Review of a Panel Discussion on Self-Access Learning Centers in Japan at the 2021 IALLT Conference

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Author Biography

Phillip J Cameron's primary interests include UX design for student audiences and the heady crucible of world language courses, games and game-based pedagogies, social justice, and praxis. He has been studying UX and language pedagogy for a decade, more recently coming to see the value of social justice in world language instruction.

The presentations in the panel discussion at the International Association for Language Learning Technology Virtual Conference (Bennett et al., 2021) serve as an excellent introduction to the goals and foundational operating principles of self-access learning centers (SALC) in Japan. Moderated by Betsy Lavolette of Kyoto Sangyo University, the panel consisted of Hisako Yamashita of Kobe Shoin Women's University, Phillip Bennett of Kanda University of International Studies, and Katherine Thornton of Otemon Gakuin University. The format of the session was consecutive presentations from the three speakers listed above, followed by a short question and answer session at the end. Taken as a whole, this session was an excellent way to both understand what self-access learning centers are, as well as how to begin developing a new SALC.

The issue all three panelists address is that learning English in Japan is, for many students, disconnected from their day-to-day lives, as well as perceived as a very difficult and isolated task. A solution that all three panelists, who each manage at least one SALC, have implemented is for their staff to actively and thoughtfully connect with their constituents. These staff members may be student peers, SALC staff who host consultation and (synchronous or asynchronous, written) advising sessions, or some hybrid of the two.

To begin, Yamashita defined the core mission of SALCs in broad terms, and then explained the theoretical models that drive their design by using examples from her SALC. Next, Bennett explained how a SALC may teach students Intentional Reflective Writing Techniques in order to meet the goals explained by Yamashita; Bennett then thoroughly and clearly explained an example of written reflective activities. Finally, Thornton reported on the effects that different SALC layouts have on student engagement and retention by comparing two different SALCs at her institution. This review focuses on the significant points touched on by each presenter.

Hisako Yamashita

Yamashita defines the gap that SALCs set out to close as, quoting some of her students, "Studying English makes them feel, 'Allergic' to English," and that English is seen as a language that only, "special people can succeed in…!" She points out that these perceptions are rooted in what amounts to a lack of ownership of their English studies, as well as "a sense of detachment from the language learning process" that leads to, "little improvement." SALCs set out to address

these perceptions by increasing learner autonomy through providing positive environments, as well as teaching constituents the ability to think reflectively about their language learning processes. The three pillars that Yamashita defines as common across all SALCs in Japan are: facilities and learning resources; educational support; and community. These are covered in the subsections below.

Facilities and Learning Resources

Yamashita explains that facilities generally have multiple spaces within them. Each space is designed for specific activities that range from solitary activities, such as media consumption or production, through to spaces for group activities such as board games, watching media, or participating in a learning resource activity.

Learning resources, in the context of SALCs, are often student-led events, which all students are encouraged to attend or host. These events may be talks or presentations, as well as participating in target language conversation groups; study skills workshops; or other event formats such as cultural experiences or hands-on workshops. These resources are all hosted by SALC staff and/or student peers.

Educational Support

Yamashita explains that a central purpose of SALCs is to offer advice on how to learn a language. In varying degrees all SALC staff understand how language learning works. At Kobe Shoin Women's University they also offer self-reflective "Learner Autonomy Modules," which are a combination of written reflection and guided conversation designed to deepen a student's understanding of their own language learning process. According to the presentation, the goals of these advising sessions include teaching the student how to think critically about their goals and learning strategies. These interventions aim to help the student gain confidence in their language learning abilities, take ownership of their learning, and increase their motivation. It is important to note that these interventions happen repeatedly over a span of months.

Community

While it is not explicitly explained, the inference can be made that attending events throughout the semester combined with positive outcomes after visiting a SALC would create relationships both between students and between students and SALC staff.

Phillip Bennett

Bennett first explains that the principles behind advising are based on Kato and Mynard's 2016 work, "Intentional Reflective Dialogue." He goes on to say that advising encompasses two things: first, "a conscious discourse with a student in order to engage, support, and prompt their development as a language learner," and second, the strategies advisors are trained to share with their students. Bennett notes that these strategies and techniques are all closely related to those of counseling and coaching. Another important point he makes is that the advising does not have to be in the target language, or even a student's first language. The advising should be done in the manner that most easily facilitates communication between the advisor and the student.

During the rest of Bennett's presentation, he explains Kanda University's "Effective Learning Modules" (ELM). ELMs are self-directed, fifteen-week courses "aimed at developing the various skills needed to be an autonomous language learner." Students receive one credit for participating in the ELM. There are six units across the 15 weeks. During the first five weeks, students learn about effective ways to study and learn. Then, in week six, they create a "SURE (Study-Use-Review-Evaluate) Learning Plan" based on what they have learned and submit it to a SALC advisor for feedback. The next nine weeks are spent documenting their application of the plan and reflecting on their language learning. During this documentation and reflection period, students receive written feedback from their advisors. Bennett closes by doing a thorough and excellent job of showing and discussing actual examples of advisor feedback.

Katherine Thornton

Thornton focuses on ways that Otemon Gakuin University SALCs have built learner autonomy practices into their physical spaces and programming. Reiterating points made by both previous speakers, she explains how community, personalization (autonomy), and reflection can be designed into SALC spaces. Thornton shares four foundational influences that scaffold her SALCs as "Autonomy-Supportive Social Environments." They are: communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991); Relatedness (one of three basic psychological needs in self-determination theory) (Deci & Ryan, 1994); social learning spaces for language learning (Murray & Fujishima, 2016; Mynard et al., 2020); Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning (Murray, 2014).

One of the most important aspects of Thornton's SALC is the "front desk" counter area that everyone who enters must pass by. She frames the purpose of the front desk not as a passive

"help desk" area, but as an active, "way to greet students into the center, and a way to acknowledge the presence of everyone in the space." Thornton notes that, "initiating some kind of dialogue with the learner as they come in—find out why they're there, what they want to do, or if they're a regular, just saying hello… is really important." She also explains that the counter allows her staff to focus on, "micro-advising" (Shibata, 2012) where student staff ask reflective and organizing questions of SALC constituents. This is different from the second SALC space that Thornton oversees, which does not have a front desk. She observes of the second space, "Students come in and make a bee line for a space they want to use, and it's very difficult to initiate that initial interaction."

Finally, to paraphrase Thornton, many SALCs utilize consciously designed spaces for different purposes. This is done because entering a large and unfamiliar space that does not communicate how it might be used can stifle learners' engagement. Thus, having curated, signposted spaces engages students with the things they can do in each of the spaces within a SALC. She notes that in many centers curated, signposted areas are disappearing. While this disappearance may be okay for confident students, new or timid students usually struggle and may not return because they did not understand how to use the space.

At the end of the panel discussion, Thornton also explained what she thinks SALCs will look like in the future. Thornton said that, going forward, online sessions will always be an option, but that physical spaces really create a sense of belonging and community far more meaningfully and enduringly than online "spaces" have thus far been able to do, even during the 2020–2021 academic year.

Key Takeaway

All three presenters and the questions asked during the question and answer session reinforced the importance of two factors for increasing student autonomy and engagement with language learning: first, face-to-face interaction, ideally in person, but possibly online; and second, exposing SALC constituents to active reflective thinking processes. SALCs in Japan, as these presentations clearly show, are an excellent way to increase student autonomy in language learning.

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