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The Future Role of Online Consultations Within Self-Access Learning

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The Future Role of Online Consultations Within Self-Access Learning

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Abstract

In response to COVID-19, Japanese self-access learning centers (SALCs) rapidly shifted their in-person consultations entirely online. While online consultations were scarce prior to 2020, there still existed few attempts. Yet, this prior history has not been considered in recent studies. Additionally, while researchers have recently addressed the role of online consultations, there is insufficient data from students regarding their experiences and future needs. Instead, the discussion has positioned online consultations as a temporary solution without considering their continuation. Therefore, this study assesses the effects that online consultations have had on students and addresses their future role, considering the history while soliciting students' perceptions. Data collection included a survey consisting of closed and open-ended questions administered to eighteen students at a university in Japan who voluntarily participated in multiple online consultations at a self-access facility. The main findings indicate that students would still prefer to attend online consultations in the future and see them as playing an integral role in their self-access learning. Additionally, students' experiences with online consultations have been positive, and motivation and language learning are unhindered.

Keywords: self-access language learning, self-access learning centers, online consultations, computer-assisted language learning

Universities in Japan have invested heavily in campus self-access language learning programs, hereafter referred to as 'self-access,' providing supplemental support outside of classrooms and promoting autonomous language learning. Japanese university students require supplemental language learning assistance in addition to classroom courses to address their language deficiencies associated with being false starters (Small, 2017). This becomes apparent when noting the significant gap between Japanese students' English writing skills upon entering university and the expected English proficiency required for academic writing (Murray, 2015). Thus, universities rely on various extracurricular services to combat this.

Self-access encompasses a broad term of services focusing on instilling oral and written output language competencies by providing services and learning materials. Such programs have long been established at universities around the world in various forms, especially in native-English-speaking countries where there is a prevalence of writing centers that focus on academic writing support. In Japan, universities typically offer both oral and

written communication support through self-access learning centers (SALCs). SALCs vary in the specific services they offer, such as language advising and consultations for conversation, academic writing, proficiency tests, and presentations. Here, *advising* refers to interactions prioritizing the overall reflective processes of becoming autonomous learners (Mynard, 2020), whereas *consultations* include direct assistance in a tutor-like and practice style (Aydın & Tütüniş, 2021). While these approaches are typically separated, there have been instances of integration (Tweed, 2019). In addition, SALCs can offer other services such as learning materials, workshops, and cultural events. While relatively new to Japan, there are currently almost sixty registered SALCs nationwide listed on the Japan Association for Self-access Learning (JASAL) website (LLS Registry). Up until 2020, the abovementioned services took place mainly in person, requiring physical space on campuses. Thus, universities have allocated substantial resources and space for establishing large and visually appealing facilities meant to instill an attractive atmosphere that students will be encouraged to visit and use.

Conversely, despite the tremendous growth seen in SALCs, almost no online consultations were available to students in Japan before 2020. Instead, the focus was solely on in-person consultations. Any online presence, if at all, mainly consisted of writing language resources known as online writing labs (OWLs) that only provided resources and reference materials (Denekamp, 2016).

By early 2020, the effects of the global pandemic had reached Japan, and with it, all university activities simultaneously moved online, including classroom teaching and SALC consultations. In stark contrast to having over a decade of researchers meticulously addressing the role of self-access in Japan, SALCs were suddenly forced to find an online solution immediately. Much of this response has been seen as an emergency and temporary measure in response to a novel circumstance. And, given the newness of the situation, we are just now starting to consider the positive and negative effects of online consultations on students. Additionally, much of the discussion on online consultations focuses on post-2020 while disregarding prior online self-access attempts.

Therefore, neither the past nor the future role of online consultations have been sufficiently considered for when they are no longer necessary since online consultations are often treated as a substitute for in-person ones instead of entities that may complement each other. Just as fast as the online consultations came, so too are they being replaced with in-person interactions again. This leaves questions such as what have been the effects (both

positive and negative) on students? And what will (and should) be the role of online consultations in the future? To answer this, collecting data on stakeholder opinions is crucial, namely students.

