Developing Student Support in Self-access Centres

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Introduction

‘All learners are capable of learning and self-development and are regarded as being the most important in the process of learning and teaching.’

(Office of the National Education Commission, 2000).

‘Our students are not able to learn by themselves yet. We need to help them, to give explanations and to correct their work.’

(A teacher working in a Students English Access Room in a province in Thailand)

At the beginning of 2004, the Thai Ministry of Education established 80 self-access centres called SEARs (Students English Access Rooms) in secondary schools across the country. These SEARs are designed as a resource for students to help train them in how to learn according to their own learning styles, develop ability for self-directed learning and become independent learners based on their needs, interest and potentiality: in other words, to develop learner autonomy (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2004). Despite central government funding and careful planning, many teachers and students are uncertain about how to gain the greatest benefits from SEARs. In this chapter, we explore from different perspectives what specific problems teachers and students face in making the best use of SEARs. Our goal is to understand what future support in such limited environments will best help the beneficial development of learner autonomy within SEARs in secondary schools in Thailand.

The design and initial preparation of the SEARs

The setting up of SEARs in 2004 was the culmination of different education reforms from 1999 onwards: the National Education Act B.E. 2542 (ONEC, 1999); the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project implemented by the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC), Ministry of Education (2000); and the Curriculum of Basic Education (2001). The overall aim of these reforms was to support a learner-centred approach in English education by providing facilities where learners could experience learning based on their own individual styles. Learners would be trained to engage with English, develop their ability for self-directed learning and become independent learners based on their needs, interest and potential (Office of the National Education Commission, 2000). SEARs were to be the structured learning environment in which teachers would help learners to have more choices and make more decisions about their learning.

The 80 schools chosen to participate in the SEAR project were mostly those regarded as the best schools in the province, or schools that were ready to adopt this project since they had enough facilities and staff. Equipment in the SEARs included audio cassette players, televisions, and video players. Computers were also budgeted for, but unfortunately the purchase was cancelled, although some schools were able to allocate some of their own school budget to buy them. Paper-based and computer-based materials in the SEARs included both published and specially-designed materials for self-access learning.

Equipment and materials are just one part of the puzzle, however. Setting up any kind of self-access centre involves a change of roles for both learners and teachers. Facilitators/helpers/counsellors were provided in many self-access centres to give consultations when needed, and there was also documentation to help students structure their learning, such as learner contracts, record sheets, and needs analysis questionnaires (Dickinson, 1987; Gardner and Miller, 1999). Providing learner training in class as a preparation for using a self-access centre was also considered necessary (Dickinson, 1987; Wenden, 1991; Sinclair, 1996).

Three workshops were organized by the Ministry of Education to prepare teachers for the use of SEARs with their students. The first workshop, lasting ten days and run at the beginning of the implementation of SEARs in schools, aimed to introduce self-access, learner training, use of IT, and self-access for four skills. Two teachers from each SEAR school were invited to participate. The second training was organized when the SEARs had been operating for eight months. This