

Developing Educational Activities that Encourage Autonomy for Teaching Assistants and Students

Hiro Mitsuo Hayashi

*Kyushu University, Integrated Sciences for Global Society
hiromhayashi@aol.com*

Bartosz Wolanski

*Kyushu University, Faculty of Arts and Science
wolanski.bartosz@artsci.kyushu-u.ac.jp*

Author Biography

Hiro Mitsuo Hayashi is a PhD candidate in Kyushu University's Integrated Sciences for Global Society. His research interests include the impact of the atomic bomb on minority groups, diversity in sports, and the role of self-access learning centers in academic institutions.

Bartosz Wolanski serves an advisory role to the Kyushu University SALC. He has conducted research in sociolinguistics of Japanese, English, and Polish. More recently, he has been investigating how differences in the usage of punctuation marks affect the understanding of Japanese learners of English.

Abstract

Learning facilities around the world have returned to in-person services in response to a decrease in the number of people contracting the coronavirus and the development of more effective strategies to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, examining the re-introduction of educationally stimulating face-to-face activities into self-learning centers schedules in the post-pandemic era is a fruitful exercise. The Self Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kyushu University, located in Fukuoka Japan, has hosted regular events to promote study abroad programs as part of the university's annual study abroad fair. During the 2019 fair, the SALC held a series of talks in which international teaching assistants (TAs) spoke about their home countries, experiences of studying abroad, and approaches to language learning. This article will examine how these presentations were developed, halted due to COVID-19 pandemic, and later re-introduced. This will help provide context to better understand their impact in cultivating a sense of autonomy among the students and TAs. Two small scale online surveys were conducted after in-person talks were re-introduced at the 2023 Study Abroad Fair in SALC: one aimed at participants and one at presenters. Further interviews were also conducted with the 2023 presenters. The questions in the surveys and interviews were designed to gauge the effects of the event on the autonomy, skills, and personal relationships of the respondents. The results gathered highlighted the benefits of creating opportunities for teaching staff to share their experiences with learners and how interactive sessions can prove beneficial to both parties.

Keywords: educational activities, autonomy, study abroad fair, cultural exchange

ティーチング・アシスタントと学生の自主性を促す教育活動を展開

コロナウイルス感染者数の減少と、新型コロナウイルス感染症のパンデミックに対処する戦略の策定により、世界中の学習施設が対面サービスを再導入している。このような背景において、教育的に刺激的な対面活動の再導入を検討することは有益であると考えられる。福岡にある九州大学セルフ・アクセス・ラーニング・センター (SALC) は、毎年恒例の大学留学フェアの一環として、海外留学プログラムを促進するイベントを定期的に開催してきた。2019年のフェア期間中、SALCは留学生ティーチング・アシスタント (TA) が母国、自身の留学経験、語学学習へのアプローチなどについて語る一連のプレゼンテーションを開催した。本論文では、これらのプレゼンテーションがどのように開発され、新型コロナウイルス感染症のパンデミックにより中止され、その後再び導入されたかを検証する。これは、学生と TA の自主性を育む上での影響をよりよく理解するための背景を提供するのに役立つ。SALC の 2023 年留学フェアで対面トークが再導入された後、2つの小規模なオンライン調査が実施された。1つは参加者を対象としたもの、もう1つは発表者を対象としたものである。2023年の発表者へのさらなるインタビューも実施された。アンケートとインタビューの質問は、回答者の自主性、スキル、人間関係に対するイベントの影響を評価するように設計されている。この結果は、教員が自分の経験を学習者と共有する機会を設けることの利点と、双方向のセッションがいかに双方にとって有益であるかを浮き彫りにした。

Learning facilities around the world have started to return to offering in-person services in response to a decrease in the number of people contracting the coronavirus and the development of more effective strategies to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, looking at the re-introduction of educationally stimulating activities back into self-learning centers' schedules in the post-pandemic era is a fruitful exercise. Seeking out reflections on the manner in which events, developed before the pandemic, have been received since returning to face-to-face learning can offer insight into the value of maintaining these activities moving forward.

Initiatives that promote study abroad programs held at Kyushu University, located in Fukuoka, provide a setting to review the type of events highlighted above. Various facilities throughout Kyushu University participate in a coordinated effort to hold events during a set period of the academic calendar that give the student body an opportunity to learn more about overseas academic opportunities. The best example of this multi-pronged effort to promote the benefits of learning in a new environment is the university's annual study abroad fair. When this cross-departmental project has taken place, the SALC has usually contributed, as the goals of the facility align with many of the general aims of studying abroad. For example, both stress the importance of students cultivating a desire to study languages and the benefits that result from assuming autonomy in learning. From the center's perspective, these kinds of shared goals have made participating in this university-wide study abroad initiative worthwhile. The center has supported numerous students who have gone on to study abroad after participating in the fair and made use of the SALC in their efforts to develop language skills in preparation for joining exchange programs. In many cases, the managerial staff have witnessed students increase their independent, out-of-class language studies upon learning that they have an opportunity to study abroad. Involvement in the fair also ensures that the SALC is working in-sync with other facilities within the university and can also help raise awareness about the services that the SALC offers.

