

Colorful Conversation: Weekly Topics and Their Impact on Basic Psychological Needs at SAC Group Chat Sessions

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Author Biographies

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Abstract

During a tour of the self-access center at Soka University, the authors observed signage for a system of topics used to facilitate conversation. Following the tour, they developed a similar system of weekly topics for a self-access center group conversation service at a private technical university in Kansai, Japan. The system was established to provide guidance for student staff members who help run the service as well as focus for participating student users. This paper explores student perspectives of the system via interviews with two student staff members (SSMs) and two student users, the content of which is analyzed using basic psychological needs theory (BPNT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017), to understand how the system may impact students' well-being and motivation. Expected benefits include reduced preparation demands and repetition, which support SSM autonomy and competence needs by providing structure without removing flexibility. Unexpected benefits include pedagogical advantages for users, increased inter-SSM communication, and potentially greater ease of participation. These benefits are interpreted as supporting relatedness needs through increased collaboration, competence needs through the removal of barriers to participation, and autonomy needs through perceived non-intrusivity. These findings highlight the potential of lightly structured, autonomy-supportive systems within SACs to improve both SSM and user experiences. Limitations of the study are also considered, along with practical implications for BPNT-informed approaches at SACs.

本研究では、創価大学の自律学習センター見学時に観察された会話促進用トピック掲示を契機として、関西地方の私立工科大学の自律学習センターにおけるグループ会話サービスに週替わりトピック制度を導入した。本制度は、学生スタッフ (Student Staff Members: SSMs) への指針提供と参加学生の会話の焦点化を目的とする。本稿では、SSM2名および利用学生2名へのインタビューを通じて本制度に対する学生の視点を検討し、基本的心理的欲求理論 (basic psychological needs theory: BPNT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) の枠組みからその影響を分析する。分析の結果、準備負担や発話の反復の軽減が確認され、これらは構造を保ちながら柔軟性を損なわない点でSSMの自律性および有能感の欲求を支える可能性が示唆された。また、教育的利点、SSM間のコミュニケーションの促進、参加のしやすさの向上も確認され、関係性・有能感・自律性の各欲求の充足と関連づけられる。一方、一部のトピックは有能感の欲求に対する課題となる可能性も示された。以上より、軽度に構造化された自律性支援型の仕組みが、SSMおよび利用学生双方の経験向上に寄与する可能性が示唆される。最後に、本研究の限界とBPNTに基づく実践的示唆を述べる。

Keywords: group conversation, student staff members, basic psychological needs, well-being, motivation

Group language practice sessions are one way that self-access centers (SACs) may offer users opportunities to practice speaking target languages with peers. Such group language practice sessions align with Dam and colleagues' (1990) definition of learner autonomy, which highlights the importance of autonomous social learning alongside independent study. The SAC featured in this paper, located at a private technical university in Kansai, Japan, offers group language practice sessions in the form of casual group conversation. Given the role of such services in Self-Access Language Learning (SALL), improving their operation is crucial to benefit users and student staff members (SSMs) who may facilitate them. In this paper, we evaluate a weekly topics system introduced by the authors to help SSMs prepare group conversation sessions at the SAC by analyzing the experiences of student users who participate in the sessions and SSMs who help lead them.

We first discuss group language practice before introducing basic psychological needs theory (BPNT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) as our analytical framework. After describing our setting and the context that led to the introduction of the system, we detail our research questions, participants, and methodology. We then explore key themes and evaluate participant perceptions of the system through the lens of BPNT. Finally, we conclude with takeaways and offer next steps in the hope that similar systems and approaches might benefit SSMs and users at other SACs.

Literature Review

Group Language Practice

Various forms of group language practice are commonly offered in SACs, including casual conversations (Acuña González et al., 2015; Moore & Tachibana, 2015; Werner & Von Joo, 2018; Zoni Upton et al., 2023) and discussions based around more formal topics (Jeanneau & O'Riordan, 2015; Sugie, 2023). The latter is recommended in Gardner and Miller's (1999) seminal work on running self-access environments, with faculty gradually removing their presence from the group as it matures.

