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## **Increasing Attendance in a Self-Access Language Lounge**

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### **Abstract**

Scheduled class time for students in tertiary language classes is limited, and is likely insufficient in itself to enable students to attain second language mastery (Nunan, 1989). Provision of language practice can be expanded outside regular class time through various means, including self-access centers. However, without effective marketing and management, and effective teaching staff, such facilities risk low participation rates. The current paper discusses the provision of an English language conversation lounge facility at a Japanese university in the light of a 69% increase in student attendance for the year 2015-16. The discussion is initially situated in the need for extra language study outside regular class time. A brief description of the language center is then given. The focus of the present paper is to note recent changes, and to consider effective practice for increasing attendance and for improving participation.

*Keywords:* self-access conversation lounge, Japanese higher education

The three authors of the current paper all teach at a Japanese university conversation lounge called 'English Island'. After a 69% increase in student attendance at the lounge during the academic year of 2015-16, we assert that for self-access centers to be effectively utilized by students, thorough marketing and an effective staff roster are essential. The present paper discusses key aspects of effective conversation lounge management in four sections. Firstly, the authors situate the discussion in a language study context, asserting the need for extra language practice time outside regular classes. Secondly, institutional context is provided, with a brief description of the facility. Thirdly, the authors note multiple recent improvements and consider how to optimize attendance and participation. Finally, the paper closes with final thoughts and advice regarding effective practice.

### **Making the Case for a Language Lounge: Increased Language Exposure and Practice**

Classroom time alone appears insufficient for language students to fully develop their English competence (Nunan, 1989). 2,200 classroom hours has been suggested (Jackson & Kaplan, 1999) as a necessary lower limit for students learning linguistically ‘distant’ languages. However, students only have an estimated 630 hours of English language provision in their regular schooling prior to university (Honna, 2008), delivered largely via grammar-translation methodology (Gorsuch, 2001). Therefore, even assuming effective curricula and teachers, motivated students, and a modicum of assigned homework, insufficient total hours appear allocated to language study in tertiary institutions to bridge this gap. A self-access language facility can offer such a bridge, giving additional target language exposure and practice in a non-formal setting where students can further develop a sense of community and can learn in an experiential and social manner (Murray & Fujishima, 2013; Oblinger, 2006).

#### **Overview of the Self-Access Language Facility: English Island**

##### ***Institutional and curricular context.***

Kobe Shoin Women’s University is a small private women’s university in western Japan with various departments, including English, Japanese Language and Culture, Psychology, Child Development, and Fashion. Regarding the study program of English majors, there are two streams from first year entry. The first stream incorporates study abroad, of either one or two semesters, as an integral element. In the second stream, students may opt to apply for study abroad, and some do so, but it is not required. The conversation lounge discussed herein is open to students of all faculties, not just either of the two streams of English majors.

The self-access facility was established in 1986, to offer extra speaking practice for students. We are told the lounge was named ‘*English Island*’ to present a distinction from the routine and formality of the regular English curriculum classes. The room has magazines for students to borrow and read, but the main activity of the lounge is that of English conversation, which takes place around a centrally situated large round coffee table – a round table being the optimal shape for facilitating conversation (Taylor, 2014). English Island is open from 10:40 am until 2:40 pm on

weekdays, during the teaching semester. There is no reservation necessary, and students are free to visit the lounge at any time it is open and to stay as long as they wish. Students are also welcome to eat and drink in the lounge. The facility is staffed by eight 'native' English speakers who are full-time faculty, part-time university teachers, or teachers recruited to work only at the facility.

### **Tips for Optimizing Student Attendance and Participation**

#### ***A deliberate decision to change: Focusing on boosting numbers***

In Academic Year 2015-16, student attendance numbers at the self-access conversation lounge, English Island, increased by 69% on the previous year, as can be seen in Figure 1, due to various interventions by the coordinators.

