Report on the JASAL Forum at JALT2021. Serendipities in Self-Access Learning: Positives from the Pandemic

Clair Taylor

Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University

taylor@gifu.shotoku.ac.jp

Katherine Thornton

Otemon Gakuin University

thornton.katherine@gmail.com

Isra Wongsarnpigoon

Kanda University of International Studies

wongsarnpigoon-i@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Stacey Vye

Saitama University

stacey.vye@gmail.com

Author Biographies

Clair Taylor is an associate professor at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University, Japan. Her research interests are learning space design and learning beyond the classroom. Clair was president of JASAL between 2019–2022 and is currently in charge of JASAL's membership.

Katherine Thornton is an associate professor at Otemon Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan where she works as a learning advisor. She is the director of E-CO (English Café at Otemon) and the current president of JASAL. Her research focuses on language policy and practice in self-access language learning.

Isra Wongsarnpigoon is a learning advisor and resource coordinator in the Self-Access

Learning Center at Kanda University of International Studies. His research interests include language learning spaces, multilingualism in language learning, and learner autonomy.

Stacey Vye is a professor, a volunteer advisor, and coordinator of the English Resource Center at Saitama University. Her research interests are the connections between learner and teacher autonomy, learning environments, and organizational change.

On 13th November 2022, the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) held an online forum at the annual Japan Association for Language Teaching conference. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic had by this stage been dominating our professional and personal lives for around 18 months, we decided to focus on ways in which the disruption brought about by the necessary restrictions has in places led to new discoveries and beneficial practices which might otherwise have not come about, and we entitled the forum: *Serendipities in self-access learning: Positives from the pandemic.* Recent studies from the first phase of the pandemic, when many physical self-access learning centers (SALCs) were closed, focused on both technological advances and the push the pandemic has given many practitioners to embrace online models of self-access, as well as efforts to sustain and reproduce supportive community environments for learners in the context of remote learning. Technological innovations have taken many different forms. Videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom are now commonplace in many self-access environments, as indeed they are in our personal lives too. New or expanded uses have been found for learning management systems and other online tools (Anas et al., 2020; Schneider, 2020).

While these technological advances have enabled communication between learners and practitioners in self-access environments who want to support their language learning, they do not automatically result in the same kind of community-building which is considered vital to sustain motivation for autonomous language learning, so this requires specific attention. Ohara and Ishimura (2020) described the limitations of their initial emergency remote support system in providing social support for learners. Nevertheless, there have been some successes. Mideros (2020) highlighted how social media tools such as What's App can be used not only to disseminate information to students, but also to provide forums for learners to interact and share resources online. Ruiz-Guerrero (2020) described how community was at the heart of her SALC's response to the pandemic, both within the SALC team and among students. Similarly, Davies et al. (2020) reported on the approach of their SALC, which emphasized "connecting learners, fostering well-being and advising in language learning" (p. 144).

In the second phase of the pandemic, many SALCs have re-opened, at least partially, but have been faced with the challenge of supporting students while ensuring their safety by imposing strict social distancing requirements. These restrictions may limit the number of

students allowed in a space or session at any one time, the kinds of activities that can be engaged in, and how students can safely interact.

All these restrictions have compelled self-access language learning practitioners to innovate. The two presentations in the JASAL Forum examined both the online and on campus environments during the pandemic and presented some unexpected benefits which have emerged from the necessity to rethink and reimagine common practices. In the next sections an account of each of the presentations is given, followed by a summary of the discussion which took place between participants of the forum.

Students' On-Campus and Online Self-Access Learning Preferences

This presentation provided insights regarding student preferences for attending the English Resource Center (ERC) at the national Saitama University from 2018 to 2021, both on-campus and online due to COVID-19. Additionally, the three full-time volunteer ERC advisors participated in a focus group session sharing reflections on student preferences for the same duration. The results indicate overall that learners preferred chatting or speaking in English at the center both in-person or online. Nevertheless, during ERC Online, learner engagement increased due to greater personalization by sharing dwelling spaces on Zoom in a creative digital venue associated with remote learning.