The SALC's involvement in the study abroad fair provides an opportunity to review some of the educational activities that have been established by the managerial staff in conjunction with the faculty and university's wider work. This report focuses on a series of presentations that the SALC organized over the period of a few days a week in 2019 during the last in-person study abroad fair that the facility participated in before the outbreak of the

coronavirus. In these talks, international members of staff were given the opportunity to talk about their home countries, their experiences of studying overseas, and language learning in Japan. The series of talks was designed to be mutually beneficial for students and teaching staff. Many of the talks focused on non-English speaking countries, as the TAs who presented were from countries all over the world. However, all of them took place in English in order to provide language learners with an opportunity to practice their listening skills. This was of paramount importance given that the SALC's main goal is to provide support for English language learners (more details about the core and supplementary services of the SALC at Kyushu University are outlined below). They also promoted independent learning amongst students as the TAs could discuss how taking initiative in their studies positively impacted their ability to move abroad. The wide range of countries discussed by the TAs highlighted how new educational opportunities have emerged as globalization has accelerated. The talks also underlined the idea that study can take place outside the constraints of a classroom. The talks also provided the SALC staff with the chance to develop professional skills, such as presenting and lesson planning.

This article will examine how the SALC management developed, implemented, and later reintroduced this educational program. Studies that examine approaches to cultivating autonomous students and employees will help underpin this section of the paper. The paper will initially focus on the presentations that were held in 2019, the first year that the program was introduced. Focus will then shift on to two small scale online surveys conducted in 2023, which was the first time that in-person presentations were held following the lifting of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions at the university: One aimed at participants and one at presenters. Details will also be provided about follow up interviews that were held with the 2023 presenters. The conclusion will discuss whether or not similar events may prove beneficial for university-based academic facilities in the future.

SALC at Kyushu University

The SALC at Kyushu University operates within KIKAN Education (the Faculty of Arts and Science). Since opening in 2014, the center has aimed to support autonomous language learning for both students and staff. The center primarily provides assistance to English language learners. However, the center also offers visitors the chance to practice other languages. At

different times throughout the center's operation, the managerial staff have helped run events that support learners of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, and Russian. Nonetheless, daily English conversation sessions are the core service on offer to learners. They usually function as open discussions, which users can join at any time without having to make an appointment. These sessions are supplemented by one-to-one support for students looking to take English language tests, such as TOEFL iBT, IELTS, TOEIC, and GRE). Learners are normally encouraged to make a reservation to utilize this service. In addition, the SALC runs a range of activities, such as game nights and open lectures that promote exchange while also establishing platforms for individuals to sharpen their language skills. The center is also home to a small library and stocks a range of interactive games that encourage students to engage in the language learning process.

The center employs a team of TAs that help support these activities. The majority of TAs are international graduate students at Kyushu University. However, the center has also employed Japanese students and undergraduates. The size of the team fluctuates in number but there are usually between 8 to 15 TAs employed at any one time. The center employs two administrators, a role that involves looking after the day-to-day running of the facility. A member of the Faculty of Arts and Science teaching staff serves as an advisor to the SALC. This individual supports the administrators and assumes a degree of academic responsibility of the SALC alongside the director of the center, who oversees the running of the facility. The authors of this paper have worked in various roles associated with the SALC at Kyushu University. At the time of writing this paper, one of the authors held the position of advisor and the other was no longer attached to the SALC.

Literature Review

The educational activities described in this paper were implanted with a desire to cultivate a sense of autonomy among students and staff. In keeping with Mynard's (2022) model, which links autonomy with increasing intrinsic motivation, the SALC looked to provide a setting where students could pursue their interests and freely express themselves in a safe, interactive environment. By inviting TAs to engage with the students through sharing their experiences of language learning and living abroad, the series of events would hopefully help the students feel at ease when expressing themselves. The talks would also provide a platform for the students to

get to know the center's teaching staff, which could facilitate future interactions between both sides. The aims of these events tie in neatly with Wang and Han's (2020) suggestion that interaction, efforts to introduce culture, and positive social networks help enhance an individual's ability to learn in an autonomous manner. They also stress that both teachers and students, along with the educational authority, are involved in the process of cultivating an ability to display autonomy.

The importance placed on relationship building within the talks held by Kyushu University's SALC draws from Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory, which indicates that people are naturally drawn to positive educational experiences and the desire to cultivate close, caring relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020). The type of reciprocal bonds highlighted in this framework dovetails with an interactive learning process that Little and Brammerts (1996) explore in more detail. Within this discussion, they stress that developing learner autonomy is a collaborative process. This also links in with Murphey and Jacobs' (2000) notion that autonomy involves "an understanding of how and when collaboration may be beneficial and the right to choose it" (p. 6).

Furthermore, the managerial staff who helped implement and run these talks hoped that students would draw inspiration from TAs in order to become the type of autonomous learner that Holec (1981) describes as being "capable of taking charge" of their own learning. This approach involves "determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used," and "evaluating what has been acquired" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). The managerial staff also felt that these concepts were not limited to students and that the SALC could benefit as a facility by giving TAs an opportunity to develop similar skills through delivering their own independent sessions. This paper's attempt to examine the methods for encouraging autonomy amongst TAs, as well as students, draws on themes explored in Tassinari's (2018) study into the structures and processes that help make a SALC a facility that fosters autonomy for both learners and workers environment. Tassinari highlights that it is the duty of managerial staff to foster a sense of autonomy within their staff, especially when the team is composed of student assistants. Tassinari's notion that this can be achieved by providing teaching staff with the platform to make decisions and take initiative is of particular relevance to this study.

As the paper also explores the development of the talks from the perspective of the SALC managerial staff, the authors have also looked into wider views of autonomy in the workplace. Within in this context, Gagné & Bhave's (2011) discussion on the importance of autonomy in job design and staff management provides a useful resource. These resources provide the authors with the framework to examine a core question that underpins this study: how autonomy can be encouraged within an educational facility.

Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of how the SALC study abroad talks were received and the value of holding them again, the authors sought a manageable way to gain feedback from both participants and presenters. Gaining meaningful feedback would not only highlight whether or not changes should be made to the contents of the talk moving forward but crucially also provide insight into the means for encouraging autonomy for TAs and students. The 2023 Study Abroad Fair presented a valuable opportunity to collect this kind of information. This marked the first time that in-person presentations were fully re-introduced at the SALC during the study abroad fair following the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors asked both groups to respond to questions in a survey (one aimed at participants and the other at presenters). The questions were designed to gauge how well the events were received through the lens of autonomy, skill development, and personal relationships. The studies highlighted in the literature review have helped the authors identify these three areas as pertinent to this study. Respondents marked the degree to which they agreed with a total of 14 different statements (eight aimed at participants and six at presenters). Participants were instructed to indicate their stance on a sliding scale from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The questions were intended to gain insight into attitudes towards the events in terms of key topics, such as language learning opportunities, autonomy, and interpersonal relationships. The participant and presenter surveys also gave students as well as TAs and presenters an opportunity to add any remaining comments or impressions about the event in a final open-ended question.

A full list of the questions that were distributed online can be found in Appendices A and B, along with supplementary notes that were added at the bottom of the survey. The questions were distributed using Google Forms and the participants received an access link immediately after a given talk. A total of 11 participants and seven presenters responded to their respective

surveys. Respondents were not asked to provide their personal details when submitting their surveys. This approach was employed as the authors felt that a certain level of anonymity would increase the likelihood that people engage with the project. The authors then collected the results, looked at the mean score for each question and used this as a general indicator for how respondents viewed each statement. Thus, the analysis and insights discussed in the participant and presenter survey results are drawn from these averages.

Upon examining the feedback, the authors decided that follow up interviews with the presenters would be a useful way of gathering more in-depth views on the events and checking if their opinions had changed with the benefit of hindsight. Even though the surveys were submitted anonymously, it was possible to check if respondents to the presenter survey were available to provide added feedback. A total of seven presenter surveys were filled in after the series of talks, which meant that all participants responded. Furthermore, the SALC managerial staff had contact information for the TAs as they were employed by the facility. This meant that it would be possible to simply ask for extra feedback from all seven presenters. This was done through email and two of the presenters provided additional feedback. However, seeking similar responses from the participants who answered the initial survey proved logistically challenging. The participants did not need to register to attend the event and survey respondents were not asked to provide contact information. These two factors meant that there was no means for the authors to later contact the participants who responded to the survey.

Gaining feedback from the students and presenters involved in the talks not only helps to understand how they were received, but also allows both sides to reflect on the activities. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) also argue that reflection is “an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it.” They further stress that it is this process in conjunction “with experience that is important in learning” (p. 19). Although the questions in the surveys were designed not to be taxing on respondents, asking students to look back at the events that they have participated in at the SALC, can hopefully cultivate a desire to reflect in a more critical manner. This ability is valuable as it can be seen a facet of autonomy along with “decision-making, and independent action” (Little, 1991, p. 4).

Developing the Project: Benefits for Teaching Assistants

The SALC participated in a university study abroad fair that ran across a couple of weeks at the beginning of the 2018 academic calendar. As a part of this initiative, the SALC held a series of talks where the management and international TAs gave talks about their home countries. The SALC managerial staff felt that the talks that took place in 2018 were successful in promoting possible study abroad destinations to students but wanted to encourage a greater level of engagement in the sessions. In 2019, the SALC participated in the same study abroad fair; however, it decided to further develop the talks by asking presenters to also share their own experience of studying abroad and how they approached the challenges that they faced in new academic environments. This decision ties in with Tassinari's (2018) suggestion that a diverse team of student assistants can draw on their own set of interests and skills to contribute to the development of an SALC. Tassinari adds that their experience of being students and staff members within the university means that they can provide divergent perspectives into the learning environment. In order to inject a range of viewpoints into this series of talks, the managerial staff involved international TAs who worked in the SALC. A total of six TAs were pinpointed as possible candidates to deliver talks based about their experiences (see Table 1). It was important that the presenters came from diverse backgrounds and would be able to share interesting tips for studying in a new environment. The managerial staff wanted each TA to take charge of one session, which would last approximately 30 minutes to one hour. The talks would take place during the university-wide study abroad initiative, which ran in April 2019. Each speaker would be allocated a time slot to speak over a period of three days.

Table 1

Overview of Presentation Schedule – 2019

Date/Time	Content
Monday 22nd April - 5th period	Talk One: Presentation about Peru ¹ Talk Two: Presentation about Iraq

¹ Each presenter spoke about their personal experiences in Japan and provided advice about studying abroad.

Tuesday 23rd April - Lunchtime	Talk Three: Presentation about Malaysia
Tuesday 23rd April - 5th period	Talk Four: Presentation about China
Wednesday 24th April - Lunchtime	Talk Five: Presentation about Mongolia
Wednesday 24th April - 5th period	Talk Six: Presentation about Brazil

The managerial staff wanted the series of presentations to provide an opportunity for TAs to develop their skills. Prior to the event, the TAs who were involved were reminded that they could communicate with the managerial staff if they had any questions about the talks. However, staff wanted to cultivate a sense of independence among the TAs and establish a platform for personal growth. The presenters were told about the aims of the project and the basic structure of the talks. The managerial staff asked for the TAs to talk about their hometown, as well as their experiences of language learning and studying abroad; however, they were given the freedom to develop their sessions in whatever they felt would best appeal to students. Managerial staff thought that providing the TAs with this kind of independent task could encourage an autonomous work environment that facilitates motivation and cultivates a desire for staff to engage in their work and strive for high performance (Gagné & Bhavé, 2011). The presenters were encouraged to reach out to the managerial staff to ask for assistance if they wanted help in developing their talks.

