

From Zero to Hero: The Story of a Free Conversation Service

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Author Biography

Christopher Cladis has taught EFL in both Japan and Turkey over the last 10 years. He is currently a lecturer at the Language Learning Center at Osaka Institute of Technology. His research interests include developing curricula for project-based learning courses and learner autonomy as it is related to self-access centers.

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In self-access learning centers (SALCs) across Japan, some form of a ‘free conversation’ service is quite common. These services provide a designated space where students can

comfortably practice communicating in English. and tend not to require a reservation or registration. This sort of service can be met with varying levels of student participation . This progress report will detail the history of such a service, including changes implemented in order to improve it and the subsequent results. It is the writers' hope that other SALC teams can gain insight from the lessons learned and gather some ideas to implement in their own service. The focus will largely be placed on how the service impacted the overall goal of the SALC to build a learning community or Community of Practice (COP) (Wenger, 1998) and the role played by the physical space it inhabited. As consideration of community when planning learning spaces is critical for fostering deeper learning (Bickford & Wright, 2006), many of the decisions made involved careful thought about physical spaces and how to best utilize those spaces .

SALC Background

The institution discussed here is a SALC called the Language Learning Center (LLC), established in 2012, at a technology university in Japan. There is a director, two instructors, one manager and seventeen student staff. The building, located slightly off campus, has three floors; all services are currently found on the second floor, while the other two floors consist of free study space.

The LLC provides a variety of services and resources which include a library of books, comics, and DVDs. The center offers credit and elective courses, including TOEIC and study abroad support courses. In addition, students can receive specialized support to suit their individual needs during one-to-one sessions in a Consultation Room (CR). This service is offered at various times throughout the week and requires a reservation. Free Conversation (FC), the focus of this report, is a non-reservation service held daily during lunchtime. During FC, students have an opportunity to communicate in English with an instructor, a student staff member, and each other, sometimes in the form of a casual conversation, and other times in the form of a game or activity.

The FC has undergone a number of changes over the years to improve the service and increase participation. In order to maximize the potential of the service and attract higher numbers of students, the LLC team ultimately chose to distill the various functions of a SALC into the broader purpose of fostering a supportive language learning community. As language learning is a social process, providing opportunities to participate in community building activities is paramount (Curry & Mynard, 2014). While the LLC, overall, has been successful in

creating this type of community, the FC service tended to have inconsistent numbers of participants and seemed to exist separately from the main community. What follows is a report of the challenges that have arisen over the years, improvements made, and how the FC service has turned into the hero of the LLC, successfully drawing in large numbers of students and becoming one of the most popular services.

History of the Free Conversation Service

In 2014, two years after the LLC was established, the decision was made by the LLC team at the time to introduce a free conversation space on the underused third floor of the building (Figure 1). Initially, the LLC team decided to run the free conversation service with themed activities each day of the week. Mondays and Fridays were focused on TOEIC activities, Tuesday was for games, Wednesday featured a book club and Thursday was geared towards movies. A café was introduced in order to increase the foot traffic to the third floor. This café was separate to the free conversation space but users could eat and drink purchased food whilst using the service.

Figure 1:

Free Conversation on the 3rd Floor



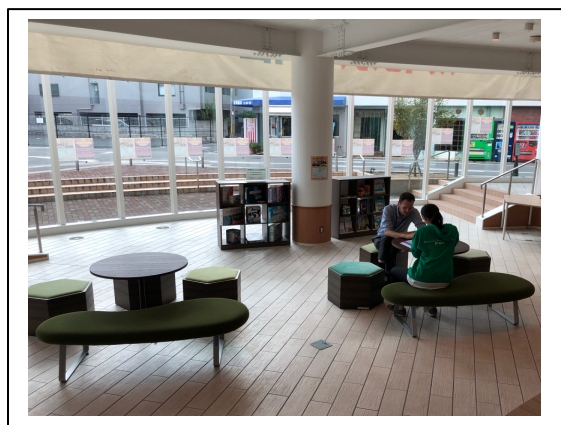
Initially, the service attracted students, but it was noted on weekly sign-up sheets that the number of users steadily decreased over the course of the semester. Possible reasons for this decrease in users included the large areas of empty space around the FC space that may have made shyer students uncomfortable. In addition, the nature of some activities required a certain

degree of commitment to attend on a regular basis. For example, students would have to consider a TOEIC activity or a story they wanted to discuss prior to attending the service. The lack of natural footfall to the third floor of the building also may have affected the popularity of the service.

