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How can Independent Learning Centres mediate language learning and communication?

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Abstract

Self-Access Centres (SACs) and Independent Learning Centres (ILCs) have been an integral part of many tertiary language schools around the world for several years. However, recently there have been restructurings, new developments, financial constraints and an on-going blossoming interest in distance and blended learning, all of which influence the functionality, effectiveness, utilisation and management of SACs. This paper reports on a qualitative research project throughout New Zealand, which benchmarks existing frameworks and services of Centres. Research methodology involves triangulating data from questionnaires, interviews and observations. Current issues arising from the research are: the philosophical and physical place of SACs within institutions and student programmes; support for ILCs from the institute, school and teachers; and the range and organisation of support services offered. Overarching this is enquiry into "Good Practice" for ILCs and linking this project to other current international studies.

Background

What is a Self-Access Centre?

Autonomous learning was the key goal in the 1970's groundbreaking research, conducted at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL), in Nancy, France, by Henri Holec and his team. Their work resulted in suggestions for ways to prepare learners for autonomous language learning (Holec, 1981). In their study they focussed on two modes of practice for fostering autonomous learners; learner training and studies in self-access centres. It is the latter mode that has since become very popular among many learning institutions around the world and in New Zealand.

Self-Access Centres in New Zealand may have a number of different titles - anything from Independent Learning Centre (ILC), to Language Learning Centre to Self-Directed Learning Centre - but whatever they may be called, they typically have two major common purposes. The first is to assist our language learners with their studies both in and out of class time, and the second is to facilitate the process of developing autonomous language learning.

Most centres house a range of interesting topical learning resources from Literacy to Advanced levels, all adapted for self-access use and including the following:

- all the language skills i.e. Listening, Speaking, (including Pronunciation), Reading, Writing

- the language systems i.e. Vocabulary and Grammar
- special purposes for using English e.g. Business, Medicine, Early Childhood, Employment, Engineering
- language tests e.g. IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC
- learning advice for skills practice, learning strategies and autonomy
- a range of learning modalities e.g. visual, audio, kinaesthetic, including books, leaflets, computers, DVDs, CDs etc.

A number of centres offer study skills sheets about how to study effectively and how to specifically use the materials and resources in the centre to improve various skills and strategies.

Several centres also have a learner advising service, which can be accessed either as an individual or in small groups; on a regular timetable or on a course-by-course basis; by appointment or casual drop-in; and facilitated by either peer tutors/tutorial assistants, teachers or specialised advisors. Depending on the centre and its resources both in terms of time, financial and human resources, advising may be for all students or only for those identified as being ‘at risk’.

While some centres have minimal links with classroom lessons and practice, others are complementary to the classroom instruction and are strongly supported by frequent contact from academic staff, who encourage students to make use of the centre. In some cases classes are actually timetabled into the centre either for class instruction or for ‘self-study’ time. In some institutes, an ILC is seen as being part of the responsibility of the educational institution as a whole and there are strong links maintained between learners, advisors, centre staff, teachers and programmes in the Language School.

One aspect of the rationale of most centres is to promote lifelong independent learning, as teachers will not always be available. Another important role of centres is to foster active engagement in the language learning process so that time spent studying effectively benefits students as much as possible.

Project Description

The aim of this project is to research how tertiary institutions can maximise uptake of ILC facilities and it was initiated to develop guidelines for maximising student use of Independent Learning Centres at educational institutions in New Zealand.

In order to fulfil these aims, this research project investigates and will present an up-to-date snapshot of current practices in some ILCs throughout New Zealand, while focusing on the utilisation, effectiveness and support offered within tertiary level ILCs throughout New Zealand. This includes the facilities and practices for advising learners, the exploitation of resources, the use of Learning Facilitators/Tutorial Assistants, and the development of support structures. At the moment there are no guidelines for good practice for new or existing learning centres, and this project is aiming in part to fill this gap in an important area of our support provision to our students. Of course this project is also situated within an overarching desire amongst all institutions to improve the success and retention rates of their student body.

Through collaboration, and the pooling of ideas and creative solutions, we are striving to create a resource of innovative good practice ideas. From these, guidelines describing good practice for ILCs will be developed and disseminated via a posting on the Ako Aotearoa website and a hard-copy brochure will be distributed to practitioners in the field. Another outcome of this study will be to set up an active virtual ‘Community of Practice’ amongst self-access staff in New Zealand where we can share new ideas, initiatives, and resources and keep networked about upcoming conferences and useful websites for centre users, both staff and students.

The results of this research project could inform and provide a basis to affect and assist in improving the learning experience and outcomes for all tertiary students whether this be within the University sector, Polytechnic sector or other Private Training Enterprises, including Foundation Studies students and students in other contexts such as Maori and Pasifika students.

