

JASAL 2025 Conference Report

Jonathan Baker

Reitaku University

jbaker@reitaku-u.ac.jp

Author Biography

Jonathan Baker is a lecturer at Reitaku University. He started at Reitaku in 2023 and has also worked as a lecturer at Kanagawa University. He has also taught elementary school, junior high school, high school, and working adults in Japan, the United States, China, and Germany.

The Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) 2025 Annual National Conference was held on Saturday, October 11th, 2025, at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) in Beppu, Oita prefecture, Japan. The theme of the conference was *Emotions in Self-Access Language Learning*. With 101 in situ attendees and 15 online, the JASAL community continues to grow. Conference attendees also had the opportunity to enjoy a tour of Ritsumeikan's self-access center on Friday, an evening networking reception on Saturday, and a post-conference social event on Sunday morning.

In this report, I will proceed chronologically through the events of the conference, beginning with the optional SALC tour, followed by a longer overview of the plenary presentation, then shorter summaries of the presentations and workshops I attended. The report will conclude with a reflection about social and practical aspects of the conference, as well as my personal takeaways, which revolve primarily around how to proactively build positive emotional experiences for students and staff at self-access learning centers.

SALC Tour

As a prelude to the conference presentations on Saturday, a tour of the self-access learning center (SALC) at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University was conducted by an enthusiastic pair of student peer advisors. 24 conference attendees were initially greeted by Steven C. Pattison and Lindsay Mack from APU, who gave us a history of the SALC there. Begun in 2006, it was founded in just one small room with limited materials including DVDs, extensive reading materials, and a small number of tutors focused primarily on administrative tasks. From those small beginnings, it has grown to be the large, varied facility today. Fabian Allen Valensius and Aoi Ozawa, the two peer advisors mentioned above, led us to each area of that facility. Rooms are designated by colors present in the décor, such as the blue room for self study; the sound-proof red room where language advisors give 30-minute advising sessions on Japanese or English language learning, aided by the ample standardized test preparation material present there; the green room, which features six booths for peer advising sessions for eight languages (Japanese, English, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Korean, and Spanish), a number of options I found surprisingly large; and the tree room, the largest, central room of the SALC. The tree room includes a welcoming entrance area with conversational sofa for eight, a tatami-mat seating area and low table for six or more, a wide front desk where cheerful photos of every peer advisor are hung on the wall, extensive collections of board games, card games, manga, graded-readers, and a very special *tomodachi board*. This is a bulletin board on which students can record their contact

information, the language they wish to practice, and the languages they themselves are proficient in, for the purpose of finding friends and opportunities for practice conversation.

It was inspiring to visit such a successful and well-organized SALC. With around 400 unique students having made peer and learning advisor sessions last semester, it is clear that not only I as a visitor, but also the students at APU feel that the space is both a supportive and fun learning environment. With a myriad of events (picnics, talks on topics chosen by peer advisors, art events, etc.), students with a variety of interests clearly like to get involved.

Not to be forgotten, I was not only impressed by the number and variety of students who come to learn there, but also in the exceptional student staff. Our student tour guides were thorough and enthusiastic, even giving a workshop before the tour, which was a truly novel experience for me on a SALC tour, and shared with us their thorough training process. Peer advisors undergo weekly training sessions focused on both language and pedagogy, which no doubt contributes to the level of professionalism and confidence I saw displayed by Allen and Aoi.

From the start, with the introduction to APU's SALC goals (language proficiency, learner autonomy, and intercultural competence) to the final group reflection, the Friday afternoon tour of the SALC was surely a success.

Plenary Presentation

On Saturday the following morning, the plenary presentation, *Addressing Affect in Self-Access Learning Settings*, was delivered by Maria Giovanna Tassinari, PhD (Free University Berlin). She began by briefly clarifying key concepts such as affect for participants. She then explained how self-access language learning contributes to affect, emphasizing that the unity of emotion and cognition of learners in conjunction with the environment forms the basis for learning and decision making. Sources of affect in SALC were identified as the learning environment itself, the overall structure and provision of the self-access center, the activities and communities within it, and both learner-staff and staff-staff interactions.

