

Investigating and Supporting Emotions in Self-Access Language Learning

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Similarly to the research on second language learning, research on self-access language learning (SALL) has recognised the importance of addressing the affective dimension both in research and in pedagogical practice. In a different way to the language classroom, self-access settings can provoke manifold and sometimes contradictory emotions in learners. Entering a self-access centre (SAC) for the first time can trigger insecurity, even anxiety, which may overshadow the curiosity, motivation, and desire to learn that brought them there. A learner needs to feel welcomed and supported in exploring the resources, and at the same time they need to feel free to act. Communities, such as conversation groups, may attract a learner's interest while simultaneously making them feel shy or even ashamed. Courage and openness are necessary to address a learning advisor. SAC staff, particularly student staff, may feel excited and motivated by the role they take on but also insecure, not competent enough, and then frustrated if their initiatives are not successful.

The body of research on affective aspects of self-access language learning in SACs is already significant. Following the JASAL National Conference in October 2025, which had the theme *Emotions in Language Learning*, the present issue of JASAL Journal serves as another forum to add questions and findings concerning this field. With regards to support for learners, those questions include how to design SACs in order to make them welcoming

spaces in which learners feel at ease; how to create pathways to participation that lower psychological barriers for students who are feeling anxious; how to support learners in reflecting about their well-being; how to provide structured support that aligns with a learner's level of autonomy; and how spaces and practices outside traditional self-access contexts might contribute to learner motivation, agency and well-being. Regarding the development of those who work in SACs, questions include how to find a balance between guiding student assistants while giving them the autonomy to contribute with their creativity; how to use technology to develop advising skills while supporting advisors' basic psychological needs; and how experience as educators in self-access centres can inform classroom teaching practices. Acting as a foundation for this research and the pedagogical practices it supports, self-determination theory, complexity theory, agency, and communities of practice approaches are some of the theoretical underpinnings which recur in the explorations of this exciting and complex field.

We start this issue with four research papers that look at different aspects of learners' affective processes and how to support them. The first of these is a study by **Geradine McCrohan** of Kagawa University, **James Broxholme** of Kwansai Gakuin University, and **Adam Sol Brod** of Kagawa University, who investigate patterns of willingness to communicate (WTC), anxiety, and confidence among frequent users of a SAC using survey data collected between 2015 and 2025. The post-COVID period has seen a shift in how users engage with the SAC, with a smaller proportion of students taking part in organised SAC activities and more students using the space for informal social interaction only. While the results show little variation in mean reported levels of WTC, anxiety, and confidence in pre- and post-COVID cohorts, analysis reveals that students who participated in structured activities reported higher levels of both WTC and anxiety than social-only users. This coexistence of WTC and anxiety suggests that anxiety does not necessarily preclude participation, and the authors argue that anxiety should be viewed as a normal part of learner development, not as a deficit to be eliminated. They recommend designing a variety of entry points and pathways to participation, integrating opportunities for language use into social spaces, and supporting communication that is "brave", not just "comfortable".

John Rowberry's paper similarly deals with the complex interactions between learner agency and emotions such as enjoyment, boredom, or foreign language anxiety. Drawing on data from self-directed learning portfolios and stimulated recall interviews with participants of a self-directed learning programme at Sojo University, the study investigates how emotions facilitated or constrained the learners' agency and what impact this had on

their use or non-use of the services and resources at their institution's SAC. Findings suggest a reciprocal relationship between positive emotions and agency, in which the freedom to choose activities that aligned with their personal interests and goals contributed to students' feelings of enjoyment and increased confidence, which in turn encouraged them to take further agentive action. Conversely, while some participants were able to overcome negative emotions, with those emotions even motivating learning in some cases, there were some participants for whom anxiety and fear of negative evaluation constrained their agency and limited their uptake of the learning affordances of the SAC. The author discusses implications for SACs and gives suggestions for how to help learners overcome such psychological barriers.

In "Visualizing Learner Well-Being in Language Learning: An Exploratory Classroom Implementation Supporting Reflective Dialogue", **Satoko Kato**, from Kanda University of International Studies, introduces a Language Learning Well-Being questionnaire, a tool designed for learners which scaffolds learners' reflection on their well-being in the language learning process. The questionnaire entails 60 items, covering 15 dimensions of well-being, such as meaning, positive emotions, relatedness, autonomy, time, vitality, and achievement. These dimensions are derived from a thorough analysis of theoretical frameworks, integrating research in self-determination theory, positive psychology, and language learner autonomy. The scores of the questionnaire are displayed as a radar chart, thus enabling learners to visualise their profiles as well as the relationships among the dimensions. The items were discussed with and validated by a group of experts and the pilot version of the questionnaire, both in Japanese and in English, was administered to a group of students in a self-access centre at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The findings suggest that making well-being visible through multidimensional visualisation may support autonomous learning by encouraging reflection and serving as a potential shared reference point for reflective dialogue.

