

Report on the JASAL Forum at JALT2022. Motivation in Self-Access Learning: Listening to Student Experiences

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Etsuko Yamada is an associate professor at Hokkaido University. She mainly teaches multicultural classes where international and Japanese students study together and is in charge of self-directed English learning for Japanese undergraduate students. Her research interests focus on fostering self-directed learning and intercultural communication in multicultural classes.

The JASAL Forum, a 90-minute conference session organised by the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL), was held online at the international JALT2022 conference on November 13th, 2022. In this year's forum we were happy to welcome two speakers, Gerardine McCrohan from Kagawa University, and Etsuko Yamada from Hokkaido University, who each presented on projects inspired by the overall conference theme: *Learning from Students, Educating Teachers: Research and Practice*. As self-access language learning (SALL) and self-access centres (SACs) themselves are in their very nature student-centred, this theme was a good fit for this year's forum. Over 20 participants joined the forum, and the presentations were followed by some lively discussion (see below). The next sections contain summaries of the two presentations, which are then followed by an account of the discussions which took place during the forum. As these are short summaries rather than full research papers, methodologies are only given in brief.

The Motivation Behind Consistent Self-Access Center Attendees (Gerardine McCrohan)

The SAC at Kagawa University aims to provide a space for students to study alone or in groups, to socialise, and hold events in a relaxed atmosphere. Despite having a wide range of classes and activities, teachers and staff at the SAC have found that while a small number of students become regular attendees, often attending the SAC several times a week and in some cases every day, the majority of students attend only sporadically if at all.

To try to understand why some students attend frequently for extended periods of time, a 3-part multi-choice questionnaire was administered at the end of the autumn semesters of 2019, 2020 and 2021. In total, 28 students whom the research team (the author, other teachers and staff of the SAC) identified as frequent attendees completed the questionnaire. The data from the questionnaire was then tabulated to facilitate comparison and analysis. This study aimed to answer three questions:

1. Why did these students first attend?
2. Why did they continue to attend?
3. Could feedback from these students help us to create an environment that would encourage more students to attend frequently?

Part 1 of the questionnaire focused on focusing on gathering background information.

There was an almost even split between male and female students, and 65% of frequent attendees were first or second years with slightly more students in their second year than first year. Students considered their spoken English abilities to be low to intermediate.

Part 2 of the questionnaire focused on their first experience attending the SAC and what motivated them to continue attending. Questions were multi-choice and students could usually select more than one answer. Nearly all the students indicated that a recommendation (from senior students, friends, and teachers) was how they first heard about the SAC. Improving their language ability (academic factors) and making friends (social factor) were important motivating factors for first attendance. When asked to choose one reason for their continued attendance, the majority of students indicated either social (55%) or academic (27%) responses as their primary reason for continuing.

Part 3 of the questionnaire surveyed the type of classes and events students attended, how often they attended these, and how they would rate the quality of these events. Students rated classes/events highly, attended a wide range of these, and "dropped by " the Global Cafe at least 3.3 days/week on average.

Although interesting data was obtained through the questionnaire, the multi-choice nature of the questions did not give students the opportunity to freely express their opinions regarding their experiences at the SAC. We therefore decided to conduct interviews and to date, the author (McCrohan) has conducted 15 follow-up interviews which were then transcribed and analysed to determine what common themes emerged.

The interviews opened by asking students what their purpose was the first time they attended the SAC. The majority of students, as in the questionnaire, mentioned a recommendation as the means through which they heard about the SAC. Moreover, 6 students (40%) said they initially went for primarily academic reasons while only 3 (20%) mentioned social reasons. The remaining students attended to get "bonus points" for their regular classes. However, when asked why they continued, 6 of the attendees (40%) said they continued to attend primarily for social reasons, while 5 (33%) said it was primarily for academic purposes, including getting bonus points from some teachers for SAC attendance. When we removed students who mentioned this bonus points incentive as their primary motivation for attendance, only 2 students said it was primarily for academic reasons.

