Advising Practices: A Survey of Self-Access Learner Motivations and Preferences

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Abstract

Based on queries from students who frequently visit the English Resource Center (ERC) at Saitama University, this research team set out to examine what motivational factors encourage ERC attendees to participate for an extended period of time in the Center on a regular basis. Initial indications are that social collaborative learning amongst peers at the Center is the most significant long-term motivational factor for students to become involved with learning English in the ERC. More specifically, this study explores factors that encourage these learners to become regular and perhaps more autonomous center participants in terms of advising practices such as (a) what factors led students to their initial discovery of ERC, (b) what inspired that very first visit, (c) what encouraged learners to continue to attend the Center on a regular basis, (d) what attendees value about the ERC, and finally (e) what might be done to ensure that greater support is provided for students who come to the ERC for the first time.

Keywords: advising, autonomy, language learning, motivation, networking, preferences, self-access center, socialization

Background of the Study

The English Resource Center (ERC) is an English self-access center for the university-wide community located at the Center for English Education and Development (CEED) at Saitama University, open during weekdays between the hours of 15:00 - 17:00. The energy-smart design of the ERC with greenery, visible from the hallway, has a sizable collection of DVDs, graded readers, language resources and books for attendees to borrow, and it provides a more informal English learning environment where countless authentic social interactions occur between the center attendees. The space comfortably accommodates 25-30 learners at a time and although attendees ask about individual learning concerns to the advisors or simply come to borrow resources, nevertheless, peer socialization seems to be a prominent feature of the center that encourages a wider variety of patterns of L2 interaction that the attendees would otherwise

not have access to. Consequently, in this study, the four advisors elicited responses from regular ERC attendees to find out more about what factors motivate these students to become regular center participants, how they first discovered the ERC, what happened during their very first visit, what they value about the center, and what improvements can be made. It is our belief that by knowing more precise information about the attendees' perceptions, ERC student peers and the advisors together can more readily facilitate support for current and future attendees in our rapidly expanding center

Connections Between Autonomy and Socially Situated Learning Environments

The goal of the ERC advisors is to facilitate language learning and support the needs of our student population, which may not always be related to English, and to provide support for their educational and personal development as the learners themselves see fit. Furthermore, the physical and structural design of the ERC supports a socially situated environment (see Hughes, Vye, & Krug, 2011; Krug, Wurzinger, Hughes, & Vye, 2011). This philosophy indicates that we facilitate learner autonomy, yet this research team does not label what kind of autonomy is fostered. The reason is because there is some emphasis on the ERC attendees' individual language needs, which requires some aspects of personal or individual autonomy, yet all participants (the students and the advisors alike) share the space while collaborating in a social learning environment. Therefore, labeling a certain type of autonomy here does not serve a purpose (also see Vye, Barfield, & Athanasiou, 2010), rather we simply facilitate autonomy. Additionally, reviews of autonomous language learning often cite Holec's (1981, p. 3) definition. Instead of following suit in this review, we feel Thornbury (2011), summarizes the sentiments of Japan-based teachers who provide practical autonomous solutions with their learners in contexts not unlike our own, precisely:

> *Autonomy, then, is less than a matter of the individual taking charge of his or her own learning (in Holec's much cited formulation), although this may well be the long-term objective. Rather it is the capacity of the group to take charge of its own learning, the group being, "the people in the room," which of course, includes the teacher.* (p. 264)

The "people in the room" in a language learning environment, much like "the people in room of the ERC," then are the teachers/advisors and peers/students who interact with each other in a multitude of ways. In Ushioda's (2007) study of learners and teachers, conditions that facilitate autonomy occur when elements of challenge exist in the learning process and provide a situation which is personally meaningful to the learners. Only then can they internalize their socially constructed goals to feel the motivation for learning a language emanating within themselves as agents of their own regulation. Some theorists argue that there is a distinction between agency and autonomy in socially situated learning, however Benson (2011) argues that this trend is a moot point because both terms are socially mediated and obliged. In another book of autonomy studies, with some based in Japan (Barfield & Brown, 2007), Toohey (2007) asserts that these researchers and their language learners are working in a multitude of ways where in most cases the facilitation of autonomy does not stress individualism, but rather moves toward the equalization of possibilities for social agency with the learners to engage actively in learning with others (Goffman, 1974), which in this context involves "the people in the room of the ERC."

