

## **Report on the JASAL 2016 Annual Conference**

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### **Abstract**

In Japanese English education, more and more educational institutions have established self-access learning environment. Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) is an organization where teachers, students, and administration staff who are involved in this field can exchange ideas and receive knowledge to develop their self-access facilities. JASAL held the annual conference at Konan Women's University (KWU) on December 10th, 2016. This time, over 95 participants from 43 different affiliations gathered at the conference. The conference included self-access center's tour at KWU, 20 presentations, and 12 poster presentations regarding various topics of self-access learning. This report summarizes the presentations based on four categories: student assistant; training and professional development; integrate learning in class and self-access center; and finally promoting and managing self-access center. The authors concluded this article with ideas for future expansion of JASAL.

Keywords; self-access, advising, professional development, autonomy, student assistant

Along with the success of the first independent conference in 2015, the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) held a conference at Konan Women's University (KWU) in Kobe in 2016. Participants came from 43 different educational institutions in Japan and other countries to exchange ideas and knowledge. At the opening remarks, the president of JASAL, Hisako Yamashita introduced the history and the mission of JASAL and how it has developed as an organization and contributed to the field of self-access learning. Following the remarks, Jo Mynard from Kanda University of International Studies gave a plenary talk regarding the recent shifts in self-access learning and how we can respond to the changes. After the plenary talk, ten 15-minute presentations were provided, and 12 poster presentations followed after the lunch break. An additional ten 15-minute presentations concluded the conference. The conference also included a tour of the self-access center (SAC) called "e-space" at KWU which offers advising service, extensive reading and

various events. One notable feature was students who work as staff in SAC presented about their activities and experiences. This allowed the participants to consider self-access learning from a student perspective. Student participants had student get-togethers and communicated with students from other universities.

This report mainly summarizes the plenary talk and 15-minute presentations. The presenters talked about various topics related to self-access learning, and those topics can be categorized into five groups. The first category is related to student assistants in SAC. Recently, student assistants have played greater roles in SAC in terms of managing and improving the centers. The next group is about training or professional development of staff including teachers and students. The third group focuses on how to integrate learning in class and SAC. The presentations introduced some cases in which teachers tried to connect learning in the class and SAC in order to enhance the effectiveness of the SAC. The last group is about promoting and managing a SAC. The presenters shared some challenges and how to deal with them.

### **The plenary talk**

The plenary talk highlighted the recent challenges as well as hope for people who engage in the field of self-access learning. Jo Mynard first illustrated the recent shifts in self-access learning in terms of learning environment, informal learning, and government and institutional guidelines. She also shared the three responses to the shifts. Traditionally, a SAC had individual space for watching and listening to learning materials. Students did not possess tools to watch or listen by themselves, so the SAC provided this

function. However, most people have access to various educational tools by themselves via internet or smartphone devices. According to Ms. Mynard, this is not the end of SAC, as the SAC has an important role as a social dimension where users can connect people who have the same goals or are seeking help. The second shift is the expansion of informal learning. Many people use informal learning materials such as free websites or applications for language learning. The SAC prepares not only learning materials but also support for users to continue their studies. For example, an advising service is often included in the SAC, and it can provide support in relation to affective strategies. The third shift is government and institutional guidelines that put more emphasis on lifelong learning, active learning or 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. These goals can be promoted through self-access learning since self-access learning aims to empower users' autonomous learning. Autonomous learners can reflect their learning, set their own goals, and utilize strategies and resources by themselves. These skills can assist people to become life-long learners.

### **Student Assistant**

Student staff often manage self-access centers and they are the core of centers, thus many presenters mentioned about the roles of student staff.

Kodai Okabayashi and Mika Kobayashi, student staff at Kyoto University of Foreign studies, presented about their self-access facilities called "NINJA". NINJA stands for Navigating Independent Non-stop Journey to Autonomy, and one of the important roles of the center is connecting Japanese students and international students. They manage programs such as language exchange and conversation programs in various languages and help students

make use of the programs.

