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Abstract

The mandate of self-access centers is to provide a venue, materials and support for self-directed learning; taking learning outside of the classroom. The Academic Achievement Center (AAC), on which this paper focusses, is a support service offered within a self-access center at a university in Japan. Students who receive support do so on a completely voluntary basis, in a self-directed effort to support and enhance their classroom learning. This paper was written as a collaboration between the coordinator of the AAC and three peer tutors, who were employed in the center. At the time of writing, one of the authors was a student in the Graduate School of Japanese Language Teaching Practices, while two were undergraduate students in the Faculty of International Liberal Arts; taking their learning outside of the self-access center and sharing it with a wider audience. This paper was motivated by the desire on the part of the peer tutors to share what we are doing in the AAC with those thinking of, or in the process of, creating a tutoring center, especially in Japan. Additionally, it was written to give readers an insight into how a tutoring center in an international university in Japan is run, as well as its successes and challenges. The paper itself is a co-authored publication by a professor and a few student-tutors, representing the vast possibilities of active and collaborative research which can be done in a university setting.

The Context

Akita International University is an international university where all classes throughout the university are conducted in English. The curriculum begins with an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program, in which students can polish their English capability before progressing into the undergraduate curriculum. Additionally, there are a small proportion of incoming students (up to 10% in any year), who enter the university at a proficiency level which enables them to skip EAP and start studying in the undergraduate program straight away.

After completing their EAP requirements, students move on to introductory level courses in a wide range of disciplines within the Basic Education (BE) program. This program is based on the U.S. university model, in which students should take compulsory

courses in a wide range of disciplines before moving on to study in their major area. Students typically study in the BE program for a period of one year.

Upon leaving the BE program, most students go abroad for a period of one year to study at one of 174 partner institutions. Studying abroad for a period of one year is a graduation requirement at the university. Prior to studying abroad, students are required to complete certain core BE classes, maintaining a GPA of 2.5 (the equivalent of a B- average) as well as achieving a TOEFL ITP score of 550 (or the equivalent score in TOEFL iBT (80) or IELTS (6.5)). The study abroad partnerships basically involve an exchange of one outbound student for one inbound student. This means that a large number of undergraduate students on campus at any time are short-term international exchange students. Three hundred and seventy-seven inbound students studied at Akita International University in the 2015 academic year.

Finally, students choose one of the two majors; Global Studies (GS) or Global Business (GB), and take courses in their major area as well as completing a graduation thesis on a topic of special interest within their major area. The curriculum appears to offer a variety of challenges to students, from the high English language proficiency required to successfully study at the university, to the wide range of subjects students are required to study and the strict GPA and standardized test requirements for study abroad.

The Active Learning Support Center

The Active Learning Support Center (ALSC), which was established with a focus on active learning, consists of three centers with different purposes: Language Development and Intercultural Studies Center (LDIC), Academic Career Support Center (ACSC), and the AAC. Peer tutoring takes place at the AAC, which is discussed below. ALSC provides support for self-directed and autonomous learning, and it has become an important part of learning environment of the university. This center drives the university toward a learning-centered environment.

The AAC offers peer tutoring to support students with their course content, and this center has been successful in supporting students' academic achievement. The academic support offered at the AAC is not limited to language courses, but it covers courses of mathematics, natural science, and standardized English proficiency tests such as TOEFL and IELTS. In the AAC peer tutoring, trained tutors support tutees with the focus on tutees' development into more autonomous learners. Therefore, the AAC can be considered the ideal environment for practicing peer tutoring.

Procedures within the AAC

From its establishment in 2009, until this paper was written in 2015, the AAC employed 181 students as peer tutors. In the early years, the demand for sessions was lower and fewer tutors were employed. More recently, the number of tutors has been higher in order to meet the demand for sessions. The number of tutors employed in any one semester has ranged from 13 to 40 and the average is 27. Of these 181 peer tutors, the largest number have been regular undergraduate students (77 students, or 43%). Fifty-nine of the tutors (33%) have been graduate students, while 45 (25%) have been short-term international exchange students. On average, each tutor has worked in the center for one year.