Research on group language practice in SACs indicates that such activities can support the development of students' English communication skills (Sugie, 2023), promote participation and fluency (Jeanneau & O'Riordan, 2015), provide opportunities for regular speaking practice (Acuña González et al., 2015), and create relaxed, socially supportive environments for language use (Werner & Von Joo, 2018; Sigala Villa et al., 2019). In addition, such spaces can offer opportunities for informal interaction and social engagement

among peers (Zoni Upton et al., 2023), which may contribute to sustained participation. In many SAC contexts, group sessions may be SSM- or teacher-led, sometimes with the two working in tandem (Jeanneau & O’Riordan, 2015; Moore & Tachibana, 2015).

However, SALL literature also highlights challenges associated with group language practice. Without sufficient guidance or training, peer-led conversation activities may become inconsistent (Jeanneau & O’Riordan, 2015; Sigala Villa et al., 2019), overly dependent on individual facilitators (Werner & Von Joo, 2018), or repetitive (Sigala Villa et al., 2019). While these issues have been highlighted, there remains relatively limited research within SALL examining how group language practice, particularly informal, conversation-based services, might be supported and improved.

Basic Psychological Needs Theory

Basic psychological needs theory (BPNT) is one of six mini-theories in self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). It details three BPNs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) that, if supported, predict well-being and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy concerns feelings of control and ownership over behavior; competence relates to feelings of growth and mastery; and relatedness concerns feelings of connection and unity with others in respectful relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Satisfying or thwarting these needs facilitates or diminishes motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Though it is outside of the remit of this paper to explore SDT on a macro level, of the forms of motivation it describes, intrinsic motivation is associated with autonomous acts predominantly engaged in out of interest, when BPNs are supported to a high degree (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Extrinsically motivated behaviors, however, vary in the degree to which they are autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2017) as they are performed for reasons other than interest. Such reasons include receiving rewards, avoiding punishments, or because one endorses the behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Accordingly, it is viewed as a less potent form of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020). Crucially, several studies on university students have demonstrated that autonomous acts of helping others, or autonomous prosocial behavior, satisfy all BPNs (Martela & Ryan, 2016; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

Basic Psychological Needs Theory & Self-Access Language Learning

Such findings are of interest to SALL, as many behaviors observed in self-access contexts may be considered prosocial, including those seen in conversation groups. Hooper (2025) demonstrated through learner narratives that autonomous prosocial behavior is perceived as fulfilling by members of a SAC learning community. Similarly, Phelps (2025)

found that prosociality was one factor that motivated SSMs to start and continue in their roles. Findings such as these provide insight into the relationship between BPN satisfaction and behavior associated with SALL.

Indeed, over the last ten years, BPNT, alongside SDT more generally, has been increasingly applied in SALL, both as an analytical lens to study the field and as a guiding theory for devising improvements which foster greater motivation and well-being. Mynard (2022) focused on how SALL environments might be reimagined as BPN-supportive, while Shelton-Strong and Tassinari (2022) explored advising in language learning from the perspective of SDT and identified it as an autonomy-supportive practice which supports BPNs. Similarly, Watkins and Hooper (2023) promoted a model for developing student leaders in SACs who contribute to supporting student BPNs. Beyond these theoretical contributions, Watkins (2022) reported that students in SAC learning communities experienced BPN satisfaction, and as they found these environments to be low-stress and enjoyable, their motivation to learn was sustained.

Exploring a SAC and its language learning supports from the perspective of BPNT, Yarwood et al. (2019) and Asta and Mynard (2018) found university SAC users visited their SAC with the goal of communicating with others and practicing English. They argued that the students desired to do so in order to facilitate relationships, thereby satisfying relatedness needs (Yarwood et al., 2019). Asta and Mynard (2018) also proposed the careful introduction of systems that promote autonomy-supportive environments with a balance of structure and control.

In this paper, we add to this body of research by exploring SSM and user perspectives of a group conversation weekly topics system through the lens of BPNT to consider potential impacts on student motivation and well-being.

