Accessing the Creative Self: Encouraging Innovative L2 Expression Within a Japanese Business University Self-Access Center

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Abstract

Examining how creativity functions in regards to Japanese students' English acquisition is a growing field of research. This descriptive practice article outlines the integration of a pioneering framework for creative expression within the Self-Access Center (SAC) of a private Japanese business university. The author provides an argument for the practical application of scaffolded, theory-based learning activities that promote creative development, increase learner engagement, and develop higher-order thinking skills. Example creative writing, reading, speaking, and listening activities are discussed.

Keywords: creativity, self-expression, second language acquisition, business university

Since 2011, English language instruction has been a compulsory part of Japanese primary and secondary education. English instruction continues at the tertiary level, with trade schools, colleges, and universities often requiring students to successfully pass the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) in order to graduate. In 2012, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) released a white paper which began, "What is truly needed in Japan is independent-minded learning by individuals in order to realize independence, collaboration, and creativity" (MEXT, 2012). In 2013, MEXT released *The second basic plan for the promotion of education*, acknowledging objectives in support of "discovering unsolved issues" and recognizing that "in a globalizing industrial society, English…[is] becoming indispensable" (MEXT, 2013). The belief that creativity and English language proficiency should be fostered within Japanese educational systems is widely accepted, however practical guides for how this can be implemented are not readily available. Informative works on how self-access centers (SACs) can promote and foster creative skills in their student body are even less so.

This descriptive practice article examines the integration of a preliminary six-week framework of scaffolded creative exercises within a private Japanese business university's SAC. First, I briefly explore the complex nature of creativity. An overview of past research findings on the importance of creativity in ESL education and an argument for why center administrators/support services should provide creative materials and promote creativity

within SACs is put forth. Next, I describe the particular SAC environment in which the creative framework discussed was implemented. Following the examination of my center's unique strengths and weaknesses and the impetus for creative intervention, I outline a practical model for the application of scaffolded, theory-based learning activities that encourage creative expression and draw upon student interests, concerns, and needs. A variety of writing, reading, speaking, and listening activities are explored, and example student responses are provided to demonstrate how creative exercises can benefit students of all proficiency levels. Successes and obstacles encountered during the implementation of the project are assessed along with suggestions for other practitioners who may be interested in implementing a similar program. The paper concludes with a reflection on the project and overview of next steps for the future expansion of the framework.

The Case for Fostering Creativity in SACs

When discussing creativity in language learning, inevitably some of the first questions to arise are, 'Well, what exactly *is* creativity? How do you *define* it? And *why* should we encourage students to be creative?' Prominent scholars in the field of language learning argue that creativity is an important factor in student success, yet they acknowledge that there is great difficulty in providing any 'unified theory' on the subject (Jones & Richards, 2016). The 'mystery' which surrounds this term may have led to many of the antagonistic beliefs concerning the critical vs. the creative divide within academia. Over the course of recent decades more and more academic journals, such as the *Creativity Research Journal*, *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, and the *Journal of Creative Behavior*, have been established and dedicated to the study of how creativity functions within educational, societal, psychological, and cultural contexts.

In one of the seminal works on creative theory, *Dimensions of Creativity*, Margaret A. Boden (1994) reviews multiple and sometimes paradoxical definitions of the term. From the active definition of bringing what was once not in existence into being to the more static idea of "novel combinations of old ideas (Boden, 1994, p. 75)", the term and its meaning have been questioned and evaluated for eons by everyone from classical philosophers to modern poets to cognitive psychologists. Boden explores creativity from a number of perspectives— connectionist theory, neuroscience, machine learning, and psychology amongst others. While no definitive statement on what creativity constitutes or how it can be measured is argued, Boden makes one point clear: creativity is part of the generative system of learning. Drawing upon input and extending consciously or subconsciously learned patterns, the human mind

works to structure novelty within an established system. Creativity, in this light, is a dynamic mental process of data examination and manipulation which aids in the continued expansion of a language system. It is a higher-order critical thinking skill—the creative and the critical cannot and should not be separated.

Although a conclusive definition of the term 'creativity' is unlikely to (perhaps ever) be agreed upon, it is generally accepted that creative works implicitly involve certain key features, namely unconventionality (i.e., originality or individualism), imagination, risk-taking, flexibility, and the capacity to create novel classifications and systemizations of knowledge (Sternberg, 1985, 2006). Students engaging in language development are often called upon to practice and embrace these elements in order to more fully express individual choice and belief. Hadley (2003) notes that learning to use a language creatively is essential in moving beyond the rudimentary stages of acquisition, which often make heavy use of lower order thinking skills like memorization and imitation.

Creativity is not simply 'anything goes'. As learners' language develops and the complexity of potential language structure productions increases, it is necessary to provide students with controlled creative tasks. The use of constraints (i.e., limitations such as rules or boundaries that a work must be produced in accordance with) in creative tasks has been promoted by various theorists, including Boden (1994) and Tin (2013). Tin (2013) aptly summarizes the function of constraints within an ESL environment when she states that they "direct the search for novel solutions while limiting the search among the known" (p. 390). This idea draws upon Krashen's (1999) input hypothesis which argues that for language acquisition to occur, students must be provided with 'comprehensible input,' or information which is understandable but still challenging. Constraints in creative tasks help to focus students' cognition on innovating with new, comprehensible input. As Tin (2011, 2013) argues, because creative tasks focus on what can be rather than what is, what is known and easily accessible within a second language learners' internalized knowledge storage is utilized but is not the focus of creative meaning-making. This is in contrast to non-creative tasks which center around lower-level taxonomic skills that often use "simple, safe, and known utterances instead of retrieving less accessible language and knowledge" (Tin, 2013, p. 386). Creative tasks strategically ask students to participate in the transformative aspect of language and to broaden their specific linguistic boundaries.

How creativity affects English language acquisition has been extensively researched by a number of scholars and theorists, especially in regard to the communicative, productive skills of speaking and writing. Avila (2015) outlined a pedagogical intervention to combat

low student engagement levels and found that creative activities not only promoted higher interest among students, they also contributed to an increase in oral and written fluency. In a study of university students' oral task performance, Albert (2011) found that the variable of creativity was linked to learners' ability to create complex spoken narratives. Higher levels of measured creativity were positively correlated with language features such as lexical variety and syntactic complexity. Likewise, in a study of Hungarian secondary students, Otto (1998) concluded that students with greater creative aptitude had greater success within a communicative language teaching (CLT) environment than less creative students. The more creative students exhibited greater adaptability in role-playing and other interactional tasks while also scoring higher on class tests.