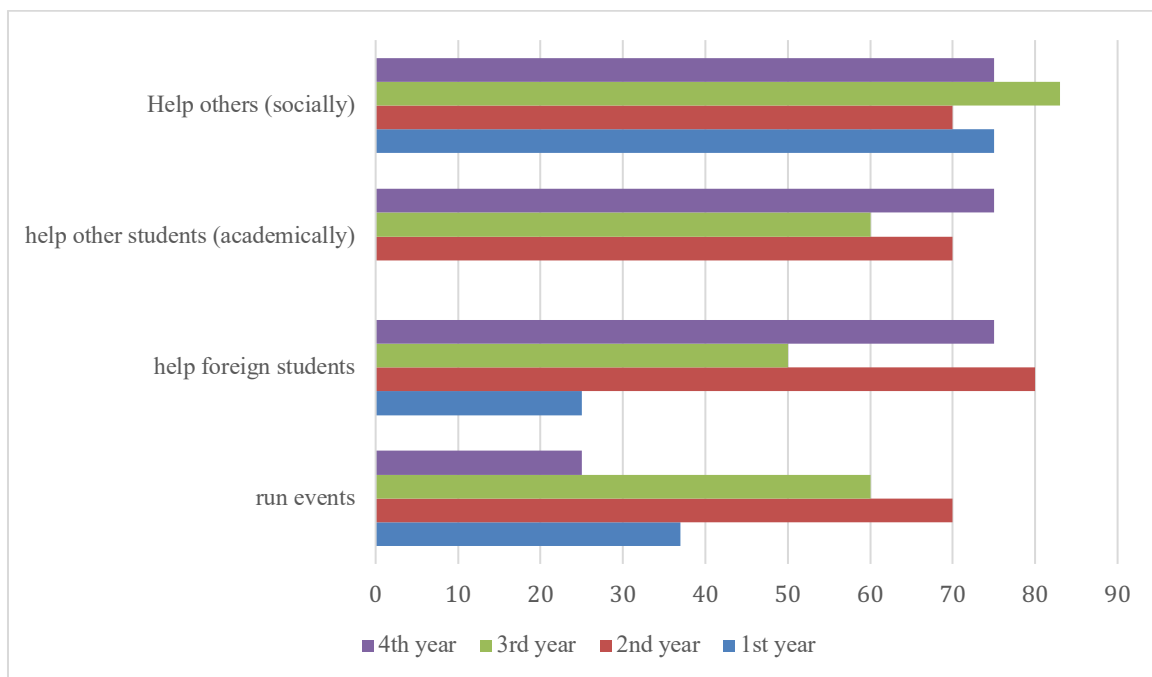
From these interviews it appears that the academic reasons for their continued attendance declined in importance while the social elements increased. This is similar to what has been found in other studies such as Hughes et al. (2012). This change was reflected in

their use of vocabulary with increased usage of words and phrases associated with the social side of the SAC in the interviews.

Of particular interest was students' feeling of responsibility for the successful running of the SAC and a desire to help others. From the survey, students expressed a wide range of areas for which they felt they had a responsibility for (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Student Areas of Responsibility (in %) (n=28)



In the interviews, students again mentioned having a sense of responsibility for the success of the SAC. From these, we learned that “Helping foreign students” included a very diverse range of activities such as assisting them with their Japanese language studies, or going with them to attend a medical clinic. In addition, many students believed they also had a responsibility to help other Japanese students. For those in the upper grades, this often included academic support while helping socially was common for students in all grades.

Three main findings emerged from the research. First, since many students indicated that a recommendation was how they learned about the SAC, the most efficient way to attract new attendees may be to encourage current attendees to bring their friends and recommend it to more junior students. Second, offering students the opportunity to assume a more managerial role in the SAC gave students both a sense of community, something other researchers have found to be important in student attendance at a SAC (Murray & Fujishima,

2013; Oblinger, 2006), and a sense of responsibility for the success of the SAC. Finally, building relationships with international students, and between Japanese students across faculties and grades, cannot be underestimated. This leaves the team, and all those involved with running a SAC, with an interesting conundrum: What is the best way to balance having good-quality academic activities while helping students build strong social networks? If we could achieve this balance, we hope that the number of frequent attendees would increase, making the SAC a warm, inviting, social, and academically stimulating space.