Concerning self-access centers (SACs) in Japan, in the past 10 years, there has been an increase in fostering of motivation, learner autonomy, and self-directed learning in out-of-class settings in universities. The membership of the Japan Association of Self-access Learning (JASAL) has increased in size as more SACs have been established in universities throughout the country. Several studies that focus on surveying the needs of the learners who use or potentially might use SACs have emerged in the Japanese tertiary context, which are particularly useful to the ERC in terms of focusing on the learners' needs and requests. Gilles's (2007; 2010) research suggests that an institution's SAC appeals to intrinsically motivated students who are most often at a higher proficiency of English than the general student population, while students who were more dependent on teachers in the classroom were more hesitant to use the SAC. His conclusion was that plans should be made to help make the SAC more accessible and appealing to a larger student body and calls for stronger links of support for courses taught in English with the SAC. In another study (Johnson & Morikawa, 2011), a large-scale survey was conducted to assess students' need for justification to establish an SAC. They found more awareness was needed about how SACs could support the students' English education because just five of the 236 students stated that they had used a SAC previously. Lastly, Heigham's (2011) study was of

much interest to us as our advisor faculty is spread rather thinly with a larger attendee population than in previous years. Heigham found the need in a rapidly growing SAC for peer advisors to take charge of the center, facilitate peer learning with center attendees and take control over the development of their own English at the same time. This represented a win-win solution in terms of learner development and the enhancement of support for the center.

The Context of the Study

The following section details the data-gathering procedure of the study, the structure of the questionnaire given to regular attendees of the ERC (the participants of the study). These methods were utilized in order to establish what motivates attendees to come to the ERC, how they might participate during their stay—the most common factor conceivably being social in nature—and what suggestions the participants have to make this ever-growing center better serve their needs.

The data-gathering procedure

In order to look more closely at students' reasons for becoming (regularly) involved with the ERC—and the networks or bonds created between attendees—a short ten-point questionnaire was designed and administered to attendees. To conserve space, the questionnaire is shown in a condensed, summarized form in this paper (see Appendix A). As can be seen, the questionnaire was largely opened-ended in nature in order to allow attendees to provide freer, more detailed perceptions, ideas, and beliefs—allowing for unpredicted information to emerge from the data, rather than using a closed (and, hence, more restricted) questioning format (Burns, 1999).

Requiring approximately fifteen minutes to complete, the questionnaire was made available to respondents between October 12, 2010 and November 29, 2011—which is the period during which electronic records of ERC attendance were kept and continuing through to completion of the data-gathering process of this investigation. For reasons of convenience and practicality, SurveyMonkey (2011) <http://www.surveymonkey.com> was chosen as the primary means of distributing the questionnaire. It was made available to students on two computers within the ERC (during ordinary operational hours), and it was also distributed to attendees via email.

For this study, it was particularly important that responses were sought from experienced ERC attendees. The research team, therefore, decided to focus on those most familiar with all aspects of the Center. Compared to newer attendees, experienced ERC-goers should be more knowledgeable about what happens in the ERC space, they ought to know more clearly about what they want from this space, and they should be able to provide more complete responses to the questionnaire (especially those questionnaire items seeking information concerned with the formation of interpersonal networks). On the other hand, the research team felt that newer attendees (i.e., those less familiar with the daily operation of the ERC space and the activities that take place there) might provide skewed or biased responses unintentionally through feeling pressure to give overly positive responses—thus avoiding potentially helpful criticism or feedback for the present study. As a result, it must be noted here that respondents were approached by the research team and asked if they would be willing to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire was, thus, distributed in a non-random manner.

