

## Lessons Learnt from the SEARs Project

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### **Abstract**

*One of the largest recent innovations in Thailand has been the SEARs (Student English Access Rooms) project to set up effective self-access centres in 80 schools throughout Thailand. With World Bank funding, materials were supplied to the schools and teachers received training. While some of the SEARs can be unequivocally judged as effective, others have led to more strife within the school than learning by students. This paper examines the factors which led to such different results and how the problems were dealt with. Guidelines for how to effectively implement innovations at secondary level are suggested.*

In deciding to hold a conference on the topic of 'Innovations in English Language Teaching', the organisers have highlighted a key issue in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Thailand at present. On the one hand, demands for reform seem to be coming thick and fast from the Ministry of Education; on the other, individual schools want to make changes that set themselves apart from their competitors and teachers want to improve their teaching. With so much innovation being conducted in Thai ELT at the moment, it is important to try to identify factors that promote or hinder the success of innovations. To do this, a case study approach needs to be taken, and in this paper, I intend to examine one of the largest-scale innovations currently being undertaken in Thailand, namely, the SEARs project.

### **Overview of the SEARs project**

The World Bank is funding the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQI-2) implemented by the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) with the aim of improving teaching methodologies and upgrading laboratories and equipment for Science, Mathematics and English. For the development and improvement of English, Student English Access Rooms (SEARs) are being set up in 80 schools throughout the country. These SEARs are, in effect, self-access centres, in other words, places where "students can select and work on tasks on their own and obtain feedback on their performance" (Sheerin, 1991: 143).

In order to set up so many self-access centres, seven key aspects have been addressed in the project:

1. *Rooms*

Clearly it is impossible to have a large self-access centre without a room to host it. At the beginning of the project in 2002, therefore, OBEC requested each school to assign a room or rooms for the SEAR.

2. *Furniture*

Once rooms had been assigned and renovated, furniture such as bookshelves, chairs and tables were provided.

3. *Teacher training*

Given the unfamiliarity of self-access learning for most of the teachers involved in the project, it was important that they accept and learn about the concept. Within 2003 and 2004, there have in fact been three separate stages of teacher training in the project (see below).

4. *Materials*

For students to be able to engage in self-access learning, materials appropriate to self-instruction need to be provided. In the SEARs project, these materials consist of published materials adaptable to self-access learning (such as CD-ROMs and graded readers), both computer-based and paper-based materials specifically designed for the project by King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, and newspapers and magazines subscribed to by individual SEARs.

5. *Systems*

To be able to use the materials effectively, certain systems need to be set up, such as a placement test, a materials classification system, and methods of linking the SEAR to classroom learning.

6. *Administration*

For the SEAR to operate effectively, support from the school administrators is necessary and effective management of the SEAR itself needs to be implemented. Each school is expected to nominate one English teacher to be SEAR manager and all other English teaching staff should be involved and provide help.

7. *Equipment*

Many of the materials in the SEARs such as CD-ROMs and listening cassettes require certain equipment to operate. It was therefore decided to purchase computers and other equipment for the project. Unfortunately, excessive delays in the procurement of this equipment make it unlikely that it will ever be received by the SEARs (for more details, see Watson Todd, 2005).

With seven main aspects to cover in the project for 80 schools, the SEARs project is one of the largest projects in ELT in Thailand at present. Although self-access centres may be familiar at the tertiary level, both in Thailand and in most other countries, self-access at the secondary level is a rarity. Because of this, setting up and running SEARs can be considered an innovation.

### **The process of implementing the SEARs project**

The implementation of the SEARs project can be viewed from two perspectives: from the perspective of the Ministry of Education in implementing the whole project, and from the perspective of each of the concerned schools in setting up and running one SEAR. While the latter perspective is more likely to provide insights useful to individual teachers and institutions, I will start by examining the process of implementing the whole project to show what all 80 schools have in common. From this base, we can go on to attempt to identify the factors which influence the level of success of individual SEARs.

