

## **A Space That Speaks to Students and Supports Their Learning: A Description of a Language Learning Space Which Incorporates Text and Video Into the Design**

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In a classroom setting, the teacher guides and motivates students. However, in a self-access space it is primarily the physical space itself which guides and shapes the learners' mindsets, moods, and behaviors. Design features such as color schemes, furniture, and displays are particularly important (Cooker, 2011/2018). To feel fully autonomous, students must be able to navigate such spaces independently (Sjöblom et al., 2016).

This practice paper describes a space designed to support students in their language learning at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University, Japan. The space—an annex to the existing social language learning space on campus—was created in response to student needs for a quiet study zone and a private area for advising sessions unmet by the existing facility. Here, the faculty members who designed the space outline its key features, including the inspiring quotes adhered to the walls with accompanying video supports. This description may be useful for others who are creating or developing a learning space on a limited budget, as it outlines the multi-disciplinary research which informed the decision-making, as well as the low-cost, hands-on procedures. It also discusses the development process, based on observing students in their use of the space, listening to them, and understanding their needs and wants.

### **Background**

The setting for this project is Lounge MELT (an abbreviation of Maximum English Learning Together). Lounge MELT is a social language learning space, an informal space for independent language learning, with a focus on social interaction. Offering learning resources and services such as learning advising, for example, social language learning spaces are broader in scope than conversation lounges, but have less emphasis on the provision of materials than self-access centers (Murray & Fujishima, 2013; Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, 2014).

Originally set up as an English/Chinese conversation lounge by students in 2010 (in a large classroom with donated furniture) the space was, by 2012, in a poor state and unused. Several action research cycles followed, involving design changes such as glass doors, carpeting, and plants, in addition to the introduction of hot drinks, toys, and guitars to entice students in and create a welcoming, relaxing, playful atmosphere. Interventions also included employing learning advisers, a budget for cultural events and learning resources, and a



rebranding, with increased emphasis on English (Taylor, 2014, 2016). By 2016, a thriving learning community had formed, with English at the core, and other foreign languages such as Chinese and Portuguese also spoken; the lounge had transitioned into a powerful social language learning space.

However, over time, new problems emerged. As the community grew, space and seating became insufficient. Students struggled to concentrate on tasks such as timed essay writing in the lively environment. Meanwhile, students singing and talking in Lounge MELT seemed inhibited by the presence of students studying “seriously.” There was a clear need for a separate, quieter area for learning activities which require concentration. Moreover, staff providing advising and tutoring services were limited by the lack of privacy and Lounge MELT’s “no Japanese” language policy. A separate space, with a separate language policy, was required to enable learners to receive support in their first language. Lastly, in terms of facilities, any new space would ideally have a sink, as the lack of a place to wash-up cups had been a continuing problem in Lounge MELT.

In 2020, the campus health room, adjacent to Lounge MELT, relocated. With a water supply and partitions for patient beds, this vacated room held potential as a space which could be converted at reasonable cost into an annex to Lounge MELT. A plan was developed through consultation with the university administrators and the renovation company. The extension was named MELT Annex.

### **MELT Annex**

#### **Aim**

Through our design (discussed in Taylor & Nagao, 2022), we aimed for students to see MELT as a single facility, with areas for different purposes: Lounge MELT for socializing, and MELT Annex for activity requiring concentration or privacy. Connected by an archway, design features help students “read” the two spaces (Strange & Banning, 2001), intuiting the kinds of behavior appropriate in each. Table 1 shows the orientations the spaces aim to support.

**Table 1***Contrast Between the Two Spaces*

<b>Lounge MELT</b>	<b>MELT Annex</b>
Play, fun	Work, concentration
Social, relaxed, intimate	Individual & collaborative
Here-and-now, being present	Future-orientation, goal-focused
Incidental learning, implicit learning	Explicit learning, effort, purposeful activity
Cheerful, lively, energizing, restorative	Quiet, calm, focused

**The Physical Space*****Interior***

The interiors of the two spaces (Figure 1) support these different ways of learning. Lounge MELT is a large open-plan space, designed for socializing. In contrast, MELT Annex has a room for advising, a small area for individual or collaborative study, and partitioned booths which students can reserve for distraction-free individual work. These partitioned areas also serve as a refuge for students who seek solitude (Gee, 2006).