Structure of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was constructed in such a fashion that clusters of questions target specific information. Item 1 calls for respondents to identify themselves through the provision of student identification numbers. Although somewhat of a contentious issue, the research team decided that the gathering of attendee identification data throughout the questionnaire was essential for this study—in other words, identification data would provide the research team with a reliable means of mapping attendee networks network (by, for example, permitting the authors to match ID numbers with names that respondents list in Items 6 and 7 a little further on in the questionnaire). Items 2-4 elicit information concerning attendees' first visit to the ERC. Items 5-7 go on to examine reasons or motives for sustained visitations and the networks established among attendees during this time. Specifically with reference to Items 6 and 7, data collected through these questionnaire items could add support for or against the hypothesis that socialization is the main long-term motivation for students to attend the ERC. Items 8 and 9 seek to explore those advising practices that students engage in and find beneficial. The final item, Item 10, calls for suggestions for improvement of the ERC space from the participants' perspective.

The participants

A total of 30 ERC attendees participated in this study. The 30 participants comprise but a fraction of the population of 409 students who have visited the ERC in the 154 days between October 12, 2010 and November 29, 2011.

It is important to note that the study participants attended the ERC much more frequently than the majority of the ERC population. Whereas the typical attendee visited the ERC an average of 5.85 times over the 154-day period (SD=11.42, Min=1, Max=95), those participating in this study attended an average of 22 times (SD=18.69, Min=3, Max=68).

Therefore, in the ensuing discussion, it is important for the reader to bear in mind that the findings of this study are reflective of this purposefully chosen sample, which consisted of the most motivated ERC users (in terms of their frequency of ERC usage). To a degree, the implications and conclusions drawn from the sample population can be extended to the greater ERC population. However, to provide more depth and to help create a more detailed picture of the factors that encourage learners to become regular, autonomous center participants, additional studies involving wider, randomly selected samples are called for in the future.

Results and Discussion

In the following section, we explore the results of the survey, investigating their implications with regard the reasons why students attend the ERC, the advising practices they value, and the practices they desire more of.

How respondents first found out about the ERC

A simple tallying of responses and counting of referrers named for Item 2 revealed that 11 (37%) of the respondents found out about the ERC on their own, whereas 19 (63%) were referred by someone else. Of those who were referred, eight were referred by teachers, while 11 were referred by peers.

Reasons for first visit versus reasons for continuing to visit

In this section, we contrast the types of reasons students gave for why they first visited (Item 3) and why they continue to visit (Item 5) employing two complementary approaches.

For our first approach, we subjectively determined how the responses could be meaningfully, yet concisely categorized, discovering that we could divide them into four different categories or orientations of motivation: (language) learning, social, resource and teacher-orientations. The following lists responses exemplifying each.

Learning: "Because I want to study abroad next year, so I had to study English very hard."

Social: "The members are so kind."

Resource: "Because I want to read English books."

Teacher: "Because an English teacher was telling the students about ERC and I thought it would be interesting."

Often a single response indicated more than one of these orientations, as demonstrated below:

"At first I simply wanted to practice speaking English, but later, I also wanted to have fun in the ERC." (Learning and Social)

"because it is fun to talk with someone, also i can borrow some books and DVDs." (Social and Resource)

However, no single response ever indicated all four orientations.

After, determining which categories of orientation applied to each response, we summed the number of times each orientation applied and calculated percentages for each response set. Figure 1 displays the results:
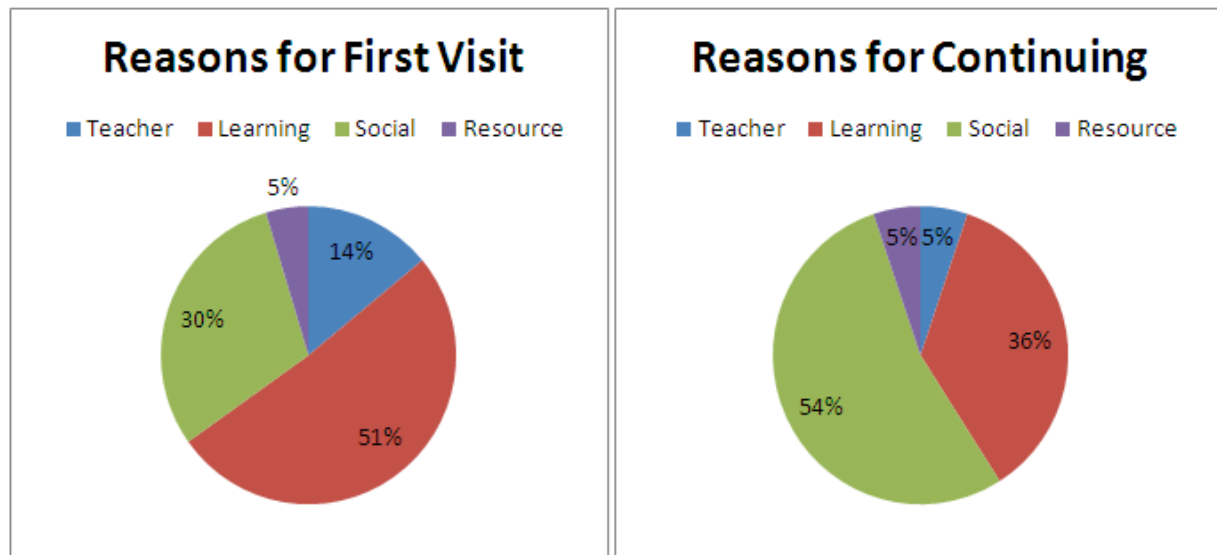
Figure 1. Reasons for first visit and for continuing to visit the ERC