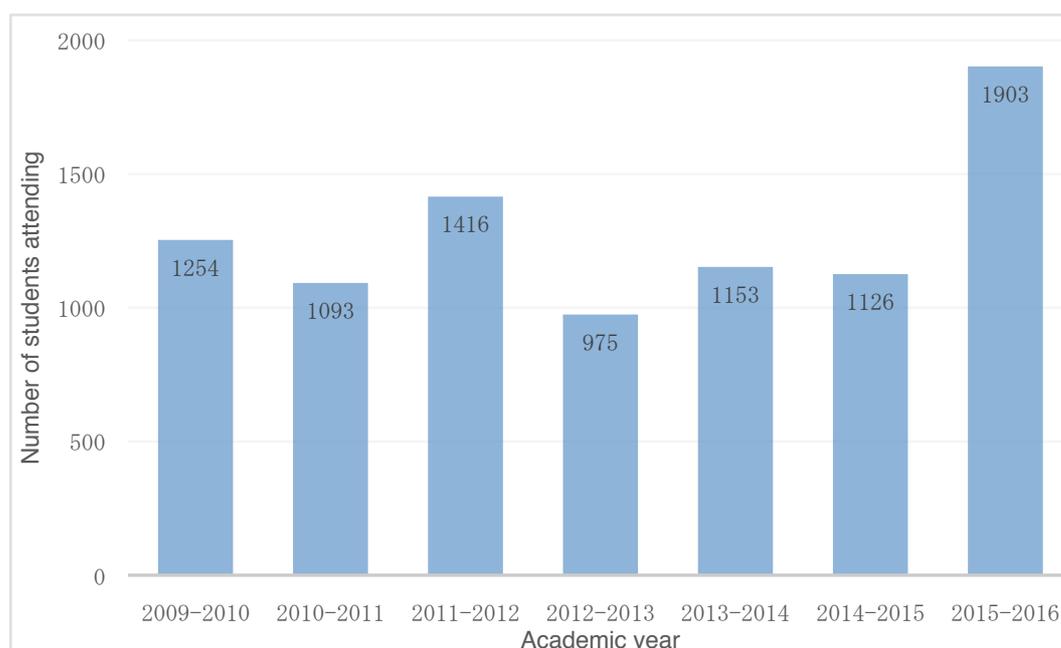


Figure 1. Total Number of Attendees in English Island in an Academic Year

Here it is necessary to note the internal budgeting reality that has informed the recent push by coordinators to improve attendance. In order to retain university funding for English Island, the staff responsible need to justify the use of the lounge in terms of student attendance numbers. However, other than 2011-12 when attendance was mandated, numbers appeared low. Therefore, in order to be assured of retaining funding for the facility and continue offering students the benefits of the necessary extra language practice, enhanced by group interactions (Bygate, 1988;

Pica & Doughty, 1985), peer support, and role models (Murphey, 1998; Ruddick & Nadasdy, 2013), coordinating staff felt a need to increase attendance numbers.

### ***Identifying the issues***

Students were surveyed in two first-year English classes in 2015 to try to identify reasons for non-attendance at the self-access lounge. Students noted two key issues: firstly, many students claimed they did not know where the lounge was; secondly, students expressed a lack of confidence as English speakers and thought they needed to have high existing levels of communicative ability before they could go to the lounge.

How then to address these two issues - to raise awareness of English Island and to encourage students to attend for the first time, particularly those with lower levels of speaking proficiency?

### ***Promotion of location on campus***

The conversation lounge is located on the ground floor, next to the main path in the center of a relatively small campus. The facility was initially positioned on the fifth floor of one of the classroom blocks but was moved five years ago, in 2011, in an effort to make it more visible and easily accessible for students. However, as noted above, some students still did not know the location of the lounge. This feedback encouraged facilitating staff to try to improve marketing, via improved communications, campus tours (which from 2015 are now part of the syllabus for all first year students), and events. It should also be noted that the visible location helped students to remember the location once introduced. As such, we assert that while even a highly visible location still requires marketing to promote awareness of the location on campus, an easily accessible location certainly helps to complement this.

### ***Teaching staff***

The teaching roster in English Island is balanced amongst full-time faculty, part-time teachers, and teachers who only work in the conversation lounge. Though there remains an institutional requirement to use some full-time faculty, there is some flexibility, and in 2015 the coordinator opted to move toward using more part-time teaching staff within English Island.

New English Island staff are native English speakers and experienced language teachers with at least an undergraduate degree. The majority have a Masters degree. In hiring and in scheduling staff, the more recent emphasis since 2015 has been on people skills rather than on qualifications or obligation. New hires are provided with an orientation by the English Island coordinator, wherein the typical happenings, including likely numbers and levels, are explained. Two aspects are emphasized: the purpose of the facility and the non-formal approach utilized in order to build an atmosphere separate to that of the students' formal studies.

