原　著

Attributes of Successful Self-access Learning Centres

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＜Abstract＞

Self-access learning centres (SALCs) offer language learners an environment in which to extend their studies in an individualized, self-motivated manner. Using a SALC's materials, technology, multi-media resources, and academic support, students can create programmes of study through which they can move at their own pace and level. However, for a SALC to be successful, there needs to be more available than just space and materials. Through interviews with the staff of SALCs both in Japan and abroad, as well as a review of relevant literature, it was found that two areas of concern are commonly expressed:

1. The level of student usage
2. Staff commitment to providing support

This paper will discuss both these areas, and report on strategies that have been employed to help SALCs more effectively serve the needs of their students.

Keywords：self access, learner-centred, independent learning

The need for learner-centred resources in language education

One of the biggest problems in learning languages is the belief by many students that just coming to classes will provide them with sufficient knowledge and skills to master the language. Students readily show surprise－and even indignation－that this minimal commitment of time and effort has led to little or even no improvement in ability in the target language. Conversely, it is not until students start to take active responsibility for their own learning that results really begin to accrue. As Thompson and Atkinson (2010) state, "Linking self-access and classroom learning is a difficult and time-consuming business, but one which can lead to great rewards as learners develop independent learning skills and assume greater responsibility for their learning." This responsibility might be illustrated in a variety of activities, such as joining circles or groups which study the target language, volunteering to help in community projects to teach others, taking part in study abroad programmes, or taking advantage of the abundance of multimedia material that is available.

However, by far the most universal－and arguably the most effective－way for students to build their skills is by engaging in regular, ongoing, and incremental self-study programmes. Benson (2001) wrote that, "any practice that encourages and enables learners to take greater control of any aspect of their learning can be considered a means of promoting autonomy". This self-directed learning comes in many forms, such as using textbooks for independent study, enrolling in online study programmes, studying for specific language tests (such as

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Eiken's STEP tests or TOEIC), or creating self-made activities such as focused vocabulary lists or listening activities. For this self-study to be effective, however, it needs to take place on a regular basis, as spasmodic or crammed learning is well proven to be only marginally effective, as any gains made are soon lost. Independent study also needs to follow a continuum, so that learning takes place in a structured rather than chaotic fashion. Within this structure, there needs to be recycling of learning – specifically when understanding is weak or limited – so that concepts are constantly being relearned and reviewed. This concept of spacing the learning – as opposed to cramming – is well documented, such as in Kornell's study on the use of flashcards (2009). In addition, the material needs to develop in incremental stages, so that the students are always reaching out to master concepts they do not fully understand, thus maintaining a gap between their current knowledge and their desired learning outcomes.

There are vast amounts of resources out there (such as vocabulary activities, listening and comprehension training, or practice tests for external exams), and much of it is available free or at a nominal price for anyone with Internet access. Schools also will usually provide materials and resources to students wanting to develop their language skills through library resources or teacher-provided materials and guidance. However, for any but the most organized and dedicated students, developing an effective self-study programme and organizing the resources to work at it is beyond them. Particularly in Japan, university students are burdened with heavy class schedules and all the attendant homework and assignment requirements. On top of that are the pressures of clubs and circles, part-time jobs, and the social expectations that are an intrinsic part of university life.

From the school's side, they have to walk a fine line between handholding students or going totally hands off with independent study. If programmes are set up as requirements with specific goals and guidelines, there is a risk of a backlash of resistance from students. Students in such programmes will be less inclined to develop any sense of proactivity in becoming independent, self-motivated language learners. Furthermore, if programmes are prescribed to students as a whole rather than individually, they lack the flexibility to be tailored to distinct student needs, resulting in students having to do work they don't need to cover, or missing areas of study they desperately need. On the other hand, if schools opt to let students totally decide the form and extent of their self-study, chances are that very few will give it more than scant attention.

However, the most effective learning is always going to be that which is student centred. When any learner makes an independent decision to learn, then follows that up with an active and well-planned programme of study, the results are always going to be more positive. Students are better able to focus on their weaker areas, they can select activities that match their learning styles, and they have a stronger sense of self-motivation. So for schools that are looking to foster a pro-active approach to self-study amongst their student body, the task then becomes one of providing as much logistical and material support as possible without taking away from the students their expectation of self-determination in what they will learn.

