listen to the students and cancel the project?' or 'Should we keep reducing the amount of work until the students feel satisfied?' Our feeling, as language teachers, our understanding, indeed, is that learning a second language is not like learning a 'content' subject, such as History or Economics. Acquiring knowledge of a particular academic subject does not necessarily require learners to spend time practising the knowledge they have learnt. The amount of time required to see improvement in a second language is therefore greater, requiring, as it does, the learner to keep using the language regularly. Students, however, care little for this kind of 'academic theory', and tend to feel pretty frustrated when they cannot get instant results.

### *Is SALL work useful?*

Although some of our students tended to be negative about the SALL project, when they were asked if self-access work was necessary for effective learning of English, 56% of them agreed or strongly agreed with the statement in the online survey conducted at the end of the first semester. When we tried to elicit more information directly related to the SALL project in the survey conducted at the end of the second semester, 45% said the project helped their language learning. However, it is not clear how the students interpreted the idea of 'effective English learning' or that something 'helped their language learning'. Are they really referring to improvement in their language standards?

Since assessment of the SALL project focuses on task completion and the students' reflection on their learning process (that is, task analysis), we do not try to measure any improvement in the students' language standards. Since this is the case, do we need to include an element of assessment that measures their 'achievements' in the language? After all, we state in our handouts that the overall aim of the SALL component is to enhance 'English language proficiency in a specific language area'. If there is no such mechanism to measure students' proficiency, how can we substantiate our claim that the programme will enhance language proficiency? On reflection, perhaps the students are right to be sceptical when we keep telling them that the programme can help enhance their language proficiency.

We have, in fact, included an online vocabulary test in our latest SALL programme as one of the tasks for students who choose to work on the area of reading and vocabulary. Before they take the test, they are

given a list of new words to learn. The test then assesses whether they are able to use the words correctly. While no marks are awarded for the test, students are encouraged to take the test as often as they like to check their progress. They must then submit printouts of the online tests they have taken. According to the reflections in their portfolios, some students were positive about the value of this test. This may be due to the fact that they could see their own 'achievements'.

### *Does intrinsic motivation count?*

With the current political climate of accountability, we, like other members of the workforce, are often asked by senior management about our 'value' as language teachers. As part of this process it is perhaps not surprising that we are asked to provide some 'evidence' of our students' language achievements in order to prove our own 'value'.

However, the people who make this request have possibly neglected an important element in relation to improvement in students' language standards. That is, they fail to consider the learners' intrinsic motivation for learning the language. If students do not see any joy or fun in learning the language - viewing it only as a means to an end, getting a grade now or a job in the future - what can we do to change this attitude? When I say the 'joy' or 'fun' of learning the language, I'm not just talking about seeing an English film or listening to an English song occasionally. I mean that they really enjoy the process of learning the language and are able to appreciate the culture attached to the language. They are able to see the language perhaps as an instrument that allows them to get to know other people who speak the language. If they don't have this motivation, how can we sustain their interest in learning or improving their language skills

when they are no longer required to submit a SALL portfolio?

### *Conclusion*

I am not in a position to provide answers to all the questions I set out in this article. I have, however, listed all the questions that have been raised as our SALL programme has undergone continuous and extensive revision. Unfortunately, none of our revisions seem to have entertained the needs of all our students. But perhaps no changes ever will! After five years perhaps, it's time for us to reflect on what we should do next in order to see if we can come closer to reaching our Holy Grail, the improvement of students' language proficiency. Alternatively, perhaps we need to find ways of measuring and quantifying intrinsic motivation.

### **Problems and solutions: A brief report and personal reflection on the last five years of the HKUST SAC team**

Richard Pemberton

Since 1997, the SAC team at HKUST has been facing increasing problems. In this brief report I will outline these problems and describe how we have attempted to deal with them.

#### *The problems*

The first problem that we faced back in 1997 was increased teaching. At that time teaching loads had increased to 16 contact hours per week (with an additional 2 hours advising time for SAC team members and a nominal 4 hours additional SAC work where possible – and other similar extracurricular duties for non-SAC team members). The following year, courses were also reorganised: the nature of the courses diversified and the number of courses expanded

– for example, instead of a single first-year course, there were now three (one each for students of Business, Science and Engineering) and Engineering students were required to take English courses for six semesters as opposed to four. As a result, there was a great deal of materials writing required (shared between many Language Centre instructors), which was taking up all the spare time of many SAC team members. In 1999, teaching loads increased to 18 hours, with SAC team members again doing 2 hours advising (and additional SAC work where possible) on top of that.

