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## **Review of JASAL Online Student Forum 2020 and a Reflection**

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This short report is a review of and my reflections on the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) online student forum which was held on Saturday, July 4, 2020 on Zoom. The conference was held online due to COVID-19. I participated in the forum as a user and student staff member representing Maximum English Learning Together (MELT), which is the social language learning space at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University in Japan. At the event, students shared ideas and initiatives for online events at each of their university's language learning spaces (LLS) or centers. In the discussion groups that I joined, we talked about two focus points, which were the connection between each center and students, and the tactical use of SNS to promote our LLS to students. I will give a summary of the discussions and also make some suggestions for enhancing students' study motivation and participation in events, even in remote learning / online situations.

This was the first online JASAL student forum, as it was not possible to hold a physical student conference this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I attended the student forum because I needed to make connections with other university students who had the same difficulties. Moreover, I was curious about how other centers tackled online events in the first semester. There were 22 students from seven universities and 22 teachers and administrators from 13 universities in Japan. The students shared their LLS or centers' online activities and events and discussed the issues they are facing in order to enhance the quality of their activities and events. In the discussions, only students were allowed to talk; teachers and administrators were only able to observe some students' group discussions. The sessions were separated into two parts. Session 1 was the time for students to share their centers' current activities and issues with five students who were from different universities. In Session 2, students were placed in new groups, again with five members from different universities. In Session 2, they talked about their ideas for supporting students in their centers moving forward.

### **Session 1**

There were four groups with students from different universities and in each group there was a student leader who facilitated the group discussions. After self-introductions, the participants explained about their center and the current online activities and events which had already been held or were being planned. In my group there were five students, from Kanda University of

International Studies, Konan Women's University, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, and Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University.

Student staff members at KUIS 8, which is the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies, explained that they had held a special event which was for freshmen on June 30th. In addition, its university learners were able to spontaneously join meetings to learn vocabulary and English grammar after school.

Student staff members from e-space, which is the SALC at Konan Women's University, provided an opportunity for first-year students to ask about university life. Also, as part of their daily work, they opened a lunchtime English Cafe to offer an English immersion opportunity for students.

Student staff members of NINJA (Navigating an Independent Non-stop Journey to Autonomy), the LLS at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, had planned an online *Tanabata* (one of the Japanese summer festivals) event and they constantly shared information about their events using their official Instagram account.

Student staff members from the SALC at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University held big zoom meetings for both Japanese students and international students. The vast majority of students who joined were freshmen and sophomores.

MELT, the LLS at my university, Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University, had a Zoom welcome party on June 8th. At the event, guests enjoyed an online scavenger hunt game and a guitar performance from one of the volunteer staff members. Moreover, the center opened an online chat room using Google Classroom from 10 am to 5 pm so that all of the students could practice and enjoy English anytime with the center staff or other students.

On the whole, we found that most universities' English centers had the common difficulty of gathering new students. Because of COVID-19 they may have not built enough connections between the first-year students and other students. Thus, the majority of students felt hesitant to mingle with a new community. On the other hand, interestingly, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University experienced the problem from another perspective. Their problem was that there were *too many* participants to be able to organize their meetings. Through our discussion in this group, we realized that student staff members in each center need to adjust to the number of students making use of an activity.

## **Session 2**

In Session 2, all the groups were shuffled and “future ideas” were discussed. My group members were students from Otomon Gakuin University, Konan Women's University, Kanda University of International Studies, and Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University. There were two key

concepts, which were the tactical utilization of SNS and the connection between universities to hold their online events.

Regarding the tactical utilization of SNS, it would be effective and efficient to use SNS to promote online events for first-year students. Presumably, students do not receive enough information about online events or what centers offer to help them. Plus, each center or LLS should consider the timing of events. One positive aspect of online events is the flexibility. In other words, participants can join events from their home. My group considered the possibility of holding online events at night or in the evening instead of during the day time. In this case, it is also important to consider who would be the host of the event.

In terms of connections between each university, student staff member should share which online events succeeded and what kinds of help students required from the center. Nowadays, university life and study styles have totally changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All centers struggle to create new online events and ways to embolden new students. That is why my group thought about the importance of having connections between different universities to consider some solutions. In addition, it would also be beneficial to socialize with each other online.

To sum up session 2, my group discussed two new significant future ideas which were the utilization of SNS and the forming of connections between universities. We concurred on the matter to overcome current difficulties and to move in a positive direction.

### **Suggestions**

Reflecting on these discussions, my suggestions to enhance students' motivation and participation in online events is that preferably, each center could consider strongly encouraging first-year students to participate in these online events by offering some extra points for classes. Students will react positively when given extra credit as students feel positive about self-study outside the classroom when their teacher provides motivational tools (Rhoads & deHaan, 2013). Thus, the crucial point is to ponder the ways in which these LLS or centers give students who have never joined online events or sessions an opportunity to know about each center's activity. It would encourage connections between new students and other students at each LLS.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the forum clarified that most universities have had the same issue, which was how to make connections between students and each center. In this case, we should consider how to tactically use SNS and encourage interaction with each university student. Although the recent

unexpected pandemic situation has made us struggle, all centers have been organizing their own original online events and trying to overcome these difficulties.

#### **Notes on the Contributor**

Naoki Tashiro is a student in the Foreign Language Department at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University in Japan. He is a student advisor and a staff member at MELT, which is the social language learning space at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University.

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