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Self-Access in Japan: Introduction

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Self-Access in Japan: Introduction

Jo Mynard, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

Welcome to issue 7(4) of *SiSAL Journal*, which is a special issue on Japan. It is my hope that future issues can be guest-edited special issues from other parts of the world, too. In this introduction, I will begin by commenting on some issues likely to arise in the Japanese context in the coming years along with some practical ways for us to respond. The ideas are based on plenary talks I gave this year in Mexico (see Benson, Chávez Sánchez, McLoughlin, Mynard, & Peña Clavel (2016) for a summary) and Japan (Mynard, 2016; also see Lin (2016) for a summary). I will then give a brief summary of each contribution to this special issue.

The History of Self-Access in Japan

Japan is a relative newcomer to the field of self-access, and although there are informal reports that some centres were established in schools and language academies as early as the 1980s, most university-based self-access learning centres (SALCs) did not start to appear until at least 2000. The Japan Association of Self-Access Learning (JASAL) provides a 'Language Learning Space Registry' service (<https://jasalorg.com/lis-registry/>) where 34 centres in Japan have so far entered details. The earliest SALCs on the registry are Soka University, Tokyo (1996), Nagoya University of Commerce and Business (1999), Kobe Shoin Women's University (2000), and Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba (2001). It would be fair to say that although the field of self-access is well established in other parts of the world, it is only beginning to attract mainstream interest in Japan. Membership of JASAL has grown from a membership of 25 when it was established in 2005 to its current membership of 255 (Yamashita, 2016). At the recent JASAL conference held in Kobe in December 2016, many of the participants were new to the field or gathering information that would help them to set up a new centre in a university or school in Japan.

Shifting Self-Access Environments

After enjoying several decades of relative stability, self-access environments are certainly starting to shift rapidly. Until now, SALCs have tended to be physical

locations or centres where students are able to find resources and support for their self-access language learning. Japanese SALCs have been influenced by SALCs in other parts of the world, especially Hong Kong, and many centres worldwide have looked more or less the same for decades. As I see it, three environmental shifts in particular will affect our field in Japan in the coming years. I will outline each of these shifts and then in the subsequent section outline three (among many) responses we can consider.

Shift 1: Learning environments

Traditionally, Japan has offered few opportunities for language learners to interact in the target language (TL) outside the classroom (SALCs are still relatively rare). The current shift is that language learners now have access to multiple online / digital environments in which to access the TL and communities of TL users (Benson, 2016), and this is challenging the nature of traditional self-access support and indeed language education in general. In Japan, one feature of a SALC is to provide an opportunity for TL practice, but if students no longer need to come to a physical centre to access TL resources or communities, is self-access still relevant?

Shift 2: Informal learning

Traditionally, support for language learning in Japan has mainly been available via a classroom environment. This might be at school, university or in one of the many ‘eikaiwas’ (private language academies). Informal learning via MOOCs, apps, and social learning tools is on the rise and it is now commonplace for people to study languages outside the structure of a traditional course or institution. One success story is Duolingo (<http://duolingo.com>), which 120,000,000 people worldwide are using to learn languages. It is likely that access to free learning tools will affect course enrolments, including for language courses, and this in turn may affect attendance at institutional SALCs.

Shift 3: Government and institutional guidelines

There is a realisation worldwide that in a rapidly shifting world it is not enough to teach students content knowledge, as the emphasis will be on constant learning and re-learning throughout their lives. It is important that they have the skills to be able to know *how to learn*. In Europe, governments are emphasising ‘21st Century Skills’ which include the higher-order skills needed for deeper learning. In Japan, the government is emphasising ‘Active Learning’ through the entire education system, a term I interpret to mean lifelong and autonomous learning. Those of us

working in self-access have been actively focussing on promoting autonomous lifelong learning for years, but now we have to be aware that classroom-based educators will *all* be asked to promote it. This is obviously good news for learners and the field of language teaching in general, but what will happen to self-access professionals when we no longer have this ‘special’ role alongside content or language educators?

