

Best practice in guided individual learning in Australian ELICOS colleges

Kath Brandon

Introduction

The National ELT Accreditation Scheme (NEAS) is an independent industry-based organisation responsible for accrediting and monitoring centres which offer English language intensive courses to overseas students (ELICOS) in Australia. The primary goal of NEAS is to maintain high levels of quality in English Language Teaching (ELT) programs and services in Australia. Colleges wishing to offer ELICOS courses to international students must gain and maintain accreditation through NEAS. This accreditation is recognised by State and Commonwealth Governments (NEAS 2002).

To comply with Australian Government legislation, colleges must offer 25 hours of study per week to clients who hold student visas. For up to five of those 25 hours, students may participate in self-access programs. Self-access has been a part of ELICOS provision for almost as long as international students have been coming to Australia.

There are a wide range of interpretations of self-access and the educational value and cost effectiveness of self-access programs have been questioned. Keen to provide support to accredited colleges, the NEAS Board of Directors commissioned a project to research the different uses of self-access programs and to document best practice. Colleges large and small, private and government-owned throughout Australia were involved in the project. This paper outlines the major outcomes of the project, including an examination of different successful approaches to self-access. It proposes a renaming of the concept to better describe practices in the Australian ELICOS context.

Methodology

Accredited colleges offering some form of self-access within the 25 hours per week of compulsory class time were identified through NEAS records. The self-access component of college programs ranged from half an hour to the maximum five hours. Twenty-four of the colleges participated in the project with a further two colleges helping to trial the survey instrument.

Based on the annual returns submitted to NEAS, colleges were classified according to provider type. The colleges were then categorised according to the number of students at the institution and the number of classes offered.

| Cat | No. of students | No. of classes |
|-----|-----------------|----------------|
| 1 | >300 | >20 |
| 2 | 181 – 300 | 12 – 20 |
| 3 | 91 – 180 | 6 - 12 |
| 4 | 46 – 90 | 3 – 6 |
| 5 | <45 | <3 |

Table 1: Categories of college involved in the research

Table 2 outlines the distribution of colleges in the survey according to size and provider type.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <i>University</i> | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| <i>TAFE/AMES</i> | | | 2 | | |
| <i>Private</i> | 3 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 1 |

Table 2: Distribution of categories of college involved in the research

Colleges were asked to nominate the staff member most closely involved with self-access. A researcher then visited the college and conducted an in-depth interview with the nominated person. In many cases two or three people, with different roles or from different centres within the same college, participated in the interview, giving a fuller picture of self-access practices at the college. Outcomes of formal and informal student evaluation of self-access were elicited but unfortunately more detailed student input was not possible due to time and resource limitations.

Interviewees were given an outline of the topics to be covered at least a week prior to the interview and a structured questionnaire was used to guide the interview. Twenty-one colleges were involved in face-to-face interviews, with a further three being involved in telephone interviews. Interviews generally lasted around two hours and included a tour of self-access facilities. The interviewers recorded information on the questionnaire during the interview and tour of the facilities. A report on each interview and centre was written and the content of these reports formed the basis of the best practice paper.

Responses to the project were extremely positive. Respondents were generally open and eager to participate. Several respondents remarked that the project gave them an opportunity to reflect on the self-access practices in the college, to identify the strengths and to consider how they might improve the effectiveness of self-access practices.

A number of non-ELICOS colleges with a strong tradition of independent learning provided a further context but they did not directly inform the best practice paper.

Theoretical perspectives

Self-access is firmly grounded in two fundamental principles of second language acquisition theory. The first is that every student is an individual and within any group of learners there will be differences in personality, intelligence, learning and life experience, preferred learning styles, interests and aspirations. No single style of teaching can provide relevant learning activities for all individuals and self-access can provide opportunities for students to meet their own individual needs with support from a teacher, if required.

The second principle states that we are all natural learners, with an *internal syllabus* (Corder 1981) that seems to enable us to learn. At times this internal syllabus operates despite the teacher. Self-access enables students to activate their internal acquisition capacity and to make their own connections between pieces of information they have been given in class.

Hard models of self-access (Gardner and Miller 1999), as practised in the wider educational context, are primarily concerned with the development of autonomous learning skills to prepare the learner for lifelong learning. This means enabling the learner to *take charge of their own learning* (Holec 1981), to identify their own study goals and to study independent of a teacher. Although this approach may be relevant to some ELICOS students, it is not an appropriate goal for many students. Some students may have neither the time nor the inclination to learn such skills because of their particular learning background, learning style and/or educational goals.