The second problem that we have faced is partly related to the first one. As courses have expanded to meet the demands of subject departments and employers, there has been increasing need for SALL resources and support, both as course components, and outside the classroom. Similarly, student demand for SALL resources and support has tended to increase over the period as students realise that the job market is tight and language skills are in demand – and I suspect that this trend will intensify when the Exit Test really kicks in.

The third problem sounds paradoxical as it results from the success we have had in developing our SALL resources to date. As SAC resources have developed and expanded over the years, course designers have become more ready to refer students to them and to incorporate SALL into their courses. But with resources being used more heavily (and especially when you get a course of some 700 students using the SAC), it soon becomes apparent that there are gaps in the resources and support systems that you never knew existed when provision and usage were at a lower level.

To summarise the situation, changes to the curriculum and the demand for

language learning meant that SAC team members had been expected to devote their primary energies to teaching and writing materials for the increasing number of language courses, while being unable to meet the needs of the increasing number of self-access language learners. The quality and extent of the support we were able to provide learners had been significantly reduced. There was a definite danger that the team might simply fail to meet its mission of:

- providing a supportive environment for autonomous language learning;
- helping learners develop the ability to control their own learning; and
- continually evaluating and developing the service provided.

#### *The solutions*

In 1997 I put a range of options to the SAC team as possible ways of coping with the situation. There were 12 options altogether, ranging from 'highly desirable' (a dedicated team of 3-5 full-time SAC Advisers) through 'desirable' (core team: reduced teaching load; + main team: full teaching load plus advising duties) to 'status quo' to 'highly undesirable' (1 clerical officer with no language staff support at all). The verdict of the team was to retain the 'status quo' as a bottom line but if possible to go for a dedicated core team with an 'outer' team still involved.

But with everyone's time increasingly required for writing for and teaching the new courses, I couldn't see where we would get time (i.e. money) to reduce teaching loads. I thought about asking business to sponsor self-directed learning programmes, but the economy wasn't doing well either. With the increased teaching loads that were introduced the following year, the

idea of reducing teaching loads seemed a non-starter.

The idea was revived, however, by team members who could see that the situation was getting worse and wanted to do something about it. Together we put together a proposal for a dedicated team of four full-time advisers in Fall 2000, received the blessing of our Head of Department and then took it to his line manager in Academic Affairs. To my surprise, he approved and money was found to fund the proposal for a trial period in Spring 2001. This was subsequently extended by a year.

With the added resources, the first thing that we were able to do was to extend the advising hours. Whereas before, advisers had been on duty from 12-4pm, Monday-Friday, they were now on duty 9am-8pm – i.e. whenever the SAC is open during weekdays, an adviser is now on duty. This has not only increased our overall availability, but has also made core team advisers more visible – the more often individual advisers are seen in the centre, the more they are recognised, and the more learners come to see them. (Although funded full-time, the four core team members retained some teaching duties.)

The extra time allocated also enabled us to help course coordinators integrate SALL components into courses, produce more advice sheets and course materials to support course-integrated self-access learning projects, to make our presence known to the university community as a whole by refining and maintaining our website, and to provide a greater variety of SALL activities and ensure that they were well supported. Perhaps most importantly, it enabled us to sit down and plan out the future in a systematic way, rather than responding to crises in an ad hoc fashion.

The main outcome of this planning has been to develop a proposal for a Virtual Language Adviser Database (or 'VLAD' as we like to refer to it), in conjunction with the Computer Science Department and the Center for Enhanced Learning and Teaching at HKUST. The aim of the project is to produce an interactive, adaptive online advising system. Learners will input their English-learning needs and receive appropriate, case-specific advice. In terms of technology, the system will be self-adaptive and able to learn from problems it has not yet encountered. In terms of language learning, the system will engage the learner in a dialogue, helping the learner to narrow down the scope of learning and choose materials and learning strategies that are appropriate to them. We hope that the system will thus provide an interaction similar to the initial face-to-face consultations offered at the moment at some institutions in Hong Kong but will be easily accessible to all tertiary students in Hong Kong. (The system will be primarily targeted at students at HKUST, HKU and HKBU, but will be available free of charge to all users online.)