To run the SEARs project, OBEC set up a committee with responsibility for the educational consideration (as opposed to bureaucratic issues) in the project. This committee consisted of secondary school teachers and supervisors, who, it was hoped, would have a clear understanding of the situations in which the SEARs would operate and thus would be able to make decisions concerning the project from the perspective of those most closely involved, i.e. the secondary school teachers who would be managing and running the SEARs.

Based on the decision of this committee, a series of steps were taken to implement the project. The main steps taken are shown in Table 1 together with timing and the aspects of the SEAR which each step focused on.

<b>Timing</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Aspect of the SEAR</b>
May 2003	Workshop for school administrators explaining self-access and emphasising the importance of the SEAR.	Administration
Mid 2002 – 2003	Allocation and renovation of rooms for SEARs.	Rooms
May – July 2003	Teacher training workshop 1 run by the British Council for 2 teachers per school for 2 weeks. Goals of the workshop: introducing self-access, learner training, use of IT, self-access for the four skills.	Teacher training
2003	Delivery of furniture for SEARs and setting up rooms.	Rooms Furniture
Late 2003	Writing of terms of reference for materials and equipment procurement	Materials Equipment
February – May 2004	Delivery of materials for SEARs, both published materials and materials specifically designed for the project	Materials
March 2004	Distribution of a SEAR manual explaining how to manage the SEAR and the systems involved in running a SEAR.	Administration Systems
March 2004	Teacher training workshop 2 run by OBEC for 80 SEAR managers for 2 days. Goals of the workshop: further explanation of systems covered in the manual and explanation of materials specifically designed for the project.	Teacher training Systems Materials
May – September 2004	First semester of operation of SEARs.	
May – September 2004	Monitoring of setting up and running SEARs to identify areas requiring further support. The monitoring procedures included visits by committee members to 25 schools and distribution of questionnaires (see below).	
December 2004	Announcement of misprocurement of equipment.	Equipment
December 2004	Teacher training workshop 3 run by OBEC for 3 teachers plus 1 administrator from each school for 3 days. Goals of the workshop: to provide further support for areas identified as problematic from the monitoring procedures, including administrative support for SEARs and certain key systems.	Teacher training Administration Systems
December 2004 ongoing	Website to support further development of SEARs (arts.kmutt.ac.th/SEARs/) to facilitate dissemination of further key information and to allow SEAR managers and teachers to share ideas.	

Table 1 SEAR project timetable

From Table 1, we can see that the SEARs project has been running for some time and that, as with most government projects, there have been extensive delays between different stages of the project. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the procedures

used in the project (with the exception of the misprocured equipment) provide sufficient support for the 80 schools to set up and run effective self-access centres. To see if this has actually happened, we need to look at the progress and results of the individual SEARs.

### **Data collection in the SEARs project**

In teacher training workshop 3, participants were asked to prepare posters concerning their SEARs and to share ideas to help each other. From this session, it quickly became apparent that about 5 schools had serious problems setting up and running the SEARs, and that in these schools it is unlikely that the SEARs are benefiting student learning. On the other hand, about 15 schools had made great progress with the SEARs, implementing their own innovations and encouraging extensive student use of the SEAR. The majority of schools fall somewhere between these two extremes. Given that all 80 schools had received the same resources and training, it is interesting to try to identify the factors causing such disparities in the success of the SEARs.

The main source of data concerning the SEARs project is the monitoring procedures run by OBEC in mid-2004. The prime purpose of these procedures was not to evaluate the effectiveness of SEARs; rather, it was to identify areas for which further support could be usefully provided. The data collected therefore does not directly show the factors affecting the level of success of individual SEARs, but should provide some indications.