Renaming self-access

There is a wide diversity of practice within ELICOS colleges but three main characteristics emerge as constant:

- 1 There is some attempt to meet individual student needs.

- 2 The teacher is available as an expert guide rather than a director.
- 3 There is an element of individual student choice.

Colleges have developed different names for self-access programs. The most popular term is *independent learning* but other terms include *general independent study*, *private study* and *afternoon program*. There is clearly a need for a term that is appropriate to the Australian ELICOS context and the best practice paper suggests the term *guided individual learning* (GIL) which is defined as *goal oriented activities related to meeting students' individual learning needs and supported by skilled teaching staff*. The inclusion of *learning* in the term makes the process explicit.

Characteristics of best practice in guided individual learning

No two colleges operate their guided individual learning in exactly the same way but through the research ten features of effective guided individual learning emerged.

1 College management supports guided individual learning

A positive GIL culture is developed within a college when management and staff believe it will:

- provide students with valuable learning opportunities not available in a teacher-directed classroom
- support, enhance and extend the course syllabus

The Principal Administrator and/or the Director of Studies makes the decision to incorporate guided individual learning into the curriculum and ensures the necessary resources are made available. This includes teacher time and funds to purchase and maintain materials and equipment. It is also important that management supports and encourages the enthusiasm of teachers by valuing their role in GIL and their commitment to it.

2 The goals of guided individual learning are clear to all involved

There are a number of possible goals for guided individual learning, which relate to the curriculum and the student body. When the college goals for GIL are articulated clearly and shared with staff and students, the students have a strong understanding of why they are participating in GIL activities and the teachers and supervising staff know what they need to do to support GIL. This leads to positive outcomes in terms of student learning and satisfaction and a sense of ownership and engagement by staff.

Best practice colleges articulate their GIL goals to students and staff and the individual goals of students using GIL are identified. Effective induction is provided for students and all levels of staff, including administrative support staff, class teachers, GIL supervisors, ILC Coordinators and Directors of Studies. It is important that there is ongoing communication between management and students, management and staff and staff and students. Information about GIL can be included in college brochures and student handbooks and goals can be posted on a noticeboard or in a newsletter. Staff can be reminded of GIL goals during staff meetings and as part of professional development.

3 Guided individual learning meets the needs of the students

Decisions about the goals, timing, activities and resourcing of GIL will vary within and between colleges. These will depend on the characteristics and learning and personal goals of the particular student body and a general willingness to ensure that student needs are met.

Best practice colleges make sure they are meeting the needs of their students by gathering information about the goals and characteristics of the student body. They use this information to analyse and then plan how GIL can best meet student needs. Ongoing evaluation makes sure that needs are met and appropriate changes to GIL provision are made.

4 Students accept that GIL provides them with useful opportunities to meet their learning goals.

If students are to engage fully with guided individual learning, they need to be satisfied that GIL is meaningful and will help them to meet their learning needs. There will always be students who choose not to engage with GIL for a number of reasons, however these students are in the minority.

Colleges need to ensure that students understand how GIL can help them meet their learning goals. This can be done by providing information about the relationship between GIL and learning goals during induction and orientation. It is important to establish what student learning needs are and this can be done by carrying out a needs analysis and discussing with students what particular activities and resources they can use during GIL to meet those needs. The achievement of learning goals must be monitored and further guidance and support provided as required.

5 The students are familiar with the process of guided individual learning, and the procedures, facilities and resources available for GIL

Students need to know the range of activities and resources available for guided individual learning and be able to use the technology required to access them. For example, they must know what day and time a conversation option is available or when they can go to the university library to carry out supervised research for their assignments. Students should be engaged in meaningful activities, making the most of their GIL time.

Best practice colleges make sure their students know what to do during GIL by providing thorough induction for students on the location and types of activities and the use of appropriate technologies. They ensure effective communication between staff and students eg: posting information about different options on a noticeboard or in a newsletter.

6 Materials available for guided individual learning are relevant, meaningful, useful and accessible

A large range of materials and state-of-the-art equipment are not pre-requisites for guided individual learning. However materials should be sufficient to enable students to meet their learning goals. Materials should be classified, indexed and located so that they are easily accessible to the students. Damaged and broken material and equipment should be repaired.