Responses

Clearly, we as SALC professionals need to respond to these shifts if the field is to continue to not just survive but thrive and grow. There are many ways in which we can respond, but in this introduction I will focus on three key ways; in short I will argue that there is a place for a physical SALC as long as we ensure that they are social hubs where students naturally come for emotional and learning support.

Response 1: Focus on social dimensions of learning

One important starting point is to focus on why learners come to a centre. This might vary from SALC to SALC so it is important for SALC staff to conduct their own research. In the case of my own SALC at Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, we know from surveys and other research that social factors play a significant role. This is echoed in researched published by other colleagues in Japan. For example, Hughes, Krug, & Vye (2012) investigated reasons why learners came to their SALC in Saitama, Japan and why regular users continued to come. They found that students initially came for a variety of reasons, but the regular users continued to come for social reasons: “social collaborative learning amongst peers at the Center is the most significant long-term motivational factor for students to become involved with learning English” (p. 163). Murray and Fujishima (2013; 2016) suggest that informal social interaction in their L-Café at Okayama University, Japan is the most important factor for the success of their SALC, where people are the main resources and reciprocal learning opportunities exist for everyone.

Benson (2016) makes the case that learners need self-access more than they need a traditional classroom and, taking an ecological perspective, argued that a SALC is one of many learning environments available to a learner.

Doffs and Hobbs (2011, citing Ushioda, 2011) write that “...the key to enabling students’ own motivation to grow and develop seems to lie in orchestrating the social learning environment in such a way that students want to learn” (p. 26), but how can we create the kinds of social environments that appeal to our learners?

Again, this will vary from SALC to SALC, and it is important to gather input, insights and involvement from the users themselves, but many successful SALCs have focussed on the following:

- Events and social activities held in the SALC
- Self-access tasks involving a social element
- Awareness-raising that social factors play a role in language learning
- Laying out the centre in ways which promote social interaction
- Initiating, supporting and promoting learning communities
- Employing student staff and/or encouraging students to volunteer

Response 2: Focus on affective factors

Affective factors include moods, feelings, emotions, preferences, beliefs and attitudes, and these clearly affect language learning. Traditionally, we viewed the emotional and cognitive sides of learning as separate, but we now know from research in psychology and neuroscience that cognition and affect are bidirectional; for example, negative affective states influence learning and performance (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). We also know from work in distance learning, for example in the UK, that in non-classroom learning environments, there is a need “to focus on positive emotions and attitudes and build in strategies in the materials that can help students to maintain a positive outlook” (Hurd, 2008, p. 232). Dealing with learners’ emotions and feelings presents a challenge for those of us working in the field of self-access “with a background based more on pedagogy than on psychology” (Tassinari & Ciekanski, 2013, p. 263). One way we might help our learners to manage their emotional states in order to benefit their language learning is to explicitly teach them some meta-affective strategies (Oxford, 2011). For example:

- How to control emotions
 - understanding one’s emotional responses
 - reflection-in-action
 - mindfulness and presence
- How to generate and maintain motivation
 - positive self-talk
 - rewards
 - enhancing interest in a task

Such strategies can be taught in class, in SALC workshops, in advising sessions or they can be embedded into SALC tasks and worksheets. Affective strategies and support are needed for all kinds of learning situations and new environments for learners to persist and be successful lifelong language learners. SALC staff have a significant role to play in offering this affective support as it may not be available elsewhere.

Response 3: Promoting learner autonomy

As learners now have access to multiple learning environments, opportunities to interact with TL users, and multiple tools for language learning, it is more important than ever to ensure that learners know how to make the most of the opportunities. Another way of phrasing this is as the need to develop learners' "inner resources for environmental interaction" and to learn how to "interact more autonomously with the affordances in their environments" (Benson, 2016). Some ways of promoting these inner resources might be promoting the following through our advising and teaching:

- Ongoing reflection
- Personal goal-setting
- An awareness of strategies, resources and environments
- Evaluation of learning
- Ways to keep motivated

In addition, we have a role to play in helping colleagues to develop an awareness of how this can be done. In addition, we need to redefine the roles of SALCs and classrooms in our institutions and consider how they might overlap or intersect to best support learners.

