

Reviving the REAL Room: Integrating Stakeholder Voices in Self-Access Center Development

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive needs analysis conducted to explore the perspectives of students and faculty on the redevelopment of the REAL Room, a self-access learning center (SALC) at Tokyo Kasei University in Japan. Historically underutilized, the REAL Room offered an opportunity for redesign grounded in current best practices in self-access education. Influenced by existing self-access literature emphasizing stakeholder integration, mission clarity, and student agency, the analysis employed surveys to gather data from 61 students and seven faculty members. The findings revealed a strong demand for the REAL Room as a communicative space to enhance speaking and listening skills through interactions with peers and faculty. Students also expressed interest in using the facility for academic support and consultation. Faculty feedback highlighted the potential of the space as both a learning resource and a promotional tool for the university. Based on these insights, we developed a mission statement to guide the transformation of the REAL Room into a collaborative, accessible, and learner-centered space. Future steps include establishing student staff teams, creating an online presence, integrating the SALC with coursework, and engaging in continuous assessment and cross-departmental collaboration. This study aims to inform the creation of principled, adaptable SALCs in similar educational contexts.

本書は、日本の東京家政大学のセルフ・アクセス・ラーニング・センター（SALC）である REAL ルームの再開発について、学生と教員の視点を探るために実施された包括的なニーズ分析をまとめたものである。歴史的にあまり利用されてこなかった REAL ルームは、セルフアクセス教育における現在のベストプラクティスに基づいた再設計の機会を提供した。ステークホルダーの統合、ミッションの明確化、学生の主体性を強調するセルフアクセスに関する既存の文献に影響を受け、分析では 61 人の学生と 7 人の教員からデータを収集するためにアンケートを採用した。その結果、仲間や教員との交流を通じてスピーキングやリスニングのスキルを高めるためのコミュニケーションスペースとして、REAL ルームに対する強い要望が明らかになった。学生はまた、学業支援や相談にこの施設を利用することにも興味を示していた。教員からのフィードバックでは、このスペースが学習リソースとして、また大学の宣伝ツールとしての可能性が強調されました。これらの洞察に基づき、私たちは REAL ルームを共同的で、利用しやすく、学習者中心のスペースに変えるための指針となるミッション・ステートメントを作成しました。今後のステップとしては、学生スタッフチームの設立、オンラインプレゼンスの構築、SALC とコースワークの統合、継続的な評価と学部横断的な協力体制の構築などが挙げられる。本研究は、同様の教育状況において、原則的で適応可能な SALC を作成するための情報を提供することを目的としている。

Keywords: needs analysis, faculty integration, SALC establishment, feedback, mission statement

This report outlines a needs analysis conducted in order to gauge student and faculty member perceptions on the potential future direction of the REAL Room, a relaunched self-access space at Tokyo Kasei University in Tokyo, Japan. The REAL Room had existed in various forms over the last fifteen years in our department, but for a number of reasons discussed below had stagnated and, at the time of our needs analysis, had been completely shut due to both a lack of student attendance and for the purposes of redesigning/redecorating the space. This presented us with an opportunity to start from scratch and develop a new direction and vision for the REAL Room based on up-to-date principles and best practices from the field of self-access. Based on existing self-access literature emphasizing the importance of faculty integration (Datwani-Choy, 2016; Von Joo et al., 2020), the creation of a coherent mission statement (Mynard, 2016; Werner & Von Joo, 2018), and student involvement in self-access management (Cooker, 2010; Murray & Fujishima, 2016; Mynard et al., 2020), our team decided early on that student and faculty voices would be crucial in the redevelopment of the REAL Room.

In this report, we will first summarize relevant existing literature that guided our vision and needs analysis. From there, we will outline in detail the steps we went through in collecting and analyzing student and faculty perspectives. Finally, we will highlight some implications based on the data we received, discuss the future direction for the REAL Room, and examine ways in which we can operationalize our vision for the space. We hope that this discussion of practices may serve as a point of reference for others hoping to take the first tentative steps in designing (or redesigning) a principled self-access space within their institution.

