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Abstract

This paper explores expanding a self-access language learning desk online. In 2017, Osaka University's Center for International Affairs expanded its Language Support Desk to allow students from different campuses to access its services via online synchronous language support sessions that mimic the in-person ones. While there is an abundance of resources available to students online through online writing labs and online writing centers, most of these services only consist of reference materials with no option for advising or language teaching. Furthermore, the few universities that offer language learning services usually implement an asynchronous system through a delayed medium such as email. In this paper, we describe the implementation of online sessions at Osaka University and highlight issues and opportunities for the future based on our experience and observations.

Keywords: Self-Access Language Centers, CALL, synchronous support, conferencing, Self-Access Language Learning

Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is now urging Japan universities to create programs that develop 'global citizens' to meet the demands of today's international world. To accomplish this, English communication abilities are essential for participating in collaborative research and global dialogs. However, the country consistently ranks at the bottom in English proficiency despite students undergoing years of English coursework in middle and high school (Murai, 2016). Particularly, Japanese students have been deemed 'false starters' because they have an imbalance of fundamental English competencies (Small, 2017). For example, research has shown a large gap between Japanese students' English writing skills when they graduate from high school and the expected English proficiency level required for university academic writing (Murray, 2015). By gaining support for improving their English skills, students can be motivated to be confident and positive towards global interactions.

Students at Osaka University are encouraged to increase their English competencies by writing their theses in English and participating in international conferences and exchanges. In this regard, the Center for International Affairs within the Graduate School of Engineering is responsible for coordinating interactions for its students and more than 500 incoming international students. Part of our goal at the Center is to prepare students for international opportunities by assisting them with their English communication skills.

In 2014, the Center established the Language Support Desk, a self-access language learning (SALL) service that offers sessions in writing, speaking, and presentations (Figure 1). Additional information regarding the desk's establishment can be seen in Nakahashi and Andersson (2017), as well as significant changes that it underwent in Andersson and Nakahashi (2017).

Figure 1. Language Support Desk

The Language Support Desk currently is staffed by four teachers: one full-time assistant professor who manages operations and conducts the writing and presentation sessions, and three part-time employees that teach the conversation sessions. The desk is open Monday through Friday five hours a day, allowing a maximum of 25 sessions per week lasting 45 minutes each. Students can autonomously make or manage their reservations online through Coubic (Figure 2), the booking system we use to manage appointments.

Figure 2. Online Booking Site

Attendance at the desk is completely voluntary in that we do not require students to participate and no extra credit or other incentives are offered. Our advertising efforts are also minimal and mostly consist of word-of-mouth referrals, or advertising on the in-campus bulletin board or university email mailing list. Despite this, we have managed to consecutively increase our annual sessions and we are not able to offer enough sessions to meet the demand.

The original purpose of the desk was to assist students within our campus mainly consisting of students in engineering or technical majors. However, as our desk became popular, we began receiving requests for language support from students at different campuses. Since Osaka University is divided into three isolated campuses, simply expanding our in-person sessions was not a plausible solution. Thompson (2014) indicates that geographical location plays an important role in determining the success of Self-Access Language Centers (SALCs) and we wanted to offer students a convenient medium. Therefore, in 2017, we decided to expand the services online.

We will next explain the relevant literature on synchronous versus asynchronous online sessions, followed by a description of the implementation of the online sessions along with demographic and survey results for a full school year. The paper will conclude with an

analysis of observations along with mention of issues encountered and opportunities for the future.

Background

Online writing centers, OWLs, and online SALCs

Many universities offer online English guidance consisting of writing support through online writing labs (OWLs) and, therefore, most relevant research focuses on OWLs. Furthermore, most of these services only offer online writing resources with no option for advising or language teaching (Denekamp, 2016). Besides writing services, we are not aware of any relevant studies outlining attempts to provide online conversation or presentation services.

