Collaborative Research and Development ("Seed") Project:

Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) in Hong Kong Secondary Schools (2001 — 2003)

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Purpose of this Publication

The purpose of this publication is to report on a Research and Development ("Seed") project on "Self-access Language Learning (SALL) in Hong Kong Secondary Schools" developed and carried out by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB), Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, in collaboration with secondary schools and tertiary institutions in 2001-2003. Enclosed in this publication is a CD-ROM which documents the different approaches to SALL that the schools participating in the project have adopted. It is hoped that through this publication and the CD-ROM, teachers will gain insights into how SALL can be promoted in their own school.

Background to the Project

Independent and lifelong learning is one of the principal aims of the recent Curriculum Reform in Hong Kong. To achieve this aim, it is necessary to help learners develop, inter alia, generic skills (e.g. the skills of communication, collaboration, self-management and critical thinking), and positive values (e.g. self-reflection, independence) and attitudes (e.g. responsibility, perseverance, keenness to learn).

As a means of encouraging learners to take charge of their own learning, SALL readily lends itself to helping students develop these skills, values and attitudes. It is fundamentally an approach to language learning rather than a mere collection of learning materials or a system for organizing resources, which it is often misconstrued as. It expresses itself through a variety of activities such as project work, life-wide learning activities (i.e. co-curricular or extra-curricular activities which take place beyond the classroom and which may involve the use of community resources) and classroom-based language learning tasks, providing learners with ample opportunities for negotiation, making choices and decisions over what and how they want to learn, and for reflecting on and evaluating their own learning. The Collaborative Research and Development ("Seed") project, "Self-access Language Learning (SALL) in Hong Kong Secondary Schools", was set up and carried out to promote a culture of autonomous learning.
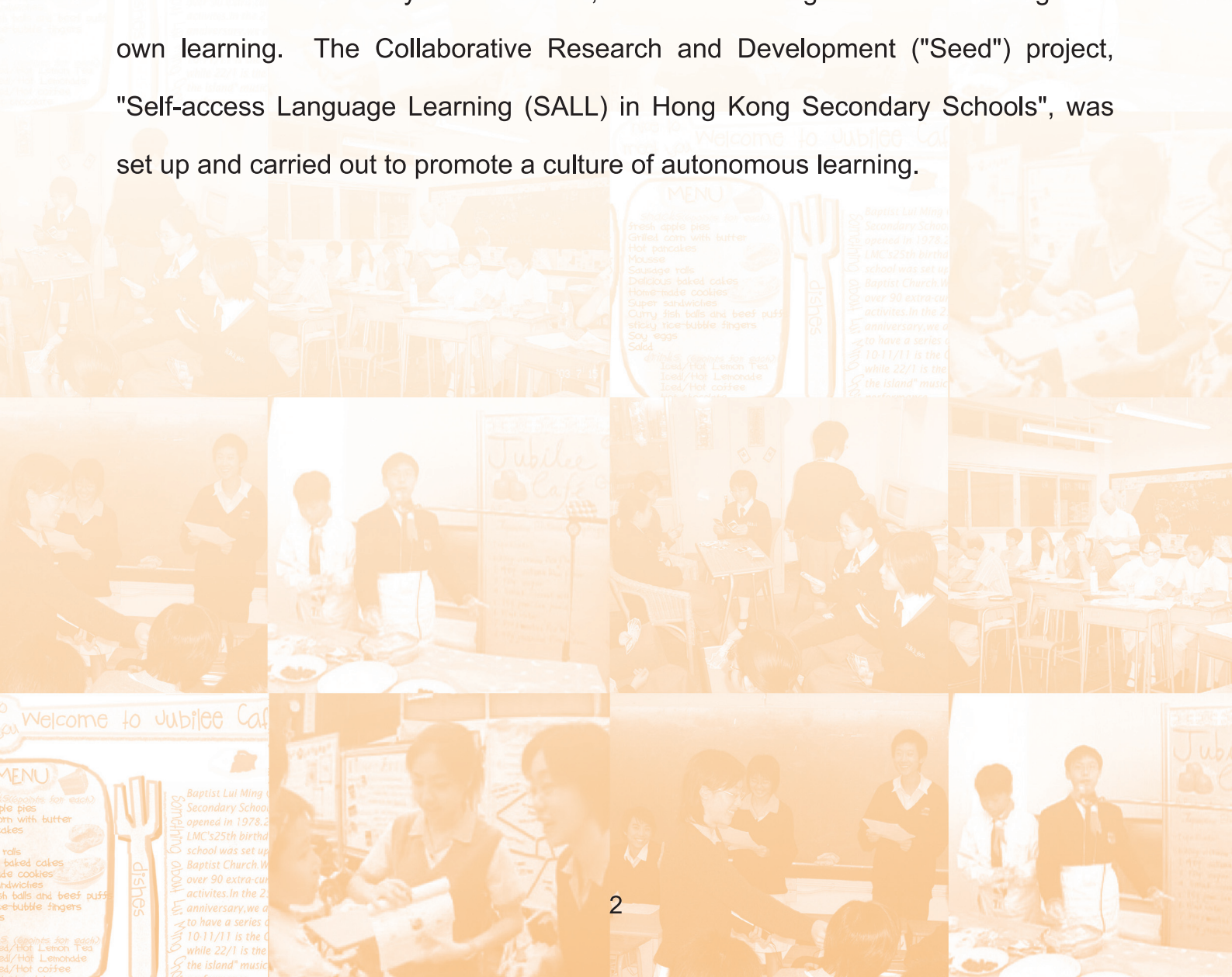
Aims and Objectives of the Project