From the monitoring procedures, there are seven instruments providing information:

1. *Questionnaire 1* concerning setting up the SEARs was distributed to all 80 SEAR managers in May 2004, the time at which the SEARs should have been set up for use. The questionnaire focused on problems encountered in setting up the SEARs. 79 full responses were received.
2. During the school visits to 25 schools in July-August 2004, *interviews with SEAR managers* were conducted to gain information concerning how the SEAR was running, and the problems and successes of the SEAR.
3. Also during the school visits, *interviews with teachers* who were also involved in the SEAR were conducted for the same purpose.
4. During the school visits, *SEAR observations* were conducted. At each SEAR, student use of the SEAR for one hour was observed three times to find out how the students were using the SEAR, how attentive they were, and what problems they encountered. SEAR observations were not possible at all schools visited, and 35 hour-long observations were conducted in total.
5. During the school visits, a *student questionnaire* was distributed. These questionnaires asked students to identify what they liked and disliked about the SEAR and what problems they had in using it. Although it was not possible to distribute student questionnaires in 4 schools, in most schools SEARs questionnaires were completed by 30 students.
6. After the school visits, the OBEC committee members visiting each school were asked to write down *visitor comments*, noting any salient issues arising during their visits.
7. *Questionnaire 2* concerning running the SEARs was distributed in September 2004 to the SEAR managers of the 55 schools not visited. The questionnaire focused on problems and successes in running the SEAR for one semester.

### **Findings concerning SEARs**

Bearing in mind that the main purpose of the seven instruments is not to evaluate the SEARs, we can still identify some key obstacles to and successes deriving from setting up and running the SEARs. It should be noted that the data were collected before teacher training workshop 3, and it is to be hoped that some of the problems identified have already been solved through this workshop.

Before examining problems, however, it is worth noting those aspects of the SEARs which appear to be successful across a wide range of schools. The most noticeable success is the materials provided for SEARs. According to the student questionnaires, students at 7 schools particularly liked the graded readers provided, students at 6 schools liked the newspapers and magazines, and at 3 schools the materials specifically designed for the project were enjoyed. These last materials were also identified by SEAR managers in questionnaire 2 as a successful aspect of the SEAR and were the main materials used on 63% of the occasions when the SEAR was observed. Although in questionnaire 2 14 schools mentioned a desire for more materials, it appears that self-access materials are not a major cause for concern in this project.

A second less obvious success is the students' willingness and ability to use the SEAR. Although in the student questionnaire students from 7 schools stated that they were not clear about the purpose of the SEAR, from the interviews during school visits managers and teachers stated that SEARs were generally heavily used, and from the observations all students could find and use materials with few problems.

On the negative side, the most frequently stated problem affecting all SEARs was the lack of equipment. Aside from this, systems problems emerged from the monitoring procedures as common causes of concern. In questionnaire 2, the most highly ranked aspect of the SEAR in terms of needing further support was integrating the SEAR and the classroom. Similarly, materials classification systems and the need for an effective placement test were also frequently mentioned as problematic issues by numerous schools. These three aspects, therefore, were set as objectives of teacher training workshop 3.

The successes and problems mentioned above are those common across schools, and therefore do not have much impact on the disparate levels of success of individual SEARs. Two aspects of the SEARs, however, showed clear variation between schools and appeared to be related to levels of success.

Firstly, the rooms and furniture allocated for SEARs caused problems at some schools but not at others. The SEAR is envisioned as a single entity, but at some schools the space allocated for the SEAR consists of 3 or 4 separate rooms which cannot be joined. As well as forcing the division of the SEAR into sections, this arrangement also causes problems for security as teachers/SEAR staff need to be monitoring all of the rooms. A further problem concerns moving the SEAR room. At one school the SEAR has already been moved several times (interview with SEAR manager), and the SEAR has also been forced to be moved at least once at several other schools. In addition to creating extra work for SEAR staff, such moves reduce any continuity in SEAR use. For furniture, a standardised set of furniture was delivered to all schools irrespective of the number of students, meaning that many schools ended up with insufficient tables and chairs, whereas others had plenty.