Ayumi Tahara, Erina Kinoshita and Yui Fukushima, students of Konan Women's University, are part of their university's e-space committee, and initiated a campaign to create a better learning atmosphere in E-space, their university's SAC. Several students had complained about the noise and changing purposes for using the SAC which sparked the start of this campaign. After doing research and a lot of hard work, these three dedicated students were able to improve the learning environment in E-space. They added many useful tools to e-space including: a magazine shelf, movie board, TOEIC corner, information board, news live screen, board for this week's word and experience information. In addition, they embellished the white board and posted the rules of e-space. After the changes were implemented, many students had positive comments regarding the changes, feeling the e-space was more enjoyable and interesting than previously. As a result, the e-space has become a much more colorful and productive learning environment for Konan Women's University students.

John Tomecsek of Osaka Kyoiku University gave a dynamic presentation about the growth of the Global Learning Community (GLC) at his university. There are many student supporters involved in creating a strong learning community at Osaka Kyoiku. All students recruited as staff must receive thorough training focusing on leadership, problem-solving, open communication and working together as a community. The GLC has offered 900 classes (taught by students) and 29 events throughout its existence. Students of all experiences and majors are welcome to participate in the GLC in order to enrich the experience and encourage diversity among all students. Student outreach was also discussed as a method GLC uses to cater to the needs of the university's

desires and needs. Once students have participated in the GLC it is greatly hoped that they will take all of their experiences out into society and make a difference.

### **Training and Professional Development**

Training and professional development are necessary for staff at self-access centers in order to respond to changes and improve the quality of services.

Saki Inoue from Soka University explained the beneficial effect that advising has on helping students progress in language learning. She shared about Soka's self-access center, the English Consultation Room (ECR). In this center, students can receive advice on how to study for TOEIC, TOEFL and other English tests as well as have assistance with study planning, improving English skills or preparing to study abroad. Students are offered private 30-minute consultation sessions in either English or Japanese. The main goal of the ECR is to promote autonomous learning and encourage students to create solutions to their language learning issues and improve their study habits on their own after talking with the advisor. Furthermore, the professional development aspect was presented, showing that each year advisors partake in staff training, self-reflection, peer observation and training from an advising expert. Moreover, Ms. Inoue discussed the challenges that occur in the ECR. For example, not all advisors agree on the definition of autonomy and students who come to the center have various needs and learning styles. Despite the challenges, the ECR has been quite successful with over 700 students visiting per year and the advisors developing professionally by gaining confidence and skills regarding

advising in the language learning field.

Satoko Kato from Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages presented about her research regarding mentoring programs for experienced learning advisors. She emphasized the importance of dialogue not only between advisors and students, but among advisors. She quoted Brockbank, McGill & Beech (2002), "reflection with others, or dialogue, offers the power of challenge and different perspectives to the learner and ultimately the potential for double loop learning" (p.21). Based on these beliefs, she established the PD program for learning advisors which includes mentoring. Her idea of mentoring is not just an experienced advisor giving feedback, but more like a collaboration or co-creation. The mentoring program promotes mutual growth for the mentor's and mentee's and advisor's well-being.

Meg Varney & Lindsay Mack from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University also introduced the activity of peer assistants (PA) as well as how they train the PAs. Pas' roles are basically three: being a tutor and a greeter, and doing some administrative tasks at the SAC. For their initial training, students need to experience shadowing of a senior PA's work as well as their self-study habits. Additionally, this university offers group training for the PAs. In the group training, the PAs participate in discussion and workshops, and are involved in material development. Based on each PA's specialty, they have a working group such as a facebook team or statistics team. Since a PA's responsibility is rather heavy, the hiring process is strict and each PA needs to be recommended by a teacher.

### **Integrating learning in class and SAC**

One way to encourage students to use SAC is to integrate classroom and SAC. Students can prepare before they go to SAC, or vice versa. Sometimes the integrations can bring more learning outcome. Mark Hammond from Kanazawa University introduced an interesting case at Kanazawa College of Art where students learn arts such as designing and crafting. In the English Help Center, which offers a weekly one-hour session of English conversation practice, students introduce about their current class project and assignment in English. The English Help Center is also used for a place where students can develop friendships with international students. Not only in the Help Center, but also students started to visit each other's workspace and studios. In their workspace, students can actually experience what other students do and use English in more authentic situations. That promotes their curiosity and increases their motivation to communicate with others in English.