Giovanna then engaged participants in a reflective activity. There were four scenarios related to supporting learners and staff in SALCs, and we reflected on what our emotions would be in the situations in order to understand the impact of affect more personally.

The presentation's final section examined affect within the advising process, highlighting advising sessions as privileged contexts for expressing, reflecting on, and regulating emotions throughout the learning journey. Drawing on Tassinari (2016), Giovanna

discussed research revealing a significant discrepancy between the emotional traces in learner and advisor discourse, with learners exhibiting far more emotional expression. Advisors, she argued, can enhance learning by helping students recognize and reflect on their emotions metacognitively (Tassinari, 2016). Giving ideas for emotional regulation strategies would also be beneficial (Shuman, 2013).

The session underscored the importance of integrating affective and meta-affective dimensions into advising practice for students (Tassinari, 2016), as well as being transparent about one's own emotions during sessions. The concept of metacognitively eliciting learners' emotions so as to guide them towards more positive emotions, regulation, and mindfulness was particularly compelling (Beseghi, 2022; Mozzon-McPherson, 2019; Shelton-Strong & Tassinari, 2022). Advisors themselves must become more empathetic and improve their own self-regulation in order to be more effective (Marzin et al., 2022).

Giovanna concluded by noting that there is much room for further research on emotions, feelings, and well-being of advisors, tutors, and SALC staff.

Concurrent Sessions

Following the plenary, the JASAL Annual General Meeting was briefly held before the concurrent sessions began, which included 29 presentations, two workshops, 10 poster presentations, and an additional opportunity for a tour of the Ritsumeikan APU SALC. Presenters came from all over Japan, and we were even privileged to have several international scholars attend and present, such as our plenary presenter. A few of the presentations are outlined below.

Yanki CHUNG — *Emotional Realities of an LLS in a Public High School in Tokyo*

In her practice-based presentation, Reitaku University's Yanki Chung described how she created an English learning space in a school where there was originally no out-of-class English learning and very low student interest, but which slowly gained in popularity. She shared several profiles of those involved in the space, highlighting how a large variety of emotional responses are likely to be present in both students and teachers who are unfamiliar with self-access language learning. Chung herself experienced enthusiasm, disappointment, and anxiety but found the project deeply rewarding overall. In her words, "mixed emotions, including discouraging moments, are part of the reality, not a failure". Her primary points for takeaway were how important student involvement is, as well as to bring a non-judgmental attitude to student disengagement.

Eucharia DONNERY — *Empowering Student Writers through Staff Training Sessions*

Eucharia Donnery described how she and others at Soka University aim to emphasize humanist education in her practice-based presentation. They do so by believing in students' "innate goodness" and "focusing on emotional well-being, learner- and learning-centeredness". The presentation promoted viewing students in terms of what they can do rather than what they cannot, giving feedback in order to guide them "from confusion to clarity, from turmoil to calm, from paralysis to empowerment". Advisors in writing centers should act as counselors rather than graders. When training writing center staff, they should practice active listening through techniques such as (1) using minimal encouragers, (2) speaking more slowly with longer pauses, (3) paraphrasing to ensure accuracy, and (4) asking students to summarize on their own. Trainings at Soka are held twice a semester, where students educate one another—seniors guiding juniors—and are conducted in both Japanese and English to ensure the principles are conveyed accurately.