Examining how creativity functions in regards specifically to Asian language learners' English acquisition was examined in Tin's (2011) study of the co-emergence of form and meaning. Within this study, Tin found that creative writing exercises helped Asian ESL students transform "familiar utterances into unfamiliar ones, shaping and reshaping learners' language syntactically and lexically, paradigmatically, and syntagmatically" (p. 215). Unosawa (2010) delineated a series of autonomous learning, creative writing tasks and author reflection activities which allowed students the opportunity to freely choose, plan, and organize their ideas. He argues that such tasks helped to expand and reinforce students' metacognitive abilities. Creativity (not only creative ability itself but also participating in creative language-learning tasks that support the growth of that ability) is embraced by many within the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The majority of international scholars are in agreement: creativity and language acquisition are fundamentally related.

Self-access centers are well-positioned to support creativity and students' creative language development. As defined by Reinders (2012), self-access centers (SACs) are physical or virtual language learning spaces that are learner-oriented and encourage the development of learner autonomy by providing "materials, activities, and staff support to help learners develop the skills necessary for taking control over the content, pace, and method of their learning" (p. 5166). With their focus on individualization and emphasis on empowering students, SACs can undoubtedly be nexuses of creative language learning. In fact, administrators, volunteers, advisors, and other SAC support staff across the globe likely encourage a number of the creative characteristics previously outlined by Sternberg (1985, 2006) on a daily basis. Features such as unconventionality (i.e., individualism), flexibility, and the contrivance of new systemizations of knowledge are employed as students work

toward setting and achieving their personal language learning goals. Offering materials and activities that elicit creative responses for students within SAC environments is a worthy and well-informed undertaking. Providing a variety of creative task types (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, etc.) will help to ensure student needs are met while scaffolding the activities will allow students of all proficiency levels to be adequately supported (Hogan & Pressley, 1997).

The Self-Access Center at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business

Located in Nisshin City, Aichi prefecture, the Nagoya University of Commerce and Business (NUCB) is a non-profit, private Japanese university whose mission statement is "to educate innovative and ethical leaders who possess a 'Frontier Spirit' and to create knowledge that advances business and society" (NUCB, 2021). Here, 'Frontier Spirit' refers to cultivating students who can act as pioneering leaders in their chosen fields of study, that is to say "persons who think creatively and independently" (NUCB, 2021). There is a growing concern globally for students of all levels to exhibit 21st century competencies (Crockett et al., 2011; Sawyer, 2019; Voogt et al., 2013). Since 2016, the World Economic Forum (WEF) has reported on the top marketable skills across global industries. Creativity has always placed high on the list. The WEF's (2020) *Future of Jobs Report 2020* lists creativity in fifth place (along with originality and initiative) for most in-demand skill predicted for 2025. The desire for students to develop innovative capacities and advanced problem-solving skills in order to be career-ready is prevalent within many institutions of higher education. It is of even more significance within business universities—where inventive thinking and creative applications of knowledge are recognized as leading characteristics of successful entrepreneurs and 21st century businesspersons.

The SAC at NUCB is a learning environment located within the Central Information Center (library) which provides students with a wide range of language learning resources, including: books (textbooks and reference books, study aides, graded readers, etc.); worksheets and practice exercises on topics such as grammar structures, test-taking best practices, and reading comprehension; videos: audio materials, and computer labs. Students can also sign up for conversation practice and advising sessions. As of February 2021, the SAC is staffed with one full-time coordinator and one part-time support staff member. A number of faculty members from the department of International Studies, both native and non-native English speakers, volunteer as conversation partners and mentors.

Frequently citing Monk and Ozawa (2002, 2005), Warrington (2018) skillfully details 20 years of the NUCB SAC's evolution. Established in 1998 as part of the trending first wave

of Japanese self-access centers, the mission and policy of the center was solidified in 2001. At this time, it was determined by university administration that the SAC would function as a type of required study hall space or 'homework room' for those students enrolled in English courses (Mynard, 2012, as cited in Warrington, 2018). The SAC's primary purpose has remained relatively unchanged since 2001. Warrington outlines a number of struggles faced by the NUCB SAC to acquire an identity separate from that of the library, obtain and maintain adequate levels of support staff, and keep up with frequently shifting and often problematic policy changes implemented by university upper administration. These policy changes range from making SAC attendance compulsory for specific students to prohibiting student collaboration to explicitly encouraging certain materials be studied within the SAC in order to increase standardized test scores (Warrington, 2018). Obviously, such policies are not student-centric and put the space in jeopardy of becoming classified as 'self-access' in name only.

With a total enrollment of approximately 4000 students, NUCB currently has approximately 400 students who make use of the SAC. According to the SAC coordinator, only around ten students utilize the center voluntarily/for no course credit. The other ~390 students' SAC attendance is factored into the assessment for all levels of English Fundamentals classes. In these classes, students are required to undertake 100 minutes of self-directed language study per week, with this often accounting for 15-20% of the overall course grade. While SAC attendance is compulsory for these courses, the students do have freedom to choose what and how they study independently.

Each student completes a planning sheet at the beginning of their self-study session as well as a self-assessment sheet at the conclusion of their time in the SAC. Completing these pre- and post-study forms help students to set clear learning goals as well as consider what progress they've made during each weekly session. As Gardner and Miller (1999) affirm, individualization is an important element of SACs, with learners being encouraged to reflect on their own learning style, pace of learning, ability level, and goals. The majority of students spend their 100 minutes each week on tasks which center around TOEIC test preparation in conjunction with lower-level taxonomic skills such as the study of grammatical parts of speech and the rote memorization of vocabulary terms, usually taken from TOEIC manuals. As Warrington (2018) notes, since 2018, the university administration has asked that students be encouraged to study for the TOEIC in order to raise overall university standings. Much of this 'encouragement' to study for the TOEIC while in the SAC is made by instructors outside of the SAC/within their language classes. However, 'TOEIC' has also been added as one of

eight task options (alongside skills like Reading, Writing, Grammar, etc. and activities such as Film, Advising, and Conversation) on the session planning sheets. Notably, 'TOEIC' is positioned as the first option in the task list. Many and various TOEIC materials are also prominently displayed within the SAC. It is clear that students feel pressure to do well on the exam, as they are required to take it three times a year. Additionally, another portion (usually 15%) of their overall English Fundamentals course grade is derived from their TOEIC scores. Besides studying for the TOEIC and taking practice exams, other common activities undertaken in the NUCB SAC include watching English sitcoms, late-night talk shows, music videos, and grammar tutorials on YouTube and compiling and practicing vocabulary terms.