In informal ways, teachers already do this by providing time, learning opportunities, and materials to students outside of class time. Unfortunately, the random nature of this assistance means that the needs of many learners go unaddressed. There is unlikely to be any significant coordination between faculty members, and the positive consequences of teacher assistance are less likely to flow

over to motivate other students to likewise seek support. Teachers themselves, already overburdened with academic responsibilities, are less likely to offer support that is planned and coordinated. Besides, students may also feel reluctant to approach faculty through their own feelings of shyness and low self-confidence.

What is required, then, is a programme of study that utilizes the resources the school already quite likely has in the form of materials and staffing, yet allows the learners to determine for themselves what, when, and how fast they will learn.

Self-access centres as a possible solution

One approach many institutions have taken to resolve these issues is to set up self-access learning centres (SALCs). These are, in the broadest sense, "any purposefully designed facility in which learning resources are made directly available for learners" (Benson, 2001). The goal is generally to offer facilities that encourage students to either partially or fully participate in self-directed learning. As the website introduction to Kanda University of International Studies' SALC states, "the SALC is a place where students can individualise their language learning and develop autonomous learning skills." They can range from simple resource libraries of materials that students can self-access to full blown physical spaces with large amounts of resources, staffing, and equipment. Some examples of large and successful language-related SALCs are:

- Kanda University of International Studies – *Self Access Learning Centre*: <http://www.kandagaigo.ac.jp/kuis/salc/>
- City University of Hong Kong – *English Language Centre*: <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/elc/>
- Hong Kong University of Science and Technology – *Language Centre*: <http://lc.ust.hk/>
- University of Auckland (New Zealand) – *English Language Self-Access Centre*: <http://www.cad.auckland.ac.nz/index.php?p=elsac>

In smaller centres, the focus is generally on offering resources for students to use. These are most commonly listening and reading resources, games and books, and a selection of movies on tapes and disks. Staffing is probably nominal, and there is little oversight of how students are using the resources.

As the learning centres get bigger, other elements begin to be offered, such as:

- Full administration and supervisorial staffing
- Full- or part-time teaching staff
- Increased amounts of technology and equipment
- Increased student oversight – generally by electronic recording
- Dedicated spaces for specific purposes such as listening booths, stages, study cubicles, seminar rooms, presentation spaces, or lounge areas
- Programmes for specific purposes, such as writing workshops, counseling, test preparation, or cultural studies
- Banks of activity materials for specific needs and skills
- Libraries of books, magazines, and other media
- Practice material for tests such as TOEIC or Eiken
- Information on study-abroad programmes

Big or small, the goals are the same – namely, to offer any student both a location and resources for them to engage in independent language learning in a coordinated, supportive, and systematic fashion.

Research project: The attributes of successful SALCs

Measuring outcomes

Assessing the effectiveness of learning centres is always challenging. The learning outcomes are not clearly set and are very individualized, so they cannot be clearly measured. In addition, there are no control groups to compare with to make any measure of progress. Ideally, this should not be an issue as, like a traditional library, a SALC is a resource that any student can use and therefore should be independent of outcomes. However, with shrinking budgets and more focus on returns, schools want to see how money that has been spent is being used. Moreover, centres need to know which resources are being effectively used or are most helpful to students, and what programmes assist the students most in their goal to learn independently.

Through interviews with staff at centres in both Japan and Hong Kong (see Appendix 1), as well as a review of relevant literature, strategies that SALCs are employing to monitor, assess, and improve their facilities were discussed and compared. It was found that most centres face the same issues, most commonly related to attracting students and institutional support.

Student usage

Students are busy people, both with their studies and with their lives outside school. Language students face double hurdles, as they not only have to keep up with their studies, but must also attain competency in another language. SALCs are created to help them to develop language competency by creating opportunities for further study outside the classroom. The challenge for SALCs, however, is to actually get the students through the door, and to this end a variety of tactics is employed.

