Developing the Competencies Required for the Instructors Working for Self-Access Language Learning Center

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Abstract

The Language Institute of Thammasat University has been faced with a new challenge, the promotion of autonomous learning in students. The strategy developed to achieve this policy is the establishment of the Self-Access Language Learning Center (SALC). From the outset of the initiative, the instructors have had to take on new roles and responsibilities. Hence, the competencies required to fulfill those roles had to be identified. The professional development program was planned to improve levels of competency in the area most lacking – the knowledge in self-study materials development. This paper examines the potential of the professional development program as a process to enhance the specified competency. It discusses the stages of the learning process of the program: situation and needs identification, preparatory work, implementation, and evaluation. This paper also provides some evidence and implication as to the success of each stage throughout the process. Some suggestions are also given about how the professional development program should be planned and implemented in order to get the best results.

Introduction

The Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) was established at the Rangsit Campus of Thammasat University in 1997. The twenty instructors were assigned to set up and run the SALC. Since then, they have been prepared to take on the new roles and responsibilities by attending field trips to Self-Access at Chulalongkorn University and King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thonburi. After that, the experience and knowledge gained from the trips were put into operation. All of the SALC staff learned about self-access learning from practical application. At that time, no Thai institution offered formal education or qualifications in self-access learning. Therefore, no one had formal education or qualifications on self-access learning.

The SALC involves and has tremendous effects on many people, especially on students as SALC users. Care should therefore be taken on the implementation of the SALC. One way to ensure that the self-access work is of high quality is the development of self-access staff competency. Consequently, the professional development program to increase staff competency to fulfill the SALC roles must be specifically designed.

This paper discusses that professional development program. The structure of the paper is as follows. It starts with the factors that affect the professional practices. Next, the way the needs of professionals are analyzed is provided. Then it is followed by the suggested strategies for the professional development. After that, the factors for planning are discussed. Subsequently, it expresses how the program should appear in line with the condition discussed within, followed by the implementation and the evaluation. The paper concludes by providing the advantages of the professional development program and the existing factors that contributes to success.

Situational Analysis

The context in which schools and teachers are situated has significance in determining what and how teachers learn. One context of the Language Institute of Thammasat University (LITU) that should be referred to is the changing culture of student learning from dependent to more autonomous learning. This idea is promoted throughout the country. The response to this issue is reflected in the Language Institute policies and initiatives on education. That is to say, the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) was set up. Its overall objective is to promote learner autonomy in language learning. Such policies and initiatives have an impact, as external factors, on the Institute activities and the instructors' ways of working, and thereby affect the professional development of instructors.

Another context is the nature of Thammasat University which has two campuses, the Tha Prachan Campus in Bangkok and the Rangsit Campus in Pratum Thani. Those campuses are not two independent universities. They are administered by the same administration. Although they are situated at different locations, some resources such as the library and the instructors are shared.

With this context, the LITU must also separate its work into two because it provides English courses at both campuses. Faculty staff must be allocated. Some staff work at one campus, whereas others have to work at both. In the past, the Institute's work at Rangsit was supervised by the deputy-director for Rangsit affairs. All policies and practices were imposed by the administration from the main campus via the deputy-director. Then the Rangsit instructors implemented the policies as directed. With this way of organization and management, the Rangsit instructors had few opportunities to be involved in the decision-making process, even for their own changes. This frustrated and discouraged the Rangsit instructors a lot.

When the SALC was established at Rangsit, the instructors were informed of new responsibilities in setting up and running it. At that time, the SALC was headed by the deputy-director for academic affairs who was also based at the main campus. At the beginning, the practice was quite the same as before. The Rangsit instructors, as the SALC staff, had to wait for the decisions and assignments from the administration. To date, the situation has started to change. Having worked for the SALC for years, the SALC staff's now have more opportunities to be involved in the decision-making process regarding the SALC and to be responsible for their learning and changes. Hence, The SALC staff's attitudes towards the way of practice are more positive. This context, as an internal factor, has impacted on the professional development of instructors as well.