Some universities have established online consultation for goal-setting. The University of Helsinki, for example, has an online consultation program called Kaleidoscope that allows students to assess their current needs, skills, motivation, personality, and learning history to reflect on their own language studies (von Boehm & Kidd, 2012). Additionally, Toogood, Ho, Pemberton, and Jones (2004) discussed the creation of a virtual English language assistance (VELA) system that mimics the key features found in the initial consultation between advisers and learners. Through this service, learners work with a virtual assistant to identify specific language learning problems and to receive a plan for improving their English learning, critical thinking, and ability to take responsibility.

All online writing centers require a platform for receiving students' writing and sending feedback. Neaderhiser and Wolfe (2009) indicated that most writing centers do not adequately utilize available technologies for consultation, and at the most rudimentary level, consultation can be accomplished through email exchange. However, as seen in Rosalia (2013), some online writing centers utilize web-based tools such as Drupal or Google Apps, while others design their own webpage using a Learning Management System such as Moodle. Among the select few OWLs that provide online consultation, approximately 90% of them consist of asynchronous (as opposed to synchronous) support usually through email communication (Neaderhiser & Wolfe, 2009).

Synchronous versus asynchronous support

When universities decide to offer online language support services, they must choose to conduct the sessions either synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous sessions are also known as conferencing, and the sessions take place simultaneously with the instructor

and student in a way that mimics in-person interaction. Conversely, asynchronous support requires the students to submit their writing work beforehand and have the instructor respond typically within a couple of days with comments.

There are advantages and disadvantages to implementing both systems. Neaderhiser and Wolfe (2009) pointed out that asynchronous sessions can be limiting given that both parties cannot talk freely through uninterrupted dialogue. Furthermore, Weigle and Nelson (2004) proposed that online conferencing might be more fruitful. Synchronous sessions also allow faster interaction and immediate feedback and checking (Denekamp, 2016). In this way, instructors can promote students to interact more with comments, collaboration, and interaction while creating an overall authentic experience. Any confusing points can also be quickly addressed and clarified.

Asynchronous support, on the other hand, has been shown to allow students to address and easily check writing corrections while encouraging them to make several more revisions (Denekamp, 2016). The biggest advantage, however, is the time delay which encourages students to spend more time working on their writing with less pressure. According to Thornton and Mynard (2012), “written comments from an advisor allow learners to digest the feedback at their own pace... and to think deeply about what has been written before responding” (p. 137). The students experience less stress and have more time for reflection, metacognition, and critical thinking. Additionally, the time delay also benefits the advisors because they can have adequate time to respond and provide feedback in the most appropriate manner.

Conversely, the biggest advantage of asynchronous support is also its greatest weakness. According to Denekamp (2016), the time delay can make it difficult to clarify any confusing points. Appropriate response times can also be difficult to uphold if the instructors are overloaded with work. Finally, some students may be less encouraged to use the services more than once on a given paper, making the interaction closer to proofreading than reflective dialogue.

Implementation of the Online Services

In reaching a decision regarding expanding our desk, we decided to implement synchronous sessions for the following two reasons. First, we felt it would be impossible to conduct the conversation and presentation sessions asynchronously as they would require immediate interaction. Second, while we could have chosen asynchronous sessions for writing support, we wanted to mimic the in-person interaction that students experienced in

our face-to-face sessions and take advantage of the abovementioned benefits of synchronous sessions. By keeping the in-person and online sessions consistent, it was easier overall to manage and execute.

Given that the desk already had an online booking system, incorporating the online sessions was a relatively straightforward task. We simply duplicated the three reservation options (writing, conversation, presentations) to allow students to choose either in-person or online sessions (Figure 3). The timing of the online sessions remained at 45 minutes with 15 minutes of transition time. For survey-taking, we previously had a paper version of the sign-in sheet and exit questionnaire. We digitized these forms for both the in-person and online sessions by creating Google Forms surveys.

