

## Remote SALC Practices in a Pandemic: One University's Initial Approach and Subsequent Revisions

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COVID-19's initial rapid spread in early 2020 severely impacted a broad range of institutions around the world, including universities and colleges. A global survey on higher education conducted in March and April of 2020 by the International Association of Universities reported that among 454 institutions, 89% had to close or partially close campuses, and 67% had transitioned from in-person to online instruction at that time (Marinoni et al., 2020). An estimated 220 million university students across 170 countries were negatively affected (Bassett, 2020). Freshmen were particularly vulnerable to disruptions caused by the pandemic, including distressing levels of social isolation (International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020).

Aiming to both mitigate COVID-19's isolating effects and continue to provide a student-centered space for English practice, the instructors and student staff at Language LOFT, Konan University's self-access learning center (SALC), quickly planned and then transitioned to an online format. The process described herein, from initial implementation to subsequent improvements, enabled a popular forum for English language learning opportunities and meaningful social interactions, especially among freshmen students, to be sustained.

### **Language LOFT**

LOFT, in its non-virtual form, is housed within Konan's Global Zone facility and comprises roughly a quarter of the total floor space. The Global Zone also contains a study area for international students, a multi-purpose lounge, and an outdoor terrace to facilitate intermingling between Konan students and their international counterparts. From the outset, LOFT was never envisioned as a stand-alone facility in either a physical or functional sense. Instead, it has always been viewed as an integral part of the Global Zone and is invested in the facility's overall purpose: to increase intercultural interactions on campus.

This social context lends itself to prioritizing activities that promote communication and collaboration over more solitary and self-directed SALC learning experiences. Therefore, when the pandemic forced LOFT to relocate online, successfully retaining aspects of the SALC that maximize interaction was deemed essential. *Visits* and *Events*, explained in detail below, were moved online. *Tasks* (our term for self-directed activities that students complete alone) were temporarily cancelled. Such solo activities are typically a core feature of any SALC as they epitomize student choice and autonomy. However, this category was sacrificed in favor of the more communicative *Visits* and *Events*.

Before COVID-19, LOFT averaged roughly 10,000 instances of student usage annually. While total university enrollment hovers around 9,000, the vast majority of LOFT users are freshmen. Stamp cards tie LOFT usage to one of the required freshmen English courses, and a completed card comprises 10% of that course's grade. While not compulsory since a passing grade is still possible without it, this system incentivizes use of the SALC. The goal is to familiarize freshmen enough with LOFT that a significant number will continue using it even after the grade-based incentive no longer applies.

Beyond the need to adjust activities to online formats and devise a virtual replacement for the LOFT stamp card, student staffing was also a major hurdle. On campus, LOFT is staffed by both international students (*LOFT Tutors*, or *LTs*) and Konan students (*LOFT Assistants*, or *LAs*). Unfortunately, we could no longer employ LTs once the pandemic forced international students to return to their home countries, so greater use had to be made of LAs than ever before.

### **Bringing Language LOFT Online**

In transitioning to an online format, the primary focus was to create a learner-friendly virtual environment that would support language learning objectives and enhance social interaction. Maintaining essential aspects of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981) and preserving connections between students were guiding principles. Pathways to activities (Visits and Events) were modified accordingly. Available resources were identified and utilized in the most efficient and practical ways possible, enabling teachers and student staff to facilitate 14 activities each week.

The content and structure of activities were revised to work on Zoom, the popular video communications technology. Various Zoom features, particularly the breakout rooms and chat tools, were incorporated to enhance spontaneous, interactive learning experiences for students. Other revisions included activity length and adjustments to teacher and LA roles. Once the modified activities were underway, procedures designed to ensure easy student access to them and reliable recording of student attendance were also utilized. (The next section discusses these activities and their implementation in detail.)

Another vital part of developing the online program was providing adequate training to the team of LAs. As in-person orientation was no longer possible, there were limitations to training LAs remotely in such a short time. As such, a significant part of student staff development was actually on-the-job training, gained through working with teachers and

other staff members as a team. However, alternative training sessions were provided through a combination of asynchronous pre-recorded videos and synchronous Zoom sessions. The university's learning management system was used to house video resources and materials created to monitor LAs' readiness and progress, and also to identify potential problems such as network connectivity or computer availability issues. Reliance on LINE, a popular SNS application, enabled timely and ongoing communication between student staff and the scheduling coordinator.