A quick glance reveals a decrease in learning orientation (from 51 to 36 percent) and teacher orientation (from 14 to 5 percent) accompanied by an increase in social orientation from 30 to 54 percent. Thus, while motivation to learn the language served as main factor in bringing students to the ERC, the social aspect of the ERC appears to be the main motivation to continue attending.

For our second, arguably less subjective, method of analysis, we subtracted the frequencies of words occurring in Item 5 responses from the frequencies of the same words in Item 3 responses (combining words in the same family). We then extracted content words whose difference in frequency between the two sets was more than one standard deviation above or below the mean difference as demonstrative of the difference between the responses. Figure 2 displays the results:
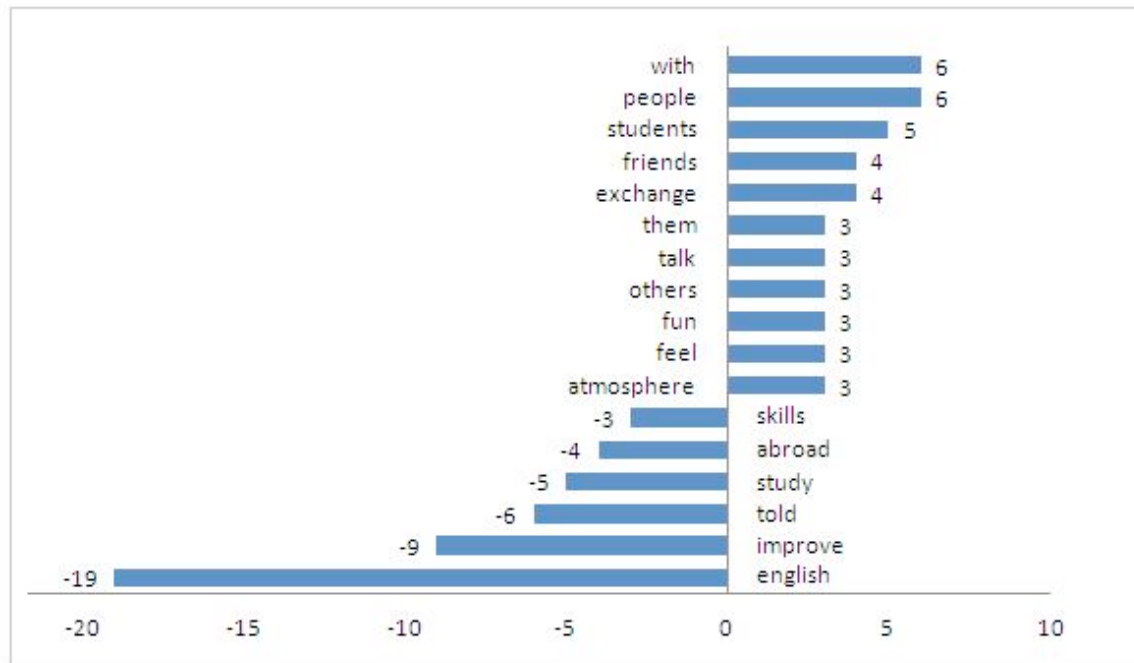
Figure 2. Item 5 response word frequencies minus item 3 response word frequencies

