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Sea Change in Library Use

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This article gives an overview of a project we are currently working on. We are extending our current support system and library (Resource Centre) to include a self-access and counselling service. Support, as traditionally understood in the centre, has catered to borderline students who needed specific help with one more areas in order to pass on to the next level. This project will also include learner training (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989) being incorporated into the syllabus for all levels as well as further learner training within the counselling sessions. The learning training is intended to foster more autonomous learning and allow the learners to take full advantage for the resources (both digital and paper) which the centre has in abundance. We draw upon the work of David Little who writes: “It is fundamental to autonomous learning that the learner should develop a capacity to reflect critically on the learning process, evaluate his progress, and if necessary make adjustments to his learning strategies” (Little, 1991, p. 52).

The Centre and our Learners

The centre is a dedicated young learners centre, teaching English as an extra-curricular activity, in central Madrid. The centre was established in 1940, and became a dedicated young learner centre from the late 90s. Over a hundred thousand students have passed through its doors in its seventy-five year history. All teachers at the centre are first language English speakers and have at least two years' post-CELTA or equivalent experience. Most have a background in English language teaching with a few coming to the centre from mainstream education. The majority of the teachers are from the British Isles with other nationalities represented. Most teachers are settled in the city and at the centre, meaning that the annual staff turnover is relatively low. The centre offers continual professional development, in which all teachers are encouraged to participate, through the TYLEC - Trinity Young Learners Extension Certificate (Trinity College London, 2015a), the Trinity DipTESOL - Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (Trinity College London, 2015b) and an extensive INSET programme.

The students range in age from four to eighteen with maximum class sizes of fifteen. Seniors within the school are age fourteen and above and these classes include specific levels orientated towards the Cambridge English language exams particularly the Cambridge English: First (FCE) and the Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE) although last year almost thirty students from the centre passed the Cambridge English: Proficiency (CPE). The centre has 28 modern classrooms fitted with interactive whiteboards and has its own library with multimedia facilities including computers with Internet access. Over recent years we have seen an increase in off-site classes. These are classes given within public, grant-maintained and private curricular schools in our area, either during the lunch period or once the school day has finished. The types of learners and the methodology used are the same as in the main teaching centre; the off-site classes are popular as the learners do not have to travel to central Madrid. A disadvantage for the learners in these off-site classes is they do not have access to our Resource Centre. There is also a plethora of digital resources available only at the centre including class sets of laptops, tablets and Play Station Portables. Also, due to their location, it is difficult for learners from the majority of the off-site schools to attend support classes.

Currently we offer support classes for small groups of learners who are considered to be struggling with their current course during the academic year as well as during the month long summer intensive courses. Students are referred to the support classes by teachers who feel that they will not meet the standardised criteria for progressing to the next level. Teachers will usually request support for a learner for one or more specific problems e.g. “student struggles with auxiliary verbs and syntax while forming spoken questions”. At the moment support teachers have a fairly sizeable bank of activities and materials to draw on which minimises the preparation for these classes. Quite often these support classes are successful and enable the learner to complete their course. Unfortunately these classes are only available at certain times during the academic year or intensive course, as the same teachers provide exam preparation workshops around the time of Cambridge English exams. Support hours form part of substitution time at the centre. At any given time between three and six teachers will be on paid substitution time meaning they are expected to be in the centre should another teacher’s class require substituting due to illness or unpaid leave. The centre limits the number of support hours given that teachers timetabled to teach support classes cannot also be put on the substitution roster. The support classes are normally timetabled

around our busiest periods and this allows the majority of learners to attend support classes just before or after their normal classes. Due to changes in demand for classes at these times, both on-site and off-site, we will not have the staff available to continue with our current model of support classes. The project described in this paper proposes a change to the current system which will provide a more dynamic form of support throughout the course, running alongside the current support classes, but these will be more limited in their scope.