Literature Review

The Role of SALCs

In general, Japan SALCs promote learning in all language competencies while also helping students establish awareness, control, and ownership over their learning (Mynard, 2019) by offering various services and materials to students to foster autonomous learning (Gardner & Miller, 2011; Mynard, 2012). This belief was reaffirmed in a study on 28 SALCs in Japan and other countries, where the SALC administrators rated as essential the ability to 1) provide students access to learning opportunities independent of classroom work and 2) offer learning materials (Navarro, 2014). This draws similarities to the role of writing centers in the United States, where the focus is on guiding students in their writing process by providing overall feedback, teaching critical thinking, building confidence, and promoting writing as a fun and social (rather than individual) activity (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2016). Working within their shared framework, SALCs individually decide their own methods for accomplishing their goals, and the specific roles have constantly changed over time (Thornton, 2020).

Within the SALCs themselves, the role of language advisors has also been extensively addressed. Carson and Mynard (2012) analyzed the aims, practices, skills, locations, and discourses of advising in language learning. With this, the authors consider the role of the language and learner advisor, which is often mistaken as simply ‘fixing’ users’ language problems (Moore, 2012; Woodward-Kron, 2007). Advisors are instead tasked to instill learner autonomy by assisting individuals with identifying their language learning needs, choosing appropriate resources, and evaluating their language learning (Carson & Mynard 2012). Other studies have assessed the role of learning advisors and their interaction with students as well as advising in general (Moore, 2012; Morrison & Navarro, 2012).

Technology in Self-access Language Learning

Online consultations require the utilization of computer technology, which is a topic frequently looked at in self-access applications as researchers have long discussed ways that technology can assist SALCs. These attempts to join computer-assisted language learning (CALL) mainly consist of various applications, oftentimes located onsite within SALCs themselves. SALCs have been said to use technologies extensively (Gardner & Miller, 1999),

but this has been seen as limited and under-researched compared to classroom teaching (Lázaro & Reinders, 2006; Reinders & White, 2016). Thus, Lázaro and Reinders (2006) proposed a formal framework for utilizing and assessing technology use in SALCs, encompassing two categories explained as follows. The first includes the types of technology support a SALC may offer students. This is divided into practical support, described as support students can use in a practical manner, and learning support, which includes support for increasing students' knowledge. The second is the electronic tool used to mediate the online interaction, such as email, chat, and online courses.

Researchers have also experimented with computer-based learning in self-access environments. Notably, Duc (2017) assessed the implementation of a computer-based system for self-directed learning to enhance autonomous learning. The results suggest that the system can be considered as a method for assessing students' oral performance and becoming responsible for their learning. Additionally, Zhong (2018) examined the effects of technology-mediated environments on autonomy, with results showing increased autonomy, use of online sources, and regulation of self-directed study. For additional studies on various technologies assessed in SALCs before COVID-19, see Mideros (2020) and Thornton (2020).

Online Resources and Consultations

Prior to COVID-19, most online self-access assistance globally was limited to OWLs posting online material resources or writing center advertisements with no option for human interaction (Denekamp, 2016), and much of the related research addressed difficulties with writing centers' websites in offering these services, such as assisting students with disabilities (Quinn et al., 2019; Ries, 2015). The few writing centers offering online consultations were divided between asynchronous and synchronous interactions.

Online consultations can be divided into two approaches. First, asynchronous consultations have a time delay between the advisor and participant and are mostly applicable for writing support. Likewise, synchronous consultations entail live and instantaneous communication between involved parties through teleconferencing software. Among the few universities that offered consultations prior to 2020, approximately 90% of them used asynchronous (time-delayed) support through rudimentary mediums such as email (Neaderhiser & Wolfe, 2009). At the time, a debate ensued regarding the role of online consultations and whether asynchronous or synchronous methods were most effective for self-access learning (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2019). An advantage of asynchronous support is that it allows students to easily address and check writing corrections while encouraging

them to make several more revisions (Denekamp, 2016). Additionally, the time delay encourages students to spend more time processing and considering feedback they receive on their self-directed learning process with less pressure as “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” (Thornton & Mynard, 2012, p. 137), affording students more time for reflection, metacognition, and critical thinking. And for advisors, asynchronous consultations allow time to consider their responses and provide better feedback.