The rationale was that providing the staff with an opportunity to speak about topics that they have experienced first-hand in a structure that best suited their personality would create a more enjoyable work experience. Having experienced working in the SALC as TAs, the managerial staff felt that creating a supportive, fun work setting would prove beneficial for staff. While in this instance, it would also encourage the presenters to engage in their tasks at their own volition. This approach links to the aspect of SDT that argues that staff function at an optimal level when they are autonomously motivated to an appropriate level (Slomp, Lee, & Mossman, 2021). It also ties in Ryan and Deci's SDT framework, which suggests people's psychological development is contingent on an environment that encourages engagement within as a means of experiencing autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020).

The managerial staff believed that the event would have highly practical and tangible benefits for the TAs. Presenters who actively engaged in their tasks could develop transferable skills, such as speaking in front of a group, preparing a talk with a specific audience in mind, delivering an academically engaging session, selecting appropriate levels of language, and facilitating discussion.

Structure of the Presentations: Benefits for Students

The staff determined that the talks would work well if divided into three sections. The first would focus on the speaker's hometown. This would provide students with a chance to find out more about places where they might want to study or work. Staff wanted to have some TAs represent countries or regions that Kyushu University students could choose as a destination to study abroad as academic connections with institutions in those locations had already been established. It was also decided that it would be good to have TAs presenting from places where not so many Kyushu University students go to study as this would encourage participants to broaden their horizons and open their minds to new possibilities for the future. This part of the presentations could also enhance the participants' cultural awareness, which is an indispensable factor in the process of learning English as a foreign language (Wang & Han, 2020).

The next section would see the speakers talk about their own personal experiences of language learning and studying abroad. This would provide listeners with ideas for how to approach their own studies, cultivate a desire to pursue a second or third language, and hopefully inspire them to seek different challenges in their academic careers. If the presentations could help serve as motivation, they might influence students' attitudes towards learning. Wang and Han (2020) argue that motivated study facilitates autonomous learning. They view the two concepts as feeding into each other, suggesting that learner autonomy also leads to motivation. Specifically, they highlight that encouraging students to exert agency and take responsibility for their learning can help promote motivation.

Staff also thought that hearing the experiences of international residents in Japan would help build mutual understanding. One of the key tasks for TAs in the SALC at Kyushu University is to lead engaging, educationally stimulating English language discussions for students who want to practice their language skills. The staff concluded that giving participants the opportunity to discover more about the TAs during the presentations could prove conducive

to a more relaxed atmosphere for the core services. The SALC managerial staff agreed with the viewpoint that autonomous learners can maintain a sense of independence while still promoting group work (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013). If participants made the decision to use the SALC at a later date at their own volition, these talks could help lay the groundwork for more open, engaging discussion sessions between the TAs and students in the future. This, in turn, would lead to the creation of a positive group dynamic, which would encourage the students to become more frequent users. These first two sections of the talks would also provide students with the chance to practice their listening skills.

The SALC managerial staff decided that the final section of the presentations would be a relaxed question and answer session. This would serve as a platform for exchange, allowing the TAs and students to develop a rapport. Staff believed that the question and answers would help newcomers to the center feel more at ease in the premises after witnessing that the space can be used for open discussion, helping to promote the facility and the kind of interactions that take place within the facility. There was a desire to avoid a traditional teacher-centered learning environment and ensure that the setting encouraged an engaged, motivated attitude towards language learning (Wang & Han, 2020).

Students who were already using the SALC could take advantage of this section to find out more about TAs they may have met before when utilizing the facility's core services. This section would also encourage students to speak and practice formulating questions. The SALC managerial staff wanted to ensure that each part of the talk would have practical and educational significance for those in attendance. Thus, participants could experience various benefits through joining the talks. The decision was also made to ask TAs to prepare a PowerPoint presentation to accompany their talks. It was felt that imagery would help provide a visual component to the talks, while any text featured would give students context for the points covered and be useful for participants who struggle with listening.

Promotional Activities

The SALC managerial staff created posters to advertise the presentations. One design was used to promote all six speakers. Details about the speaker's hometowns and the topics that would be covered in the presentations were featured, alongside information about the date, time,

and venue. The posters were put inside the SALC premises and all around the main university campus. Information about the events and the posters were also put up on the SALC's website.²

The university produced a list of all the activities taking place during the study abroad fair, which was also posted around the main campus and online. Information about the SALC events were included in the list of these activities. The faculty members who support the SALC also promoted the talks to their students. Furthermore, the SALC managerial staff and TAs encouraged regular visitors to the center to attend.

Interested participants would not be asked to register for both conceptual and practical purposes. The SALC managerial staff felt that removing registration requirements for participants would help create a relaxed atmosphere that would be conducive to autonomous learning, while also reducing the amount of information that needed to be conveyed in promotional materials.

Initial Reactions, Hiatus, and Re-introduction

Each presentation welcomed approximately 10 students. Unfortunately, an exact breakdown of who joined each session is not available; however, this figure was a combination of regular SALC users who attended multiple sessions and less frequent visitors who just participated in a single talk that resonated with their interests. This proved to be an optimal number of participants as core language support activities were also taking place parallel to the talks. As the size of the center is somewhat limited, welcoming more participants could have proved detrimental to one or both of these activities. In addition, the number of participants for each presentation allowed for small to mid-size discussions to ensue during the question and answer section.

