

Exploring Student Perceptions of the New Learning Commons at the Ikebukuro Campus of Tokyo International University

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Author Biography

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In the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, institutions are constantly striving to create dynamic and inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of their student body. Tokyo International University (TIU) recently opened a new facility, the Learning Commons, at its Ikebukuro campus. This space serves as a hub for linguistic exploration, cultural exchange, and collaborative learning, aiming to enhance the overall academic experience for students.

To gauge the impact of this facility, the authors of this paper are currently conducting a survey targeting students who actively participate in the Learning Commons' programs and activities. This study seeks to explore and compare the experiences of students at two distinct SACs – one established on the Kawagoe campus and a newly formed counterpart on the Ikebukuro campus. The study focuses on understanding how the transition and differences between the two SACs impact student engagement and satisfaction. Participants in the study were students who had utilized the English Plaza (EP) on Kawagoe campus during the spring semester and subsequently experienced the newly opened Learning Commons (LC) on the Ikebukuro campus in the fall semester of the same year. The objective is to identify factors contributing to the students' experience at each location and evaluate how the establishment phase of a SAC influences student perceptions and interactions. This analysis is particularly relevant as most students who used the EP have since transitioned to the Ikebukuro campus, offering a unique perspective on continuity and change in student life facilitated by campus activity centers. Another question the researchers are exploring is whether the change in language policy in the LC, allowing students to speak both English and Japanese, will attract new students to visit and participate in activities compared to the EP.

The aim of this research project is to understand student perspectives and how their perceptions play a role in university administrators' assessment of the effectiveness of the LC. This paper will detail the preliminary findings from survey responses from students who have participated in the LC, shedding light on strengths, areas for improvement, and overall impact. The researchers attempt to illustrate how language policy affects students' participation and perception of the space (Thornton, 2018). The authors hope to contribute valuable insights that can inform future enhancements and ensure the continued success of TIU's commitment to global education and cross-cultural understanding.

Context

TIU was established in 1965 and its main campus is located in Saitama, Japan. There are approximately 7,000 students representing over 100 countries. In the fall of 2023, a new campus opened in Ikebukuro, Tokyo. This campus caters to the international student population and English language and International Relations majors.

The original SAC at TIU is called the English Plaza (EP) on the Kawagoe Campus in Saitama, created in 2013. It is located in a reappropriated student lounge in a main classroom building on campus. Activities included the English Lounge, a conversation practice area, and Academic Advising, which is a homework and tutoring space. The faculty of the Global Teaching Institute (GTI) provides English conversation and academic support. There is also a section of the space dedicated to English language books for students to use freely, and a small cafe space for students to order drinks free of charge. The newly established SAC on the Ikebukuro campus, the Learning Commons, provides similar facilities to those on the Kawagoe campus, including dedicated spaces for English conversation, academic advising, individual study rooms, and a spacious cafe area. While the facilities are nearly identical, there has been a change in the language policy. Instead of being exclusively English-speaking, the facility now accommodates both English and Japanese languages.

Day-to-day operations are managed by paid student interns, consisting of both Japanese and international students, who undergo training and are supervised by faculty advisors. The space is administered by GTI managers and university administration.

In keeping with mission statements common to other SACs (Chen & Mynard, 2018), the EP was designed to be a hub of English language development and international understanding. The aim is to provide a space where students meet to refine their language skills, connect with international students, and gain the support of experienced tutors and advisors in pursuit of academic and personal excellence. The space proved to be popular with students; anecdotal feedback from repeat visitors to the EP noted how they enjoyed the atmosphere, surroundings and furniture. The genesis for the creation of the EP came from TIU administrators who recognized the importance of creating new and dynamic spaces to attract students. There was also the recognition that a SAC could become a hub for intercultural exchange, as TIU was actively recruiting students from abroad during this time to enroll in the university's English-mediated Instruction (EMI) program, English Track (E-Track). Mynard (2019) noted that this

rationale among university administrators has become more common in consideration of the declining birthrate in Japan.

Previous Research

The establishment of SACs within higher education institutions, particularly in the Japanese context, has been a subject of scholarly investigation for many years. Previous studies (Thornton & Noguchi, 2016; Hooper, 2020) have provided valuable insights into students' perceptions of such learning centers, shedding light on various aspects ranging from student needs assessment to the growing recognition of the importance of social learning. Chen and Mynard (2018) explored students' perceptions of the SAC space through the lens of students' experiences, emphasizing the positive correlation between engagement in language centers and the impact of the physical environment on users' experiences.

This research, conducted in various cultural contexts, offers insights relevant to the bilingual and culturally diverse environment of the SAC on the Ikebukuro campus. For instance, a study conducted at a university in the Netherlands (Beckers et al., 2016) delved into the role of learning spaces and their impact on meeting students' expectations. The findings indicated that well-designed learning spaces, like those found in language centers around the world, contribute to students' sense of control over their learning journey and promote collaborative learning among students, faculty, and staff.