In 2015 the decision was made to move the FC service to the first floor of the LLC (Figure 2). Changes made included a reduction from five days to three days a week and the structured activities were abandoned in favor of a conversation space where students could talk to an instructor without any pressure to do an ‘activity’. After an initial increase in the number of students using the service there was a gradual decline over the first year. In 2016, an effort to increase participation was made by linking the use of the service with the option to get credit if students attended a certain number of times. This bolstered numbers significantly, but the quality of the interactions was reduced as students’ motivation to use English was not adequately addressed. Those students who attended in order to obtain credit, rather than practice English, often continued speaking Japanese throughout the session and did not make an effort to participate in activities.

Figure 2:

Free Conversation on the 1st Floor



Overall, the reasons for the struggles of the service likely stemmed from the position of the FC space, exposed and easily visible, meaning that shy students might have felt self-

conscious speaking English. The furniture was also lacking in comfort, mainly consisting of hard wooden stools. By the midway point of the 2018 academic year, the LLC staff had to make the decision to either stop the service or reinvent the service to increase the number of users. The team opted for the latter.

Measures Taken to Improve the Service

Probably the most drastic change to the FC service was moving it to the second floor (Figure 3). The initial rationale for moving FC to the first floor was that this would make the space more visible from the outside of the building, advertising the service to students walking by, and giving students on the way to the second floor an opportunity to join. In reality, this did not happen, as attendance fell further. The furniture was not comfortable and the windows meant the FC group was visible to passersby, which might have inhibited participation. Further, foot traffic did not bring students directly into the FC area. Most students using other services would enter the building and turn away from the FC area to go upstairs for their CR appointments.

Figure 3:

Free Conversation on the 2nd Floor



By moving to the second floor, FC became intertwined with the rest of the LLC services, and thus enhanced the sense of community in the LLC and ‘the social dimension of learning’ (Shelton-Strong & Mynard, 2018, p. 59), which is of utmost importance. Students waiting for

their appointments in the CR used to sit quietly, playing on their phones or doing homework, but now they could easily join FC and talk to other students while waiting. Instructors and staff could also pass by regularly and join the conversation, whereas on the first floor, the only people passing by the FC area were on their way to the restrooms and likely not eager to join the conversation. The frequency of sessions was also increased, from three times a week back to five, so students could be sure that lunchtime always meant FC was happening.

The move to the second floor allowed for use of the already-existing furniture there, which helped foster a more welcoming atmosphere. The bright sofas and padded chairs arranged around a coffee table and TV lent itself to a casual setting resembling a living room. Additionally, the TV meant a movie or series could be playing in the background. On top of that, a Nintendo Switch was provided, along with multiplayer games such as Mario Kart and Mario Party, which necessitate communication among players.

Challenges and their Solutions

Challenges Encountered

Once these changes were implemented, at the start of the 2019 school year, the number of participants joining the FC service increased dramatically. Looking at the semester participation numbers as a whole compared to previous years (Figure 4), it is by far the most successful (2016 is excluded from the data because of the previously mentioned experiment offering credit to attend FC). Additionally, looking at the semester week to week (Figure 5), there is a steady participation rate throughout the term.

