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Student Perceptions of the English Lounge after a Layout Change

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Abstract

This research aims to understand how students use English at the Self Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). Specifically, the research is focused on the second floor of the SALC which is intended to be an English only space. The new SALC opened in April 2017, but some layout changes were made in September (the start of the second semester) in response to student feedback indicating that the English Lounge was intimidating and difficult to access. The present research investigates whether students use the English Lounge differently since the layout change and their views on how the SALC can further be improved.

Keywords: social learning spaces, self-access, student perceptions, conversation lounge

Introduction

There are two main aims to this paper. Firstly, the authors would like to add to the growing body of knowledge related to social learning spaces for the promotion of languages. Secondly, the authors are interested in uncovering students' views on specific aspects of their own context that will ensure that the space serves the needs of its users.

In order to explore both of these aims and to draw upon the strengths that each of the authors brings to the project, the paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, Jo Mynard the director of the Self-Access Learning Centre (The SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan gives a brief literature review, background to the research, and an overview of previous research which frames the present project. The second part is a first-person account of a piece of interpretative research conducted by Allen Chen, an undergraduate exchange student doing a work placement at the SALC. The authors jointly conclude with some implications of the study.

Part 1: Background by Jo Mynard

Self-access learning facilities have been defined as “person-centred social learning environments that actively promote language learner autonomy both within and outside the space” (Mynard, 2016b). This definition and other recent ones (e.g. Gardner, 2011; Reinders, 2012) stress the importance of several factors for successful self-access including: (1) support for learning, (2) the availability of resources and facilities suited to different kinds of language learners and language learning, (3) and opportunities for students to practice the target language.

Self-access facilities are mostly physical centers (often supported by online resources and systems) that have become hubs for the promotion of autonomous language learning. Self-access learning is commonly framed within social constructivism where there is an emphasis on how people make sense of new information as they negotiate meaning and incorporate it into their existing schemata (Adelman Reyes & Vallone, 2008; von Glasersfeld, 1989). This negotiation process is facilitated by interaction with the world and the people within it. As a self-access facility is considered to be a social learning space (Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2016; Mynard, 2016a), it is important to provide opportunities for promoting interactions with others in order to foster learning. In addition, as one of the purposes of a self-access facility is to promote language learning, it is essential that a space for students to practice speaking their target languages is provided.

Conversation Lounges

Conversation Lounges are often established within self-access facilities in order to provide two vital services: opportunities for social interaction with others, and opportunities for target language practice. Both will be discussed in this section. Depending on the institution, students' use of the lounge might be optional (e.g. Bibby et al, 2016), incentivized (e.g. Taylor et al., 2012), or scaffolded (e.g. Croker & Ashurova, 2012; Thompson & Atkinson, 2010).

Social interaction

Typically, conversation lounges provide a comfortable space for learners, teachers and other people to come together and engage in social activities, language practice activities, and casual meetings and events. Ideally, the space also provides opportunities for users to develop a sense of ownership and to feel part of a community. Several researchers (e.g. Hughes, Krug & Vye, 2011; Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2016; Murray, Fujishima & Uzuka, 2014) have reported that one of the most important attractions of a self-access facility is the opportunity to make friends. Hughes, Krug & Vye (2011) found in a study in Saitama, Japan that although the initial reason that learners came to the SALC was because of a learning need, the reason people returned was for the social affordances. This means that we need to consider learners' social needs. Providing access to the community via social events encourages initial participation (Bibby et al., 2016) which often leads to deeper engagement with the community that is needed for language learning.

Target language practice

A self-access facility also needs to provide opportunities for language learners to practice their target language in a supportive environment. One reason for this in the Japanese context is that English language speakers have few opportunities to use their language skills as it is largely a monolingual culture where every interaction takes place in Japanese. Although language policies within a SALC may appear to go against the idea of autonomy and personal preference, on balance, colleagues in the field have described effective English-only environments in Japan (Barrs, 2010; Croker & Ashurova, 2012). At the very least, it is a good idea to provide a section of a SALC dedicated to target language practice.

