

MEMBERS' VOICES | メンバーの声

Ways to Encourage Elementary School Learners' Autonomy Inside and Outside the Classroom

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My name is Sandy Chong. I have been teaching freelance in Tokyo, Japan for more than eight years. Like many, I started my career as an eikaiwa instructor. I, then, gradually narrowed my work down to teaching children. I found great passion in teaching children because by experience, I realized that the skills used to teach them, such as scaffolding and designing fun activities, can be customized to teach adults. However, the skills used to teach adults may not be modified to teach children due to excessive explanations and minimal fun activities. I am fascinated by the thought that being a successful teacher for children can lead to success in teaching adults. Therefore, I decided to earn a Master of Education degree while practicing onsite. Yet, I still practice the art of scaffolding everyday teaching at elementary schools.

After completing my studies last year, I joined the Japan Association for Language Teaching, in hopes of continuing to enhance my skills through learning from experienced educators. I decided to join the Learner Development SIG because I hoped that I could

gain and contribute ideas on learner autonomy.

As an educator for children for more than two years now, I have been engaging myself in ongoing action research to explore what is best for young Japanese learners. Conducting action research is an excellent way to help bolster my focus on developing the best teaching methods for children. For one of my action research projects, I explored appropriate activities for children to help develop their autonomy outside of class time. For example, I found that the English section in the library is not as popular as any other sections. Therefore, I started hanging around the English books section to see what would happen. At first, a few children who know me would approach me and I would start reading a book to them. That attracted many more children and they would listen to the storytelling until the school bell rang. Later, according to the librarians, some children had asked when I would be there again for storytelling and more children have started borrowing English books. My next step is to try storytelling at the beginning of each class to see if that will encourage the children to become more interested in reading English books on their own in the library.

Another action research project that I have been conducting is finding out what studying English means to young Japanese learners. In my classes with fourth graders, I asked them why they think it is necessary to learn English at this age. Out of 170 students, approximately 30% of them raised their hands. The answers I collected from them include to

be able to enter a good school in the future, to prepare them for future English classes, to communicate with foreigners, and to look for a good occupation when they grow up. They seem to be aware of the logic behind learning English as an investment for their future. While they specify the reason to learning English is to interact with foreigners, I am more interested in how the process of learning English would help them to ‘communicate’ better in general.

Although I do not possess any concrete data to share at the moment, I recognize that the majority of my students reacted to the word ‘communicate’. As an experiment, with the help of the Japanese homeroom teachers, I explained to the classes that I believe ‘communication’ is not only to share information in words, but to be able to present oneself to another and to acknowledge one another. When I mentioned the keyword, even with my limited observation due to a large number of students in each class, I could see that this word rang a bell with attentive students, put an indifferent look on quiet and distant students, and caused a queasy face on students who are suffering from autism. It seems to me that, if there is one, the barrier for these children in learning English in the first place was their fear of facing disapproval and failure of utilizing English. If I were to reposition English from just a subject to a useful tool to face their fear to communicate with foreigners, perhaps that may change their attitude towards it. I am convinced because after I had explained it in every class, my students are more willing to take part and speak up. My ongoing engagement in this matter is to experiment with ways to help these young

learners develop their own ways of communicating effectively as a whole in our English classes.

As a passionate educator for children, I am excited to dedicate time to experiment with ways to help children’s learning. I hope my ideas of teaching can influence children as well as other inexperienced teachers. to take parts to speak up. My ongoing engagement in this matter is to experiment ways to help these young learners develop their own ways of communicating effectively as a whole in our English classes.

How can a self-access learning center facilitate English use among students?

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Hello everyone!

My name is Sina Takada. I am currently a student in the MA TESOL program at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) and my academic interest is in learner autonomy, learning strategy, phonetics, and pragmatics. I also did my undergraduate studies at KUIS, graduating in 2018 with a BA in English. While I was at KUIS, I worked as a TOEFL tutor, and it was this first experience of teaching English that made me interested in EFL and ESL. After graduating, I enrolled in the MA program and started working as a part-time English teacher at a local cram school. Later that year, I started teaching adult learners English conversation, and got a position as a Learning

Advisor for junior and senior high school students.