Noriko KAWASAKI — *Process to Develop Student English Leaders at a Local University*

Noriko Kawasaki, from University of Miyazaki, explained her efforts to foster "global engineers" within a regional Japanese university context in her practice-based presentation. Her faculty's mission includes developing not only technical skills but also communication, language proficiency, and international mindsets. She identified several barriers to this goal, including the absence of a SALC, only one staff member being available to support these goals, the introverted culture of engineering students, and the potential misalignment between teacher and student interests. To address these challenges, Kawasaki organized joint research projects among local universities, established a student English club, and formed a student leader group. She has been able to sustain these activities thanks to willing student volunteers and emphasized that financial and institutional support remain essential for anyone seeking to maintain such initiatives. One main takeaway was that engineering students may have some fundamental differences from students majoring in communication or language, needing smaller steps towards involvement, a very clear sense of making progress, a feeling of loyalty or belonging to their university, and that a closeness to international students can be particularly beneficial.

John BANKIER — *When a Conversation Lounge Becomes a "Clique"*

In his practice-based presentation, John Bankier of Kanagawa University discussed the challenges that arise when a small number of students dominate conversation spaces, monopolizing teacher attention and creating an atmosphere that feels unwelcoming to others.

Having been present at the university in question while these issues were occurring, but not for the resolution, this presentation was of particular interest to me. Bankier noted that while intervention risks undermining the principles of self-access, self-access was being restricted regardless because students themselves were choosing to stay away from the SALC. Key factors included the lounge's separate location, the absence of SALC-specific staff, its perceived association with a single faculty rather than the entire student body, and the lack of a tradition of self-directed learning across ability levels. To address these issues, he implemented greater integration and oversight with the broader SALC, as well as more structured lounge sessions, such as posting daily topics to ensure discussions stayed on track. He also revised teacher/advisor training to give them the tools needed to include all students and gently guide cliques to be more inclusive. As a result of these changes, student comments about cliques disappeared from open-response feedback, indicating a more inclusive and balanced environment.

Satoko KATO — *Visualizing Learner Well-Being across 15 Dimensions*

From Kanda University of International Studies, Satoko Kato introduced an excellent new technological tool in her research-based presentation. Her research explored the relationship between autonomy and well-being, asking what lies beyond autonomy and why learner well-being matters. She defines autonomy as living and learning in line with one's authentic self, finding one's own voice and purpose in the process of learning. Well-being is more than happiness, she explained, and also includes meaning, connection, relationships, and accomplishment. The tool Kato introduced was designed to measure these aspects within language learning. It consists of a series of 60 questions, which, when answered, yield interactive graphs. The instrument measures 15 dimensions—meaning, achievement, engagement, positive emotions, relatedness, competence, autonomy, digital well-being, resilience, finance, physical environment, time, humor, vitality, and overall well-being—and is available in both Japanese and English (you can find the tool here: <https://well-being-questionnaire.web.app/>). Kato pointed out that it should not only yield scores but can also serve as a launching point for reflective activity, which I felt connected well with Giovanna's plenary presentation on the benefits of helping students assess their own affect and its impact on learning. This tool could serve well to that end.

Jordan SVIEN and Colleen SEKI — *Running a SALC-Integrated Bonus Credit Point Card System*

Hiroshima Bunkyo University's Jordan Svien and Colleen Seki shared how they developed a point card program to address declining second-term SALC usage in their practice-based presentation.

As only a small number of students are intrinsically motivated, the system was designed to appeal to extrinsically motivated learners. Their SALC had already used an attendance point card and prize raffle, which they expanded to operate year-round. Uniquely, they were also able to convince administrators to link the new system with course grades: students can earn up to 10% extra credit for completing the entire point card, or 1% per stamp if incomplete, in addition to eligibility for prize draws. Eligible activities include conversation practice, events, clubs, planning study goals, and advising sessions. The design of the cards is highly professional, and consistency and integration in advertising for events and eligible activities helped create recognition in the student body.

The results were positive as well. The program resulted in a 13% increase in overall SALC usage from 2023 to 2024 and reduced the usual second-term decline, though challenges remained in areas such as institutional approval, data tracking, communication with students about the policy, and avoiding a negative bell curve in student motivation.