Learning Environments

Prior research has indicated that users feel more comfortable using the target language when they feel attracted and comfortable in that particular space. As a result, numerous colleagues advocate creating a motivating and optimal space for learning (Barrs, 2010; Cooker, 2010; Taylor, 2014; Taylor & Birchley, 2011). Drawing on the fields of psychology, neuroscience, instructional design, ecology, architecture, Edlin (2016) outlines six principles for self-access design that enhance learning:

1. Create a welcoming environment that stimulates a positive emotional response
2. Provide a low-stress and safe environment
3. Promote social interaction through the space design
4. Make the space physically comfortable
5. Remove barriers to learning and increase accessibility
6. Be flexible to change

Context

KUIS was established in 1987 and is located in Chiba, Japan. There are approximately 4000 undergraduate students all majoring in languages and international cultures.

The SALC at KUIS was originally established in 2001. It was located in two former classrooms that had been remodeled slightly for the purpose of self-access learning. The space was popular with students, so the university created a new purpose-built SALC which opened in 2003 and replaced the original SALC. The second SALC ran for 13 years and gradually expanded its services and scope. In April, 2017 a third version of the SALC opened and replaced the previous version. The new SALC is located in a new building called KUIS 8 and is much larger than the previous SALC. One of the main enhancements of the KUIS 8 SALC is the increased areas specifically designed for social interaction. One such social space is one half of the second floor officially known as The English Lounge. The nickname used by students for the lounge is “the yellow sofa” due to the large number of yellow sofas present. Yellow sofas were also a prominent feature of the previous SALC and added some continuity during the move. The English Lounge is intended to be an English only space designed for casual interactions between KUIS students and sometimes teachers who are on duty throughout the day to help facilitate English discussions.

Students from all departments and years use the SALC, but it is particularly popular with freshman and sophomore students who take more English language courses than other years. In addition, the most frequent users tend to be those majoring in English (although all students take some English courses even if they are majoring in another language). More than 1000 students use the SALC each day and its use is completely optional. It is not incentivised in any way, but students are encouraged by teachers to make use of the facilities and opportunities.

Previous Research

In addition to providing self-access language learning support for language learners, the SALC also comprises the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education (RILAE). Research has been a key feature of the SALC since 2001 and has focused on all aspects of the SALC and learner autonomy in order to continue to ensure that SALC services meet the needs of KUIS students. Along with the move into a new facility in 2017, several research projects commenced which are examining the new spaces in use by students. Two such projects relevant to the present paper are related to (1) students' use and perceptions of the conversation lounge (Burke et. al., 2018 (this volume); Mynard, Lyon, Kushida, & Sampson, 2017), and (2) an observation of the communities forming in the conversation lounge (Burke et. al., forthcoming; Hooper, Burke, Taw, & Mynard, 2017). A SALC survey was also administered in July-August 2017 which provided the SALC team with several insights (Wongsarnpigoon & Hori, 2017). These studies provided a starting point for the present research which will be described in detail in the next section.

Part 2: The Present Research by Allen Chen

Purpose of the Study

This research aims to understand how KUIS students use English in the SALC. Specifically, this research is focused on The English Lounge on the 2nd floor which is the English-only space. After some layout changes which were made in September 2017, this research is interested in gauging how the space has changed since the furniture was moved. In particular, the yellow sofas on the second floor are an integral aspect of The English Lounge and they were moved, which created a point of curiosity for the SALC team.

Layout Changes

In the first semester, the yellow sofas were situated next to one another (see Figure 1), creating one enclosed area for speaking English. However, feedback from students gleaned from the research projects referred to in the previous section indicated that a large number of students felt that this space was exclusive and intimidating. As a result, the yellow sofas were rearranged on the second floor at the beginning of the second semester (see Figure 2). While there remains a yellow sofa area in the corner, accessible by the stairs on the west wing, there are now two more locations on the second floor for the yellow sofas. These two locations can be accessed through the middle flight of stairs (see Figure 3).