Nevertheless, the drawback of the time delay is that it limits stakeholders’ ability to talk freely and not be uninterrupted (Neaderhiser & Wolfe, 2009). It can also make it challenging to clarify any confusing points (Denekamp, 2016), and maintaining appropriate response times can be difficult for overworked instructors. Finally, 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. Thus, it has been proposed that online synchronous conferencing might be more beneficial (Weigle & Nelson 2004).

Next, a significant benefit of synchronous consultations is that they are considered the closest thing to natural in-person human interactions. Interactions through computers can seem cold, sterile, and uninviting (Martinez, 2015), and universities have relied predominantly on synchronous services to mitigate any disturbances of the pandemic. An additional benefit is that synchronous consultations allow quicker interaction and immediate feedback and checking (Denekamp, 2016). Here, instructors can encourage students to interact more through comments and collaboration while creating a relatively authentic online experience. Additionally, any confusing points can also be quickly addressed and clarified.

Despite online consultations being virtually nonexistent in Japan-based SALCs prior to 2020, there is, nevertheless, evidence of attempts of mostly asynchronous consultations. Notably, Thompson (2014) discussed their process of terminating all in-person consultations and moving their writing center entirely online, mainly citing attendance issues as their reason for doing so. Indeed, geographical convenience plays a significant factor in determining SALC attendance (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2016; Thompson, 2014), and offering online services can be a solution.

The authors were able to find one case in Japan where synchronous consultations were implemented prior to the pandemic (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2019), where a self-access service offered synchronous online consultations equally alongside in-person ones. After one year of hybrid services, the desk reported that 22% of the consultations were

conducted online. Additionally, increased inclusivity and higher attendance were reported as students from different campuses could participate, and the survey results were positive. Ruiz-Guerrero (2020) also reported that their SALC had previously offered students a mix of options, including in-person consultations, asynchronous writing consultations via email, and communication consultations through teleconferencing software. Nevertheless, further details are not offered, and thus, other attempts could have been made but are under-reported.

Due to the onset of COVID-19, the above synchronous-versus-asynchronous argument has been shelved, as the role of online consultations rapidly shifted in reverse from being primarily asynchronous and supplementary to in-person SALC consultations to then becoming mainly synchronous and an integral method to best mimic the in-person consultations they replaced.

Post-Pandemic Online Consultations

By April 2020, most university self-access consultations for oral and written communication in Japan were conducted online synchronously. Since then, there has been a surge of publications from SALCs both in Japan (e.g., Davies et al., 2020; Harwood & Koyama, 2020) and around the world (e.g., Al Ghazali, 2020; Anas et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2020; Navarro Cira & Carrillo López, 2020; Schneider, 2020; Uzun & Guven-Yalcin, 2021) relating to all forms of online teaching, including classroom environments and SALCs. Yet, most related publications discuss SALC's experiences and strategies for handling the situation with no data gathering. Most of these reports from various countries entail creating synchronous online consultations, with some attempts to offer asynchronous consultations as well (Ruiz-Guerrero, 2020; Zhong, 2021).

Therefore, despite the recent increased interest in related studies, there is minimal evidence to determine what the impact of online consultations has been on students at Japanese universities. Nevertheless, data on the effects of online consultations are beginning to be published. Guban-Caisido (2020) interviewed students in the Philippines regarding their online SALC experiences and identified difficulties relating to personal, technical, economic, and learning aspects induced by remote learning. Mideros (2020) looked at students' efforts towards utilizing out-of-class resources for autonomous learning during the pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago, indicating that students tried to expand their knowledge independently, but the effort was minimal, and more work is needed to raise awareness and promote learner engagement and exploration. And within Japan, Ohara and Ishimura (2020) looked at the successes and limitations of providing remote support during the pandemic. The results

indicated that their SALC successfully provided students with sufficient language learning and psychological support but struggled with establishing a social environment typically seen at in-person facilities.

