

# Managing Self-Access Language Learning

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# *Case Study 2*

## Managing Self-Access Language Learning at Hong Kong Baptist University

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Ian LEE

### Introduction

English Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) is provided by the Language Centre through a combination of services and facilities within the university. These consist primarily of SALL courses and workshops that train learning strategies; online self-study resources housed on a dedicated SALL website; and a self-access lab called The English Learning Oasis (ELO) to support out-of-class learning. These services and facilities are available without charge to any undergraduate or postgraduate student of the university who is funded by the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong (i.e., publicly funded).

### A. Principles of Managing SALL

#### 1. *Rationale for the Self-Access Centre*

The mission of the Language Centre at HKBU is to help students acquire the linguistic skills necessary for successful participation in the academic life of the university and in their future working environments. The ELO supports this mission by providing not only additional resources for students to supplement course-related and discipline-specific learning but also directions and guidance to facilitate individualised self-paced study to meet both students' immediate and future needs. The ELO therefore plays a supportive role in the overall language curriculum.

The goal of the English SALL services and facilities is to create for students an independent study environment with readily accessible resources in which they can learn English as active participants. This goal is embedded in the design of the ELO and our SALL courses and workshops. It is hoped that, through the use of the self-study resources and by participating in the SALL courses and workshops, students will be exposed to a range of autonomous learning styles, become equipped with useful learner strategies, and ultimately learn to transfer the necessary skills to become lifelong learners.

## **2. *The Manager's underlying beliefs and values***

My beliefs and values of self-access have been largely shaped by my understanding of the core of learning, which was inspired by John Holt's perspectives of education, how children fail and how children learn. To me, education, as Holt (1976) defines it, is "something a person gets for himself, not that which someone else gives or does to him". Therefore, I firmly believe that:

We cannot have real learning in school if we think it is our duty and our right to tell children what they must learn. We cannot know, at any moment, what particular bit of knowledge or understanding a child needs most, will most strengthen and best fit his model of reality. Only he can do this. He may not do it very well, but he can do it a hundred times better than we can. The most we can do is try to help, by letting him know roughly what is available and where he can look for it. Choosing what he wants to learn and what he does not is something he must do for himself. (Holt, 1984, p.179)

With this understanding of learning strongly in mind, I see learner autonomy as the goal of taking control of one's learning, whereas self-access learning is the process of learning to make use of available resources to help with one's learning. As such, self-access learning is a means to achieving learner autonomy.

As the SALL coordinator, I am more concerned with the creation of an environment conducive to both self-access learning and learner autonomy. Our key role as a self-access centre should be to prepare learners for independent learning and give them successful experiences of independence in learning (Dickinson, 1994). Below I will explain my beliefs and values.

### **2.1 Voluntary not compulsory**

It is my strongest belief that students should not be told or forced to take part in

SALL activities, nor should SALL be a compulsory requirement of a course. Our role should be to create a learning environment where students will have the time and freedom within the curriculum to carry out self-study.

## **2.2 Helping not teaching**

Developing strategies: I share Little's (1995) idea that, "In formal educational contexts learners do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning—teachers must help them to do so; and they will not necessarily find it easy to reflect critically on the learning process—teachers must first provide them with appropriate tools and with opportunities to practise using them" (pp.176–177). Thus, the focus of SALL should be on raising students' awareness of learning strategies and providing them with opportunities to practise and develop such strategies in a study environment where they are required for a meaningful purpose. Ideally, students who have used our facilities or services are expected to go away with useful self-learning strategies and positive self-learning experience and ultimately become an independent learner for life.

Providing resources and keeping students informed of resources: The SALL manager's main roles are to identify and acquire resources suitable for the students, and provide them with a user-friendly system to help them learn to locate relevant resources by themselves. To facilitate that, effective communication channels should be established to make students aware of the availability of existing and new resources.

Self-analysis, goal-setting and progression: Learners need to have specific attainable goals and feel the need for achievement to become motivated for second language learning (Dörnyei, 1994). To support students' self-learning, guidance may sometimes need to be given to help students understand and analyse their strengths and weaknesses as well as set realistic goals. There should also be a structured framework with regard to SALL courses/services/resources offered to students so that they are motivated to take themselves to the next level and get a sense of progression and achievement.

## **2.3 Providing a purpose, meeting needs**

A key underlying motivation for carrying out SALL is purpose, because "all language learners need to feel that their learning is purposeful to be successful" (Dickinson, 1994, p.41). It is essential therefore for SALL managers to analyse the needs of the students in order to plan and offer resources and services that target their needs, particularly aspects that the present curriculum does not cover.

## **2.4 Encompassing individual differences**

**Providing choices:** As learners abilities and proficiencies vary, and the goal of SALL is for them to learn to take control of their own learning, a key element of SALL is to provide as many choices and levels of resources as possible to cater for their individual differences and learning styles.

**Tailoring services and resources:** Besides offering choices, SALL courses and resources provided to students should also be tailored to suit their differences and needs.

