

# Plotting a New Course in Language Learner Development: Directions from the Literature on Self-Access Learning Center Management in Japan

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## What is a self-access learning center?

In order to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of what self-access learning centers (SALCs) are and their role within an educational institution, one must first examine some conceptual assumptions that underpin them. The most prominent of these is the notion of learner autonomy. Learner autonomy can be defined as “the capacity to take control over one’s own learning” (Benson, 2011, p. 2). One important clarification that must be made early in this paper is regarding the incorrect assumption that learner autonomy is analogous to “learning in isolation” or “independent learning.” Although an autonomous learner may indeed wish to engage in independent study, there is widespread recognition of the value of autonomy development through social interaction/dialogue and interdependent agency (learners relying on each other and developing through social bonds). This parallels Block’s (2003) discussion of the “social turn” in applied linguistics research and established sociocultural, ecological, and social constructivist perspectives on learning in a broader sense (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; van Lier, 2004).

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Furthermore, a growing number of studies are also exploring the interplay between autonomy, language learning motivation (Ushioda, 2011), and learner identity construction (Huang & Benson, 2013). Put simply, learners bring with them their own sense of who they are and who they do or do not want to become. The purpose of an autonomy-supportive environment is to provide them with support and opportunities to interact with tools/people so that they may exercise control over their own identity (and skill) development.

With this in mind, a SALC is a “person-centered social learning environment that actively promote[s] language learner autonomy both within and outside of the space” (Mynard, 2016b, cited in Mynard, 2019, p. 186). This means that the role of a SALC is to promote learner autonomy in a more general sense so that it can manifest itself anywhere a student engages in language learning, be it a classroom, outside spaces, or online environments (Mynard, 2019). Since their early inceptions during the 1970s, SALCs have spread throughout the globe and have evolved in line with developments in SLA research and general educational theory. In many cases, SALCs have developed from being simple repositories for learning resources (“language labs”) to spaces with both face-to-face and online components that embrace social learning and individualized support via learner advising (Thornton, 2021). Within Japanese tertiary education, recognition of the role and value of SALCs has been steadily increasing, with a number of prominent institutions such as Akita International University, Chiba University, Kanda University of International Studies, Kindai University, Osaka University, and Saitama University developing self-access learning facilities (JASAL, 2021; Mehran, Alizadeh, Koguchi, & Takemura, 2016). Mynard (2019) asserts that this recognition of and

investment in SALCs in Japanese universities stems from three main considerations:

1. SALC facilities as a means of attracting new student enrollments in the face of a declining birthrate. SALC facilities represent an innovative and welcoming learning environment that may keep an institution “ahead of the competition” (p. 190)
2. SALCs help to address the current push within Japan for practical English skills. Japan’s relatively poor performance in global measures of English proficiency as well as the Ministry of Education’s push for the development of “active learning” have shaped the policies of many institutions. Establishing a SALC is seen as one means of promoting “active learning” and helping students to become more employable upon graduation.
3. More institutions are acknowledging that learners require additional support and increased opportunities for L2 use outside of classroom contact hours.

The Language Commons (hereafter LC), a SALC at Daigyoji Campus at Hakuoh University, has recently reopened following a number of setbacks, including typhoon damage in 2019 and the effects of the current COVID pandemic. This brief review of literature on SALC management aims to increase awareness of the potential role of the LC within Hakuoh and illustrate some practical considerations as we strive to create a positive environment for our students’ development in the years to come.

## **Principles and mission statement**

Lucy Cooker, one of the pioneers of self-access in Japan, established the SALC at Kanda University of International Studies in 2001. Over the last two decades, the SALC at Kanda has gradually become one of the foremost self-access facilities in the world with over 1,000 students using the SALC each day (Chen & Mynard, 2018) and a number of high-profile research projects emerging from the team there (Shelton-Strong, 2020; Morrison & Navarro, 2012; Mynard et al, 2020a). Cooker (2010) determined four “self-access principles” that she argued must ideally underpin the running of a SALC.