The presentations proved valuable to the TAs, as they were given the opportunity to assume greater responsibilities and a sense of autonomy in their duties. They were asked to take on extra work, as the presentations required preparation; however, the personal nature of topics discussed meant that the workload was not excessive and did not interfere with their studies or

² In the time since this event was held, the SALC has expanded its online presence. The center now operates an X page (formerly Twitter), Instagram account, and Moodle site in addition to the platforms mentioned.

core TA responsibilities. Consequently, these kinds of events can prove an effective, efficient way of utilizing the experience and knowledge of TAs.

One of the key aims was to develop educationally stimulating small scale events that would be inclusive and encouraging in nature. As the presentations took place in English, participants were able to practice their listening during the presentations, as well as their speaking in the question-and-answer section. Students also got to learn about new cultures, think about possible study abroad destinations, cultivated relationships with TAs, picked up practical tips for language learning, and heard how other students dealt with the process of acclimatizing to different environments.

However, the SALC could not build on these initial successes in years that followed, as the COVID-19 pandemic meant a reduced number of students traveling abroad for academic purposes. This in turn resulted in the study abroad fair not taking place during the subsequent three-year period. However, as opportunities to study abroad start to increase for students engaged in higher education all around the world, 2023 proved a logical time to re-introduce the series of TA-led presentations as the need for programs that facilitate study abroad prospects became increasingly necessary. The SALC staff arranged for a series of seven talks to take place during Kyushu University's study abroad fair. The concept, aim, promotion, and implementation of the talks followed the same pattern as the pre-pandemic events. One of the main differences between the two sets of talks was that the 2023 saw all TAs lead their presentations on the same day (as highlighted in Table 2).

Table 2

Overview of Presentation Schedule - 2023

Date/Time	Content
Tuesday 25th April 2023 - Lunchtime	Talk One: Presentation about Indonesia ³ Talk Two: Presentation about Tunisia Talk Three: Presentation about Mexico

³ As with the previous set of talks in 2019, each presenter spoke about their personal experiences in Japan and provided advice about studying abroad.

Tuesday 25th April 2023 - 5th period

Talk Four: Presentation about Indonesia

Talk Five: Presentation about Turkey

Talk Six: Presentation about Croatia

Talk Seven: Presentation about Egypt

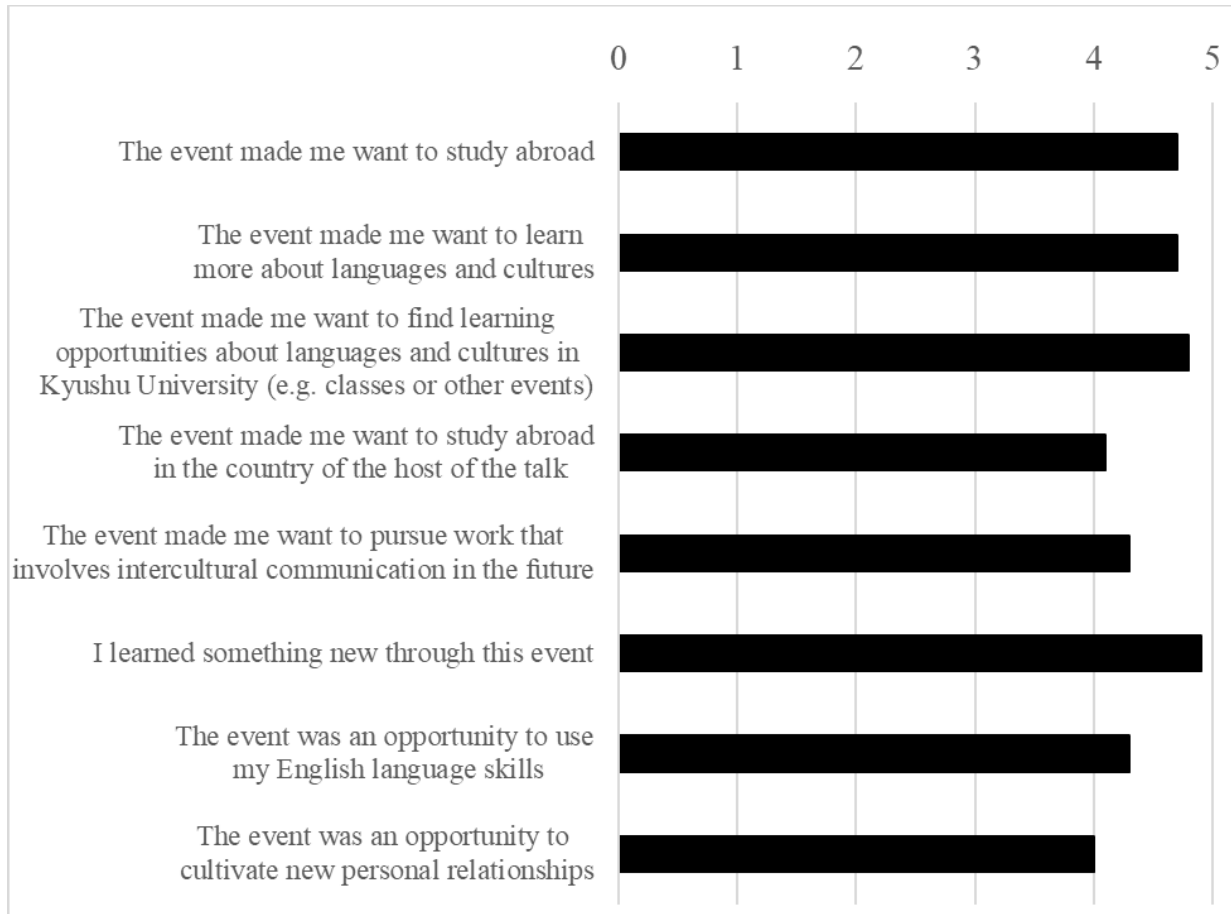
The 2023 Study Abroad Fair would also provide a valuable chance to conduct a survey examining the degree to which reintroducing these events was a worthwhile exercise. The following sections provide details about the answers that were gathered from the survey, as well as the key points that were gleaned from this intervention.