The SALL project principally aims to accomplish the key Curriculum Reform goal of promoting learner autonomy and lifelong language learning at secondary level through the collaboration between secondary schools, tertiary institutions and the EMB.

It seeks to accomplish this goal by:

- helping participating schools set up and run SALL;

- documenting and evaluating the process of participating schools in undertaking the SALL project; and

- disseminating project findings and exemplary materials and practices among all secondary schools in Hong Kong.
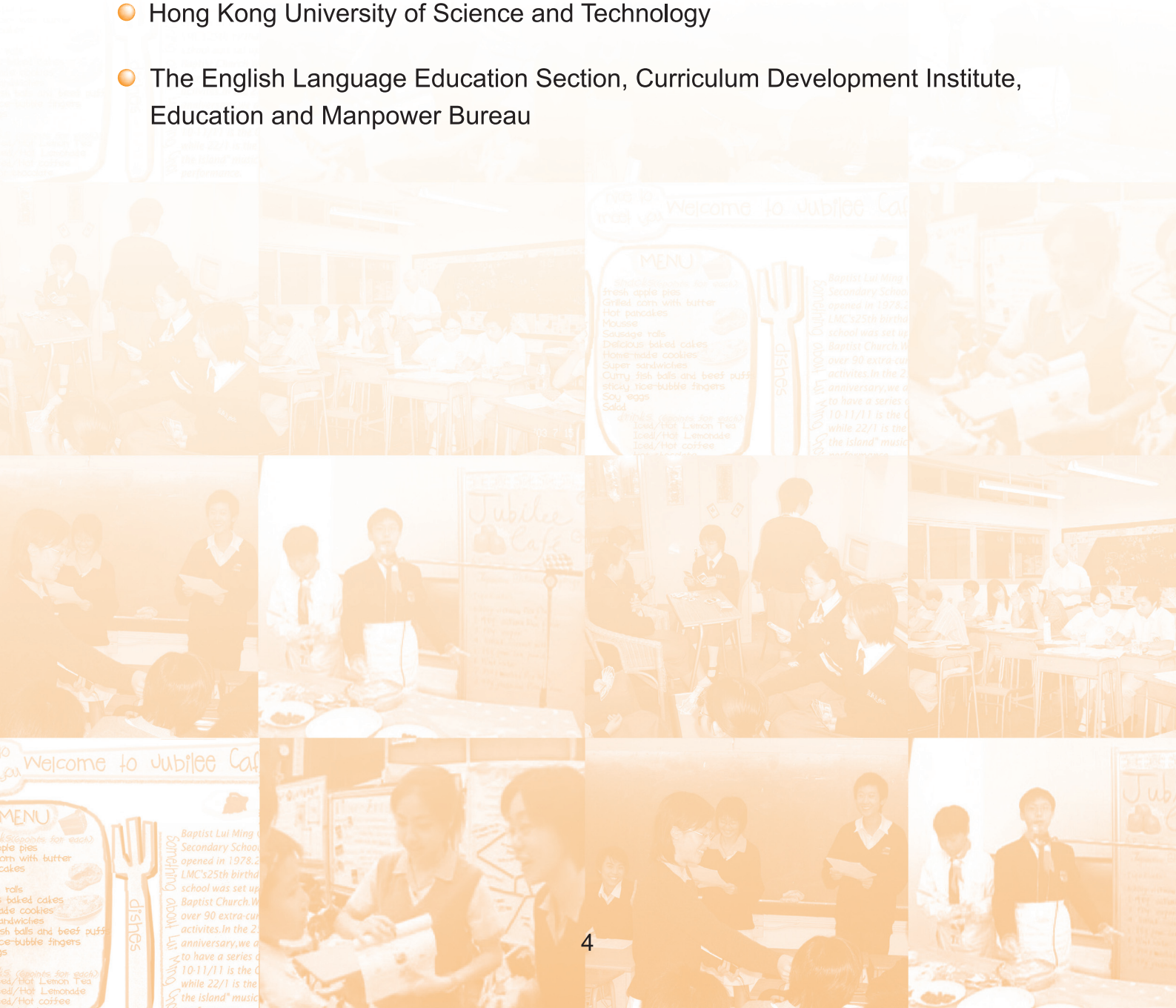
Participating Schools