Chhayankdhar Singh RATHORE — *Empathy in Action: SALC New Teacher Onboarding*

Finally, Chhayankdhar Singh Rathore from Konan Women's University led an extremely thoughtful workshop addressing the emotional and professional challenges faced by new SALC faculty. The session began with icebreakers and discussions to help participants envision the emotional landscape at the start of a new job. This was followed by an overview of faculty hierarchy and the role of SALCs within the traditional Japanese academic system.

A key issue identified was the disconnect between the qualifications required to manage a SALC and those listed in hiring criteria, which can lead to identity crises for new hires. While generally hired based on research or teaching qualifications, SALC managers must also function as advisors, managers, interlocutors, and teachers, as well as have a certain degree of technological affinity (due to the frequent use of data tracking or scheduling systems).

In order to help such overburdened staff, Rathore emphasized the importance of mentoring and structured onboarding, including (1) early advocacy to address discriminatory practices (such as native speakerism); (2) proactive outreach and onboarding sessions planned well in advance; (3) the content of the onboarding sessions themselves, such as time for incoming teachers' concerns, details of job responsibilities, clearly outlined expectations, addressing working and communication styles/culture openly, and the mechanisms in place for conflict resolution; and (4) continuous care through weekly well-being check-ins, constructive feedback, and power sharing by giving staff opportunities to exercise their own expertise.

Being rather new myself to working in a SALC, I felt strongly that the kind of onboarding presented in this workshop would have significantly eased my transition, and I believe it could be beneficial if administered again and more broadly. I look forward to implementing its principles in my own context.

Networking and Social Aspects

In addition to the presentations, there were ample opportunities to connect with other attendees. The Friday SALC tour included several opportunities for casual conversation. On Saturday morning, a morning mixer was held for 30 minutes or so before the opening remarks. Saturday evening saw the primary networking event take place, a two-hour dinner at a restaurant near Beppu Station. Finally, the Sunday post-conference social event was a particularly relaxed chance to get to know colleagues while exploring Beppu together. As a first-time conference attendee and new member of JASAL, I can attest to the truth of a phrase I heard repeated several times by various JASAL members: there was a friendliness, openness (lack of cliques), and mutual respect shown at every part of the conference that made even someone as inexperienced as I am feel I was an honored and important part of the group. I was immediately welcomed by everyone I interacted with.

Review of Practicalities

I must briefly note how well-organized the conference was. In the materials distributed before the conference, every possible piece of information needed to plan attendance had been thoughtfully prepared, including bus schedules, recommended hotels, and conference lunch information. The venue itself was organized conveniently, with all the presentations in close proximity and very clearly marked. Time was kept carefully by student

volunteers, so the entire conference was able to proceed almost exactly to the timetable posted. Overall, it was quite an impressive feat.

Reflection

I am coming away from this conference with a firm sense of how possible it is to anticipate and address the emotional needs of students and staff in SALCs and thereby improve the experience for all. I was deeply impressed by the idea of metacognitively addressing negative affect as presented in Giovanna's plenary presentation. In the weeks that have elapsed since the conference and the writing of this report, I have already begun to put into practice what she taught. Whenever I hear students speaking negatively about their learning or when I have heard student staff in our SALC speaking negatively about aspects of their position, I have drawn attention to their framing, offered positive reinforcement of my own, and invited them to be sure to include space for positivity in their own thinking.

Thanks to several actionable presentations focusing on staff training, I am also looking forward to discussing an overhaul of our own SALC staff training with my supervisor and team members. Weekly check-ins, clearer expectations, and focusing on active listening are three places I think will be easy to start.

Reflecting on the event as a whole, from the myriad of high-quality, information-dense presentations to the many convivial social and networking opportunities, the JASAL 2025 National Conference seemed to be a great success on every front. As I heard new friends and colleagues mention, perhaps the only unfortunate aspect of the event is that one is not able to attend every single presentation on the schedule. However, I am sure all who attended look forward to the conference next year, and, most of all, are coming away equipped with knowledge, skills, and aptitudes that will help us improve our self-access centers, no matter where we are.

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