Figure 3. The Updated Reservation site

When choosing the conferencing software, we decided to use Skype due to several benefits. First, Skype is the most popular conferencing software and many students are already familiar with it. Additionally, students can join the sessions using only an internet browser and do not need to install the software or register an account. Finally, Skype allows students to join the Language Support chatroom using only an internet URL. When students make an appointment, a confirmation email is sent to them with the link. Students click the link at the time of the appointment and will be brought into the appropriate room.

For the writing and presentation sessions, the instructor shares their computer screen with the students to work on their documents together (Figure 4). In this way, the instructor has full control of the editing process. As with the in-person sessions, students have the option of emailing us their documents several days in advance.

Figure 4. Example of a Synchronous Writing Session with Screen Sharing

Results for the Online Sessions

We collected the online results of a full school year from April 2018 to March 2019. The desk had approximately 650 total sessions (Figure 5), which was a consecutive increase from the previous years. Of the total sessions, approximately 22% were online (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Total Number of Sessions (including in-person and online)

Figure 6. Session Type

To measure the demographics of students and their level of satisfaction, we collected sign-in surveys at the beginning of sessions and an exit survey questionnaires after the sessions. Since the focus of this paper is on the online sessions, the following data will mostly pertain to this.

As Table 1 shows, almost half of the sessions included Ph.D. students, while more than a third of the sessions consisted of Bachelor students. The average TOEIC score for all students was exceptionally high at 876.92 out of a maximum of 990. This well exceeds the expected average for employment opportunities in Japan of 565 (Murai, 2016).

Table 1

Total Students Attending Online Sessions

Student Type	Percentage (rounded)
Bachelor Students	35%
Master Students	17%
Ph.D. Students	48%

Table 2 breaks down the students' majors as a percentage of the total number of online sessions. The majority of the sessions included students from non-technical majors. We believe this is because students in technical degrees would most likely be in closer proximity to our office and would, therefore, elect to do in-person sessions. Most students conducted the online sessions while at the other campuses, while a few were in different countries on temporary exchanges.

Table 2

Percentage of Online Total Sessions

Students' Major	Percentage (rounded)
Technical major	21%
Non-technical major	79%

Regarding the type of sessions that students booked, it was almost split equally between conversation and writing sessions; presentation sessions only occupied a small fraction of the overall online sessions (Table 3).

Table 3

Online Session Type

Session Type	Percentage (rounded)
Conversation	48%
Writing	50%
Presentation	2%

The type of online session that students sought is shown in Table 4. A large number of sessions included preparation for English proficiency examinations and assistance with writing essays. There were also several students who wanted to improve their general daily conversation skills or receive assistance in applying for international study abroad and internship programs.

Table 4

Students' Goal for the Online Sessions

Type of session desired	Percentage (rounded)
Daily Conversation Practice	12%
English Test Preparation (TOEFL, IELTS, etc.)	30%
Research Proposal	7%
Application Form (study abroad, internships, etc.)	9%
Practicing English for Work and Research	7%
Essay/Paper	30%
Translation Tasks	2%
Native Check for English Manuscript	2%

When asked how students learned about the online services, most answered that they were referred by word-of-mouth by a friend or heard about the services through the university mailing system (Table 5). Other means of knowing about the desk were marginal.

Table 5

How Students Learned About the Online Sessions

Type of referral	Percentage (rounded)
University Mailing System	42%
Word-of-mouth referral from a friend	48%
Brochure	6%
Learned about it from a professor	3%

In the exit survey, students were asked three questions regarding their feelings towards being able to achieve their intended objective during the online session (Figure 7). The questions were on a Likert scale from 1-4, 1 being “I was able to achieve the intended goal” and 4 being “I was not able to achieve the intended goal at all”. The first question asked, “Were you able to achieve your purpose today during the session?”. The students’ average score was 1.25, indicating that most answered that they were able to achieve their intended goal. The second question asked, “Do you feel that you can improve your skills based on the advice you were given?”. Again, most of the students also answered positively with an average score of 1.375. The third question asked, “Do you want to use the desk again?”. The average score was 1.125, indicating that most intended to continue using the services.