Figure 4:

Free Conversation Users (2014-2019: Semester 1)

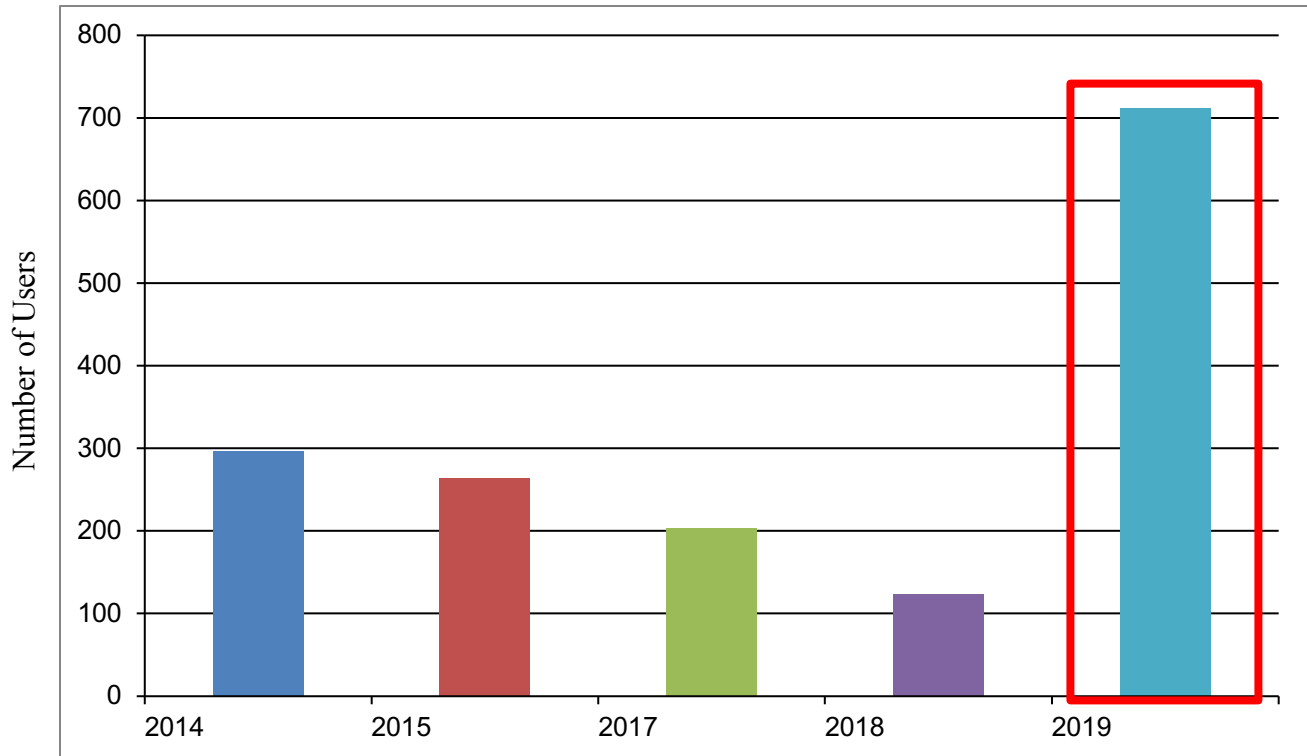
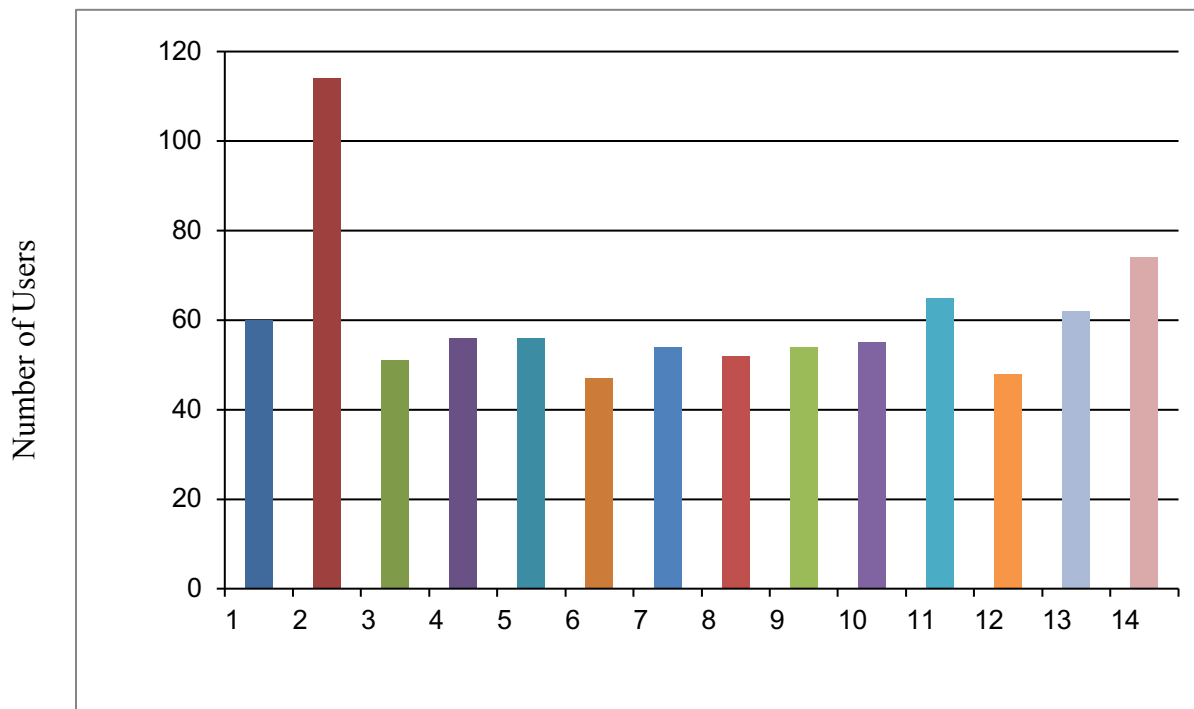


