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Promoting Independent English Language Learning within an Asian Tertiary Institution: The Lingnan Experience

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Abstract

This article is a self-reflective account of the English Language Support Service (ELSS) at the Centre for English and Additional Languages at Lingnan University in Hong Kong. The article gives a brief background of the Centre's structure, goals, development and the role it plays in student language development. Stressing the importance of self-motivation and independent learning, the article examines the issues the centre has had attracting and retaining students and the on-campus and online promotion used to increase student attendance, self-access, and face-to-face interactions. The article offers lessons-learned and future goals that can be applied to other tertiary institution self-access language centres.

Keywords: Self-Access, Independent Learning, Language Development, Motivation, Student Retention

Background

The English Language Support Service (ELSS) at Lingnan University's Centre for English and Additional Languages (CEAL) is a young, independent learning (IL) centre. The centre opened six years ago, with the goal of bringing self-access to students who may be unfamiliar with IL and reluctant to use English in a social setting. Prior to university, students in Hong Kong attend one of three different secondary school streams: Chinese medium of instruction (CMI), which accounts for 70% of all secondary schools, English medium of instruction (EMI)—20%, or international schools which follow either International Baccalaureate or their own home countries' system. For many students, this Centre may be their first opportunity to improve their productive English language skills through IL, by assessing their own problem areas, developing tailored learning outcomes, and making plans to meet those outcomes.

The Centre is managed by the ELSS Coordinator, who is also a Senior Language Instructor, responsible for the day-to-day management of the centre and training our three Visiting English Tutors (VETs). As an IL centre, it is important to provide students with a consultant or coach to guide them through their learning process (Wielgolawski, 2011).

Therefore, each year Lingnan hires three VETs to work with students. The VETs are recent graduates, TEFL-certified, and come from a wide-range of academic disciplines. Having VETs who are fresh graduates has helped immensely. Being close in age, the VETs and students tend to readily establish peer-to-peer relationships, giving the VETs a unique role, while also enabling them to complete many functions of the traditional outside-the-classroom language learning advisor (Mozzon-McPherson, 2006).

The VETs run four types of academic programmes under the guidance of the ELSS Coordinator: Reading, Speaking, and Writing Assistance Programmes, as well as a Drop-In Centre, housing a computer station and English resource library where students can stop by for casual conversation, specialised English support, or just to read a magazine.

The academic assistance programmes are run daily by the VETs and are designed to help students improve their English through interactive workshops and discussions. All three of these aim to give students a relaxed but focused space to practice their English, gain confidence, interact with native speakers, and improve upon their problem areas.

The Writing Assistance Programme (WAP) consists of one-on-one sessions between a VET and a student, examining the student's writing to identify problem areas, suggest improvements, and provide resources and exercises addressing key issues. The Reading Assistance Programme (RAP) consists of small-group workshops focusing on a range of academic reading skills, such as reading comprehension or understanding meaning from context, to help students improve on common problem areas. Finally, the Speaking Assistance Programme (SAP) consists of three aspects, free-talk, discussions, and structured workshops designed to help students gain confidence speaking through improving their social and academic oral fluency. These are designed by the ELSS Coordinator and the VETs to support the core curriculum and in turn allow students to develop their academic speaking skills, such as argumentative skills (agreeing, disagreeing, acknowledging) while improving oral fluency.

Additionally, the VETs also organize a wide range of social activities, such as movie nights, casual dinners, and weekend outings. Through the various programs offered by the VETs, we intend to build lasting rapport with the student body, empower students to practice English on their own and with their peers, and ultimately offer something to every student, regardless of their interests, motivations, or language abilities.

Challenges and Responses

The biggest challenge the ELSS has faced from its onset has been getting students into the centre in the first place. Many Hong Kong students enter university thinking they possess the requisite language skills to graduate. However, what they do not realise is that they lack the level required to find and keep a job once they graduate (Yeung, 2015). Therefore, demonstrating ‘a need for IL’ has been an obstacle that the ELSS has exhaustively worked to overcome.

Also, since students today, particularly in Asia, have spent their young lives undertaking a rigorous learning cycle, driven by ‘Tiger Moms’ and the like, prior to entering university they have focused much of their attention solely on academic success (Kohler, Aldridge, Christensen, & Kilgo, 2012, p. 52). Thus, when students enter university, the new found freedom is often overwhelming and self-improvement is the furthest thing from their minds. Especially in regards to English language learning, many Hong Kong students have spent their entire lives taking compulsory English classes without realising the importance of the language. As far back as 1997, in a study by Gardner and Miller on tertiary level self-access facilities, one Hong Kong participant even described learning English as an “arranged marriage” and argued that it took him over ten years of studying the language to understand its importance (Gardner & Miller, 1997). And sadly, even among the students who do feel productive English skills are important, many may be reluctant to use a self-access centre, out of personal shyness or other reasons.