Participant Survey Results

As outlined in the methodology, the authors calculated a mean average for each respective statement and posited that the closer to five a comment scored, the more it resonated with participants. Overall, the averages indicate that the respondents agreed with all the statements in the survey, with no average dropping below four out of five (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Participant Survey: Average Score for Each Statement



The statements “The event made me want to study abroad” and “The event made me want to learn more about languages and cultures” both generated an average response of 4.7 out of 5. Participants also responded positively to “The event made me want to find learning opportunities about languages and cultures in Kyushu University (e.g. classes or other events),” with the statement scoring an average of 4.8 out of 5. These responses highlight that the event stimulated the participants’ desire to learn more about other languages and culture, as well as an interest in studying abroad. Wang and Han (2020) discuss how a lack of knowledge about another culture can have a negative impact on learning a language. They stress the need to enhance student’s awareness of cultures as a lack of cultural knowledge in this area can impede the motivation to learn. The scores for these statements indicate that talks of this nature can act as a casual, undemanding entry point which motivates students to continue exploring language learning and study abroad options at their own volition.

“The event made me want to study abroad in the country of the host of the talk” averaged

4.1 amongst respondents. The slightly lower score here can be explained by the variety of countries focused on during the presentations, some of which are less common destinations for students at Kyushu University. There is a limited amount of formal learning opportunities, such as exchange programs, linking some of the locations discussed in the talks and Kyushu University. Thus, the scores indicate the participants left the events feeling highly motivated to study abroad in a general sense; however, it seems that the home countries of the presenters were not always an optimal match.

Similarly, not all participants expressed a strong desire to pursue a career that involves international communication, which is a more serious commitment than a fixed-term educational study abroad program. “The event made me want to pursue work that involves intercultural communication in the future” averaged 4.3 amongst respondents. Although the nature of the event likely attracted students who already had some interest in the kind of work outlined in the statement, it is likely that others had different and potentially more casual motivations for joining.

Those in attendance reported learning through participation. “I learned something new through this event” averaged 4.9 in the survey. However, there was slightly lower agreement reported for statements that related to improved language proficiency and relationship building. “The event was an opportunity to use my English language skills” averaged 4.3, while “The event was an opportunity to cultivate new personal relationships” scored slightly at 4.0. These scores suggest that these events could benefit from incorporating more interactive elements. Activities such as pair chats, themed discussions, or quizzes could help engage the audience more than a traditional question and answer session.

Finally, in the free comment section, one participant expressed appreciation for getting a chance to listen to a speaker who had studied in the United States, as this was also a destination they were hoping to visit in the future. Another stated that they would like to visit the SALC again. This latter participant’s response highlights that these sorts of events can serve as a valuable first encounter with self-access for some students and encourage repeat visits.

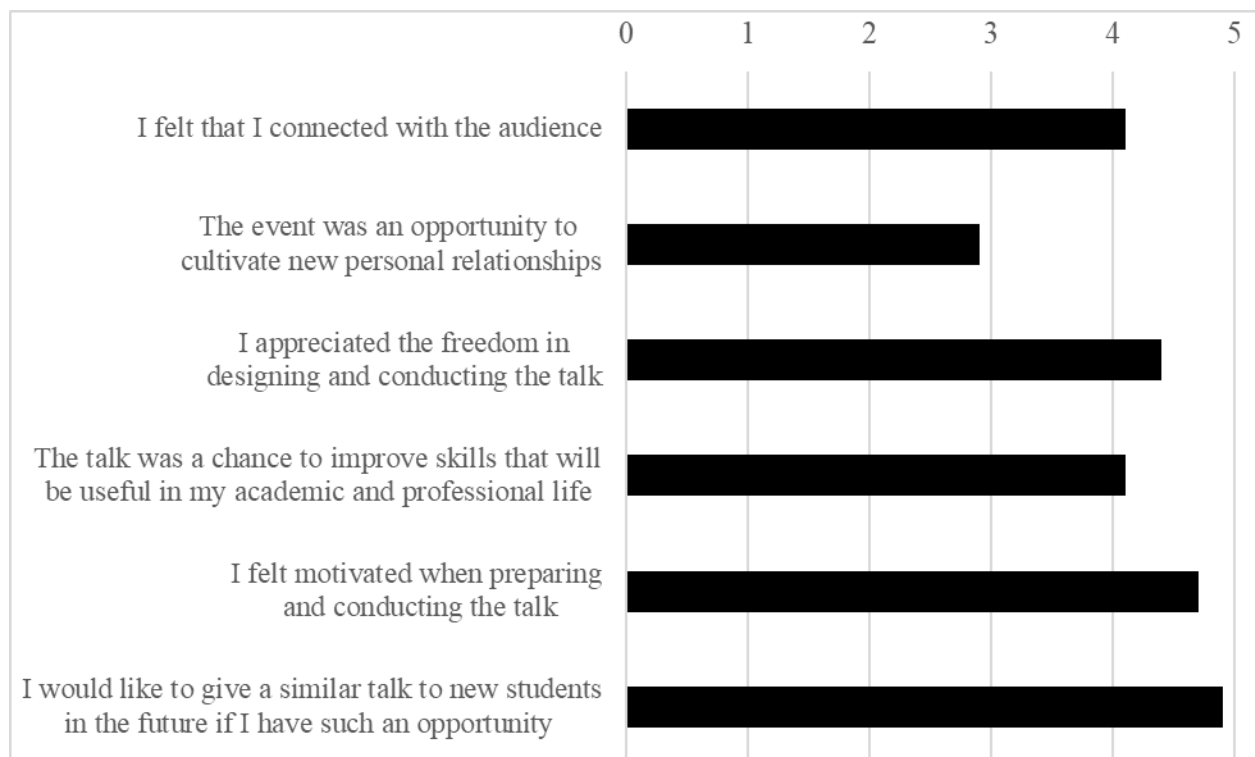
Presenter Survey Results

As with the participant survey, the authors have taken a mean average for each statement