Methodology

To enable a development of an in-depth analysis of multiple centres, a qualitative multi-case study format is being applied to this research project. The authors gained full ethical approval from the CPIT Research Ethics Committee to collect this information about the current state of, and any issues facing, a selection of fourteen centres throughout the New Zealand tertiary sector.

The researchers are visiting centres from a wide range of tertiary institutions to make observations and gather other data. This includes taking photos, making observations, collecting documents and interviewing managers and other staff members using a semi-structured interviews format. To enable triangulation and to clarify ambiguous issues the visits are being followed up by questionnaires and electronic mails.

All of the data collated is being analysed using a model by Burns (2000). This comprises a method of structured, focused comparison, and summarising responses from each group of interviewees, then identifying themes of good practice ideas across the cases studies. The combination of interviews, observations and questionnaires enabled triangulation of data and facilitated similar and comparable investigations of each centre.

As a result of the study, data from the above three avenues, together with the literature review and researchers' existing operational knowledge of ILCs, recommendations for good practice in the running of independent learning centres will emerge, be published, and distributed to all interested parties.

Findings

Some of the findings to date are in the areas of learner support, speaking opportunities, learner involvement and support for the centre.

Learner Support

As mentioned above, learner advising and support can be provided in a variety of groupings and using a range of support documents such as advisory sheets on learning styles and associated relevant strategies, as well as information and exercise sheets for skills improvement. An important focus of a set of these sheets is to foster language learner autonomy with the associated requirement for self-awareness as a learner in terms of learner beliefs and preferred learning styles, needs analysis, goal setting, motivation, planning and evaluation. Across the country, two features of centres – having an established and viable and effective advisory service within the centre, and using a centre for self-study only - can be found somewhere on a continuum from being included as part of the curriculum to being totally 'drop-in' based.

Speaking Opportunities

As studies in an ILC not only involve quiet activities but also as Gardner & Miller (1999) so rightly draw attention to, it is the opportunity for learners to learn and practice whatever part of the language they need and want. So, an important aspect of many centres is therefore the coordination of conversation and discussion groups for learners of English who do not have

many opportunities outside of class to practise their use of English. These opportunities offer a range of scaffolded and free conversation practice, and can take several forms depending on the needs of the students and facilitation capacity of each institution. Some of the main forms of provision are:

- conversation clubs, with snacks and drinks
- speaking as the main choice in scheduled ILC time
- pre-organised speaking topics for timetabled groups, related to course work
- native English speakers learning other languages matched up with native speakers of those other languages who are learning English
- computer programmes requiring verbal language input from students
- speaking groups
- conversation classes run by peer students
- focused speaking practice - driven by the student's choice of focus e.g. accuracy, fluency, appropriacy (register), intonation, vocabulary, and/or grammar etc.

Learner Involvement

It is mutually beneficial for both students and an ILC if students develop a feeling of ownership over the centre, as Sheerin (1989) points out "...the advantages are many: students become more self-reliant and responsible ... and they have more opportunities for getting to know the system well, and of influencing its development." (p. 33)

Different centres have different levels of learner engagement in the management and running of the centre, and differences in the use of Peer Tutors or non-peer Tutorial Assistants (including Peer Facilitators), who are paid to help the students and teachers either in class or in the centre. These trained helpers perform a range of activities: they may run vocabulary groups studying the academic word list; facilitate speaking groups; help students with using the materials effectively; informally communicate with students; and help them to use the method of 'fan teaching' i.e. teach what they have just learned to someone else.

Other centres also invite students to take part in a range of extra-curricular activities such as photo competitions, book reviews on the library wall, a school blog, Facebook groups, magnet boards for poems or other general messages, origami collections, student posters on walls, opinion polls, suggestion boxes, evaluation sheets, notice boards, classroom project boards, and cue cards which students take to the student cafeteria to assist in casual conversation with native English speakers.

Support for the Centre

Another important element in the management and successful continuation of ILCs is the type and level of staff and teacher support, both from the language school and senior management team of the tertiary institution. Some ILC managers are involved in contributing to professional development sessions for staff at the language school, while others are on school management committees, research committees, and a few also have a presence at faculty research committee level. Others work more closely with class teachers on a day to day basis, and one centre runs a regular special interest group meeting for interested staff.

How ILCs Mediate Language Learning & Communication

ILCs in particular can mediate language learning and communication in a range of different ways to suit the varying situations and personalities of a wide assortment of students. These students typically emanate from many different first language cultures and so have a wide array of age ranges, educational, economic and social backgrounds, and life experiences.