The Broader Educational Context

Over the past ten years bilingual education has been gradually introduced into Spanish state schools. The classes given in English are limited to Science, Arts and Crafts, Music, Physical Education and English (as a Foreign Language). This has led to a general improvement in the English level of learners coming through this system but has created a need for some learners to reinforce their vocabulary for these subjects. To help these learners we also aim to include some Task Based Learning and Content and Language Integrated Learning activities that can either be used on-line or in our Resource Centre to cover these areas as these are not explicitly covered in our syllabi. This new direction for the Resource Centre can thus be seen as a dynamic response to a change happening with in our local curricular school system.

The Project: Application and Structure

This project starts with a structured self-access support system. Structured refers to the levels of guidance a learner will receive (Gardner & Miller, 1999), as the centre deals with young learners, high levels of guidance will probably be needed until the learners are used to this style of learning. At first this would be by teacher referrals to the current support system which will provide the learners with two or three contact classes. The learners will then be provided with self-access support including counselling sessions and access to study materials. To enable all of our learners to access these study materials they will be housed on the centre's portal. Access to the portal is restricted to our learners and is individually password protected. A needs analysis will have been carried out by the teacher, during the referral process, therefore the initial purpose of the counselling will be to make learners aware of the resources available to them. The counselling session will ultimately focus on helping learners learn rather than filling in gaps in their target language. Dam (2000) defines a learner

centred learning environment as one where learners are: given the possibility of being consciously involved in their own learning; expected to be actively engaged in their own learning and thus made aware of the different elements involved in the learning process - an awareness to be made use of in other contexts.

The change in the nature of support and the role of the resources centre must recognise the student and their needs as central to the process. One of the overriding factors behind introducing the self-access system is to improve learner awareness of being autonomous in language learning. This is an area that is not encouraged in the Spanish education system in any subject. Feedback will be sought on the effectiveness of learner training and recorded to help focus future training. A fair amount of counselling time will also thus have to be dedicated to making learners aware of their learning preferences as well as which learning strategies' work best for them. This is no easy task and depends on the commitment of the learner as well as the skills set of the counsellor. As Wenden so rightly observed

As noted in Holec (1981), learners need methodological and psychological preparation to be autonomous, i.e. facility in the use of strategies, including the skills of self-directed learning and the self-confidence and willingness necessary to take on the challenges of autonomous learning (Wenden, 1995, p.192).

The counsellor thus becomes a guide to the learner allowing them to take more and more control of and responsibility for the learning process.

To keep track of their progress, the learners will be expected to keep a learner diary. This will be accessed via the central portal, along with relevant materials, allowing easy access for both learners and counsellors over the Internet. Learners will be expected to complete an agreed study plan with a counsellor and this will be entered in their learner diary along with a record of the work they have done towards the study plan. The diaries will be loosely based on the European Language portfolio with an emphasis on the learner identifying areas they are struggling with and devising a plan of action with the help of the counsellors. The diary will also give the learner a space to reflect on which learning strategies worked best for them and how they could transfer these effective study skills into other academic areas. Although as Little (1991) has noted learner autonomy in one area of study does not necessarily translate into other academic areas it is hoped that at least some of the skills and techniques acquired and generated by learners will be applicable in other scholastic endeavours.

The structure of the process of the new self-access style support system can be seen in the flowchart (Figure 1).