**Figure 1***Lounge MELT (left) and MELT Annex (right)*

To create a sense of unity, the corridor-facing front and entrance to MELT Annex are made with the same glass panels and off-white doors as Lounge MELT, and the floors have the same brown carpet tiles. Otherwise, the color schemes are purposely different. Research indicates that warmer colors (orange, yellow) support socializing, while cooler colors (blue, green) are better for concentration (Barrett & Barrett, 2010). Kopec (2012) also reports that in work and study environments, orange and yellow energize, while blue calms. Thus, Lounge MELT has warm off-white walls, pink-orange curtains, and a yellow and orange logo on the windows. For MELT Annex, we made different choices. Barrett et al.'s (2015) large-scale study found that better learning outcomes are achieved in study environments with white or light walls, and brightly colored feature walls and / or furnishings. Accordingly, we chose a cooler shade of off-white walls, and covered the existing partitions with blue coating. The logo on the corridor-facing window is dark and light blue (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Lounge MELT and MELT Annex Logos*



### ***Seating and Artifacts***

The items in the spaces cue the students on how to use the areas and support specific learning activities. The furniture in Lounge MELT (coffee tables, beanbags, etc.) creates a

relaxed, “at home” atmosphere where students can feel fully in the moment. The chalkboard evokes associations of university life, grounding students in the present, and affords opportunities to playfully draw and write. In MELT Annex, the office-style tables, chairs, and mobile whiteboards serve to help students orient towards their future career aspirations and focus on their goals. The items in each booth support a particular activity; for example, in the presentation booth there is a mirror for observing gestures and a smartphone stand for recording. Both Lounge MELT and MELT Annex have plants, as their restorative, calming effects (Kopeck, 2012) support both socializing and focused study. Because the sink is located in MELT Annex, the drink-making facilities, microwave, and refrigerator were moved there from Lounge MELT, creating a small kitchen area. Ideally, this would be part of Lounge MELT, since talking over food and drink is a core lounge activity, but budget restraints prevented this.

The seating is quite different in the two spaces. Chairs without arms support intimacy, allowing students to be close enough to touch, whereas armrests on chairs provide a “protective barrier” (Scott Webber, 2009, p. 11) which maintains personal distance. Lounge MELT supports intimacy and friendship building, so it has chairs without armrests, while those in MELT Annex have armrests. Seat arrangement is also important. Chairs in the lounge have a radial arrangement which is ideal for conversation, facilitating eye contact (Scott Webber, 2009). The four chairs in the communal study area in MELT Annex have a linear arrangement on both sides of a square table, so that students sitting adjacent to each other can peer teach, or work collaboratively on a project, both able to see the shared materials on the table in front of them. The square table also provides greater surface space for study materials than the round tables in Lounge MELT. The linear arrangement reduces chat, promoting quiet and concentration.

### ***Ambient Conditions***

As a study area, MELT Annex has bright, white fluorescent lights, which are associated with increased learning (Barrett et al, 2015). This contrasts with the social area Lounge MELT, which has warm-colored fluorescent lights and shaded lamps with warm lightbulbs. These lighting choices were made because people disclose more, speak more, and feel more relaxed in softly-lit space (Miwa & Hanyu, 2006); dim lighting increases sociability

(Wardono et al., 2012); and warm lighting is perceived as cozier and more intimate than white lighting (Casciani & Musante, 2016).