## **3. *The institution's attitudes towards self-access learning***

At the institutional level, HKBU highly values whole person education as its mission. As stated by the university, one of its goals is to foster graduates who are independent lifelong learners with trilingual and biliterate competence in English and Chinese. The university sees the importance of language training and is willing to support the Language Centre's work in relation to self-access learning by providing funding and physical space for self-access resources and facilities.

## **4. *Implementation of self-access learning***

### **4.1 Factors which have influenced implementation**

The implementation of SALL in HKBU has been largely limited by the inadequate space available on campus. With only a classroom-sized self-access lab and heavy reliance on computer-based resources, we have not been able to provide a very wide spectrum of other essential self-learning facilities (such as self-study corners and discussion rooms) and print/audio-visual resources for students.

Concerns about staffing and workload allocation have also influenced implementation. Since the SALL coordinator is the only member of teaching staff responsible for SALL and the number of other colleagues who can be involved in SALL varies from semester to semester depending on the overall teaching assignments, the services we can provide are rather basic and long-term planning is made more difficult. Having only one technical assistant also means that our ELO has to be closed at lunchtime and cannot stay open after office hours when most students in fact have more time to use it.

In addition to less than ideal ELO opening hours, students also have packed timetables and assignment schedules. As a result, they have to be exceptionally motivated to find time to do extra self-study out of class. And even when they

find a space in their day for SALL it may be at times when the physical facilities are not available. These constraints have influenced implementation in the sense that virtual SALL facilities have taken on a great importance because of their anytime-anywhere availability. They have also influenced the provision of SALL courses and other services which have to fit the students' availability. In addition, like in all universities the demands on students' time tend to be cyclical rather than constant often peaking at certain key points in the semester and dropping off during semester breaks. This requires SALL provisions to be much more flexible than regular teaching resources. It is only normal that the demands of credit-earning, regularly scheduled taught courses will take priority over SALL.

A final factor which has influenced the implementation of SALL at HKBU relates to colleagues. They are a useful resource as their help is sought in the implementation of SALL-related activities as a part of the optional components of our core English courses. However, some seem to have inconsistent understandings of the concept of SALL and perceptions of its value for students. This may be related to their own personal experiences of SALL as learners and teachers. Among some colleagues the lack of enthusiasm for SALL and appropriate strategies to guide students in the process can create obstacles for the implementation of SALL. This is sometimes problematic for the implementation of new ideas.

#### **4.2 How SALL is managed**

The chain of management related to the SALL at HKBU consists of the SALL coordinator who oversees the SALL component of the Language Centre and has responsibility for the day-to-day management of SALL and the ELO, development of course materials, especially multimedia and interactive Web-based SALL materials, liaison with colleagues within the Language Centre and staff from other departments, faculties and support units, supervision of technical staff for the ELO and SALL, and purchasing of English learning materials.

The SALL coordinator reports directly to the head of the Language Centre, whose role is to monitor the overall implementation of SALL. The coordinator also reports SALL activities every semester to the university's Advisory Committee on Language Enhancement Programme. The head reports SALL activities to the senior managers of the university by means of annual reports to the University Grants Committee.

Working under the SALL coordinator are a web technician whose main task is to develop multimedia materials and maintain the SALL website and course Moodles, and a technical assistant who is recruited to maintain the ELO and provide support to ELO users.

In practice, the SALL coordinator is given considerable freedom to plan and decide on the approach to implementing SALL within the Centre. The management of SALL at HKBU and its on-going implementation are influenced by three things: the existing constraints of physical space available, students' needs and availability, and staffing and workload allocation; the SALL coordinator's own beliefs about SALL; and feedback from students and colleagues. The feedback is obtained both formally and informally. Formal feedback consists of end-of-course evaluations filled out by students enrolled on our SALL courses and analyses of enrolment patterns. Informal feedback consists of teacher observations in SALL course and casual conversations with SALL teachers and students. These various forms of feedback play an important role in informing the overall implementation and design of SALL courses and services.

### **4.3 How SALL is linked to the teaching of courses**

It is central to the ethos of SALL at HKBU that students should be provided with a genuine purpose to conduct self-access learning. This can be achieved initially by incorporating SALL into the existing taught courses of the Language Centre. To facilitate this, the SALL coordinator has established a number of course websites which suggest supplementary SALL resources of use to students of those courses and which contain SALL activities that are designed around the topics and skills covered in those courses. This kind of natural integration gives students a meaningful purpose and higher motivation for self-access learning. However, the use of these resources and activities is never made a compulsory part of the courses they relate to. This is because the concept of "mandatory" SALL is contrary to the principles of SALL as implemented within the context at HKBU.

## **5. Future Directions**

A proposal has already been submitted to the university to set up a more comprehensive self-access centre for the learning of English, Chinese, Putonghua and foreign languages. Subject to the overall campus expansion plan and availability of additional sources of funding, the self-access centre will take up further space near the present ELO and be equipped with a full range of self-learning resources and self-study facilities including specialist consultation rooms to enable learner counselling. There is also a plan to introduce SALL to existing and new English courses.