1. A SALC should be “truly self-access” in that users should attend the facilities voluntarily rather than it being made a mandatory requirement.
2. Students should take an active role in the running of the SALC. This is achieved by recruiting and empowering student staff by giving them leadership roles and decision-making opportunities.
3. Language learning should be enjoyable and the SALC should attract learners by providing fun learning materials and genuine opportunities for making friends. A SALC should highlight how language learning is not tied to the classroom and ways in which it can actually be stimulating and fun.
4. The learning environment of a SALC should be “different” from a classroom or a library. This can be achieved through an “English only” language policy or through attractive and comfortable decoration/ furnishings/ layout.

An additional element that has been claimed to aid in the

establishment and evaluation of an effective SALC is a coherent mission statement (Datwani-Choy, 2016; Mynard, 2016). The mission statement from the SALC at Ryutsu Keizai University in Ibaraki Prefecture is “to provide a supportive environment for self-directed learning, support students in taking charge of their own learning, and promote learner autonomy in the university community” (Werner & Von Joo, 2018, p. 117). When analyzing the SALC facilities at The University of Hong Kong, Datwani-Choy (2016) found that the lack of a mission statement led to confusion in the overall running of the space and how it was perceived by both users and institutional stakeholders. Mynard (2016) also foregrounds the importance of a mission statement in evaluating the efficacy of a SALC as it can be regularly reassessed and updated by both full-time and student staff on a yearly basis so as to “ensure that the SALC directions focus on core values and services” (p. 428).

### **Push or pull?**

Cooker’s (2010) first “self-access principle” states that SALC attendance should be voluntary rather than required. Congruent with this assertion, within the SALCs investigated in Adamson, Brown, and Fujimoto-Adamson (2012), Bibby, Jolley, and Shiobara (2016), and Cladis, Eades, Tachibana, and Worth (2020), it was discovered that when SALC attendance was made compulsory, the results were counterproductive. Although in a superficial sense attendance numbers were high, the researchers found that students came to equate the SALC to a form of homework. This meant that student participation took on a more passive nature and ceased as soon as the attendance requirements were satisfied. Barrs (2010) states that while forcing students to attend a SALC may indeed do more harm than good, it is also important for an institution

to highlight to students the links that exist between what they do in the classroom and what the SALC offers. Furthermore, he claims that providing students with a comprehensive and compulsory orientation to the SALC is vital as this removes barriers to participation that may simply arise from a lack of information and support. By providing adequate SALC orientation, we demystify the unknown for students - many of whom are unlikely to have used a SALC before - and provide them with all the information required for them to make a reasoned decision on whether they wish to make use of the facilities or not. Furthermore, in a broader institutional sense, Barrs (2010) argues that without an established orientation procedure in place, the SALC may be implicitly framed as unintegrated into the fabric of the university - a mere “add-on” to the “real” learning that takes place in the classroom.

Although it can be confidently stated that voluntary and active participation is the desired state for any SALC facilities, some centers have adopted a hybrid approach combining a “push” approach that uses mandatory requirements to start students utilizing SALC services and a “pull” approach involving enjoyable social events that attract them back voluntarily to the space. One such strategy was reported by Croker and Ashurova (2012), who set students communicative assignments as classwork that needed to be completed in the SALC. The rationale behind this “push-pull” approach was partly influenced by the difficulties that first-year university students may experience adapting to not only an English-dominant environment, but also the freedom that the autonomy-grounded environment of the SALC provides. During junior high and high school, students often experience education based on studying English as an academic subject (*eigo*) in a manner that is primarily teacher-led and

classroom-centered rather than using it as a communicative tool (*eikaiwa*) (Nagatomo, 2016). Therefore, exposure to a starkly different educational approach in a SALC can seem “foreign” and daunting to these learners at first (Jones, 1995). The “push” tasks implemented by Croker and Ashurova were designed to encourage them to take the first step and enter the SALC and demystify what went on in the space. From there, “pull” activities such as free chat sessions, guest speakers, and movie clubs were used to help these new attendees to relax, feel a sense of belonging, and start to attend the space more regularly. Rose and Elliot (2010) also reported that “push” activities directing learners towards initial SALC use may indeed be beneficial. This, however, came with the caveat that once learners have “broken the ice” and become accustomed to using the SALC, an autonomy-supportive voluntary approach to attendance should once again be paramount.