Kinki University's *Cube* in Osaka is a beautifully designed timber building that follows an open plan format. Inside the building, tables and chairs are set out in a café-style design. In fact, there is even a coffee shop to the side that serves drinks and food. At the tables, young native-English speakers work with groups of students on language activities, guidance, and language games. Yet even with a beautiful, futuristic building and attractive staff, the centre still has difficulty in attracting students. In order to bring students in, the centre plans a lot of activities, such as movie nights, concerts, or visits by famous personalities. They have theme weeks, such as a Halloween week at the end of October. In fact, during a visit by the writers, they even had a visiting zoo set up outside the centre. Even with these enticements, it was still proving difficult to attract sufficient numbers of students, so a passport system was set up. Each student is given a passport to the centre, and upon visiting, the date, time, and activities completed are recorded. Each semester, every student on the campus is required to spend a minimum amount of time in the centre, and this requirement is built into their mandatory English class's course structure.

At the *Language Centre* in Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HK-UST), a similar time requirement is hardwired into courses. When students visit and leave, they must swipe their student card through a reader at the entrance, and their total time in the centre is recorded. This mandatory time requirement seems to be the most common way for SALCs to encourage students to take part, though methods of recording and assessing participation vary between institutions. According to staff, the hope is that by setting a minimum mandatory time requirement, students will discover the benefits of using the SALC's facilities, and begin to use it of their own accord.

However, systems of setting mandatory

requirements, even though they get students through the door, are not without problems. At HK-UST, for example, they have found that a lot of students have been getting around the system by logging in, leaving the centre, then coming back later to log out, consequently negating any benefits they might have gained. At places like Kinki University where attendance is tied to course assessment, this results in low usage for much of the semester with a flood just before cut-off dates, thus overloading the centres and countering the goals of regular, sustained language practice.

Commentary

It seems self-defeating for institutions to prescribe compulsory attendance at centres whose very name implies self-determination of learning practice. As many universities have learned, the only real gain in setting these requirements is a statistical boost in reporting figures. Although some schools have reported moderate success in using this as a *bait and hook* strategy, how real this success is seems difficult to determine. The better strategy would be to reverse this from being a negative requirement to a positive inducement – offering instead additional credit for SALC users in their class grades. Students who use the SALC on an on-going basis could be entitled to extra points in their course assessments, or exemptions from tests or assignments.

Better still, however, would be for SALCs to increase the intrinsic benefits of their programmes. At the City University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), centre staff members offer clinics or extra tutorials in specific skills such as English writing, standardized test preparation, or presenting in English. Students who have assignments due may make reservations to work with staff members or volunteers and get advice on their work. Rather than functioning as a correctional service, staff point out areas where writing is weak and explain how it could be corrected. Writers can then go away, edit their papers, and return later for follow-up counseling.

In this way, students see the on-campus SALCs as a useful and usable resource to help them in their studies, rather than an extra activity they need to include in their already crowded calendars. In fact, in their 2010 study, Miller and Gardner found that there has been a shift from universities in Hong Kong viewing SALC activities as a separate and independent entity to integrating them more and more into regular study courses, giving the SALC programmes greater currency without making them an added burden.

Vibrancy also seems to be a feature of successful SALCs. The small centre that Ochanomizu University in Tokyo offers in its basement area appears to work better actually because it is so compact. Upon entering, the first impressions are of students and staff busily engaged in centre activities, and this provides a far more enticing atmosphere than larger centres which often feature cavernous but relatively empty entrance areas. Centres that provide regular activities in an informal atmosphere report that they slowly develop a core group of regular users. These regular users play an important role in recruiting and introducing other students to their programmes. Students are far more likely to take part if they can come in the company of another friend, rather than walking through a door on their own.

KUIS's *Group Access Area* is a popular section of its SALC where students can gather to informally talk amongst themselves or with faculty members – of course, strictly in English. It offers tables and comfortable chairs, as well as large sofas that people can use to sit in groups over lunch or drinks for conversation purposes. Again, there is a sense of relaxed vitality that offers a comfortable and welcoming impression for users.

All the centres the writers visited offer regular events, such as movie nights, language lounges, discussions and debates, lectures, themed parties, and cultural occasions, and these seem to be instrumental in attracting and maintaining users. Although it would be easy to classify such events as simply recruiting occasions, they actually offer a broader purpose as opportunities for target language practice and use, and are one of the more successful activities cited by all SALCs visited.