The ERC On-Campus and Online Support

The presenter Stacey Vye, the coordinator of the ERC, explained that the small one-room center has been open since 2005 on weekday afternoons and can accommodate about 30 students, staff, and faculty campus-wide in person (or more in the university community online). In a prior study, although learners reported valuing the socially-oriented learning environment, 13 of the 30 respondents in an anonymous survey reported nervousness the first time entering the room (Hughes et al., 2012). Feeling uncomfortable entering SALCs for the first time is a common theme, yet beyond the scope of this presentation. Consequently, for ten years, the advisors have intentionally supported new attendees to feel more welcome by empathizing with the learners' feelings of nervousness and expectancies to communicate with elder peers and advisors.

The ERC Advisee Preferences and Advisors' Focus Group

It was decided that an ethnographic approach analyzing the ERC attendance preferences and a recorded 30-minute focus group advisor session, including Vye, was practical. An ethnography seemed fitting because Vye is part of the ERC culture as a first-hand witness and participant (McEwan & McEwan, 2003). Moreover, ethnographies in education classify themes emerging from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach allowed Vye to discover themes of events connected within the context (Maxwell, 2013) focused on shared experiences (Creswell, 2014).

Methods

First, Vye examined four years of learner preferences recorded pre-visit with permissions, analyzing the data from October of each year from 2018 to 2021 due to time constraints. The responses were recorded via Google Forms in 2018 and 2019 and in an in-house ERC Online application in 2020 and 2021. She did not indicate multiple preferences by the same learner who visited frequently and strategically focused on preferences for the visits.

Second, since the recorded learner preferences were short phrases or sentences, Vye collected more data based on the three advisors' reflective dialogues regarding learner preferences before and during COVID-19 in a 30-minute recorded focus group session, which was transcribed.

Learners' Preferences

The learners' preferences for visiting the ERC in October from 2018 to 2021 are shown in Table 1. The results are not conclusive for 2018 and 2019 because the data was not registered for two of the five days opened per week. In 2018 there were 91 visits, in 2019, 51 visits, for 2020, 73, and in 2021, fewer at 31.

Table 1

October 2018 to 2021 Learner Preferences by Visit

	2018 (in-person)	2019 (in-person)	2020 (online)	2021 (online)
Talk/chat/speak English	53	30	13	17
Improve English skills	17	5	28	3

Individual Preferences	8	6	9	4
Study English	9	6	-	-
It's fun!	6	-	4	-
Halloween Party	7	-	9	6
Teacher recommendation	-	-	7	1
Conference practice	5	-	-	-

Consistently, the primary reason for visiting the ERC each year, except for 2020, was social: talking, chatting, or speaking in English was most prominent. However, in October 2020, the learners preferred to improve their English skills rather than chatting, most likely because they wanted the ERC opened, as it had been closed in the spring. The only two other consistent preferences other than talking/chatting/speaking English for all four years were improving English skills and individual preferences. More conclusive data would emerge if Vye conducted interviews or surveys with the learners.

Six Implications From the Advisors' Reflections: Positives from the Pandemic

Six positive findings emerged from the advisors' focus group reflections that can be used to enhance the learning culture.

Theme One

The first theme was the strategy of stepping back by using silence in the group advising, both in-person and online, to facilitate dialogues for more learner-centered communication. While in person, the advisors would physically step away; stepping away online would mean pausing the video, in both instances reminding learners that the advisor was there and to call when needed.

Theme Two

The second positive theme was sharing immediate and practical digital learning content, including learning resources, personal photos, podcasts, movie reviews, and other modalities through Zoom screen sharing. The advisees and advisors alike provided a rich depth to the learning experience online that will continue to be utilized in hybrid or in-person.

Theme Three

38

The third theme Vye noticed was that, compared with 2020, in 2021 the learners had a more meaningful sense of comfortability with the family and learning spaces at home. For example, the group advising participants might see a family member walking by in the background on the Zoom videos. The normalization of the Zoom environment has helped the community in the ERC accept the transition, which also seemed to boost confidence.

Theme Four

The fourth finding was increased emotive connections on Zoom between the advisor and the advisees. These appeared stronger because of the personalized culture of sharing spaces at home rather than a shared environment on campus, which was more formal. This implies that improvements can be made to the design of the campus environment to feel more like home.

Theme Five

The fifth theme was that through this localized culture on the Zoom platform, the personalization created a playful and creative space. One advisor described, "Well, now it is this virtual space that can be whatever, so whatever and with whomever and what objects, room or virtual background, which I find, you know, some of the stuff is really interesting and it becomes a topic of conversation." The playful and creative space increased engagement and content input from the learners.