Best practice colleges manage materials by allocating staff responsibility and time for purchasing, developing, repairing, monitoring and replenishing materials and equipment. They ensure resources are organised so that they are accessible.

7 The spaces provided for guided individual learning are appropriate and comfortable

It is not necessary to have an Individual Learning Centre. Guided individual learning can take place in a classroom if useful resources, meaningful activities and adequate teacher support are provided to help students meet their learning needs. Students need a room in which they can work comfortably on their own and they also need spaces where they can engage in small-group work or discuss projects together without disturbing others. Areas should be well lit and comply with OH & S standards.

Best practice colleges ensure their facilities are comfortable and appropriate by providing space within the centre that can be used for GIL. Furniture is used to create areas for different activities and tasks. Relationships are developed with other organisations or departments to share facilities and resources eg: local libraries and universities.

8 Staff involved in GIL are knowledgeable and committed

The staff who are directly involved in guided individual learning, particularly those coordinating and working in ILCs, should be extremely knowledgeable and dedicated. These valuable staff members know the goals of GIL, understand student needs, are familiar with the resources and equipment and can respond effectively to student questions related to language and learning, resources and activities. Such staff are able to provide leadership to other staff, disseminating information through staff meetings and/or professional development.

Best practice colleges select staff who are able to carry out GIL duties effectively and allocate time for staff to carry out these duties, with administrative support, if necessary. They build a GIL culture by

providing information about the college GIL objectives in teacher induction packages and presenting new GIL resources in staff meetings. Colleges find that offering and supporting meaningful professional development enables staff involved in GIL to benefit from professional input and exchange. Best practice colleges provide appropriate recognition to GIL staff.

9 The student-teacher ratio is appropriate

The student-teacher ratio cannot easily be generalised. It very much depends on the goals of guided individual learning and student needs and characteristics. When GIL is running effectively, there are enough teachers available for students to have the support they need to participate in their chosen activities and complete learning tasks effectively. The ratio could be as high as 25 or 30 to 1 for students with well-developed independent study skills and clear learning goals. It can be as low as 15 to 1 for younger students, students with lower levels of English proficiency or students in the early stages of developing learning skills.

Best practice colleges make sure their student-teacher ratios are appropriate by taking student goals and characteristics into account eg: younger or less proficient learners are given more support, especially initially. They also undertake regular student evaluation and elicit information formally and informally about whether students think that they are being given enough support.

10 Class teachers are involved, aware and interested

Classroom teachers play a key role in making sure that students gain maximum benefit from guided individual learning. Teachers need to know how GIL relates to the syllabus and how they can enhance student learning through GIL. The level of teacher involvement can range from knowing the goals and outcomes of GIL for their students to setting tasks to be achieved during student GIL time. Involved teachers are able to provide informal student feedback to the staff member responsible for coordinating GIL and make recommendations about the purchase of useful resources and materials.

Best practice colleges ensure classroom teachers are involved, aware and interested in GIL by providing effective induction and professional development for teachers and explicitly mentioning GIL in syllabus documentation. They also provide opportunities for staff to train in GIL and participate in materials development. When new resources and materials become available for GIL, updates are given to staff

Conclusion

Although there can be no one single definition of guided individual learning best practice, the general characteristics of best practice can be outlined. A range of clear goals for GIL need to relate to the learning goals and characteristics of the students and to the learning programs or courses within a college. A major feature of GIL best practice is a commitment to funding the provision and maintenance of effective and appropriate facilities, materials and staff. Each college needs to consider the goals and needs of their particular student cohort in order to develop effective guided individual learning while at the same time keeping within the framework of budget and time. Colleges need to consider how they should communicate the goals and processes of guided individual learning to their teachers and students and how they should collect and act on information about student responses to GIL.

References

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NB: This paper is based on the forthcoming paper *Best Practice in Guided Individual Learning* to be published by NEAS Australia. The paper includes a comprehensive guide to best practice and addresses goals, staffing, student and staff induction, activities, resources, student evaluation of GIL, perceived problems, copyright issues and concludes with three case studies. It will be distributed free of charge to all colleges accredited through NEAS and will also be available for purchase. Details will be on the NEAS Australia website (www.neasaustralia.com).

About the author

Kath Brandon has been involved in adult ESOL for more than 15 years. She has been a teacher, teacher educator, manager and curriculum developer in Japan, England, Egypt, China, New Zealand and Australia, She now runs her own business as an independent curriculum consultant.

Email: kbrandon@curriculum.com.au