In my personal observations as a SAC advisor (a role which involves reviewing planning/reflection sheets, circulating among students, answering questions, and providing advice when prompted), learner motivation within the SAC is middling at best. Often, students appear disinterested and tired, and on many occasions, students have been found playing video games on their smartphones, texting friends, or napping. When asked why they are not interested in studying English, students often reply that they are tired from coursework or part-time jobs, or they just want to relax. Students have regularly complained about how much TOEIC test preparation is required and how "boring" and "difficult" the test is. Teaching specifically to any standardized test, or assessment-focused instruction, is not a practice which fosters the development of broad skills which can be built upon and expanded as language learning progresses. Teaching to a test may adequately expose students to test format and question-type, allowing students to recognize what kind of material is likely to be encountered, but teaching to an assessment does not foster the flexibility needed to interpret a language construct within a more varied environment and utilize that language construct in novel instances. In short, standardized tests, teaching to them, and studying for them are rarely imaginative undertakings.

In order to combat the low levels of student engagement, provide opportunities for learners to feel more empowered and self-aware, and to strengthen students' core language skills, a project was recently undertaken in the NUCB SAC to incorporate unique language learning activities that promoted creative thinking skills and application. These activities were strategically designed to elicit personally relevant responses from students in the target language. As Sawyer (2003) notes, creativity is a problem-solving process and creative activities not only challenge second language learners, they also allow them to connect with their second language. By providing learners the opportunity to think deeply, reflect, and

make choices, creative tasks help to develop a student's particular L2 personality. Rather than completing convergent thinking exercises which must be solved for only one answer (e.g., test preparation worksheets), creative tasks encourage divergent thinking, allowing a broad range of responses, infusing playfulness into the learning process and asking students to build connections between what is known and what can be. According to Ausubel (2000), the interstices stage of integrating new knowledge with existing knowledge is the point at which meaningful learning occurs. This is crucial to progressing toward advanced levels of second language acquisition.

Language learning instructors at the university as well as the coordinator, staff, and volunteers at NUCB's SAC are continuously seeking out new strategies to engage their students. We want to encourage students to explore what needs they have as individuals and how they can best go about reaching their objectives. Self-access is a path of learner discovery and creative exercises can play a supportive role along this path. In order to better assist students as they become more passionate and curious learners, a series of voluntarily creative tasks were provided to students in the NUCB SAC which asked them to "extend their language," and move beyond prescriptive constructs. The aim of these exercises was to increase personal investment and motivation levels by giving students the opportunity to express agency and gain a deeper connection to their second language, one that is linked closely to their own personal identity.

Applying a Creative Framework & Examining Student Responses

The scaffolded framework implemented within NUCB's SAC employs activities which both test and promote a number of established creative characteristics. Drawing upon E.P. Torrance's (1962) work in Creative Assessment, the activities spur creative engagement and novel constructions in regards to a variety of language learning skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, etc.). The verbal and figural Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT) are the most widely used and validated tests of creative ability and are largely considered the most systemic and accurate tests of divergent thinking in people of all ages (Torrance, 1998). While the scaffolded activities for the SAC were only loosely drawn from tasks found within the TTCT, the activities designed encourage a number of the same creative characteristics proposed to be strong indicators/measures of creativity in individuals, namely: fluency, originality, abstractness, elaboration and resistance to premature closure, expressiveness, story-telling articulateness, syntheses, extending or breaking boundaries, humor, richness/colorfulness of imagery, and fantasy.

The NUCB SAC framework follows a six-week sequence of exercises broken into three categories: Reading/Writing Activities, Listening/Speaking Activities, and Creative Expression Activities, the latter of which often involve an element of imagery creation or interpretation. Thus, three different creative exercises are available for students to choose from each week. All activities were made available to students on a voluntary basis. Students were made aware of the exercises by word of mouth and light advertising (i.e., a sign posted in a prominent area of the self-access center. See Figure 1). All students were made aware of the possibility of their submitted work being used for research purposes.

Figure 1
Advertising for Voluntary Creative Exercises
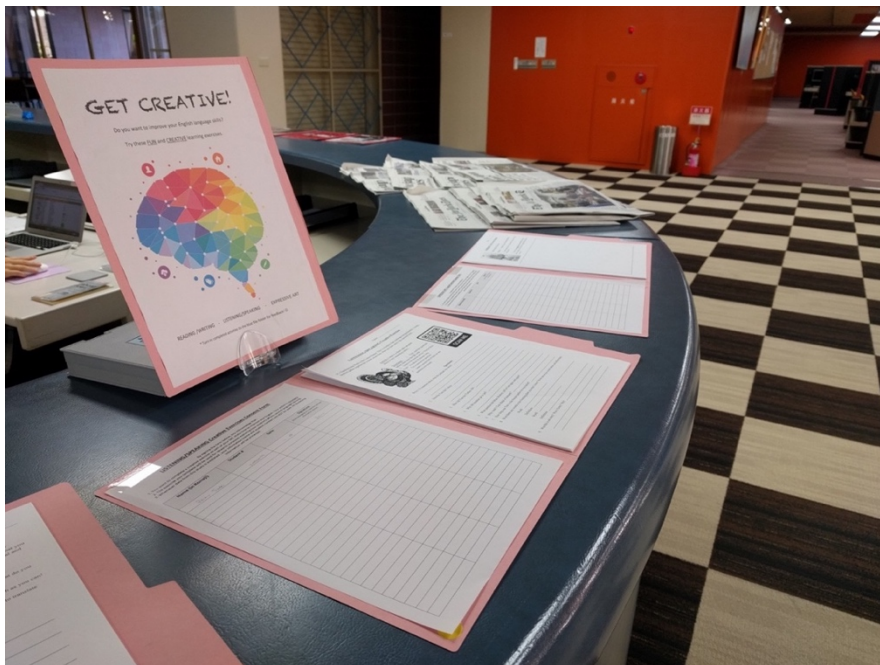
Of the approximately 400 students who visit the NUCB SAC on a weekly basis, 23 individual students (~6%) chose to complete one or more of the creative tasks over the course of the program. Of those 23 students, 11 (~48%) were repeat completers, voluntarily undertaking multiple creative assignments over the six weeks. While most students focused on only one type of creative exercise (for example, choosing to complete only Reading/Writing exercises), three of the total 23 individuals (~13%) undertook both Reading/Writing and Listening/Speaking exercises, and two students (~9%) attempted all three types of creative assignments during the six-week period. In one case, a student completed more than one creative activity within the same 100-minute SAC study session;

the same student took activites home in a subsequent week to complete them over the weekend for additional practice.