Theme Six

Lastly, the unexpected theme based on an ethnographic perspective of the shared working culture was previously unknown. Vye found the advisors have been referring to learners as 'people' rather than students or advisees and used the gender-neutral pronoun of 'they' for several years as an organic rather than a deliberative process. Vye asserted that valuing each participant in the community as equals creates a welcoming atmosphere for all participants of the ERC community.

From these six implications, Vye explained how she focuses on the physical ERC with the return of plants and artistic design, to provide a welcoming learning space. She also detailed adapting the positives from the remote learning experiences as the ERC gradually restarts in-person services.

Lounge MELT Got Even More Melty: Unanticipated Beneficial Outcomes From Our Covid-Safe Measures

This presentation shared how measures introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic situation led to some unanticipated beneficial outcomes at the social language learning space at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University (GSGU), Japan. The space is called Lounge MELT, which stands for "Maximum English Learning Together." The name "MELT" was chosen because it suggests warmth, and also the idea of a melting pot, where students, staff, and faculty from different departments mix together. In this presentation, Clair Taylor, the director of Lounge MELT, explained how both warmth and inclusivity were unexpectedly enhanced as a result of changes that were made to keep the space running safely during the pandemic.

When the pandemic hit in April 2020, GSGU closed both its campuses to students. Lounge MELT—previously a lively space in which students gathered to speak English over lunch or coffee, studied together, made use of advising services, and enjoyed lively parties—was suddenly deserted, just as it was in the process of extending by opening a new quiet study annex (MELT Annex) with study booths and an advising room. To continue to support students in their language learning, an online system was set up. One Google Classroom class was made for Lounge MELT, using the integrated Google Meet to allow the learning advisor on duty to staff the space from the iMac based in the lounge. The students could see the familiar learning space in the background as they chatted to the advisor and were free to enter and leave at any time, using the online space in the same way they had previously used the physical space. In the adjacent MELT Annex, another Google Classroom class was set up for advising sessions, which used Google Calendar to allow students to book slots for advising or tutoring. The advisor could move to the iMac in the private advising room in MELT Annex to give remote advising sessions using Google Meet and return to the main Lounge to facilitate conversation during gaps between bookings. Following the lead of cafés in Japan (Nagase, 2020), stuffed toys were arranged around the tables in Lounge MELT, to make the space look more friendly and less empty. Even as some students returned to campus in September 2020, and more and more in-person classes were held in the 2021 academic year, these measures were continued alongside the reopening of the physical learning spaces, which had new rules requiring social distancing and mask use, with eating and drinking both banned.

Taylor explained that the first positive outcome from these COVID-safe measures was that it increased the accessibility of the Lounge MELT services. The university has two campuses, located approximately 3km apart. Prior to the pandemic, students enrolled at the smaller of the two campuses needed to travel if they wished to make use of the social language learning space at the larger campus, and this was, consequently, a rare occurrence. The provision of the online lounge and online advising meant that students based at the smaller campus could access services as easily as students at the larger campus, and a small number began to make use of these services. For this reason, MELT Annex's provision of online advising sessions will continue indefinitely.

The second positive outcome Taylor reported was the response of the students to the stuffed toys, which were given names by students and treated like pets. As students returned to the campus and to the social language learning space, they began to engage frequently with these new Lounge MELT "pets" (see Figure 1 for two examples).

Figure 1

Two of Lounge MELT's "Pets," 4G (left) and 5G (right)

Taylor showed photos and videos of students holding and stroking the toys as they studied and talked in Lounge MELT and described how this has become an everyday practice in the space and how it has been particularly helpful during campus visits by nervous high school students. She observed that this appears to have helped alleviate student anxiety caused by the

41

return to socializing following the period of seclusion during the pandemic and helped to deal with the ongoing stress of speaking in a foreign language with the new restrictions (masking, social distancing, and the ban on eating and drinking).