Context

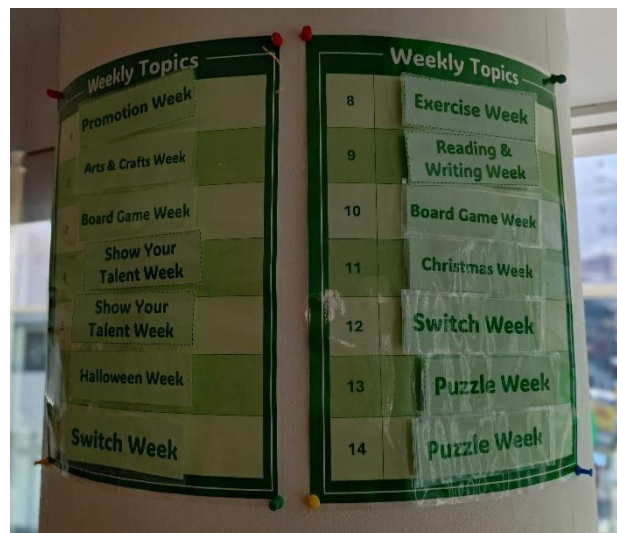
Since its establishment in 2012, the SAC has aimed to provide a dynamic, student-centered space that supports autonomous language learning and community building. It is coordinated by three full-time teachers and an office manager, with support from 16 SSMs. The SSMs are divided into four sub-teams, one of which, the English Conversation Assistant (ECA) team, leads the “Free Conversation” service alongside the SAC teachers. They use games, videos, and other activities to facilitate group language practice in the form of casual conversation sessions. Free Conversation is held Monday to Friday in termtime for 100

minutes during the lunch period. It is unreserved, allowing students to come and go freely, eat lunch, and engage in relaxed English conversation. At our SAC, prior to the introduction of the system that is the focus of this study, each ECA selected their own daily topic or activity for Free Conversation. While it seemed to us as SAC teachers that this practice gave ECAs the autonomy to choose from a wide range of activities, in reality we observed that they excessively repeated them. This may have negatively affected the overall quality and benefits of Free Conversation for users. In response, we developed a system of support to help the ECAs select appropriate activities.

The new system, which we refer to as the Weekly Topics system, was inspired by a comparable one observed during a tour of the SAC at Soka University in October 2024. In practical terms, the primary goal of our Weekly Topics system is to help ECAs select and prepare activities for Free Conversation by providing consistent starting points. A schedule of these topics is displayed near the Free Conversation space (see Figure 1) and announced on social media, serving as a shared reference for both ECAs and users.

Figure 1

Weekly Topics Schedule in Semester 2 of 2025



Topics such as Board Games and Arts and Crafts Week were selected to stimulate interaction and provide structure without being overly restrictive. Our intention was that the topics were broad enough to allow the ECAs to interpret them, encouraging ownership and creativity, while minimizing repetition by changing the theme weekly to encourage ECAs to

try new activities. We arranged topics to balance difficulty with academic demands. Lighter themes, such as those involving video games, were scheduled during exam periods, while comparatively intensive ones, such as TV Drama Week or Discussion Week, were placed during less demanding weeks. We trialed the Weekly Topics system at the end of the 2024 academic year, with full implementation in the first semester of 2025. Although topics were initially selected and scheduled by teachers, since this research was conducted, the ECAs requested ownership of this process for the second semester in 2025. Thus, new topics were added to the schedule and system maintenance shifted from the teachers to SSMs.

Research Questions

In exploring the impact of Weekly Topics on ECAs and Free Conversation participants, we were interested in the following questions:

- 1) What is the impact of the Weekly Topics system on ECAs' and student users' perspectives of Free Conversation?
- 2) Is the Weekly Topics system perceived as a source of support by ECAs and student users?
- 3) How does the Weekly Topics system impact students' BPNs?