This project has recently been funded \$2.5M by the UGC's Teaching Development Grant, and is underway. As part of the money from the grant was allocated to reduce the advising load of three core team members so that they could dedicate time to the project, we have been able to extend the core team from four to eight, with seven of those having substantial teaching reductions. As a result, we have been able to maintain the 9am-8pm advising timetable, and have almost doubled the number of group-learning self-access activities that we organise for learners (now offering 11 activities for learners of Putonghua, English, French, Spanish and other languages).

Of course, the money will not last for ever. But we hope that the activities we have set up this semester will make it possible for colleagues to continue to run them (on a diminished scale, perhaps) when advisers revert to full-time teaching. Similarly, our hope is that VLAD will be able to reduce the amount of time that advisers spend in identifying needs and narrowing down the scope in the initial stages of learner-adviser meetings, and help us direct our focus to supporting ongoing learning and developing other types of support for learners such as SALL activities and more SALL course integration. If we have to return to less generous advising schedules in the future, we hope that VLAD will help us maintain a more widespread support than we would otherwise be able to offer.

One of the areas that we may well need to address is that if VLAD works as expected, it will increase the number of students who feel able to start out on and continue with self-directed learning. This will mean a larger number of students coming to real advisers, perhaps not so much with initial queries, but with specific problems and requests for evaluation of plans and progress. That will be another challenge that we will have to face.

### *Lessons*

What lessons have I drawn from the experience of the last four years? There are several but the main one I'd like to mention here is that there are sometimes possibilities amidst all the doom and gloom, and that it's worth taking risks and trying every option to fight for what you believe in. I hasten to add that this is a personal lesson, and that our solution may not work for all. But it's been useful for me to see the value of 'going the extra mile' to try and

find a solution, rather than shrugging my shoulders and saying "Our hands are tied – what can we do?".

#### *Postscript*

A colleague who is doing a doctorate in Educational Management points out that 'problems' are really 'challenges'. I take the point, but have left the wording as 'problems' as that is how I saw them at the time. Suitably empowered, I will now regard them as mere 'challenges' in the future.

### **The Independent Learning Centre (ILC), CUHK**

Eva Lai

The English section of the ILC, CUHK is staffed by four Full-time-Equivalent (FTE) instructors and supported by a team of technical and clerical staff. As these four FTEs are seconded from the ELT Unit, we try to get as great a range of talent as possible and the FTEs translate into four 0.25 instructors for the Language Counselling Centre, four 0.25 instructors for the Writing Centre, three 0.3 instructors for Speaking Activities, one 0.5 instructor for Computer Assisted Language Learning Workshops and one 0.5 teacher for language learning strategy workshops. We then have a greater variety of activities to suit the needs of our students. Please visit our web page for an update on current activities: <http://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/english/activities/activities.html>

ILC activities are regularly promoted on the web, by email to target groups of students, by staff email and most importantly of all, by running orientation tours. These tours are provided to all ELT Unit students at the start of the term and

to any other students twice a week throughout the term.

During the orientation tours, ILC staff members take students round the centre, showing them where learning materials are located, how they can borrow materials, how they can reserve TV stations or multi-purpose rooms and how they can improve their English by self-access learning. When they come to the Language Counselling Centre or the Writing Centre, they are given more details about how these two centres can help them.

Students are required to sign up for time slots to see the Language Counsellors or Writing Tutors. They also sign up for workshops. For all other activities, they can just walk in. The most popular activity in the ILC is watching films. Students enjoy watching films and they are happy to learn more English with the assistance of English captions. When they become better listeners they can turn off the caption machine.

For some ELT Unit first-year courses there is an independent learning component in addition to face-to-face contact, and students who take these courses are required to come to the ILC and work on some self-selected activities. At the end of these activities they have to either write a short report on their self-access learning or share their learning experiences with others in the class.

To find out if students find the ILC activities useful, or if they have needs not met by the ILC, there is an online evaluation form for users to fill out. Based on students' feedback, adjustments are made to improve the services provided at the centre.



**Managing and maintaining change: A CityU perspective**  
Alison Wong

The Self-Access Centre (SAC) at CityU is well established with technical support, resources and staff. As the Senior Tutor in charge of the SAC for three years, I have come across two main problems: firstly, how to motivate students to use the SAC on their own, and second, how to define the role of classroom teachers in relation to SALL. Both are related to the on-going issue of defining and redefining the concept of independent learning and how it is perceived by teachers and administrators.