## **Staffing**

Related in part to Cooker’s (2010) second principle (students taking an active role in SALC management) is the practical issue of who will be in charge of the day-to-day running of the facilities. Bibby et al. (2016) described how student staff were effective in managing a free conversation area in their SALC as they were closer to the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) of new attendees and therefore well-positioned to scaffold their target language use. In a similar way, student guest speakers in Croker and Ashurova’s (2012) SALC acted as near-peer role models (Murphey, 1998) and potential plausible future ideal L2 selves (Dörnyei, 2014) that could motivate and guide younger learners. Heigham (2011) reported a similar phenomenon in interviews with student SALC staff members who indicated that other more senior student staff socialized

them into the SALC community and represented a motivating influence in their own language learning.

*“First, I like to go to SAC. I have been there many times. SAC is a good place to study English and meet new people. That’s why I went there a lot of times. Second, I want more chances to use English. I stayed in Edinburgh for 6 months. I used English everyday but I don’t have enough time to use English in Japan because there is [sic] few classes which I can speak and listen to English, so I want to be a PA and use English in SAC. Moreover, I respect my seniors who are PAs. I remember the first impression of them. They are amazing! I’ve got a kind of shock. They speak English very well and they give me some advices [sic] as seniors about study abroad, studying English and so on. I would like to do the same things for undergraduates. It could be good for them and me.”*

(Heigham, 2011, pp. 82-83)

Data from Datwani-Choy’s (2016) SALC in Hong Kong echoes these findings as it was found that a peer tutoring system was evaluated by SALC users most highly out of all of the services offered. Noguchi (2015) also provides examples of how student staff within a Japan-based university SALC came to form their own community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Noguchi reports how by interacting and working towards common goals and using English within a supportive and egalitarian environment, student staff members exhibited an increased willingness-to-communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998) in the target language. These findings were also contrasted with the staff members’ WTC in their language classrooms which was found to be markedly lower due to issues such as language anxiety, peer pressure, and fear of making



mistakes.

In the case of teaching staff, Bibby et al. (2016) recommended that teachers or full-time SALC staff should focus their efforts on creating a friendly and welcoming environment for SALC users. This also means that any part-time or trainee staff working in the space should be familiarized with the SALC mission statement and encouraged to focus more on developing students' confidence and fluency rather than attempting to constantly correct lexico-grammatical errors. A SALC, according to Bibby et al., should be seen as complementary to formal classroom instruction, and making the need for accessibility and confidence building clear to any staff is an important step.

### **Affective issues and social affordances**

As previously discussed, entering a SALC is a considerable transition for new students, arguably comparable to studying abroad in terms of educational culture (compared with secondary education), and neophyte attendees are often extremely intimidated (Bibby et al., 2016; Croker & Ashurova, 2012; Murray & Fujishima, 2016; Mynard et al., 2020). Below is a brief student account of his first experience attempting to join the English Cafe, part of a SALC at Okayama University.

*“I remember the first time I tried to join the English Café. I walked toward the place by myself and looked inside through the glass doors. There were a few foreign and Japanese students. They were sitting at a round table and talking to each other. I suddenly got a little scared about whether it was appropriate to join them. I thought I didn't have English skills good enough to talk to them. Then I decided to come over again at another time and*

*walked away on that day too. After that I did the same thing a couple of times  
- I went in front of the entrance of the English Café but turned back.”*

(Kuwada, 2016, pp. 120-121)