Next, the general potential benefits and difficulties of offering online consultations have previously been discussed. Thompson (2014) indicated that geographical location plays an important role in determining the success of SALCs, and online consultations can be seen as a convenient alternative. Additionally, relationship building can be comparatively hindered by online communication because, as previously mentioned, interaction through a computer screen can be relatively unwelcoming and cold (Martinez, 2015).

The Future Role of Online Consultations

Hodges et al. (2020) discuss the difference between emergency responses versus planned-out online services in classroom environments. Ohara and Ishimura (2020) agree with this idea within SALCs in Japan, postulating that actions by SALC staff primarily represent an emergency response. Based on this, many studies assessing the outcomes of online consultations can be considered reactionary planning in response to a temporary and unfortunate situation rather than a consideration for the expected future role of online support.

It is essential to assess stakeholders' input when deciding the future role of online consultations, namely the students who partake in the consultations. Yet, their perceptions about the role of future online consultations remain elusive. Handford et al. (2021) conducted a survey post-2020 on students' perceptions at a Canadian university's writing center that offers in-person and online consultations, but the authors admitted that only a fraction of the participants surveyed represented online students. Additionally, many SALCs implement compulsory attendance policies, complicating our ability to determine true needs, intentions, and motivations.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review, two research questions were developed for this study as follows:

RQ 1. What were the positive and negative effects and overall experience of self-access online consultations during COVID-19 for students?

RQ 2. What are students' views on the future role of self-access online consultations?

Methodology

Participants

The study sample includes students who had recently participated in multiple online consultations at Osaka University’s voluntary Language Support Desk (also referred to as ‘the desk’ in this paper). The desk was established in 2015 and previously offered both in-person and online language learning assistance for writing, oral communication, and presentations (see Andersson & Nakahashi, 2017). The students were contacted by email and asked to participate, and in total, eighteen students volunteered and gave their informed consent after receiving an explanation of the contents of data collection, usage, and identity protection.

The participants’ demographics were as follows. Five students were majoring in Foreign Studies/Language and Culture, four in Human Science, three in Economics, two in both International Public Policy and Engineering, and one in both Engineering Science and Medicine. There was a diverse range of grades, including nine students in undergraduate programs, five in master’s programs, and four in doctorate programs.

The types of consultations students attended, and their reasons for doing so include the following. Twelve students attended conversation consultations, ten attended writing consultations, and only one attended presentation consultations. Additionally, four students who attended writing consultations also attended conversation consultations. The students’ goals (Table 1) mainly included English test preparation and practicing daily conversation.

Table 1

Purpose of Consultation

Purpose	Frequency
English test preparation (TOEIC, IELTS, TOEFL, etc.)	10
Practice with daily conversation	7
Study abroad preparation	3
Essay	3
Application (interview, study abroad, etc.)	2
Other	2
Presentation materials	1

Note. Multiple answers were allowed.

Table 2 displays the students’ history of using the desk, showing that the earliest appointment was at the end of 2019. Of the eighteen students, three had taken an in-person

consultation when they were previously offered before COVID-19, while the remaining had only attended online consultations. Table 3 displays the frequency of monthly visits. The majority of students (55.6%) attended three to four consultations a month. Note that four represents the maximum possible, as the desk limits usage to once per week to allow others to participate.

Table 2

Year of First Consultation

Year	Students
2019	1
2020	3
2021	11
2022	3

Table 3

Monthly Consultations

Frequency of Sessions	Frequency
Once a month	2
Twice a month	6
Three times a month	4
Four times a month	6

Resources and Procedures

Data collection entailed administering a survey soliciting both fixed and open responses. The survey was created in English and translated into Japanese by a native Japanese speaker with advanced English proficiency. The first part included a 5-point Likert questionnaire ranging from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree* with thirteen items measuring the potential benefits of online consultations, such as geographical convenience (Q1) (Thompson, 2014), and perceived disadvantages such as difficulties with relationship building (Q4) (Martinez, 2015), transferring digital literacy (Takahashi, 2011) into computer operations (Q5) (Lockley, 2011), fatigue (Q6), nervousness (Q7), and learning hindrance (Q9). In addition, the question items covered students' overall experience (Q8), ability to

learn (Q2), motivation (Q3), and preference (Q10), as well as the future role of online consultations (Q11-13).

