The Need for Establishing an English Self-Access Center at Osaka University: Practical Suggestions and Guidelines

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Abstract

As part of a PhD project, an in-depth needs analysis was carried out to assess the English language needs and difficulties of undergraduate Japanese EFL learners at Osaka University. The results were primarily intended to guide the design and development of an online English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) course. The findings further revealed a pressing need for launching and maintaining self-access language learning facilities which could provide learners with independent and semi-guided learning opportunities addressing their needs and interests. In this paper, the importance of establishing a self-access language learning center at Osaka University will be proposed with the goal of fostering learner autonomy. In fulfilling this objective, practical suggestions and overall guidelines will be outlined based on a number of language learning center observations in Japan. It is hoped that this writing will serve as a stimulus to strengthen the status of English language teaching at Osaka University.

Keywords: self-access language learning (SALL), self-access language learning center (SALLC), needs analysis

Self-Access Language Learning Centers (SALLCs)

Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) is an individualized form of learning which can take place within a variety of settings ranging from controlled (e.g., classrooms) to uncontrolled (e.g., cafeterias) learning environments (Gardner & Miller, 1999; 2011). Centers for providing SALL opportunities, known as Self-Access Language Learning Centers (SALLCs), have been, and continue to be, established over years around the world to empower students by helping them experience autonomous, independent, self-directed, and flexible learning. Numerous studies on SALL (to name a few, Gardner & Miller, 1997; Koyalan, 2009) have indicated that students learn best through the self-access mode anywhere, anytime, anyhow, at their own pace and convenience.

SALLCs have traditionally been regarded as physical spaces with language learning resources which can be accessed by learners (e.g., Sheerin, 1989). However, their physical...
boundaries are far more difficult to identify with the incorporation of digital technology breaking the barriers of time and space as well as the integration of self-access learning into formal courses (Gardner, 2011).

Reinders (2012) has pointed out a number of misconceptions surrounding SALLCs and their features and functions. First, SALLCs are different from teacher-centered language labs or specialized libraries in that although they contain a large bulk of resources, they place more emphasis upon supporting the learning process rather than solely providing information. Another misconception about self-access language learning is that it is identical to self-study. Despite the indubitable fact that individual learning plays a pivotal role in this process, most SALLCs provide ample opportunities for individual and collaborative learning experiences.

SALLCs serve a complementary, rather than alternative, function (Gardner & Miller, 1999). According to Ingram (2001), these centers are not directly involved with the development of language education policy since policy choices often tend to be shaped by governments or ministries of higher education. Such centers also function independently and have no intention of replacing foreign language departments which are in charge of offering credit courses as mandated by curriculum. In fact, the institutions of higher education establish SALLCs in order to enhance the efficiency of their language education. In such cases, there is a tendency on the part of those institutions to detach themselves from traditional approaches (e.g., the grammar-translation method) so as to place more emphasis on developing higher levels of linguistic and cultural proficiency as well as to ensure career success through focusing on vocational language skills. Such a strategy oftentimes aids foreign language departments in pursuing academic, curriculum-based goals while helping students practice their language skills beyond the borders of the classroom through accessing SALLCs.

**SALLCs in Japanese Higher Education**

SALLCs have been set up in universities all over Japan in recent years. The Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) has been remarkably active in encouraging and sustaining SALL and learner autonomy in Japan since 2005 by supporting SALL projects and organizing self-access related discussion groups, events, talks, and conferences. Moreover, *SiSAL Journal* (Studies in Self-Access Learning) began publishing quarterly in 2010 through the SALC at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), Chiba, Japan (http://www.kandagaigo.ac.jp/kuis/salc/index.html). This center has been a pioneering leader.
in lifelong language learner autonomy over a decade in Japan and is regarded as one of “the most effective” SALLCs (Hill & Tomlinson, 2013, p. 434). As Mach (2015) remarks, SALLCs are now highly prevalent among Japanese universities with a range of facilities from least resourced to best resourced as universities compete hard for attracting students whose number has been dropping year by year in present Japan.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the benefits yielded by SALLCs within Japanese universities, the researchers visited a number of such centers including the ones at Kindai University (formerly known as Kinki University), Tamagawa University, Kwansei Gakuin University, Ritsumeikan University, and Kobe College. In what follows, the diversity of resources and the modes of support provided by SALLCs at Kindai University and Tamagawa University are described in detail due to their prominence in Japan.

**Kindai University English Village**

The English Village (Eigo Mura, 英語村), also known as E³ (e-cube), was established in 2006 at the university’s main campus located in Osaka (http://www.kindai.ac.jp/e-cube/). The center is said to have an average of 700 student visits per day. Apart from ensuring access to learning resources which is typical of SALLCs, E³ regularly organizes various seasonal activities to further engage learners, such as cultural events about different countries and holding parties. There is also a basketball court and a café as part of E³ so as to immerse the students into an interactive English-only environment.

