Abu Dhabi Men's College Independent Learning Centre: Reflections on 10 years of innovation

by Peter Waters and John Delahunty

HCT Abu Dhabi Men's College

Abstract

In this article, the authors trace the progress from the initial creation of the Independent Learning Centre (ILC) at Abu Dhabi Men's College (ADMC) in the United Arab Emirates to some of the multiple functions that the ILC fulfils at the present time, focusing on student participation that leads to student autonomy. Initially, we will look at how the physical space of the ILC guided and directed the production of online materials. We then look at the online materials created as a logical extension of the ILC learning environment with particular reference to Arab-Emirati students, as well as the integration of the ILC online material into class curricula that the students were, and are, undertaking. Finally, we will look at one teacher's overall experience of involving students in the ILC as part of their learning process. We will highlight the methodology of introducing the students to these computer-based materials, how students responded to the physical space of a new learning environment, to new materials and to the online access and evaluation of the material. The results of surveys looking at student responses to the use of the ILC materials will be analysed and the history of these materials will be examined as part of the recommendation that such resources need constant updating, and refinement.

Keywords: *independent learning; self-access language learning (SALL); curriculum development; instructional innovation; educational technology; learning; learner support*

Introduction

The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) is a community of more than 19,000 students and almost 2,000 staff based on 17 campuses throughout the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and is the largest higher education institution in the UAE. The HCT offers a wide range of English-taught programmes in the Faculties of Business, Education & General Studies, Engineering Technology & Sciences, Foundations, Health Sciences and Computer Information Sciences & Applied Communications.

As part of the HCT, Abu Dhabi Men's College (ADMC) receives male students in their late teens and early twenties who have completed their customary secondary or high school education and wish to extend that education to degree level in a variety of subjects, which are supported by English-language classes from the General Education Department. All courses are conducted in English and students have their own laptops.

Initially, a Learner Assistance Centre (LAC) was set up in 1993 at ADMC with a corner of the library set aside with books, magazines and newspapers and a dedicated teacher. A separate study hall was also created for remedial work in English and Maths (Arikat, 2011).

With the move to new premises in 1994, an Independent Learning Centre (ILC) was established as part of an on-going strategy to engage students in a computer-based online learning environment. This was done with the intention of moving away from the classroom-based, teacher-centred environment that the majority of students had been accustomed to, with one that focused more on the individual student and modern teaching methodologies. Examples of the materials developed will be highlighted throughout the article.

Under the vision of His Excellency, Sheikh Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan, then Minister for Higher Education and Scientific Research, "The HCT stays abreast of new developments in technologies and learning systems so as to give our students the skills and attributes they need to succeed in a global work environment" (Al Nahayan 2011).

Located on the first floor at the front of the main building, the ILC is in an open-plan learning environment adjacent to the main ADMC library with which it shares a large,

Image1: Abu Dhabi Men's College Independent Learning Centre 2012

well-lit study area. The ILC is open from 7.30 am to 10.00 pm, five days a week, and from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm on Saturdays. During exam periods, hours are extended to 12.00 midnight, excluding Saturdays.

ILC facilities include 65 'open access' wireless laptops, 10 Apple iMacs and three interactive electronic whiteboards and projectors. Laptops are managed by lab management software which connects the teacher's laptop with every other laptop in the centre and offers a variety of features such as monitoring students' activities and providing guidance and support throughout the lesson. All laptops display a virtual desktop, providing users with a 'one click' entry point to over 140 programmes and websites. Examples of the software available include Tense Buster, Study Skills Success, Mind Game, Business Writing, United Streaming, and Self Access.com. The modular furniture has adjustable privacy screens and the ergonomic chairs can be adjusted in all directions. All laptops have high quality headphones and microphones for listening and speaking activities.

The ILC's mission is to provide an environment beyond the classroom enriched with support, encouragement and assistance that is engaging and responsive to each student, allowing for individual differences and learning styles, with access to the very best learning opportunities using current technologies and resources that support student learning and development.