In a general sense, we were interested in whether students perceived the Weekly Topics system as a positive addition to the SAC, and whether it supported or hindered the ECAs and users. For ECAs, we sought to determine whether the Weekly Topics system helped them choose activities and organize sessions efficiently or created extra work. As for users, we aimed to explore the pedagogical impact and whether they were aware of the system or if they felt it intruded on their regular experience of Free Conversation. With regards to question 3, as BPNT predicts motivation and well-being based on the degree to which needs are satisfied, we viewed evidence of needs satisfaction as indicators of the system's positive impact.

Method

Participants

To clarify the effects of the Weekly Topics system on ECAs and participating users, we interviewed a convenience sample of four students, two ECAs, and two regular users (see Table 1). Please note that all names have been anonymized to avoid disclosing their identity. Hana, a Japanese fourth-year student, had been an ECA for one semester, while Odi, a non-

Japanese first-year master's student, had been an ECA for several years and was serving as the team leader. Ryoma and Yoji were both Japanese students who had attended Free Conversation several times a week over a prolonged period at the time the research was carried out. We conducted interviews in English, as none of the researchers were comfortable doing so in Japanese. As such, we considered language proficiency when approaching participants, along with factors such as availability and willingness to be interviewed. Although our sample was small and included only regular users, we proceeded with the research due to the inherent difficulty of recruiting non-regular or first-time users to participate.

Table 1

Biographical Information on Research Participants

| Participant | Role | University Year | Nationality | Length as ECA |
|-------------|------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|
| Hana | ECA | Fourth | Japanese | One semester |
| Odi | ECA | First, Master's | Non-Japanese | Several years |
| Ryoma | User | Third | Japanese | N/A |
| Yoji | User | Second | Japanese | N/A |

Procedure

We began our study by obtaining consent from the participants listed above, then two of the three authors interviewed participants individually via the video-conferencing app *Zoom* in 20-30-minute recorded sessions, following a semi-structured interview schedule with questions based on whether the participant was a SSM (see Appendix A) or a regular user (see Appendix B). After reviewing the automatically generated *Zoom* transcripts for errors, we sent them to the participants to clarify ambiguous sections. Following this, to identify emergent themes in the transcripts, we narrowed notable extracts to keywords or phrases that summarized participants' reactions to the new system. Finally, we analyzed these themes using BPNT to ascertain the impact of the Weekly Topics system on students and whether they perceived it as a source of support.

Findings & Discussion

Several themes emerged from the interview data related to the Weekly Topics system, organized below as expected benefits, unexpected benefits, and challenges.

Expected Benefits

Prior to beginning the study, we expected that the Weekly Topics would reduce repetition of certain activities, would provide some scaffolding for ECAs as they select topics, that the topics we chose would be somewhat interesting, and that it would support students pedagogically.

Reduced Repetition

One of the main drivers for instituting the Weekly Topics system was to reduce repetition. Both ECAs felt that the prior system resulted in repetitive sessions, with Odi stating that she was “just picking out like things that I like and due to that [...] what I’m doing is really repetitive.” Similarly, Hana said that without the Weekly Topics, “we sometimes become silent. [We] tend to do same things every day.” Odi also revealed that “we [ran] out of ideas and [...] only talking is boring, but only playing the same games is also [...] boring,” illustrating how ECAs previously defaulted to safe and familiar activities. In contrast, the new system encouraged them to select activities related to specific topics, leading to new activities each week. Odi noted that “once we get the weekly topics, we know what to do. Each day we have [...] new ideas on what to do, even [...] only by talking. We have topics to talk about. So, it's not boring at all.” Thus, with topics planned from the beginning of the semester, ECAs had the information needed to plan activities for Free Conversation. Rather than limiting choices within particular sessions, Odi’s comments reveal that the Weekly Topics system reduced repetition by encouraging ECAs to develop different activities within a weekly framework. This reduced repetition may mean that ECAs feel they can effectively facilitate more interesting sessions, which may satisfy competence needs as they perceive they are doing their job well.