All the first-year undergraduate students at Kindai University are obliged to visit E³ at least four times within a year to get the required stamps on their passports (Figure 1). There are other rewards and badges given to the students to encourage them to visit the center, for instance getting a stamp known as a visa by talking to native speaking teachers for ten minutes. Although the SALLC at Kanda University has a more consolidated status in terms of research robustness and expertise, the English Village at Kindai University has also been frequently featured in the media and press.
The Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF) at Tamagawa University in Tokyo ([http://www.tamagawa.ac.jp/celf/](http://www.tamagawa.ac.jp/celf/)) is in charge of providing campus-wide English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) programs for most of the departments at this university. In a building known as “ELF Study Hall 2015”, the students have access to modern facilities such as the Active Learning Zone and the Self Study Zone (the hyperlinks show the 360° panoramic view of the two zones). In addition, the instructors at this center are from various L1 backgrounds, which is aimed at exposing students to world Englishes. There is also a quotation by Widdowson on one of the walls of the Self Study Zone further highlighting the importance of learning ELF (Figure 2).

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**Figure 1. The Village E³ (e-cube) Passport Cover Page**

**Figure 2. Tamagawa University Self Study Zone | Photo Taken by the Researchers**
The Scenario at Osaka University

As part of a PhD project on designing, developing, and implementing an EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes) online course targeting Japanese undergraduate students, the researchers conducted interviews with several English language instructors and policy makers to investigate the challenges of English language teaching at Osaka University. The interviewees were asked about the types of extra-curricular activities or programs designed to support the students with limited English proficiency. Content analysis of the interviews revealed that there is no SALLC at Osaka University where students could foster their language skills beyond the borders of the classroom. There are, however, some programs to help students mainly with academic English and occasionally with conversational English which are described below:

Academic English Support Desk

Multilingual Expert Program (MLE), supported by the departments of humanities at Osaka University, offers various programs for 24 languages. With regard to the English language, MLE started the Academic English Support Desk Program (Figure 3) in 2015 to enhance students’ academic presentation and writing skills. Students can individually consult with a native speaker to improve their academic performance.

Figure 3. Academic English Support Desk, Osaka University
(source: http://www.mle.osaka-u.ac.jp/event/en_trial_suita_toyonaka.pdf)

Language Support Desk

The Center for International Affairs (CIA) at the Graduate School of Engineering, Osaka University has initiated a program entitled “Language Support Desk” (ランゲージサポートデスク) (Figure 4), which offers free English support to undergraduate and graduate
students of the School of Engineering. The activities of this center range from helping students in writing essays and articles, making PowerPoint slides, giving academic presentations and responding to questions, to improving their conversational and academic spoken English skills. CIA also holds English Movie Cafés once a week, open to all Osaka University students.

Test preparation

Test preparation activities such as “IELTS One-day Seminar” (Figure 5) are often organized at Osaka University to familiarize students with different English language proficiency tests and provide them with the necessary tools and test-taking strategies to maximize their scores.

Figure 4. Language Support Desk, Osaka University
(source: http://www.fsao.eng.osaka-u.ac.jp/lang/LanguageSupportDesk.pdf)

Figure 5. IELTS One-day Seminar, Osaka University
Program for strengthening professional English skills

The International Student Affairs Division, Department of Education Promotion has recently started offering free speaking-oriented “Practical English Courses” (実践英語力強化講座) (Figure 6) for specific purposes covering social sciences, humanities, foreign studies, business communication, and medical sciences, in collaboration with Eiken Foundation of Japan and British Council. The courses provide opportunities for students to develop and strengthen their understanding of technical terminology and usage. “Study Abroad Preparation with Aptis” is another course with an emphasis on effective communication, preparing students to communicate confidently and efficiently in English when studying abroad and to perform successfully in the Aptis English test.

Figure 6. Program for Strengthening Professional English Skills, Practical English Courses, Osaka University
(source: http://www.osaka-u.ac.jp/ja/news/event/2016/02/files/20160217_11)

English Café

The Center for Education in Liberal Arts and Sciences (CELAS) has been organizing English Café (Figure 7) to help Japanese students practice their speaking skills at lunchtimes by creating a space where Japanese and international students can talk to each other in English about topics of their own interest in a casual environment. Apart from English, CELAS also holds similar cafés for other languages such as French, Spanish, German, Chinese, and Korean.
Figure 7. Multilingual Café, Osaka University  

**Tandem Learning Project**

Tandem Learning Project (タンデム学習プロジェクト) is run by the Faculty of Letters through a Facebook page (Figure 8), yet not limited to its students. The participants are paired up with a language partner who is a native or proficient speaker of the language they want to learn, which creates opportunities for mutual language exchange in a structured way.

![Facebook post from Osaka U Tandem](https://www.facebook.com/OsakaUTandem/?fref=ts)

Figure 8. Tandem Learning Project, Osaka University  
(source: [https://www.facebook.com/OsakaUTandem/?fref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/OsakaUTandem/?fref=ts))

**Others**

The Center for the Advancement of Research and Education Exchange Networks in Asia (CAREN) and the Center for International Education and Exchange (CIEE) have held speech contests in English to encourage Japanese students to practice public speaking. In the last English speech contest (2016), for instance, the student participants were requested to
speak for five minutes about their ideas on how to help Osaka University shine on the international stage (Figure 9).