It is therefore crucial for both full-time and student staff to scaffold and support legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) for newcomers. This allows students of differing language proficiency and confidence levels to participate in a safe and non-face threatening way. The communicative “push” activities advocated by Croker and Ashurova (2012) aimed to scaffold new students’ experiences in the SALC and acclimatize them to the culture of the space. They were practiced first in class in order to increase students’ sense of self-efficacy before they tried them out in the SALC. In addition, they held a special “Beginner’s Paradise” session in the free conversation area for lower proficiency/confidence learners. Materials like jigsaw puzzles, Scrabble, Jenga, and Kahoot! can offer new students a “way in” to participating in the space from which they can build up to active conversation (Cladis et al., 2020). Having a set of pre-prepared conversation topics or a predetermined theme that new students can prepare for before they arrive can also assist with the initial acclimatization process. Mynard et al. (2020b) also emphasize the importance of the role of SALC or teaching staff in socializing students in an English-dominant SALC environment. Their ethnographic study of an English social learning space within a university SALC revealed that both social and target language anxiety were among the greatest obstacles preventing student participation. Consequently, they recommend a number of ways that staff could mitigate these negative affective factors such as proactively inviting students to join conversations, using props or games to facilitate discussions, and giving more wait time for students to formulate their ideas in English.

Just as the predominant role of SALCs has evolved from being a repository for learning materials/ technology to becoming driven by social learning (Murray & Fujishima, 2016; Mynard, 2019; Thornton, 2021), research has shown that the social affordances of a SALC may be crucial for continued student attendance. In their study of a university SALC, Hughes, Krug, & Vye (2012) identified that while learning resources may have initially brought students to the SALC, it was the social affordances and connections they had made in the space that motivated their continued usage of the facilities. Additionally, while students first came to the SALC with a “self-oriented view” of the SALC (p. 177) where they viewed it simply as a venue to develop their own L2 linguistic proficiency, this changed over time with continued attendance attributed to social factors such as spending time with friends and networking with knowledgeable peers. The importance of social relations in SALC attendance and language learning motivation more broadly was illustrated in this excerpt from a user of Okayama University’s English Café:

*“Through talking with people at the English Café, I was always able to find something new about English, which helped me to maintain my motivation. There were times I felt down when I realized how bad my English was. There were also times I felt happy when I was able to use sentences in real conversations that I learned in class or from movies.”*

(Kuwada, 2016, p. 122)

SALCs, therefore, can be viewed not only as a site for target language practice and accessing learning resources, but also as an important venue for building social networks and receiving emotional or motivational support from both staff and peers.

## **Layout and environment**

Based on the existing research on SALC layout, there appear to be a number of principles that are relatively consistent. The first of these is the need for both areas for individual and group access (Cooker & Torpey, 2004). In the case of the first SALC at Kanda University of International Studies, individual access areas included listening stations, a reading area, and PCs for writing practice. Group access areas came in the form of an area for English conversation and general socializing and multi-purpose rooms for group work.

Edlin (2016) highlights other considerations for SALC layout and design based on implications from the broader field of learning environment design. Grounded in educational psychology research, he asserts that SALC managers or designers would benefit from creating a safe and comfortable learning environment with soft furnishings and warm lighting that would in turn encourage attendees to relax, lower their inhibitions, and thus increase their likelihood of risk-taking (productive target language use). Not only the design, but also the layout of furniture within a SALC has also been shown to have a marked effect on group dynamics and the way in which new attendees regard a particular area or community. Chen and Mynard (2018) describe how collaborative action between students and staff within a university SALC led to the management rearranging furniture in one English conversation space in order to lower psychological obstacles for freshmen students wishing to join the area.

An attractive and welcoming atmosphere not only encourages new attendees to visit the space, it can also contribute to the quality of learning that goes on within it. Drawing upon the neuroscientific concept of

myelination (the strengthening of neural pathways through repeated use), Edlin (2016) proposes that repeated practice is an essential element of linguistic development. Consequently, if a SALC represents a comfortable environment where risks can be taken safely, its users are more likely to engage in the regular target language use required for improvement. A further design measure that Edlin and Imamura (2018) advocate is the integration of clear signage within a SALC so as to reduce the non-learning focused cognitive load that attendees experience, thus allowing them to concentrate their cognitive resources primarily on the desired learning behaviors.

