

## Supporting Growth through Self-Access Learning: Report on the JASAL Forum at JALT2023

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### Author Biographies

**Agnes Maria Francis** is a lecturer in the Department of English for Global Communication at Konan Women's University. Besides teaching, she is also an advisor and manager of the department's Self-Access Learning Center, e-space. Her research interests are learner autonomy, self-access, and language learning motivation.

**Yaya Yao** is an arts-based educator, editor, and doctoral researcher at Kyushu University's Faculty of Design. She also teaches part-time at Kyushu Sangyo University and at a public high school. Yaya is the author of a collection of poetry, *Flesh, Tongue*, and lead writer of the *Educators Equity Companion Guide*. She lives in Fukuoka with her family.

**Katherine Thornton** is an associate professor and learning advisor at Otemon Gakuin University, Osaka. She is the director of E-CO (English Café at Otemon), the university's self-access centre, and current president of the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL). Her research focuses on multilingualism in self-access environments, and second language identities.

Forum events at the international Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) conference have been an important part of the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning's (JASAL) annual calendar since the organisation started in 2005. They serve two main purposes: to give JASAL members the chance to meet and discuss issues related to self-access learning, and also to introduce new people to our association.

On November 25th, 2023, the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) held its first face-to-face forum at JALT for several years. A Call for Papers went out to the membership in early 2023, and through this process, two presentations were selected for participation in the forum, entitled Supporting Growth through Self-Access Learning, in keeping with the overall conference theme of Growth Mindset. In this report, Yaya Yao and Agnes Maria Francis summarise their presentations and discuss their experience participating in the forum and the ideas that emerged from it.

### **Yaya Yao: Translanguaging Arts-Based Approaches for Linguistic Justice**

In this presentation, I shared understandings drawn from a study conducted through a university self-access language learning center in urban Japan. The study involved the implementation of two workshops in February 2023 applying translanguaging performance poetry to center bilingual/multilingual identities and experiences. I then engaged in follow-up dialogues with one participant, Mohan (a pseudonym), over the next several months, to reflect on his creative process in the workshops, his poem, and his subsequent linguistic development.

### **Translanguaging**

Translanguaging (García, 2009) as a concept and applied theory has received considerable attention over the past two decades. It is built around an understanding of how bilinguals (henceforth used interchangeably with multilinguals) use language; that is, how we draw on all our linguistic resources to make meaning. We do so in a way that is unbounded by state-imposed boundaries on languages, versus dialects, versus language varieties. As such, we must regard personal linguistic resources as one entity rather than divided into discrete languages. This is reflected in the idea of a holistic language repertoire. The translanguaging (and plurilingual) perspective argues that (language) learning is most supported when bilinguals are encouraged to draw on our holistic repertoires freely, mirroring and centering uniquely

dynamic cognitive processes. In the context of English language education (ELE), challenging normative monolingualism and celebrating bilingual ways of knowing and being.

### **Arts-Based Approaches**

Arts-based approaches to ELE that incorporate translanguaging are a burgeoning area of research. Given the multimodal, open-ended nature of arts-based methods, they are an intuitive fit with translanguaging. This is especially so with the genre of poetry, and especially of performance poetry, given its multimodal focus on linguistic experimentation, wordplay, and in-the-moment interaction. But translanguaging arts-based approaches have received little attention in Japanese secondary and tertiary contexts. Given how self-access learning, or SAL, is concerned with attuning to learner perspectives to foster autonomy (Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022), and with the related impetus to decolonize ELT, translanguaging arts-based approaches can support these goals.