Seeking to address these problems, and seeing strategic benefit for both the classroom instructors and the centre staff to know what goes on in the classroom and jointly develop learning materials to support each other (Gardner & Miller, 1997), the ELSS has worked intimately with language instructors to encourage self-access. Many of the academic assistance workshops the ELSS offers are specifically designed to support the English curricular content and coincide with the course schedule. As a result, when students struggle with a course, they can attend a workshop or the Drop-in Centre for varying degrees of independent guided practice with feedback, which research has shown to be one of the most important and effective learning methods (Weinstein, Acee, Jung, & Dearman, 2011). Each year, the ELSS Coordinator reviews the course materials and assists the VETs to develop workshops and exercises to extend students’ learning.

Likewise, the classroom instructors supplement the efforts of the centre by requiring students to attend its services and programs. Mandatory core English courses at Lingnan

(four courses, 16 credits) have always included an IL component (before establishing the self-access centre, students could only seek advice from their language instructors {if at all}). In 2014, the ELSS, in cooperation with the language instructors, developed an Independent Learner Training unit for the freshman course. This unit introduces students to academic and social English enhancement programs and activities. To pass their first undergraduate English course, students must visit at least two of the four academic assistance programmes and at least one social activity. In the second course, they must attend any two academic or social activities. The aim of the IL requirement is for students to get acquainted with a variety of the ELSS services, habituate English usage among and between their peers, and build rapport with the staff—hopefully extending well beyond the first year.

Although all classes at Hong Kong universities must be taught in English (with some exceptions, such as Chinese language classes, etc.) students only take English language courses per se in the first two years of study. Therefore, attracting year 3 and 4 students remains a major challenge. Lingnan University has begun to recognize this, and last year mandated every class taught in English must attribute a minimum 10% of a student's grade to language proficiency. Even so, without their initial motivation or self-drive, it can be extremely difficult for students to improve upon their language goals (Murphy, 2011). Thus, it is of paramount importance for centre staff to focus on helping students become self-motivated.

Re-designing the IL Unit in the freshman year intends to show students the need to improve their English, and motivate them to attend ELSS programmes, but student sign-in data from 2014-2016 shows only a 10-15% return rate for third and fourth year students. This statistic implies that making it mandatory for students to undertake an IL plan (graded or otherwise) or attaching a percentage of a final grade to English ability in their earlier years of study may not be enough to drive students to seek help and advice later in their academic careers. Thus, the VETs and the ELSS coordinator must avidly work to find alternative means to promote the services.

On-Campus Promotion

Each year, the VETs and ELSS devote significant effort to traditional forms of campus advertising, such as tabling outside the canteen, producing a monthly e-newsletter for all students and designing flyers to be placed on bulletin boards around the various residence halls and academic buildings. Beyond this, however, the Centre has found a number of new

and creative ways to market itself to students, ideally from the first day they step onto campus.

New-staff orientation

In the last two years, the VETs, along with the ELSS Coordinator, have participated in the new staff orientation to get acquainted with other staff. Each year, the ELSS Coordinator gives a presentation introducing the services to new faculty members and stresses the importance of their involvement in the student referral process.

New-student orientation

By holding an “English Salon” during the New Student Orientation period, the ELSS is able to promote its services before the start of the academic year. The English Salon is a one-hour session run by the ELSS coordinator and the VETs, in which the services are introduced, the VETs play an English game with the students, and students are given time to ask any questions they have and introduce themselves to the VETs. Additionally, the ELSS is featured in the Lingnan Student Handbook each student receives during Orientation.

Student handbook

Each semester, the centre produces an ELSS Student Handbook, a 50-page booklet which provides students with information about the language support services and IL resources, as well as the names of the organizers, to help them manage their time. The aim of the handbook is to give students a manual to help decide what aspect of their language learning they want to improve upon in addition to giving them a few options of how to begin their language learning process. The handbook also contains consultation records and notes pages so that students can document their independent learning.

Classroom visits

In the first semester, the VETs visit every English freshman class during the first two weeks to introduce themselves personally, play a video highlighting the most popular services, distribute the ELSS Student Handbook, and advertise their social events for the semester. The classroom visits ensure that nearly all students are aware of the ELSS programmes and have some recognition of who the VETs are.

Online Presence

From the onset, the ELSS development team at CEAL (headed by the ELSS Coordinator) realised that technology was rapidly changing the educational landscape. Particularly for a centre with limits of both space and budget, the best and most progressive choice was to begin developing online resources to meet the demands of our language learners. As the Internet became ever more connected with our students, so did we.