Branden Carl Kirchmeyer, Alison Koga and Kayoko Horai of Sojo University explore the effects of emotions on students' agency and motivation through a case study in an interesting and novel context: self-access centre-hosted camping excursions. Through qualitative survey data, email interviews, field notes and post-camp observations, the authors found that social opportunities and the desire to spend time in nature motivated students to participate in the excursions, and that while some students experienced negative emotions at the beginning of the camps, by the end of them, these shifted positively. After the camps, increased participant motivation and agency emerged for engagement in activities beyond the

camping excursions, not only in language study, but also in the participation and development of further events. Their results highlight the benefits and potential of such events outside traditional self-access spaces. Based on their findings, the authors encourage other self-access practitioners to consider hosting similar events.

Next, we have two papers concerned with supporting the development of those who work in SACs and SALL. In “Colorful Conversation: Weekly Topics and Their Impact on Basic Psychological Needs at SAC Group Chat Sessions,” **Christopher Cladis, Jeremy Eades, and Christopher Phelps**, from Osaka Institute of Technology, research the impact of an intervention aimed at providing student assistants in charge of conversation groups at the SAC of their university with support in the form of weekly topics. Drawing on the framework of basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), they aim to identify how the Weekly Topics system influences satisfaction of basic psychological needs both in student assistants and in students participating in the conversation groups. To do so, they interviewed two of the student assistants in charge and two regular participants and analysed their answers in the light of BPNT. Despite the limited sample and possible language challenges—the interviews were conducted in English, the target language of the participants—the findings of the research show several benefits of the intervention. Among others, the student assistants felt supported in providing more varied activities within the suggested topics, thus contributing with their own ideas and creativity, and further increasing their confidence and sense of competence. In addition, they communicated more often with their fellow student assistants, thus feeling their sense of community grow. The authors reflect on the experience and on the results of their investigation and draw conclusions for its further development and research.

Sina Takada, Satoko Kato, Emily A. Marzin, Jo Mynard, and Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa, of Kanda University of International Studies, present a research paper on the development of a web-based application that facilitates the practice of advising skills through simulated dialogues with AI avatars while supporting basic psychological needs. Takada and his colleagues surveyed eight participants, including teachers and learning advisors, and analysed their feedback through the lens of self-determination theory. Despite some technical issues with the application, and those related to the perceived depth of the conversations it replicated, the authors find that their participants respond positively to the application. Simulated dialogues within the application are perceived as similar to authentic advising sessions, providing a safe space to improve skills and enhancing the participants' sense of competence. Their study provides an innovative and practical example of how AI can be utilised in advisor education to promote growth in an autonomy-supportive manner.

In their discussions of practice paper, **Masako Wakisaka and Hiroaki Kobayashi** compare two eTandem projects, one between students in Japan and Korea, and one between students in Japan and Germany. In both projects, students were offered support in the form of a logbook app and advising sessions, with the aim of helping learners to reflect, solve problems, and adjust learning strategies. In the Japan–Korea project, in which the logbook and advising were optional, student uptake of the support was minimal. In the Japan–Germany project, however, the logbook and advising were systematically integrated into the programme as standard components for all participants. Analysis of logbook entries and post-programme interviews suggests that this structured framework helped students to sustain their learning activities. The authors discuss the importance of finding an appropriate balance between structure and flexibility that tailors support to learners’ developmental stage of autonomy.

In their paper “When Advisors Become Teachers: Learner-Centered Classroom Practice”, **Yuri Imamura**, from Shukutoku University, and **Robert Stevenson**, from Tamagawa University, reflect on how their background as language learning advisors at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) influences their classroom teaching. Drawing on their experiences at KUIS and robust theoretical frameworks including the reflective judgement model, transformative learning theory, and learner-centred environment principles, they discuss how they shaped their pedagogical approach with the aim of fostering learners’ cognitive, metacognitive, and emotional development, through dialogic and reflective activities, using learning journals and peer- or self-assessment phases. Despite working at different institutions, they share their experience and reflect together on the opportunities and challenges of introducing a pedagogy for learner development in mandatory English courses.

George Hays of Tokyo International University contributes a reflective paper that considers how small choices in visual design may affect learners’ emotional experiences in SACs. Drawing on self-determination theory, complex dynamic systems theory and self-access language learning literature, he examines the emotional impact of multiple design elements through informal conversations, observation, and reflection, while acknowledging the limitations of these methods. The paper highlights learners’ positive reactions to vibrant colours and graphical design, as well as to student interns’ photos and displays featuring students’ work. Through this reflection, Hays offers several suggestions for creating visually inviting spaces that communicate safety and support and promote ownership, while considering issues surrounding inclusivity in SACs. He also invites further research based on

interviews with learners to deepen understanding of how various visual or spatial design elements contribute to emotional experience in self-access spaces and whether there are cultural differences in how they are perceived.

We finish this issue of *JASAL Journal* with a report by **Daniel Hooper**, **Sam Reid**, **Suwako Uehara**, and **Katherine Thornton**, who summarise the *JASAL Forum* at JALT2025. The presentations this year detailed initiatives at two self-access centres which highlighted the importance of reaching out to the wider university community and building strategic partnerships.

We would like to congratulate and thank the authors who contributed to Issue 7(1) of the *JASAL Journal*. We would also like to express our appreciation to the reviewers for their insightful and constructive feedback, and to the copyeditors for all their work behind the scenes.