Context

The REAL Room was originally established in 2009 within the English Communication Department at Tokyo Kasei University. It was originally known as the Room for Enjoyment for Active Language, but due to the rather unwieldiness of this original name, was eventually referred to simply as the REAL Room. This space featured an area with sofas for casual chat, audiovisual equipment such as a TV and computers, and a small library of graded readers and English magazines. Seasonal events were also periodically held for Halloween and Christmas. While the REAL Room was primarily designated as a meeting place for students wishing to practice English, it also functioned as a *de facto* rest space for

“native”¹ English teachers who would eat lunch or prepare for lessons there. Consequently, it was hoped that this dual purpose of the space would facilitate increased communication between students and foreign teachers.

Although there were indeed signs that the REAL Room had historically made some positive contributions to the department and had been popular at times with students (there were 2842 recorded student visits in 2014 according to internal data), it also became evident that there were also a number of persistent issues to be addressed with the redesign of the space. Firstly, the REAL Room was predominantly framed as a place that students could come and “enjoy.” This meant that, although there was no official mission statement in place during this time, the role of students appeared to be largely passive, similar to consumers or audience members. Rather than being a “social-supportive SALC” with “an institutional mission to promote learner autonomy” (Mynard, 2019, p. 192), the REAL Room did not actively did not encourage students to play an active role in their learning or facilitate student management of the space. This was arguably compounded by a tendency to focus on “native speaker” teachers as the central figures in the REAL Room. Wall displays and seasonal events tended to focus on their cultural backgrounds or interests, and they alone were called upon to provide content or learning opportunities for students who visited. This dynamic further reinforced the assumption that the REAL Room was a place where the university would provide access to “native speakers” that students could then passively “consume” as they wished. A side effect of this overreliance on “native speakers” was that the perceived value of the REAL Room by faculty members or the department hinged upon the degree of enthusiasm that foreign teachers displayed towards their role there and the level of interest students had for interacting with them. In sum, this meant that this space was essentially transactional in nature, where students would be rewarded for coming to the REAL Room with opportunities to passively learn *from* “natives”. This model, consequently, offered few avenues for the student agency or ownership essential to the cultivation of a successful SALC (Cooker, 2010). One final issue was that, due to the REAL Room having been established fifteen years ago, there remained an overreliance on physical learning materials such as graded readers or English magazines. Due to recent technological advancements such as smartphones, these resources had become basically obsolete (Kronenberg, 2016; Reinders, 2012) and, to reflect a movement within self-access towards SALCs as social hubs, i.e.,

¹ The term “native speaker” is displayed in quotation marks throughout this article due its socially-constructed and contestable nature (Moussu & Llorca, 2008).

places where students can learn with and from each other (Thornton, 2021), a new direction for the REAL Room was necessary.

Literature Review

Numerous accounts of conducting needs analyses or, indeed, any type of assessment of self-access facilities and services highlight the importance of including multiple perspectives from a range of different stakeholders (Datwani-Choy, 2016; Morrison, 2003; Takahashi et al., 2013; Werner & Von Joo, 2018). Just as multiple data sources within qualitative research are used to provide rigorous and comprehensive findings, Takahashi et al. (2013) suggest that by *triangulating* perspectives from teachers, learning advisors, students, and university management, we get a fuller picture of how a SALC can meet the needs of an institution. Werner and Von Joo (2018) echo this notion as they discuss the importance of *coproduction* across multiple stakeholders during needs analysis. When establishing a new SALC at Ryutsu Keizai University, the researchers proactively sought to meet multiple stakeholders face to face in order to coproduce a facility that “[sought] out input from multiple stakeholders” and was “multi-purposed in response to said input” (p. 126). In the case of Ryutsu Keizai University, the university had a strong focus on sports and study abroad, and the feedback received allowed the SALC team to tailor its services to better reflect and serve that unique educational setting (Von Joo et al., 2020). This coproduction process was also bidirectional in that while receiving feedback from faculty and university staff, Werner and Von Joo were also able to increase the institutional visibility of the SALC and reassure faculty and teachers of its role as a complement (rather than competition) to their role.