Needs Analysis

With the changing context, the change in the instructors' roles was required. That is, they not only taught but also worked for the SALC. The investigation was conducted to find out whether the instructors recognized their new roles, and whether they understood those new roles well and uniformly. The data was collected through questionnaires and informal talks. I found out that the instructors perceived their roles in the same way. What's more, they seemed to understand their roles and know what functions they had to perform very well although they did not have any formal education or qualifications on self-access learning. The roles perceived by the instructors corresponded to those proposed by David Gardener and Lindsay Miller in *Establishing Self-Access: from theory to practice* (1999). This asserted the good understanding of the instructors on their SALC roles.

After that, the instructors were asked to identify the competencies required to fulfill their revised roles. Among all those competencies, they specified which competencies they considered most lacking in themselves. This allowed them to self-examine the difference between the competencies held by them and those required for the job. These steps were legitimate because the effectiveness of a workplace depends on staff understanding. The information contained in the analysis would be useful for making decisions about professional development. Then they were asked to suggest ways to develop the most lacking competencies.

I put my focus on involving the SALC instructors in the needs analysis because I believe that when the instructors had a chance to reflect on their practice and be involved in generating change to some extent, it would raise the ownership of the learning in relation to imposed change. I also believed that for learning to be really effective, it had to come from within. That is to say, the instructors must want to learn before they will actually change their practice.

It was necessary to identify the competencies required to fulfill the roles of SALC instructors because there was no such a thing called "competency standard." In addition, it was reasonable that they were identified by the people—the SALC instructors—involved in the business.

Planning

Taking into consideration the information from the questionnaires and the informal talks, the most lacking competencies were the knowledge of self-study materials development.

According to the discussion among the instructors, the knowledge of self-study materials development is of the highest priority. There were five reasons for this urgent need. Firstly, the current materials had been used for quite a long time. Some of them seemed to be out of date in terms of content. In addition, all of the materials were copied and adapted from commercial materials. Some might have been done in inappropriate ways which could cause copyright problems. Thirdly, this competency was not difficult to develop in the instructors because they all had knowledge and experience in classroom materials development which could be adapted and transferred to self-access learning. What they might need to learn more was self-access learning principles, the difference between classroom and self-access learning, the appropriate format of the materials and so on. Next, it was the competency in which the majority of instructors thought they were most lacking in. It was the idea that most instructors had in common, and thereby they should be willing to participate in the development program. Finally, this competency was important in that when the instructors possessed it, they would be able to create effective and appropriate self-study materials which subsequently benefited students. Then students would be able to develop their autonomy in language learning and English skills through those materials.

With those reasons, the competency in self-study materials development was prioritized over others. Since the data was gathered from the people who were really involved in the SALC, along with the consideration of real situation, the validity could be ensured.

To make a plan for professional development, the following issues were taken into account.

1. The nature of the profession and the factors that affected professional work

The LITU instructors were always burdened with eighteen to twenty-five hours a week of teaching workload. Each of them had to be responsible for two to six subjects in a semester. Consequently, most of their time was spent on lesson planning and teaching. Some instructors had to travel between the Tha Prachan and Rangsit Campuses because they had classes at both sites. It took about two hours back and forth.

Furthermore, with the existence of the SALC, the instructors had the additional responsibility of setting up and running it. All of us had to spend three to six hours a week, in the SALC giving counseling to SALC users. Seemingly, heavy workload and time constraints affect our professional work a lot and thereby should be taken into consideration when the professional development was planned.

2. The knowledge and skills to be learned and applied in the workplace

The knowledge and skills that would be learned was self-study materials development. The SALC aimed at developing Thammasat students' autonomous learning and English skills. It was divided into sections according to English macro skill-reading, writing, listening, speaking—and types of activities, and facilities. As a result, the instructors should learn how to develop the materials for those four skills, and how to develop materials which were interesting, motivating and appropriate in terms of self-access learning, culture, and levels of difficulty.

3. Learner and motive for learning

The learners were twenty instructors working for the SALC. They wanted to learn the new competency in developing self-study materials because they realized that they did not own it. Additionally, that new competency was required to help them to fulfill the new and imposed roles and to work better. They also realized that when they had competency in developing good materials and developed actual ones, students would be the people who used them and learned from them. Hence, their learning would benefit not only the instructors but also the students as clients. Therefore, the motives for their learning were both intrinsic and extrinsic.