As shown, the words which increased in frequency (*with, people, students, friends, exchange, them, talk, others, fun, feel, atmosphere*) are of a social nature, whereas most of the words that decreased (*skills, abroad, study, improve, English*) suggest a learning orientation. Meanwhile the leftover decreased word, "told," hints at a teacher orientation. In fact, except for a single case, "told" was always used in conjunction with "teacher" or a teacher's name as in, "I was told to come here by [teacher A] and [teacher B]." Thus, the word frequency contrast reflects the same changes in motivation to visit the ERC that are indicated by the more subjective, initial analysis. Students began mostly with an intention to "learn," but continued visiting mainly to socialize with their peers.

Valued advising and peer-advising practices

This section analyzes the responses to Items 8 and 9 using the two contrast methods previously employed for Items 3 and 5. However, upon examining the responses, we found that all Item 9 responses referred to teachers and resource orientation, and in the composite of the two sets of responses, there was only one response that referred to resources. Thus, in place of

teacher and resource orientation, we realized a new category of orientation was necessary: (non-linguistic) content/knowledge orientation. The following lists examples of each of the categories used.

Learning: "teaching me correct English"

Social: "facilitating conversations between students"

Content/Knowledge: "giving me a lot of information about various topics I do not know so much."

As with before, no single response indicated all of categories together. Figure 3 displays a contrast between the resulting percentages of times each orientation applied to Item 8 responses versus Item 9 responses.
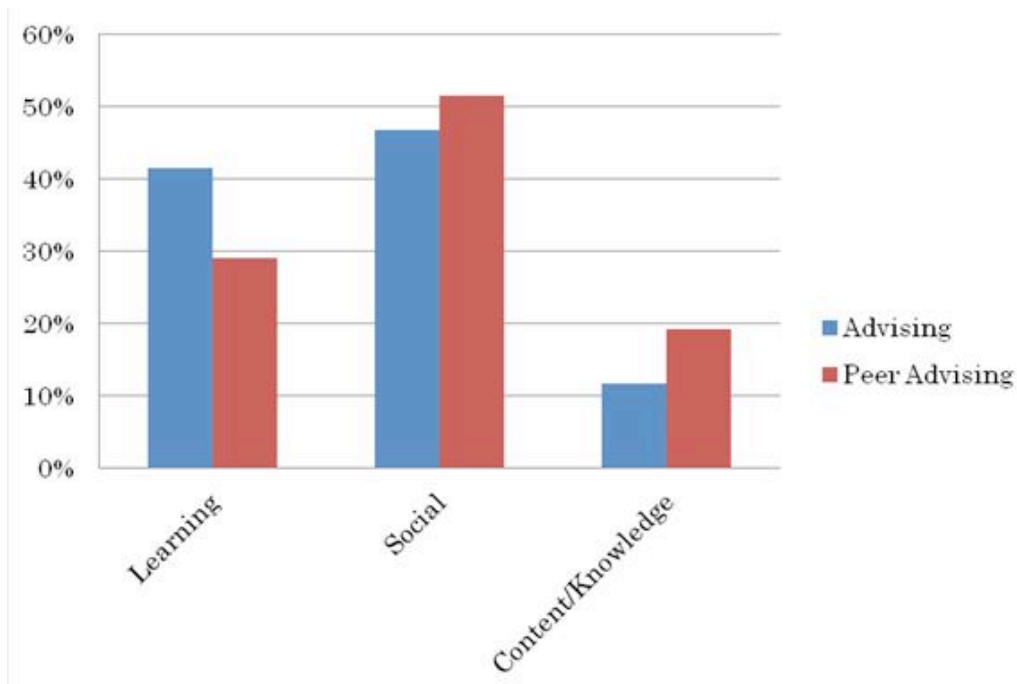