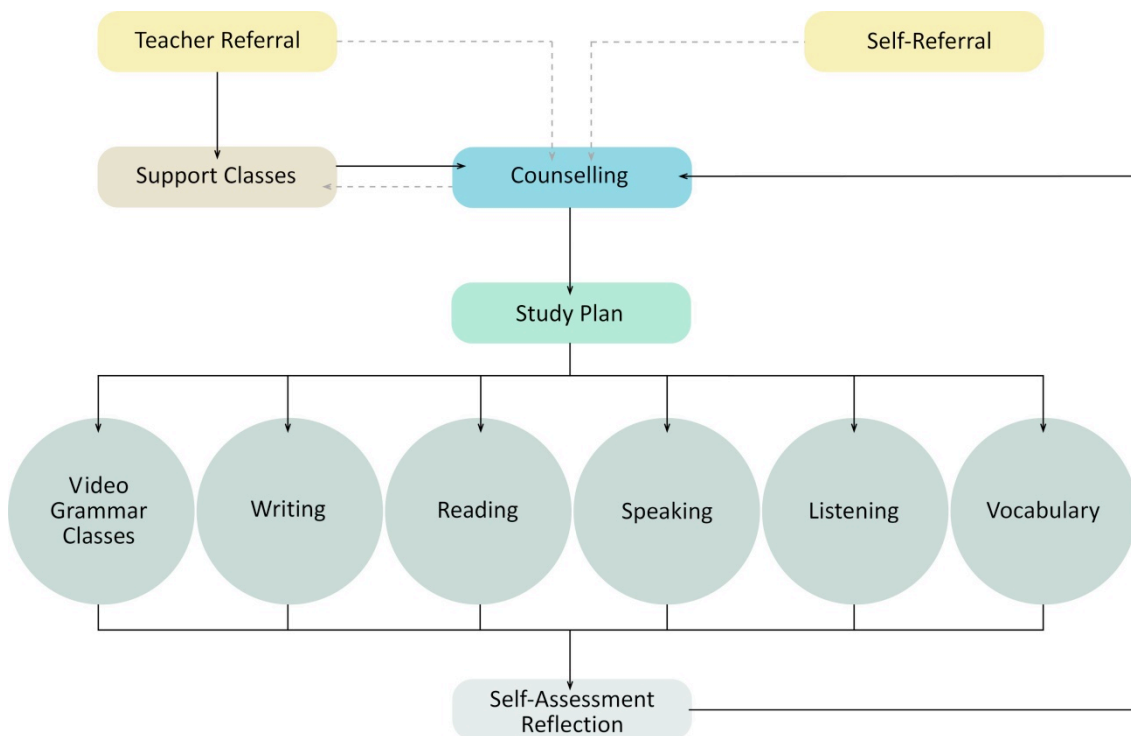


Figure 1. Self-Access Flowchart

As can be seen from the flowchart, the system will be opened up in the future to allow for teacher referral and self-referral for those learners interested in working beyond the classroom.

The system would need to be introduced in a phased manner. The majority of the material we will need to use is already available in the resource centre but it will need to be indexed for these specific purposes and made available on-line.

As the material will be available on the portal it will allow learners from off-site classes to have access to the system, permitting learners to work from home and avoiding the need to attend the centre. This will also reduce the demands on space within the resource centre.

The vast majority of the materials needed can be produced and indexed by teachers on substitution time, so this should not involve any great expenditure for the centre. The same would go for the counselling service as this would be provided during the same substitution slots.

Materials for the video grammar classes will be sourced from British Council websites like LearnEnglishKids, LearnEnglishTeens and LearnEnglish. When the

required material is not available, short videos will be sourced from other sites or produced in-house. The video classes will be based on a short instructional video of the area in question followed by short tasks to check understanding.

Training will have to be provided for teachers on counselling services. The majority of this training could be included on the induction days for the summer course and the academic year. All of our off-site schools have a co-ordinator who will be trained to provide counselling services to learners who are unable to attend the teaching centre. Training should include special educational needs (SEN) awareness as this has been an area of concern recently as we have seen an increase in SEN learners recently and need to improve our service to these learners. Counselling services will be provided by the existing support teachers at first for two reasons. Firstly they are used to helping students with their motivation and setting goals through their experience in support classes and secondly to allow time to fully train other volunteer teachers to take on the role of counsellors. The counselling services we intend to provide will be language based with some elements promoting learner autonomy. Essentially we need to train teachers in how to set up a new framework of communication with learners including the skills that set counselling apart from teaching like questioning, confronting, empathising etc. (Mozzon-McPherson, 2011).

The resource centre staff will have to be trained to provide cover for the counselling service as a precautionary measure to ensure a continuous service is provided. As the resource centre staff are not expected to be able to give full counselling sessions their duties would be to orientate learners on the use of the self-access system.

