

Improved Language Learning through Self-Access

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Abstract

A pilot project to establish a self-access language-learning center (LLC) is currently underway at NUIS. This paper profiles the project including the educational and philosophical basis of self-access learning and learner autonomy as well as the practical benefits an LLC would bring to both the school and the students. It also describes the action plan for establishing the LLC. A successful LLC must balance questions of space, materials, systems and personnel. The paper also outlines the political, academic and logistical elements of the project.

概要

現在、NUISでは、自主的語学学習センター（LLC）の設立に係る試験的プロジェクトが進行中です。ここでは、自主的学習や学習者の自主性に関する教育的、論理的基準について、またLLC設立により大学と学生両者が享受できるであろう実質的な恩恵といった内容を含む計画の概略を提示します。また、LLC設立のための行動計画についても言及します。LLCプロジェクトの成功は、LLCの物理的な設置場所、使用する教材、制度自体、そしてプロジェクトに関わる人的資源いずれにおいても同様につりあいがとれていることが重要なポイントになります。関係者間の意見調整、プログラムの教育制度、実施スケジュールやその内容といった計画実施のための項目についても言及します。

Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been considerable interest within the second language education community concerning the potential of Self-Access Language Learning to revolutionize aspects of the Teaching of English as a Foreign or Second Language (TEFL/TESL). Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) is roughly defined in the growing literature on the subject as the process of encouraging learners to take greater responsibility for their own language studies (Dam 1995; Gardner & Miller 1999; Benson 2001). At present, SALL and the construction of Self-Access Centers (SACs) have spread throughout Asia in such places as the People's Republic of China, Singapore, Indonesia, and beyond (Diptoadi & Teopilus 2003; Wang & Li 2004). Most notably at major and private universities, the rapid spread of SACs has been in large part fueled by the rise of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), a cyberlinguistic trend in language education that was predicted to gain momentum in all aspects of language learning as we move further into the 21st century (Hadley 2001).

The field of second language education has since moved beyond the somewhat naïve beliefs that a marriage of CALL to SALL would somehow automate or even replace the remedial and tutorial functions of language teaching (Levy 1997, pp. 102-103). Most innovative proponents of SALL today view its inclusion in the educational process, and as well the creation of SACs within their institutions, as a supplementary but vital means for aiding language learners in receiving personalized instruction that meets their specific needs and interests.

However, in the stages leading up to starting a SAC, it is common to encounter misconceptions about its nature and use. Teachers frequently envision either a place which is more akin to a language library, (hearkening back to the days of old when students would quietly pour over turgid collections of grammar books), or of a language laboratory that remains firmly under the centralized control of a teacher who is

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physically monitoring the learners (Martyn & Voller 1993; Gardner & Miller 1999). If not maintained with a viable training program, students can easily misconstrue a SAC as more of a social space than a venue for enjoyable language study, and thereby contribute to its devolution into a cybercafé (McMurray 2005). School administrators as well can sometimes be found guilty of throwing large amounts of money into facilities and the purchase of educational technology without adequately investing in teaching staff, training, maintenance and clerical support (Prince 2000).

As the Department of Information Culture at Niigata University of International and Information Studies (NUIS) considers the prospect of a Self-Access Center, we feel it is important to consider some of the "first principles" that are important for both creating and maintaining a robust SAC. The creation of a SAC at NUIS carries with it the strong potential for becoming a showpiece for the success in recent years that NUIS has already enjoyed in the area of language education. After a brief consideration of the nature, origins and key concepts that support SALL, we will discuss the rationale, needs, set up process, maintenance and challenges that face self-access language learning at NUIS.

