

MEMBERS' VOICES | メンバーの声

Developing Student Autonomy through Self- Access Learning Centres and Teacher Practice - A New Endeavour



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From Teaching to Advising

I have worked as an English Language instructor in many different capacities over the last 10 years, in South Korea, Australia, and now Japan. While I thought this would be a fairly straightforward career path, at the end of 2021 I was offered a full-time position at a university's Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC). Having previously taught part-time at the university, I jumped at the opportunity to work within a department I knew to be passionate, innovative, and generally a joy to work with. However, my only prior knowledge of SALCs was a second-hand account describing them as spaces that hosted conversation-practice groups. While I asked many questions about what the day-to-day work would look like I did not think to ask about the deeper purpose of a SALC, what learners would or wouldn't need from me, and how learner autonomy would reshape my concept of language learning as a whole.

The SALC was set up several years before, with generous funding and under the guidance of a few dedicated staff members. Learners currently have access to several thousand English graded readers, nearly 900 English-audio movies, computers and iPads, study resource books, English print media, advice and community-building displays, and study spaces. A small group of paid student-staff man the counter and host the "English Café", where learners join for conversation over lunch or English-based board games. Additional events are held regularly, with the advisors presenting about foreign cultural

topics or running workshops while the student-staff present their own topics of interest related to English study. Lastly, learners can book 1:1 sessions with advisors for free conversation time or seek study advice.

Teaching How to Think about Learning

As well as being an advisor in the SALC, the position includes a bi-weekly Tutoring class which is compulsory for all first-year students. This class partially aims to familiarise the students with the SALC with participation in programs being a graded component. The main goal of the Tutoring class, however, is to help them become more self-aware of their studies, use of English, goals, and progress. Classes ask them to be more aware of how they have studied English in the past and how it was or wasn't successful. They practice setting long-term goals and breaking them down into achievable targets and habits. The students are exposed to new study methods and opportunities and are asked to evaluate the relevance of these methods to their goals. Class time is also given to discussing failures and successes in their progress in an effort to build community and support networks.

For example, the fall semester is largely based around students developing an elected skill meaningful to their goals. Students are asked to choose an area they wish to work on throughout the semester such as reading, vocabulary, TOEIC, or speaking. They then discuss this goal 1:1 with me. The student reflects on why they want to achieve this goal and how they can break the goal down to more easily definable targets with regular accountability and self-evaluation. A student who wishes to improve their speaking may express that they are scared of joining a study abroad program because they won't be able to talk to peers while overseas. They identify three specific goals for the semester: talking to peers in casual settings, confidence, and everyday vocabulary. The student

decides that they will build a vocabulary list around their hobbies, daily life, weekend activities, and other topics they might share with peers. Once prepared and confident with their topics, they then attend the English Café once a week. To improve accountability and reduce shyness, the student will attend with a classmate with similar goals. After the English Café session, the student will write a self-reflection noting how the conversation went, whether they used their prepared vocabulary, and how they felt about their participation. At the end of the semester, students are to give a short presentation, reflecting on if and how they improved their chosen skill, and whether they have the ability to continue to improve.

A successful student in this course is not one who achieves the highest TOEIC test score or reads the most number of books. Instead, students are taught to think about their wants and needs in language learning, understand and implement processes to achieve their goals, and reflect on their progress in a way that develops long-term, sustainable growth. It is hoped that these skills will stick with the students not just through their first year learning English at university but throughout their lives in various contexts.

Learning What, Learning How, and Beyond

As a language teacher, I often encouraged my learners to use the language covered in class in creative and personalised ways and gave them as much time as possible to practice the target language through a variety of output methods. However, the underlying premise was that the target language, usually prescribed by a textbook or syllabus, would be necessary for the learner and therefore important and valuable to them. In this scenario, the goal was either to pass the class or achieve some vague, ill-defined promise of future fluency. In return, I often talk with learners who describe wanting to “study more vocabulary” or “get grammar correct” in order to “be fluent”. This sets in mind that the goal itself is the study and the end result is something not easily definable. In my previous classrooms, I wished to

support learners’ goals so provided more words to learn. While I modelled and practiced various memorisation activities, learners were not given the freedom to choose how and what to learn. This passive learning model is one the MEXT has been attempting to reverse. However, many Japanese students are reaching university and are still unaccustomed to the premise of active learning and learner autonomy.

My teaching methodology described above still relied on the idea that understanding many words and grammar structures would get learners where they wished to be. When asking learners to visualise themselves as “fluent” (in their words) in English, they describe scenes such as chatting with friends from around the world in English, travelling internationally with confidence, and enjoying English media without the use of translations. What they are describing, of course, is not learning a language but using a language. This is why the Tutoring class has a compulsory element connected to participating in events and activities in the SALC. The SALC does not score the students’ performance in activities or tell them their response is incorrect. Rather it is an opportunity and a way to meet the learners at whatever level of accuracy, fluency, or motivation they display.

Through my work in the SALC so far, my understanding of learner autonomy has developed from an obscure notion to a guiding principle in how I see myself as an educator. There is an urge to provide the right answers for students, provide as much support as possible, and predict their needs. However, this reduces students’ abilities to act autonomously in their own learning and develop the vital skills needed not just to use the language but also to seek out what they want to learn. By attempting to guide learners toward what I perceive to be their goals, I am inadvertently telling them that they lack the ability to improve.

Without a sense of ownership and responsibility over their learning and without a clear understanding of where they want to be in their language learning journey, how are learners meant to achieve their lofty goals? Goals need to

be discussed and broken down into smaller, achievable targets. Meta-awareness needs to be developed regarding language skills and learning processes. Habits need to be built and accountability systems need to be put in place so that when there is a fumble it does not become a failure. Opportunities need to be provided so that there is time and space to use the language and explore it further. And confidence needs to be fostered so that learners believe in their ability to learn.

My first semester working in a SALC and teaching the Tutoring class has been eye-opening and inspiring. I do not believe I can return to English teaching with the same approach I was using for the decade prior. I now understand that the language itself is just one tool learners will need to employ on their journey and so teachers, in return, need to offer so much more.

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#1: a short personal profile of yourself as a learner and teacher and your interest in learner development (about 500 to 1,000 words) : 学習者・教員としての自身のプロフィールと学習者の成長に関する興味 (約 2,000 字-4,000 字)

#2: a story of your ongoing interest in, and engagement with, particular learner development (and/or learner autonomy) issues (about 500 to 1,000 words) : 学習者の成長や学習者の自律に関する興味や取り組み (約 2,000 字-4,000 字)

#3: a short profile of your learner development research interests and how you hope to develop your research (about 500 to 1,000 words) : 学習者の成長に関する研究内容と今後の研究の展望 (約 2,000 字-4,000 字)

#4: a short profile of your working context and the focus on learner development/learner autonomy that a particular institution takes and/or is trying to develop in a particular curriculum (about 500 to 1,000 words) : 教育環境の紹介、所属機関やカリキュラムにおける学習者の成長や自律に関する取り組み (約 2,000 字-4,000 字)