Odi’s comments highlight the shift from repetitive, boring activities to more varied and engaging ones under the new system, suggesting the presence of some degree of intrinsic motivation associated with her activities. SDT posits that intrinsic motivation, or doing activities perceived as interesting, indicates high levels of BPN satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Although Odi does not explicitly describe the sessions as “fun,” by contrasting them with the previous, boring sessions, she alludes to them being so, hinting at high levels of BPN satisfaction. Odi’s comments are supported by Hana, who stated that the Weekly Topics

system is, “really good [...] because we have like a specific thing to talk and it makes the conversation more colorful.” Here, by describing the conversation as “colorful,” Hana points to the non-repetitive and comparatively interesting and BPN-supportive nature of Free Conversation under the new system.

Supportive Scaffolding

The Weekly Topics system was designed to offer light structure rather than impose strict rules. As such, we were especially interested in whether participants experienced the system as supportive. From a BPNT perspective, this is a central concern, as autonomy-supportive environments enhance motivation and well-being, while controlling structures can undermine them. Echoing Odi’s earlier comments, Hana noted that having set weekly topics gave her and the other ECAs clearer goals. She explained that “for ECAs, it got really easier because they know what they have to do on that day, like they have [...] a very obvious vision like a goal to do.” She also outlined her process, stating, “I recognize the Weekly Topic. And then I kind of brainstorm some ideas [...] on the bus,” and later mentioned that she starts her shift by searching for activities or preparing Google Slides with relevant discussion questions. The advance notice the Weekly Topics system provides appears to have supported ECAs, allowing them to focus on user needs, rather than on the various options available to them. Having a predetermined topic allows ECAs to brainstorm ahead of time and narrow the number of activities available, avoiding what previously may have been an overwhelming process. Simplifying the process of choosing activities may support competence needs as ECAs feel more confident in their ability to select good activities. Hana’s comments also suggest the scaffolding offered through the Weekly Topics system supports autonomy needs by giving ECAs further control of activity selection, while supporting competence needs through clarity of purpose. From this perspective, the Weekly Topics system may be viewed as an example of the type of non-intrusive need-supportive systems Asta and Mynard (2018) argue should be established within SALL contexts. Conversely, the previous system’s lack of structure may have frustrated BPNs, despite seeming autonomy-supportive from the teachers’ perspective.

Interesting Topics

Naturally, we tried to select topics both users and ECAs would appreciate. According to student responses, several topics were perceived as interesting, with the ECAs particularly enjoying Arts and Crafts Week. Odi thought, “It’s a really good week. Because, like, all of [the attending students] just either show off their own [...] arts and crafts skills, or they learn

a lot of new things, and we make it together, although it's really fun.” Likewise, Hana felt that this topic was enjoyable and allowed ECAs to be creative in how they ran their session. By describing the sessions as “really fun”, Odi suggests a degree of intrinsic motivation resulting from the new topic, which is supported by Hana’s perception that it was enjoyable. Based on their responses, the topic provided direction but promoted creativity, making it conducive to autonomy and competence needs satisfaction. The opportunity to learn new things and demonstrate skills signals growth and mastery, the two facets of competence needs satisfaction. Additionally, the topic’s emphasis on making things together may satisfy relatedness needs.

User Support

Participants generally reported that the system preserved user autonomy and that they did not feel obliged to engage with it. Hana offered a particularly informative perspective, having participated in Free Conversation consistently as a user in her first year, then as a SSM in another team, and finally as an ECA in her fourth year. She opined that while the Weekly Topics system introduced clearer scaffolding for ECAs, it did not fundamentally alter how users experienced Free Conversation. Reflecting on the shift, she noted, “as a student, I’m a type of person who really enjoys the conversation, so personally it didn’t really change, but I think for ECAs, it got really easier because they know what they have to do on that day.” Her comments imply that the Weekly Topics system was experienced as a subtle, largely non-intrusive change from a user’s perspective, that the core experience of casual English conversations with peers remained intact. Hana's views were supported by Yoji, one of the users, who indicated that his overall experience remained largely unchanged at Free Conversation. Being perceived as a subtle addition suggests that the system supports autonomy needs. Furthermore, rather than acting as constraints, the topics were perceived as helpful reference points, particularly for users lacking confidence in their ability to participate. Yoji, for example, argued that having a visible topic could make it easier for some participants to speak, as it provided a shared focus and reduced pressure to generate conversation independently, highlighting a potential role in supporting competence needs.

