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JASAL Online Student Conference 2021 From an Overseas Perspective

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JASAL Online Student Conference 2021 From an Overseas Perspective

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Abstract

This paper reports on the insights gained during the 5th Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) conference for students and the similarities shared by self-access centers (SACs) worldwide. A group of students from 13 universities shared their experiences, ideas, and the current issues faced by their SACs with the aim of, collaboratively, finding a solution to make them available to more language learners. The outcome of this exchange gives an insight into intercultural collaboration and the impact of self-access centers in the process of language learning.

Keywords: self-access centers, language learning, students' experiences.

The 5th JASAL Student conference for students, held on November 27th of 2021, offered the opportunity for autonomous learners worldwide to share their thoughts in an online meeting that brought participants from 13 different universities together. During the three hours in which the conference took place, attendees were able to hear about the contexts of eleven self-access centers (SACs) in Japanese universities such as Toyo University, Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, Kanda University of International Studies, Kobe Shoin Women's University, and Reitaku University among others. The presence of these participating universities provided me, a student from the University of Guanajuato in central Mexico, with the opportunity to hear about the role of self-access in Japan; but also facilitated the exchange of experiences from autonomous learners, which did not differ much regardless of our cultural, academic or geographical context.

The Organization of the Conference

The conference started with a warm welcoming message from the organizers as well as a brief self-reflection activity: What would we like to know once the conference was over? What were our expectations? What were we most curious about? And, even more personal, what were the goals that we, participants, could set for ourselves to

engage more in the interaction that was to be held during the conference? After the discussion, the conference continued with a discussion with some of the presenters in small groups, giving us the chance to get to know each other and share ideas about the conference. Once the rapport was established, presentations about the SACs started with small rounds of presentations before a group chat, once again in small groups, to discuss our ideas on what had been presented. This structure was kept for the subsequent presentations, allowing participants (students and teachers) to ask questions or give suggestions. After the rounds of presentations and group chats were over, there was some time for sharing overall experiences by the attendees, as well as the plans each of the presenters made thanks to the comments received in the different discussions.

Thoughts on the Conference

As mentioned by McMurry et al. (2010), self-access refers to materials, people, and other resources that learners can take advantage of to learn independently; one of those resources, as shown by the engagement of the students who had the chance to talk about their SACs, can involve conference such as JASAL, where participants have the opportunities to meet peers from different universities around the world to improve, in this case, the use of their SACs.

As a student who has made active use of the *Centro de Auto-Aprendizaje De Idiomas (C.A.A.D.I)* at the University of Guanajuato for over three years, it was interesting to hear about other students' experiences learning in a SAC; I was particularly interested in the ideas presented on how to make the centers more attractive for those students who might enjoy a more autonomous learning process but had never been in one.

In this conference, I got the chance to hear great ideas for involving students to actively participate in the designing of materials/decoration of the SACs to have a more direct approach and make those facilities' users feel more comfortable, as mentioned in the presentations of students from Toyo University, Kobe Shoin Women's University, and Reitaku University. It was particularly interesting to see how, regardless of belonging to different universities, we all share similar ideas on how the incorporation of learners who are learning autonomously into the SACs staff—whether it is for gathering creative ideas or as an active administrative role—increases the alumni body to participate as well.

Themed days in the SACs was also a popular topic; it was especially interesting to hear the idea presented by the student from Kanda University, which suggested reaching and engaging students by practicing the language through the discussion of movies they know. It is a popular topic in language classes. However, adding it to a SAC, where the environment provided is already more relaxed and where students feel free to speak, seems an excellent idea to encourage the students to participate in communicative and collaborative learning.

Overall, all the presenters shared one focus for their SACs: student-student interaction as a tool for engagement and improvement. This idea is reinforced by Hughes et al. (2012), who state this understanding of SACs as not simply “self” guided learning centers, but places for social interaction. Given the importance of social interaction and its relation to the correct use of a SAC, the 5th JASAL Student conference was the perfect opportunity and environment for autonomous students to find the motivation to continue improving their centers. Still, it also served as a safe space where questions, issues, and advice were not only welcomed but encouraged. This exchange of ideas among users—especially with such a wide variety of contexts and cultures mixed into one conference—is the best tool for the improvement of SACs:

The idea is that self-access allows students to choose the materials and activities for their individual learning experience [...] Exploring the beliefs of students who consider themselves autonomous learners and comparing them to other students may provide additional data that speaks to how SACs can be enhanced (McMurry et al., 2010. p. 101).

Attending the 5th JASAL Student Conference allowed me to think of *C.A.A.D.I.* not only as a center where language learning is facilitated through a variety of materials and interaction in language workshops but also as a space that can encourage active participation from those who make use of it. It also provided me with ideas that could solve the current issues *C.A.A.D.I.* is facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ideas on how to make use of our resources, spaces, and the students of the language teaching B.A. programs to enrich the experience that a SAC can offer for those who are interested in taking their language learning process beyond the classrooms.

Notes on the Contributor

Denisse Alejandra Vargas Montiel is a graduate student from the English Teaching B.A. program at the University of Guanajuato who has collaborated and continues to collaborate with the SAC Centro de Auto-Aprendizaje De Idiomas (C.A.A.D.I.) of the same institution actively. Her interests are language education, the role of culture in language learning, and the improvement of language learning through social interaction among international students. She is currently studying Spanish as a second language B.A. program in the same university.

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