The second part of the survey included six open-ended questions (Table 4) to allow students to elaborate further on their ideas regarding advantages (Q1), disadvantages (Q2), overall experience (Q3), future usage (Q4-5), and any other related comment (Q6).

Table 4

Open-Ended Question Items

Question prompt
1. What are the benefits of online consultations at this desk for you?
2. What are the drawbacks of online consultations at this desk for you?
3. Please describe your experience so far using online consultations.
4. After Covid-19, do you want to take in-person consultations or online consultations?
5. Regarding your answer to 4, please state your reason for choosing your answer.
6. Feel free to write any other comments.

Data Analysis

The survey means and standard deviations were tabulated, and the interpretation of the results followed the methodology of Boonmoh et al. (2021), where means were interpreted in brackets as follows. A score of 1.0–1.50 is interpreted as strongly disagree or very low, 1.51–2.50 disagree or low, 2.51–3.50 agree or moderate, and 3.51–5.00 strongly agree or very high.

For the open comments, students wrote their answers in Japanese, which were translated into English by a native Japanese speaker with advanced English proficiency and verified by a native English speaker. The transcripts were then coded individually by the authors, and themes were identified. Finally, the themes were discussed by both authors and mutually agreed upon after resolving any differences.

In addition to the open questions, the participants were also asked to choose between one of two oppositely-worded statements regarding the expected future role of online consultations as either a temporary provision or integral service. These statements and responses are displayed later in Table 6.

Results

The results of the Likert survey are shown in Table 5. Items 1–3 pertain to the advantages and benefits of taking online consultations. Students answered highly (strongly agree) regarding convenience (Item 1, M=4.28), ability to learn (Item 2, M=3.94), and motivation (Item 3, M=4.17).

Items 4–7 relate to the disadvantages of online consultations. Students indicated very minimal nervousness (Item 7, M=2.11) and fatigue (Item 6, M=2.39), followed by slightly below neutral (within disagree or low) regarding difficulties in developing personal relations with instructors (Item 4, M=2.44) and slightly above neutral (within agree or moderate) for struggling with the required technology (Item 5 M=2.56).

Next, Items 8–10 relate to students’ overall experience and preference for consultations. The students rate their experience as very positive (Item 8, M=4.33) with minimal hindrance to their language learning (Item 9, M=1.78). The students indicated that they would still prefer online consultations even without a pandemic (Item 10, M=3.39).

Finally, Items 11-13 pertain to the future role and sustainability of online consultations. The students indicated that they plan to continue taking online consultations in the future (Item 11, M=3.56), online consultations will continue to be important (Item 12, M=4.11), and online consultations are not just a temporary solution (Item 13, M=2.17).

Table 5
Means and Standard Deviations for Likert Questions

Item	M	SD
Compared to in-person consultations at the Language Support Desk...		
1. being able to do online consultations is convenient at the LSD.	4.28	0.93
2. I can learn enough with online consultations at the LSD.	3.94	1.08
3. I can keep enough motivation for learning English with online consultations at the LSD.	4.17	0.76
4. it is difficult to develop personal relations with my online advisor at the LSD.	2.44	1.12
5. I sometimes struggle with the technology required for online consultations at the LSD.	2.56	1.38
6. online consultations are tiring at the LSD.	2.39	1.11
7. doing online consultations makes me nervous at the LSD.	2.11	0.87
8. my overall experience with online consultations has been positive at the LSD.	4.33	0.67
9. being forced to take online consultations at the LSD has hindered my language learning.	1.78	0.63

10. even if there weren't a global pandemic, I would still rather do online consultations at the LSD.	3.39	1.64
11. I plan on continuing online consultations in the future at the LSD, even after the pandemic is over.	3.56	1.34
12. The LSD's online consultations will continue to be important to me even after the COVID-19 pandemic is over.	4.11	0.99
13. online consultations outside of classes should be considered only a temporary solution during the pandemic, and we should return to all consultations being in person when the pandemic is over.	2.17	1.30

Note. The scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The results of the open-ended questions are discussed below. Altogether, eight themes were identified and separated into five topics as follows.