Maho Sano of Soka University shared about her experience integrating a Self-Access Conversation Program into her English Course. This assignment was given to help students improve their study habits, self-reflect and make use of the conversation program. The students received speaking strategy training in the class and were given one topic talk to use per week and had a log sheet. The topics would then be utilized outside to correspond with the Conversation Program. The Log sheet asked students to check if they used specific strategies/communication skills that were introduced in class as well as provide a self-reflection about successful aspects, as well as goals they created for the next session. Ms. Sano noticed positive outcomes of this process in which students started going to the self-access programs, while concurrently worked on using strategies and skills to improve their English and enhance their self-reflection

skills. On the other hand, problems persisted with some students not participating in the program, inconsistent in-class speaking practice and huge gaps occurring among learners' proficiency levels. As a result of this procedure, it was concluded that many teaching aspects could be looked at and improved including: scaffolding speaking and reflection skills, addressing emotional issues students have and investigating both motivating and demotivating factors involved with speaking practice.

### **Promoting and Managing SAC**

Yuki Ota from Seitoku University designed a poster presentation on how to manage a SAC and cope with issues that may arise. Seitoku University created the Language Education Center (LEC) in 2012 in order to provide an English- only environment, while simultaneously offer assistance to students struggling with learning English. Generally, students come requesting help with homework or exams, self-studying or for conversation practice. However, there are some students coming because of non-academic issues, which is a challenge that may occur in other universities as well. Most of the students are not fond of studying English and have lower level English proficiency. Ms. Ota depicted several common issues. Among the issues shared pertained to: students complaining about friendship issues, students wanting to go abroad with no solidified plan, or having a negative perspective towards studying English only because other friends To alleviate the issues the Language Advisors listen and then offer appropriate advice Depending on the situation, there is sometimes a need to request students to speak to the school counselor. Additionally, placards are often used to encourage students to have a more positive attitude towards

learning English. Despite the challenges, the LEC takes strong measures and aims to protect the original purpose of the center as being a learning space.

Thomas Mach & Shari Yamamoto from Konan University introduced their experience of working on a large-scale SAC called "LOFT". In their SAC, about 50 student staff are working; some as a tutor and others as an assistant. They plan various events and help other students. Students visit LOFT for various purposes, and the presenters tracked why students come to LOFT by using a stamp card. One of the findings was that students just visited LOFT at the beginning of semester, but gradually students came to LOFT in order to do tasks provided at LOFT. Therefore, they want to work on adding useful tasks for students. They also talked about how they promote their program and events, and the effective way of promotion is via LINE.

### **Closing Remarks/Conclusion**

At the conclusion of the conference, a majority of participants gathered to hear closing remarks made by JASAL committee members, Hisako Yamashita, Clair Taylor, Katherine Thornton and Andy Tweed. The committee thanked all of the participants for their great presentations and contributions to the conference. Additionally, participants had a chance to share their thoughts and suggestions about JASAL and the conference. Generally, participants shared about having positive experiences at the conference and could garner new knowledge about SACs and how other universities are managing. Being that most participants were educators and students, the administrative perspective on SACs was not represented during this conference. Perhaps, hearing from the administrative perspective on SACs would be very beneficial in improving the success and progression in the SAC field. One

notable feedback mentioned was that JASAL should expand its promotion, as the organization is fairly new and remains unknown to many Japanese educators and researchers. Perhaps promoting the current Facebook page, having brochures or advertisements would make JASAL more widely known throughout Japan. After the remarks, a group photo was taken at the end to commemorate the success of the JASAL 2016 conference.

#### Reference

Brockbank, A., McGill, I., & Beech, N. (2002). *Reflective Learning in Practice*. Farnham, UK: Gower Publishing.