All tutors need to have a GPA of 3 or higher (the equivalent of a B average). In addition to this, they need to have received a B or better in all courses for each subject they intend to tutor. Furthermore, applicants who wish to tutor for the standardized language proficiency tests (TOEFL ITP, TOEFL iBT or IELTS) are required to have a documented score of 550 or higher for TOEFL ITP (with a score of at least 50 for each section of the test they would like to support), 80 or higher for TOEFL iBT (with a score of at least 20 for each section of the test that they would like to support) or 6.5 or higher for IELTS (with a score of at least 6.5 for each section of the test that they would like to tutor).

Students who apply to become tutors are usually highly motivated and hardworking. Students not only meet the requirements but are often active in other extracurricular activities. They are often core members of student clubs and associations. Students with higher English fluency or those who participate in Teacher's Licence Program tend to be interested in becoming tutors as well.

There are two training options for tutors. An intensive one-day training workshop is offered once per semester on a Saturday. In the workshop, practical tutoring skills are covered, as well as learning styles, communication skills such as active listening and different patterns of communication, tutoring ethics and the administrative aspects of the position, such as policies and paperwork. Alternatively, tutors can take a one-credit course on "Tutoring" which is offered within the BE Program. This course offers all the practical aspects covered in the one-day training, in addition to providing a theoretical background by introducing students to the concepts of learner autonomy, scaffolding and intercultural communication skills, as well as discussing plagiarism and appropriation. The students who take the tutoring course are required to read ten articles and write reflections.

After the training is completed, new tutors have to observe one tutorial session and write an observation report. They then offer a 'practice session' for one hour, while being observed by an incumbent tutor, who writes and submits an observation report in the same format. Following the observation and practice session, each new tutor meets the coordinator to discuss the sessions. If they are deemed ready, they are officially employed by the center at this stage. In some cases, new tutors are required to conduct further observations or practice sessions before they are employed. To maintain and observe the service offered at AAC, both tutors and tutees are required to fill in a feedback after every session. Tutees' feedback questions include multiple choice and open ended questions regarding the degree of their understanding, if they learned something new, and their level of confidence.

When students require academic support from the AAC, they make a formal request through the AAC online registration system. Students typically request weekly sessions with the same tutor for the remainder of the semester. However, one-off sessions are also possible. In the 2014 academic year, the AAC received 253 individual requests for tutoring from 197 students. In total, approximately 2,000 one-hour tutorial sessions were offered in that year. In the spring semester of the 2015 academic year, the AAC received 166 individual requests from 132 different students, with 1,050 one-hour tutorial sessions being offered. Since the total undergraduate student body of the university is less than 900, these figures show that a large proportion of more than 20% of undergraduate students enrolled at the university are receiving academic support from the AAC.

The Kinds of Students Who Request Support

As mentioned in previous sections, there are four groups of students at Akita International University: EAP, BE, GS/GB, and exchange students (EXC). Figure 1 shows the total numbers of requests for peer tutoring by each group from spring term 2013 to spring term 2015. As indicated in the graph, BE exceeds other groups with 247 requests for the 4 terms. Although there is not a remarkable difference in numbers of requests from the other groups, there are certain tendencies in the subjects they request.

Figure 1. Numbers of Requests by Student Group

Figure 2 indicates a comparison of the frequently requested subjects by BE students. Approximately half of the requests are for standardized English proficiency tests including TOEFL ITP, iBT, and IELTS. The second most frequent subject is *Academic Writing*. Mandatory mathematics courses including *Algebra*, *Statistics*, and *Math for Liberal Arts* are also highly requested.

