

Supporting and Developing SALL: The Need for a Core Team

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In the 1990s, a great deal of money was spent on setting up self-access centres in Hong Kong universities. By the mid 1990s, there were self-access centres in all seven universities and the Institute of Education. At the end of the decade, the picture was slightly different. In at least two of the eight institutions, the SACs had been moved into the library – away from the original sites where they had been run by language teachers. In most of the remaining SACs, demands to provide more and more language courses were having a noticeable impact on the ability of Language Centres to provide the same level of staffing that had been possible in the early 1990s.

This was the problem that we found ourselves faced with at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). In 1998, as demand increased, our Language Centre was required to teach a much greater number and variety of language courses. As a result, materials-writing duties intensified, and teaching loads increased to 18 hours per week, on top of which teachers were required to do extracurricular duties such as 2 hours of SAC advising (plus other SAC work if possible). This all led to a general feeling amongst staff involved in SAC work that they could barely keep their heads above water, let alone maintain or expand SALL activities and support.

At the same time, as SAC resources had developed and expanded over the years, more courses had started to include SALL components. But with the greater use, there was of course a greater need for learning support. We found ourselves increasingly having to dedicate our time to ensuring that Language Centre courses ran effectively (the main priority), with SAC work often only being done ‘if there was time’. More and more we were running to stand still. There was a grave danger that our once proud SAC would soon become a place where learners could look for materials but find no support to help them meet their specific needs and develop their autonomy. In other words, we felt the centre was in danger of becoming a white elephant.

Solution 1: the present

Although we were aware of the problem, we could see no solution. The facts of the matter were that teaching and materials-writing loads were increasing, and those were our priorities. What could we do? Finally, though, team members decided that something had to be tried and in 2000, four of us put a proposal to our Head of Department for a dedicated team of four full-time SAC advisers. With his approval, we went ‘upstairs’ to academic registration, and submitted a formal proposal asking specifically that we be allowed to dedicate time to maintaining and developing learner support in the SAC. To our surprise, our proposal was approved, and money was found to fund replacement teachers for four full-time advisers for a semester (later extended by a year).

The time we were given enabled us to do several things:

- On a purely numbers basis, it enabled us to extend the advising hours so that an adviser is always on duty whenever the centre is open on weekdays (9am-8pm).

- It enabled us to help course coordinators integrate SALL components into courses and provide adequate resources and support for learners whilst they carry out their SALL projects.
- We were able to make our presence known to the university community as a whole by refining and maintaining our website.
- It allowed us to provide a greater variety of SALL activities and ensure that they were well supported.
- Perhaps most importantly, it enabled us to sit down and plan out the future in a systematic way, rather than responding to crises in an ad hoc fashion.

The main outcome of this planning has been a proposal for a Virtual Language Adviser Database (VLAD). This is described below. The proposal received funding, which in turn enabled us to fund extra advisers to cover the advising time of full-time advisers who need to dedicate most of their time to the VLAD project. As a result, we now have eight SAC team members with teaching reductions, and have been able to substantially increase the number of SALL activities we organise for learners, while maintaining the extended advising schedule.

Solution 2: the future

VLAD is being jointly developed by the Language Centre, the Computer Science Department and the Centre for Enhanced Learning and Teaching at HKUST. The aim of the project is to produce an interactive, adaptive online advising system. Learners will input their English-learning needs and receive appropriate, case-specific advice. In terms of technology, the system will be self-adaptive and able to learn from problems it has not yet encountered. In terms of language learning, the system will engage the learner in a dialogue, helping the learner to narrow down the scope of learning and choose materials and learning strategies that are appropriate to them. We hope that the system will thus provide an interaction similar to the face-to-face advice offered at the moment at some institutions in Hong Kong but will be easily accessible to all tertiary students in Hong Kong. (The system will be primarily targeted at students at HKUST, and two other universities in Hong Kong, but will be available free of charge to all users online.)

Our hope is that VLAD will be able to reduce the amount of time that advisers spend in helping learners identify needs and narrow down the scope in the initial stages of learner-adviser meetings, and so help us direct our focus to supporting ongoing learning and developing other types of support for learners such as SALL activities and more SALL course integration. If we have to return to less generous advising schedules in the future, we hope that VLAD will help us maintain a more widespread support than we would otherwise be able to offer.

One of the areas that we may well need to address is that if VLAD succeeds in supporting learners in the initial stages of their decision-making, it could increase the number of students who feel they would benefit from ongoing SALL support. This will mean a larger number of students coming to real advisers, perhaps not so much with initial queries, but with specific problems and requests for evaluation of plans and progress.

What we have learned

When faced with change or limitations, it is important to try to create solutions and push the limits as far as you can. Constraints are not always as shatterproof as they may appear.

A group of four people working together has many benefits: ideas are shared, challenged and developed; end products tend to be better thought out as they have been viewed from several angles; support is provided and a sense of belonging develops. (However, it is important that each member of the group is able to work well with the others – an obvious fact perhaps, but an important one nonetheless. We have found that the ability to listen to each other and the fact that we share the same fundamental beliefs about learning are invaluable in ensuring that we complement each other and produce outcomes which have been thoroughly reflected on.)

Questions for discussion

Have others experienced situations where ‘not giving up’ has resulted in change – perhaps from unexpected quarters?

If people have had to reduce self-access provision and learner autonomy support to some sort of skeleton service, what have been the outcomes?

Is there an ideal number in terms of SAC team members? How important are group dynamics? How successful have people been in situations where they were the only person responsible for self-access learning, with no one to bounce ideas off?

Any questions relating to VLAD?