- Baptist Lui Ming Choi Secondary School

- Buddhist Kok Kwong Secondary School

- SKH Tsang Shiu Tim Secondary School

Co-investigating Institutions

- City University of Hong Kong

- Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

- The English Language Education Section, Curriculum Development Institute, Education and Manpower Bureau

Data Collection

Case studies were carried out in the project schools. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect information from teachers and students throughout the project. The following table summarizes the methods of data collection.

Methodology / Subjects	Quantitative	Qualitative
Teachers	Questionnaire survey on perceptions of SALL (35 teachers in total completed the questionnaire)	Interviews and discussions (This involved 6 teachers in the 3 schools)
Students	Questionnaire survey on perceptions of SALL (A total of 954 students from 29 classes completed the questionnaire)	Focus group interviews (12 focus groups with a total of 35 students were interviewed)

Stages of the Project

(October 2001 - December 2001)

- Reviewing the literature on SALL
- Planning the training programme for project teachers

Phase 2

(January 2002 - August 2002)

- Collaborating with the project teachers by helping them establish their own SALL programme:
  - Helping them plan and develop their own SALL programmes
  - Training teachers and students about the setting up and running of the SALL programme
  - Setting up and moderating a webboard conferencing system for project teachers

Phase 3

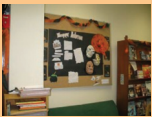**(September 2002 - November 2003)**

- More training of teachers and students
- Implementing and evaluating the SALL programme in the project schools
- Disseminating project findings and exemplary SALL materials and practices through professional sharing sessions

Implementation

The project was implemented in the following way:

- Teachers in each of the three project schools identified their goals and worked out plans for the development of SALL, based on their understanding of their own school context and the needs and interests of their students.

- SALL programmes with different focuses were then formulated and implemented.

- Rather than an add-on, they were closely integrated into the school curriculum and covered a wide variety of SALL activities involving students at different levels.

It is noteworthy that post-activity evaluation of various types, notably peer evaluation, was built into each SALL programme. The following pages summarize the key SALL activities conducted in each of the project schools.