Lounge MELT always has background music (BGM) playing to reduce anxiety and aid L2 talk (Degrave, 2019), as well as to encourage visits of longer duration (Sullivan, 2002). MELT Annex has no BGM, which could distract students from their (often exam-oriented) tasks; Chou (2010) has shown students perform better on TOEFL tasks without music. While including sound-proofed booths would create an ideal study environment, this was not possible due to budget constraints.

The policies of both spaces affect the ambient noise and smells. Unlike Lounge MELT, MELT Annex has a no-food-or-drink policy, to reduce distractions (from food smells and eating noises) for other students working silently. MELT Annex also has a policy of no conversation, although quiet study-related talk is allowed. This policy reduces the distractions from boisterous talk and laughter which students were experiencing in Lounge MELT.

### **Signage and Wall Text**

Environmental print is a feature in both spaces, but it is a significant and integral part of the design for MELT Annex in particular. The print serves multiple purposes. First, students can learn some L2 words and phrases just by seeing them on the walls (Bisson et al, 2013). Second, seeing English (and Chinese, which some students study) in the environment serves as a cue to students that they should use a foreign language in the space. Other similar facilities use L2 in the environment in this way (see Figures 2 and 3). Imamura (2018, pp. 203–204) explains that the English text on the staircase in KUIS 8 (Figure 3) helps the students “switch” their brains (into English mode) and reminds students of the language policy. The content of the text in Figures 2 and 3, however, shows that it does more than just prime or remind students to use English; the text (with messages such as “Are you ready?” and “How can you be the best today?”) has an affective function—it helps students switch their emotional state to one of readiness and positivity. Drawing on these established practices, we built text into the design of MELT Annex, creating a space that supports learning not only practically and physiologically, but also psychologically.

**Figure 2**

*Wall Text on the Stairway of Sojo University's SILC*



**Figure 3**

*Stairs at Kanda University of International Studies' KUIS 8*



The print in MELT Annex consists of signs (with the name and slogan for each booth), and text on the wall in each area intended to induce a positive mindset for learning which matches the type of activity each space is designed to support, such as “hard work” for desk-based study (see Table 2). In the presentation booth, the text is: “I can and I will.” Hallett and Hoffman (2014) claim that such affirmations can control self-talk, increase confidence, and sustain attention, helping people achieve a peak performance mindset.

**Table 2**

*The Print in MELT Annex*

Description of space and contents	Name	Slogan	Wall text
Communal study space. Chairs, table, bookshelves with study materials.	-	-	“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” —Durant
Booth with door. Height-adjustable chair and desk. Plant.	Customizable Study Booth	To your liking	“Genius is 1% talent and 99% hard work.” —Einstein
Curtained booth. Mirror, smartphone stand.	Presentation Booth	Practice makes perfect	I can and I will
Curtained booth. Reclining chair.	Deskless Study Booth	Comfy chair	“A new language is a new life” —Persian Proverb
Room with door. Two chairs, table, iMac.	Advising Room	Side-by-side	“You’re braver than you believe, stronger than you seem and smarter than you think” —Milne

Other wall texts in MELT Annex are intended to promote a growth language learning mindset (believing that L2 learning is based on malleable factors such as strategy use) instead of a fixed mindset (believing that L2 learning is dependent on natural talent). Learners with a fixed mindset become discouraged easily, whereas those with a growth mindset are aspirational and resilient (Mercer & Ryan, 2010). Leung argues that learners’ L2 mindsets can be changed through psychological interventions such as a growth-mindset phrase, seen



frequently (2018). Such interventions lead to “long-lasting gains in achievement” (Yeager & Walton, 2011, p. 293) shaping beliefs and endorsing goals, effort, and strategies, helping students persist, seek help, and learn more, generating an upward spiral which gathers momentum.