Considering the context of the Ikebukuro campus, with its diverse student population encompassing both Japanese and international students, it is crucial to understand how SACs contribute to students' perceptions of the university environment, language proficiency, autonomy, and intercultural competence. The collective findings of these studies emphasize the multifaceted benefits of such centers, providing a valuable foundation for the current study on the LC at Ikebukuro campus.

Synthesizing these studies, it is evident that SACs and their language policies in Japan play a vital role in shaping students' perceptions of the university environment. As we navigate the specific context of Ikebukuro campus, with its bilingual and culturally inclusive SAC, we aim to build upon and extend these insights to contribute to the broader understanding of the impact of similar learning environments on students, particularly focusing on the experiences and perspectives of both Japanese and international students.

Ongoing Data Collection of Student Perceptions

The ongoing study focuses on exploring the experiences and perceptions of 88 participants: 75 Japanese students and 13 international students. The international students are enrolled in the E-Track Program at TIU, studying fields such as international relations, business and economics, or digital business innovation. They originate from various countries, with more than 100 nations being represented at the university. While these students do not take regular classes with Japanese students, they regularly use the LC to practice Japanese and meet fellow students. At present, the participation of international students in the survey is limited. While some international students who frequently visit or work in the LC as interns were participants in the survey, the researchers are actively seeking more feedback from this group. Among the Japanese respondents, 68 individuals were first-year students. The primary method employed for data collection has been a survey distributed to first-year seminar classes and made accessible online through a QR code in the LC. The data was collected towards the end of the 2023 academic year, following the opening of the new campus in the fall of 2023. After the campus had been operational for three months, it was determined that sufficient time had elapsed to begin gathering data on student perceptions of the new facilities.

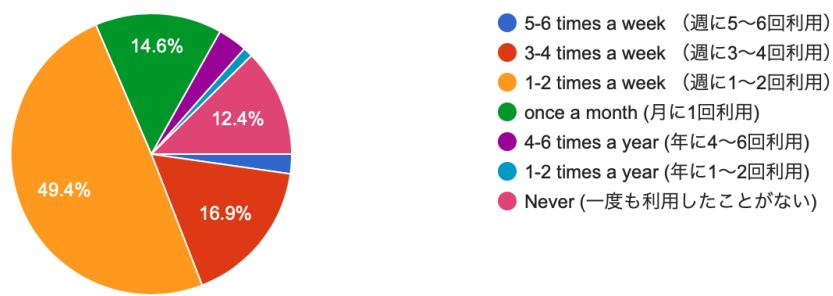
The survey aims to capture insights into various aspects of the participants' experiences within the learning environment, particularly focusing on their interactions and engagement in activities within the LC. This facility serves as a central hub for academic and social activities, making it an ideal setting for studying student engagement and experiences.

While all students across different academic years were invited to participate, the study primarily targets first-year students. This focus is driven by the fact that some activities in the LC, English Lounge (conversation practice) and Academic Advising (tutoring support), are mandatory and connected to course grades for first and second-year Japanese students who major in English. However, international students must visit Academic Advising for only first-year academic literacy courses. Therefore, this cohort represents a significant portion of the target population and provides valuable insights into students' initial experiences transitioning into higher education. By including both Japanese and international students, the study aims to capture a diverse range of perspectives and experiences, considering potential cultural differences in engagement and utilization of the LC.

The survey items focused on students' frequency of visits, motivation for attending, and their awareness of policies and rules. This report focuses on the first two of these matters. In total, there were 10 questions. Questions were provided in both English and Japanese and participants could write their open-ended responses in either language. Figure 1 notes the frequency of users in the fall semester of 2023. This was the first semester of the newly-opened campus in Ikebukuro.

Figure 1

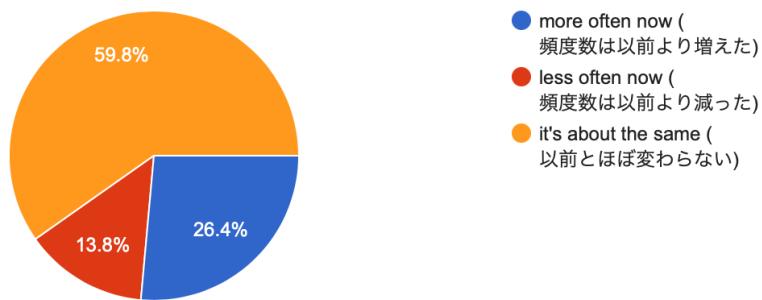
How Often Do You Visit the Learning Commons (Not Including Intern Working Hours or Class Time)?