In summary, environments are shifting, more learning opportunities are available, and all educators are being asked to promote learner autonomy. To respond we need to make sure our SALCs are social hubs where students naturally come for social, emotional, and learning support.

Special Issue on Japan

In this special issue we can see how colleagues are responding to challenges in different institutions around Japan. The special issue contains three general papers, one book review and one conference summary edited by Hisako Yamashita, as well

as three papers that form the seventh and final part of the language learning spaces column edited by Katherine Thornton.

General papers

The first paper was contributed by Simon Cooke, who is based at Tohoku Institute of Technology. The author takes the language classroom as the context in which to engage learners in reflection and self-evaluation. The language classroom is an appropriate place to start, particularly as students have not yet engaged in self-access learning and will need support in developing autonomous learning skills. In this pilot study, the author describes tasks where learners watch and discuss online videos in English, reflect on their performance and set goals for improving their language skills. The author provides insights from the research investigating learners' responses to these tasks.

The second paper is a report focussed on providing writing support in Japan by Shawn Andersson and Maho Nakahashi from Osaka University. The authors summarise some features of well-established facilities in the United States before making recommendations for their own institution and the Japanese context.

The third paper by Parisa Mehran, Mehrasa Alizadeh, Ichiro Koguchi, and Haruo Takemura, also at Osaka University, is the result of an in-depth needs analysis assessing Japanese undergraduate students' needs in order to provide self-access support for them. The authors provide practical guidelines for establishing a centre that support autonomous language learning based on a comprehensive review of various facilities in Japan.

Reviews

The reviews section edited by Hisako Yamashita contains one book review and one conference summary. *Social spaces for language learning: Stories from the L-café* was edited by Garold Murray and Naomi Fujishima and is reviewed here by Anthony DiGiulio from Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages in Tokyo. DiGiulio describes the three parts of the book in detail and suggests that it a "must-read" for anyone considering creating social language learning space.

Michael P. Lin from Kobe Shoin, Konan, and Konan Women's Universities, Hyogo, Japan reports on the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) 2016 Annual Conference held on December 10, 2016 at Konan Women's University in Kobe, Japan. JASAL is a non-profit professional organization in its 12th year devoted to promoting self-access learning in Japan. The JASAL 2016 conference was

its second stand-alone event and attracted almost 100 participants from Japan and beyond.

Language Learning Spaces: Self-Access in Action

Katherine Thornton from Otemon Gakuin University in Osaka introduces the theme of the final instalment of the *Language Learning Spaces: Self-Access in Action* column with a useful commentary on some of the issues involved in evaluating self-access. The three contributions in the final instalment come from Daya Datwani-Choy from the University of Hong Kong (HKU); Katherine Thornton and Nao Noguchi from Otemon Gakuin University, Osaka; and finally my own contribution from Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba.

The Future of Self-Access in Japan

The contributions to this issue suggest that the field of self-access is thriving in Japan. Cooke's paper shows how preparation for autonomous self-access learning is beginning in the classroom; the papers by Andersson and Nakahashi, and Mehran et al., show the beginnings of new self-access facilities based on students' needs. The two reviews demonstrate engagement in scholarship and also a focus on community-building among Japan's self-access professionals. Finally, the column instalment demonstrates how institutions are taking evaluation and continued growth seriously. I hope this special issue will serve to inspire newcomers and veterans to the field within Japan and of course beyond. Feel free to get in touch if you would be interested in guest editing or contributing to a future issue focussing on a specific region of the world.

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Notes on the Editor

Jo Mynard is the founding editor of *SiSAL Journal*. She is an associate professor and the Director of the Self-Access Learning Centre at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. She has been involved in facilitating self-access language learning since 1996.

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