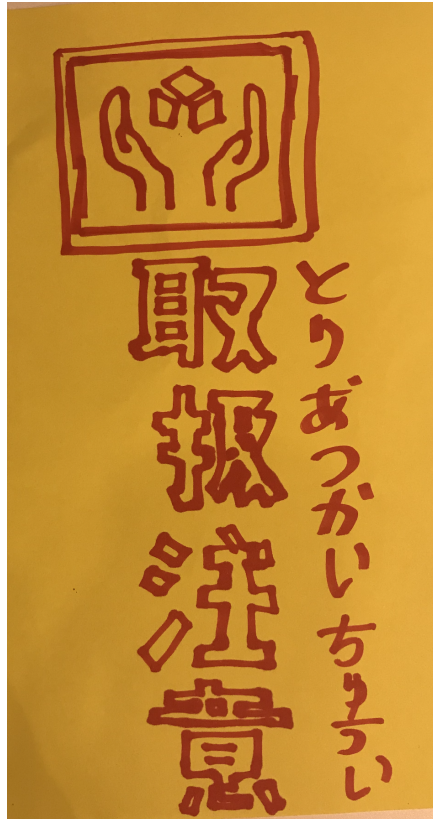
### **Results & Discussion**

This study explored the participatory dialogue between Mohan and me as we interpreted his creative process, poem, and linguistic development over the eight months following the initial workshops.

At the start of the study, Mohan was at the end of his first year of a master's program at a Japanese university. An international student from India, he was adjusting to a new culture and language. His poem reflected his relationships to Hindi, his mother tongue and formative language of instruction; English, the other language in which he had been educated; and Japanese, a recently adopted language. The Hindi and Japanese lines of his poem seem to plead to the reader for understanding. The English lines exhibit a more declamatory and direct tone. Mohan's performance of the poem reflected a sense of vulnerability that was underlined by the final Japanese-language line, translated as "Handle with care." He also included a visual element to his multimodal performance of the poem, pulling out a hand-drawn symbol (with accompanying kanji) typically affixed to fragile mail (Figure 1).

### **Figure 1**

#### ***The Visual Element of Mohan's Poem***



In three subsequent dialogues undertaken between March and October 2023, Mohan and I explored the underlying meanings of his poem, his feelings and thoughts in the workshop process, and the changes in his language repertoire since the workshops. Reflections connected milestones in his personal life to shifts in his linguistic expression and identity. In his words, “this Japanese guy” was experiencing exciting transformations. These discoveries were clarified through a dialogue in which his initial poem served as an anchor for reflection, crystallizing his mindset at the time of creation.

### **Conclusion**

Challenging linguistic injustice involves the direct critique of the systems of power that marginalize multilingual ways of languaging. It also means recognizing and celebrating the diverse ways that multilinguals relate to their holistic repertoires. The creative and dialogic process following the initial poetry creation and performance surfaced depth of knowledge that Mohan developed through family, community, and social lives (and typically marginalized in his current schooling context); in other words, celebrating his funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992).

Suffice to say, reflecting on Mohan's creative process through dialogue fostered both participant and researcher learning in unexpected and powerful ways. Through this and other approaches, translanguaging arts-based methods can facilitate non-hierarchical interactions that can move learners and educators towards deeper mutual understanding, autonomy, and linguistic justice.

### **Agnes Maria Francis: Navigating New Advising Sessions, Growing as an Advisor**

In this presentation, I reflected on my personal experiences as a learning advisor at three different institutions. As each institution implemented distinct advising approaches, I realized the importance of support for new advisors. Hence, through this presentation, I aimed to explore various types of advising that I had experienced, examine different training approaches, and propose support that could be provided for advisors.

#### **First Experience: Advising To Check Students' Learning Progress**

My first experience as an advisor began all the way back in Indonesia at a language school for adults, which incorporated some self-access components. At this language school, students were required to see the advisors every two or three months to check their learning progress and to address any challenges students faced; advising sessions had a clear goal and were quite structured. Dialogues were used to assist students in reflecting on their progress, although advisors maintained significant control during the advising sessions. During this time, my view of learner autonomy was rather limited.

Delving into advising could be intimidating. However, I found that the structured advisor training was helpful and practical. The new advisors observed the experienced ones, followed by a reflection session. Then, for the new advisors' first advising sessions, they would be observed and receive feedback. There were regular observations and feedback sessions every year to maintain advising quality.

#### **Second Experience: Advising To Assist Students with Their Learning**

My second experience with advising began when I started working at a self-access center (SAC) in Japan. In contrast with my previous experience, this advising was on a voluntary basis. Most students seeking advising had specific goals in mind, such as enhancing their listening skills for an upcoming TOEIC test, thus the advising sessions were tailored accordingly. By this

time, I had a better grasp of learner autonomy as I had done some research on the topic. I was able to involve students in the decision-making and encourage them to voice their opinions.