Project schools	Buddhist Kok Kwong Secondary School	Baptist Lui Ming Choi Secondary School	SKH Tsang Shiu Tim Secondary School
Focus	Promoting SALL through Setting up a Self-Access Centre (SAC)	Integrating SALL into the School Curriculum	Promoting SALL Through Project Work
Level and number of students involved	S1, S2, S6, S7 (approximately 200)	S1, S2 (approximately 400)	S1, S4-7 (approximately 780)
SALL Activities	**Setting up a Self-Access Centre (SAC)** To enhance students' ownership of the SAC, students at various levels collaborated in decorating the room and organizing promotional activities (e.g. suggesting a name for the SAC and developing rules about its use). **Mini-project: Selecting Materials for the SAC** S1 and S2 students undertook to collect authentic reading materials they found interesting and would like to put in the SAC. **SALL Materials Development Workshop** A workshop was organized for both teachers and S6 students. The latter worked alongside their teachers, whom they regarded as peers, to develop activity sheets from the materials selected by S1 and S2 students for use in the SAC.	**SALL Outing** • S1 students went on an outing where they interviewed tourists and collected information at some local tourist spots. • They were responsible for planning and making decisions regarding how to realize their plans with teacher support. • After the outing, they collaborated in organizing the information to produce a group report. **Charities** • A textbook unit ("Charities") was adapted and redesigned with a strong SALL focus. • Students working in groups of 4 researched a list of charity organizations and made decisions about which charity organization they would like to support. • In groups, they gave an oral presentation and prepared a written proposal based on their findings. **Jubilee Café Workshop** • S1 students planned, designed and set up a Jubilee Café to celebrate the school's 25th Anniversary Open Day. • They designed their own place mats and assumed different roles (e.g. receptionists and waiters/waitresses) in interacting with guests and their fellow students in English.	**ECA Promotion Day** • S4-S7 students of each school club or society collaborated in the setting up of a stall and designing games and promotional materials for the ECA Promotion Day. • S1 students visited the stalls, made inquiries with the senior form students and made decisions about which clubs to join. **Variety Show** • S4 students working in groups of 20 researched, planned and developed wide-ranging materials and activities in preparation for the variety show to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of the school. • The show included a singing performance, a short drama and a game involving the participation of the audience made up of fellow students. **Careers Oscars** • Originally a talk given by the Careers Master/Mistress, this was turned into a student-led activity. • S6 students working in groups of 4 to 5 negotiated with their teachers and decided on a career-related area of study of their own interest for research. • They used the information for a 10-minute career show presented to one S4 or S5 class as peer tutoring.

During the project, students engaged in a variety of SALL activities that aimed at achieving the major goal of promoting independent, lifelong learning. Together they made a positive impact on the students, teachers and school-based curriculum development.

Impact on Students

SALL helped students extend their space of learning by

- providing ample opportunities and space (both physical and cognitive) for language learning;
- increasing students' engagement in language learning activities both inside and outside school;
- encouraging them to assume an active learner role through developing learner autonomy; and
- enhancing self-motivation and confidence which led to improvement in using English.

> △ 54% of students reported increased confidence in learning English.
> △ 72.7% of students indicated that SALL could help them improve their general English level.
> △ 62.8% of students said they could learn more English by SALL.
> △ 77.6% of students expressed their preference for learning English in groups.
> △ 64.3% of students would like to use more SALL activities to learn English.

These figures are meaningful and encouraging as they show that SALL succeeded in promoting English language learning and in helping students towards autonomous learning. One might argue that only a relatively low number (54%) of the students involved in the project expressed increased confidence in learning English. However, this is a number not to be dismissed when viewed in a larger context where a substantial number of students in Hong Kong acknowledged that they spent relatively less time engaging in active communication in their English classes and that they felt anxious and nervous when using English, as documented in a recent study on the perceptions and experiences of Hong Kong senior secondary and university students in learning and using English.* Likewise, the majority (77.6%) of the students involved in the SALL project showed preference for learning English in groups, a finding which corroborates a similar one in the aforementioned study. As regards the other figures related to the students showing appreciation of the benefits of SALL (72.7%, 62.8% and 64.3%), it is enlightening to see that with the implementation of SALL, students who were not normally motivated to take risks in language learning now showed a preference for SALL where risk-taking and autonomy in learning are entailed.