CEAL ELSS website

The CEAL ELSS website is designed as a one-stop-shop for all English Language learning needs. Besides allowing students to connect with the Centre electronically and physically come to our door, this website offers an entire catalogue of IL materials, and learning pathways to improve specific language skills. Lingnan recently completed the Inter-Institutional (with Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong City University, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and the Hong Kong Institute of Education) Collaborative Online Self-Access (ICOSA) project to develop a wide range of English language exercises focused specifically on Asian students' language needs. The ICOSA project developed over 1500 ESL and ESP exercises which are now being utilised by students and the general public. In September 2016, the website launched a real-time discussion board, which will give students an online platform to interact with the VETs and other students about English language learning.

Social media

Twenty-first century students are best reached through twenty-first century means. As such, maintaining a strong social media presence has proven necessary for our centre to make lasting connections with large groups of students.

For the ELSS, Facebook has successfully reached many key target populations. The VETs constantly promote the Facebook account via QR-codes in every printed promotional material. The ELSS maintains two Facebook accounts (one individual "Friend" & one official Page). Students who want to "friend" the centre can do so through the individual friend account, while those who do not can follow the official page with no privacy concerns.

The official Facebook page of the ELSS is a platform for the VETs and ELSS coordinator to share relevant academic posts, which promote useful websites and resources for students to use to support their language learning. This page has 741 likes at the time of this writing, and while it does reach a significant audience, it is not the centre's greatest tool.

The individual CEAL ELSS account, which operates on Facebook like any regular user, has over 3,300 friends (more than the entire current undergraduate population of the university). On this account, the VETs share regular posts (Music Monday, VETs Favourites, etc.), photos from every ELSS event, humorous and interesting videos, as well as any other information that the students might find useful. Students are able to post on this page's wall, or use Facebook Messenger to directly contact the VETs, making this not only a platform for promoting the centre, but an actual digital forum, providing distinct opportunities for self-access users. The benefit of that reach, and the instantaneous nature of communication, is immense.

Along with the Facebook pages, the ELSS connects with students through Instagram. This year alone, the ELSS Instagram followers increased from just 11 to over 140, and as the original content grows, we expect to see similarly rapid growth. On Instagram, the VETs share photos and videos, simultaneously cataloguing and promoting their many events and projects. Like any user, the ELSS can cultivate a specific aesthetic, promoting the value of English language learning and thanks to the effective ubiquity of this platform among Lingnan students, we believe it can become a valuable source of outreach.

The ELSS YouTube page, conscious of many students' preference for video over text, serves as a repository of original content designed to assist self-access users. In less than three years, the centre staff have created 65 videos, which to date have garnered over 45,000 views. The videos focus on common problem areas among students, as well as basic language skills. For example, this year the VETs created videos to teach students how to effectively edit papers, create vocabulary cards, and address common grammatical errors. More than any other social media platform, YouTube empowers independent learners. Never before has self-access been so user-friendly, offering students more choice of resources as soon as he or she completes an old one (Sherer & Shea, 2011). By maintaining the YouTube channel, and producing a wealth of original content, the ELSS seeks to contribute to the large and dynamic language learning community that YouTube contains.

Overall, social media has been a great tool to promote the services and share useful information. Through it, the ELSS is able to promote events, communicate with students, and share resources. It is evident, however that an online presence cannot replace the value of working with a VET in person, where students are afforded face to face mentorship to set outcomes and progress can be established and evaluated more readily and the risk of miscommunication is lessened (Switzer, 2010). Overall, it would be best for students to combine both conventional and online resources to foster greater language learning.

Conclusion, Advice, and Suggestions

In the 2013-14 school year, before implementing the IL training component in the core courses, the academic services were used 1,713 times by students. After implementing it, attendance increased to 2,448 in 2014-15 and 3,048 in 2015-16. This reflects almost an 80% increase in three years. When looking specifically at the Drop-In Centre, the attendance rate increased by approximately 130% to nearly 1,000 visits this past academic year. This substantial rise tends to suggest that the integration of IL into the course curriculum coupled with the variety of promotional measures undertaken by the Centre seems to have had a positive impact on student attendance.

In order to continue this trend, the Centre must increase institutional awareness to ensure all departments are playing a more active role in promoting the ELSS to support students' learning (Gardner & Miller, 1997). This top-down approach focuses on not only attendance, but also student retention among 3rd and 4th year students. To supplement that goal, we have taken varied measures to foster lasting connections between our students and staff. We integrate a range of new and traditional platforms, which aim to help an even broader range of student needs.

The way students learn has changed and will continue to change, and predicting the future is never easy. New technologies, and new students, continually challenge our conventional education systems to adapt. If we have learned one thing over our young history, it is to be open to change. Although something may have worked in the past—even last semester—it may now be dated and have to be replaced. Maintaining a successful self-access centre means staying up to date on current trends, and always looking for new ways to incorporate them into the existing modes of promotion and education.

Notes on the Contributors

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