Literature Review

The driving force behind SALL has resulted from the culmination of philosophical, educational and economic dynamics. Although some maintain that Self-Access Language Learning is a postmodernist enterprise (Finch 2005), we believe that philosophically, SALL has drawn its sustenance from constructivism. Constructivism maintains that people are, in effect, like scientists who interact with the outside world and then construct theoretical interpretations based upon their experiences. In terms of educational theory, constructivism suggests that the way students act or react with regard to language teaching is connected to mental constructs that they have formed from previous classroom events. By the time many have reached the tertiary level in their educational careers, students often see what they expect to see, and may not be reacting to the actual language lessons, but instead to those formative language lessons of the past (Kelly 1963; Wenden 1998; Lincoln & Guba 2000; Hadley & Evans 2001). Self-Access Language Learning helps to provide a fresh venue (via the SAC) for students to construct new language learning experiences through self-discovery as well as trial and error, all the while complementing their existing needs and worldview.

Educationally, the notion of *learner autonomy* is foundational within the literature that justifies SALL. Gremmo & Riley (1995) state that the importance of learners being equipped to take control over their studies and to continue even when away from the direct control of their teachers has, in many countries, long been seen as a sign of success by such seminal scholars as Rogers (1961), Holec (1979; 1988), Freire (1972) and Illich (1971), who famously proclaimed that most learning takes place outside of the classroom. A few contend that the concept of autonomy is in itself a culturally-bound concept, and that some educational systems might find a Western application of this educational ideal, such as those in many Asian cultures, (which have had long history of collectivism within their educational models), to be countercultural or counterproductive (Jones 1995; Lee 1998; Harmer 2003; Bressan 2005). However, in Japan, the Ministry of Science and Education (*monbukagaku-sho*) has in recent years called upon universities to cooperate in its initiative to foster life-long learning (*shōgai kyōiku*), which is a signal of far-reaching changes both within the society and the educational culture. As will be discussed later in this paper, we believe that the notion of life-long learning is compatible with SALL, in that both call on learners to continue to study even when not within the confines of a traditional classroom (Brady, Hadley & Jones 2004).

Another influence on the formation of SACs and SALL has been that of economic neoliberalism, a form of free-market capitalism associated with globalization and seen most visibly in the economies of Thatcher's United Kingdom, Berlusconi's Italy, and the US Reagan administration's "trickle-down" theory. Neoliberalism

emphasizes the rule of the Market, deregulation, privatization and the elimination of communal efforts in favor of individual achievement (George 1999; Shah 2005). For example, writing in support of SALL, Gremmo and Riley (1995) state:

The commercialization of much language provision, together with the movement to heighten consumer awareness mentioned earlier, has also had an influence on the way the language learner's role is perceived. No longer the passive recipient of institutional charity, the learner is seen as a consumer making informed choices in the market. This form of discourse is certainly not to everyone's taste, but it is a clear indication of what is happening to public perceptions of and attitudes to educational institutions, practices and values (p. 154).

It is no coincidence, therefore, that Gardner & Miller (1999, pp. 241-261), in their case studies of SACs from various institutions throughout the world, use terms such as "supermarket" and "technology store" to highlight the one-stop shopping nature of this form of language learning. The neo-liberalist model for SACs can also be seen in the calls for students to be encouraged to work for their own success in the target language. The learning process is deregulated from the central control of the teacher, while at the same time, administrators can potentially increase the students' exposure to the language via computers and other materials without additional labor costs in the form of hiring new teachers or staff.

We believe this aspect of SALL is perhaps one of the reasons why Japanese universities have been behind many other Asian countries in the development of SACs. Using the political compass analysis employed by Shah (2005; *The Political Compass* 2006), the political and academic practices within Japanese universities following the Second World War have tended to waver between the authoritarian and libertarian left, which has supported state-sponsored collectivism while at the same time seeking to maintain a strong emphasis on institutional or regional identity (Figure 1). A move towards SALL inevitably carries with it the implications of a move towards somewhere between the libertarian right for teachers and authoritarian right for financial stakeholders within an educational institution.

