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Review of the Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (JASAL) 2019 National Conference: New Beginnings

Jackson Koon Yat Lee, Gifu University, Japan

Self-access language learning is a new term that I learned in the past couple of years, despite having been participating actively in two self-access facilities for years. When the current JASAL President, Clair Taylor invited me to join the association and take part in the annual conference, the academic world of self-access suddenly opened up to me, and it felt fresh yet familiar. Since I receive no research funding from my non-researching position, the generous support of the Newcomer Grant from JASAL allowed me to be a part of the JASAL 2019 national conference as both an attendee and a presenter.

At my current university, I have been heavily involved with the Gifu University English Club as an advisory instructor for over five years, running the weekly sessions of the club and hosting seasonal events for students who are keen on improving their English by being surrounded by the language. In addition, I have also been a part the English Center since it was first established. As a side project, we made a self-access advice/practice service called English Xtra and later its extensive reading counterpart, English Xtra Reading. Both are available to all students and university staff members. We self-evaluated the three programs as successful, but we admittedly are also amateurs in self-access learning (SAL) working in a bubble. Therefore, I had two main purposes in attending the conference: 1) to re-evaluate our programs through comparisons with existing and more-experienced programs in various institutions across Japan, and 2) to learn with an open mind and return to my university with ideas for improvements.

This review of the conference may differ from the typical event review, as it is sharing from the perspective of a person brand new to the field of self-access language learning. Rather than using expertise knowledge to analyze and discuss each presentation, it is more appropriate that this first-person-perspective report has been written based on the major revelations I gathered throughout the conference as a beginner in the subject, which allows me to effectively present the conference without making many presumptions about the topics. This review describes what I have learned from attending presentations and

connecting with educators and administrators who are well-experienced with self-access learning.

Biggest Regret

My biggest regret of the conference was that due to a work schedule conflict, I was not able to attend the plenary session by Dr. Luke Carson, Associate Professor in the International Studies Faculty at Hiroshima City University, as well as several other presentations early Saturday. I was informed ahead of the conference that Dr. Carson is a brilliant man who speaks his mind and is very open to teaching and helping educators find their directions in their careers.

Speaking to several other attendees at the event, they all recalled the plenary speech to be substantially impressive. With the conference theme of “New Beginners”, the session delivered an important reminder to new and experienced educators alike on why self-access learning centers (SALCs) are a vital part of linguistic and social education that cultivate global-ready individuals. His plenary speech also encouraged teachers and students to rediscover the unexplored potential of such unique learning spaces, reminding attendees that we are all learners during the conference. Although I had missed the plenary session myself, the on-going discussions and praises about the plenary throughout the conference demonstrated how Dr. Carson was nothing short of inspirational. Later in the conference, I had the lucky opportunity to dine at the same table with him at the networking reception, and the kind advice I received from him showed that he who was an ideal choice as plenary speaker for JASAL 2019.

When I had first arrived at the Ibaraki campus of Otomon Gakuin University, I was greeted by several officers of the association and immediately invited to connect with the presenters at the poster session. The warm welcome was the beginning of my JASAL experience. Out of the numerous lessons I had learned, I would like to share three main themes that impacted me the most by reporting on related presentations I attended as well as my self-reflections. The three themes deeply resonated with me were: 1) incentives for visiting SALCs, 2) usages of online spaces, and 3) student involvement in running SALCs.

Incentives for Visiting SALCs

Working at a newly established and relatively small-scale SALC with extremely limited resources, our approach to serving the entire university has been to focus on help students who are motivated enough to actively seek support from the center. What learners

gain out of their sessions entirely depends on their requests, and the visits do not provide them with any external incentives. Therefore, one of the biggest discussions throughout the conference, whether to and how to incentivize students to visit the SALCs, was a new theme for me. This aspect of SALCs frequently appeared in presentations and casual discussions, and many approaches were introduced by several attendees.

One approach mentioned in several presentations was to improve the quality of the SALC services to encourage students to spend time in there. For instance, in Caroline Hutchinson's presentation, 'Freedom or Focus? Approaches to Fostering Autonomous Learners', she shared some activity ideas used at her center that have kept students engaged and active. She also discussed her research on how students became better autonomous learners through the motivation of having the freedom to select specific activities they want to experience. Mikiko Fukutome's presentation, 'Discovering the Roles of the Language Learning Advisor: My Personal Journey' used her SALC at the International College of Liberal Arts as a model to demonstrate how the success of a SALC requires more than appealing seasonal and cultural events to increase attendance. She described the importance of having center advisors who can expand their roles beyond language teachers and into being role models, capable of connecting with the learners in other aspects of their young adult life. From interacting with other attendees during break time, I recognized that many other great ideas were being shared outside of presentations as well.

