Review and Reflection of JASAL Online Student Forum 2023

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This report contains a review and my reflections on the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) student forum. The online forum was held on Saturday, June 10, 2023. Thirteen students and ten teachers, advisors, and members of JASAL staff from nine different universities met on Zoom. We had an opening session, three discussion sessions, and a closing session.

In the opening session, we talked about the reasons for and our goals for attending the forum. Each participant had one minute to talk, including their self-introduction. The three discussion sessions were really meaningful. We went into groups of three to four students and discussed different topics in each session. Attendees gave their opinions based on their experiences at their Self-Access Learning Center (SALC). The group members were replaced every session so we could meet and talk with different students. After the discussion sessions, we shared what we learned and what we wanted to try in the chat box.

**Opening Session**

I felt a little nervous at the beginning of this forum, but the opening session was a good icebreaker. I introduced myself and shared my goal for the forum. I was a unique student at the event because my major is not English but computer science. In addition to that, there is no SALC at our university.

My purpose for participating in this student forum was to learn about SALCs in other universities. I was especially interested in what kind of activities other SALCs do and how to encourage SALC student staff. I organized a new student team to learn English in May 2023. Our activity had just started, so my learning in this forum was a big help to develop our team.

**Discussion 1**

The first discussion topics were easy to talk about. We talked about how we study English and recommendations as SALC staff. Each student had two to three minutes to talk. Our
ways of studying were similar. We focus on speaking activities, such as talking with international students, having discussions, and debating. One of the group members was a staff member of a SALC, and she talked about the events they hold once in a while, such as presentations about other countries by native students, cooking *takoyaki*, and running a bingo game. They said planning and holding events develop the fundamental strength of the team. I thought I should challenge myself to run events with my new team.

**Discussion 2**

The second discussion was exciting as it was about how to recruit new students to our student staff team. We concluded that organizing attractive events is the best way to recruit new students. Some of the other groups had the same opinion, and we also considered effective ways to advertise events.

Social Networking Services (SNS), such as *Instagram*, are good ways to let the students know about events, and other groups also mentioned this as a method of advertising. As a matter of fact, almost all SALCs have Instagram accounts and use them for advertising. We also thought that SNS is very useful, but we can only transmit information to particular people, for instance, followers of the SALC account. In other words, only students who already know about the SALC get the information, so it’s difficult to provide it to the new students.

We came up with two ways to spread information to many students at our universities. The first way is making a poster promoting events and putting it up in a place where many people gather, for example, the school cafeteria, library, and school store. Another way is handing out flyers about the event. It might be a similar way to the first way, but we can meet and talk with students face to face. Both ways could be effective, so I will try them when I organize events in the future.

**Discussion 3**

In the final discussion session, we discussed the three questions below:

1. What kind of projects are we working on at the moment in your SALC?
2. Any problems you are dealing with?
3. Any solutions you have found so far?
I’m not a member of SALT, so I mentioned the situation of our new team. We’ve had weekly activities four times at that time. The main content of the activity is speaking English for an hour on Zoom. We divide into breakout rooms, and each room has two or three students. The topic is anything they want, but I prepared a topic sheet for their conversation to avoid running out of things to talk about.

In our activities, I realized the gap in English level among the team members. I’d like to adopt discussion, debate, and presentation as activities in the future, but the gap can be a major barrier to these activities. One of my discussion group members advised me to group the team members by English level and give them different topics. The idea could be an effective solution, so I’m going to try it in our next activity.

For other students at the forum, scheduling is a big problem in their SALC activities. They have held some events so far, but sometimes, only a few students showed up. This is because of the difference in students’ majors or class schedules. We sought a solution, but we could not figure out an effective solution during the discussion time.

Suggestions

I had a wonderful time in this forum, but I have two suggestions for improving future forums. The first suggestion is to share the discussion topics before the meeting. By doing so, students will have time to think about the topics and prepare their opinions well. It is connected to deeper discussion.

The second suggestion is to confirm the English level of participants in advance and divide participants into groups equally. It’s desirable for all groups to have a student who can facilitate the discussion. The level of English is different among the participants, and the discussion doesn’t go smoothly if students who are not good at speaking get together in one group. In order to confirm participants’ English levels, making applicants fill out their English test scores in the application form might be effective.

Conclusion

It was my first time attending this kind of forum. The forum and participants from other universities motivated me a lot. I enjoyed all of the sessions, and I am keenly aware of the difference between our team and others SALCs. I will make use of what I learned to enhance our
team. I’m deeply grateful to the people involved in the forum, and I’m really looking forward to meeting each other again at the JASAL student conference, which will be held in December.

Notes on the Contributor

Shiira Imada is a graduate student majoring in computer science at University of Miyazaki in Miyazaki, Japan. There is no self-access center at his university, but he organized a student team that focuses on improving English speaking skills. His interests are student motivation for language learning, organizational management of language learning groups, and the effect of self-access centers on students.