All creative assignments completed and submitted were returned to the students the following week, along with teacher feedback in the form of short, positive messages. These messages were largely free of any kind of evaluation statements, focusing rather on creating connections and expressing delight, amusement, or intrigue as was deemed appropriate. For example, messages such as "Thanks for sharing this idea," "Me, too!/I think so, too!," and "This is cool/funny/interesting," were common. Emoticons/various drawn faces were also incorporated (e.g. the hand-drawn equivalents of :) :D ;) : 0 and so on). Entirely incomprehensible information submitted by students was simply circled with a note stating, "I'm not sure what this means. Can you tell me more?" On one or two occasions, students approached me while I was volunteering to discuss a past submitted task and/or clarify an idea.

Because creative processing is necessary for higher-order knowledge acquisition to occur, and because creative applications work in tandem with critical ability in aiding the development and mastery of a second language, all the activities provided incorporated some level of processing and critical application. The critical thinking/creative restructuring component lies at the interstices of the receptive skills and productive skills. Thus, the active cognitive component of Second Language Acquisition was activated during the students' interlanguage stages by these activities with the goal of progressing students forward in their continuum of understanding.

Over the six weeks, students moved through a succession of learning activities that were carefully scaffolded to build upon their past knowledge and push their current knowledge further. All tasks presented were organized to provide clear explication and often provided an example to help students understand the activity. Learning materials and instruction that is appropriately scaffolded to meet student needs supports Vygotsky's (1999) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as students move from completing tasks with guidance to completing tasks autonomously. The exercises were broken down into manageable chunks of information for easy comprehension. As such, the content was scaffolded. Similarly, the tasks themselves were scaffolded, becoming increasingly more involved as the weeks progressed and requiring greater attention and creative characteristic/TTCT measure application.

The tasks are best subdivided into three, two-week units. The activities in the beginning two weeks (outlined in Table 1) focused on biographical material and utilized

easily accessible knowledge (i.e., information about themselves and people closest to them such as friends or family).

Table 1

Creative Activities Framework – Beginning Level: Weeks #1 and #2

		Reading / Writing	**Listening / Speaking**	**Creative Expression**
WEEK 1 Self-Expression and Explication	Activity	Creative Self-Questionnaire (11 questions)	Create a Soundtrack to Your Life (6 events)	Draw and Label a Picture of Yourself (6 important elements)
	TTCT Measure	1. Elaboration 2. Originality	1. Elaboration 2. Originality	1. Elaboration 2. Richness/ colorfulness of Imagery
WEEK 2 Exploring the Self and Others	Activity	Six-Word Life Story (self + 4 family/friends)	Eavesdropping on Others	Create a Comic about Daily Activities (4 panels)
	TTCT Measure	1. Originality 2. Expressiveness	1. Fluency 2. Resistance to Premature Closure	1. Originality 2. Richness/ colorfulness of Imagery

For example, the Reading/Writing activity for Week #1 involved answering a short creative questionnaire with non-standard questions such as "What annoys you?" and "Your friend says they are stressed. What do you tell them to do?" Students were given the opportunity to discuss personal interests, hopes, and challenges. Their responses often provided insight into issues that are connected to affective learning barriers. Most students who completed the questionnaire gave strong elaboration and wrote more than one sentence, exhibiting a desire to be clearly understood. Example student responses are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Example Student Responses to Week #1 Reading/Writing Activity

What annoys you? *It's studying english and human relationships. English is very very difficult. Love makes me blind... and I have no enough time. (:)*

What class do you dislike the most? Why is it bad? *I don't like bookkeeping in college. Because I'm good at calculations, but I'm not good at sorting.*

Your friend says they are very stressed. What do you tell them to do? *I tell them to listen to music that they love or to sleep.*

Are you obsessed with anything? Is there something you really, really love? Why do you like it? *I really love to listen to music. I like music because I can listen to music not even in a happy moment but also in sad moments in my life. It helps me to make up my mind.*

Similarly, in regards to encouraging self-expression, the Listening/Speaking exercise for Week #2 asked students to eavesdrop on people in the SAC environment, urging them to describe in detail what they hear as well as what they wish they could hear/what they wish they couldn't hear. One student noted that they heard two friends speaking, that this was a distraction, and that they wished they heard only English being spoken in general (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Example student response to Week #2 Listening/Speaking Activity

> I can hear my __writing English sentence with a mechanical pencil__.
>
> I like the sound of __conversation Japanese people and faein people__
>
> because __they practice English conversation heard__.
>
> I don't like the sound of __conversation Friends to Friend__
>
> because __I can't concentrate on study.__
>
> One sound I wish was in the SAC is __only English sounds__

Student feedback generated from this activity has the potential to help inform future practices and policies within self-access environments. Allowing students a space to concentrate on what they experience and reflect on how those experiences affect them is crucial to helping them build metacognitive awareness in addition to ensuring that they feel heard. When students understand that their opinions and preferences are important to the construction of their learning environment, they become more invested in that environment. In my teacher feedback to this particular exercise, I thanked the student for their comments and let them know their ideas would be helpful in improving the conditions within the NUCB SAC in the future. In fact, the information provided from the student in Figure 3 helped encourage the formulation of an English-language exchange program between native Japanese and foreign international students which was incorporated into the schedule of SAC activities the following term.

While Week #1 and Week #2 activities drew upon easily accessible knowledge and encouraged the application of only one or two creative characteristics (e.g., fluency and elaboration), Week #3 and Week #4 activities progressed to asking students to respond to prompts in order to make novel productions as well as move toward integrating information from outside sources into their own knowledge. These activities (outlined in Table 2) additionally required the application of another creative characteristic (i.e., three TTCT measures as opposed to the two required for Weeks #1 and #2).