These infrastructure problems led 39 of the 79 schools replying to questionnaire 1 to mention layout as a problem. In the student questionnaires, students at 6 schools mentioned layout as a reason for disliking the SEAR, whereas students at 5 other schools stated that the arrangement attracted them to use the SEAR. These

problems and successes concerning the rooms for the SEAR are likely to derive from two main causes: the availability of rooms in a school, and the administrators' attitudes towards the importance of the SEAR.

The second factor showing variation between schools concerns cooperation among English teachers at a school with the workload of running the SEAR either falling largely on a small group of teachers or being evenly distributed among the staff. In questionnaire 1, 12 schools mentioned lack of staff cooperation as a key problem, and this issue was still rated as a major challenge facing the SEAR by 8 schools in questionnaire 2. From the interviews during school visits, several SEAR managers and teachers complained about problems of staff cooperation. For example, "Only three of us are working for the SEAR with administrative support from the head. She informed other staff members many times in the meetings [about the need to help in the SEAR] but there's still no reaction from them." The members of the PIU committee visiting the SEARs also noted that staff cooperation issues were severely restricting the effectiveness of the SEAR at 5 of the schools visited. These staff problems, however, appear to be school-specific rather than a general problem at all SEARs, since other schools have managed to achieve high levels of staff involvement in the SEAR. For example, from an interview during a visit to one school, it was noted that 90% of the teachers in the English department were actively involved in running the SEAR.

The extent of staff cooperation in the SEAR appears to closely relate to SEAR success with the SEARs experiencing serious problems being in schools which lack staff cooperation while the successful SEARs involve large numbers of teachers in SEAR work. While guidelines for setting up a SEAR committee and involving staff in the SEAR were given in the manual, the causes of problems concerning staff cooperation appear deep-rooted. In some schools, there are a few teachers who reject the idea of self-access learning; in a couple of schools, the English department is fragmented and full of personal conflicts; and in a few schools, the teacher nominated as SEAR manager has not taken the responsibilities seriously and initiated no attempts to develop the SEAR or involve staff. In these situations, in contrast to those schools where cooperation and dedication are thriving, it is difficult to see how the SEAR can develop in the future.

### **SEARs and other self-access centres**

The situation with SEARs is different from that of most other self-access centres. The decision to set up most centres is made at an institutional level and so is internal to the institution. Because of this, most self-access centres have full administrative support and at least a few teachers committed to implementing self-access. For the SEARs, on the other hand, the decision to set up the centres was made at a national level and imposed on the schools (even if many of the schools welcomed the innovation). This difference in the origin of the idea of implementing self-access learning is probably the reason for differences in the factors identified as crucial between SEARs, on the one hand, and the literature on self-access, on the other.

In the literature, the aspect of self-access most frequently identified as important is learner training. For example, Miller (2000) emphasises the importance of preparing learners for independent learning; Rujiketgumjorn (2000) stresses the need for teachers to provide support for learners; and Yeung and Hyland (1999) identified the need for learner guidance and preparation as crucial.

Learner training, however, is one of only six issues that Rost (2002) highlights as crucial to the success of self-access centres, the others being management of

innovation, provision of suitable location and facilities, staff development, learners' culture, and suitable materials. Some of these issues can be seen as prerequisites for others. In situations where well-managed and suitable facilities have been set up, learner training may become an issue; but if the self-access facilities are chaotic and rudimentary, effective learner training will be of little help. In situations like the SEARs where self-access is imposed on an institution from outside, therefore, a greater emphasis on the prerequisites of management and facilities may be necessary.

### **The SEARs as an innovation**

The literature on innovation highlights three major aspects of innovations that are likely to influence their uptake and success, namely, the nature of the innovation itself, the process by which the innovation is implemented, and the context in which the innovation is implemented.

Regarding the nature of the innovation, several lists of key characteristics of innovations affecting their success have been drawn up. In this paper, I will discuss ten of these characteristics taken from Markee (1997) and Pinar (1999) in terms of how they apply to the SEARs project.