When I was an undergraduate student at KUIS, I used to use the SALC (Self Access Learning Center) almost every day. The SALC was a fascinating place to me, because it provides students opportunities to use English outside of class where students can use a variety of resources for learning English, including CDs, textbooks, magazines, PCs, teachers, advisors, and other students. The most significant part of the SALC was that we speak English there. In order to improve conversational proficiency, I spent much time chatting or playing games with other people that involved a lot of unplanned speeches. In the third year, I became a leader of a SALC community called a Study Group, where members gather at the SALC and study English together. Through those experiences of interacting with other students, I was always interested in how students' interaction can foster SALC use and language learning. Indeed I have done some research about how the members of the Study Group affect each other's motivation. I conducted interviews with active members of the Study Group with such questions as why they joined a Study Group and whether they feel motivated or demotivated. Through the interviews, I learned that they are most likely motivated to study hard by peer pressure. For example, one answered that when he sees other members studying hard, he also feels like he wishes to study hard to catch up with them. While this was a motivation to some students, it turned out that some can be stressed and rather demotivated. In addition to this external motivation, members are also intrinsically motivated to gather at SALC, for example,

casually meeting in lunch time chatting in English.

For my next research project about students' interaction, I am interested in learning about language use at the SALC. As I mentioned, the SALC is an English speaking area but its language policy has been controversial. I personally liked the strict restriction of using Japanese in the area, because it pushes students to use English. However, some students can be so intimidated by the strict policy that they lose confidence and give up coming to the SALC. In addition, using Japanese is occasionally useful, such as asking how to say a Japanese word in English. For those pros and cons of English-only policy, it is hard to define legitimate rules of language use. Instead of defining sets of rules, I feel that it will be more important to think about how to motivate students to use English rather than forcing them to do so.

Now that I am working at K-SALC (the SALC at Kanda Jogakuen Junior & Senior High School), I am experiencing the same issue of language use that the SALC at KUIS has. Although K-SALC is intended to be an English-only, or recommended, space, I have seen quite a few students speaking Japanese to their friends and even to their teachers sometimes. I have seen a similar situation at the SALC in KUIS too. First, it seemed to me that students resort to using Japanese due to lack of proficiency or confidence, but I have come to notice another possible reason. I highly suspect that students cannot code-switch to English due to the strong relationship they have already developed with each other outside the SALC. As I noticed the relationship between the students and teachers outside of K-SALC, I came to suspect

that many students don't see K-SALC as a 'special' place where students have to code-switch to English, which means that being in the SALC means nothing different for them from being any other places. I imagine that speaking English to someone with whom you don't usually talk in English is not an easy action, because it can be uncomfortable or embarrassing to change language to communicate with close friends. For example, when I did an English conversation session with a pair of students, they tried speaking English to me. However, they tended to speak much more Japanese to each other.

I suppose that once people develop a particular relationship with each other using languages in a particular way for that relationship, they also develop such rules as how to call each other, whether or not to use honorifics, and what language to use. Most students usually develop their relationships with each other outside of K-SALC. It is moreover likely that the students know that some of the English teachers can speak Japanese, which, if true, explains why some students also speak to them in Japanese. Indeed, when I was chatting with a student, she revealed that she does not feel any difference between being in K-SALC and other facilities. As she speaks to her friends and English teachers in Japanese outside of K-SALC, so does she in there too. I found her opinion important for thinking about what K-SALC means to the students. This has made me decide it would be worth researching whether or not many students feel similarly to her. If so, they will need some stimuli that motivate them to use English, and take them beyond their pre-existing outside-SALC relationship.

Teachers keep emphasizing English use at K-SALC, but teachers pushing students to use English may not be the best kind of motivation because it is highly extrinsic and students might not value using English themselves. I suppose that students need more "subconscious" pressure that makes them feel that they want to use English spontaneously. For example, constantly playing TV shows or radio in English in K-SALC is one of the ways to make the area more English abundant and different from the outside world, hence facilitating English use. These ideas are still hypothetical, but I wish to explore how students are feeling about language use in K-SALC. At the same time, it will be useful to ask them directly what can help them use English. By making some changes in K-SALC after listening to students' feelings and opinions and observing their behavior, we will be able to understand better how students can be motivated to use English spontaneously.