* Littlewood, W., and Liu, N. F. (1996). The UCG-funded LEAP Project: Learning Experience, Attitudes and Proficiency of First-year University Students. Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong.

Students say:

By reaching a goal, we can develop a sense of confidence. It is especially with our speaking.

I could focus on what I didn't know and what I was weak in. Being allowed to design the time table for myself, I could learn whatever I like wherever I was free and so I enjoyed this very much.

We can learn in a lively way, and we learn how to cooperate with each other, appreciate each other's effort, and how to communicate with each other.

I enjoy learning English in this way because it is not exam-oriented. It could definitely improve my English without giving me any pressure. It is a kind of fun and it makes me want to dig more deeply into the subject.

Impact on Teachers

SALL enhanced teachers' understanding of and their commitment towards building a SALL culture.

- Teachers gained a better understanding of SALL.

  63% of the respondents to the questionnaire for teachers indicated that they had not been trying to integrate SALL into the English Language curriculum in their own school prior to the project. However, teachers' understanding of SALL and their conviction of its worth increased as the project gathered momentum. This was reflected through their active participation, and the increase in the year levels of students and the number of teachers involved (where in one school, in particular, the entire English panel participated).

- Teachers became more committed to developing their own school-based SALL programmes.

  Integrating SALL into the school-based English Language curriculum was not a common practice prior to the project, as suggested by 77% of the teacher respondents. This, however, took a different turn as teachers' beliefs in SALL strengthened during the project. Not only did they undertake to develop interesting and appropriate SALL materials and activities for their students, they strove to make SALL an integral part of the English Language programme and even integrate it into life-wide learning activities, including morning assemblies, school outing and English Day.

- Space for teacher-student and teacher-teacher collaboration was created.

  ◆ The SALL project created opportunities and space for collaboration and sharing of expertise among teachers within and between schools. This enabled teachers to set appropriate goals and develop better focussed SALL programmes and more student-friendly SALL activities/materials, based on an improved understanding of students' needs and interests.

  ◆ Space for mutual communication and learning between teachers and students was also created. All three project schools provided students with plenty of opportunities to assume responsibility, to plan and make major decisions, and implement them through negotiation and collaboration with their teachers. In one school, students were given the opportunity to develop SALL activity sheets in parallel with their teachers.

- Principals appreciated the value of SALL and provided the necessary support.

  Assistance from the principals in the form of extra funding, flexible time-tabling, providing space, and actual participation in professional development seminars further helped to enhance the teachers' commitment to developing and promoting SALL.

Teachers' reflection:

I [will] have to think up more variety in language teaching not only relying on textbooks or some two dimensional materials..., it encourages more collaboration....
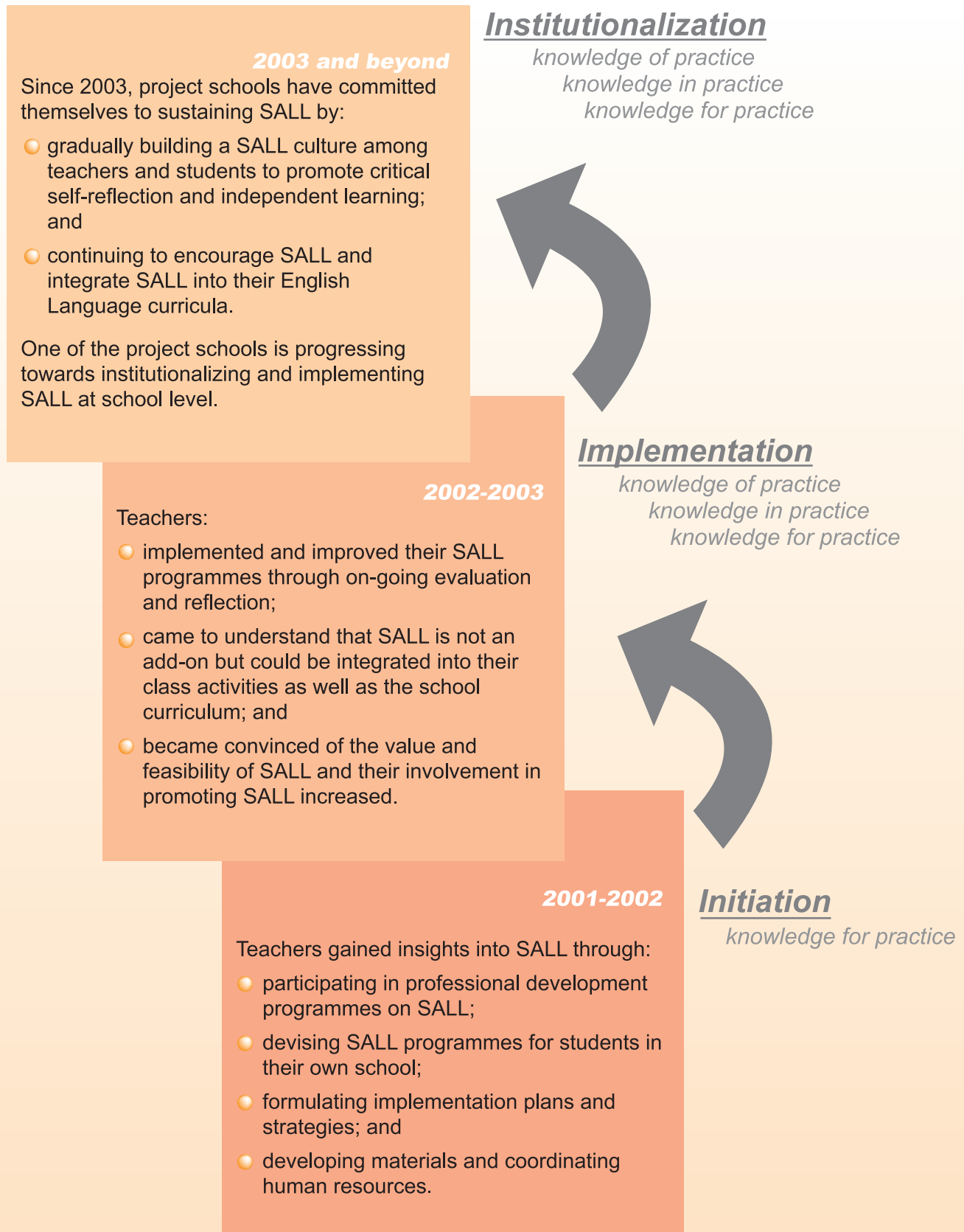
The kids are more interested in English, more willing to use English.... My kids enjoy the language.

If we can extend the project to, like territory-wide, it would be much better, so that more teachers can work together, more ideas will come up.

Impact on School-based Curriculum Development

Through the SALL project, teachers became better equipped to develop, implement and evaluate their school-based English Language learning programmes.

Institutionalization
knowledge of practice
knowledge in practice
knowledge for practice

2003 and beyond

Since 2003, project schools have committed themselves to sustaining SALL by:

- gradually building a SALL culture among teachers and students to promote critical self-reflection and independent learning; and

- continuing to encourage SALL and integrate SALL into their English Language curricula.

One of the project schools is progressing towards institutionalizing and implementing SALL at school level.

Implementation
knowledge of practice
knowledge in practice
knowledge for practice

2002-2003

Teachers:

- implemented and improved their SALL programmes through on-going evaluation and reflection;

- came to understand that SALL is not an add-on but could be integrated into their class activities as well as the school curriculum; and

- became convinced of the value and feasibility of SALL and their involvement in promoting SALL increased.

Initiation
knowledge for practice

2001-2002

Teachers gained insights into SALL through:

- participating in professional development programmes on SALL;

- devising SALL programmes for students in their own school;

- formulating implementation plans and strategies; and

- developing materials and coordinating human resources.