1. *Effectiveness or reliability or relative advantages.* The effectiveness of self-access learning is almost impossible to measure (Gardner, 1999), and thus it is unclear whether the SEARs hold a relative advantage or not.
2. *Relevance or desirability or compatibility.* Hosting a SEAR in a school may be perceived as adding to the school's prestige and therefore be desirable. Whether self-access learning is relevant or compatible to the Thai situation, however, is less clear. Regarding Asian learners in general, Littlewood (1996) compiled a list of characteristics which suggested that Asian learners would not necessarily accept self-access learning. On the other hand, for Hong Kong Chinese students, there is evidence that self-access learning is readily accepted (Gardner and Miller, 1997). More specifically, in Thailand, Rujiketgumjorn (2000) found little evidence of resistance to self-access learning from students, although teachers were less open. It therefore seems likely that the SEARs are desirable and reasonably compatible with the situations.
3. *Feasibility.* In most situations, setting up self-access centres is relatively difficult, given the amount of financing and time required. In the SEARs project, however, financing is not an issue, since most required aspects of the SEAR are provided centrally. The SEARs therefore should be seen as feasible.
4. *Efficiency.* Even though the SEARs are feasible, a large amount of time needs to be devoted by teachers to set up and run effective SEARs. It is unclear whether this time is recouped in savings on teaching time, but generally the efficiency of SEARs does not seem to be very high.
5. *Complexity.* A self-access centre is a complex innovation requiring a combination of many different aspects and systems.
6. *Observability or trialability.* Within any individual school, it is not possible to go through, say, half of the procedures required for setting up a SEAR and observe its impact at that stage. However, teachers from schools without SEARs can visit

self-access centres at other institutions to observe how they operate. This type of observability was included in the teacher training workshop 1 where visits to two self-access centres were included.

7. *Concrete form.* The more concrete the form of an innovation, the easier it is for teachers to understand and therefore accept. Self-access centres should be considered more concrete than, say, teaching methodologies.
8. *Explicitness.* The more explicit an innovation, again the easier it is for teachers to understand and accept. For self-access learning, the complexity of the innovation makes it difficult to present in an explicit form.
9. *Adaptability.* Self-access learning is one of the most adaptable of all educational innovations. Adding new systems, changing ways in which students use the SEAR and altering layout are all relatively easily accomplished.
10. *Originality.* While self-access learning cannot be considered original in any absolute sense, within most of the schools setting up SEARs, it is an original innovation.

From the above discussion, we can see that, with regard to the SEARs project, some of the characteristics of innovations are likely to have positive effects on the success of the innovation, some may have negative effects, and the effects of some are unclear. These implications of the characteristics of SEARs as an innovation are summarised in Table 2.

<b>Characteristic of the innovation</b>	<b>Likely effect in the SEAR project</b>
<i>Effectiveness or reliability or relative advantages</i>	Unclear
<i>Relevance or desirability or compatibility</i>	Probably positive
<i>Feasibility</i>	Positive
<i>Efficiency</i>	Unclear
<i>Complexity</i>	Negative
<i>Observability or trialability</i>	Unclear
<i>Concrete form</i>	Positive
<i>Explicitness</i>	Negative
<i>Adaptability</i>	Positive
<i>Originality</i>	Unclear

Table 2 Likely effects of characteristics of the innovation on the SEARs project

From Table 2, we can see that the positives outweigh the negatives. The two main negatives of complexity and explicitness will affect how easily the teachers understand, and therefore are able to accept, the innovation. With focuses in the teacher training workshops on helping teachers understand self-access learning, it therefore seems likely that the innovation of self-access learning itself is not going to have a great negative impact on the possible success of SEARs.