Topic 1. Advantages of Online Consultations

Theme 1: Locational Convenience

Almost all students mentioned the convenience of being able to attend consultations from home. “It’s convenient,” one student said, while others echoed, “I can take consultations wherever I am,” “I can take consultations from home,” and “Since I can take consultations at home, I don’t have to worry too much about the time before and after the session, including the travel time.” Additionally, Osaka University is geographically separated into three campuses, and two students mentioned the benefit of online consultations in this regard. One explained, “Since I usually take classes on different campuses, the biggest advantage is that I am able to receive services on other campuses.”

Theme 2: Computer Screen and Material-sharing Benefits

Two students mentioned the benefit of being able to share screens and materials online. One stated, “... since I can take classes while sharing the teacher’s screen, I thought that it would be better to go online rather than face-to-face because I can see clearly what has been corrected.” Another said, “It is convenient to be able to share materials.”

Topic 2. Disadvantages of Online Consultations

Theme 3: Human Interaction and Relationship Difficulties

When discussing the relative disadvantages of online consultations, six students pointed to a less authentic human interaction and difficulties with relationship-building. One student commented on online consultations inhibiting language transmission by saying, “I feel that much of the information that is transmitted outside the language is removed online.” In contrast, in-person consultations were said to be “... easier to communicate when questions arise” and “... more realistic when interacting with foreigners.” Others said of online

consultations, “It’s hard to make eye contact” and “I cannot have the experience of speaking directly with people in English, though I think it is a limited disadvantage.” Another student felt that online consultations create “... less tension than face-to-face consultations,” ‘tension’ being a positive aspect.

Theme 4: Telecommunication Technology Issues

Four students indicated various difficulties they had with using the telecommunication software. “Sometimes the network is unstable,” one student said. Another mentioned, “The session may be interrupted due to network connectivity,” while others reiterated, “Sometimes it is difficult to hear each other’s voice well depending on the internet reception quality and the microphone condition,” and “it is harder to hear people’s voices than face-to-face.”

Topic 3. Overall Experience With Online Consultations

Theme 5: Positive Overall Experiences

Most students (12) wrote comments clearly depicting positive overall experiences with online consultations. The remaining students’ (6) comments were unrelated to online consultations and were disregarded. Therefore, no students expressed having negative online experiences. One student positively commented, “I had my IELTS writing corrected regularly, and my sensitivity to the range of expressions and grammatical matters increased.” Another said, “The instructor kindly helped me get accustomed to online consultations.” And another explained, “It is very convenient for me to review English grammar while at home. I think the effect is sufficient. I feel that my language skills have improved recently.” Additional comments include, “It is easy to ask questions” and “There is so much to learn in the weekly consultations, and it is very helpful. I was in trouble because I didn’t have the opportunity to correct my English, so it’s very helpful.”

Topic 4. Attending In-person or Online Consultations After the Pandemic

Theme 6: Students are Divided on Preference for Future Consultations

When asked if they desired to continue online consultations in the future after the pandemic, the students’ answers were split. Eight wrote comments favoring future online consultations. One student explained, “I can take classes anywhere and at any time. Also, the screen is easy to see. But sometimes it’s nice to meet each other in person.” Several students expressed ‘convenience’ as their main reason in stating, “Online consultations (because) it’s convenient,” and “There are not many opportunities to go to Suita campus, and it is difficult to attend (in-person consultations),” and “Online consultations (because) you don’t have to go anywhere, and you can take high-quality lessons.”

Conversely, five students wrote that they would favor taking in-person consultations in the future. Some explained, “I have enjoyed talking online for the past six months, but I feel that face-to-face communication could be smoother because I was taught spelling through chatting with newly taught words,” and “I think face-to-face is more effective for learning to the maximum.”