Taylor provided a brief overview of research on the serious effects of anxiety on language learners. MacIntyre (2017) has noted the "enormous toll" (p. 20) anxiety has on foreign language speakers, due to the negative effects on processing and performance dynamic, and discussed the various fluctuating and interacting factors that play a role, including physiological reactions (such as perspiration, racing heart, shaky limbs, and butterflies in the stomach) and how this leads to avoidance, declining perceptions of competence, and lower willingness to communicate (p. 25). Oxford (1999) has suggested ways to diminish this anxiety, including use of music and laughter. Taylor (2014) has outlined ways to reduce anxiety in social language learning spaces through the design of the physical environment (temperature, color, lighting, furniture/furnishings, plants, and toys).

There is extensive research on the effects of stroking animals and soft toys on anxiety states. Morrison (2016) has shown that stroking involves the opioid and oxytocin systems and acts as a stress buffer, reducing heart rate and blood pressure. Su and Su (2018) demonstrated that allo-touch scaffolds prosociality and increases prosociality, highlighting how touch leads to the release of many neuropeptides such as oxytocin, arginine vasopressin, serotonin, and endogenous opioids. Eckstein et al. (2020) showed how stroking inhibits the amygdala fear response, and how both blood pressure and heart rate go down with petting (noting, though, that real or haptic robots work better than stuffed toys). Soft toys are widely used in dementia care, where they have been shown to improve wellbeing and mood, to lower stress, to promote laughter and social contact, and to help patients feel in the "here and now" (Ihamäki & Heljakka, 2021). They have also been used to support children with autism, with studies showing that children relax and talk more with soft toys (Seo & Aravindan, 2015). They feature in higher education settings, in which soft toys have been used as an ice-breaker, to make students feel safe and to help them think (Raye, 2017).

Taylor argued that this strong evidence base, and the pervasiveness of the soft toy petting in Lounge MELT, with the obvious comfort and relaxation it brings to the students, indicate that soft toy "pets" can play a valuable role in social language learning spaces.

Discussion

Following the two presentations, there was time for all participants to discuss the ideas introduced by the presenters, along with other issues related to the theme of the forum. In order to stimulate conversation, two general topics were suggested: (1) unexpected positives discovered from operating during the pandemic, and (2) any adjustments made during the pandemic which participants expected to continue even after restrictions are eased.

One beneficial measure brought up was that learning advisors at one SAC had started providing the option of conducting advising sessions outdoors or while walking around with their advisees. Although this alternative was initially devised in response to the need for social distance and proper air circulation, the advisors realized that such meetings had additional serendipitous effects: Sitting outdoors on a nice day could provide a positive, calming atmosphere away from students' usual learning environments, and the process of walking while talking during a session might help alleviate students' anxiety (e.g., from preparing for tests or interviews). Some of the participants noticed parallels between this practice and similar concepts, such as the idea in neurolinguistic programming that external behavior (e.g., posture, breathing) can affect our thinking and feelings (Ellerton, 2006; NLP in the Northwest, n.d.), or Richlin's (2006) suggested strategy of walking before taking an important test.

Those working at centers that had been providing advising services online during the pandemic largely agreed that they wanted to continue doing so, even after a return to physical, face-to-face operations. Online sessions had proven to be a convenient way to continue meeting with advisors for students who do not come to campus often, such as those that live far from the university or third- or fourth-year students, who may have fewer class hours in a week. By continuing to offer an online option even when self-access centers are fully open, advisors can offer support to all students, including students that might not have taken the time to meet an advisor in person otherwise.

Although the opportunity to find positives in the "new normal" was uplifting, participants were also able to discuss other issues related to self-access. Some attendees were intrigued by the attempts at one center to create a physical environment conducive to the different purposes for which learners might use it. These efforts included the use of color and plants in helping users to

refresh themselves and focus. Another topic was negotiating the sensitive balance between utilizing lively, open spaces in SACs and staff members who dislike the noise; this led participants to reflect on how welcoming the spaces in our centers can be, in contrast with stakeholders at other institutions who may prefer more "serious," rigorously academic environments. Finally, there was a chance to share and empathize with the issues in starting a new, smaller self-access space. Some challenges include finding enough staff, especially given the added necessity of certain tasks due to the current circumstances (e.g., sanitizing spaces), as well as receiving enough support from administrations to pay such staff. Although many of us good-naturedly grumble about online conference fatigue these days, the JASAL forum was a productive event. Even (or especially) at the end of a long day of online presentations, it was a welcome opportunity to (re)connect with colleagues and reflect on our current situations in a supportive and lively environment.

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