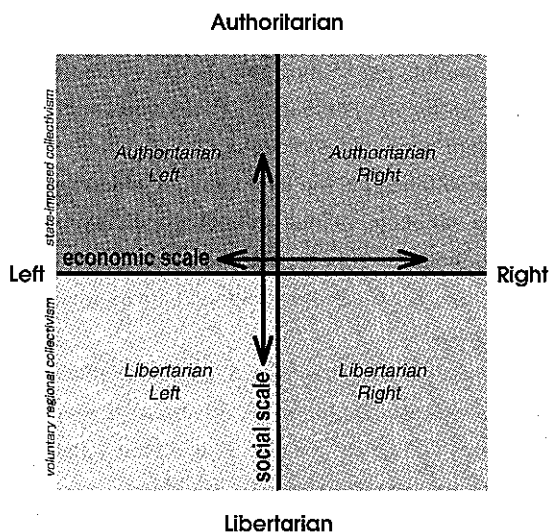


Figure 1 Political Compass (Political Compass Website, 2006)

We contend that the far-reaching neoliberal changes that are already taking place within the Japanese tertiary education system. A few examples can be seen in the sudden emphasis on student surveys as a means to measure customer satisfaction, the importance of TOEIC, (the language of which focuses American business

models), as a universal standard for measuring pragmatic success within Japanese university language curricula, and the reduction of teachers' salaries without consultation or the existence of union-based negotiation. With such changes expected to continue in Japan for the unforeseeable future, the climate is right among some of the most influential stakeholders for the implementation of a Self-Access Center at NUIS. We will now shift our discussion to the practical considerations for the creation of a SAC.

Rationale for SAC

The rationale for establishing a SAC at NUIS is three-fold. There are practical, philosophical and pedagogical dimensions to the reasons behind the plan. As suggested earlier in this paper, on a practical level, a SAC will be a significant asset to NUIS. NUIS has built its reputation on being a high-tech facility dedicated to international understanding, language education and student services. A well-run, attractive SAC will become a showpiece for NUIS. It will be a tangible sign of the commitment the university shows to developing its curriculum and student services. A vibrant, active SAC will be a key stop on high-school student recruitment tours and could be a centerpiece of promotional materials.

An active SAC also has the potential to be a center for research, allowing the teaching staff of all the different language programs a venue for innovative investigations into language education and language acquisition. This will result in publications and presentations under the NUIS name, thus benefiting the university's reputation in academic circles.

Establishing a SAC also gives NUIS a position at the forefront of a significant trend in tertiary education in Japan. While self-access language learning used as a supplement to face-to-face classes has become the norm in North America and Europe for some time, it is now becoming a viable option in Japan as well. Universities across the country are beginning to establish SACs with dedicated professionals for staffing these facilities. As evidence of the trend, one only has to look to the fact that the 2007 International Independent Learning Association will be holding their next conference at Kanda University in Chiba.

On a philosophical level, a SAC can help prepare students for the realities of the 21st century. It has the potential to support students in developing their autonomy as learners. Work in a SAC environment can help students develop the skills and, somewhat more importantly, attitudes they need to work and study independently and to make their own learning decisions. These skills and attitudes, if developed early, can support a lifelong habit of self-directed learning (Bittel 1989).

Developing this lifelong habit of self-directed learning is key for education in the new millennium. The fact is that we are in a new era. In the new knowledge economy, specific skills and factual knowledge are soon obsolete, often before the students graduate. No school or university can now claim to provide everything students will need in their working life. The focus of education as a whole has to be on developing transferable, self-directed learning skills (Benson 2001).

On a pedagogical level, a well-managed SAC has the potential to benefit students in a number of areas. This fact was acknowledged in 2005 by the Japanese Ministry of Education in a recent Award for Excellence in Best Practices, which was given to Kanda University for their Self-Access Learning Center. Some of the many potential educational benefits to students from SAC work are as follows:

- Work in SAC environments is inherently motivational. We believe that students having greater choice and control over their learning environment are key elements in developing learner motivation.
- The SAC will allow for a degree of individualization of learning not possible in classroom work.
- The SAC will give students a chance to work with materials beyond what is possible in the class. This includes not only the range of materials housed in the SAC but also the range of language learning experiences and ways to interact with the target language.