### **Online Activities**

In the 10 weeks that LOFT was online during the truncated spring semester, teachers and student staff facilitated a total of 140 activities, attended 1,754 times by students. Nearly all participants (98%) were first-year students, and most of them (71%) were enrolled in the freshmen English course linked to LOFT usage. A post-session feedback form asked participants whether the activity, either an Event or a Visit, that they had joined positively influenced them, and close to 70% "strongly agreed" while another 30% "agreed." Caution in interpreting this sort of self-reporting on a non-anonymous survey is advisable, but these results at least suggest that nearly all students were generally satisfied with their experiences of LOFT online activities.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Activity Type 1: Events**

One of the two types of activity offered, Events, used a PowerPoint presentation format. Each Event lasted 30 minutes and was led by a single LA, supported by two other LAs and a teacher. At least one LA was a veteran, and the same group of LAs and teacher worked together throughout the semester. Presentations were prepared by the LAs themselves on thematic weekly topics such as English language learning tips, study abroad experiences, and other issues of personal interest to LAs. The Events started with a brief teacher-led icebreaker, and then the presentation commenced. The non-presenting LAs supported the presenter by assisting with modelling, while the teacher played a facilitative role. Presentations lasted around 20 minutes. Opportunities for audience interaction, usually interactive quizzes, language games, or discussion questions on the topic, were interspersed throughout, lasting a few minutes each.

There were a few notable differences with pre-pandemic Events beyond the move online. The face-to-face Events were talks followed by Q&A sessions with limited to no student participation during the talks, and teachers' only involvement was to check and give

advice about student presentation ideas during the planning stage. For the online Events, teachers were active during the welcoming stage and managed Zoom-related logistical issues, which allowed LAs to focus solely on giving their presentations. Other aspects of format, theme, and LA roles remained unchanged.

Ninety Events were held during the spring semester's 10-week period. Attendance ranged from one to 56 students, averaging roughly 16 attendees per Event. Attendance peaked after a few weeks, declining gradually towards the end of the semester. A consistent workflow was adopted: The team assembled online for a preparation session, lasting 20 minutes, the Event was then held, and finally there was a 10-minute reflection session after participants left. As LAs learned to better anticipate fluctuating attendance, their presentation styles evolved. For example, when more interaction was needed, more discussion questions were included.

Teachers observed that the approach taken had several advantages. LAs spoke on familiar topics or adapted their existing presentations to the new format, thereby reducing their preparatory burden. They also benefited from the opportunity to watch, participate in, and engage in directed reflection on presentations. In addition, consistent group membership allowed teamwork to become progressively streamlined. Members gradually became familiar with each other, the format, and how best to use the various Zoom functions. Nevertheless, there were ongoing problems with holding some attendees' attention throughout the presentations and with occasional connectivity issues.

### **Activity Type 2: Visits**

The main goal of the second type of activity offered, Visits, was to provide students with an opportunity to engage in casual English conversations with peers. Each Visit lasted 30 minutes and was run by a teacher, who served as the host, and three LAs, who led two rounds of conversations in separate breakout rooms with small groups of student attendees. Each week there was a general theme, such as music or food, and then a more specific set of questions to get the chats started. At the beginning of each Visit, the teacher and the team of LAs modeled one of the questions in a round-robin style Q&A. The teacher then put students into breakout rooms with at least one LA in each. After six or seven minutes, they were brought back into the main room to share some interesting answers before returning to the same breakout rooms to continue the chat with other pre-established questions as starting points.

Online Visits were significantly more structured compared to their face-to-face counterparts. Previously, students walked into LOFT and could choose to participate in a Visit if an LA was available at the time or take on a Task by independently following instructions on a worksheet that guided them through a short listening or reading activity. Students could join an ongoing Visit with an LA or start a new one if multiple students arrived at the same time. LA's initiated and guided free conversation or suggested activities such as board games for the students to play together. Unlike online Visits, teachers were not involved, no discussion themes were set ahead of time, and LA's operated almost entirely independently.

Over the 10-week spring period, LOFT hosted 50 total Visits. Typically, between 10 and 15 students would attend, but occasionally there were only three or four. In practice, the teacher mostly guided the activity and managed Zoom functions. The LAs focused on leading the small-group chats while adjusting to the unique group of students in their breakout rooms. There were minor changes to the procedures, particularly in the first few weeks, as teachers and LAs discovered what worked well and what did not. For example, if the number of attendees was very small, everyone stayed in the main Zoom room rather than using breakout rooms.

At the end of the semester, staff and teachers reflected on their experiences with Visits through discussion and review of survey feedback. The planning stage was challenging because there were a lot of unknowns; however, what was initially implemented only needed minor tweaks along the way. Incorporating a decent degree of flexibility with timings, questions, and roles was critical to this success. The most significant issues centered on how to flexibly adapt to each unique group of student attendees that showed up and how to raise participant output during the activity.

### **Student Feedback on Online Activities**

When comparing data on Events and Visits, they were both generally well received, with 68% of Event attendees and 78% of Visit attendees reporting strong agreement that the activity had a positive impact (Yamamoto, 2020). Events were found to be enjoyable, had improved learners' attitudes towards English, or taught them useful study tips. Events also attracted many more participants than Visits, comprising 82% of total LOFT attendance in the spring semester. On the other hand, students generally liked the smaller groups and familiar themes that allowed more interaction with peers during Visits. LAs reported that Events helped them to improve their skills in a variety of areas including language and

communication, leadership, presentation, and problem-solving.