Figure 1. The Original Positions of the Yellow Sofas

Figure 2. The Layout of the Lounge after the Move

Figure 3. Plan of the 2nd Floor

Research Questions

In this research, my aims were to understand how students are using the English Lounge differently since the physical restructuring. In particular, I was interested in answering the following questions:

1. How and why are students using the English Lounge?
2. What are the attitudes of the students who use the English Lounge?
3. How has the physical rearrangement of the second floor affected the way the yellow sofas are being used?
4. What recommendations do KUIS students have for the SALC as a whole?

Methods

This interpretative study is informed by my in-depth interviews with six regular SALC users — Three first-year students, two sophomore students, and one junior; Four were English majors, and two were majoring in International Communications. All of the interviews were conducted in English. In my role as a KUIS student, international student, SALC student worker, and researcher, I was able to gain a wide range of perspectives

because of my varying, and intersecting, positionalities. My unique perspective informed the creation of the interview questions, the analysis, and the final dissemination.

Interviewees were selected in four ways, based on personal relationships, professional working relationships, and finally at random. The interviews took place in the SALC and each lasted about an hour. The interview questionnaire was created with SALC-specific questions in order to investigate how this space is experienced, perceived, and used. The interview questions can be divided into the following five domains.

1. Relationship to KUIS and the English language
2. Usage of KUIS 8, the SALC, and the English Lounge
3. Critical conception of the English Lounge
4. The yellow sofas
5. Recommendations for the SALC team

In particular, by establishing these domains, I hoped to gain a broader understanding of how KUIS students utilize the SALC space starting with understanding their initial entry into KUIS. My interview questions then proceed to more specific questions which aimed to gather information about usage and regularity. Afterwards, I tasked the interviewees to critically conceive their usage of the English Lounge beyond frequency. This was done in an effort to understand their attitudes, motivations, and reasoning for attending KUIS, using this space, and their future plans. In particular, how did the changing of the yellow sofas affect their learning? The interview ended with an opportunity for the six participants to voice their opinions, questions, and concerns which could then be used by the larger SALC team to improve the SALC's facilities and services. After all the interviews were completed, transcripts were coded in order to detect patterns between participants. Excerpts from the transcripts, labeled A through F, will be included in the following analysis to support my assumptions made.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the interview transcripts question by question order to find patterns between participants. Similar themes or findings were grouped together and analyzed, while insights that deviated from the other participants were also considered in the overall analysis of the data. The findings are presented in terms of their specific domain.

Findings

1. Relationship to KUIS and English language

Starting with the first domain, I was specifically interested in understanding participants' motivations for studying at KUIS. In comparison to other more traditional colleges and universities, where students would study an academic discipline, KUIS stands out from the rest since its primary focus is language acquisition, development, and mastery. For Japanese students who are interested in advancing their English skills, KUIS is an academically relevant university to attend. If the student decides to major in English or International Communications, in particular, they will have the entirety of their college

experience devoted to studying the English language. When I asked the interviewees about why they chose KUIS, all six participants referred to language development as a defining factor for choosing KUIS. More specifically, two even mentioned the SALC, and its accompanying language development services, as a reason for their matriculation.

“Because of the SALC, I thought I would have opportunities to speak English. I know it is really hard to find some place to speak English in Japan so I chose this school.”
— Participant C

For some historical context, when the SALC first opened in 2001, it was a pioneer for self-access learning centers in Japan. Since then, the SALC at KUIS has gained global influence and recognition. As a result, students who are invested in language learning are interested in KUIS because of this space. Using the SALC as a mechanism for English language development, the participants listed four main motivations for studying English.

