

JASAL Online Student Forum 2021: A Review and Reflection

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Author Biography

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The Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) 2nd Student Forum took place on Saturday afternoon of February 6th, 2021. Like the 1st Student Forum on July 4th, 2020, it was held online through Zoom due to COVID-19. However, most of the students and teachers in the forum seemed to enjoy the greetings, conversations, and learning through the screen. In addition, the online situation made it possible for some students from other countries to attend. In this forum, 14 students from six universities participated, and three of the students, who contributed a lot to the success of this event, played an important role as a student leader. Those six universities are located in different areas of Japan: Chiba, Saitama, and Ibaragi in Kanto area, Gifu in Tokai area, and Oita in Kyushu area. The attendees were not only Japanese, but there were also foreign students, some of whom are currently back in their home country, as well as some who are now in Japan and studying in a Japanese university. Also, we had six teachers including administrators. One of them was an invited speaker of this forum, Mr. Jackson Koon Yat Lee, who is a specially-appointed lecturer at Toyo University in Tokyo. This event started with a short opening remark and then moved on to a presentation given by Jackson Lee. After three meaningful sessions organized by student leaders, the event closed with warm remarks.

Guest Speaker Presentation

Jackson Lee, as a guest speaker, gave a presentation on fun ways to study a language. The title was “10 Self-Access Activities to Learn English Without Studying”. This is based on his idea that students often feel tired when they study English, and this is because of the tremendous amount and variety of things they need to learn and the complex English they meet in class. Even though these are indeed important parts of studying a language, he stated that language learning can be much more enjoyable depending on the way of learning. He has all these perspectives partly because he is an English teacher. As a teacher, he has seen many university students who dislike English because of the reasons above, and he wishes more students could feel less pressured when they study it. However, his idea is not only based on his experience as a teacher. Even though he is a fluent English speaker, English is not his first language. He actually has experience of studying English (and he is currently a learner of Japanese), and he understands how it feels for students to study or use a language that they do not feel comfortable with.

The 10 activities that he shared in the presentation were, 1) reading material, 2) videos, 3) YouTube, 4) single-player video games, 5) music, 6) party games, 7) multiplayer video games, 8) communities, 9) social media, 10) content creation. All of these are focused

not only on studying English but also using English. Obviously, some of them are not what all teachers recommend their students in a classroom as good ways of learning a language, but that is the point: Students are able to learn a language without feeling like they are studying it. In effect, one of the students in the forum looked surprised when Jackson Lee mentioned trading cards (Yu-gi-oh) as one example of 1) reading material. This is perhaps because for him, card games are nothing but games, which are just for fun, or perhaps because he was surprised at the fact that an English teacher plays trading card games too.

Jackson Lee believes that finding the balance between studying English and using English is very important. Although many students focus too much on doing what they do in the classroom, students have to make a transition from being an English learner to being an English speaker in order for the language to be a part of their life. For Self-Access Centers (SACs) and their leaders and staff, therefore, thinking creatively in order to find new and varied ways for students to use English is going to be the key to enjoying English with their members.

Student Forum

The Student Forum started after the presentation by Jackson Lee. This forum was organized entirely by student leaders, who had worked on this project for several weeks. During the forum, we had three sessions with three breakout rooms each. Every room had one student leader, and teachers were free to go observe those rooms. Since this was a student-led event, teachers were not supposed to talk but only listen to students' conversation. Each of the three sessions had one theme to discuss. In the Student Forum, we were expected to talk in English, but we were also able to use Japanese when we felt it difficult to speak English.

Three student leaders were introduced, and each one of us also introduced ourselves too. One of the student leaders announced the first topic, and we were assigned to the breakout rooms.

Session 1

The first topic was about the countries we have been to. Because we did not know each other, and because it was the first session, there was a short silence after we were put in a breakout room. When the student leader was sure that everyone was assigned in the room, he started the conversation. He repeated the topic, made sure that all of the students in the room have had been to at least one foreign country, and then shared his experience in the

Philippines, where he had studied English for a month. He talked about what he did and did not enjoy there. His story helped us to think of what we can talk about in this session. Then we shared our own experience abroad one by one, commenting on each other's experiences, and afterwards went back to the main room. There, one of the students from each room shared what they had talked about in their breakout room with everyone, and then we moved on to the next session.

Session 2

In this session, the topic was tips to study English, or what motivates us to study English. In this room, we had different members to Session 1, and the student leader started the conversation. As we did in the last session, we took turns and shared our own ideas. Learning what hard-working students are doing and what they are being careful about when they study a language was very helpful for me. Listening to diligent language learners actually motivated me to study English harder. Also, there were students who study a language in the way Jackson Lee talked about in his presentation. Some of us had similar ideas, and others had different ideas. Some felt that they need to study more, and others were trying not to push themselves too much. Although the students were already quite motivated for studying a language and good at English, they listened to, asked, and learned from each other. After going back to the original main room, one student from each breakout room again shared the ideas they had discussed.

Session 3

The last topic was the current situation of SACs in the pandemic environment and how we are using them. Since there were students from different universities, it was interesting to hear about the situation of each center. Because of the coronavirus, everyone refrained from meeting people or holding an event at the beginning of the school year, but it seemed that at the time we had the forum, most of us in the room had gradually resumed events and activities either online or face to face. As in the two previous sessions, the student leader was the facilitator of the conversation. After all of us finished sharing the situations in our own environment, he asked the other students several questions in order to make the discussion broader and deeper.

After we returned to the main room and shared the conversations briefly, we moved on to the ending section, which was a Q&A time for Jackson Lee's presentation. Teachers asked questions from the perspective of improving their students' language and motivation. Students asked about ways to improve their English ability. Then, we took a picture and had

some time to share our SNS so that we can get in touch with the students from the forum.

My Thoughts on this Forum

This was my first time to attend the JASAL Student Forum, and I was surprised that this well-organized event was put on by students. During the forum, I was able to see how much time and effort student leaders had taken to make this event better. Most of the attendees of this forum did not know each other, so the event was planned to gradually break the walls between each other. Starting with self-introductions, we were put into different rooms, and each room had four or five students. Because the group was smaller, that made me feel comfortable enough to have a discussion. Smaller groups also helped me to get to know people in the room. There was a student leader who took time for self-introductions again at the beginning of the discussion. Knowing about the people in the group made me feel easier to talk about myself.

The topics were well-considered too. According to the report on the 1st Student Forum, there were also three sessions, but all the topics were about Self-Access Centers (Tashiro, 2020). On the other hand, as I mentioned above, the topics in this forum were 1) experience in foreign countries, 2) our own ways of studying a language, and 3) the current situations of SACs. We started with a casual topic, which was fun and easy to talk about, then discussed our own ideas for a language study. Later at the last session, we talked about the SACs. The first topic was interesting, and it also played a role as an icebreaker. By gradually changing to the important topic, I assume the student leaders wanted to make sure that we would have more practical discussions.

According to Pennington (2011), it is impossible to have enough language study time only in the classroom, and self-learning is sometimes very difficult to accomplish by oneself. What helps us then is friends. Learning from teachers is indeed helpful, but there are many benefits of learning with our friends. The benefits can include motivating, encouraging, and giving advice to each other. They can also include motivating ourselves by wanting to be as fluent as a friend in a language or by competing against a friend. When we are with friends or other language learners, we feel safer talking in a foreign language. We can study a language alone, but it would be more effective when we have someone who has the same goal. We can see the benefits of learning with friends, but not many students actually take an action. JASAL Student Forum has given me an opportunity to think again about the importance of working with people, and it was a great place to discuss issues and ideas and also make connections for better language study.

References

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