in the survey. Compared to the participant survey, the presenter's average scores suggest more variety in their responses, with one statement scoring under three out of five. However, the respondents did agree with most of the comments, with the remaining comments all averaging over four out of five (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Presenter Survey: Average Score for Each Statement



Most presenters felt that they were able to reach their audience in an effective manner, with the statement “I felt that I connected with the audience” averaging 4.1 out 5. However, one presenter did voice a practical concern regarding the venue and this comment highlights a wider issue with organizing events within a SALC that operates drop-in language practice throughout the day. The presenter in question wrote the following in the comment section of survey:

“The talk was conducted during regular language table sessions so voices clash and that sometimes disrupt the atmosphere of the talk. I imagine if our talks were scheduled

somewhere else we might have more participants and can create a different feel than what we did with these ones.”

This comment highlights the trade-off between creating an environment conducive to focus on one hand and encouraging spontaneous participation on the other. A separate isolated space would minimize outside interference, but holding the event in the shared space within the SALC made it visible to visitors (not planning to participate in the talks) and even passersby outside of the building. Kyushu University does not hold statistics that provide insight into the number of students who spontaneously joined these talks having simply walked past the SALC. However, discussions between the SALC managerial staff and students suggest that this was a pathway to entry for some participants. The SALC managerial staff strive to create activities that are more accessible to everyone on campus but the kind of disruption the respondent spoke about in the above quotation is an occasional side effect that cannot be ignored. Gardner and Miller (1999) discuss how noise caused by speaking within a SALC should be accepted given the need to accommodate different forms of study that are driven in accordance to the learner’s approach. They also highlight that explaining the need for this kind of noise to both students and staff can help mitigate against issues arising in this area. Taking necessary precautions to manage sound level expectations prior to the hosting of events that supplement an SALCs core services can help avoid the types of challenges outlined by this presenter.

“The event was an opportunity to cultivate new personal relationships” scored 2.9 out of 5, which was the lowest level of agreement out of any of the statements in either survey. This is perhaps to be expected from an event that is only organized only once a year. However, one speaker felt that the tight schedule of the presentation did not allow enough time to meaningfully interact with the audience. Setting aside more time for the question-and-answer session, providing the audience with some prompts for the discussion, or exploring interactive activities (as discussed earlier) could better facilitate interpersonal relationships. This could have given participants the chance to speak about their goals, which could have been particularly fruitful given that learners can gain a understanding of their own sense of purpose when encouraged to open up about their dreams and personal motivations (Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022). During the preparation of the talks, the managerial staff could more actively encourage presenters to ask the audience their own questions. It is important that educators who wish to promote greater

learner autonomy start by reflecting on their own practices and expectations (Little, 1991). Promoting this approach among the presenters prior to the talks would be worth considering when holding similar activities in the future. A short briefing with TAs could prove a simple yet highly effective way to ensure that the question-and-answer session does not become a one-directional exchange. It could also provide the TAs with an opportunity to develop lesson planning skills and encourage the SALC managerial staff to interact with the presenters about their topics before the events take place.

This neatly ties in with the next statement in the survey and the level of autonomy that is attributed to TAs (and or support staff) based in SALCs. All the speakers felt that they were given free rein in creating their presentation as is evident in the 4.4 average score that was attributed to the “I appreciated the freedom in designing and conducting the talk” statement. All but one of the presenters seemed to see that as a positive. However, there was one speaker who evidently felt differently:

“While I did appreciate the freedom in designing the talk, it was difficult for me to decide on the contents. I could get an idea of the type of attendant by the prompt "Japanese students with an interest in studying abroad" but I didn't really know what they expected or what they were interested in when preparing the talk. Nonetheless, I enjoyed the experience and learning to engage different types of audience is a useful skill to have.”

Although this respondent is focusing on some of the challenges that TAs experienced during this series of talks, it can be valuable to compare their experience to the issues that might arise for language learners in SALCs, as this can provide a useful point of reference when developing activities. While pursuing one’s goals independently and proactively brings benefits such as increased learning motivation (Dickinson, 1995), some students might feel confused or even lost without enough structure, especially if they expect the faculty and staff to provide it (Ho & Crookall, 1995). Future speakers could benefit from being provided with a more detailed profile of the potential audience and what it may seek to hear in the talk.

“The talk was a chance to improve skills that will be useful in my academic and professional life” scored 4.1 out 5. This implies that the speakers generally felt that the talks were an opportunity to develop or cultivate useful skills, which meant that the events were not

only beneficial to the students who attended, but also of the hosts of the talks.

Finally, the speakers reported a strong sense of motivation and willingness to repeat their role in upcoming Study Abroad Fairs. “I felt motivated when preparing and conducting the talk” averaged 4.7 amongst respondents and “I would like to give a similar talk to new students in the future if I have such an opportunity” was slightly higher at 4.9. Any issues that were reported by respondents did not discourage them from future participation, meaning suggests they were perceived either as tolerable or as fixable.