Figure 5:

Free Conversation weekly users (2019-2020: Semester I, Weeks 1-14)



The dramatic increase in numbers was accompanied by a number of challenges. Whereas before instructors and student staff had to accommodate approximately one to five students in a session, they now had to contend with 15 to 20 attendees. First, there were the physical limitations of the space, whereby students arriving later might be relegated to an outside seat, far from the instructor and student staff. This placed them in a difficult position to participate in an activity or conversation. This made it particularly difficult to include hesitant students. Second, instructors and staff were not quite sure what to do with larger crowds. Whereas in previous years, a simple group chat or a board game might suffice, in this new landscape, these activities were not ideal, as they are better suited to smaller groups. While students could possibly form their own group and play a board game, they would be cut off from the instructor/staff member and might not feel motivated to use English.

Solutions

Several steps were taken in order to deal with these challenges and accommodate participants.

- **Student Staff Adjustments:** The first step that was taken to remedy some of these problems was adding an additional student staff member to the FC service. The presence of an instructor, plus two student staff members increased opportunities for participants to interact with a member of the SALC team.
- **Simplifying Activities:** The next step included activities for larger groups of people. To some degree, simplification was key, opting for activities such as Pictionary or conversation starter question cards. With these simple activities, larger groups could easily be split and made into smaller pockets of conversation or teams.
- **Inclusive Activities:** In terms of activities that could easily draw more students, jigsaw puzzles were useful tools. A puzzle could be placed on the coffee table in the middle of the group and students could participate (or not) at their leisure. This saw large numbers of up to ten students crowded around a table, engaged and using English, and surprisingly, some students often stayed well after FC was over so they could continue working on the puzzle. Another very popular activity was *Kahoot*, which is an online quiz game run through a computer connected to the TV whereby students participate using their mobile phones. Students could choose from a vast collection of public quizzes

and the LLC team also created their own. These quizzes were an efficient way to include large numbers of students and easily involve lower level and shy students.

Conclusion

Through this experience, two key lessons were learned: the importance of increasing flexibility, and establishing and maintaining a nurturing language learning community. Given the added flexibility of the FC in terms of the days it was offered, the removal of structured activities, and the offering of more inclusive activities, students did not feel pressure to prepare and could rest assured that they could easily participate. When FC was moved to the middle of the LLC on the second floor, it became far more accessible, not only for students but also for instructors, and served to establish a closer community. Once established, FC became everyone's shared space for catching up and relaxing. Essentially, all of the lessons learned and changes made served to consolidate and intertwine the services of the LLC, including FC, into a more comfortable space, giving more opportunities for authentic communication among students, instructors, and staff. The changes made also contributed towards fostering a genuine sense of community and togetherness, which provides a strong foundation for all future innovations to be built upon.

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