Table 2

Creative Activities Framework: Intermediate Level: Weeks #3 and #4

		Reading / Writing	**Listening / Speaking**	**Creative Expression**
WEEK 3 Using Extensive Prompts to Foster Novel Production	Activity	Write a Dialogue in Response to Picture Prompt	Tongue Twister Practice and Creation	Comic Fill-in
	TTCT Measure	1. Originality 2. Humor 3. Story-telling Articulateness	1. Originality 2. Humor 3. Expressiveness	1. Originality 2. Humor 3. Story-telling Articulateness
WEEK 4 Beginning Synthesis of Personal Past, Present, and Future	Activity	Future Profession Acrostic Poem	TED Video Viewing and Response	Describing an Elaborate Image Related to Japanese Culture
	TTCT Measure	1. Originality 2. Expressiveness 3. Synthesis	1. Fluency 2. Elaboration 3. Synthesis	1. Elaboration 2. Resistance to Premature Closure 3. Synthesis

Exercises in Weeks #3 and #4 provided students with thoroughly articulated prompts to serve as springboards and aid students in structuring their own original responses. For example, the Creative Expression exercise for Week #3 was a public domain comic book excerpt which had the majority of text removed. Students were able to read a teacher-generated example of a different comic fill-in prior to making their own attempts. The blank comic they received was composed of three comic panels and featured two characters, a female and a male, in a shop setting. Students were asked to examine the images in the comic and the starting words provided in order to create their own storyline based on the characters' expressions and context. The starting words provided included only "Her" in the title of the comic, "It was a normal day" in the first panel and "Suddenly" in the second panel.

This exercise proved popular with students and resulted in a number of highly original creations. For this activity, many students drew upon their knowledge and understanding of Japanese manga and how it differs from Western-style comics, such as the one utilized in this

exercise. Students created dramatic and humorous stories that sometimes exhibited high levels of wordplay. One particularly creative student-generated comic is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Example Student Response to Week #3 Creative Expression Activity

In this example, the student first introduces themselves as the narrator of the comic, placing themselves in a central position of importance within the story. They establish their position by proclaiming "I am a narrator" and drawing an image of their own to go along with the comic: a wide, toothy smiling face. This inclusion is placed outside of the confines of the comic panel's boundaries—literally a creation "outside the box." The student later goes

on to tackle phonetic confusions between the Japanese and English languages. As narrator, the student serves as "teacher" to the comic's audience, negotiating the two languages and explaining the source of contention between the characters in the comic. "Who is Yankee Amy? You choose Amy over me?" the female character bemoans. "Not Amy. Ami…In Japanese Yaki Ami means a grill" the male character replies, providing the Japanese kanji for the term as well as the narratorial aside "(a toasting net)" for further clarification.

Another intermediate activity which proved popular among students was Week #4's Reading/Writing exercise which asked students to create an acrostic poem based on their future professional goals. In the activity's explanation and directions, the term "acrostic" was defined for the students and an example using the profession of a nurse was provided (see Figure 5). This example was chosen because a nurse is a well-known profession yet one that business school students are unlikely to pursue as a future career path. Consequently, the content was scaffolded for easy comprehension but influence on student responses would be limited.

Figure 5

Week #4 Reading/Writing Activity Prompt

READING/WRITING Creative Exercise

Activity: Write an **acrostic**.

An **acrostic** is a type of writing where one word is hidden in a larger piece of writing.

Look at the example of an acrostic below. The word **NURSE** is spelled out using the first letters of each line.

Directions:
1. Read the example.
2. Write the name of a job or profession you want to have in the future. Write one letter of the job's name on each line.
3. For each letter of the name, write a sentence or group of words that describes the profession.

Acrostic Example:

Never stops learning about the body, illnesses, and how to help
Usually works long hours
Responsibilities include giving medicine and keeping records
Smiles and tries to keep patients and families calm
Everyone in the hospital depends on them

Insight into students' future goals and their familiarity with duties and responsibilities of the professions they are interested in were gathered from these responses. Potential career paths included a range of professions within the service, travel, public relations, and non-profit industries. Two representative examples of student responses are provided in Figure 6. The first example shows a lower-level student response with more rudimentary grammar and

vocabulary knowledge while the second example is from a higher-level student with greater L2 fluency. This shows that creative exercises which are low-risk and high-reward can serve as study aids for students of varying levels of proficiency.

Figure 6

Example Student Responses to Week #4 Reading/Writing Activity
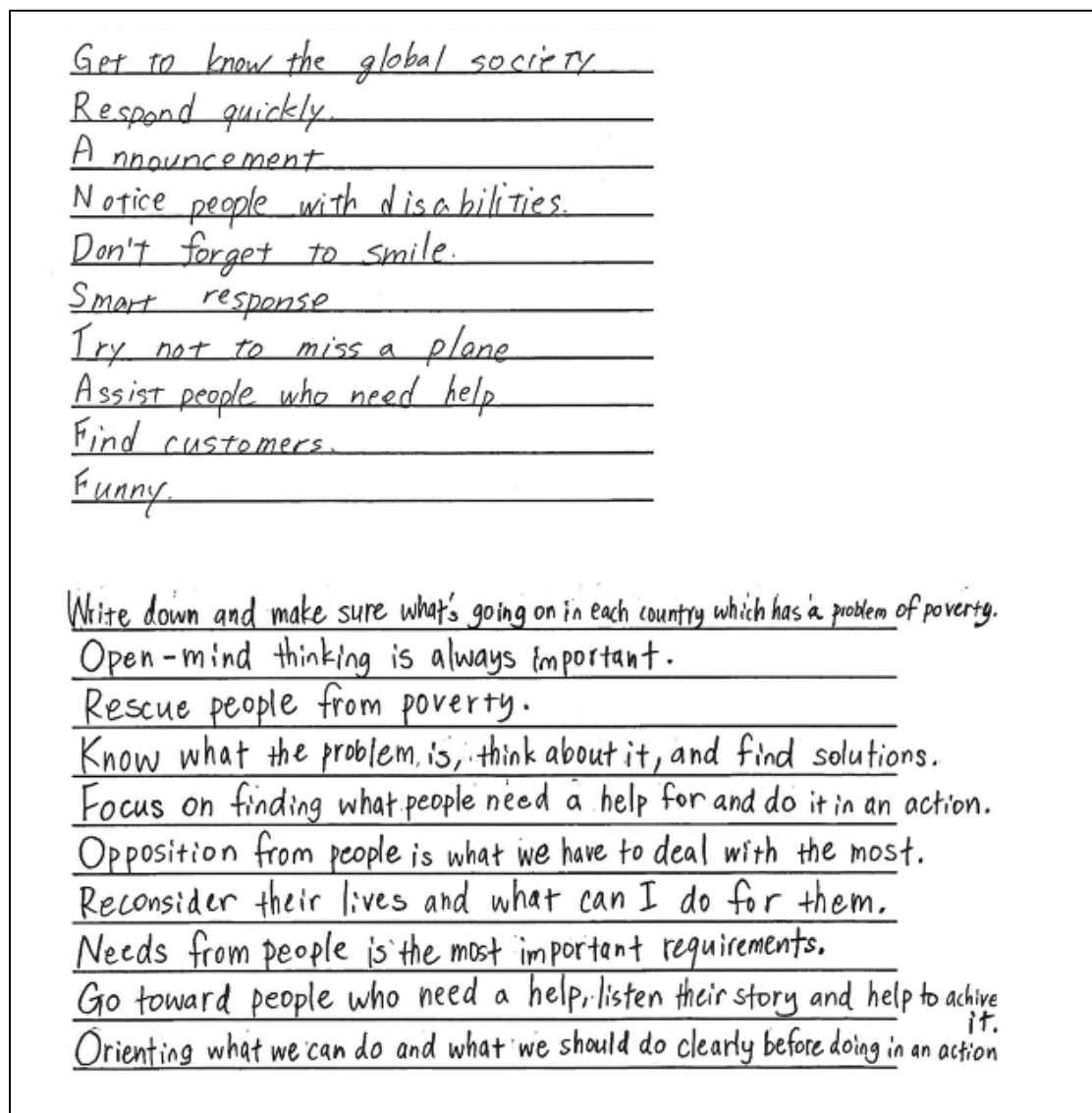
The activities which were offered during Weeks #5 and #6 were the most advanced exercises. These assignments involved tasks which asked students to apply significantly higher levels of critical/creative thought with more limited scaffolding examples. The tasks often centered around exploring fantastic scenarios, creating unknowns/hypotheticals, or reflecting and synthesizing unconventional concepts. For Weeks #5 and #6, an additional