Of course, the primary question every student is going to ask is, "What's in it for me?" and all SALCs offer similar resources as stated before: books and magazines, multimedia resources, guided activities, special spaces, and staff support. To let students know that these are available, two methods are universally employed. The first are orientation sessions. Most schools offer orientations to all new students with tours of the centres and explanations of the functions and resources of the SALC. In addition to these freshman orientations, regular sessions are offered to other users and visitors. HK-UST has in its lobby area a partitioned-off area with comfortable sofas where new users can watch a video programme about the centre, then receive an explanation and a tour by a staff member.

The second method uses web pages to explain the functions of the SALC, as well as giving students access to resources, calendars, and staff contact and reservation pages. Providing this kind of material means students can access information anytime, at any pace, and from any web-capable device. Students often find this a more comfortable and less daunting way to get the information they need before coming to the SALC. They can also learn about events and activities that are coming up, and about the staff who are involved in the centre.

Web access also offers students the chance to locate materials they may need for study purposes. SALCs are well positioned to offer learning resources to students that are not available in such resource areas as libraries because the material is more likely to be of a practical nature. By creating indexes or databases of materials, students can define their needs before visiting. As McMurry, Tanner, and Anderson (2010) found, "…managers can encourage more autonomous use of center materials by provided a website and database to help students find appropriate materials to use to learn English." In fact, the study goes on to report the results of a survey showing that "students tend to use (centre) resources more autonomously as a result of having a web-based database."

In general, it seems to be those centres that portray an image of warm, friendly, and vibrant environments have the least problem in attracting students to spontaneously join the centre's activities, and have greater consistency in attendance and usage. SALCs that impose restrictions and requirements end up spending more time on policing the policies and dealing with the negativity they create. In addition, because of the imbalance of usage, facilities are put under greater stress at certain times, and it becomes difficult to determine the SALC needs because of this wave effect.

Both Cooker (2010) and Gardner & Miller (2010) also discussed the effects of environment on learner participation. Cooker noted that a relaxed and attractive ambience that felt like a "reverse home stay" encouraged more students to join, while Gardner and Miller wrote of the increased student use being at least partly due to the upgrading and attractive nature of SALCs in Hong Kong over the past decade.

To summarise, as Fouser, (2005) succinctly states:

> To attract students in numbers sufficient to justify its existence, a SALC needs to do the following:
>
> - Link itself to the educational ethos of the university.
> - Link itself to the foreign language curriculum.
> - Offer students services that they need but that are difficult to get elsewhere.
> - Create a user-friendly environment that invites student use. (p. 58)

The environment and unique services are a vital part of a SALC's role, and if the linking to curriculum and philosophy needs can be done in such a way as to provide a positive impetus, rather than a negative shove, then student participation is likely to increase.

Institutional support

The other factor often cited as a problem for SALCs is institutional support. This refers to all levels of support, from within the teaching faculty right through to the administrative offices. Setting up, and more importantly, maintaining a SALC requires a blanket commitment from all areas of an organization. The administrative support is probably self-apparent, because that is where the financial backing will come from. Before planning for a SALC can even begin, a school will need to commit the resources necessary to its construction, maintenance, and possible future expansion.

However, of greater impact eventually will be the degree to which the faculty supports the setting up of such a centre. Perhaps parallels to this issue can be found in problems with the implementation of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programmes in universities. Research journals are littered with papers describing the failures of CALL programmes within institutions, not because of the expensive or state-of-the-art media and equipment supplied, but because of the lack of consultation, training, and support of the staff involved. As Timuçin (2006) states, "An innovation can only flourish if the teachers become vigorous, engaged participants, and if the teachers realize that there will be continuous attempts to make them integral parts of the 'novel' system."

So it is with SALCs. To succeed, the support and teaching staff of a centre need to be enthusiastically committed to the project, and this can only happen if these people believe in and understand what they are doing. As is often the case, a project such as this begins with the vision of a committed person or small group. Once begun, however, it needs to become a team effort. To receive and maintain such support, the following conditions need to be in place:

- All staff members are willing to commit themselves to the project, even if this requires pledging additional time
- Staff see themselves as equal stakeholders in the project, and are not working to assist another person
- Staff fully understand the programme and its objectives
- Staff are willing to collaborate in developing resources
- Duties are shared equally and fairly
- Regular frank and open reappraisals of the programme take place
- Full training programmes are developed and implemented

In defining "staff," this should not just refer to the teaching faculty and ancillary administration people, but to the student body themselves (Cooker, 2010). Students should be involved from the start because they have a strong understanding of what they need and what will invite greater participation. In terms of staffing the centre, they can assist with such areas as running the reception areas, volunteering to tutor students, managing resources, and selecting and maintaining

materials. This also offers the additional benefit that they themselves will attract students to the centre.