4. The practical experience that the instructors brought to the learning situation

The SALC instructors brought to the learning situation their great knowledge and experience. When considering the nature of the instructors, I thought they were homogeneous in terms of intellect, emotion, social capacity, and mental fitness. Nonetheless, they were heterogeneous in their teaching experience, professional behavior, ages and physical fitness. As for their teaching experience, it ranged from two to twenty-five years. Their ages were between twenty-six to fifty-five years old. Furthermore, their work experience varied greatly. Some used to teach in high school. Some worked for businesses before coming to the LITU. Some were in an administration. Despite those differences, they brought with them their concerns about self-access to the learning situation. A major implication was the enthusiastic participation in the meetings and discussions on SALC. Some instructors attended the seminars or training programs on self-access although they had to pay the fee themselves. One instructor conducted a research study which focused on students' needs for self-improvement through SALC. Another was conducting a research study to evaluate the SALC.

Furthermore, when the self-access learning was introduced at Thammasat University, most of the instructors participated in the setting up process despite not in an administrative or policy level. They seemed to have practical experience on it and realized the obstacles they had been faced with as well as the progress of the SALC very well.

This knowledge and experience could be helpful and valuable to the learning situation if taken properly. Additionally, more sensitivity was required on the planning and implementing the plan.

5.   The means to learning – the human and the resources available to support and challenge the learner

Although no one at the LITU had a formal education or qualifications on self-access learning, some attended seminars or training programs on that topic. Some programs were comprehensive. Therefore, those instructors could be regarded as resource persons for the professional development. Additionally, since Thammasat University is an educational institution, the infrastructure and facilities for learning were in place. There were rooms for meetings, computers, reference books, stationery, typists, secretaries, etc. This condition was really conducive to any type of learning.

6.   The outcomes of learning

The intended outcomes were the increased knowledge in self-study materials development which would result in better practice in developing good self-study materials. Once these outcomes have been achieved, they can subsequently benefit students in that they can develop their English skills and learning strategies through those effective and appropriate materials developed by the instructors.

After deliberation, I made the development plan which included the following characteristics.

1. Because of the heavy workload and time constraints, the learning activities should be held during the semester break. In addition, the instructors should have some spare time to prepare themselves for the coming semester.

2. Because this professional development is intended to be both process – and product – oriented, the combination of theory and practice is preferable. Once the instructors learn the theory of self-access learning, they should have an opportunity to put it into practice; that is, to develop real self-access materials. This way, their time will be spent worthily and the product will be gained.

3. The relationship of the participants is collegial. They know each other very well. No one is superior to others in terms of status. With this context, it is reasonable for the learning situation to be informal, relaxing, and supportive.

4. Since all of the participants are instructors whose jobs are to impart knowledge to others, it can be frustrating and uneasy for them to have to learn from others. In a conventional educational setting, those who teach are often thought to be vested with the power over those who learn. In an adult educational setting this principle tends to arouse antagonism in that adult learners have derived a certain degree of autonomy from their life experiences, which include occupancy of a variety of social roles outside the learning, environment. As a consequence, they should be encouraged to learn from each other by sharing their knowledge and experience. Before they really get to learn, they may be persuaded with the incentives that their learning can benefit their students. With this rationale, they may be more willing to learn.

5. Since the resource persons are available, mentoring can be one strategy for learning.

6. The instructors are aged from twenty-six to fifty-five, so the program should be planned in consideration of their physical abilities, restriction and reduced learning speed. It should not be too rigorous in terms of time and activity.

7.   Under the condition mentioned, learners should be provided with opportunities to learn through varied strategies such as mentoring, collaborative learning, and action learning. The outstanding characteristics of each are considered and brought into the learning process. For example, mentoring has benefits for all involved—mentors (the instructors attending training programs on self-access learning) and protégés. It also benefits for the organization in that it can improve interpersonal relationships by increasing the communication networks and sustaining the motivation of experienced staff. Collaborative learning is one approach of group learning which involves trust-building activities, joint planning, and an understanding of team support conduct. It is an approach which is based on shared learning goals and outcomes. Therefore, positive interdependence can be developed through setting mutual goals. By action learning, people learn with and from each other. They identify their goals and problems. Then they implement solutions to those problems.