A further key component of establishing a principled self-access center, that both facilitates and is facilitated by a coproduced needs analysis, is the development of a coherent mission statement. Conducting a needs analysis allows a SALC team to tailor its mission statement to its specific institution and population. Moreover, in the opposite direction, having a clear mission for a SALC can reduce confusion over its purpose and purview among staff, students, and faculty alike, thus making support and promotion easier to implement (Datwani-Choy, 2016). In institutional landscapes marked by rapid educational and technological shifts and evolution, the necessity for a SALC’s mission to drive design (rather than the other way around) can be even more keenly felt (Kronenberg, 2016). In addition to these benefits, a clear mission statement can act as a gauge or benchmark for continuous assessment and future development of a SALC. Literature focusing on the role of language

centers in the US has asserted the importance of coherent mission statements and their role in effectively assessing whether or not centers are adequately responding to contemporary educational mandates (Lavolette, 2018). Mynard (2016) discussed how the mission statement of the SALC at Kanda University of International Studies is revisited and updated on an annual basis depending on evolving needs and “ensures that the SALC directions focus on core values and services” (p. 428). This mission statement represents yet another example of coproduction in that its content is partly based on insights from student staff members. Furthermore, evaluation of how well the SALC’s practice is congruent with its mission statement can draw upon a range of perspectives, including learning advisors, teachers, students, administrative staff, or even external parties such as an expert in PR or marketing.

Influenced by this existing body of work, in the project outlined below, we endeavored to analyze the needs of a variety of stakeholders at Tokyo Kasei University in order to determine what type of SALC might serve them best. Based on these insights, we then attempted to develop a mission statement for the REAL Room that would clarify its role within our local institutional landscape and allow us to evaluate the efficacy of our center in the years to come.

Building a Roadmap for the REAL Room: Student and Faculty Feedback

To survey the perspectives of students and faculty members from the English Communication Department, in August 2024 we distributed two Google Forms (Appendix A and B) via both the university’s LMS and during first- and second-year compulsory English classes. In the case of the student survey, we also included questions relating to scheduling (what days/periods they would be available to attend the REAL Room) and social media preferences (through which platforms we could disseminate promotional information). In the case of both student and faculty surveys, the main aim was to find out what activities or functions that they felt the REAL Room should include. Both surveys featured a combination of closed- (four-point Likert scale based on perceived importance/checklist items) and open-response items. All items were bilingual and respondents could complete the open-response items in either English or Japanese. In total, we received 61 student responses and seven faculty responses to the two surveys. The relatively low number of faculty responses was due to the survey only having been distributed to members of the English Communication Department as the REAL Room fell directly under their administrative umbrella. In terms of analysis, the open-response items were inductively coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to identify any existent trends.

There were a number of limitations that should be noted regarding our surveys. Firstly, piloting the survey items with our target population could have reduced the risk of confusing or poorly worded items. Furthermore, it would have been preferable to collect more detailed qualitative responses through interviews or focus groups with former REAL Room users in order to obtain richer insights into how the space might better serve student needs. Finally, the surveys were distributed to a convenience sample of current students/faculty members and there is a chance that due to the long inactivity of the REAL Room, the degree of familiarity some respondents had with the space would have been very low, thus potentially impacting the usefulness of their responses.

Student responses

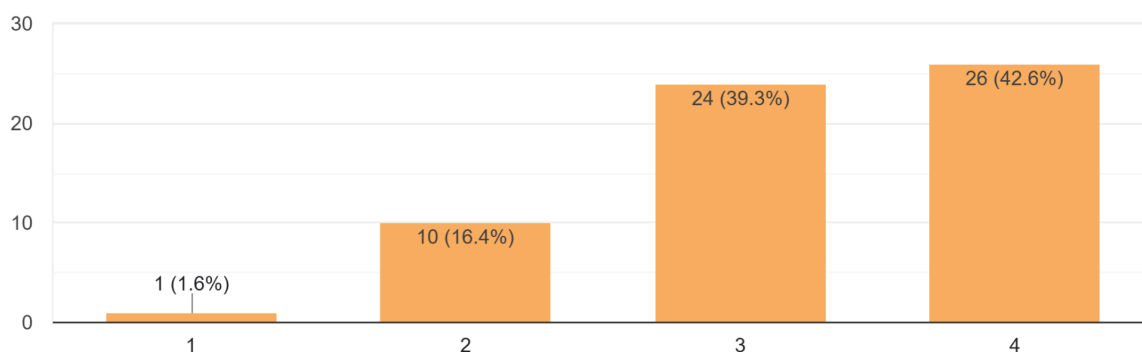
By examining the closed-response data, we could determine that many students desired the REAL Room to function primarily as a space for communicative practice or general interaction in English (Figure 1). The list of closed-response items included 14 types of SALC activities that were selected based on our experience working in and observing various SALCs throughout Japan as well as insights drawn from existing academic literature on self-access language learning. Students responding to the prompt, “I would use the REAL Room to... (私は REAL Room をこのように利用したい。)” indicated enthusiasm towards the items listed below:

- chat with friends or seniors. (友達や先輩とおしゃべりする)
- chat with teachers. (先生とおしゃべり)

Figure 1*REAL Room as a communicative space**(scale represents lowest importance (1) to highest importance (4))*

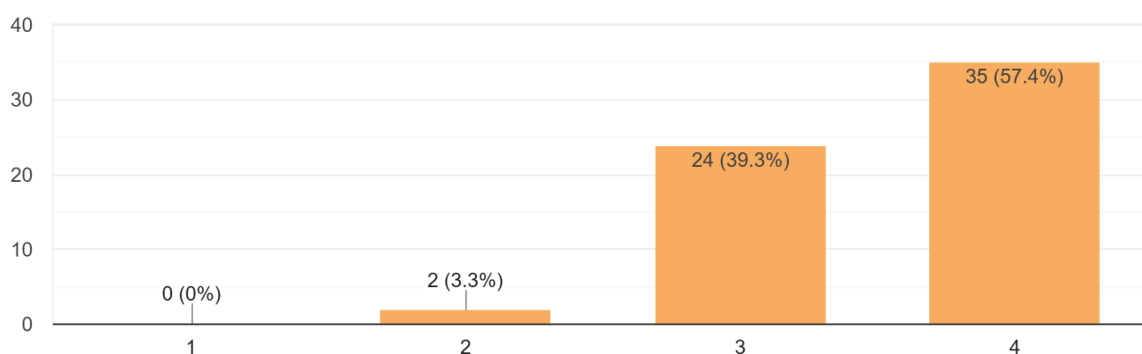
1. chat with friends or seniors. (友達や先輩とおしゃべりする)

61 responses



2. chat with teachers. (先生とおしゃべり)

61 responses



The open-responses to the question, “I would use the REAL Room to... (具体的には、REAL Room を使用して、次の分野で上達したいと思います。)” were congruent with the above closed-response data, with the majority of responses (n=44) being coded as “communicative/interactional”. As can be observed in the following responses, students appeared to value the REAL Room first and foremost as a site to improve their speaking and listening skills through interaction with teachers or *senpai* (seniors):

- *I would use the REAL Room to study English with friend, Senpai, teacher.*

- *I want to improve my listening and speaking skills. I want to talk with teachers, senior students, and native English speakers to eliminate my resistance to speaking English and to be able to have daily conversations in English.*
- *I want to make opportunities to speak English. I would like to communicate with seniors through English.*
- *I would like to use REAL Room to improve my English speaking. I would like to go with someone who is easy to talk to, like a friend, or I would like to talk to a teacher to get used to speaking English. Sometimes I don't speak as well as I think I should, so I would like to improve that.*

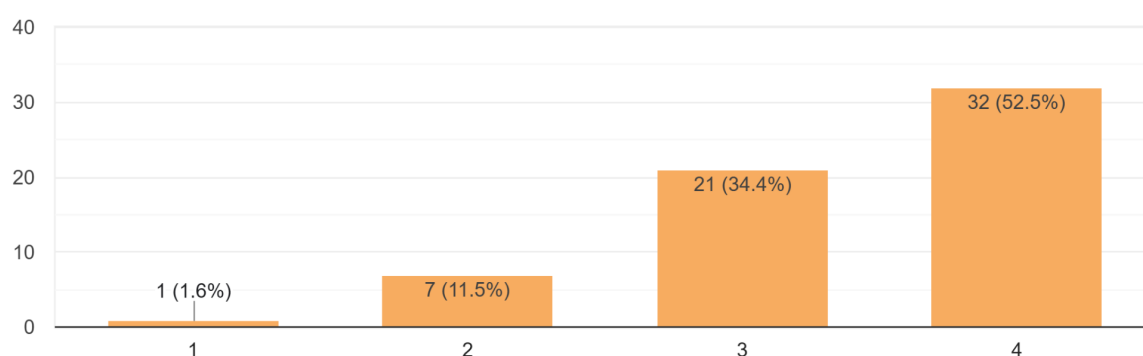
A further theme was an apparent interest in the REAL Room as a site for academic and affective support. Numerous students responded positively to the idea of opportunities being provided to consult about classwork, approaches to self-study, or general academic worries (Figure 2).