Learning from L2 Speakers of Japanese: The Effect on Japanese Students' English Learning

(Etsuko Yamada)

The continuation of self-directed English learning is a challenge especially for students after the compulsory stage of English education. Many students have studied English for university entrance examinations and after these they complete the accredited compulsory English courses during the general education stage at university. In the case of Hokkaido University, many students tend to have difficulties in setting their own direction for their English learning by themselves after they are released from these extrinsic motivations of studying English exclusively for credits and exams. To support them in continuing their English learning, a half-a-year non-credit course which consists of an intensive English learning strategy course, followed by a five-month monitoring period, is now offered to Japanese undergraduate students in 2nd to 6th years (some medical science majors have six-year undergraduate programmes) who have already completed compulsory foreign language courses.

This intensive course is the context for this study. It is conducted in Japanese by the author (Yamada). The intensive course consists of five sessions (90 minutes each): Goal-setting, English proficiency/skills needed, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, Plan-Do- Check-Act (PDCA) cycle, and learning strategies. A total of 60 students participated (divided into two groups) in summer 2022 and their own self-directed study was monitored for five months (using an online community in Google Classroom, monthly face-to-face meeting sessions, and a monthly goal setting and reflection form) after the intensive course.

This study explored a dimension added to the intensive course this year to raise L2 speakers' awareness of their own mother tongue, Japanese. The following two activities were added to the course:

- (1) Discussions in Japanese on language learning experience with international students “learning Japanese” (advanced level L2 speakers of Japanese were invited to a session).
- (2) Listening to Japanese speeches by L2 speakers of Japanese (three levels: with beginners, intermediate, and advanced) and paying attention to what kind of elements differentiate the levels of their speeches.

In (1), the aim was to make students aware of what it means ‘to use a foreign language in real communication’ through interaction in Japanese with international students. Japanese students without authentic experience of having used foreign languages for meaningful purposes tend to have difficulties in understanding what their potential and realistic goals are, as their experience of English use is limited to controlled conversation in classrooms or online. It was assumed that they could gain a better sense through this activity in their mother tongue.

In (2), the aim was to help Japanese students perceive the difference of oral proficiency levels, as they can have a better grasp of the levels in their mother tongue, Japanese. It is important for them to identify what kinds of elements differentiate the levels, which would help them become more aware of the skills they need to aim to acquire in English.

Under a loose research design, it was decided to make the research question open: what are the learnings from the activities involving the L2 speakers of Japanese? For the investigation, students' reflection notes were used as data, as the data should ideally be what students produced without being conscious of my research question. Participants' consent to the use of their productions in the course for research purposes was gained in advance, in accordance with the institution's ethics procedures.

Thirty-six Japanese students who joined in the above two sessions were asked to write whatever reflections. Student perceptions related to “L2 speakers of Japanese” were extracted from their descriptions. Twelve related themes were identified and grouped into two main categories. For (1), two key concepts were observed: *sympathy* (such as sharing the difficulties of language learning, whatever the target language is) and *inspiration* (being

motivated in their English learning, stimulated by international students using their L2). Five themes related to the former and three, to the latter. For (2), one key concept was noted: *a model to aim for* (managing well-structured/abstract topics and a wide range of vocabulary). Four themes fall into this category. The students started understanding what an advanced level learner can do in more detail, instead of a vague and idealised image of English native speakers.

