

The Report of JASAL Student Forum 2023

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Author Biography

Yuki Yamaguchi is a specially appointed administrator in the Global Lounge at Wayo Women's University. She is responsible for managing the space and promoting events associated with the Global Lounge. She completed her B.A. in Liberal Arts from Akita International University with a concentration in language learning and psychology.

The JASAL Student Forum 2023 was held on June 9, 2023, aiming to share the practices in self-access centers (SACs) across Japan and discuss ideas on their future development from student and staff perspectives. The participants of this forum were the students and staff/teachers who engage in developing SACs in their university, or those who are considering creating one in the future—as they believe SACs are an important facility for student autonomous language learning. As well as an idea-sharing space, this forum connected participants while fostering an environment that allowed further communication between the participants. This forum was especially useful for students who are expected to actively exchange more ideas and opinions since SACs generally aim to cultivate active learning motivation of learners. The forum was organized based on three broad topics: how each SAC advertises its activities and events, ongoing projects and interesting plans, and challenges and difficulties that each SAC deals with at the present moment.

How SACs Reach Students

The first topic of this forum was how to approach students and advertise SACs' events and activities. The majority of the universities that participated in this forum utilize social media, primarily Instagram. On the other hand, some students mentioned that they mainly use their school portal to advertise events available in their SACs. Others take a traditional yet more proactive approach by displaying posters in the cafeteria and the library in order to attract not only regular SAC users, but also those who usually do not visit the SACs.

Among the participants in the forum, the management of the learning spaces was also discussed. All agreed with the idea that SACs should have a comfortable atmosphere. In other words, it is crucial to organize a SAC in a visually well-presented way, implying that students are encouraged to chat, discuss, and enjoy with friends and staff in open spaces without pressure. Some SACs take advantage of colors and visually engaging furniture, and also board games to create a welcoming ambiance.

Moreover, the recruitment of student staff was also addressed. Many of the SACs hire student assistants to support the development of SACs and event organizing. Although it is debatable that their work is mainly SAC upkeep and not related to English directly, hiring student staff is very effective in advertising SACs to more users. Reitaku University designed its own jackets for student staff and the effect seemed remarkably effective because the jacket highlights the role of student staff, but at the same time, they are close to many students as friends and classmates. Therefore, it is possible to determine that more opinions and ideas can be expected through hiring student staff.

Ongoing Projects and Interesting Plans

The forum highlighted that each SAC tailors its event organization approach based on demographic factors and student interests. Specifically, SACs with a substantial number of international students provide opportunities for socializing, such as Karaoke, seasonal parties, and job fairs. In situations where Japanese and international students study together, it is vital to emphasize activities that encourage ‘vocalization,’ fostering more intercultural communication. Another strategy involves hosting non-language-related events to attract a diverse range of university community members. One university in Kyoto, for example, holds animal therapy sessions influenced by a common movement in the United States and European countries. They aim to provide a sense of reassurance that is assumed to be effective for students’ concentration level and motivation to study. This type of activity is mainly focusing on using SACs as a multi-purpose space so that students would feel less pressured to use English and other languages. These events could reach a wider range of students, even those who do not belong to English-related majors. As a result, a SAC may become an initiative to widen the students’ community and also transmit the message that their English level is irrelevant to the accessibility of SAC facilities.

Challenges and Difficulties

One of the common challenges that most SACs encounter is attracting more users. As described earlier, even though each university is seeking a way to attract more people through various approaches, there is still a tendency for the same group of people to repeatedly join events and daily activities. As a consequence, the polarization between students whose language practice is a part of their daily life and students who don’t practice is evident.

Another common difficulty is to equalize the motivation of students. On one hand, each SAC searches for a way to attract more students by hosting various kinds of events. On the other hand, it is also true that many students are attracted to prizes and foods that come along with such events. Therefore, it is complex to assess whether all students identify the facilities as places aiming to cultivate their autonomy towards language learning.

Reflecting the learning outcomes in this forum on our SAC

The SAC in Wayo Women’s University is called Global Lounge. It started in 2020, following the establishment of the Faculty of Global Studies. For the last few years, there has been an initiative that involved active discussions among teachers, administrators, and students in order to create an autonomous learning space. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the space had been in limited use until the beginning of April 2022. However, there has always

been a group of students who were eager to create a student-centered community, which contributed to the development of the current Global Lounge.

As a designated staff member in Global Lounge at Wayo Women's University, I started taking a lead in creating the learning space from April 2023. I have witnessed emerging positivity among students in my everyday work. As the number of visitors has been increasing, currently there are a certain number of students who actively interact with other members of the community (e.g., teachers, peers and administrators) on a daily basis. In particular, along with the school curriculum, a group of Student Assistants (SAs) hold workshops regularly throughout the semester in the Global Lounge. Since their events are designed for the first-year students, there has been active interaction across the different age groups. Additionally, because of the vibrant atmosphere, before and after their workshops, more students started staying in the space and socializing with their friends as well as the SAs. Although the primary role of the SA is supporting freshman students as part of the curriculum, I hope to run more events that feature the SA initiatives as their presence certainly has a powerful impact on the fellow students. In the future JASAL student forum, I would like to encourage them to participate in the discussions and share their ideas as well as practice.

Upon participating in the JASAL student forum this year, I have an action plan to keep developing the Global Lounge at Wayo Women's University. Compared to the other SACs, our space is smaller. However, taking advantage of its coziness, I would like to start creating enjoyable social gatherings and making the space more flexible. First, by creating regular social gatherings is a way to encourage students to make more connections and feel enjoyment while using English. Currently, in the Global Lounge, we offer daily lunch chat with English teachers, but there have not been informal events such as playing board games with friends and teachers. Based on my observation, those who feel less confident in English skills tend to avoid even coming to the Global Lounge even if they have interest. I proposed to add various games that allow the members of the community to socialize and feel the sense of belonging. Those games add visual impacts, so that they could transmit the impression that the space is filled with conversation and enjoyment, which makes a distinctive impression from other learning spaces such as a school library. Additionally, the flexibility of the space should be discussed extensively in order to promote its openness. As of this year, most of the events we held were about foreign language learning. However, after gaining inspiring ideas from the student discussions at the JASAL student forum, I would like to propose more events that do not necessarily focus on skills or knowledge about a specific area of study. An

art exhibition, for example, could be an event that can be advertised to new students including those who are interested in painting, sculpting, photography, and designing.

Concluding Remarks

JASAL Student Forum 2023 offered substantial opportunities for students, staff, and teachers to exchange their original ideas and opinions, and also inspired each other to develop a self-studying environment for students. Moreover, the forum allowed participants to appreciate the presence of other members who engage in something very similar to what they offer as a SAC.

For me, as a person who has never engaged in SAC activities, I think it is a progressive idea to support students from the perspective of furnishing their study space more comfortably. Also, I am in total agreement with cultivating students' autonomy when it comes to language learning because it requires constant effort and continuous study. Based on my experience, just attending class and listening to lectures is not enough to learn a language. Therefore, I believe that students would benefit greatly by finding additional ways of learning languages that they are interested in. I hope there will be another opportunity to be a part of JASAL forums and reflect more ideas on what we offer at Wayo Women's University.