In a 2019 spring semester self-report survey prior to the pandemic, 643 LOFT users were asked about which activity type they had enjoyed the most and had participated in most frequently. Visits were reported to be the most enjoyable (50%), followed by Events (21%) and Tasks (19%). Those same 2019 users also reported that Tasks were the activity they had participated in most often (47%), followed by Visits (28%), and finally Events (15%).

Direct comparisons are difficult to make since Tasks were not offered in the online environment and the same "positive impact" question was not included in the 2019 data set. However, an arguably similar question about satisfaction level was answered positively by 89% of the 2019 students, perhaps indicating that a general measure of student positivity about the LOFT experience fell somewhat but remained respectably high with the transition to online. What is clearer is that Events jumped far ahead of Visits in terms of relative usage frequency when LOFT moved online. This latter result is most likely due to a simple convenience factor: When offered on campus, Visits were available anytime while Events only happened at scheduled times, but in the online environment both were only offered at scheduled times. In any case, it is interesting to note that Events so clearly outpaced Visits in terms of usage frequency when the playing field was leveled in regard to schedule convenience, and analysis of what this might suggest for improvements when LOFT eventually returns to offering full on-campus services is ongoing.

### **Reflections and Adjustments**

During the summer break that followed, teachers and staff were able to look back over the process of transitioning this SALC to an online format. The goals of this reflective process were to produce better online LOFT working conditions for staff and teachers and to improve remote learning experiences for students in the fall semester, which continued to be almost entirely online despite some small-scale attempts to safely restart on-campus activities. In Zoom meetings and chat discussions, teachers identified three major areas that needed attention: how LAs prepared for Events and Visits, participant behavior, and attendance forms. Several adjustments were then implemented in each area for overall improvement.

In the first area of focus, preparing for LOFT activities, LA presentation proposal forms for Events were modified to ensure that the resulting presentations would be geared more towards an online format than to in-person delivery. For instance, the new forms prompted LAs to be more specific about how they planned to interact with students, and



which Zoom features they planned to use. It was also decided that LAs be required to send their proposals and slides to their teacher several days before their presentation date. This gave the teacher time to go over the presentation with the LA, and gave the LA time to make changes in response to feedback. For Visits, an additional LA orientation session was held before the fall semester with a focus on how to engage successfully with students who have varying English level abilities.

The second area covered problematic issues with student participants. The most common of these were participants joining a Zoom session late, weak internet connections, cameras being turned off so that only a cover photo or name was visible, poor use of the mute function when joining from a noisy environment, and an inadequate level of participation due to disengagement from the activity or distraction. To address these issues, a brief and lighthearted video on Zoom etiquette along with a checklist highlighting each issue were shown at the beginning of Events and Visits in the new term.<sup>2</sup>

The third area of focus was the attendance form which, in addition to collecting feedback, served as a critical replacement for the in-person stamp card. In the spring semester, every teacher used a shared online form to record LA attendance and another one for student attendance. Unfortunately, participants made various errors when filling out these forms. This led to LOFT administrative staff, sometimes unsuccessfully, trying to correct the issue. To prevent such errors, it was decided that a member of the administrative staff would join each Zoom meeting at the beginning to confirm LA attendance, and individualized attendance forms for each teacher's English course were provided to students at the start of the semester.

The results from each area of adjustment have been mostly positive. The altered procedures for Event proposals and feedback produced better presentation performances. For Visits, LAs were better prepared and more experienced, which led to higher quality discussions. Meanwhile, there were fewer problems with student behavior, and attendance reporting became simplified so that teachers could check data anytime. Amongst the teachers, staff, and LAs, there was general agreement that the differences between the spring and fall terms were evident and welcome.

### **Looking Forward**

The initial approach and subsequent revisions to remote LOFT practices at Konan University preserved extracurricular learning opportunities and social interaction in English

for students, especially freshmen, in spite of pandemic-related disruption. Most of the hurdles faced by the team were overcome with relative success, even with limited resources and time. Fostering good teamwork among teachers and LAs led to frank communication and reflection. Other key factors were keeping goals realistic and prioritizing communicative activities to counter the isolating nature of the pandemic. With an eye to a brighter future, the lessons learned while scrambling to put together this remote program will continue to be applied. For LOFT, what used to be an entirely on-campus SALC will likely continue to have a robust online presence long after this unprecedented crisis finally abates.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In its original Japanese, the survey statement was このアクティビティを通じて、自分にとって良い刺激になりました [Taking part in this activity had a positive impact on me], and only eight of the 1,754 respondents (0.45%) chose to *disagree* (seven students) or *strongly disagree* (one student) with it.

<sup>2</sup> Zoom etiquette video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnAhjdEo3kE>

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