Another approach I observed was to give additional value to the act of visiting SALCs itself. One example was by Hanako Benson of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. In her presentation, 'Designing an Independent Language Learning System', she explained how visiting the SALC and speaking to an advisor would earn students points towards an online self-access learning system. In this example, the objective of encouraging students to visit the SALC was achieved without necessarily altering the activities at the SALC. That said, the most intriguing and applicable presentation I saw that directly focused on this subject was one by Katherine Thornton of Otomon Gakuin University, JASAL 2019's Conference Chair. In her session, 'Incentivising SAC Use: The Role of Different Reward Schemes in Service Uptake at a Self-Access Centre', she introduced the systems Otomon Gakuin University has tried with varying degrees of success.

Thornton concluded her presentation with several questions, one of which was "What level of incentive is appropriate - if any at all?" This question relates to a discussion I had with one of the poster presenters on the first day. Katherine Shreves's poster was 'Encouraging Greater SAC Use: A Case Study of Instructor-Led Activities Designed for

Students in the Department of Child Education at Hokuriku Gakuin University’, which was an example of the former approach where activities taking place in the SALC started to specifically aim towards the needs of the education students, in hopes that they would use the center more regularly. We had a long and insightful conversation about whether relatively small-scale SALCs such as the ones we participate in should try to appeal to more students in the university, or if we should focus our limited time and attention to those who are motivated to actively take advantage of the center. This inconclusive discussion on the philosophy of who the SALCs serve also links to another presentation, ‘Articulating the Role of the Self-Access Learning Center in a Translingual Environment?’ by Tetsushi Ohara of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University and Ryo Mizukura of Meiji University. They referenced the danger of teachers and learners becoming a part of a system that focuses more on numbers and statistics rather than the diversity and needs that are unique to each student visiting the SALCs. Upon seeing their presentation, I recognize that the small-scale SALC at my university is not-at-all prepared to even double our current user-count, which makes me wonder if it is appropriate for my center to increase our user count by giving incentives, risking the chance of overloading our service. At the same time, we might not be given more resources until we demonstrate that our users have outgrown our capacity. The many discussions about incentives gave me plenty to think about and reflect on during and after the conference.

Online Spaces

Since my university’s self-access services are still in its infancy, we have been approaching them in traditional ways where the language practice and advising happen only at the physical location of the “center”. It took almost a year until we felt comfortable enough to allow students to sign out our extensive reading materials, so the presentations and discussions about effective usages of online spaces to provide students with self-access learning opportunities on the internet were extremely intriguing yet intimidating.

The first of the two presentations that I attended on this topic was the aforementioned ‘Designing an Independent Language Learning System’ by Hanako Benson of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. She demonstrated an independent learning system that students could access through Microsoft Office OneNote, and the system was designed to keep learners engaged and encouraged as they decide which and how many steps to take in their own language-learning journey. As students complete each “mission”, they log their results on the online system and then receive “points” according to the task difficulty. The points act as a

measurement of the students' effort while adding a gamified element to keep students returning to the system to attempt a higher score. It also stood out to me that while some of the provided tasks were common practice tasks seen in SALCs, such as "talk to your friend(s) in English for at least five minutes" and "read a news article in English", other tasks were much more suitable to be completed independently and some even included a technologic aspect to help students learn additional skills. Such tasks included "record your self-introduction for one minute" and "score over 200 points on lyrictraining.com". Benson reported that this fun system generally encouraged students to increase their English self-studying time.

Another related presentation on the topic of online self-access learning was 'The Development of Peer Collaboration and Learner Autonomy in Online Social Networking Spaces' by Ward Peeters of Kanda University of International Studies. Rather than a teacher-student online interaction, Peeters introduced how an online space can also be for interactions among students. By providing a forum and encouraging learners to actively post questions, share resources and respond to each other online, they were practicing a form of digital communication that would help them tremendously in modern society. This asynchronous interaction where a question or comment may not garner immediate responses is also an experience uniquely online and would not be seen in physical interactions.

Both presenters shared the benefits of online spaces but also discussed challenges to managing online self-access learning systems. As echoed by a part of the audience with similar experiences, the need for time and effort into moderating such online programs as well as the necessity for computer knowledge from both teachers and students create a high barrier to entry with heavy commitments. However, I was excited to be introduced to a brand new option to self-access learning that is still so new and full of potential.