TTCT measure was utilized to help shape the activity, for a total of four creative characteristics seeking to be elicited in student responses (Table 3).

Table 3

*Creative Activities Framework: Advanced Level: Weeks #5 and #6*

		Reading / Writing	**Listening / Speaking**	**Creative Expression**
WEEK 5 Using Limited Prompts to Foster Novel Production	Activity	Apocalyptic Short Story Writing Exercise	Picture Viewing and Verbal Descriptions	Animal Vocabulary Flashcards
	TTCT Measure	1. Elaboration 2. Story-telling articulateness 3. Richness/colorfulness of Imagery 4. Fantasy	1. Elaboration 2. Story-telling articulateness 3. Richness/colorfulness of Imagery 4. Fantasy	1. Originality 2. Abstractness 3. Humor 4. Fantasy
WEEK 6 Encouraging Elaborate, Fantastical Thought	Activity	Roll-a-story (Halloween themed)	Scary Story Video Viewing and Response	Create a Scary Comic (7 panels, various sizes)
	TTCT Measure	1. Elaboration 2. Story-telling Articulateness 3. Richness/colorfulness of Imagery 4. Fantasy	1. Elaboration 2. Story-telling Articulateness 3. Fantasy 4. Synthesis	1. Originality 2. Story-telling Articulateness, 3. Richness/colorfulness of Imagery 4. Fantasy

As many of the students who visited the NUCB SAC regularly spent their weekly 100-minute sessions copying and studying TOEIC vocabulary terms, a number of the creative activities over the course of the six-week program involved building vocabulary ability and/or applying vocabulary knowledge. Lexical units are fundamental meaning making devices within a language and it is important to expose students to different techniques for learning and practicing new vocabulary so they can find what strategies work best for them. Week #5's Creative Expression activity was one such vocabulary exercise which afforded students a fun and memorable way to gain confidence in their ability to utilize new terms

appropriately while supporting the development of visual literacy skills. For this exercise, students were asked to choose TOEIC vocabulary terms and create flashcards that combined a drawn image and original example sentence using each word. An additional stipulation was that their image must involve an animal in some way. One teacher-generated example flashcard was provided for task scaffolding and a blank template was provided. Student responses took many forms, with some students utilizing the template and others opting to create their own, for example, by using notebook paper (images one and two, respectively, in Figure 7).

Figure 7

Example Student Responses to Week #5 Creative Expression Activity
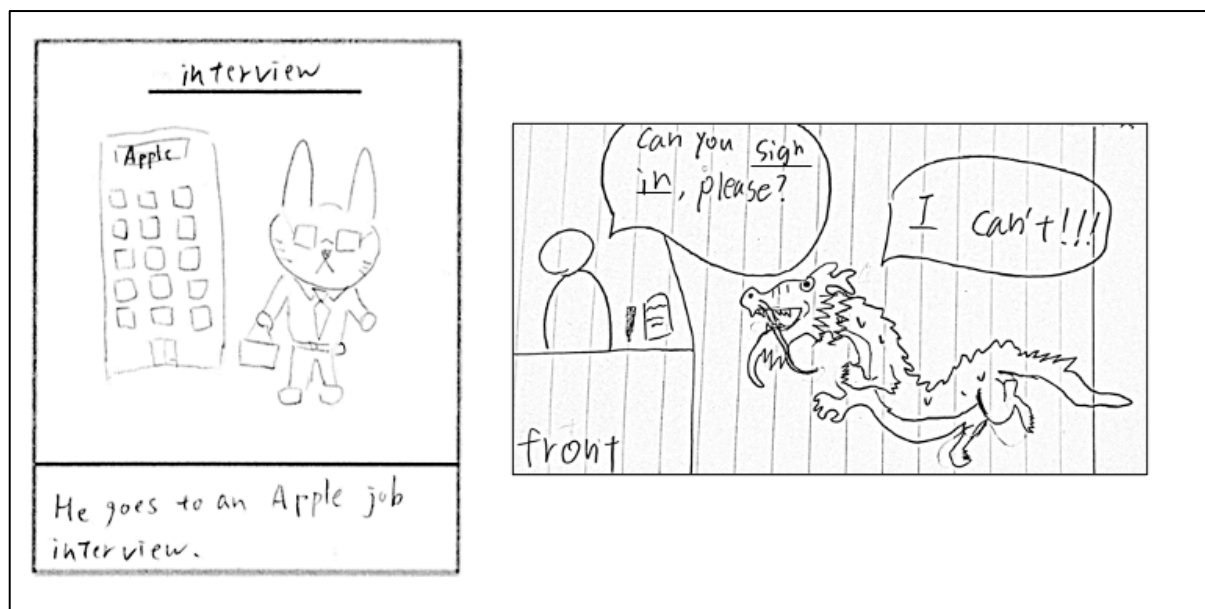
Both singular lexical units as well as phrasals were practiced and the animal figures integrated ranged from those found within the domestic realm to those firmly placed in the fantastical. As in previous creative exercises, student choice and interest dictated their responses. In the final weeks' activities, however, students often exhibited more playfulness and mental flexibility. This was especially true for those students who voluntarily chose to complete multiple creative exercises over the course of the six-weeks. Thinking creatively and building upon their creative skills appears to have become easier or more readily embraced as these skills were practiced regularly. Sternberg (2007) argues that creativity is a behavior that can be learned through regular application, stating "It may sound paradoxical that creativity—a novel response—is a habit—a routine response" (p. 3).