Figure 2

REAL Room as a venue for learner support

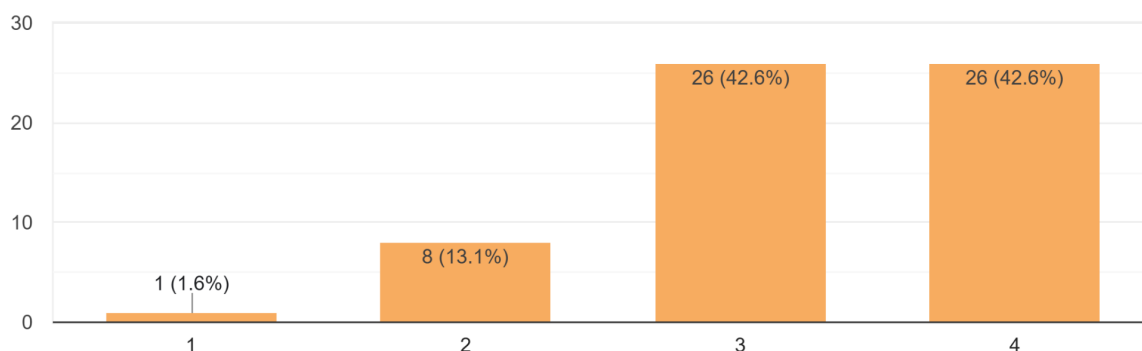
4. get support for my class work. (授業のサポートを受ける)

61 responses



9. learn how to self-study English. (英語学習を自習する方法を学ぶ)

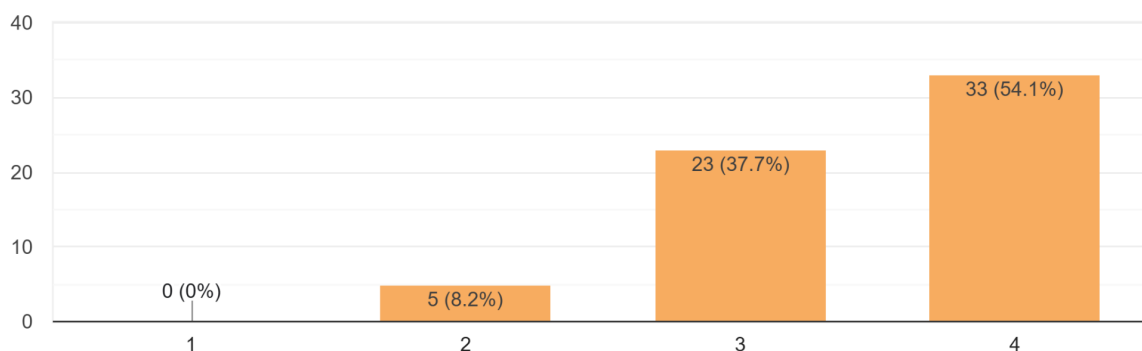
61 responses



13. get advice about problems or worries you are having about learning English.

(英語学習で困っていること、悩んでいることについてアドバイスを受ける)

61 responses



This suggests that an advising component to the REAL Room, where students could reserve time slots throughout the week to discuss their own learning, may be a welcome addition to the space. Finally, it is noteworthy that the two least popular items on the survey were “read English books and magazines (英語の本や雑誌を読む)” and “learn about online/computer study tools. (オンライン/コンピュータの学習ツールについて学ぶ)”, echoing assertions from the existing SALC literature (Reinders, 2012; Thornton, 2021) regarding a shift in self-access needs from the provision of educational materials to opportunities for social connection.