Figure 2. Frequently Requested Subjects by BE

These tendencies reflect the expectation of the curriculum on the BE students. They are required to increase their English ability and GPA to get accepted into the mandatory

study abroad programme. They are required to obtain more than 550 in TOEFL ITP, and a GPA of at least 2.5, which is an average grade of B-. Also, it is in BE when they take the most challenging writing classes. Together with all the English medium classes, this seems to increase the demand for Academic Writing support at AAC. Mandatory mathematics courses also start at this stage. It can become overwhelming for some students who have studied mathematics in Japanese to keep up with the course conducted in English. These curriculum factors affect the support they request from the AAC. The students studying in language programs including EAP and Japanese for exchange students do not share this tendency. However, the subjects requested by these two groups are also effected by curriculum factors. Figures 3 and 4 respectively provide comparisons of the subjects requested by EAP students and exchange students.

Figure 3: Frequently Requested Subjects by Exchange Students

Figure 4. Frequently Requested Subjects by EAP students

As shown in graph 3, the most frequently requested subject by exchange students is Japanese. On the other hand, more than 90% of the EAP students request subjects related to academic English, including standardized academic English proficiency tests. The students studying in these programs attend language classes on a daily basis, and they are expected to meet certain standards depending on the level of the classes. Especially the students in EAP program are expected to perform language tasks at university level English.

The subjects students request reflect the expectations of the curriculum. Students of BE request support for standardized English proficiency tests because they are required to obtain a certain level of score to move onto the next step of the academic path. Similarly, EAP and exchange students demand support for language courses because they are studying in language programs.

Tutee Expectations and Motivations

Many types of students step into the AAC to request tutoring services, motivated to do so for different reasons. Regardless of what their expectations are, there seems to be a clear distinction in the tutees' motivating factors and their grade point averages.

Some tutees are simply high achievers. They have some of the highest grades in their classes, and they come to the AAC to seek higher grades. For example, such a tutee may have an A-, but would come to receive tutoring to increase their grade to an A. These tutees are usually studious, and will come to the sessions prepared with a clear goal for the session in mind. They actively participate in the sessions and may show an increase in ability in a short period of time.

Other tutees are of average grades, and will come mostly due to a lack of confidence in their reading or writing skills. These tutees are B or C students, who usually want confirmation from a tutor to see if they are on the right track to meeting their professor's expectations. Such tutees may show reluctance in the beginning to speak up or set their own goals, but will usually begin to participate more actively after a few sessions.

Finally, some tutees come to the AAC because their professors suggest for them to do so. These students are usually struggling to pass their classes and need extra help and support on fundamental skills, such as time management and basic study skills, without which they cannot understand the class content. Sometimes, these tutees come with the expectation that the tutors will correct their work for them, and will refuse to participate when they realize that they will need to do the work. Additionally, although no one forces them, these tutees

may feel that their professors made them come to the AAC, which can result in negative attitudes. Working with such tutees is often the most challenging for tutors.

Theoretical Background

The AAC is based on the framework of peer tutoring, which is defined by Topping (1998, p. 322) as “people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching.” This style, in which two or more people achieve a similar goal by learning from and teaching one another, has also been termed *collaborative learning*. Gerlach (1994) states, “Collaborative learning is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves.” Sessions at the AAC involve two participants, one student tutor and one student tutee, working together to achieve higher grades or a deeper understanding of the material they are working on. The occurrence of collaborative learning can be concluded through past surveys conducted at the AAC, in which tutors have written, “I learned how to explain the differences in introduction and background information” or “I learned not only how to write or use language but also how to consider or rethink my essay.” Topping, Duran and Van (2015) also explain the benefits of peer tutoring as helping the students improve not only academically, but also reducing the psychological stress of learning on the students (p. 24). Past tutees have given comments such as “It is comfortable to ask questions” and “Honestly, her way of teaching is better than that of my Algebra teacher.” We can see that there are many benefits to peer tutoring, not only for the tutee, but also for the tutor, as learning occurs for both parties.

