Raising the bar on Self-Access Centre learning support

Kerstin Dofs[1]
Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology
New Zealand

Moira Hobbs
Unitec
New Zealand

Abstract

Tertiary Learning Advisors reflect on their 'good practice' through three key terms: utilisation, effectiveness and individual student support. We ask ourselves: Are the facilities and the advisory service support structures utilised fully? How effective is our learners' study? What is best practice regarding the way we support our students?

This article has two main sections. The first consists of a summary of individualised student support followed by two examples of practice in this area; these include an outline of three studies focusing on support for independent language learning conducted at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) from 2006 to 2009 (Dofs & Hornby, 2006; Dofs, 2009a; Dofs, 2009b), and an up-to-date description of independent language learning in the Independent Learning Centre (ILC) at Unitec. The second section comprises a progress report from a study about the current state of ILCs in New Zealand, the issues facing them, and how these might be addressed. The main themes emerging from both the research in progress, and from the authors' own experiences, fall into two main categories: the philosophical position of independent learning/autonomous learning in the ILC within the institute, and the implications of managing a centre to be of most benefit to students. The latter were evident in the utilisation of the ILC at one of the institutions where research led to the conclusions that it is not enough to simply provide an ILC; students also have to learn how to study independently, how to use self study materials, and how to plan for their self studies, and the ILC should provide this support, in liaison with classroom teachers.

Introduction

Like many other academic learning support providers across a range of Universities, Polytechnics and Private Training Enterprise institutions in New Zealand, the authors have experienced 2009 as a year of uncertainty and shifting sands according to the

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winds of change, with regard to the nature of the tertiary education sector landscape, its changing funding mechanisms and the restructuring of many organisations. Along with these shifts there have also been political and social pressures to promote vocational training in the younger age group, and the flow-on effects of the economic recession both within New Zealand and from external global influences. Underpinning all this there is an essential need for stability for our students and their learning, so they can progress successfully with as much appropriate and useful assistance as we can offer. In reality, the actual support utilised by the students varies, depending on such factors as the immediate goals of their current courses of study, the current state of their metacognitive and cognitive awareness, and the long term goals associated with their lifelong learning. In order to address some of these issues, one of the authors has been undertaking ongoing research into the use of ILCs and in particular, has been trialling and evaluating the use of learning strategy training modules by the students to help them understand the learning process and giving them the tools to use to enable them to reach their goals.

Individualised student support

The aim of ILCs is to support both language learning and the academic endeavours of students who are enrolled in a range of international and foreign language courses, with a majority of them studying English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL). These ILCs have considerable commonality of purpose and services to the centres offering general learning support on campus, (sometimes called Academic Skills and Learning Centres; Te Tari Awhina Centres; Maia or Pasifika Centres; Student Learning Support Centres; etc). Whatever the name of the centre, the support offered is geared towards students either preparing for further study through Foundation Studies or its equivalent, or students already enrolled in regular mainstream programmes. Therefore ILC staff who work with language school students only, and those who work within general academic support programmes, may find that their students have similar study skills issues, particularly difficulties which relate mainly to learning strategies, academic writing and language use, often because English is these students' second or other language. It is important to reflect that each of our students is an individual who will bring with them a specific combination of their own cultural, personal, educational and social backgrounds. They all have their own array of life experiences, previous learning experiences, current living and working situations, aspirations, self-identities and beliefs, and their own range of abilities in both the cognitive and metacognitive domains.

A guiding principle of relating learning to the student's own background and culture enables better understanding and internalisation of the study skills, strategies and language to be learned. The importance of this aspect is pointed out by Newton (2009) in his suggestion that all ESOL teaching in New Zealand should adopt the Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching (ICLT) approach already well implemented in many parts of the western world such as North America, Australia and Europe. He describes this teaching as an approach where:

Culture is no longer ignored or treated incidentally through cultural anecdotes and casual observations or through transmission of cultural information. Instead an intercultural stance produces an integrated and consistent focus on culture as an inseparable part of all language and communication. (p. 10)

By according respect to and utilising the key factors that students themselves bring to their studies and combining this with the concept of individuality, educators can offer a powerful support for students. The authors of this paper suggest that this is in fact the main driver behind the ethos, development and success of our Independent Learning Centres.

Individualised learning at CPIT

As an important first step in the process of improving the support for each student, the CPIT ILC (called the Language Self-Access Centre, LSAC) undertook a series of in-house action research projects. The first study was an audit of the use of the LSAC - how, why and when learners and tutors use the Centre, and recommendations to maximise its effective exploitation. The second study was a pilot project to implement these recommendations with the aim of increasing the level of support offered for students' independent learning. The third study explored the actual nature of the support itself in more detail, including the development of the Learning Facilitator (LF) advisory role and the supervised self study time in the centre. To develop the advisory role the LFs and tutors met regularly within a larger group for discussions with colleagues about any issues they were facing and sharing information about current literature.