Week #6 of the creative framework implementation fell around the time of Halloween. The holiday was employed as a thematic element in all the final weeks' exercises, which served to increase the relevancy of the activities and provide students with an outlet to engage with current transnational topics. For example, the Listening/Speaking activity for Week #6 provided students with a QR code to scan which was linked to a YouTube playlist of full episodes of the original American-Canadian children's TV series *Are You Afraid of the Dark?,* which features dramatizations of ghost stories with predominately Western origins. As this was the final week of creative exercises, students were encouraged to try to listen and understand the video without the aid of Japanese subtitles (in opposition to directions given in earlier weeks' Listening/Speaking exercises). Students could, however, utilize English subtitles to aid in their listening comprehension if desired. In this way, the task was scaffolded to encourage deeper engagement with the material while still offering an adequate level of multimodal support for students who needed it.

Students were tasked with choosing a video of interest from the YouTube playlist, watching it, then responding to a short series of questions. These included one basic comprehension question (i.e., "What was the story about? Write a paragraph that summarizes the story in the video") followed by several personal extension questions (e.g., "Do you like scary stories? Why or why not?"). The personal extension questions allowed students to express themselves freely, and students often synthesized their past knowledge with new knowledge by making comparisons between the Western ghost stories they viewed and the Japanese ghost stories they had personal experience with. Their responses to the extension questions often included carefully articulated ideas, detailed explanations of Japanese *oni* (demons)*, obake* (ghosts)*,* and *yokai* (supernatural beings)*,* and prominent stories from their cultural heritage. One student responded with a personal narrative which exhibited sophisticated levels of introspection as well as story-telling aptitude (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Example Student Response to Week #6 Listening/Speaking Activity

In their response, the student demonstrates a high level of critical/creative thought as evidenced by the variety of TTCT measures present within the piece. These include originality, storytelling articulateness, elaboration, and synthesis. Their writing not only exhibits a significant understanding of plot structure and character development aided by quoted dialogue, it also concludes with a series of questions and an ellipsis statement, drawing the audience into the narrative and inviting the reader to reflect and respond in turn. The student wrote about twice as much as the space allotted for response, turning the paper over to continue their story and final musings. They also edited the piece for grammatical

accuracy (as denoted by the proofreading insertion mark in "I ^was surprised…"). All of these components combined to create a memorable and captivating story, and they indicate that the learner was invested in making themselves understood.

Student Response, Reflections, and Future Plans

Over the course of the program, a total of 49 individual activities were completed and submitted by students. Students who took part in the project responded positively, with some noting in their post-study SAC assessment sheets that they enjoyed the creative exercises they completed and could see the value in what they had accomplished (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Example Student Reflections on 6-Week Creative Exercise Program

In analyzing the response rates for each type of activity, it is clear that the Reading/Writing Activities were the most popular among students, accounting for 31 (63.3%) of the 49 overall tasks completed. Listening/Speaking Activities and Creative Expression Activities were matched, with nine student responses each (18.4%). Reading/Writing activities resulted in the largest quantity of student-generated output, not only in regards to the number of overall exercises completed but also in regards to elaboration. Students regularly wrote more than the space allotted for Reading/Writing activities and also exhibited a greater attention to detail (as shown, for example through the use of expressive adjectives and verbs). In contrast, for Listening/Speaking and Creative Expression activities, students

less frequently wrote more than expected in terms of length and thoroughness, or otherwise created "outside of the margins."

The activities which failed to attract any student response included the first Creative Expression activity, "Draw and Label a Picture of Yourself" and the last Creative Expression activity, "Create a Scary Comic." In part, this could be due to the general low-level of student engagement at the beginning and end of each term as students "gear up" and "wind down" in the SAC. However, all Reading/Writing and Listening/Speaking activities were completed by at least one student. Additionally, the first week's Reading/Writing activity, the "Creative Self-Questionnaire" had the overall greatest student response (nine unique responses, the same as the total number of Listening/Speaking and Creative Expression activities for *all* six weeks combined).

While anecdotal evidence is in no way conclusive, it is important to note that I spoke with some students who completed the Creative Exercises in casual conversation. The students verbalized that they had not previously been exposed to assignments in a learning environment that asked them to mix words and images. According to these students, "drawing manga" was "not okay" in a school setting. One student mentioned that they had gotten in trouble for drawing in class before. As this type of visual-verbal creative activity is not well-established within Japanese secondary education, it could have attributed in some part to the low-levels of student engagement with the Creative Expression activities.

Similarly, novel speech production is not a main focus within Japanese junior and senior high school English language instruction. Despite MEXT's stated aims which tout creative and "independent-minded" students, many English language learning environments still largely follow the *yakudoku* (word-for-word translation) model which incorporates rote memorization and repetition within classrooms full of otherwise silent students (Gorsuch, 1998; Hino, 1988; Nakane, 2006; Yashima, 2002). Much of the knowledge presented using this model is taught in a receptive way rather than a productive one. As such, students may be accustomed to taking in information and memorizing patterns but are uncomfortable using the knowledge in new ways or applying what they know in non-familiar contexts. The higher level of completion among the Reading/Writing activities can likely, at least in part, be attributed to students' earlier exposure to approximated activities within their pre-university learning environments. In short, the novel and innovative aspects of the Creative Expression and Listening/Speaking activities potentially resulted in some reticence among students to attempt them.