The Implementation of the Plan

The plan was implemented in four steps. Firstly, it started with the whole group discussion and sharing. In this step, the instructors shared their understanding of self-access learning, discussed the rationale behind self-access philosophies and the professional development plan. This was like a preparation for instructors to move out of their comfort zone. In other words, they were prepared for the changing context and changing roles. They were prepared to do something that they were not familiar with—learning from each other. Part of this first step corresponded to the step "theorizing" in the essentials for leaving new professional practices summarized by Joyce and Showers (1998) in *Student Achievement through staff Development*.

The second step was small group work. The instructors would get into small groups as they preferred, according to the language skills that were intended to be developed through the self-study materials. The group work was facilitated by one of the instructors who attended a seminar on self-study materials development and was considered an expert. The facilitator would share their knowledge and experience gained from the seminar, and model how to develop good materials. Then, the participants shared, discussed, and reflected on their experience and practice. After that, they put their ideas into operation by developing materials for self-access. While working, they had a chance to mentor each other. At the end, they commented on each other's work in a constructive way. This step corresponded to "modeling" and "practicing" steps where learners had several practice opportunities and were provided with feedback in 'safe' settings with supportive colleagues. They also had the chance to practice the role of 'critical friends.'

In the third step, everybody got into the whole group again and discussed how to put their work into the SALC with existing materials and facilities and how to follow up, assess and evaluate those new materials when they were used by students (the real clients) in the SALC. This step corresponded to the last step "practicing extensively" in real world settings with feedback from supportive colleagues.

According to the plan and the plan implementation, the changes were likely to happen. That is, there were changes in the instructors' knowledge, skill, practices and attitudes towards learning. It was so because the key factors that brought about the changes were presented as follows.

1. The four experts or facilitators could act as catalysts for the change. They could be helpful to the learning situation because they were insiders who understood the situation and knew the participants' needs very well. However, the quality of the experts was critical to the learning situation. If experts were proficient in the subject, learners were likely to learn well accordingly. So, this should be paid attention to.

2.   There was the sharing of knowledge, experience and vision throughout the process. All joined efforts in organizing the learning process and interweaving the thoughts and problem solving. Additionally, self-esteem could be a result because their knowledge, experience, and vision were highly valued.

3.   The resources such as time, money, and equipment were adequate as mentioned earlier. The implementation of the plan during the semester break seemed realistic. Besides, the program took place at the SALC where the facilities for learning were available and thus the environment was conducive to learning. As for money, it seemed that a little expense was needed. If we really needed financial support, we could ask for it from the administration at the main campus. There were funds allocated for staff development. This kind of program which could benefits both the staff and the Institute was likely to get support from the administration without difficulty

4.   The environment was supportive and based on friendship. The instructors helped each other do the task in a non-competitive manner. The communication among participants who were colleagues was open and free. The reward was also present. It was not money or promotion, but it was a sense of achievement and pride which happened after the work was done and when they knew that their work was beneficial to their clients.

Evaluation

According to the objective of the professional development, the intended outcomes were the development of the SALC instructors' professional skills—the skills in developing self-study materials. Those skills could be detected from the materials which were developed by those instructors. The data was collected from students and SALC staff. At this phase, the gained data was only attitudes towards the SALC materials. Therefore, an observation should be further conducted to collect data on student's behavior in using the SALC materials. This data was believed to be able to reflect the quality of the materials to some extent.

Nevertheless, there was no exact indicator or criteria to judge whether or not a particular material was good for self-access learning. Therefore, the LITU should work with the external agents and experts to establish the criteria for judging the quality of self-access materials.

No attention had been paid to the assessment of the development of the personal skills which could also result from the professional development program. Those personal skills were the ability to work collaboratively with other people, and learn autonomously and to be responsible for their own changes. To detect those outcomes, the assessor needed to follow up the instructors' behavior for a period of time. One semester should be long enough to detect those changes. Alternatively, those outcomes might be detected from self-reflective reports written by the SALC instructors.

The professional development program which was designed for the SALC instructors to develop the competency in developing self-study materials could be categorized as "on-the-job" one. It was part of normal work activity. When considering the purpose and the output, it was the "tailored" professional development. It was deliberately structured to achieve the institute purpose in that it increased the competency of the instructors to be able to work for the SALC better and subsequently increased the effectiveness of the SALC. This was also a "group responsibility". The topic for development came from the SALC instructors. It was considered integral to both the group and the Institute.