*How to motivate students to use the SAC on their own*

The SAC in the English Language Centre has been running since 1997 having been transferred and relocated into a smaller space from the then Language Institute. It has a multi-purpose room, which contains sixteen PC workstations, a teacher's PC and a multimedia display projector complete with a mini screen. There is also a small AAC (Audio Active Comparative) room containing about 10 sets of AAC tape recorders with microphones and headphones for students to listen to a tape, record their voices and replay and listen to their recordings. In addition, there are over 100 in-house worksheets with keys that students can take away. Textbooks are available for use only in the SAC. Meanwhile, in the main room of the SAC, students have four computer workstations for CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning software) exercises and Internet access.

However, when I was appointed SAC Manager in 1999, I began to feel that the SAC needed more than a display of hi-tech equipment, textbooks and in-house worksheets. Something was

lacking in terms of the question 'How to motivate students to use the SAC?' For me, it was most important to publicise the self-access centre's role and the role of the SAC Counselling Service (now called 'LLAS' - Language Learning Advisory Service) because I felt that few students in the general CityU populace were aware of the SAC. Secondly, the SAC was in need of materials that helped learners to analyse their needs and select appropriate resources.

To an extent, the SAC Counselling Service had been set up by my predecessor in the hope of providing ELC staff to help students make a study plan and show them the resources available to work on their plans. However, having volunteered as an SAC Counsellor both before I became SAC Manager and as SAC Manager, it was obvious that the role of the SAC Counselling Service was not clear to either the Counsellors or students. As a result, students expected Counsellors to be teachers or proofreaders and Counsellors found it difficult to adapt to the new role of 'facilitator'. It was very frustrating for teachers who did not want to be seen as 'private tutors' and for students who could not understand why the Counsellors would not simply correct their grammar errors.

Hence, a new set of objectives was planned in 1999-2000 to overcome the confusion in the roles and to publicise the SAC, all in the optimistic hope that more students would be motivated to use the SAC. The objectives can be summarised as follows:

1. Promote SAC facilities through leaflets and email.
2. Aim to make study plans with students.
3. Increase Learner Training in the form of skill-specific inductions and discovery tasks.

4. Set up guidelines for the SAC Counselling Service.
5. Ensure Students understand the role of the SAC Counselling Service.
6. Set up quality appraisal in the form of an SAC Evaluation Questionnaire.
7. Integrate the English Language Centre English courses with the SAC.

All of these objectives were achieved in the first year with a 37% increase in the number of visitors compared to figures from the previous year. Publicity was also given a boost in 1999 as an Open Day was held, which skews the figures for that year, however, it could be visibly seen that more ELC teachers were bringing their students into the SAC, more students were using the SAC on their own, and publicity did a good job of highlighting the SAC Counselling Service.

So, students can be motivated to use a self-access centre if it is publicised well. Yet, this still does not solve the problem of students 'being motivated on their own' and being 'independent learners'. Student support was increased with the skills-based leaflets and discovery tasks listed in all ELC course booklets. In addition an *SAC Booklet* which gives guidance on the identification of needs, how to select materials, how to make a study plan and recommended resources, and a *Pathways Booklet* (these are available upon request) were developed to help students new to the SAC plan and develop their independent learning skills. Further, an 'Independent Learning Course' was introduced in the academic year 2000-01, which motivated a specific group of 60 students to use the SAC resources.

However, despite the successful publicity, it came to light that the SAC was exploited in terms of the misunderstanding of independent

learning both by teachers and students. Teachers used the SAC because of the superior resources available. Most often they booked the Multi-Purpose Room for CALL programmes or Internet websites, which was good, but then there were also teachers who used the Multi-Purpose Room for teaching. Moreover, students coming to the SAC still did not know how to start on their own and still sought the advice of the Counsellors who were seen as 'teachers' and were expected to teach them. Counsellors in turn felt obliged to teach the students. This brings me to the next issue: the role of teachers.

#### *The role of teachers*

The concept of independent learning is still new to teachers and students. I believe that for students to be independent learners, they should be provided with support and learner training by their teachers. If they have no teachers, in the case of students who go to an SAC on their own, there should be self-study materials that take on the role of a teacher, that is materials or learner packages that give specific instructions or guidance.

When our publicity succeeded in enticing more students and their teachers into the SAC, it was good news. However, the SAC Counselling service had to deal with both students who still expected Counsellors to act as teachers and classroom teachers who expected the same. There was still the same confusion over teacher and student roles.

