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3.15 Training new teachers to promote self-directed learning

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Introduction

This paper reports on a small-scale project to work with teachers who have little or no familiarity or previous experience with self-directed learning (SDL). The goal is to raise the level of awareness of those teachers about issues related to the promotion of SDL. This project is situated within the context of a tertiary level institution in Hong Kong where the curriculum is about to undergo vast changes which necessitate the integration of SDL into 33 English-in-the-Discipline (academic literacy) courses. The project is the second stage in an attempt to understand existing challenges and to prepare teachers, willing or not, to embrace the integration of SDL into the curriculum. These teachers will need a clear understanding of the concept of SDL and its connection with learner autonomy in order to support the learners required to engage in it.

Background

The researchers collected data from teachers who are novices to SDL teaching on one existing course already containing a substantial SDL component. Students' attitudes to SDL on this course were studied earlier (Gardner 2007). More recently, Lai (2011) examined the challenges the teachers face and their perceptions of the support they need. In that study Lai proposed a programme of in-service teacher development aimed at preparing teachers to support their students' SDL. The Orientation, Workshops and Learner Autonomy Facilitation Resources (OWL) outlined in the programme match exactly the support those teachers requested.

Context

The current project is a first attempt to actualize some aspects of OWL by providing an orientation package consisting of a pre-course briefing; a tour of the university's Language Resource Centre (LRC); and a bibliography. The pre-course briefing explained SDL and its role in the taught course, and included a question and answer session. The tour, which was conducted by the departmental self-access manager, provided insights into issues students face with English and the resources and activities available to help. The annotated bibliography directed users to the most accessible literature for both an overview and for areas of focus within the field. The annotations guided users to the recommended read for each section and to other further reading.

Six teachers who were new or nearly new to SDL participated in the study. Pre- and post-course questionnaires were used to find changes in participants' perceptions of: SDL, the teachers' own roles, and their self-reported capabilities in promoting SDL. An evaluation of the training package was also conducted. After the course, teachers were interviewed to discuss in greater depth their questionnaire responses.

Findings

There are a number of interesting aspects to teachers' perceptions of SDL but in summary it was found that even though the teachers were clearly not well informed about SDL, four of them were positive about it from the outset and became even more positive after teaching the course. The other two were uncertain at the beginning and became positive by the end. One initially uncertain teacher was influenced by memories of his own behaviour as a student but changed his opinion when he experienced his students' seriousness towards SDL. The other initially uncertain teacher had doubted her own ability to relinquish control but was happy to discover she could do it during the course and thus became positive about SDL. All evidence of teachers' positive perceptions relates to their students' level of engagement with SDL.

Findings about the orientation package are also interesting but in summary show that the teachers were largely not impressed with it. They found the tour of the LRC useful and the annotated resource list not useful at all. In fact, some did not even look at it. This is surprising because the request by teachers for such a list featured strongly in Lai's (ibid) earlier research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the attempt to support teachers who are novices to SDL it was found that they were largely positive about SDL but it was not because of the orientation package. In particular, the previously much-requested annotated resource list was not well-received. OWL is undoubtedly necessary given the challenges ahead but ways need to be found to make it more relevant to the users. The feedback received in the interviews has triggered a range of ideas revolving around content and mode of delivery that will be used to upgrade the package.

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