![SPEECH CONTEST IN ENGLISH](image)

**Figure 9. CAREN Speech Contest in English 2016, Osaka University**
(source: [https://goo.gl/dPiVRD](https://goo.gl/dPiVRD))

Furthermore, the Education Planning Division also announced a call for ideas to improve the English proficiency of Osaka University students (Figure 10). The ideas collected through this initiative were open to public comments at the time of preparing this manuscript.

![Call for Ideas](image)

**Figure 10. Call for Ideas to Improve English at Osaka University**
(source: [http://www.fbs.osaka-u.ac.jp/jpn/board/docs/英語力強化ポスター.pdf](http://www.fbs.osaka-u.ac.jp/jpn/board/docs/英語力強化ポスター.pdf))
Practical Suggestions and Overall Guidelines

The following are some suggestions and guidelines for the establishment of a SALLC that have emerged from the researchers’ SALLC visits and from the literature in the form of general and specific principles.

Cooker (2010) has identified a number of general principles associated with creating and maintaining SALLCs. First, SALLCs should be truly self-accessed, meaning that students should be allowed to access them on a voluntary basis rather than as part of their course of study. The second principle concerns involving learners in administrative roles, serving as a bridge between the student population and SALLC staff. Thirdly, fun and edutainment should be an integral feature of SALLCs due to the voluntary nature of self-access. Finally, the learning environment should be relaxing and visually appealing.

A set of more specific principles should be kept in mind in designing, managing, resourcing, and running a SALLC as discussed below.

Environment

The environment of a SALLC should be ambient so that students feel safe, relaxed, and comfortable to learn. Therefore, the physical layout, décor, furnishings, and amenities of the learning spaces are of utmost importance. To create an enticing atmosphere, it is typical to install a café or lounge style area within a SALLC. Dedicated learning spaces such as listening and speaking booths, study cubicles for individual or group learning, and reading and writing areas are recommended for a SALLC. It is worth noting that the geographic location of the center is also important to assure the ease of access (Mach, 2015).

Management

Successful management of a SALLC involves planning, efficient staffing, organizing extensive training, and managing human and physical resources. The manager is responsible for advancing the ultimate goal of a SALLC which is maximizing opportunities for autonomous learning. A veteran SALLC manager engages with various components including learners, teachers, materials, activities, equipment, and the learning environment (Gardner, 2011).
Facilities

Self-access materials should serve learners’ needs, interests, and wants and provide them with more than what they receive from their credit courses (e.g., more variety, feedback, individual support). Self-access materials should also help learners become autonomous in order to be able to learn and discover the language independent of the materials. Moreover, self-access materials should be access-self meaning that learners should be involved as human beings, that is, their individuality should be taken into account in the learning process. Feedback should be provided in detail far more than answer keys as well. Furthermore, the tasks should be authentic and realistic. It is worth mentioning that students should be aware of what is available to them and how to access materials easily by being notified through promotional posters, catalogues, text messages, etc. In addition, a number of context-specific principles, for instance, age, gender, levels (Common European Framework of Reference can be a good standard), language learning purposes, and attitudes to SALL, should be considered (Tomlinson, 2010).

Among the facilities that can be offered at a SALLC especially in the context of Japan to gear to learners’ interests are the following: Graded readers and audio books for extensive reading, exam preparation shelves such as TOEIC sample tests, magazines and translated English manga (Japanese comic books), movies and translated English anime (Japanese movie and television animation), music (karaoke boxes), games (edutainment booths), and so forth. CALL resources such as online sessions via Skype and Web 2.0 tools, as recommended by Kershaw et al. (2010), can be utilized, too. Language consulting services can be delivered online or onsite as well. The center can also arrange social events to increase interaction among the learners.

Pedagogical practices

Training learners (Gardner, 2001) for autonomy and independence is by far one of the most important pedagogical practices of any SALLC. Learners, in particular those with little experience in utilizing self-access materials, should be trained on how to make the best use of such resources. Moreover, teaching learners about study skills, language learning strategies, web searching tips, as well as self-assessment techniques enables them to further enhance their autonomous learning abilities. Integrating successful learning approaches such as collaborative, project-based learning could also help learners through the provision of scaffolding and peer support as they attempt to learn the target language by performing real-world tasks.
Looking Forward

SALLCs have a long tradition in institutes of higher education worldwide and in Japan. However, their mere presence cannot be the key to fostering self-directed learning. Training thus plays a pivotal role in assisting learners to take maximum advantage of self-access language learning materials. The administrators in charge of SALLCs are expected to provide resources and services matching students’ needs and demands through conducting ongoing needs analyses. Finally, as remarked by Jones (1995), since autonomy is heavily influenced by cultural values, every SALLC should design its facilities and services with a full knowledge of its users and their cultural and educational backgrounds.

Osaka University, nonetheless, has not yet established its own SALLC, and the English support available to the students (explicated in Section 3) is not systematic or sustainable. Consequently, there is a strongly felt need for establishing a SALLC at this university, and the authors hope that this writing could act as an incentive for the university officials to fulfill this need.

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