Figure 7. Exit Questionnaire Responses

The students also had the option to write a comment on the exit survey. Most were positive messages such as “Thank you so much!! I was glad that you taught me the meaning of the word in detail! I had a good time and practiced speaking English”, “thank you for your advices”, and “thank you for nice conversation.” However, one student voiced his/her concern regarding technical issues experienced by saying “Because I couldn’t connect to the Skype link, I used my own account to do the session. I’ll update my Skype as well just in case, but if there is some way to solve this issue, please share it with me.”

Observations

Upon looking at the survey results and personal observations, we have found some noteworthy things to mention. As intended, the majority of online sessions consisted of students with non-technical majors. Our desk’s physical location is mostly in the proximity of technical departments, whereas the non-technical departments are geographically separated. Therefore, our findings indicate that, by implementing the online desk, a diverse demographic of students are now able to access our services.

Next, for the session types, the majority of the online sessions were almost equally split between conversation and writing sessions. Given that these two services were popular and the survey results were positive, we feel that they are providing value to the students. Presentations, however, were seldom reserved. We believe the low percentage may indicate that students prefer to have in-person presentation sessions to allow them to conduct authentic mock practice sessions and receive feedback on their mannerisms.

Regarding how students are learning about our online sessions, most answered that they were either referred from a friend or saw our advertisement in the university mailing system. Traditionally, students attending the in-person sessions have predominantly been referred solely through word-of-mouth. We speculate that, given the distance between the campuses and the fact that the online service is relatively new, it will initially take longer to establish word-of-mouth referrals, and the university mailing system therefore may play an important advertising role in the meantime.

Through interacting with students during the sessions, we learned that some prefer traveling to our campus rather than conducting the sessions online typically for two reasons. First, if students have difficulty connecting to the online chatroom during their first session, they sometimes choose to join in-person sessions thereafter stating that it would simply be easier for them. This appears to be especially so for students who are less proficient with technology. While Takahashi (2011) argues that Japanese youth possess some of the highest

levels of digital literacy in the world, others believe that many Japanese university students have difficulty transferring this literacy to various rudimentary aspects of operating a computer (Lockley, 2011). Indeed, as technology progresses, so does the complexity of using it.

The second reason for students opting to have in-person sessions is that some have voiced their preference for face-to-face interaction. In various aspects, conference sessions are considered inferior to face-to-face dialogue because interaction through a computer screen can seem cold, sterile, and uninviting (Martinez, 2015). In line with this, we have experienced difficulty in providing the same level of service through an online medium.

Difficulties

After our initial implementation of online sessions, we have encountered several difficulties that we wish to address. The biggest issue is that students periodically have technical issues with joining the sessions. While the process should be automatic through the booking system, we sometimes receive emails or calls to our office from students informing us that they cannot join the session for various reasons. The most frequent cause of this is from students not knowing about the joining URL link sent to them in the booking confirmation email. Students also have general issues connecting to the sessions, which are typically associated with them needing to update their internet browser or Skype application, or having general difficulties navigating computers. Admittedly, some of the issues have also been our fault when things like the audio or microphone malfunction or the link becomes outdated.

We have also had various issues using Skype as our tool for the online sessions. One of the encountered difficulties is online spam within the desk's chatroom. As mentioned above, we allow students to connect to the chatroom using only the link to increase accessibility. However, this convenience has also created a negative side effect in that we frequently get uninvited visitors from various countries sending spam messages.

Another issue is that students do not always select ideal locations to conduct the sessions. Instead, students frequently attend the sessions in noisy, public locations such as lab rooms or even cafeterias where other students can be heard chatting. Students also sometimes choose locations with poor internet connectivity. Overall, having periodic internet latency issues and interfering noise can be distracting for both parties.