Figure 3. Orientations of valued advising versus peer-advising practices

As shown, socialization once again takes a lead role, with socially oriented behaviors comprising 47 percent of advising practices and 52 percent of peer-advising practices. Next, whereas 42 percent of advising practices were learning oriented, only 29 percent of peer advising were oriented toward learning. Finally, and interestingly, 19 percent of peer advising practices were oriented toward content/knowledge, while only 12 percent of advising practices took this orientation. Thus, not only do socially oriented practices account for the majority of advising practices that were valued enough to be recalled by respondents, peers also seem to do more to keep each other interested than advisors do. The word frequency contrast displayed in Figure 4 corroborates these findings. Item 8 responses showed a higher frequency of words suggesting that peers were known for engaging in more socially oriented advising practices (*friends, fun, listening, others, together, with, talking*) and content/knowledge oriented practices (*different, experience, ideas, new, know*), while engaging less in learning-oriented advising practices as shown by the relative absence of correcting, teaching, checking, and pronunciation compared to advisors' practices.
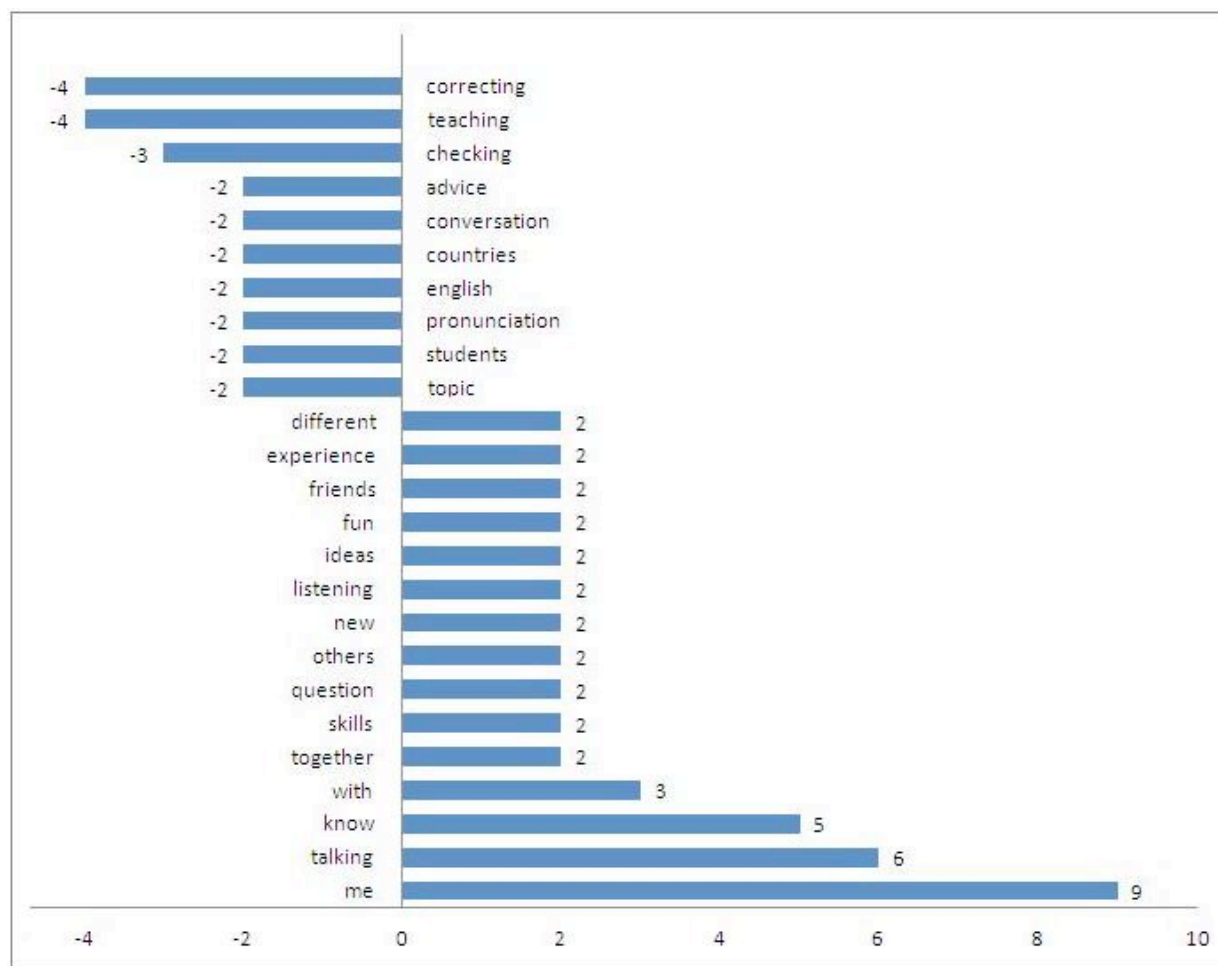
Figure 4. Item 8 response word frequencies minus item 9 response word frequencies