ILC History and Context

In the initial years of the new century, the ILC was home to 40 Olivetti desktop computers with Internet access. A Co-coordinator, an IT technician, and an administrative assistant were employed to run the centre, and a wide range of paper-based materials organised by skill and level was also available. At the time this was only one of two IT environments at ADMC where computers were available for student use. Consequently, compulsory curriculum components such as the Basic Learning and

Image2: Independent Learning Centre

Information Skills Course (BLIS 1100), a purely computer-based course, could only be completed in the ILC. Here, students typically spent at least one hour per week, and was well-utilised by the first-year students.

BLIS 1100 was a one-semester, 16-week course. Its main goals were to enable students to locate and use relevant information, equipment and resources in the library and ILC and become more effective independent learners. Unfortunately, there was no extension to this course, and no longer-term computer-based material for students to move on to.

As a result, in the summer of 2002, the ILC Co-ordinator and an English language teacher came together with a view to making additional material available to students during their third and final years at the college. This was the inception of *e-Tasks*, a resource comprised of links to various English-language websites with online skills practice and a discussion board hosted on a Learning Management System (LMS).

e-Tasks was created with the purpose of complementing students' course material that the creators thought students would enjoy and benefit from. No discussion topics were provided as it was assumed that students would automatically use the discussion board without question prompts. However, monitoring showed that few links were accessed and only a very few messages were posted. Although it was not expected for teachers to bring students to the ILC, the creators of the material were dependent on the teachers for raising the students' awareness of this new material. In reality, few teachers carried this through, perhaps due to uncertainty and unfamiliarity with this new approach. Clearly much more guidance and direction were needed.

Undeterred, the authors reviewed the format of the material. Primarily, they felt navigation of the site was difficult due to the quantity of exercises provided. A clearer framework was needed, with written guidelines. So both authors began reviewing the material and re-structuring the layout. Once completed, they approached the English Language supervisor with the proposal that for *e-Tasks* to be more successfully utilised, it had to be a compulsory component of the students' English course. This was agreed to, on the understanding that it be classified as a pilot project. In September of 2003, 156 students were registered for *e-Tasks*. Activities consisted of a variety of listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks plus additional communicative activities organised into a fortnightly timetable throughout the 16-week semester. With an anticipated completion time of three hours per fortnight, one class-hour per week was given over to *e-Tasks*; students also worked on them in their own time, with each task taking no more than 15 minutes to complete.

The results were astonishing. They exceeded the expectations of all involved, both in terms of the volume of work produced by the students and the very positive feedback. This pilot project was created for a 16-week semester during which 1,076 online readings were completed and 2,727 discussion board postings were made (Andon & Waters, 2005).

At the end of the semester an online survey went out to all e-Task students. Forty-one replies were received (22.5% of all students). Of the respondees, 85% rated *e-Tasks* as useful; 67% rated *e-Tasks* enjoyable; 82% felt that their English had improved, and an unexpected 38% wanted more *e-Tasks*.

The survey also showed significant responses regarding students' perception of the difficulty of *e-Tasks*, with 79% saying that e-Tasks were 'At the Right Level' (Lower-Intermediate) and 21% saying they were 'Easy'. Apart from the measurable interaction between students and *e-Tasks*, these figures were seen as extremely important as they reflected the students' positive perceptions of their own involvement and their own achievements.

A new semester began in February of 2004 with the same students, now on a much shorter 5-week Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET) preparation course. Using their experience gained in the previous semester, the authors set about creating new *e-Tasks* to match the new course. This entailed exam-focused material with the same format but of a necessarily higher level.

Such was the students' comfort and familiarity with the material that no induction was necessary, as they took to the work very well. They responded to a second survey even more positively. This time, 82 replies were received (69% of respondees), of which 97.5% said that *e-Tasks* were useful; 95% said that their English had improved, and 42% asked for more. Teacher feedback was equally encouraging:

'e-Tasks ………. have easily been the most successful of all the Web CT-delivered programs. It is pedagogically sound, well-organised, reliable, and very motivating for students'.

(as cited by Andon & Waters, 2005),

and also:

'It's something that makes students feel good about themselves'.

(as cited by Andon & Waters, 2005).