1. Intercultural communication — communicating with native English speakers
2. American (pop) culture — desire to understand and consume American media
3. Professional relevance — using English in future work
4. Language appreciation — appreciation for language literacy

Given all of these motivating factors, all six participants explained that attending KUIS has helped them improve their conversational competency inside and outside the classroom. Participant C, in particular, stated that prior to their enrollment, they could not speak English at all. However, between their classes and the availability of resources, this sophomore student improved to the point of comfortably completing the entire interview in English.

2. Usage of KUIS 8, the SALC, and the English Lounge

After learning about their personal histories and motivations, the conversation proceeded to focus on how they utilized the SALC and the English Lounge. Of the numerical data that was collected, participants even continued using the SALC at the same frequency or more.

Table 1

Summary of Results

<u>How often do you use KUIS 8 (not including work or classes)?</u> [5-6 times a week / 3-4 times a week / 1-2 times a week / once a month / 4-6 times a year / 1-2 times a year / never]	<u>How often did you use the English Lounge this semester?</u> [4 or more times a week / 2 or more times a week / once a week or less / once a month or less / never]	<u>Has this changed since last semester?</u> [more often now] [less often now] [it's about the same]
A. 3-4 times a week B. 5-6 times a week C. 3-4 times a week D. 5-6 times a week E. 5-6 times a week F. 5-6 times a week	A. 2 or more times a week B. 4 or more times a week C. 2 or more times a week D. 4 or more times a week E. 4 or more times a week F. 4 or more times a week	A. It's about the same B. More often now C. More often now D. More often now E. It's about the same F. It's about the same

Participants regarded the SALC as a social learning space. Depending on the student and the moment, the SALC functions in a different way. It can simultaneously be a classroom, English only zone, hangout space, homework spot, international area, lunchroom, and meeting place. Though I expected students to describe the SALC in an academic manner, one participant brought upon a new viewpoint that I had not previously considered. From his point of view, the English Lounge is less of an academic space, and more of a social one.

“If I’m with my friends, we just talk. I don’t normally do homework. Because upstairs, the main point is to talk to others in English, so we don’t need to do homework here, that’s my thought.” — Participant A

While the SALC is usually a space where socializing and learning can take place simultaneously, this participant makes a valid observation regarding how the English Lounge is used socially. Since this student is less invested in doing homework in the English Lounge, they are able to focus solely on English conversation. This finding demonstrates just how differently the SALC functions depending on the student’s perception of the space. As a result, the next domain that addresses the students’ critical conception of the English Lounge is especially important.

3. Critical conception of the English Lounge

Building on the two previous domains, these questions were meant to critically uncover how KUIS students thought about the SALC as an institution that is conducive for learning. In this section of the interview, participants started to uncover for themselves why they chose to use the SALC in a particular way, and how their SALC usage impacted their future and affected their personality. For example, Participant B spoke about their lack of confidence when speaking English. However, this lack of confidence extended beyond language ability or grammar. Instead, the student seemed keen on learning English in order to change their personality as a whole. This finding echoes findings by Mynard et. al (2017) who suggest that reasons KUIS students do not use the lounge are social rather than linguistic. The process of learning and using English became a way for the student to gain more confidence as a whole. This student also explained that they found it particularly difficult to use the English Lounge when they were tired because using English was such an active process. Participant D shared a similar sentiment, stating that they “switch” their brain to English when they approach the English Lounge. Since the SALC tends to be the only space in Japan where they can regularly use English, this student makes a conscious effort to speak, and even think, in English while they are using the SALC. These two participants both demonstrate a sense of empowerment and awareness in relation to their language development. As SALC users, they are aware of how to actively use this space for their own benefit, realizing that this space is challenging, but rewarding.