After I took the whole process of the professional development program into consideration, I thought that the program had several possible advantages. First, it stimulated initiative and self-responsibility because the SALC instructors had opportunities to take part in the planning process. They proposed the topic as well as the strategies for their own development. This was good for their morale since they had freedom of choice. Therefore, it was more likely that the program would meet the instructors' need and was relevant to their work. This condition also reduced the responsibilities for management of the administration. The deliberation of the situation of the institute helped ensure that the program was targeted towards the institute's needs.

The professional development program was likely to be successful because it achieved the following characteristics.

1.   The SALC instructors regarded the program as essential and integral component of their change. From the discussion, the instructors enthusiastically expressed their opinions on self-development. They said it was the first time that they had the opportunity to take charge of their own development and it was a good start. They also said that although it was part of my doctoral study, it should be further realized. It seemed that no one was resistant to change. Therefore, it was possible for the instructors to move to the invention phase that they were reflective and continually looked at ways to learn and improve themselves.

2.   All of the SALC instructors, as stakeholders, were involved in the whole process—planning, implementing, and evaluating. When they had a chance to take part in the program, it could build ownership in them and they were likely to be committed to the program. In addition, opportunities were provided to build understanding among instructors.

3.   In the program, the SALC instructors had a chance to work as teams. This could build informal networks which were a crucial support for coping with stress of change.

4.   The SALC instructors had a chance to share their experience and previous knowledge both in small group and whole group. The sharing happened in a mentoring and supportive environment.

5.   The program was practical and purposeful. The gained product from the professional development program could be used in the SALC. They were provided with problem-solving opportunity to resolve the urgent problem which was a lack of self-study materials developed specifically for Thammasat students. When the needs to solve a problem were prompted, the instructors were more likely to be motivated to learn.

6.   The three-week program seemed to be "just enough". It should be long enough for the participants to learn both theory and practice. Besides, it was not too strenuous because the participants did it during the break and some spare time was arranged for them to relax

7.   The program was carefully planned. The issues such as the nature of profession, the knowledge and skills to be learned, motive, learners' experience and knowledge, resources, and outcomes were taken into consideration before the plan was conducted. Therefore, the difficulties were already anticipated and solutions were thought out in advance.

8.   The program was planned with an awareness that the participants had to do something new or something they were not used to, so I tried to avoid a stressful situation by giving them opportunity to negotiate the plan. However, the situation is more likely to be relaxing because the participants were colleagues and no administration was present in the program.

9.   The SALC instructors' feeling and attitudes were valued. As mentioned earlier, the instructors had to change their roles from 'teachers' to 'learners'. It might be hard and uncomfortable for them to tackle the unfamiliar role. I wam considerate of these feeling and attitudes, so the program was designed to be the sharing and exchanging of knowledge and experience instead of teacher-learner mode of learning.

With the conditions above, the program is implementable in terms of utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy.

Conclusion

When the context of the profession changed, professional development became crucial. The new way of thinking, new knowledge, skill, and practice gained from the professional development enabled the professionals to cope with those changes better. To plan for it, factors which fostered or constrained the learning process should be taken into consideration by planner and should be tackled appropriately. Those factors were the nature of profession, learners' background knowledge and experience, learners' attitudes to change, available resources, motive, and the intended outcomes. In addition, the involvement of the stakeholders was critical to the success of the learning situation. Therefore, every step should be done collaboratively. Due to the diversity, learning strategies could be varied ranging from technical to strategic/ emancipatory modes on the learning continuum framework. The examples of those learning strategies were use of experts, mentoring, action learning, and collaborative learning. Each had an important role to play in professional development.

The professional development program provided the opportunities to develop not only the specific competency—the knowledge and skills of self-study materials development, but also generic competencies which were essential to the professional work. Those competencies were:

- How to take charge of their own learning.

- How to deal well with other people and to value them.

- How to communicate effectively with others.

- How to work in teams.

- How to cope with change coming to them.

Without those competencies—both specific and generic ones—the organization would not be able to function effectively.

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