Sought-after advising practices

Through examining the responses to Items 10 and 4 this section investigates the kinds of advising and peer-advising practices students might benefit from having more of. The first step in this investigation involved two of the researchers classifying each suggestion given by respondents. Unlike the previous analyses, classification this time was relatively straightforward with each suggestion clearly fitting one classification more than any other. Table 1 displays information for classes of responses for which the number of responses was greater than three.

Table 1. Most frequent suggestions by study participants

Classification	Example Response	Number of Responses
Open Hours	"longer open hours"	12
Space	"bigger room"	8
Atmosphere	"more friendly atmosphere even if people don't have enough English speaking skills"	6
Advertising	"Advertising about the ERC. I suggest teachers should advertise about the Halloween party, for example."	4

Suggestions on open hours, space, and advertising were all expected, given the small size of the ERC, limited open hours, and current lack of publicity. However, the six suggestions for improving the atmosphere came as a surprise, after reading and analyzing responses to Item 5 such as:

"Good atmosphere is one of the reasons why I continue to come to the ERC. I can have very good time. I can make friends with a lot of people and talking with them is very fun!"

Also, of the four types of suggestions listed above, the atmosphere suggestions are the only ones that deal directly with advising practices *per se* (see Appendix B for the full list of suggestions). These suggestions indicated that respondents would like more advising practices oriented toward welcoming and encouraging attendees, especially newcomers who may not be confident in their language skills.

As "newcomers" are explicitly mentioned in the suggestions, we examined respondents' accounts of their own first visit to illuminate the reasons for the desire for a friendlier atmosphere.

We thus classified responses to Item 4 into those which indicated an uncomfortable first experience, a comfortable one, one which began as uncomfortable but became comfortable, and those which could not be classified (see Figure 5).
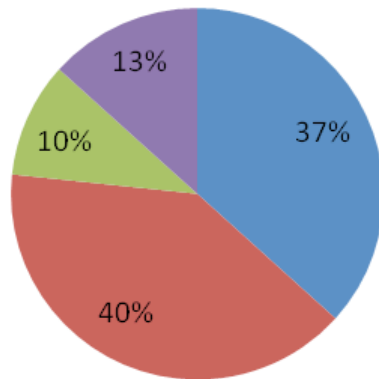

Figure 5. Comfort level during first visit to the ERC

As shown, the largest portion of respondents (40 percent) had an uncomfortable first visit. Meanwhile, a slightly smaller portion of respondents was comfortable (37 percent) and 13 percent of respondents did not mention how they felt during their first visit. Finally, 10 percent began their visit feeling uncomfortable, but over the course of their visit became comfortable. Although two of these students gave only general reasons for this transformation (the friendliness of other people in the ERC), one describes what happened specifically:

"I saw a lot of people in there. I couldn't talk with them at first, but one of them spoke to me. So, I could speak."

Further examination revealed two common elements that seemed to have contributed to respondents' discomfort: 1) the large number of people in the ERC at the time and 2) their feeling of being less proficient than other attendees. Of these two elements, the former was more common (eight responses versus two). We then investigated for a correlation between responses that mentioned the number of people and those which indicated an uncomfortable experience. A

weak but significant correlation of $r(28)=.33$, $p=.036$ emerged, indicating that newcomers may be more prone to having an uncomfortable first visit when the room is crowded, and therefore that advisors and peers should make greater efforts to help newcomers feel welcome when the ERC is busy.

Conclusion

This study set out to better ascertain what factors motivated attendees of the English Resource Center (ERC) at Saitama University, Japan, to become regular participants within the center. In doing so, this paper examined what led participants to their initial discovery of the ERC, what occurred during that initial visit, what the attendees value about the ERC, and, finally, what additional support could, or perhaps should, be provided to future first-time visitors.