This recent staff adjustment and hiring of part-time teachers for English Island sessions appears to have had a significant impact on increasing participation. For example, one time slot covered by a new teacher saw an increase from 51 participants in 2014 to 150 in 2015. Overall, we suggest that staff who may be perceived by prospective participants as approachable, amiable, and easy to talk to are needed in conversation lounges such as English Island. The choice of teachers is fundamental in terms of attracting and retaining students.

### ***Marketing and communicating facility and events: Multiple modalities***

Events can be an effective strategy in introducing the lounge to students as potential attendees, and we have sought to improve marketing of the facility and of events since 2015. Typical cultural events such as Halloween and Christmas parties are now advertised three ways: via internal mail, posters, and digital screens around the campus.

Regarding internal mail, students are sent emails several days in advance to give initial notice of the event, with a follow-up reminder sent on the morning of the event. Reminders are sent in simple English, with a Japanese version below.

Hard copy posters for events are placed on faculty noticeboards around the campus, plus one in English Island itself. From 2015, a digital version was also posted on several screens around campus, which display revolving ads of campus events and activities.

### ***Advertising the facility schedule and teachers***

For regular conversation sessions, posters are displayed around the university with a photo of each teacher in the appropriate session time, as well as the national flag of each teacher's home country. A box of flyers is also included next to the

posters. Flyers are also handed out to all new first year students, in their first English class. Noting the data on respective time slots across the years, we suggest that the relationship between particular students and teachers can have a strong impact on when and how often certain students attend regular sessions. For this reason, we assert it is beneficial to retain a fixed schedule for teachers across the academic year.

### ***Getting students in***

Prior to the 2015 changes, other attempts had been made in order to increase attendance at the lounge. Notably, mandated attendance at English Island was tried in Academic Year 2011-2012. While mandating attendance did raise bare numbers, as can be seen in Figure 1 (1093 in 2010-11 to 1416 in 2011-12), teachers complained that a number of students only came to fulfill attendance requirements, did not speak in English, and never returned. Teacher feedback indicated this to be detrimental to efforts to stimulate conversation, demotivating for other students, and harmful for teacher morale. This feedback from our staff accords with the findings of Chung (2013), who notes that students forced to attend self-access centers to fulfill class requirements did not feel motivated to continue attending after the course was finished, and of Adamson, Brown, and Fujimoto-Adamson (2012), who noted that when attendance is mandated, students liken it to homework, are less motivated, and no longer attend once the obligation is removed.

Plainly, it is not enough just to get students through the door. There must also be willing participation - and our view is that mandating fails in this regard. Thus, a way to motivate students to attend voluntarily is needed. A focus of recent social events has thus been to motivate students to attend regular sessions of their own volition through initial participation and enjoyment of these events.

In order to try further to encourage attendance at regular sessions, teachers from various session times and days throughout the week are encouraged by coordinators to attend the events. Hopefully, having met a new teacher at such an event, students may feel encouraged to return during a session conducted by this teacher.

Furthermore, as previously noted, a concern expressed by students was the belief they needed to be highly competent English speakers to attend the conversation lounge. For such students, social events offer the chance to observe the varying levels of English practiced at English Island by all students at the university, and to note that

the facility is not just for the more capable senior students after studying abroad, but for all. Additionally, the mix of students at events offers lower level (and often younger) students encounters and interaction with Near Peer Role Models (NPRMs), who can be effective in helping to motivate students and perhaps challenge any current beliefs they may have about their current and future potential L2 selves (Murphey, 1998; Ruddick & Nadasdy, 2013).

However, there remains still the possibility that lower level students may feel intimidated in encounters with more fluent peers. Thus, to ensure that a supportive and inclusive atmosphere for students of all levels is consistently promoted, teachers are oriented to pay particular attention to welcoming, speaking with, and supporting the speaking attempts of new groups of attendees (new students usually attend in pairs and/or small groups) at an appropriate English level at these events and in regular sessions.

### ***Student newcomers: understanding peripheral participation and first-timer nerves***

During regular conversation sessions we suggest that it is helpful for the teacher to be flexible in regards to levels of student participation, and coordinators emphasize this when orienting new staff. In order for newcomer students to feel comfortable and hopefully wish to return again, students are welcomed, and a few simple questions are directed to them to show interest. It is understandable that new attendees may just mostly listen, and perhaps give a few brief answers. While students can be lightly encouraged to participate, we suggest it is important that students are not forced to speak. This accords with Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of 'Legitimate Peripheral Participation', where any newcomer naturally starts on the edge of an event or situation, then, with steadily increasing familiarity, practice, and confidence, moves more centrally within a situation, offering heightened participation. As students leave, we also suggest that teachers thank students for joining, and encourage them to attend again.