Theme 7: Students Want the Ability to Choose

Two students stated that they would prefer having the option to take both in-person and online consultations in the future. “I want to take either course,” one student said. “This is because I want to use the session properly according to the case and my purpose.” Another elaborated, “I want to use both services. Basically, I like the face-to-face style, but I am grateful that I can take consultations online when I am at home or on a different campus, and it is convenient, so it is ideal to be able to select.”

Topic 5. The Future Role and Sustainability of Online Consultations

Theme 8: Online Consultations Will Continue to be Essential Because of Their Convenience

Table 6 shows the results of students’ opinions regarding the future role of online consultations. Seventeen students chose Option 2, indicating that they believe online consultations are integral to future self-access programs. The students wrote comments elaborating on their choice and once again overwhelmingly reiterated ‘convenience’ as their main reason. This is especially so for geographically isolated students. “It takes two hours to go to school one way, so I can use my time effectively by taking consultations online,” one student wrote. Two others repeated this by saying, “I think it should be considered for students who live far away,” and “I think online is better because it saves travel time to the campus.” But in-person consultations were also important for certain purposes, and “some students may prefer face-to-face for presentation and conversation consultations.” Therefore, some students wanted the ability to choose both in-person and online consultations. One stated that “depending on the content of the consultation purpose, some content is suitable for face-to-face and some is suitable for online.” The only student who chose Option 1 stated that there “are some aspects that could not be fully communicated online with the instructor, such as when searching for questions or words that I did not understand.”

Table 6
Expected Future Role of Online Consultations

Criteria	Frequency
Which statement do you agree with?:	
1) Online consultations should be considered a temporary solution during the pandemic for Japan's university language support services outside of the classroom, and we should switch back to entirely in-person consultations when we can.	1
2) Online consultations will be an essential component of future language learning for Japan's university language support services outside of the classroom even after the pandemic is over.	17

Discussion

The results of the Likert-scale items indicate that students consider online consultations convenient, and they can maintain their motivation to use them. Additionally, the participants felt online consultations only slightly induce nervousness and even less fatigue relative to in-person consultations. While difficulty with developing personal relationships through computer interaction has been observed (Martinez, 2015), the students in this study generally did not express trouble in this regard. They did, however, slightly agree that they struggle with the technology. Next, the students rated their overall online experience as positive, with minimal hindrance to their language learning, contrary to recent studies indicating negative effects on online synchronous SALC consultations (Guban-Caisido, 2020). Additionally, several students would still prefer online consultations over in-person ones and expect to partake in them if given the option. They also believe that online consultations will be an essential part of future self-access education.

The students further elaborated on their opinions through the open-ended comments, showing that locational convenience was considered a great advantage of online consultations, which supports prior findings (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2016; Thompson, 2014). Another advantage was the ability to share screens and materials. And regarding the downsides, difficulties with authentic human interactions and some technology issues were considered the main disadvantages. Nevertheless, the technology issues pertained to connectivity and clarity rather than an inability to transfer digital literacy to computer use, as argued by Lockley (2011). Next, the students were divided between preferring online or in-person consultations in the future, and some wished to be offered both. Finally, the students believed the role of online consultations will continue to be significant due to the

convenience it provides, especially for those who live far from campus. This idea is unchanged from instances where offering online consultations prior to the pandemic allowed for better inclusivity, and overall consultations increased (Andersson & Nakahashi, 2019; Thompson, 2014).

Conclusion

The role of online consultations is often discussed as a temporary replacement for in-person consultations and as a solution to best mitigate the disruption to self-access learning, and there is a desire to re-open SALC campus facilities and return operations as they were before. This study provides some perspective on how students see the impact and future role of online consultations, and the implications are that shifting back to exclusively in-person interactions may go against students' desires and needs. Additionally, certain questions require more attention, such as what should the future role of online consultations be according to all stakeholders, and should the debate between synchronous or asynchronous consultations continue? Dialogues like these will be essential when considering the future of self-access.

This study has limitations in that it is an exploratory attempt with survey questions that have not been tested for accuracy and a sample size that is too small for making generalizations. Future studies can better represent more students with greater diversity and varying degrees of English proficiency and motivation to obtain a more holistic representation as well as strengthen the question items.

Notes on the Contributors

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