Unexpected Benefits

Although the Weekly Topics system was expected to improve Free Conversation sessions by reducing preparation time and repetition, several unexpected benefits also emerged, such as pedagogical advantages, increased inter-ECA communication, and ease of participation.

Pedagogical Advantages

One unexpected benefit was that participants believed the Weekly Topics system was pedagogically advantageous for students, offering a framework to support their learning needs. Odi stated, “it's a good balance cause now that the students, when they come to [the SAC], they know that we have [...] a proper system to guide them.” Here, she demonstrates the perceived benefits of a tangible structure that users can see and interact with. This structure may support users' competence needs as it develops or is perceived to develop language skills. Additionally, Odi seems to have re-interpreted leading Free Conversation sessions under the new system as increasingly prosocial behavior. Such behavior has been found to satisfy all BPNs (Martela & Ryan, 2016; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010) and to positively affect SSMs and student users in SACs (Hooper, 2025; Phelps, 2025). If interpreted as a more effective way of learning English conversation, and therefore an example of prosocial behavior, the new system may contribute to satisfying all BPNs of ECAs.

Increased Inter-ECA Communication

Another unexpected benefit was increased communication between ECAs as the Weekly Topics system reduced reliance on familiar activities. To avoid repetition throughout the week and improve user experience, Odi described an increase in the frequency of communication between ECAs, as they report to each other daily on what they did. Hana demonstrated her awareness of other ECAs' activities via this communication when she explained that “Arts and Craft [Week] was really fun, because every ECA student [...] had their own idea, and what they wanted to do.” Likewise, Odi mentioned that other ECAs ask her for ideas, while Hana acknowledged receiving help from Odi.

Communication quality, alongside frequency, also appears to have increased. Though all SAC teams meet monthly, the Weekly Topics system seems to have added direction to the ECA meetings, drawing attention to particularly effective or problematic topics and activities. For instance, according to Hana, “Every ECA said that [TV Drama Week] was a really tough week.” Although an unsuccessful topic could be viewed negatively, the ECAs' ability to evaluate topics suggests growth in their role and in their understanding of what works well at Free Conversation.

From a BPNT perspective, increased inter-ECA communication may have several benefits. First, it creates more opportunities to satisfy relatedness needs through prosocial behavior, as ECAs support one another and build respectful relationships in the process. As previously discussed, behavior of this kind has been linked to satisfying BPNs (Hooper,

2025; Martela & Ryan, 2016; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010) and sustaining SSM motivation (Phelps, 2025). Additionally, interactions focused on specific topics and activities and subsequent feedback and advice create the potential for growth and skill development, and thus the opportunity for competence needs satisfaction. These suggestions echo observations by Sigala Villa et al. (2019) that shared planning and collaborative reflection among leaders of group-conversation-based SAC services can foster learning and socialization. ECAs are likely to learn from each other, feel more competent, and experience better relationships within their team, all of which may positively affect competence and relatedness needs. Through such learning, the benefits of the system may also extend to users, as they may find Free Conversation to be more engaging and thoughtfully planned.