Initially, the attendees took a self-oriented view of the role of the ERC (e.g., the reason students first came to the ERC was to improve individual language skills). However, the students continued to attend due to other- or peer-oriented factors such as socializing and networking. The most mentioned valued advising practices were also social in nature. Of the suggestions mentioned, providing more support for students who come to the ERC for the first time appeared as an outstanding element in need of improvement, especially during times when the center is crowded.

Our findings offer some practical implications for policy development both at our center as well as other centers with philosophies similar to ours, particularly those where attendance is voluntary. First, participants in our study were initially attracted to our SAC mainly because they believed it was a good place to learn English. Thus, centers looking to increase the number of their attendees may do well to publicize whatever evidence they possess indicating that they indeed offer an opportunity to effectively learn the language. Second, the majority of our participants were referred to our center by friends who were already attending, so SACs might find that the quickest and most efficient way to attract new attendees is to actively encourage current attendees to bring their friends. Most importantly though, our findings suggest that, more than publicity, materials, or language pedagogy *per se*, the key to fostering long-term motivation to attend seems to lie in nurturing the establishment of social bonds between attendees. The

question of how this may be more effectively accomplished is one we look forward to investigating in future studies.

Acknowledgements

About the contributors

Leander Hughes is an Assistant Professor at the Saitama University Center for English Education and Development. He is interested in quantitative language research methods and in applying findings in current social psychology to the language learning context. His other interests include computer assisted language learning, learner autonomy, and communicative task effectiveness.

Nathan Krug is an Assistant Professor in the Center for English Education and Development at Saitama University. He has research interests spanning the fields of conversation analysis, discourse analysis and CALL. Nathan is interested in language learning and second-language conversation within the computer-mediated environment.

Stacey Vye is an Assistant Professor at the Saitama University Center for English Education and Development (CEED) in Japan. Her research interests and publications include reflection, learner and teacher autonomy in language education including the connections between both processes.

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Appendices
Appendix A

Summary of the Questionnaire

1. Please enter your Student ID Number: _____

2. Who first told you about the ERC?
(a) No one. I discovered it by myself.
(b) I found out from a person named: _____

3. Why did you decide to try visiting the ERC the first time? Please explain in detail, giving names if applicable.
(One large text box was provided with ample space for a response.)

4. Please describe what you saw and felt when you first entered the ERC.
(One large text box was provided with ample space for a response.)

5. What made you decide to continue coming to the ERC (please give names if applicable)?
(One large text box was provided with ample space for a response.)

6. Presently, who do you know who attends the ERC (please list their full names)?
(Ten numbered text boxes were provided for the individual listing of names, plus an additional text box was provided for the purpose of grouping together other as-yet-unlisted names.)

7. Of the people listed above, who do you spend time with outside of the ERC (including on internet sites such as Facebook)?
(Ten numbered check boxes were provided, corresponding to the numbered text boxes in Item 6. An additional text box was provided for the purpose of indicating other as-yet-unmatched personal connections.)

8. How do other students in the ERC help you? Please list as many ways as you can think of.
(Ten text boxes were provided for the listing of individual advising practices, plus an additional text box was provided for the purpose of including other as-yet-unmentioned advising practices.)

9. How do teachers in the ERC help you? Please list as many ways as you can think of.
(Ten text boxes were provided for the listing of individual advising practices, plus an additional text box was provided for the purpose of including other as-yet-unmentioned advising practices.)

10. How can the ERC be improved? You can include suggestions about the room, teacher practices, equipment, materials, open hours…anything you want! Please list as many ideas as you can.

(Ten text boxes were provided for the listing of individual suggested improvements, plus an additional text box was provided for the purpose of including other as-yet-unmentioned suggested improvements.)

Appendix B

The Six Suggestions for Improving the ERC Atmosphere

"Make some board to indicate we are welcome."
"more friendly atmosphere even if people don't have enough English speaking skills"
"put a special care about newcomers"
"removing exclusiveness"
"The room is little bit difficult to enter, and everyone hesitate to enter this room first time."
"to speak to student more positively"