The results of the first research project led to the recognition of the need to increase student utilisation of various services within the LSAC, using a two-pronged approach:

1. Raising student and teacher awareness of effective language learning strategies and skills practice techniques;
2. Improving support for students' independent learning in the classroom and in the ILC as they use the resources, so this becomes more effective.

The rationale behind both of these approaches is frequently discussed in autonomous learning literature. There are a range of views on what autonomy entails. For example, Benson and Voller (1997) provide five definitions:

- situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- an inborn capacity (to learn) which is suppressed by institutional education;
- the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;

- the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.
   (pp. 1-2)

It has long been accepted that students benefit from learning independently (Black, 2007; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Mozzon-McPherson, 2001; Nunan, Lai & Koebke, 1999; Scharle & Szabó, 2000; Sheerin, 1997) and that successful learners employ effective learning strategies (Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990). Wenden and Rubin (1987), Oxford (2002) and Brown (2002) all suggest that independent learning can be introduced and enhanced through learner strategy training. Therefore, with the aim of facilitating and fostering more autonomous learning, higher educational institutions should actively support developmental initiatives focusing on explicitly taught strategy training. The rationale is encapsulated succinctly by Cotterall and Reinders (2004):

> By teaching your students about strategies, you are encouraging them to share responsibility for their learning … because it promotes efficient and effective learning; it increases the amount of time your students actually spend using the language; and it helps students take control of their own learning … The most important reason for focusing on strategies in your language programme is that students who use appropriate strategies learn more effectively. (p. 7)

As a way of implementing the recommendations arising from the first CPIT research (Dofs & Hornby, 2006), a programme was devised and trialled with five classes of Pre-Intermediate to Upper Intermediate ESOL students. This involved explicit language learning strategy training based on eight of the 12 units from the book *Strategies for success: A practical guide to learning Englis*h by Brown (2002).

The outcome of the second CPIT research was that teachers learnt more about an individualised approach and students shared ideas for effective strategies as part of their classroom activities. Brown's (2002) method of using 'post-it' notes to share and gather student input and knowledge was developed to a 'What Kind of Learner Are You?' communication board in the LSAC which students added to throughout the course as each topic was covered. This board worked as a consolidation and important link between the classroom and the LSAC. It also provided a communication opportunity for drop-in students, i.e. students who studied in the Centre after class but who were not included in this pilot study. They could add ideas to the board, and write comments and suggestions for others to consider and reflect on, as well as work through the associated readings and question sheets on their own.

In 2008 there was an extension of the CPIT development initiatives, which included taking cognisance of students' individual studies and offering a more personalised service in the LSAC. To help increase the support for self studies in an ILC, language advising can be very beneficial (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001). Mozzon-McPherson suggests that Learning Advisors can work with students to help them become self-aware and identify what areas they need and want to work on. Moreover, Advisors

can then assist students to set their goals, select their learning paths and materials, monitor these, and then help evaluate the effectiveness of the chosen tasks and strategies, and reflect on their learning progress.

In the third study at CPIT, the lower levels were offered self study support and advice by the class teacher, whereas the higher language level students were provided with LFs for 1-2 hours per class per week in the Centre during their ordinary study time. At this time the LFs and teachers did not teach, but instead encouraged students' independent learning. These students used a planning document which gave indications about the particular areas in which support was needed, as a guide for themselves and to help inform LFs and tutors so they could better focus their support. Specific professional development for the LF and teaching staff members involved, coupled with student introduction procedures, was developed to meet a perceived need to raise awareness about independent studies amongst both groups. The LF role, which is a relatively new one, needed to be discussed and negotiated. This was accomplished in part at workshop meetings, and also through discussions of articles on independent learning which covered a range of relevant topics such as how to best support language skills practice within the self study time, and how to improve the support offered. Furthermore, a number of professional development sessions for the classroom practitioners throughout 2007-2009 focused on learning more about how to best carry out individualised teaching and learning with the aim of fostering autonomous learners. This was influenced by the premise that to foster autonomous learners, teachers themselves need to be autonomous, as experienced and outlined by Thavenius (1999):

> Teacher autonomy can be defined as the teacher's ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning. An autonomous teacher is thus a teacher who reflects on her teacher role and who can change it, who can help her learners become autonomous, and who is independent enough to *let* her learners become independent. (p.160)

Students were then scaffolded to work independently in the Centre through a thorough induction process involving self-study preparation in the classroom, a 'learn-about-the-Language Self-Access Centre' quiz during the first session, and one-to-one help with their planning during the following self-study sessions.