Ease of Participation

Lastly, both ECAs and Yoji speculated that the system may also make it easier for first-time users to join Free Conversation. Yoji explained, “the Weekly Topics makes new participants easier to speak, because [...] first time [...] they don’t know about the Free Conversation, and also [the SAC]. So, if they have topics, they can speak with topics, and [...] they know the topics.” Applying BPNT to explain Yoji’s view suggests that advanced knowledge of the conversation topic supports competence needs and lowers the barrier for joining Free Conversation for new students, as it primes conversational themes, giving users time to think of relevant language. His comments contrast with Ryoma’s, who implied that the system may, in fact, create barriers if topics are too challenging for some users. Thus, there is ambiguity to this argument, based on the discrepancy in their views. Moreover, follow-up responses from the users indicated that not all Free Conversation participants are necessarily aware of the Weekly Topics system. Yoji speculated that students who attend infrequently may not notice the topic at all, especially if the conversation organically shifts away from the day’s theme. His view emphasizes the limits of the Weekly Topics system, which may only impact regular users or ECAs’ BPNs. Though this may portray the system as inconsequential, his view supports the notion that the system is non-intrusive from an ECA and user perspective, and unlikely to be perceived as a source of BPN frustration. However, Ryoma's wording made it difficult to determine how strongly he felt the system affected first-time users. Here we may have highlighted a limitation in our research: that conducting the interviews in English may have prevented some participants from accurately communicating their ideas.

Challenges

There were also challenges associated with the implementation of the Weekly Topics system. As previously noted, the ECAs found TV Drama Week difficult, hinting at the potentially negative effect this theme may have had on competence needs. When chosen, teachers envisioned students discussing their favorite TV shows or making recommendations to one another. However, the ECAs interpreted the topic as necessitating shared experiences with foreign TV programs or watching episodes during Free Conversation as a group. Likewise, Yoji, a user, mentioned skipping one session due to perceived time constraints related to the type of activity the weekly topic promoted. Such disconnect emphasizes the importance of clear communication between SALL practitioners and students; clearly explaining topic-related goals and framing the Weekly Topics system as a supportive framework for ECAs and users alike, rather than as rules that require engagement in specific activities, may have avoided the overloading of SSMs, confusion among users, and potentially relatedness needs frustration.

Topic timing was also an issue when the teachers scheduled one topic related to a Japanese holiday during a week that would have made associated activities irrelevant, revealing a gap in their cultural knowledge. However, the flexibility of the Weekly Topics system allowed the ECAs to draw on their knowledge and make adjustments to the schedule. This problematic episode demonstrates the benefits of encouraging SSMs to take control of services by offering their ideas and suggestions, as students can contribute in SACs in ways practitioners cannot. Hooper (2025) discusses the value, in self-access contexts, of legitimizing non-canonical knowledge—that is, knowledge students possess but is often not readily accessible to teachers—arguing it may lead to BPN satisfaction. From a BPNT perspective, despite timing issues, the ECAs offering their input indicates they felt a degree of control over the Weekly Topics system and felt able to make changes to it, implying it may be autonomy supportive.

Looking to the Future: Implications and Next Steps

While it is difficult to precisely determine the extent to which BPNs are satisfied within individuals, the Weekly Topics system appears to contribute to the satisfaction of all BPNs. Its reduced repetitiveness and supportive scaffolding may contribute to competence and autonomy needs. Indicators of intrinsic motivation stemming from the variety of activities and new, interesting topics suggest high degrees of BPN satisfaction. The system

appears to support users' autonomy needs, as participants did not perceive it to drastically change Free Conversation, with participation remaining volitional. Unexpectedly, Odi felt that structuring topics weekly might make it seem more like a syllabus that students progress through. Her view may indicate that the system supports competence needs as users' skills develop or signal Odi's belief that leading Free Conversation under the Weekly Topics system is increasingly an example of prosocial behavior, which satisfies all BPNs. Additionally, increased inter-ECA communication may increase opportunities for relatedness and competence needs satisfaction. Some participants also speculated that the Weekly Topics system could assist new users' attempts to join Free Conversation, hinting at potential competence needs support.

Thus, the Weekly Topics system is a source of support for both users and ECAs, and its impact on BPNs appears largely positive, though influence may be limited to regular users and ECAs. These findings indicate that it may have a positive impact on student motivation and well-being. While some issues with the system's introduction may have frustrated competence needs, we hope that through clearer communication and the legitimization of non-canonical knowledge, such issues may be avoided in the future.

Therefore, our next steps will be to monitor and support the ECAs and continue to offer guidance while promoting their control over the system. Monitoring the ECAs as they schedule topics is central to this process. Their request for control after just one semester suggests a desire for greater ownership of the system and autonomy needs satisfaction. Moreover, it highlights the ECAs' agency to act autonomously on their non-canonical knowledge, while providing an opportunity to further support their BPNs.