Student Involvement

The final theme to cover was a theme I had witnessed not only in several presentations, but also throughout the conference itself. The level of involvement that students put into many SALCs in Japan is unexpectedly high to beginner-administrators like me. My colleagues and I have a limiting idea that SALCs must be ran and managed by teachers, and this narrow perspective makes us lose sight of the advantages student involvement can bring to the centers that teachers cannot, as well as the benefits the students would gain through their participations at the centers.

In the student poster-presentation by Minami Ichinotani of Konan Women's University, her poster 'English Shop by Student Staff: Bringing my Experience in Study Abroad into the Event' displayed how student staff could initiate to host meaningful events. Based on the lingual and cultural challenges she faced when ordering food at shops and restaurants overseas, she turned her experience into an event at the SALC so other students could learn from her overseas experience. This event was designed from the perspective of a Japanese university student who went overseas, and it would be logical to think that a student who just completed the journey would be the most fitting organizer.

The group student-poster presentation by Yuka Sakura, Miami Okawa and Risa Matsui of Konan Women's University also shared their ideas through their poster titled "How to Increase the Number of 'e-space' Users", which stemmed from the students staff in the SALC noticing a pattern of low participants of second and third year students and decided to conduct a survey about the issue. Seeing this poster at the conference impacted me in two ways. The first revelation was that students can think from the perspective of the users much better than teachers ever can, as students would know the schedule, workload and even motivation levels of their peers. They could see and gather genuine feedback about their school's center much easier than teachers and administrators could, and they can then propose ideas directly responding to existing issues. The second realization was the simple yet obvious idea that students who enjoy the center are also thinking of ways to make them better. Teachers are not alone in improving the quality of the center, as devoted students feel strong attachments to the center as well and would want it to grow. Several presenters who highlighted the success of their center shared the feedback of the long-time users, and many feedbacks mentioned that their university's SALC was one of the most important elements of their university life. Since such devoted students exist, teachers should be more active in welcoming their valuable input.

Students also benefit greatly from taking up responsibilities in the centers. The best evidence was all the student presentations throughout the two days. Most if not all of the student presenters were student staff at the SALC of their university. They were very proud of their involvement with their centers, proud enough to present to hundreds of participants about it in a foreign language. By opening up SALC roles for students to take up, we are inviting them to a very meaningful experience.

Again, for educators like me who have been overlooking the potential of student input at SALCs, the level of student involvement seen at JASAL 2019 served as a wake-up call of the amount of valuable input we have been ignoring. Challenges exist in recruitment and role

delegation, but they are not impossible. As the student-poster presentation “Internship at E-CO” by Hoey Liu, Ryuhei Ikeda and Ayaka Satake of Otomen Gakuin University demonstrated, having a recruitment process involving applications, interviews and training sessions can get students ready to organize and run SALC events. Once a system is set up and several student staff can serve as role-models for new recruits, student involvement in SALCs becomes an investment with tremendous dividends. It is on-going gift that only students can bring to the centers.

Conclusion

Prior to attending the conference, I was proud of the self-access learning services I had been a part of. After learning so much about SALCs at JASAL 2019, particularly on the subjects of incentives, online spaces and student participation, I remained proud of what my university’s English Club, advising program and extensive reading program have been able to achieve based on our knowledge and resources. However, I also returned with so much ambition and excitement about what each program could eventually grow into.

I was also genuinely impressed by how warm and friendly JASAL was as an organization. The event was very friendly to beginners to the SAL environment. I was very glad that presentations by newcomers such as mine were not met with judgement and criticisms, but rather with insightful advice and support on how to I could develop my current self-access learning services as well as my personal career in this field. Each and every conversation I had during the conference was filled with knowledge and suggestions. There was even a participant who overheard a conversation I was in, stepped in and said: “Sorry to interrupt, but I heard what you were talking about, and I thought you might be interested in checking out this vocabulary game for students. I just wanted to share this with you. Have a great day.”

I felt that all the friendly encounters I had with the members of the association well reflected what this organization represents. This is a gathering of passionate teachers exchanging ideas on how to offer more opportunities for students to learn. Just like self-access learning centers, JASAL is open and welcoming to anyone who is willing to learn, to share, and to connect. I have learned so much from this conference, and I am very glad that JASAL 2019 was my “New Beginning” in the world of self-access language learning.

Notes on the Contributor

Jackson Lee is a specially-appointed lecturer at Gifu University in Japan. He has been a part of the English Center since its establishment in 2018, and he co-founded the English Xtra self-access language learning and advising service there to provide learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Jackson's research interests include intercultural communication, public education, young learners, self-access learning, and diversity.