As part of the LSAC service, there were also Peer Students providing some useful functions within the Centre. Part of their job description was to meet and greet other students, to help find materials and resources, and to be positive role models. They were mainly recruited from the Japanese degree student body, as they clearly had firsthand knowledge about learning a language and therefore were able to understand how to give relevant and directly applicable study support. In addition, their presence in the centre and their personalised support encouraged other learners to feel

ownership of the centre. From last year, students from the higher levels of English language courses have also been performing these duties.

Individualised learning at Unitec

One of the co-authors of this paper works at Unitec, where there was a somewhat similar system, using what was termed Peer Tutors (PTs), now called Tutorial Assistants (TAs). These PTs were originally drawn from the general student body via advertisements placed around the campus and through word of mouth. This worked well because the PTs' studies covered a variety of disciplines ranging from courses such as Fine Arts and Design, Osteopathy, Communications and Business, to trainee ESOL or primary teaching. Because of the diverse skills and experiences of this group there was also a need for a range of training, depending on the current levels of the PTs inter-cultural understanding, language awareness and their theoretical and background knowledge about teaching and learning . Most PTs therefore had to undergo some kind of relevant training before working with the students, so a series of ongoing workshops was set up and supplementary workshops were provided as requested by the peer tutors, or as needs arose within the particular groups of students being tutored at the time. Some of the PTs gradually became up-skilled and qualified in their own spheres, and subsequently left the institution for further work opportunities, while others chose to remain as PTs.

Meanwhile other members of the local community (some ex-teachers) expressed a desire for such work, and were very well suited to do it. Therefore, the word 'Peer' was replaced and the job title changed to 'Tutorial Assistant'. Since then there has been a solid base of both ex-student and CELTA (the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) graduates working in the Centre. The service was originally focused mainly on appointments with TAs (usually one-to-one but sometimes in small groups) and this evolved to include some drop-in sessions and special consultations, some focusing on learner advising and others on writing. The current format is a combination of booked conversation group sessions in the centre organised according to language level, and assistance in the classroom. The TAs are encouraged to attend the Professional Development sessions run for all teachers by the Department of Language Studies, those run by the institute as a whole, and PD sessions and workshops run by other institutions around Auckland. Also, classroom teachers sometimes offer, or are asked, to run one-off specialised sessions covering particular aspects of assistance that their students might be requesting.

It is a common view at Unitec that it is extremely important for students to have a graduated series of orientations to the ILC, and for the Centre to be truly successful, it is vital to engender close working relationships with, and have solid support from, classroom teachers. Providing excellent resources can then be a two-way process and students are actively encouraged to use the ILC both for the conversation groups and the other wide array of self-access activities and materials available.

There is an overarching need for support from both the Department of Language Studies management team and indeed, the institution as a whole, with regard to funding allowances, staffing support, space allocation, publicity etc. At Unitec, the ILC workers embed themselves productively within their institutions - the academic and administrative staff have close relationships with other staff in the Department and a personal knowledge of many of the students using the Centre. This enables useful conversations about students' needs, orientations, teachers' input and discussions about resources that need to be, or have recently been, acquired.

On-going research

The current research project is to investigate three factors relating to ILCs in New Zealand: utilisation, support and effectiveness, and to produce a brochure and/or poster to serve as a guide to good ILC practice for other Centre managers and teaching staff. The validity of the information gathered is being strengthened by the triangulation of data from: personal observations and photos, interviews with centre managers and staff, and questionnaires completed by centre personnel.

The researchers travelled around New Zealand briefly in October 2009, and will be doing more of this in 2010, to find the answers to the Who, What, Where, Why, When and How questions about learning in ILCs in New Zealand. So far (November 2009), this research project has been piloted with five universities and polytechnics from both the North and South Islands and from the data and feedback gathered to date, twelve major themes and issues seem to be emerging.

The physical location of the ILC on campus
These may be situated within the Main Library building, attached to a Learning Commons complex, attached or within the General Academic Learning Support area, within the Language School, or some distance away from the main student body on a separate part of the campus.

The philosophical location within the institution and overall management of the ILC on campus
Due in part to the range of physical locations, there is also a range of management reporting lines for the ILC Managers, depending on the various management infrastructures of the different institutions e.g. Head of Learning Centre, Head of Language Studies, Head of Continuing Education, Head of the Library, Head of the Learning Commons or Hub, Head of Teaching & Learning, and Head of Foundation Studies. Underlying issues surrounding this are the threats associated with the continuous restructuring of tertiary institutions in New Zealand over the last few years, and the positioning of ILCs, General Academic Support services and Library services within this.

The guiding principles of the ILC

These include implicit or explicit principles relating to fostering autonomy, strategy training and self-access study. They can also help inform decision-making about scheduled class use of the Centre versus drop-in time, what to purchase, the rationale for cataloguing and displaying resources, when and to whom access is made available etc. Some Centres also manage room bookings, the hardware and the software associated with computer labs, language labs and interactive classrooms (including the listening, speaking and visual components).