The second key aspect of SEARs likely to affect success is the process by which the innovation is implemented. From the beginning of the project, the process of innovation has not been promising. Crucially, the SEARs are an innovation which

has been imposed on schools in a top-down way by the Ministry of Education. Such top-down innovation is less likely to be successful than imminent innovation where the change originates from the teachers involved (De Lano et al., 1994; Markee, 1997). Within the SEARs project, however, two factors may have ameliorated this unpromising start. Firstly, the decision that the committee controlling the project should consist mainly of secondary school teachers may have helped. Secondly, although the overall decision to implement self-access learning was imposed top-down, the vast majority of specific decisions concerning how the SEAR should be set up and run rested with the teachers at each school.

In addition to the source of the innovation, previous research into the process of innovation has identified three factors likely to influence success: teacher education, communications, and support (Forsyth et al., 1999; Karavas-Doukas, 1998).

Teacher education for innovation should ideally be systematic, ongoing and long-term with the goal of making the teachers into change agents (Karavas-Doukas, 1998). For the SEARs project, the sheer size of the project and the need for teachers to receive a lot of initial input concerning self-access learning has meant that the workshops have been oriented more towards teacher training than to teacher development (for the distinctions between these two terms, see Head and Taylor, 1997), although teacher training workshop 3 did allow more input from the teachers themselves. Furthermore, teacher education in the project cannot be viewed as either ongoing or long-term. These factors may be a source of problems with the implementation of SEARs.

Similarly, inadequate communications in the project may also have led to problems. With the Ministry of Education bureaucracy playing a leading role in the project, communication of key information has at times been non-existent with even the committee running the project trying to work in an informationless limbo.

A lack of ongoing support could also be a problematic issue in the SEARs project for two reasons. Firstly, the lengthy delays between the various stages of the project means that the support provided to schools through the project could hardly be described as ongoing. Secondly, as a government project with an inflexible timeframe, at the end of the project funding will stop and there is little chance of any follow-up being possible. It is hoped that the SEARs website may help with this problem, but its potential effectiveness is unclear at present.

The process of implementing the innovation, therefore, could be seen as a potential cause of failure in the project, in contrast to the potentially helpful nature of the innovation. While interesting, these aspects apply across the board to all SEARs and therefore cannot explain why some schools have been successful in implementing SEARs while others have predominantly failed. To explain these differences in levels of success between individual SEARs, we need to turn to the third aspect of innovations, the context in which the innovation is implemented.

Most previous work on context has focused on cultural issues, and especially the distance between the source of the innovation and the context in which it is implemented (e.g. Holliday, 1999). For many national-level innovations, the recipient culture is fairly homogeneous and thus success or failure of an innovation is seen as a nationwide phenomenon with little or no distinction made between the effects at different schools (e.g. Carless, 1999; Goh, 1999). In the SEARs project, on the other hand, these school-specific differences are the crux.

As we saw above, the key differences between schools which appear to have had the greatest influence on the level of success of individual SEARs concern

infrastructure and staff cooperation. These are foundation issues which underpin the whole of the implementation of the innovation. As such, the success or failure of all other aspects of the SEARs project may depend on these issues. For example, teacher education, no matter how effective in itself, is unlikely to lead to effective innovation if the teachers do not cooperate in its implementation. Similarly, if the room is uncomfortable and uninviting, it may not matter how effective learner training is in preparing and motivating learners to use self-access. The potential influence of these prerequisite issues implies that, for projects where the innovation is imposed on a given context, special attention needs to be paid to whether the context is appropriately set up for implementing the innovation, and if not, preparation of the context is crucial.

### Conclusion

So what lessons can we learn from the SEARs project? Firstly, self-access learning can be implemented effectively at the secondary level in Thailand. Secondly, issues often overlooked in evaluating self-access, namely, facilities and management, were the most salient issues in setting up and running SEARs. Thirdly, for any innovations implemented across a range of contexts, it is likely that some contexts will succeed in effectively implementing the innovation while others will fail. The reasons for such differences reside in the contexts rather than the innovation, and the importance of preparing contexts for an innovation cannot be overemphasised.

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