Faculty responses

In terms of the closed-response item data, it appeared that faculty also tended to view the REAL Room as a site to develop students' communicative ability through interacting with either teachers or fellow students and a place to get extra out-of-class support for any academic challenges they might be facing. Accordingly, the most popular checklist responses (respondents were each asked to make five choices) to the question, “In your opinion, what are key areas of value that you hope the REAL Room can deliver? (REAL Room が提供できる価値とは何だとお考えですか?)” were as follows:

- *A place for students to practice English conversation* (n=4)
- *A place where students can interact with their senpai* (n=5)
- *Somewhere students can get extra out-of-class guidance or conversation practice with teachers* (n=4)
- *A place students can go to consult with teachers/advisors about learning problems or worries* (n=4)

One more area which faculty members appeared to particularly value was the role of the REAL Room as a promotional tool for the department or university. This was reflected in the proportionately high number of responses (n=5) to the following option, “An attractive facility that can help to promote the department/university.” Conversely, the least popular responses were “A quiet place for students to study.” (n=0) and “A place that could be used for holding poster presentations or guest speaker events.” (n=2). The relative lack of interest in these options may also reflect the desire from faculty members for the REAL Room to act primarily as an energetic social venue where students could develop communicative ability and build interpersonal connections. As can be observed in the following open faculty responses based on what they felt to be important points relating to the REAL Room, its social and promotional potential was something that faculty members recognized and felt should be leveraged in order to get the most out of the space. However, there were also concerns about ensuring that we maintain the accessibility of the space by perhaps reconsidering the historical “English only” policy of the REAL Room.

The door says “English only” on it, but some students are discouraged by the sign. I felt that the first priority should be to encourage students to enter. However, it is also important to promote the facility as an attractive place for English communication, so

we think it is necessary to take measures to actually help students improve their motivation and communication skills in the REAL Room. Since our department has basically few vertical ties, I think it would be good to appeal to students as a place where they can interact with students from other grades. I don't know if this is feasible because it is just an idea, but I think it would be easier for students of various grades to use if the department could provide opportunities for [senior] students to serve as advisors on a regular basis and offer advice on student life, job hunting, and other topics. ...I think that providing students with an opportunity to casually experience English and to enjoy interacting with various people will have some positive effects.

If we are to make the most of the department's unique characteristics, I think it is important that it be a "place to speak English". However, if the room is too specialized for learning, students will not be able to use it easily.

Hopefully, we can make use of such situations or atmosphere where students are communicating in English a lot in REAL to promote the department at open campus [events].

By also seeking out faculty perspectives, we could deepen our understanding of the need to frame the REAL Room as an accessible out-of-class communicative space where students can also come for advice or support. Concurrently, we also became aware of the importance of contributing to our department as a promotional resource. Our department has recently put more focus on student achievement and leadership as a measure of departmental success and an area that should be at the center of any ongoing promotional activities. Therefore, the REAL Room, as a site for facilitating and showcasing achievement, can play a key role in the promotional strategy of the department as a whole. We believe that by creating a safe and attractive place where students can build both linguistic and social resources, it is possible for us to satisfy the primary student/faculty stakeholders in our institutional environment. With these factors in mind, along with Tokyo Kasei University's broader mission to empower women by developing their autonomy (<https://www.tokyo-kasei.ac.jp/en/about/history.html>), we developed the following mission statement for the REAL Room that will guide our development of the space in the coming year.

The mission of the REAL Room is to provide an environment where our students have out-of-class opportunities to develop their communicative English ability while also deepening social connections with peers or teachers. We aim for the REAL Room to be an empowering space offering students support and opportunities for leadership while also acting as a means of sharing our students' visions and achievements with the wider world.

Moving Forward

Based on our mission statement, our plan over the next year will incorporate a number of clearly-defined goals to move towards (Mynard, 2016). These include 1) the establishment of a team of student staff who can help maintain plurality of perspective, 2) the creation of an online presence for the REAL Room (dedicated website, social media presence), 3) scheduling weekly advising slots staffed by faculty or students, 4) conducting action research to assess and further develop the REAL Room, 5) integrating our SALC with existing courses, and 6) collecting ideas from other SALCs via face-to-face visits, online consultations, guest speakers, and discussion in organizations such as JASAL and RILAE (<https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/rilae/>). We also hope to follow the examples set by Takahashi et al. (2013) and Von Joo et al. (2020) and reach out beyond our department to other faculty members and university administration in order to get an even more diverse and cross-sectional view of how the REAL Room is situated within the broader institutional landscape. In this way, we believe that we can discover new possibilities for our SALC and deepen our understanding of the ways it can positively contribute to our educational ecosystem.