Maintenance of Language Learning ILCs as separate School entities

ILCs that are kept separate from the General Learning Support functions of an institution seem to be able to offer a broader personalised service to learners. They can maintain autonomy of such factors as management/funding/resource allocation and display methods and have more flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of users, such as learner advising, and holding relevant materials, etc.

The workload of Centre Managers

While some institutions employ managers on an administrative contract, others are on an academic contract which may include a research component or may be only part-time. This can pose difficulties regarding financial and time allocations. Attention needs to be paid to 'system vulnerability', i.e. managers sharing information and responsibilities as well as involving other staff members in decision-making and other tasks.

Succession plan

Associated with this is a need to consider a discreet 'succession plan' but this is evident in very few ILCs.

Usage of the ILC

While records are kept of the head-count at certain times and the length of time students remain in the centres, this is naturally influenced in part by the resources available, how attractively they are presented and how readily and freely accessible they may be to find and use. The number of students and the actual usage of ILC services are also influenced by the amount of classroom teacher encouragement, Centre opening hours, staffing levels, student satisfaction, recommendations from stakeholders, advertising success rates, and the security systems in place.

Methods of publicity and orientations

There is a range of different methods of 'marketing' to both teachers and students, e.g. programme-wide introductory talks, class talks, and individually-focused class visits with an associated worksheet led by teachers or ILC staff. Some ILCs also incorporate teacher orientation during Duty Days, as part of the Induction process or Professional Development sessions.

Keeping the Centre up to date

Several ILCs are undergoing 'digitalisation', i.e. converting cassettes and videos to CDs and DVDs, and upgrading associated staff and student equipment. This requires a working knowledge of the technology used and of the Copyright Act, which may be the responsibility of the institute Library or of the individual ILC.

Student speaking opportunities
This is seen as an important role for the ILCs and it comes in a range of different formats, e.g. peer student small group discussions, conversation groups with TAs or LFs, language exchange schemes, computer programmes such as 'Eyespeak' and 'Connected Speech', and external volunteer conversation partners.

Learner involvement in the Centre
Different ILCs have a variety of ways of engaging their students in the Centre, e.g. noticeboard, posters, communication 'whiteboard', feedback forms, information brochures.

Desire for Centre Managers and staff to meet and discuss relevant issues.
Many interviewees expressed a desire to maintain discussions with other practitioners in the field and enjoyed the opportunity to be part of this current project.

While the current research project follows on from previous studies, it should also feed into another forum initiated at the Independent Learning Association, in Hong Kong 2009, by David Gardner from Hong Kong University (HKU) and Marina Chavez Sanchez from Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) relating to developing a system for validating ILCs, for defining a set of standards for ILCs and a useful system for evaluating them.[2]

Conclusion

All the above major themes and issues interact and inter-relate to some extent, and no doubt more will emerge from the full research project, while existing ones will be further elaborated. As a way forward to continue investigating this field and to fulfil the aim of suggesting ways some of the issues could be addressed, there is still a need for more action research, data collection and feedback about the usage, focus and support offered at individual ILCs in New Zealand. This should also include gathering more information about the physical locations and characteristics of the ILCs, the management hierarchies, and the ideological structures underpinning the infrastructure surrounding the Centres.

Another useful development would be to involve and bring together Centre Managers to share ideas about the support networks they currently enjoy and to be part of an evolving 'Community of Practice' whether this is mediated through 'physical' regional group meetings (and/or perhaps a major hui) or by 'virtual' means. This could be via a

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[2] The first invitation was proposed at the Independent Learning Association Conference in Hong Kong, 2009. More information on http://innovationinteaching.org/blog/2009/12/ and http://cad.cele.unam.mx/sac/index.php

range of communicative means such as blogs, wikis, Skype, twitter, re-igniting the currently dormant SACSIG national listserver, attaching Special Interest Group (SIG) meetings to relevant conferences etc. An extension of this could be for Centre Managers and staff to work together, both within and across institutions, to negotiate a set of guidelines for good ILC practice which in turn could lead to the establishment of a set of guiding principles for ILCs in New Zealand.

Final thoughts

As a final metaphor, the researchers, who are ILC managers as well as learning support advisors, consider their learning development roles and the ongoing life-long benefits for the students, comparable to the strength and longevity of ancient aqueducts, weathered by the shifting sands of time, but still standing strong and supporting the 'necessities' of life. Our tertiary institutions offer academic development support to people in all their endeavours, whatever time it may be in their lives, whatever culture(s) they may find themselves part of and in whatever direction they may decide to go, despite the day to day swirling of sands affected by the local microclimate of their daily lives and the macroclimate of our national and international educational and economic situations.

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