While analyzing the data from Figure 1 and comparing it with visits to the EP on the other campus in the spring semester (see Figure 2), we observed that nearly 60% of the students indicated no change in their visit frequency from the EP to the LC. Meanwhile, 26% reported visiting the LC more frequently. Notably, among the international students surveyed, the majority noted that their visit frequency to the LC either remained the same or decreased. To better understand this trend, the researchers aim to increase the number of international student participants in the survey and conduct interviews to explore their reasons for visiting the LC less often. Conversely, Japanese students were more likely to report increased visit frequency to the LC. The degree to which the changed language policy plays a role in these usage patterns requires further investigation.

Figure 2

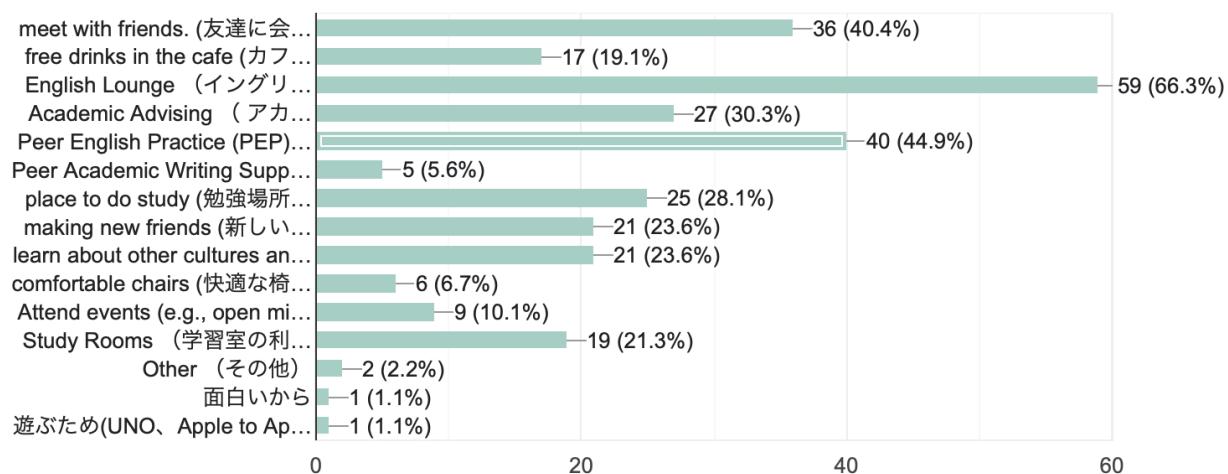
Has the Frequency of Your Visits Changed From Last Semester in the English Plaza?



To better understand motivation for visiting the LC, activities provided in the LC were added as multiple-choice items in English and Japanese (see Figure 3). This question asked participants to select several items related to the activities in the LC and EP in order to better understand their motivations for participating. Responses to this question show that the majority of users are fulfilling a requirement to participate in the English Lounge for class credit. The second highest recorded reason for using the LC is Peer English Practice which is similar to the English Lounge conversations, but led by student staff. Students can also receive class credit for attending these sessions.

Figure 3

What Is Your Motivation for Visiting the Learning Commons (Ikebukuro) or English Plaza (Kawagoe)? Select All That Apply.



At TIU, all first- and second-year English majors are required to visit the English Lounge at least once a week. In the survey, students provided their year and major so from this data it is

assumed that at least some of the EL attendance is for class credit. A closer look at the data also shows that students are exceeding requirements. While students are visiting the EL at least partially for credit, the data do not imply it is the only reason.

Although the survey data supports previously assumed ideas about usage, the next phase of the study will provide a comprehensive exploration of student experiences through interviews within the LC, shedding light on factors such as visiting for class credit. The implications from these interviews will help the researchers understand the individual motivations of students and may shed light on factors that can enhance the overall learning experience of all students, not merely first-year students. They may also aid in the continuing effort to provide tools that support learner autonomy. As Mynard and Stevenson (2017) have pointed out, measuring whether or not a SAC promotes autonomous learning is a challenge, nevertheless, it is important for university leaders to observe evidence of learning and underscore areas for improvement.

Going Forward

The authors are actively collecting additional survey data, particularly from international students, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their perceptions of both facilities. To further this inquiry, preparations are underway to conduct semi-structured interviews with students who have expressed willingness on the surveys to discuss their experiences in the EP in Kawagoe and the LC in Ikebukuro. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow the researchers to focus on predefined areas of interest while also enabling participants to offer new insights (Hooper, 2020). The aim of these interviews is to delve into specific survey responses and explore participants' motivations for using these spaces across different semesters.

The overarching goal of this research is to enhance our understanding of the functions and benefits of the SACs, along with their complexities and potential challenges. By the end of the 2024 academic year, the authors plan to present a comprehensive review of the findings to university administrators. This report will include summarized results and actionable recommendations. Ultimately, it is hoped that this research will provide institutional stakeholders with the in-depth knowledge required for informed decision-making concerning funding, staffing, and future initiatives related to the SACs.

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