The SAC Counselling service was initially set up as a service to help guide students to use the resources in the SAC, and to help students identify their weaknesses. In other words, Counsellors acted more as 'facilitators' than teachers. The guidelines given to Counsellors were

not very clear in that they instructed Counsellors to set up study plans with students, keep a log of students visiting the Counselling service, help students referred to them by teachers, and help students who were repeaters and needed to pass an exam a second or third time. Counsellors were also not trained as 'facilitators' and often relied on their experience or own concepts of independent learning to attend to students. As a result, it was felt that the SAC Counselling service was being used as a 'private tutoring service'. There was also resentment in the ranks since the staff on duty were doubling their teaching hours while they were on duty, and if they were not attending to students they were seen as 'doing an easy job', which clearly was not the case. Obviously, the number of Counsellors could have been increased to deal with more students, but it was felt that this would defeat the purpose of the Counselling Service, which is not to teach students but to facilitate their learning.

Eventually the new SAC team in 2000-2001 set out to define the roles of the 'SAC Counsellor' and the 'Student' and to introduce both students and teachers to the motto, "*If you know how to learn, then you know enough*". The SAC Counselling Service was re-named the 'Language Learning Advisory Service' and Counsellors became 'Advisors'.

Now, all staff and students are made aware of the roles through publicity and the SAC Booklets. This is not to say that we turn away students who do not know where to start or do not know what their strengths and weaknesses are, or that we do not help them evaluate an essay if they are working on developing writing skills. However, the identification of our role makes it easier for both teachers and students to realise that the Language Advisors are facilitators. The guidelines given to

teachers who volunteer as Language Advisors and are new to the role of 'facilitator' are also clearer.

However, an additional issue arises...

*Should not all teachers know more about the SAC resources and provide support for their own students SALL?*

Surely the role of teachers should be more than classroom teachers if independent learning is to be part of the curriculum. We must address comments from teachers such as, 'I have no energy to deal with the weak students. I just send them to the LLAS.'

To deal with this issue, the SAC team this year carried out our idea of 'infiltrating and disseminating' to teachers at the beginning of this academic year (2001-02). Specific courses were targeted for inductions. Teachers were informed of the resources students could use and how to integrate the resources into their lessons. They were also encouraged to encourage students to use the resources outside lesson time. It is pleasing that more teachers have used the relevant resources and students have been observed using them:

#### *Conclusion*

Independent Learning can be integrated into classroom activities and syllabi so that the SAC is a supplement to classroom learning. It is hoped that in the future, all colleagues will know more about the concept of independent learning both in the classroom and in the SAC. Hopefully in turn, more students will be more motivated to use the SAC if they are constantly encouraged and supported by teachers.

## Bibliography Update

Here's an update on a few recent or forthcoming publications in the field of self-access and autonomy. Although much more has of course been published in the last couple of years. We mention only a selection of these that you may not already be aware of. If you know of any other recent or forthcoming publications that people may not have knowledge of, please send them in.

Gardner, D. 2001. Making self-access centres more effective. In D.K. Kember, S. Candlin and L. Yan (Eds) *Further Case Studies of Improving Teaching and Learning from the Action Learning Project*, (pp.143-160). Hong Kong: Action Learning Project.

*David referred to this paper and project in his presentation earlier this year.*

La Ganza, W. 2001. Out of Sight – Not Out of Mind: Learner autonomy and interrelating in online teaching. *Information Technology, Education and Society* 2, 2, 27-46.

*Some of you will know Bill La Ganza as he has visited HK twice in the past few years. In this paper, he explains his Dynamic Interrelational Space Model, something that he also presented on at HKUST's 2001 conference. He uses this model to discuss teacher-learner interactions in an online learning environment.*

Megan, M. & Jyu, A. (Eds) 2002, *Reflecting Teaching: Reflection and innovation in language teaching and learning*. Hong Kong: Language Centre, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

*See in particular Phil Candy's paper in which he promotes lifelong interest and information literacy as two of five desired attributes of graduates.*

*Lili Song writes on her trialling of an approach to classroom organisation at Tsinghua University that has at its core the promotion of learner autonomy. Teacher autonomy is a 'by-issue' that arises.*

*Richard Pemberton and Joyce Lee discuss the importance of learners' reflections on the learning experience in evaluating their video-training materials for HK students wanting to develop their job interview skills.*

Miller, L. 2000. Views on Self-Access Language Learning: A talk with Leslie Dickinson, Lindsay Miller, Gill Sturtridge, and Radha Ravindran. *Links and Letters* 7, 183-200.