- The value of learner autonomy and responsibility instilled in learners at the SAC has a potential bonus of a trickle-down to other courses.
- The SAC provides a venue for students to interact with learners from other classes and language programs. It is a place to foster students helping students.
- Work in the SAC does not have to be separate from class work. Teachers can integrate SAC projects and tasks into class materials to expand the range of what is possible in the classroom.

SAC Needs

The needs of a SAC fall into three separate yet equally important groups – space, materials and systems.

There is no one pattern for what a SAC space looks like. Some are high-tech facilities housed in specially designed buildings (see for example Cooker & Torpey (2004)) while others are decidedly low-tech and housed in library corners or unused classrooms. There are, however some key elements of design that successful SACs share. Self-access language learning centers tend to be set off from their surroundings in some way. They are housed in a separate building, a separate room or a clearly delineated area. This demarcation gives learners a clear sense of entering a learning space when they enter the SAC. This is necessary to establish the atmosphere as a serious study area. Similarly, successful SACs tend to be subdivided into functional areas such as a CALL area, a reading corner, or a speaking lounge. These divisions allow students to more easily focus their work and avoid distractions.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of a well-established SAC is that it is a warm, inviting space. SAC style language study tends to be assigned optionally or taken on as extra credit. As such, a SAC needs to be an appealing space in which the students want to spend time. SACs tend to have the image of an open café. This kind of warm atmosphere is inspired by the neoliberal economic view of education as discussed earlier (Cooke & Torpey 2004).

In many ways, self-access centers are designed to resemble retail spaces rather than traditional educational facilities. The center is bright and the staff cheerfully greet students who enter. Materials are displayed rather than merely being shelved. Students are given a menu of options to choose from to make their visit more productive. Work in the center is a social experience, not a solitary one. Some language teachers may question the retail model used to describe SACs, but we feel that most will agree that a successful SAC should be a place where the students want to be, not where they have to be.

The second set of needs for a successful SAC revolves around materials. A SAC needs to be stocked with attractive reading and audio-visual materials to give students the comprehensible input they need to achieve language acquisition. This is especially important in a rural Japanese environment as is found at NUIS. NUIS students tend to have very little contact with their target language outside the classroom. A mix of authentic and learner specific materials can help make up for this shortfall.

A SAC also needs a wide range of self-study materials so that students can focus on improving their language skills. If students have an identified shortfall in one language skill set, work in the SAC can target their weaknesses and help them balance their language. For this reason, a SAC needs to have a wide range of materials for self-study, especially in grammar and vocabulary, which lend themselves nicely to this kind of self-study.

At present, we feel that no SAC would be complete without CALL. Computer assisted language learning resources are becoming more and more common in all areas of language learning. Computers have the potential to facilitate communication, bring far away resources directly to the learner and perform some (but not all) of the functions of a tutor. Of course, CALL itself cannot guarantee successful language learning. CALL resources, like all other materials destined for a SAC, need to be carefully chosen.

The final set of needs for a successful SAC is the system that makes a SAC work. Without these systems, a SAC is no more than a library resource center. Systems need to be established in order to manage the facility, train and support the learners, and evaluate the success of both individual learners and the program as a whole. A SAC is an active place if well-run and carefully managed. Materials need care and maintenance. Supplies need to be replenished. Schedules for the staff and academic advisors need to be set and maintained. Patterns of student usage need to be tracked so that informed decisions can be made for modifications to the center or its collection of materials. A self-access language learning center is not by default a self-sustaining project, and needs to be continually supported and renewed (Morrison 2005).