Additionally, the AAC promotes learner autonomy, which was first defined by Holec (1981) as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.” Researchers have found various benefits of autonomous learning. Chan (2003) demonstrates in his study that letting students take control over their own learning allows them to feel more responsible for their learning. This pushes them to find learning styles and resources that best suit them. Thanasoulas (2000) also writes, “The autonomous learner takes a (pro-) active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher.” By stepping into the AAC, the tutee is taking the first step towards autonomous learning, taking responsibility for what and how they learn instead of learning passively. This also includes finding weaknesses and patterns of common mistakes, so that they can apply it when they work by themselves. Tutees have concluded after sessions

that they could find their weak points, that they found their own mistake patterns, and that they felt more confident to continue working with the material that they came in with.

Tutors at the AAC also help them achieve such learning through various methods, including scaffolding, which Slavin (2009, as cited by Dzubak, 2009), defines as “the process of providing assistance to help students move to the point where they need support to the point where they are able to perform a skill independently.” Instead of giving the correct answer, AAC tutors help tutees reach their academic goals through constant encouragement and supplying necessary hints along the way. Many tutees have commented on the constant encouragement that the tutors provide during the tutoring sessions, with survey answers such as “She was very good at encouraging me to consider more about the topic from new perspectives” and “She did not just point out the mistake, but also explain[ed] how the mistakes were wrong.” This is significant for the tutee as it allows them to feel a sense of achievement and satisfaction, which leads to motivation and confidence in their work. Additionally, the usage of such methods and roles is also beneficial for the tutor, as they gain communication skills, leadership skills and critical thinking skills.

In recent years, there has been a recommendation from some for all teachers to foster a capacity for autonomy in their learners by teaching in flexible and learner-centered ways (e.g. Benson, 2013; Reinders, 2010; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004). However, not all classroom teachers are ready to give up on their well-designed lesson plans and allow their learners to take control. Specifically in East Asia, education is claimed to use predominantly teacher-centred, lecture style teaching (Chen, 2013; Tan, 2014) and passive reception of knowledge by students (DeWaelche, 2015; He, et al., 2011). The tutors’ roles at the AAC are not the same as those of this traditional style teacher. As tutors provide instruction to individuals, it is easier for them to adjust the contents and learning pace to the tutee’s needs. They can also try various methods to explain concepts until the student reaches comprehension.

In these ways, the AAC encourages collaborative learning between students in a one-on-one setting, conducting learning outside of the classroom and removed from teachers. It also strives for learner autonomy, as the final goal is for all participants to learn strategies which they can apply thereafter to take charge of their own learning.

What Happens in a Session?

The goal of tutoring is to empower tutees by helping them increase their confidence and capacity for learner autonomy. At the AAC, tutors use the tutoring cycle based on MacDonald (2000), which helps tutors to scaffold the learning in three different steps.

Beginning steps

The beginning steps are where tutors welcome the tutee and help them identify the task, break the task into smaller steps, and identifying the thought process for the task. This section also helps the tutor to build rapport with the tutee. At the very beginning of the session, the tutor greets the tutee and sets a climate so that the tutee would feel comfortable. Once settled, the tutor lets the tutee explain their concerns to identify the purpose and the goal of the tutoring session. The tutor asks open-ended questions to the tutee to clarify the depth of tutee's understanding of assignments and break the task into smaller steps. The purpose here is to provide the tutee with the opportunity to cognitively realize the thought process needed to complete the given assignment.

The tutors' job is not to give answers but to help tutees learn how to approach certain tasks. Tutors help tutees to identify the thought processes underlying the task. At this point, the tutor and tutee often review materials and information given by the instructor together. The tutor should not be the source of information but instead a guide as the tutee learns how to gather and utilize the textbook, rubric, and other resources.