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Conclusion

- One obvious limitation of the project is the small number of schools involved, which necessitates our particular caution in interpreting the findings. Participation from a greater number and variety of schools would certainly enable us to gain greater insights into the way SALL works and its effectiveness in promoting independent language learning in secondary schools in Hong Kong.

- Despite this shortcoming, however, the project was on the whole successful. The teachers collaborated closely to overcome constraints and the project certainly made a positive impact on the students, teachers and school-based curriculum development in all of the three participating schools.

- The following are key factors contributing to the effective development of SALL:
  - ◆ Teachers' continuous professional development towards achieving a sound knowledge and conception of SALL;
  - ◆ Flexibility to develop SALL materials and activities in response to the needs and interests of the students;
  - ◆ Readiness to innovate;
  - ◆ Collaboration among staff; and
  - ◆ Support from the school management.

Recommendations

- Based on the experiences of the project schools, other schools interested in developing and implementing SALL should take into consideration not only the critical success factors referred to in Conclusion above, but should also
  - ◆ develop their own approaches to SALL with reference to their own context (including the school learning culture, teacher readiness, students' interest and abilities) rather than prescribing a ready-made SALL programme that students may not find suitable or appealing;
  - ◆ set a modest goal in the initial stage towards developing SALL and gradually expand its scope with a view to institutionalizing SALL when students, teachers and the school management gain increased knowledge and experience in implementing it; and
  - ◆ integrate SALL into the school-based English Language curriculum rather than treating it as an add-on.

Frequently Asked Questions about SALL

Is SALL (Self-Access Language Learning) the same as SAC (Self-Access Centre or Corner)?

- It is a misconception to equate SALL with SAC. SALL is more than just SAC. SALL is an approach to, or a mode of, language learning and there are many ways of encouraging it. SALL can take place without a SAC.

- While making effective use of a SAC equipped with resource materials appropriate to learners' needs, interests and abilities can certainly help learners to develop the skills and habit of independent learning, there are other means or facilities that lead to this end. These include, for example:

  ◆ project work;

  ◆ life-wide learning activities (i.e. co-curricular or extra-curricular activities which take place beyond the classroom and which may involve the use of community resources); and

  ◆ classroom language learning tasks or activities designed with a strong SALL focus which allow learners the opportunities to negotiate with their teachers and make choices and decisions over the learning objectives, content and process, as well as to reflect on and evaluate their own learning.

What is the difference between SALL and project work?

- One major reason why some people have difficulty in distinguishing SALL from project work is that the latter seems to be able to do what the former tries to do - i.e. allowing learners to take an active role in the learning process by carrying out activities individually or in groups, making inquiries, discussing with each other, problem-solving, making decisions, and monitoring and assessing the work they have done.

- However, it should be remembered that SALL is really an approach to, or a mode of, learning, whereas project work is just a means, a learning activity, capable of promoting SALL when used effectively. Not all projects can encourage independent language learning, particularly those which are very controlled. There are projects in which learners are required to follow many strict instructions and guidelines, which allow no room for learner autonomy and creativity.

I have barely enough time to cover the scheme of work at my school. How can I find time for SALL?

- Careful planning and collaboration are important. To save teachers' time and to create a positive impact on student learning, it is crucial that teachers work closely together and that they make an effort to integrate SALL into the school-based English Language curriculum.

- As can be seen in the "seed" project on "Self-access Language Learning in Hong Kong Secondary Schools", the teachers first considered their students' needs and interests and the school resources that were available, and then identified what they deemed was a feasible area in the language curriculum of their own school for developing SALL (e.g. integrating SALL into project work, integrating SALL into classroom language learning). Further, they worked closely together in developing interesting and appropriate SALL materials and activities for their students, and such collaboration surely contributed to enhanced communication, the sharing of experience and expertise, and greater efficiency.

- To nurture our students to be independent learners who engage in learning beyond the classroom and school hours, both the teachers and the students need to see the space or possibilities of learning that SALL can open up. Initially, it is essential to tie in SALL closely with students' learning in class in order to motivate them to take up SALL. If SALL is treated as an add-on, it will just cause extra work and will be de-motivating for both teachers and students.

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