The students who use a SAC will also need to be supported. Sharle & Szabo (2000) are among many who are involved in the task of SALL that emphasize the fact that most student have never been taught how to become independent learners. Faced with the overwhelming first glance of a SAC containing a wide range of materials, some students may simply turn away because they do not have a sense of how to begin. A series of materials needs to be designed and provided for students which will cover topics ranging from study skills and goals setting to advice on specific language skills. These materials will take the form of handouts, student record books and workshops. These materials will have to be designed with the goal of moving students ever closer to the eventual state of greater student autonomy.

The Process of Setting up a SAC

Creating a SAC is a complicated process involving political, logistical and educational decisions, all of which must be made at a variety of levels throughout the institution. An abbreviated version of the process can be seen in the ten-point action plan with comments shown in Table 1.

<i>Step</i>		<i>Comment</i>
1.	Decide Space	Space may be preferred for logistical or educational reasons, but the final choice will result from political concerns.
2.	Secure Budget Approval	The initial budget should be for a pilot project only.
3.	Establish Relationships with Stakeholders	Creating a consensus and deciding responsibilities is a critical step in the early days of the project. Lines of communication must stay open throughout the entire process.
4.	Acquire Equipment and Materials	Materials and equipment should be bought as soon as possible and non-traditional sources should be considered.
5.	Design Training and Support Materials	Guidebooks and handouts for the SAC need to be made and distributed.
6.	Arrange Space and Place Materials	The design should reflect both usability and attractiveness.
7.	Promotion and Use	The SAC needs to be marketed in order to encourage students to come. Posters, class visits and special assignments can all be used to promote the facility.
8.	Evaluate Students and Systems	A clear set of criteria for success indicators must be established in order to determine success.
9.	Bring in Other Languages	The SAC needs to reflect the diversity found in all of the university's language programs.
10.	Ongoing Evaluation and Modifications	The SAC must be continually evaluated and improved.

Table 1 SAC Ten-Step Action Plan for NUIS

Maintaining the SAC

While the idea of a self-access language learning center does imply the students taking responsibility for their learning, staff involvement is still vital. Table Two shows the options for staffing a SAC. In the NUIS situation, it is likely that the pilot project SAC will be run with a combination of non-teaching staff and visits by teaching staff. Other staffing options can be reviewed in the future.

No Staffing	There is no involvement by staff on a day to day basis. This is obviously a non-preferred option.
Full time non-teaching staffing	The center has a full time staff person who can take care of minor matters but is not involved in centre administration and does not assist students in learning tasks.
Volunteer student tutors	Advanced students act as tutors for their peer. They establish a tutorial schedule and are available at set times.
Visits by teaching staff	Language teachers visit the center, perhaps establishing office hours to act as tutors for students. They also conduct study skills workshops.
Teaching assistant	A qualified T.A. can be hired to staff and manage the LLC. While they are not a teacher, they will help students and act as a tutor.
Full time center manager	A full time teacher is hired to manage the center, give workshops, develop materials and tutor students.

Table 2 SAC Staffing Options

Another key element in maintaining the SAC will be in establishing sufficient institutional memory to carry on with the project. As is the case in many universities in Japan, English language classes are primarily taught by instructors on term limited contracts. In NUIS's case, the term limits are four years. This has the potential for limiting the contribution any one instructor can have on a curriculum innovation project as long term as the establishment of a SAC is bound to be. In a case where the expertise in self-access language learning, student autonomy and student training all lie with the same person, there is a grave risk that a SAC project will fall apart if that person leaves the school. To make up for this limitation, it will be necessary to make the SAC independent of any given person. The success of the CEP program at NUIS (Hadley, Jeffrey & Warwick 2002; Hadley 2006) can be a model for this. The CEP program has a full time, tenured coordinator to ensure the transfer of knowledge. By staggering the intake of new instructors, the program has been able to ensure the mentoring presence of a senior instructor. Great care has been taken in the preparation of a CEP instructor's manual containing all information and a description of all systems needed to maintain the program.

