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Learning Space-Based Initiatives for Developing Learner Autonomy: Design and Implementation

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Learning Space-Based Initiatives for Developing Learner Autonomy: Design and Implementation

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Recently, traditionally resource-heavy self-access centres have increasingly been reinvented as social learning spaces (Allhouse, 2014; Murray & Fujishima, 2013), usually with a greater emphasis on peer interaction and communication in the target language.

By elevating the communication aspect of a language learning space, however, there is a danger that the important task of developing metacognitive skills gets sidelined in favour of simply developing language proficiency through peer or teacher-student interaction. Language learning spaces that set themselves up as conversation lounges are missing a big opportunity to do so much more than just develop language proficiency in users. Learner autonomy should be a central mission of any language learning space. Indeed, a language learning space can be an ideal milieu for supporting learners to become autonomous. Unlike in the classroom, users of self-access and other non-classroom learning spaces already have a sense of being in control of their learning choices, even if they are not entirely sure how to exercise that control. It is therefore vital that support is offered to guide and support learners, and this support can take many formats. The best forms of support do not simply attempt to help learners make single learning decisions such as which materials to choose or service to use, but to support their long-term development as autonomous language learners.

The papers in this instalment of the Language Learning Spaces column each describe the process of designing and implementing an initiative to develop users' self-directed learning skills as part of the services offered within the learning space. One is a blended format, consisting of online course offered to learners with support from learning advisors, while two describe face-to-face advisory services set up to address specific populations of students at the institution.

Kerstin Dofs and Moira Hobbs, long-term collaborators based on different islands of New Zealand, report on their efforts to develop a Moodle course, run through their respective self-access centres, that can be accessed by language learners enrolled at their institutions. As more and more institutions are considering ways to make content available to learners online, their project offers important insights into

this process. They describe the challenges involved in offering such voluntary online courses, particularly in terms of student engagement and peer interaction, and highlight concerns about appropriate technology and the need to ensure equity of access.

Tarik Uzun, Hatice Karaaslan and Mümin Şen from Yıldırım Beyazıt University School of Foreign Languages, in Ankara, Turkey describe their own experiences of establishing a Learning Advisory Program (LAP) to address the complex needs of “repeat students”: those who, after a year of study, fail to meet the English language requirement to enter undergraduate degree courses. Through administering strategy questionnaires, they identified that students had both affective and cognitive needs in relation to their language learning, and developed an approach that involved both face-to-face advising sessions and bespoke materials such as pamphlets for strategy instruction and learning plans. While the LAP is still in its initial phases, the authors’ reflections reveal the need for dedicated advisor training and student record systems to keep track of individual students.

Andrew Tweed describes a similar initiative implemented at a private language school in Cambodia. In this case the target of the intervention is a group of students preparing for overseas study, who have limited time to achieve certain scores on English proficiency tests. He charts the transformation of Cambodian teachers from having a largely administrative role in the self-access centre to becoming language learning advisors, and the development of learning materials such as learning plans to support advising sessions. Using data from a survey designed to discover advisors’ initial experiences of the advising services, he highlights the generally positive attitude of these new advisors but also shows evidence of the oft-cited difficult transition from teacher to advisor (Kelly, 1996; Morrison & Navarro, 2012; Mozzon-McPherson, 2006). The need for further training is again identified as an area for improvement, suggesting that becoming a competent and effective learning advisor is indeed a lengthy and complex process.

The initiatives described in this instalment, both online and face-to-face, offer several models of how support for developing autonomous learning skills can be provided through language learning spaces. The common issues faced in terms of advisor training, record keeping and materials development may offer lessons for those looking to start or adapt similar initiatives in their own contexts.

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