A final consideration relating to SALC design is the escapism that a pseudo-foreign space may afford and the implications of this on student attendance and use. In their study of a free conversation area within a university SALC, Mynard et al. (2020a) reported that many students viewed the space as a surrogate study abroad experience. In this environment, several learners became motivated to experiment with new international identities and proactively engage in target language use. This excerpt from Gillies (2010) highlights how the presence of exchange students, foreign teachers, and internationally themed decoration can contribute to a motivating environment for SALC attendees:

*“Compared with other places in the university, like other buildings, [foreign] teachers get together in [the SALC], so if I am in [the SALC] I am surrounded by [foreign] teachers, so I feel I’m in English speaking countries.. and also some TV programs in English are broadcasted. [Because of this the SALC] motivate me to study English more....the reason why I choose this university for studying is...I have a chance to study and to speak English and*

*to communicate with English speaking- English people in person...so even I am in school in Japan I feel I am in English speaking countries like...feel like.....like I am studying overseas...even I'm in Japan."*

(Gillies, 2010, p. 199)

In summary, principled SALC design can cater to learners with a wide range of different learning preferences, attract new attendees into the space by mitigating anxiety or other psychological barriers, and create conditions for productive skill building and sustaining motivation for language learners of all levels.

### **Plotting the future course for the LC**

Despite the aforementioned setbacks the LC at Daigyoji Campus has experienced over the past two years, there is much to be excited about in terms of the future potential of the SALC facilities here. One of the priority action items for the LC at this stage is to create a coherent mission statement that can be utilized for coordinating future plans for the area as well as providing criteria for continuous and systematic evaluation of progress. Based on recommendations from Bibby et al. (2016), promotion of the Language Commons and the events taking place there has been a priority in our action plan at Daigyoji Campus. In Bibby et al's study, it was reported that two main issues that constrained the growth of their facility were a lack of promotion and insufficient staffing. The researchers found that many students were unaware even of the location of the SALC on campus. This led them to engage in more proactive marketing of the facilities towards both students and staff, which contributed to a 69% increase in student attendance over a one-year period. Due to the two-year period of relative inactivity at the LC, the need for promotion of

the facilities is arguably even more vital as the majority of freshman and sophomore students are likely to be unaware of the facilities and the role they can play in their ongoing development. Consequently, a campus-wide advertising campaign of various events has begun where students have been offered opportunities to engage in free-conversation practice with teachers, consultations on classwork, as well as workshops on debate, educational technology, and pronunciation. There are also steps being taken to redecorate the LC so as to create a more international feel to the space.

As the LC moves forward, there are also plans to introduce more student-oriented events such as student learning communities (making teaching materials, English discussions) and Hakuoh alumni acting as guest speakers. To address issues of staffing and student SALC ownership, steps are being taken to implement a student-staff training/internship system where students can introduce newcomers to the materials/facilities available and socialize their peers into the LC community. Additionally, the layout of the space is being analyzed so as to provide distinct areas for individual and group access as well as integrating comfortable furnishings that will promote a warm and welcoming atmosphere that students will want to spend time in. Furthermore, in order to ensure the LC can better serve student needs, several staff members have distributed a needs analysis survey to English majors to obtain feedback on the type of events that are likely to be valuable and popular in the coming months. Through these broader student surveys and regular collaboration with student staff members, it is hoped that this will serve as an ongoing dialogue that will maintain relevance and interest in the LC among the student body. It is also vital that a dialogue takes place between the LC and teaching and administrative staff. It is important to ensure that the LC facilities

and activities do not burden, but rather support and even enhance the working conditions of colleagues. It is hoped that through continued, open discussions with all stakeholders, the LC could open up its facilities and services to all areas of the university and achieve greater integration into the fabric of the institution.

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