Lowering students' hesitation toward trying new things, motivating them to take creative risks, and building confidence in their own critical/creative thinking skills are some of the obstacles I hope to work toward overcoming in the future. As previously mentioned, like any skill that is regularly practiced, creativity and divergent thinking can become a habit (Sternberg, 2007). Further iterations of this project will work towards gradually building student confidence to try a task, even when they are unsure if they will "succeed" at it. Continuing to encourage students and, as Candy (1991) explains, providing "low-threat, unconditional positive regard, honest and open feedback, respect for the ideas and opinions of others, [with] approval of self-improvement as goal" (p. 337) will be central to accomplishing this aim. More emphasis will be placed on 'front-loading' information at the start of the program. A short introductory presentation to students at the beginning of the six-week cycle is planned for future installments. Pending approval, this presentation will take place during SAC orientation and/or be made available for viewing via a Google Drive resources folder. The presentation will provide information on:

1. The importance of cultivating independent thought within 21st century business environments

2. The goals of the program (i.e., helping students better express themselves and their beliefs in English)

3. The fact that there are no singularly correct answers to any of the activities

4. The varying types of activities they can complete along with representative examples

This introduction will serve to not only better advertise the creative exercises, it will also help to plainly frame the program and lower the level of student confusion and/or apprehension about what it entails. Pre- and post-program surveys will help to gauge student interest and need. Finally, conducting student interviews will allow support staff and volunteers to better understand students' ambitions while providing learners the opportunity to share their experiences, "be heard," and create stronger bonds within the community.

Another obstacle faced during the initial implementation of the creative exercises within the SAC included combatting the belief among students that practicing English using creative assignments will not aid them in their standardized test preparation and is therefore of little worth. Within the NUCB SAC, students sometimes discuss their study plans for the 100-minute session with each other, despite the current rule against learner-to-learner interaction. On more than one occasion, the author overheard a student suggesting that

another student complete a creative activity, to which the response would effectively be, "No, I need to study for the TOEIC." Tackling this particular bias will be a battle not easily won. Because the TOEIC exam is an integral part of the grading system and overall culture of the university, overt practice for the standardized test (i.e., studying TOEIC vocabulary and grammar books, taking partial or full practice exams, etc.) is the most widely undertaken activity in the SAC. While some connections to the TOEIC were made during the first installment of the program (e.g., asking students to create comics using TOEIC vocabulary terms; using images similar to those within the TOEIC listening section within Listening/Speaking activity prompts), there are plans for additional, differentiated exercises which can be linked to TOEIC skills to be incorporated into the framework. For example, a Reading/Writing exercise that asks students to read a short TOEIC selection and then expand upon it in an unexpected way; a Listening/Speaking activity that utilizes a fill-in-the-blank TOEIC script before having students generate a personal, recorded response; or a Creative Expression activity where students draw a comic of an employee's best or worst day working within a certain industry. By providing more creative activities that are thematically linked to the TOEIC exam, students may more readily see their value as study aids.

Lastly, there are plans to fully digitize the creative activity prompts for faster, more effective, and more environmentally-conscious distribution. While physical copies of answer templates will still be made available, creating an easily searchable databank of scaffolded activities should prove to be beneficial for both students as well as potential future collaborators. In addition, digitized copies that are readily made available via a shared Google Drive folder have the potential to grow and become an importance fixture of the NUCB SAC. A virtual sharing space for completed activities (accessible post-submission) could serve to increase the sense of community within the program as it would enable a level of collaboration not often experienced. All of these future plans are to be carried out with the ultimate goal of learning more about the needs and interests of our students in order to better serve them within the SAC.

Conclusion

The idea of what constitutes creativity and how transcultural learning environments can benefit from creative tasks has a rich past of lively discourse and will continue to have a dynamic future. While some may view the ever-evolving nature of creativity and its seeming indefinableness as an obstacle, this uncertain quality can also be viewed from a more positive vantage point. As Smith (2018) argues, "the lack of clarity regarding creativity gives

educators interested in creativity the opportunity to guide" (p. 8) their institution's reform and future growth.

Creative intervention including material modification and variation can benefit self-access centers, like the one at NUCB, that are struggling to maintain or obtain a well-defined identity. They can also be just as advantageous to SACs that do not exhibit such setbacks. SACs should be nexuses of learning and meaning-making where students become empowered as they take an active role in their own academic development. The ability to critically and creatively access oneself is integral for every productive autonomous learner. As Morrison (2008) asserted, self-access learning environments must serve four main functions in the service of students: "bringing together language learning and independent learning, enabling the learner to improve both linguistic proficiency and independent learning skills, providing the necessary resources and providing learner support" (p. 123). The SAC at NUCB faces multiple obstacles in the pursual of serving these main functions. Even so, incorporating resources that include scaffolded, creative language assignments and supporting students through the process of completing these assignments can contribute to a more successful self-access center where students feel more inspired and invested in their personal L2 progression.

Within the SAC at the Nagoya University of Commerce and Business, students have been given the opportunity to expand their knowledge and cultivate stronger, more independent and unique voices in their second language through the implementation of a series of scaffolded creative exercises focusing on the skills of Reading/Writing, Listening/Speaking, and Creative Expression. These activities ask them to expand their skills by drawing on past knowledge and pushing themselves to make innovative connections. By making new meaning and expressing themselves in novel and personal ways, the students became more engaged in their learning and in the metacognititve processes associated with second language acquisition.

Every student enters the learning environment at a different ability level and with unique needs. As such, they progress at different rates. Appropriately scaffolded creative exercises can "meet students wherever they are" along the spectrum of second language acquisition and help them to advance in memorable, authentic ways. Through the implementation of the 6-week creative exercise program within the NUCB SAC, increased engagement in SAC activities, their own learning, and the learning of others was seen among the students who self-selected to complete the exercises. Approximately half (~48%) of those voluntarily completing an exercise chose to undertake at least one other creative task over the

course of the six-week period. Some of these "repeaters" were also witnessed encouraging others, despite a talking ban, to take part in the activities.

While designing and adequately scaffolding prompts was a moderate up-front time investment, implementing the creative exercises program required minimal supervision on the part of SAC administration. The initial preparation time was, in my opinion, well worth the effort as the program served not only to help students practice and build higher-order skills but also allowed them an opportunity to more fully enjoy their SAC experience as they shaped their unique "voice" and identity in their non-native language. I strongly believe that MEXT's stated goals of cultivating an independent, creative society whose future generations exhibit high English proficiency can, in part, be supported by incorporating creative materials/tasks and encouraging creative expression within self-access centers. Without a personal connection, students often lose interest and disengage from their studies, which feeds into a cycle of lowered motivation and leads to an overall decrease in knowledge retention. In contrast, as shown through the execution of this six-week creative exercise program, a structured and supportive self-access learning environment that aids students in strategically integrating creative tasks can promote holistic learner growth, increased levels of engagement, and progressive English language skill development.

Notes on the Contributor

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