The text in MELT Annex follows key design principles. Bearing in mind that “fonts have a voice” (Kasperek, 2014, p. 50) we avoided fonts with childish associations (such as Comic Sans) and focused on readability and style. We followed Williams’ (2008) guidance, avoiding all uppercase, and including some contrast (larger text for keywords, see Figures 4 and 5). Repeating the same design elements such as font and contrast “helps to build and reinforce a brand” (Kasperek, 2014, p. 54) so we use Skia, condensed, for all the wall quotes and Skia, black condensed, for the signs. Because people associate positive affect with what is high in their visual space (Meier & Robinson, 2004), the wall texts are located above head height, so that students gaze up at them. The room signs are located at eye level.

#### Figure 4

*Photo from the University’s 2020 PR Campaign, Showing a Student and Wall Text in Customizable Study Booth, MELT Annex*





**Figure 5**

*Photo from the University's 2020 PR Campaign, Showing a Student and Wall Text in the Communal Study Area, MELT Annex*



### **A Design Development Influenced by Students' Responses to MELT Annex**

Renovation work on MELT Annex was completed in the middle of 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. With classes held remotely and few students on campus, the space had a soft opening. This (unfortunate) situation provided an opportunity to explore students' reactions to the space, observe early usage patterns, and develop MELT Annex before the full return to campus life.

We noticed that visitors to MELT Annex tended to move around the space, reading the quotes on the wall, seeking out the one which resonated best with them as language learners and users. Although the quotes were designed to match the type of learning activity to happen in each space, it became clear that visitors were responding more deeply and personally, based on their needs and experiences.

At this time, university PR photographs, in which students posed in various campus locations displaying a board on which they had written a word communicating their feelings

about the place, showed how students were able to interpret the spaces, identifying affordances. For the study booth, the student photographed chose “motivation” (Figure 4) and in the communal area, “inspiration” (Figure 5), while for Lounge MELT the word was “relax” (Figure 6).

### Figure 6

*Photo from the University’s 2020 PR Campaign, Showing a Student in Lounge MELT*



An interview study (Taylor & Nagao, 2022) exploring students’ interpretations of the space and the quotes revealed that students were indeed able to “read” the design. They experience Lounge MELT and MELT Annex differently, as this participant comment shows:

This one (MELT Annex) is more chic. The other one is warm. I wonder what this one is? [...] It’s quiet. It’s an image of a happy family get-together over there (Lounge MELT). This place (MELT Annex) has a dignified air, a scene, a calm atmosphere.  
[Our translation from Japanese]

The responses showed that different spaces within MELT Annex appealed—and different texts “spoke”—to different students, with the quotes viewed as resources students could draw on; participants said, for instance, “When I feel depressed, this makes me feel that

I can make it if I work hard” and “I need this [affirmation] for my job hunting!” However, some students were unable to read and understand the longer wall texts independently.

To address this difficulty, we created video supports—clips in which students read aloud and translate the wall quotes, uploaded to YouTube (e.g., [Annex](#), Lounge MELT, 2021). Using a QR code, these clips can be accessed with a smartphone (Figure 7), in a manner close to augmented reality, already used successfully in English language textbooks (Quasha, 2018).

**Figure 7**

*A Student Accessing the Video Support for the Wall Text*



To make the QR code signs, we used glossy photograph paper stuck on plastic nameplates, which were coated with UV-resistant spray, and attached to the wall with traceless, removable tape (Figure 8). This simple development has helped to make a space

that, quite literally, speaks to the students that visit. Such student-made clips could also be used to help visitors understand how to use a resource or make a booking, or for any guiding or orientation purpose.

**Figure 8**

*Materials for Creating the Plates with QR Codes*



This paper has provided an outline of how a learning space was designed and developed on a modest budget, responding to student needs and drawing on research from diverse fields. The project was instigated by the students' needs, and students played a vital role throughout the process, from providing their rich and insightful responses to the space to featuring in the video clips collaboratively created to make the space more independently navigable. Moving forward, we anticipate that narratives collected from long-term users will help us better understand how spaces can impact on the trajectories of individual learners. We hope that the ideas presented here will have immediate transferrable value to others creating bespoke learning spaces for their students.

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