### ***Keeping things relaxed and supportive***

Where the environment of a self-access lounge is as relaxed as possible, students are likely to be more willing to communicate (Krashen, 1982). As Noguchi (2015) suggested, students may be more comfortable speaking English in self-access centers than regular classrooms. The authors suggest that the 'teacher' in the room

adjusts their approach from that of a regular class teacher and leader to that of friendly and supportive facilitator. Such adjusted behaviors should work toward reducing the student-teacher power differential, something that Japanese students may be particularly culturally sensitive of (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Chua, 1988), and which may cause a reluctance to interact even in what teachers and administrators may assume to be a ‘relaxed’ setting, but which students themselves may adjudge otherwise.

Regarding topics of conversation, while it is always useful for teachers to take in a couple of discussion topics, we have found that often the most fruitful conversations, containing multiple turns from the most interlocutors, tend to grow organically from the students’ own interests and experiences, and in particular, as Murray and Fujishima (2013) reported, that self-access lounges allow more experienced students to share their overseas language learning experiences, as well as offer advice on job hunting and future career choices to less experienced students.

### ***Managing conversation: Balancing flow and correction***

There are several issues for teachers to note when attempting to facilitate communication, particularly with low-level language learners. Noting that students join tertiary institutions after experiencing language classes that remain on a grammar-translation approach, often to the detriment of spoken communicative ability (Honna, 2008), little can be taken for granted in terms of students’ ability to converse in the target language. Due to a relative lack of unstructured spoken practice, students may also lack confidence in engaging in any non-formulaic way. Thus, there is a balance for teachers to strike: supporting language output of some lower level students by not correcting too much, which may discourage and demotivate, while pushing more fluent speakers to speak more.

Furthermore, as language learners’ interlanguage shifts between stages of development, grammatical errors tend to increase as the need to experiment and restructure their increasing language knowledge grows (Selinker, 1972; Selinker, 1992). Therefore, in general, unless a student explicitly asks for assistance or intelligibility for the group breaks down excessively, we suggest that the flow of conversation not be interrupted. Additionally, other students can be actively encouraged to help each other when needed, instead of the ‘teacher’ jumping in to correct and help. Hopefully, this allows the more capable students to showcase their

knowledge, thus enhancing their motivation, whilst offering role models of successful language learners to those less experienced.

### **Suggestions and Advice**

This paper has described the English conversation lounge at one university in Japan. The need for the provision of extra language exposure in tertiary institutions is clear, but persuading more students to take advantage can be a challenge. As described within this paper, the number of students attending the self-access center increased by 69% over a one-year period. This was achieved mainly by increasing the publicity and by a judicious use of staff, notably hiring part-time teachers to also work in English Island.

We consider that the most important factor has been the staff working in the conversation center. Teachers are able to advertise the lounge with their own students and attract users by forming friendly relationships and encouraging students to return to subsequent sessions. To aid this, the coordinators of self-access lounges should prepare regular schedules of staff, clearly advertised throughout the institution, preferably with photographs and some introduction of the teachers. We suggest that when choosing staff to work in the center, the emphasis should be on people skills (relaxed, supportive, friendly, patient) not qualifications, while duly noting institutional minimal requirements.

The authors feel these changes have made a large contribution to the recent success in persuading students to enter the lounge for the first time, and in ensuring that the initial learner experience is sufficiently non-stressful, engaging, and fun so that students may be keen to return again and again.

### **Notes on the contributors**

Simon Bibby is a faculty member at Kobe Shoin Women's University. He qualified as an ICT teacher, then gained an MA in Educational Technology and TESOL, and is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Liverpool. His main theoretical and practical interests include effective use of educational technologies for language learning and using literature in language classes.

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Frances Shiobara is Assistant Professor at Kobe Shoin Women's University. She has been the coordinator of the conversation lounge since 2014. She received her M.Ed. from Temple University Japan and is now a doctoral candidate at the University of Liverpool. Her research interests are mobile learning and English education for young learners.

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