Language Learning in the Centre

As mentioned in the introduction, autonomous learning is an important aspect for any learner, including language learners. Unlike classroom learning, ILC learning is usually under the complete control of the student. They can decide what they want to learn, when they want to learn it, they can then plan and manage their own time and self-assess their achievements as they proceed. Even though there may be some extrinsic motivation in some centres as self-access time is included in their timetable, other centres are for students who have solely intrinsic motivation. Whatever the motivation, for most students in the centre, there is no explicit external pressure or set programme of tasks that must be performed, so they can produce the language in their own time and choose which areas of weakness or gaps in their knowledge they would like to focus on at any particular point in time. One of the very important facets of self-access work is that students must have the ability to effectively undertake regular self-assessment to check whether or not they are on the right track, and to give them valuable opportunities to reflect on their learning – both the content and the process.

Language Learning Strategies

In a language centre, students are encouraged to understand, practise and learn meta-cognitive strategies that are easily transferrable into the classroom situation, and also into any other learning environment they may experience outside the classroom. In some institutions, tuition about learning styles and strategy training is done in collaboration with teachers and is either embedded in the curriculum or taught as discrete units of work, whereas in others, there are staff members who can take on this specialist role.

Mediating Language Learning and Communication: Student to Student

When considering students communicating with other students, we need to remember that language and culture are integral – one cannot separate the two. Also, due to the massification of education and the strength of English as an important lingua franca in the realms of learning, science, commerce, air flights etc, many of our students are studying and using English as a second or other language. Therefore they are also bringing with them their own lifestyle culture, learning culture and language culture, while having to navigate their student and academic life in a second (often foreign) language and culture.

Finkbeiner (2008) outlines her own and previous research which explores a concept of cultural awareness in which she describes ‘a sphere of interculturality’ which has to be established in order to be able to relate one’s own culture (called cultural space C1) and language with the new culture and language (called cultural space C2). These two cultural spaces centre around the comparison of similarities and differences. Now, arising from various collaborations and the collision of ideas in these spaces, individuals or groups of students can go beyond these two spaces and think of the creation and construction of a new ‘third space’ on an intrapersonal or interpersonal level. This can be seen as a highly active, fluid, indeterminate cognitive and effective state, where interlanguage and interculture is developed. As such, it can be both non-conforming and non-normative, and can lead to learners questioning their existing beliefs, values, and feelings about their ‘self’ and about who they are. She proposes that this third space “might help learners to situate themselves in a safe and non-threatening way in a new world which is created beyond their old and new linguistic and cultural worlds.”(p. 28)

In a sense, ILCs can be seen as a safe physical representation of these meeting places for people from many different cultures as they strive to study and to learn English. In this

way ILCs help fulfil one of their major aims - to enable and enhance the learning experience, and to encourage and mediate learning for our students.

Newton (2009) developed the notion of these three spaces into a four-step process for language students:

- (1) identifying the first space (students own language culture);
- (2) investigating the second space (the target language culture);
- (3) reflecting on these (to reach a deeper understanding of oneself acting in both these spaces), i.e. creating the third space;
- (4) then consolidating the understanding of the third space by trying to describe it.

Using this model, we can see ILCs in the New Zealand context encouraging and mediating learning by providing resources, both materials and people, to facilitate these four steps in the following ways:

- (a) by holding some resources in the students' mother tongue and/or using their C1 content;
- (b) by acquiring some resources specifically about the NZ and English context, C2;
- (c) by having discussions groups, and information and training about learning to learn, self-awareness, strategy training, learner advising etc so that students can reflect on the first 2 steps and understand better where they fit in;
- (d) by fostering autonomy and self-efficacy in students so they can then use this knowledge to lessen the affective filters and thereby learn more effectively as they can move on to describe the above processes.

ILCs can be particularly relevant as a place where students communicate with each other - they can discuss, contrast and compare their own languages and cultures with the target language and culture, and then decide how they will learn and use English in a new 'hybrid' cultural space.

As alluded to above, students in ILCs are often made to feel less anxious than in other settings in several ways (physically, emotionally and mentally), as there are relaxing areas and seating arrangements staffed by (largely) non-classroom teachers within an environment which looks very different from a typical classroom. Students are encouraged to communicate freely without the threat of feeling nervous, exposed to others or upset about any potential mistakes. Not only is the milieu more accommodating to the students, but they can also proceed at their own pace, rather than being lock-stepped into the classroom programme and the activities of other students who may work at differing rates. Students can produce their output in their own time, while also choosing the content, in other words, they can take control of the whole learning experience – one of the key tenets of being an autonomous learner.

With the increasing number of female Muslim students attending our institutions now, we also need to be sensitive to the needs of this cohort of students, who may need the privacy of women-only groups and a room where they cannot be seen by other males, which is particularly pertinent to speaking and pronunciation work.

The fan teaching mentioned earlier is also a means of mediating meaningful communication between students within the centre, as are speaking groups which offer the opportunity for authentic practice with other students studying English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) and centre tutors.