Task steps

The task steps are the part of the session where the actual tutoring occurs. At the beginning of each task, the tutor asks the tutee to plan how much time they would like to spend on a particular task. The plan should be explicit and detailed, but flexible. While conducting the actual tutoring, the tutor encourages the tutee to take control of the session by asking questions and letting the tutee lead the conversation. While in the session, the tutor repeatedly asks the tutee to summarize the content and process used in the session. This helps the tutee to determine and evaluate their understanding. If the understanding is incomplete, the tutor asks questions to guide the tutee to self-correct.

Closing steps

Closing steps are taken to make sure that the tutee understood the process and is able to individually apply what they have learned from the session. After the tutee explains the content and process, the tutor offers positive reinforcement and confirms that the tutee really understands by asking questions. At the end of the session, both tutor and tutee decide and

plan what they should do in the next session. After the session, both tutor and tutee fill in the feedback form separately.

Overall

Tutees may not all be able to be autonomous at the beginning. The goal of the tutoring is to gradually minimize the instruction and help tutees to become independent learners. Tutors are there to help tutees understand their depth of knowledge, recognize their thought processes, and find their own method of learning. In order for tutees to gain such learner autonomy, tutors need to listen actively and keep the communication tutee-centered. Tutors confirm by asking open-ended questions. Tutors encourage tutees to work independently using what they learned during the tutoring session.

The Benefits of Tutoring for Tutors and Tutees

Through peer tutoring sessions, tutees benefit by developing learner autonomy, independent learning skills, and studying methods that are suitable for them. Tutees gradually become independent learners who are able to cognitively take control of their learning. Tutees also gain confidence through tutoring sessions, which enables them to be more comfortable in working by themselves. Out of 2000 comments left in the course of 3 semesters, 45 tutees commented on their increased confidence and motivation. Tutees left comments such as “thanks to his session, I could become confidently,” and “I could have confidence in my essay thanks to this session with her.”.

Through the tutoring sessions, the AAC provides tutors opportunities not just to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the subject but also improving their communication and leadership skills. Tutors are encouraged, challenged, and expected to have more knowledge and understanding of the course materials than their peers. Even during sessions, tutors constantly receive spontaneous feedback from their tutees in terms of how well they know the subject and how well they were able to explain it. Thus, by being a tutor, students are naturally forced to gain more knowledge and understanding of the materials and content of the subjects they tutor. As tutees gradually gain learner autonomy, tutors experience a sense of achievement. On the sessions where tutee left high evaluation and positive comments regarding confidence, tutors also commented that they could see the enhancement of the tutee’s confidence. Tutors also develop leadership skills by learning to express and set clear goals for themselves. Tutors get opportunities to foster others’ motivation and confidence through peer tutoring.

All the aspects of improvement that tutees gain from the tutor go back to tutors, making them more motivated and confident in their own tutoring. The tutoring experience provides the opportunity for students to gain skills applicable in other aspects of their lives and gives tutors wider opportunities to participate in various activities within and outside of school. Peer tutoring not only supports learners' academic achievement, but it also influences the attitudes of both the tutor and the tutee toward having more agency in their learning and becoming more active and autonomous learners.

Notes on the contributors

Rachael Ruegg is a lecturer in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Previously, she was the coordinator of the Academic Achievement Center at Akita International University, where she had the opportunity to train and mentor wonderfully talented and motivated students such as her co-authors on this paper, many of whom have gone on to careers in education.

Taku Sudo is a guest researcher in the area of Japanese language education at Aarhus University, Denmark. He has taught Japanese to primary students to adult learners in Australia, Japan and Denmark. His academic interests include learner autonomy, and teaching writing in foreign languages.

Hinako Takeuchi is working on her Master's degree in Second Language Education at McGill University, Canada. Her tutoring experiences during her undergraduate years at the Academic Achievement Center, from which this paper derives, sparked her interest in education research. Her current interests lie in bilingual education, international school education, and learner autonomy.

Yuko Sato is an undergraduate student at Akita International University. She worked as a tutor in the Academic Achievement Center at her university for over two years. She is currently studying to receive a license to teach English language in Japanese schools. Yuko plans to undertake graduate studies in education.

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