Initially, the author (Yamada) expected that the Japanese students would learn about the strategies and beliefs of L2 speakers of Japanese, as these kinds of aspects are common regardless of the target language. The international students had already acquired advanced-level Japanese language skills and it was assumed that they would have acquired numerous strategies which the Japanese students could apply to their own English learning. However, the study revealed that the effect of the activities was actually more on the psychological side: the Japanese students' motivations and aims for their own English learning. Through interacting with learners of Japanese in their mother tongue, the Japanese learners of English became more aware of what is required to be a successful L2 learner, and the range and levels of L2 skills that learners have. This understanding represents a more nuanced understanding than a single idealised and unrealistic image of native speakers' fluency and pronunciation that they might feel pressured to aim for.

To conclude, one implication of this study is that the addition of opportunities to interact with L2 speakers of Japanese could lead to a realistic and effective goal setting for English learning and broaden Japanese learners' views on English learning. Educators could enhance student motivation for learning by increasing opportunities to meet and interact with international students and to be familiar with their L2 (Japanese language) learning experiences. As Little (2000) states, "learner autonomy is a matter of developing and exercising a capacity for independent learning behaviour in interaction with other learners," (p.26). When promoting self-directed learning, such environments and occasions to meet and interact with various students need to be considered and ensured on campus. SALL facilities may be ideal places for these interactions to take place.

Discussion

In their presentations, McCrohan and Yamada highlighted the importance of integrating student input into decision-making for SALL, whether it is about what persuades

learners to use self-access facilities, or what can be learned from interacting with students with different learning experiences, in Yamada's case learners of English interacting with learners of Japanese as part of a SALL course. These voices can inform our decision-making and remind us how we may be able to motivate our learners to engage more deeply in SALL.

As the forum included both experienced SALL practitioners and newcomers to the field, the Q&A session focused on what to bear in mind when attempting to start a new self-access centre, or revive flagging facilities. The following advice from the presenters, moderators and participants was given.

Linking the facilities to institutional goals and mission statements. By showing how a SAC can fit smoothly into the existing system, and help the university achieve its own objectives (international exchange etc.), you can get more stakeholders on board. SACs can provide support for international students or make your institution a more attractive option for potential students, so highlight the marketing/publicity advantages too.

Identifying sympathetic colleagues who may be interested in working with you. There can sometimes be some suspicion from other faculty about the purpose of SALL facilities and what they may represent in terms of extra workload, so identifying colleagues who share your vision can be vital. Some may have worked at institutions with similar facilities before, so find out about their prior experiences (understanding that they may not be 100% positive ones) and get as much input from them as possible to ensure their buy-in when putting together a proposal.

Visiting other facilities. JASAL has a registry of SACs and there is likely to be at least one not too far away. Virtual visits are also possible. Most SALL practitioners will be delighted to share their experiences with you. Check out their social media posts for ideas of their activities.

Identifying core groups of users or potential users to involve as formal or informal student staff/volunteers. Harnessing the enthusiasm of students will go a long way! If there is no budget available to pay students, set up a small volunteer team and get their input on simple things like making posters, brightening up a space etc. Recruit from your classes or ask other instructors to identify potential students. International students may also be looking for ways to make Japanese friends and can be a great resource. Courses like the one Yamada describes above can also be very effective in

attracting the kinds of students who are intrinsically interested in improving their language skills through SALL activities.

Starting small. Even if you don't have a budget, starting conversation sessions at lunchtime or in office hours, or providing a cupboard or a small space with some games or materials, can be a good starting point from which to build. Once it's popular, lobby for a bigger space to use!

Holding events. Cultural workshops by international students, or study abroad reports can be popular events that students can easily take part in. More ambitious ideas raised in the forum include a presentation contest, "Model United Nations" events, etc.

As McCrohan's research highlighted, and is well-documented in the literature (Murray & Fujishima, 2013; Mynard et al., 2020), the social function of a SAC is what tends to convince students to keep coming back, so activities which focus on building a community of learners will be key. Additionally, the opportunity to interact with international students, as Yamada's study highlights, is also appreciated by Japanese users of SACs. Gathering user input and reactions, through studies such as those described by the presenters in this forum, can help to keep facilities and services relevant and interesting to students, and help guarantee the success of SALL at any institution.

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