Several centres also have a form of Language Exchange whereby students of two different languages can be matched up so each can practise their L2 with the other while also assisting their partner using their L1. By facilitating this language exchange, the centre helps students to mediate their language learning directly, and it also enables cross-cultural

understanding and communication that can lead to students feeling more comfortable and ‘at home’, which of course is an important affective factor for learning. Sometimes it can even lead to a long lasting friendship. This crossover of language experience and teaching may take place in the centre, elsewhere on campus or off campus.

Other more formal means of mediating language learning may occur within the centre, in some cases while students work quietly at shared table space and, in other cases, groups of students can have discussions and work together in small bookable rooms within an ILC.

Mediating Language Learning and Communication: Teacher to Teacher

An ILC can also be an important focal point for teachers to meet centre staff and other teachers to discuss learner needs and useful resources – whether this be face to face or by a virtual means of communication e.g. email, Skype, blogs, texts, or phone messages. In several institutions, some teaching staff have regular timetabled sessions in the centre either to work with their own classes or to be a general ‘drop-in/on-call’ support person for all students. While doing this they can also communicate with centre staff, can keep up-to-date with resources, can glean ideas from peer observation about what and how others are making use of the centre and take the opportunity for focused self-reflection about their own teaching and use of the centre.

Some centres are also actively involved in facilitating workshops and study groups for the Professional Development of classroom teachers with such groups as a Self Access Centre Special Interest Group (SAC- SIG), special workshops looking at teaching strategies, and trialling autonomous learning worksheets in classrooms and the centre etc. Other centres have more day-to-day contact with classroom teachers, who also assist in mediating the student learning – e.g. teachers may refer students to the centre staff for advising, or alternatively may simply choose to have discussions with centre staff about issues and difficulties students may have, and find out what extra resources, materials and support are available for them in the centre.

Mediating Language Learning and Communication: Teacher to Student

This type of mediation can arise from having class time scheduled into the ILC in two main ways. Firstly, it can contribute to the more global aspect of meta-cognitive awareness about learning in general and the student’s own learning in particular. Secondly, it can serve to promote knowledge about the centre and the actual materials and resources it holds and how students can use these to best personal advantage. Teachers are able to move around the class and be available for the ‘teachable moment’ and mediate the learning process on an immediate-feedback basis, which can help students’ staircase and move on as they are ready and as they need to. By circulating ‘on call’ throughout the centre, teachers can also see immediately how much scaffolding a student is requiring and adjust the advice and/or suggestions for further self-study to suit the individual needs.

The teacher also has an important role to play in the choice of course material and supplementary exercises, which they can select according to the needs and sometimes constraints of the students’ L1 and culture. Input from teachers into the ILC can be particularly useful in small group conversation sessions where groupings of students have to be negotiated (e.g. according to gender and age and in some cases, according to the agreement of the spouse or other male spokesperson) and tutorial assistants can be advised by classroom teachers to avoid certain topics, either for course-related reasons, such as topics that may be in the up-coming assessment, or for reasons of a more personal nature e.g. description of a female relative, polygamy and large families.

Mediating Language Learning and Communication: ILC Staff to Student

Staff to student mediation can take several forms, from various types of surface communication between ILC staff and students, such as asking for help to locate certain resources or requiring help with utilising hardware, plus occasional language advice, to the more sustained and focused input from peer tutors or Learning Facilitators/Tutorial Assistants. This latter, deeper form of real and often ‘authentic’ communication which takes place, can range from leading discussion groups tailored to students’ learning needs and integrated with the classroom teaching programmes, to helping students make their self-study plans and guiding them in the use of certain strategies and techniques to enhance their learning. In several centres that were visited, centre staff can actually undertake two important functions at the same time – that is, facilitating dialogue and speaking/pronunciation practice while simultaneously engaging in authentic communication. This is further enhanced in some cases by centres having bilingual Tutorial Assistants, who help bridge the previously-mentioned first and second spaces, by using a familiar first language where appropriate to describe and explain the language being learned. They thus help students to manage and manipulate the language required as they navigate the second and move into the third space.

Conclusion

From the above description of the activities in a range of Independent Learning Centres around New Zealand it can be concluded that ILCs can play a pivotal role in supporting the mediation of language learning and communication in many different ways. This support needs to target individual and group needs of the wide variety of students we have today as they come with their own disparate array of prior learning, self-knowledge about learning and how they learn best including their own student belief systems and social needs. Moreover, ILCs are an important complementary service to the other academic and social services to be found on campus to enhance students’ academic and social engagement within our institutions, which ultimately leads to increased success and retention rates. As noted by Currant & Keenan (2008), it is the responsibility of both students and the institute to be committed to ensuring students are actively engaged. Consequently, learning support and academic services offered at tertiary institutions are particularly fundamental for this to occur. Nevertheless, together with students’ satisfaction with the centre, the support for the ILC within the structure of the institution, that is, by managers and practitioners, is probably the most important factor for thriving centres.

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