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Appendix A

Student Needs Analysis Survey

During your four years at Tokyo Kasei University, merely taking courses is not sufficient to make you a fluent English speaker. By having more exposure to English on a daily basis, you can increase your language proficiency.

The REAL Room is on the 3rd floor of Building 10 (the same building as the library). We want to develop it into a place where you can immerse yourself in English and chat with friends, seniors, and teachers, practice presentations, watch movies, play board games, get help and advice about study problems, and more.

Please answer the following questions to help us create a REAL Room that will be most useful for you.

東京家政大学での4年間は、単に授業を受けるだけでは、英語を流暢に話せるようにはなりません。日常的に英語に触れる機会を増やすことで、英語力を高めることができます。

REAL Roomは10号館（図書館と同じ建物）の3階にあります。友達や先輩、先生とおしゃべりしたり、プレゼンの練習をしたり、映画を見たり、ボードゲームをしたり、勉強の悩みを相談したり、などなど、英語漬けになれる場所に育てていきたいと思っています。

あなたにとって最も役立つ REAL Room を作るために、以下の質問にお答えください。

On a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being the highest, choose the level of importance for you. (1 から4のスケールで4が一番高い、あなたにとっての重要性のレベルを選択してください。)

I would use the REAL Room to... (私は REAL Room をこのように利用したい。)

1. chat with friends or seniors. (友達や先輩とおしゃべりする)
2. chat with teachers. (先生とおしゃべり)
3. play English board games. (英語のボードゲームを遊ぶ)
4. get support for my class work. (授業のサポートを受ける)

5. study English independently. (英語の自主学習)
 6. receive free English lessons. (無料の英語レッスンを受ける)
 7. read English books and magazines. (英語の本や雑誌を読む)
 8. watch English movies. (英語の映画を見る)
 9. learn how to self-study English. (英語学習を自習する方法を学ぶ)
 10. listen to a guest speaker in English. (ゲストスピーカーの話を英語で聞く)
 11. learn about online/computer study tools. (オンライン/コンピュータの学習ツールについて学ぶ)
 12. talk to someone about how to be a better learner. (より良い学習者になるための方法を誰かに相談する)
 13. get advice about problems or worries you are having about learning English. (英語学習で困っていること、悩んでいることについてアドバイスを受ける)
 14. attend seasonal events (welcome event, Halloween, Christmas, etc.). (季節の行事に参加する (歓迎行事、ハロウィーン、クリスマスなど))
-

Please complete the following question by writing your own answer (in Japanese or English).
自分の答えを記入してください。 (日本語でも英語でも大丈夫です)

I would use the REAL Room to... (具体的には、REAL Room を使用して、次の分野で上達したいと思います。)

Thank you very much for completing this survey. Your answers will help us to make the REAL Room more useful and interesting for you!

アンケートにご協力いただき、ありがとうございました。皆様のご回答は、REAL Room をより便利で面白いものにするための参考にさせていただきます。

Appendix B

Faculty Needs Analysis Survey

REAL Room Project Group Idea Sharing

Hi everyone, I would like to get your perspectives on the REAL Room and what value you hope it can deliver to our department, our students, and Tokyo Kasei more broadly.

In your opinion, what are key areas of value that you hope the REAL Room can deliver?
(Please check your top five choices)

- A place for students to practice English conversation
 - A social hub where students can make new friends
 - A place where students can interact with their senpai
 - Somewhere students can get extra out-of-class guidance or conversation practice with teachers
 - An attractive facility that can help to promote the department/university
 - A place students can go to consult with teachers/advisors about learning problems or worries
 - Somewhere offering opportunities for student leadership
 - A place that could be used for holding poster presentations or guest speaker events
 - A quiet place that students could come to study
 - A place to hold workshops on English learning, technology use, etc.
 - Other
-

Please give details of any other considerations that you think are important for the REAL Room adding value to our department. (Japanese or English responses are fine)