## **B. Practice in Managing SALL**

### **1. *Facts and figures***

The English Learning Oasis is designed as a dual-purpose lab which is used primarily as a student resource room for independent learning of English but can also be turned into a language lab suitable for classroom teaching if demands for lab space increase. The ELO is open from 9:30a.m. to 1:30p.m. and 2:30 to 6:00p.m. from Monday to Friday. At other times it is available for Language Centre English teachers to book for use as a classroom. No provision is made for opening on Saturday because most students do not come to campus on the weekends. The ELO is 53.74 square metres in size and can accommodate a total of 20 students at one time.

Student use of the ELO varies considerably depending mostly on the design and implementation of course-related SALL components. Usage ranges between 500 and 2,000 students per semester. The main uses of the ELO are to access pre-installed English language learning software or to access English learning websites. Some of this use is by students learning independently and some as class groups. But records are not kept of exact use.

The combined SALL provisions offered by the Language Centre are managed by a SALL coordinator who is responsible for the overall planning and implementation of SALL in the university. The SALL coordinator, who was recruited specifically for expertise and experience in SALL, is a full-time teaching staff member given a small reduction in teaching load for SALL coordination duties. The SALL coordinator is supported by one full-time technical assistant to man the English Learning Oasis (ELO) during its opening hours whose duties consist of providing face-to-face technical support for student and staff users; and maintenance. Teaching on SALL courses and workshops is staffed as part of the regular teaching duties of certain Language Centre staff.

### **2. *Facilities***

Unlike most other local universities, HKBU has a relatively small campus and student population. Because of the constraints of the campus, the SALL provision offers a range of facilities and services within the available space and employs greater use of its virtual facilities.

## 2.1 Physical facilities

The ELO serves the dual functions of acting as a primary resource for self-access learning but also acting as a backup facility for classroom teaching when needed. It has, therefore, been designed with this flexibility in mind. This flexibility provides a normal configuration within the main ELO room and an extended configuration which is achieved by opening a connecting door through to the adjacent lab.

In its normal configuration the ELO provides:

- 20 student computers
- 1 teacher computer
- Over 30 English learning software packages
- A TV corner for watching English TV channels and DVDs
- A range of reference tools and dictionaries
- A small reserved collection of course-related AV materials
- A series of “Learning Pathways” (designed for use with a self-diagnostic test) and other self-study task sheets
- English learning games

In its extended configuration the ELO provides space and workstations to accommodate an additional 30 self-access learners.

## 2.2 Virtual facilities

The SALL coordinator maintains a SALL website which includes:

- information about the full range of SALL services, courses and facilities
- a catalogue of SALL resources available in the ELO
- lists of recommended links to self-study resources on the Internet organised by English language skills and sub-skills
- downloadable copies of the Learning Pathways and study task sheets
- an online Language Inquiry Forum used to answer language-related questions posted by students and staff of the university

In addition, the SALL coordinator (in collaboration with course coordinators) has developed a number of course websites or Moodles which highlight useful

supplementary self-study materials for students enrolled on the Language Centre's core and credit courses.

### 2.3 Services

Although self-study is largely a lonely journey, students generally appreciate an opportunity to interact with other learners and obtain guidance and input from a teacher during the process. They will also benefit from the introduction of self-study resources and exposure to various self-study learning strategies. Therefore, a number of SALL courses and workshops (non-credit-bearing) are offered to cater for the different needs of our students, such as Learning English through Songs and Learning to Use Self-Study IELTS Preparation Resources.

Courses are planned and offered on a semester basis largely based on the teaching assignments, student needs, previous enrolment figures and student feedback as well as students' semester schedules. Interested students can register for our SALL courses and workshops via the Language Centre's online registration system. As one of our ultimate goals is to introduce our SALL resources and facilities to students, these courses are offered in the ELO as much as possible depending on its availability.

## C. Reflection

The unique characteristics and cultures of HKBU have made the implementation of SALL a challenge for me. The major components of the challenge have been in dealing with the constraints of limited physical space, availability of time within students' busy schedules and variable levels of motivation among colleagues. Despite the difficulties, I have enjoyed the great flexibility and important responsibilities entrusted to me as the SALL coordinator.

In my management of SALL, I have found it extremely important for a SALL manager to have the right personality, a genuine concern for students, an innovative mind, a right way of handling things, and a solid grasp of SALL. These are the influences that have contributed to the way I manage SALL. I try to observe and understand the needs of our students, come up with innovative ideas for implementation and change, apply new knowledge and technology in trying out new ideas, take things step-by-step during implementation and adjust the course of actions when necessary. My knowledge and experience in self-access learning have also given me the courage to say no to unreasonable requests or suggestions that go against the principles of SALL in my implementation of it.

Looking into the future, I believe funding, staffing, the language policy and curriculum design will all play a crucial role in the development of SALL at HKBU, thus determining the effectiveness and success of its implementation. These are aspects at a more macro level that require the whole-hearted support of the senior management and all staff of the Language Centre.

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