If the SAC is to be a project of the Department of Information Culture's CEP Committee, as presently seems to be the case, these mechanisms can be used to ensure the continuation of expertise and motivation for the support of the SAC. In addition, institutional memory can be maintained within the CEP committee as well.

Potential Hurdles and Challenges

In any curriculum innovation, change agents looking to establish new program will face political and institutional hurdles along with the academic and logistic challenges of the new project. In the case of establishing a SAC this is doubly true. Gardner & Miller (1999) lay out several source of resistance to self-access projects, including teachers who do not want additional responsibilities, funding bodies who do not see the value of self-access, administrators who do not know how to evaluate a SAC and curriculum planners who do not have a common vision of the project and its goals.

Educational innovations of the type that a SAC presents, according to Nunan and Lamb (2001:36) are "a delicate juggling act" for those involved in the start up process, since they must carefully consider the various issues and stakeholders within their educational environments. The literature is replete with impressive lists that describe the attributes needed for innovations to thrive. Based upon his research of over 1,500 studies on innovations in various educational fields, Rogers (E. Rogers 1962/1995) concludes that innovations succeed when they are:

- Advantageous to the end users
- Compatible with earlier educational practices in the institution
- Simple to understand and utilize
- Easy to try out and easy to back away from
- Visible to all the stakeholders

In the case of setting up a self-access center, we believe that the potential strengths lie in the advantages to the learners, compatibility with the changing educational practices at NUIS and its visibility to stakeholders. Simplicity of use, clarity of conception and the ability to back away once started, are issues that we have yet to resolve. Kennedy, Doyle & Goh (1999, pp. 53-54) identify further issues that must be considered:

- There must be a collaborative environment that is conducive for innovations to occur
- Support from management is crucial for successful implementation
- Teachers need to be trained in the innovation
- Innovators must maximize benefits and minimize costs to stakeholders
- Innovators must be skilled in the subject content, and need expertise in management and interpersonal relations
- Innovators must remember that innovation is as much a political as a rational activity

All of these and related studies can be summarized by identifying three important factors that should be considered when planning innovations: the innovators, the educational environment, and the real needs of stakeholders.

In addition to these challenges, NUIS is in the rather unique position of having its biggest obstacle to the establishment of a self-access language center also be its greatest resource and opportunity for the SAC. NUIS has all of the physical elements of a moderately sized SAC already in place. For example, there is already a space designated as a language learning lab with some equipment and fittings in place. However, this space is somewhat inappropriate for use as a SAC since it is dark, uninviting and rather isolated from the main flow of traffic on campus. Renovating this space would be a difficult and costly enterprise. There is an ideal space available, and currently underused, in the International Exchange Center. It could very easily be made appropriate for use as a SAC. There would be very little cost as the changes that need to be made could primarily be accomplished by rearranging furniture and materials. The third element in this situation is the collection of language learning materials and dedicated equipment in the library. As with the space in the International Exchange Center, these resources are currently underused. If they could be redesigned for use as SAC resources, the costs of establishing a dynamic, successful SAC would be minimal. Budgeting requirements could be very small if the right space could be acquired within the existing facilities at NUIS. However, our experience so far in attempting to unify these concerns has encountered a number of political challenges. In the days ahead, it will be our ability to both manage interpersonal issues, while also maximizing the benefits to stakeholders, which may ultimately decide the future of the SAC Initiative.

Conclusion

Although the question of redesignating spaces and resources is the key political issue facing the SAC, we are

convinced that such a project will contribute to the creation of an even more productive learning environment at NUIS. Provided that the rationale for a SAC is understood by the major stakeholders, and agreement on what is needed is established, the set up process and maintenance of a Self-Access Center will be a minimal burden to NUIS, and the benefits of promoting autonomous language learner will more than offset any perceived challenges that we may face in the future.

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