Miller, L. 2000. What have you just learnt? Preparing learners in the classroom for self-access language learning. *Modern English Teacher (Keynote paper)* 9, 3, 7-13.

*Lindsay has been prolific over the last couple of years. Here are just a couple of things that he has written that you might like to look for.*

### *Forthcoming*

Benson, P. & Toogood, S. (Eds) *Learner Autonomy 7: Challenges to research and practice*. Dublin: Authentik.

*This publication contains papers by a number of our members. They talk about issues that arose at a symposium at HKUST's conference in 2000 and that have since been discussed at HASALD meetings.*

*And more from Authentik...*

Little, D., Ridley, J. & Ushioda, E. *Towards Greater Learner Autonomy in the Foreign Language Classroom*. Dublin: Authentik.

Little, D. (Ed.) *Teacher, Learner, Education System*. Dublin: Authentik.

## Contributors to this issue

*Phil Benson*, English Centre,  
University of Hong Kong.  
([pbenson@hkucc.hku.hk](mailto:pbenson@hkucc.hku.hk))

*Leonor Clares*, The Self-Access  
Language Learning Centre (SALLY's  
Place), English Schools Foundation.  
([Leonor@esfsall.net](mailto:Leonor@esfsall.net))

*Fu Xianling*, The Self-Access  
Language Learning Centre (SALLY's  
Place), English Schools Foundation.  
([Xianling@esfsall.net](mailto:Xianling@esfsall.net))

*David Gardner*, English Centre,  
University of Hong Kong.  
([dgardner@hkucc.hku.hk](mailto:dgardner@hkucc.hku.hk))

*Susanna Ho*, Language Centre, Hong  
Kong University of Science and  
Technology. ([lcschiu@ust.hk](mailto:lcschiu@ust.hk))

*Mark Hopkins*, Language Centre,  
Hong Kong University of Science and  
Technology. ([lcmark@ust.hk](mailto:lcmark@ust.hk))

*Eva Lai*, Independent Learning  
Centre, The Chinese University of  
Hong Kong. ([fungkuenlaw@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:fungkuenlaw@cuhk.edu.hk))

*Bruce Morrison*, English Language  
Centre, Hong Kong Polytechnic  
University. ([ecbruce@polyu.edu.hk](mailto:ecbruce@polyu.edu.hk))

*Rebecca Pang*, Language Institute,  
Lingnan University.  
([rebeccap@ln.edu.hk](mailto:rebeccap@ln.edu.hk))

*Richard Pemberton*, Language  
Centre, Hong Kong University of  
Science and Technology.  
([lcrpem@ust.hk](mailto:lcrpem@ust.hk))

*Geneviève Pivetta*, The Self-Access  
Language Learning Centre (SALLY's  
Place), English Schools Foundation.  
([Genevieve@esfsall.net](mailto:Genevieve@esfsall.net))

*Lizzie Reilly*, Language Centre, Hong  
Kong Baptist University.  
([reilly@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:reilly@hkbu.edu.hk))

*Doug Taylor*, The Self-Access  
Language Learning Centre (SALLY's  
Place), English Schools Foundation.  
([dougandstella@i-cable.com](mailto:dougandstella@i-cable.com))

*Alison Wong*, Formerly of the English  
Language Centre, City University of  
Hong Kong.

## Contact Us

The HASALD Committee is...

Sarah Toogood  
President  
[lcsally@ust.hk](mailto:lcsally@ust.hk) Ph. 2358 7843

Susanna Ho  
Treasurer  
[lcschiu@ust.hk](mailto:lcschiu@ust.hk) Ph. 2358  
7858

Richard Pemberton  
Secretary  
[lcrpem@ust.hk](mailto:lcrpem@ust.hk) Ph. 2358  
7848

Melissa Megan  
Editor  
[lcmegan@ust.hk](mailto:lcmegan@ust.hk) Ph. 2358 7891

The postal address for all committee  
members is:

The Language Centre  
Hong Kong University of Science and  
Technology, Clearwater Bay,  
Kowloon.

## How to join

To join HASALD, send a cheque for  
\$100, made out to *HASALD*, to  
Susanna Ho at the above address.

## To contribute to future issues

We'd love to publish your reports,  
articles, reviews, letters, thoughts,  
responses to anything in this issue...  
Send them to Melissa Megan by  
email or on a floppy disk.