As experienced with the in-person sessions, students often cancel last-minute or sometimes no-show for the online sessions. We acknowledge that some university SALCs

and writing centers have implemented policies to penalize students for missing appointments. For example, this type of policy can be seen on Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University's SALC site when students book a reservation ("SALC Facilities," n.d.). While we do not have such strict consequences for no-showing or arriving late, we have, on rare occasions, had to exclude students with reoccurring problems from using our services.

Another minor issue is when students try to book an online session and instead accidentally book an in-person session (or vice-versa). Our tutors then expect students to physically come to the office when in fact they are waiting online. While this does not cause much of a hindrance, we have had students consecutively make this mistake. We associate the cause of this problem with having almost identical booking options between in-person and online.

Opportunities for the Future

We have also identified and would like to outline several opportunities that can be implemented in the future. The biggest opportunity is to change to another conferencing program that allows us to maintain the benefits of Skype while also alleviating the mentioned downsides. Regarding the issue of spam, we would like to also use a program that allows the simplicity of joining through a URL while also allowing us more control over the type of users that are permitted to join. Even having the ability to block users from different countries would alleviate this issue.

Additionally, we would prefer a program that allows us to utilize a shared whiteboard-type where both the student and instructor can collaborate together. This would mostly benefit the writing sessions where we are currently using Skype's screen-sharing option, which gives the instructor full control over the document changes and, therefore, control over the interaction. While we ask students to make changes on their own computer to increase the interaction, we would benefit from a system that allows both users equal control over the writing process.

An example of a potential replacement for Skype might be Zoom, a conference software that has several positive features. Most importantly, Zoom allows both users to control the mouse when needed, allowing for more collaboration in the writing process. As with Skype, Zoom allows users to join sessions using a URL without the need to create an account. Separate chat rooms can be created (as opposed to our single room) at scheduled times, and students can wait in a holding room until the advisor is ready instead of needing to manually remove them after each session.

Finally, in addition to offering online synchronous sessions, we would also like to provide online reference resources to students that can be accessed 24 hours a day. As mentioned, many universities around the world offer such online resources through OWLs or online writing centers and it would be beneficial to offer them specifically made for EFL students (Thompson, 2014). Such resources can be beneficial for students' language improvement, provide a source of blended learning, and may promote students to participate in SALL services (Clifford, 2016). To accomplish this, we would need to incorporate a learning management system (LMS). Denekamp (2016, p. 53) states that by combining online sessions together with reference materials, "the LMS can furnish all the pedagogical learner supports... (including) language learning materials, learning activities, computer-mediated language advice, needs analysis tools, learning process planning tools, learner training, learning process monitoring tools, and assessment." While SALL entities that provide both synchronous sessions and online content are scarce, they nevertheless offer great potential.

Conclusion

SALCs offer students important supplemental support to refine communication abilities outside of classroom teaching, but geographical inconvenience can be excluding for some. By offering online language support in addition to in-person sessions, SALCs can include a greater proportion of their student population, especially for universities separated by multiple campuses.

Our initial implementation of synchronous online sessions has proven successful thus far in that many students from different campuses have been able to utilize the desk's services and have responded positively. While our desk's continuation is unknown at this time, we hope to eventually expand the number of available sessions as well as offer additional online resources. This would require the hiring of additional personnel and creation of an LMS system, both of which will depend on the future budget and commitment from the university.

SALCs that have an interest in starting such a service must first contemplate the pros and cons in choosing either a synchronous or asynchronous system and establish a system that fulfills their needs. We hope that more universities in Japan will offer such services to their students as a convenience that promotes inclusivity while increasing overall attendance.

Notes on the Contributors

Shawn Andersson is a Specially Appointed Assistant Professor at the Center for International Affairs, Graduate School of Engineering, Osaka University. He manages and teaches at the Language Support Desk and teaches English classes to Engineering students. His research interests include Self-Access Language Learning (SALL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and Digital Game-based Language Learning (DGBLL).

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