Other issues

Language policy

Most of the centres the writers visited have a strict language policy of only speaking in the target language (usually English) while in the centre. As Barrs (2010) notes, this leads to "a supportive and encouraging environment for the use of English, which motivates many students to visit and use the facilities." While this could be discouraging for lower level speakers of the language, it may well be offset by students giving the function of the centre higher *value*, and treating it as a different environment, or even country.

Materials

The materials the students use while in the centre will form a large part of their impressions while there. From their experiences in comparing 15 years of development in SALCs, Gardner and Miller (2010) offered the following recommendations:

- Training materials should be provided for all new users
- Catalogues of what is available should be available online
- Learner pathways through the materials should be clearly provided
- Emphasis on tutor led small-group activities with materials is needed
- Resource-effective materials that focus on the needs of these students should be developed in-house
- Other materials should be purchased commercially
- Materials should be streamlined to include only those most frequently used
- Teacher-training sessions on materials creation should be regularly conducted.

Equipment

There seems to be general consensus that student-friendly resources and human interfaces are more effective and better used than large amounts of technology and multimedia. While computers, players, projectors and other equipment are an important part of a SALC's inventory, these can generally be found and used in many places on campus and are thus better used as a support for the activities of the centre and not as a draw card in their own right.

Conclusion

Self-access learning centres offer schools the potential to provide their students with rich environments in which to develop their language abilities in a target language. Because of the unique materials and activities they can offer, and the relaxed but focused atmosphere within which they operate, they offer learners a chance to autonomously manage their own learning. However, to do this they need to both ensure the support of the institution and the participation of the students.

As noted above, offering rich and focused activities and material that target their needs is the most effective way to ensure student participation. These can be supplemented by events and an environment that invites participation, and a support structure that provides training and assistance with specific needs.

Teachers, ancillary staff, and students should all be deeply involved in both the development and the day-to-day running of the centre, for it is only through such collaboration that user satisfaction at every level can be assured.

Through careful and ongoing analysis of the needs of the learners, a SALC can develop as a rich environment to foster language growth within an institution, but can only do so if viewed as a work in progress and not as a completed project.

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Appendix 1: Learning centres visited by the writers

関東地区 (Kanto area)

- お茶ノ水女子大学
- 明治大学
- 電気通信大学
- 慶応大学
- 青山学院大学
- 日本大学
- 専修大学
- 神田外語大学

関西地区 (Kansai area)

- 京都女子大学
- 同志社大学
- 京都外国語大学
- 大阪大学
- 近畿大学
- 甲南女子大学

Hong Kong

- City University of Hong Kong: English Language Centre
- Hong Kong University of Science and Technology: Language Centre
- Hong Kong Insititute of Education: Centre for Language in Education

セルフ・アクセス・ラーニングセンターの有効的な活用について

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＜要　旨＞

セルフ・アクセス・ラーニングセンター（SALCs）は、言語を学習する者が、学習をさらに進めるために、各々に沿った方法でかつ個人のレベルで学習できる環境を提供するものである。SALCs内の教材、そのテクノロジー、マルチメディアを通して入手できる教材、スタッフのサポートを活用することにより学習者は自分にあった進度と難易度で学習できるプログラムを作ることができる。しかしながら、SALCsを効果的に活用するには、学習空間と教材以上に必要なものがある。SALCs関連の文献調査と日本及び海外のSALCsに携わるスタッフのインタビューを通して、以下の２つの問題が共通して見られた。

1. 学習者の活用のレベル
2. スタッフのサポート体制

本論文では、この２つの問題を検討し、学習者のニーズにあう効果的なSALCsの活用方法について提案を行う。

キーワード：セルフ・アクセス、学習者中心、個人学習

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