The initial advisor training provided allowed me to grow as an advisor. I learned how to communicate and build rapport with students from my advising experience in Indonesia, but I learned the theory of advising and intentional reflective dialogues (Kato & Mynard, 2016) during this initial training from the SAC coordinators. Besides the training, advisors were encouraged to write reflections and engage in evaluation sessions. Finally, student surveys completed after advising also helped me understand students' feelings.

### **Current Experience: Advising To Help Students Formulate Goals and Take Actions**

My current role as an advisor in e-space, the SAC at Konan Women's University, was rather different from my two previous experiences. First-year students were required to attend advising sessions as part of their grades. Due to its compulsory nature, many students did not fully understand the purpose of advising, and advisors had to lead the sessions. In the spring semester, advising topics were rather limited to students' language goals and learning plans because students were from the English department. As students arrived with personal goals, advising was tailored to accommodate each student individually. In the fall semester, reflections on students' learning experiences started to happen, and more diverse topics emerged in the advising.

### **Suggestions for Advisors and SAC Coordinators**

Drawing from my previous experiences, I would like to suggest some ideas for both advisors and SAC coordinators to consider:

1. Utilize advising tools such as student profiles, goal-setting worksheets, learning plans, and journals. Advising tools help students visualize the reflection process (Mynard, 2012). Advisors can adapt the tools to suit their advising styles and become more familiar with them.
2. Communicate the purpose of advising with students clearly and explain how the advising will go. Advisors should briefly explain the rationale behind whether students should answer questions or share stories during advising. This will help tremendously with how students feel about advising and how they will make decisions regarding their learning.

3. Professional development through communities of practice, research, training, and reflection. Although there was no official training for my current role, the informal discussions among advisors gave me a better idea of what the advising would be like.
4. Lastly, it is important to recognize that students are the focus of advising (Kato & Mynard, 2016). Advisors often fear that students will not return, so we pack a lot of information in one advising session. It is important to understand that too much advice can overwhelm students. Advisors can always invite students to come back after a few weeks.

### Discussion

These two presentations were then followed by a short discussion with other participants. The group split in two, with each presenter joining one discussion group to reflect collectively on the ideas raised in their presentation.

In the conversation inspired by Yaya's presentation, we discussed how translanguaging, even in everyday interactions, can foster learner autonomy. As a pedagogical practice, it signals to learners that their holistic repertoires—their whole selves—are welcome. This stance is especially important in the self-access space. When educators translanguage, it can build trust as we strive to express our authentic selves, to be transparent about our positionality, and to model the embracing of our own plurilingual repertoires. Of course, this is not a simple proposition, as there is generally institutional pressure to maximize time in the target language. We might be forced to choose between exclusive target language use versus modeling plurilingual ways of communicating, arguably an equally important pedagogical goal. We also discussed the ways in which native-speakerist inequities shape the ways in which educators might feel able to apply translanguaging in their practice. While, for example, a teacher assumed to be a Western native English speaker might be lauded for their plurilingual capacities and their commitment to this leading-edge paradigm, teachers perceived as Japanese or non-Western might find themselves questioned as to why they might “need to use Japanese” with learners. The topic of translanguaging in self-access is certainly one in need of greater exploration.

In Agnes's group, we shared our experiences and challenges as learning advisors. Initially, we discussed students misunderstanding the purpose of advising. For instance, they often bring personal problems to advising sessions, not realizing that advisors are not

psychologists equipped to address such issues. We reached a consensus on the importance of clearly explaining the role of advising to students beforehand to prevent disappointment. Additionally, we addressed the issue of student passivity during sessions, where they expect advisors to provide all the answers. One strategy we explored was sending advising tools to students prior to the sessions. This approach aims to outline the topics that will be discussed in the session, allowing students to prepare their thoughts and fostering a sense of ownership over their learning. Furthermore, we explored the potential of translanguaging during advising sessions to support students' reflective practices and establish rapport. This exchange was particularly enlightening, as it provided a rare opportunity for advisors from various SALCs to exchange ideas and perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

There are few opportunities for JASAL members to meet and discuss self-access related issues in person, so this forum was an excellent opportunity to bring people together, and the presenters provided an excellent starting point for our discussions. We look forward to hosting more forums and similar get-togethers at future events across Japan.

### **Acknowledgments**

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