Learner training will need to be included in the syllabus for each level, for the reasons previously stated in this article. The levels within the centre (particularly the senior levels) are based on the CEFR and its communicative 'can do' statements. As such the task and activities used should also be based on this scale. Beyond this, learners will be given the space to begin to use the self-knowledge about their own learning they have acquired in order to begin to help themselves. It has been found that learners in our centre do not habitually receive learner training, apart from some strategies for memorising vocabulary. It is envisaged to have one dedicated learner training class per term and that further learner training will be given via the counselling service. Hopefully as learner training becomes more integrated in the syllabus dedicated classes will not be necessary and will be included in general skills and language learning classes. One of the keys to success in these learner training classes will be to

make the content relevant and that it is perceived as time well spent by the learners. Put another way the benefits and progress made by the student will be dependent on their belief in and commitment to the process.

The self-access system will be completed for our Junior and Senior levels first, learners from 11 to 18 years old. Once this system is up and running we will evaluate the possibility of extending this to our Primary levels 6 to 10 years old. Due to the age of these Primary learners parental help will necessarily be involved.

As there has not been a centre-wide initiative to integrate learner training into our courses before now, the self-access system will need to be introduced slowly into the syllabus for each level. The self-access system will be closely linked to our existing courses but not integrated into them at first. It is not planned to make the self-access system obligatory outside of the classroom but we hope that its partial introduction into the syllabus will encourage learners to use it as part of their studies (Cooker, 2010). If it is proved to be successful we will incorporate Project Based Learning activities which will start to integrate the self-access system into the classes.

Overcoming the Hurdles

This is a complex and potentially challenging project and measures need to be put into place to ensure its success. We have identified three possible problems and their solutions.

The first area we need to address is teacher motivation to include the self-access system and learner training in their classes. Due to the increase in off-site classes there has been a change in teacher timetabling at the centre. The result of this is that many teachers do not coincide with each other at the centre and this leads to an increasing feeling of detachment between teachers. We plan to run a series of workshops to include all teachers in the production and maintenance of the tasks hosted on the portal. These workshops will also include the preparation of learner training tasks to be included in the syllabi. We hope that the preparation of material in this way will motivate teachers to include and expand on the learner training tasks as they will be teacher driven and not an external mandate.

Secondly, we need to be aware of our learners' ability to develop learner autonomy. We need to bear in mind that full learner autonomy is not always possible even for adult learners and that if we only see a partial gain in autonomy in the learners participating in the self-access system, this has to be seen as a positive step forward.

Self-access systems have been successfully implemented with young learners (Gardner & Miller, 1999) and learner autonomy has also been successfully introduced to young learners (Dam, 1995). Parental help will be sought to encourage learners to complete tasks outside the classroom, especially for those learners referred through the support system.

Finally we must ensure that future counsellors receive adequate training. Teachers cannot be expected to suddenly acquire the skills to be a counsellor (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001). This would avoid the obvious problem of teachers treating counselling session as a one to one lesson; which would mean maintaining the current support classes without changing the pedagogical approach underpinning it. To encourage a more reflective, dialogical approach to counselling, workshops will be organised to help create a more open and collaborative atmosphere; which will in turn enable learners to truly engage with the self-access system.

Conclusion

This project offers an exciting opportunity to meet the changing demands both within the centre and in the broader educational context in which it is situated. As the content for the self-access system will be prepared by the teachers themselves and it is a teacher led initiative, we hope that the resulting self-access system will be organic, reacting to teachers' and learners' needs, and its integration into our courses will become a natural process. The project was conceived by the authors and it has been given the green light by the centre management. The management's enthusiasm for the project is understandable since not only will it be cost effective in terms of support hours but will also offer the centre a unique selling point to distinguish it from the ever increasing competition within the city. Furthermore as has been already noted the project is a response to changing demands on language teaching services as determined by the curricular system. Another clear upside to the project is that it will allow the centre, and its staff, to use the digital resources available to their maximum potential. It is hoped that the success of this project will allow this model of self-access to be used by other centres, which have similar resources.

Notes on the Contributors

Devin Unwin and Ian Adkins are both teachers at the British Council, Madrid Young Learners and are currently studying towards a Master's degree in TESOL at the University of Nottingham, UK.

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