Presenter Survey Follow-up

Out of the seven presenters who responded to the original survey, two agreed to elaborate on their answers and provide new ones in a follow-up questionnaire. Some points raised in the responses reiterated some of the views expressed in the first set of surveys, while others offered fresh insight into the presenters’ experiences.

The first respondent provided more detail on the benefit of connecting with the participants who joined:

“I feel that what I gained the most from this presentation was experience in how to connect, as a presenter, with a Japanese audience. My feeling is that some strategies like asking questions directly to the audience or asking them to raise hands were met with some resistance”.

The above statement suggests that the presenter received some insight into the cultural considerations needed when attempting to engage Japanese students. This respondent also was in favor of imposing more structure on the topics of the presentations, which would make the preparations easier and let potential participants know what to expect. The authors concur with Tassinari’s (2018) assumption that TAs are more likely to encourage autonomy amongst learners when they experience this approach to education firsthand. Although there could be a danger that too much predefined structure might compromise the intended aim of fostering the autonomy of the presenters, it may be worthwhile providing future presenters with optional suggestions or ideas that can serve as a source of inspiration. Adopting this type of approach seems advisable given that similar feedback was provided by a presenter during the initial survey that was

circulated after the talks were held. The respondent who gave this feedback also noticed some of the participants returned to SALC to join a conversation event that they organized. On an anecdotal level, this suggests an SALCs involvement in a study abroad fair can serve as a point of entry for new students.

The second respondent also felt a deepened understanding of the particular kind of audience that attended:

“As a scholar, I am used to giving talks and presentations as such I had already acquired the necessary skills and knowledge by the time I gave the talk last year. That being said, it was useful to learn how well undergraduates-especially first and second years- can follow my talk and how responsive they are to ideas introduced in the talk.”

The comment shows that even if a presenter is already an experienced public speaker, giving a talk to young Japanese students specifically can be helpful in learning how to tailor a future talk to their needs. The practical benefits afforded to TAs who deliver talks to students inside a SALC was not as explicitly expressed in the initial presenter survey. The second respondent also highlighted that the content of the talks could be more stimulating, suggesting the need to go beyond a simple “introduction of my home country” style presentation and dive deeper to discuss problems of “access, issues of language and identity, funding, etc., that everyone who studies abroad would have navigated.” This individual also suggested using the theme of “What I would tell my younger self” as a prompt for future presenters, which could act as a balanced compromise between imposing structure and allowing free reign in designing content.

Conclusion

This paper highlights how SALCs can make efforts to encourage autonomy for both TAs and students. The feedback provided in this study highlights that Kyushu University’s SALC could consider making changes to these events in the future, such as providing the TAs with more specific guidelines during the planning phase and exploring the possibility of incorporating interactive aspects into the sessions. However, keeping the desire to foster autonomy among TAs and students as a constant focus from the development through to the implantation of an

activity is a valuable approach for SALCs to employ, as it ensures that all parties are considered by management.

The survey carried out as part of this paper serves as a useful starting point for analyzing the effectiveness of the activities developed, implemented, and reintroduced by Kyushu University's SALC as part of the Study Abroad Fair. Further analysis is required into the topic, given that there was a small sample size garnered in this survey. The follow up interviews provided another challenge in this study. As the authors did not initially plan to conduct these email-based follow up interviews, efforts were not made to capture respondents contact details. Although asking for this type of information may have impacted the ability of conducting an anonymous survey, there could have been an attempt to ask for details that could facilitate further correspondence in a sensitive, non-obtrusive manner. A key learning in this area is to integrate a back-up plan for generating further feedback as a means of mitigating against any possible limitations in responses received.

Nonetheless, the efforts discussed in this report highlight how developing activities in self-access language centers that benefit both the teaching staff and students can be worthwhile. Furthermore, making the effort to ensure that these initiatives encourage motivation on both sides can help encourage autonomy for staff and language learners. The series of talks that were reintroduced into Kyushu University's SALC during the 2023 study abroad fair were well received. This suggests that there is a continued appetite for TAs to engage with students, as well as a desire for SALC users to learn languages and study abroad. In the future, it is likely that Kyushu University will continue to host study abroad fairs and the SALC may well explore the possibility of organizing similar events. It is also of significance that the structure employed pre-pandemic could feasibly operate in an online capacity as this might help open up the sessions to an increased number of participants.

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Appendix A

Participant Survey

1. The event made me want to study abroad.
2. The event made me want to study abroad in the country of the host of the talk.
3. The event made me feel it is valuable to learn about languages and cultures.
4. The event made me want to find learning opportunities about languages and cultures in Kyushu University.
5. The event made me want to pursue a career that involves intercultural communication.
6. I learned something new through this event.
7. The event was an opportunity to practice my language skills.
8. The event was an opportunity to cultivate new personal relationships.

Note to all respondents: The results of this survey will not be made public in a way that would allow identifying the participants as individuals.

Appendix B

Presenter Survey

1. I felt like I connected to the audience.
2. The event was an opportunity to cultivate new personal relationships.
3. I appreciated the freedom in how to design and conduct the talk.
4. The talk was a chance to improve skills that will be useful in my academic and professional life.
5. I felt motivated when preparing and conducting the talk.
6. I would like to give a similar talk to new students in the future if I have such an opportunity.

Note to all respondents: The results of this survey will not be made public in a way that would allow identifying the participants as individuals.

Note to Presenters: Any response you provide will not affect your status as a SALC and

Kyushu University Teaching Assistant.