Legitimizing non-canonical knowledge may not only benefit practitioners practically by helping them avoid issues but also contribute to respectful relationships between teachers and SSMs, validating their knowledge and skills, and satisfying BPNs. Therefore, we also aim to create more avenues in the SAC to legitimize student knowledge, for instance by setting up comparable systems for other SSM teams. That said, canonical knowledge will continue to play a role in the Weekly Topics system, based on Hana's desire for teacher input in topic selection and the success of teacher-selected topics such as Arts and Crafts Week. Teacher support may also satisfy relatedness needs by maintaining and reinforcing teacher-SSM relationships. This interplay between canonical and non-canonical knowledge underpins our plan to monitor and support ECAs, while creating space for SSM knowledge and autonomy.

Finally, through our study, we realized the importance of communicating expectations and guidance clearly within SACs. As previously noted, there was some ambiguity on the part of ECAs about what particular topics entailed and the degree to which they should be implemented into Free Conversation sessions. Therefore, we plan to communicate more clearly to ECAs and users that Weekly Topics are flexible starting points, not strict rules. We hope this approach will lead to further BPN satisfaction for both ECAs and users and contribute to their motivation and well-being. Moreover, for SALL practitioners considering similar systems, we recommend clearly communicating principles so that SSMs retain autonomy and feel competent in their roles.

While these results are promising, we have already highlighted the limitation of conducting interviews in English, which may have hindered some participants' communication. Although we tried to mitigate this issue through script validity checks, conducting the research in the participants' second language may limit the scope of our findings. Additionally, the small sample size of four individuals, the snapshot nature of the study, and our context limit the generalizability of our findings. Future research on analogous systems may need to be conducted with larger numbers of participants in their first language. Alternatively, conducting research over longer periods in several SACs may help ascertain whether such systems continue to contribute to BPN satisfaction.

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Appendix A

Questions for English Conversation Assistants (ECA)

1. How long have you been a student staff member?
2. How long have you been an ECA?
3. Why did you want to become an ECA?
4. Did you ever attend free conversation sessions before becoming an ECA?
5. We introduced the Weekly Topics system last semester. Could you talk about any changes you have noticed at Free Conversation sessions since then?
6. Based on your observations, how have participants responded to these weekly topics?
7. Can you tell me about any topics you remember and how you felt about them?
8. How do you usually prepare for the Free Conversation sessions under the Weekly Topics system? Has this changed since you first became an ECA?
9. How do you feel about the Weekly Topics system in terms of your creativity?
10. What impact have the weekly topics had on your experience leading the Free Conversation sessions?
11. If you were asked for advice about future topics or activities at Free Conversation sessions, what would you say?
12. How do you feel about ECAs choosing the weekly topic? (Do you have too much support? Not enough support?)
13. Do you have any general comments about being an ECA, Free Conversation, or the Weekly Topics system?
14. Do you have any questions?

Appendix B

Questions for Regular Users

1. When did you first attend a Free Conversation session?
2. How often do you come to Free Conversation at [the SAC]?
3. What do you like about the Free Conversation sessions?
4. Before you come to a Free Conversation session, how do you feel? And after the session, how do you feel?
5. Since we started the Weekly Topics system last semester, have you noticed any changes in the Free Conversation sessions?
6. Can you tell me about any topics you remember and how you felt about them? (Were there any that you particularly liked or didn't like?)
7. Do the sessions feel different now compared to before we had the Weekly Topics system? If yes, how?
8. Does the Weekly Topics system make it easier or harder for you to join Free Conversation? Why?
9. Have you ever skipped a Free Conversation session because of a weekly topic? If so, why?
10. If you were asked for advice about future topics or activities at Free Conversation sessions, what would you say?
11. What do you think about students having the opportunity to choose the weekly topics?
12. Do you have any general comments about Free Conversation or Weekly Topics system?
13. Do you have any questions?