Over the succeeding six years *e-Tasks* was gradually incorporated into almost all other HCT colleges, benefitting more than 4,600 students. During this period 40,024 individual readings were undertaken and over 44,110 discussion board messages were posted. *e-Tasks* was presented at TESOL Arabia in Dubai in March of

2004 and subsequently at other academic institutions in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain and Toronto. In addition, *e-Tasks* was a finalist in the 'Best Teacher Project' category at the UAE Educational IT Challenge 2004 & 2006.

Image3: e-Tasks@HCT

From e-Tasks to i-Read

An initiative spearheaded by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashed Al Maktoum , Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE, and Ruler of Dubai is to empower future generations in the Arab world, through knowledge and education, to devise sustainable home-grown solutions to regional challenges. It is, therefore,

imperative to generate and disseminate awareness on the high value of books and to promote reading amongst Arab children as a lifelong habit (MBR-Foundation, 2008).

In response to the initiative from Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashed Al Maktoum, one of the co-authors of this paper and a second English language teacher began to look at addressing the issue of raising awareness of the importance of reading. Additionally, in 2008, inspired by a survey conducted by the Next Page Foundation, which reported that the average person in the Arab world reads just six minutes a year, the creators embarked upon creating a programme of interactive online reading activities (Next Page Foundation, 2010).

While *e-Tasks* balanced and encouraged the development of the four skills, this new work focussed on the skill of reading. From the outset it was entitled *i-Read*. The creators of *i-Read* combined their knowledge and experience of developing and teaching *e-Tasks*, applying the fundamental principles behind the original project, such as students having 24-hour online access, using technology as a motivating factor, a calendar and a variety of bite-sized individual tasks and exercises and lastly, the addition of a 30% course fulfilment requirement for completing *e-Tasks*.

With the skill of reading at the forefront, *i-Read* differed fundamentally from *e-Tasks*. Initially, seven units organised by topic were created, each with one short, one long and one speed reading task. Acknowledging the difficulty students may have encountering this number of readings, the authors interspersed them with related listening, writing and vocabulary activities. The reading content was collated by the teacher taking authentic material from both the Internet and newspapers. The language in the texts chosen would then re-cycle the spelling, vocabulary, writing and listening elements. Additionally, there was a public blog and a private learning journal which was accessible to only teacher and student. Consequently, the creation of the material took much longer to bring together and prepare for student use than *e-Tasks* did; in fact, it took two years to become ready for ILC use.

i-Read was not designed to replace *e-Tasks*; in fact, both were used concurrently on different courses, and *i-Read* led into *e-Tasks*. But here fundamental problems developed because *i-Read* was created for students studying on an earlier semester than those doing *e-Tasks*. Nonetheless, the work involved became more demanding in terms of the sheer number of tasks, (94), nearly double the requirement of *e-Tasks*. Additionally, some strategies that were being encouraged, particularly those involving speed reading and spelling, had not been previously taught. Furthermore, students did not receive any detailed feedback on performance from the online activities and at a practical level, students had to regularly navigate through nine pages of the LMS to get to the content.

These (unintentional) difficulties were reflected in the results of a student survey conducted in December of 2008. Of 233 students using *i-Read*, 55 replied to the survey, (23.6% of all students). These are the responses given to some of the more fundamental questions: only 68% said *i-Read* was useful for learning English; 63% said the instructions were clear; 56% found *i-Read* easy to use and only 38% said they enjoyed doing *i-Read*. Written comments included: "I think *i-Read* needs better explanations for the readings. The vocabulary needs more exercises. How do I know the meanings?"

These were disappointing results in comparison to those received from students doing *e-Tasks*, given the vast amount of development time undertaken by the co-authors. Their response was to look at three main areas: usability, language content, and learner support.

With regard to usability, given the complexity of the material developed for *i-Read*, the creators researched alternative platforms. As a result, a more suitable LMS was found that met the needs of the *i-Read* material and made it far more accessible for the students.

Having proven to be too difficult for the students at this level, the language content and lexis had to be simplified. This was done by first completely discarding those topic areas that the students had declared as uninteresting, and also by re-writing the content of some of the original texts.

Next, with now five topic areas, (of which only three were compulsory for course completion), students found the activities far more manageable. The arrangement of drop-down menus in each topic area with related exercises chunked together also contributed to easier task completion. Finally, the introduction of a virtual teacher, (five ADMC English language teachers guiding the students through each topic), proved to be a hit with the students and provided them with visual and aural online support.

Image4: i-Read

A second survey conducted in November of 2009 with the next cohort of students provided the following results: of the 63 students that responded, 82%, said *i-Read* was useful for learning English; 82% said the instructions were clear; 81% said *i-Read* was easy to use and 81% said *i-Read* was enjoyable. These results showed a huge improvement in student satisfaction, confirming the validity of the changes undertaken.

As with *e-Tasks*, *i-Read* was adopted throughout the HCT college system, as a result of which its creators won the much-coveted Nikai Faculty Award for Excellence in Innovative Teaching for 2009.

A Teacher's Observations and Reflections

Essential to successful teaching of Arab Emirati students is the establishment of a relationship between the teacher and each student in a class and between the teacher and the class as a whole (Litvin, 2010). This relationship is constantly referred to, refreshed and utilised by all students in the class as a focus of security. In transferring to an ILC environment, the aforementioned relationship is fundamental in reassuring students and helping them through tasks. But this relationship undergoes change.

The students' first contact with the ILC starts by the ILC co-ordinator giving a comprehensive orientation of the online tasks and course material to be completed over the semester. The teacher is present at these presentations. Students demonstrate excitement as they immediately access the material and begin the tasks with the help and guidance of both teacher and co-ordinator. The first two or three weeks can be demanding for all, as students learn how to navigate the sites available, complete tasks, check scoring, read feedback and re-do tasks. But crucially by the fourth week, this teacher-centred dependence disappears. Student attention shifts to completing the online activities through group work, pair work, or even alone. Students typically begin to access and utilise a range of online material such as English dictionaries, English-Arabic dictionaries and grammar-based websites to help complete the exercises. Importantly, the teacher remains present at all times, but is now able to concentrate on those discrete areas of difficulty specific to each student. Inside the ILC and outside of their traditional classroom, students are free to get up and walk around, share ideas, work together, help each other, and even leave the ILC area, with permission, to take a short break. This freedom underlines the considerable change they experience in the new physical environment of the ILC and also sends a message about how the work is to be completed. There is no teacher standing over them, but they are expected to complete the online tasks in a given time frame in the ILC.

The co-authors of this paper, having repeatedly experienced this process, have also come to note the extreme importance of the communicative and co-

operative relationships not just between teacher and students, but also between ILC coordinator, students and teacher. For the students to be able to work and learn in a relaxed, unthreatening and positive environment, where they can be both challenged and rewarded all parties need to work in harmony (Litvin, 2010).

Conclusions

In this article the co-authors have attempted to provide an overview of the development and use of the ILC at ADMC, from its beginnings to the present day. The function and use of the space and curricula-driven materials development have been identified by the co-authors as primary factors in the potential success of the ILC as a learning environment for English language students. The open-plan wireless ILC has proven to be a very flexible learning environment where students have benefitted from the collaborative, student-centric atmosphere engendered by the technology.

The co-authors of this paper have observed that becoming an independent learner is an on-going process that takes time, patience and support. In a digital environment, educators can help students to take responsibility by providing opportunities and strategies for learning independently and by encouraging them to initiate and actively participate in their learning, and finally, by providing feedback and supporting their efforts.

References

Al Nahayan, N. (2011). *Chancellor's message*. August. Retrieved http://www.hct.ac.ae/about/chancellor-message/

Litvin, K. (2010). Understanding the Cultural Dimensions of Gulf Arab Students Retrieved from: http://pdfcast.org/download/understanding-the-cultural-dimensions-of-gulf-arab-students.pdf

The Mohammed bin Rashed Al Maktoum Foundation (MBR-Foundation) (2008). The reading strategy. Retrieved from http://www.mbrfoundation.ae/English/Pages/ReadingStrategy.aspx

The Next Page Foundation. (2010). What Arabs Read. Retrieved from http://www.npage.org/article63.html

Andon, S., & Waters, P. (2005). *An evaluation of teaching ESOL using e-Tasks*. September. Retrieved from http://archive.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=ferl.aclearn.resource.id7563