4. The Yellow Sofas

After this section of the interview, half of the participants vocalized that the SALC was more than just another building to them. The SALC had become a huge part of their

overall KUIS experience, especially as students learning English. This finding was also evident in the research related to learning communities (Hooper et al., 2017). With this realization in mind, it was a prime moment to move onto the next domain and ask them their opinion of the English Lounge post-layout change. In response to the yellow sofas being dispersed throughout the second floor, five participants were in support, while one student preferred the old layout. The one student against this change preferred the yellow sofas concentrated in one area because it meant teachers would also be concentrated in one area. However, in its current iteration, teachers are stationed at different locations which makes for smaller micro-communities instead of one large community. In contrast, other students saw the change positively because of this separation. In the previous semester, the yellow sofas were frequently visited by a small population of KUIS students. Since the yellow sofas were only in one corner, being used by one group of students, this evoked an intimidating or cliquey feeling for other students. These features violated all of the suggestions by Edlin (2016) for effective learning spaces. Additionally, these students were skilled at English, further isolating students who lacked confidence, or students who were not yet frequent yellow sofa users. Since the change, though, participants regarded the yellow sofas as more accessible. While there remains a yellow sofa cluster in the original corner, there are two more locations on the second floor that students can utilize (see Figure 2). In addition, this space is now easily accessible through two separate flights of stairs. The left staircase leads to the original yellow sofa in the corner, while the larger middle staircase leads to the two new yellow sofa locations (see Figure 3). Although teachers are no longer seated in the same area, the students I spoke to seemed to feel that this change was positive overall because there are now more chances for students to join in on a conversation at one of the yellow sofa areas. They can specifically take a certain staircase to access the yellow sofas, instead of passing it by, but then walking back, hovering, or exhibiting other behaviors associated with nervousness, shyness, or a lack of confidence (behaviour reported by Burke et al., forthcoming, and Mynard et al., 2017).

5. Recommendations for the SALC team

While the change in the location of yellow sofas was ultimately positive, the participants made some interesting recommendations¹ for the SALC as a whole that should be taken into consideration. There were some thoughts regarding the possibility of SALC being an English only space on both floors. Presently, only the second floor is regarded as an English only zone. The first floor is intentionally multilingual so KUIS students can freely use Japanese, or practice a language other than English. Interestingly, the three participants who were most skilled at English suggested that the SALC should be English only. These students, who also experienced the small intimate nature of the previous SALC, believed that making the SALC entirely English only would accelerate the language development of KUIS students. Given their English ability, their desire to make the SALC English only may be reflective of their drive to pursue English. However, other students, and many KUIS staff, feel that this may be too challenging, and even isolating, for incoming students who are in the

¹ The other recommendations are not particularly relevant to this paper. One participant suggested to have more bean bag chairs; another suggested that the cafe should accept cash.

process of learning English. In its current setup, having two different floors allows for a scaffolding of sorts where students can utilize Japanese until they are ready to fully engage with English. Therefore, while making the SALC entirely English only is an insightful recommendation, it is unrealistic to expect KUIS students, with varying levels of English ability, to be able to thrive in an English only environment.

Looking holistically at the interviews, every participant was invested in English language development prior to matriculation. Two, in particular, chose to attend KUIS because of the SALC. Guided by their goals of learning English, all six participants utilize the SALC on a daily basis in order to improve their language ability. Since the SALC is part of their daily routine, it took some prodding throughout this interview to uncover some of the more nuanced reasons why students utilize the SALC. As a whole, the SALC has become a space of utmost importance to KUIS students, which is why many are very vocal about its layout in relation to its larger mission and vision. In that sense, this in-depth investigation of the SALC is a reflection of its importance for KUIS students. Therefore, it is of paramount importance for the SALC to continue to reflect on its performance, and utilize student feedback in order to create a space that is beneficial to the student body. Changing the layout of the yellow sofas was an effective first step in serving more KUIS students.

Conclusions

In this paper, the authors presented the context for a study and explored the relationship that six frequent SALC users had with the SALC. The six in-depth case studies provide a unique insight into students' perceptions and feelings about the English Lounge area. In addition to uncovering participants' thoughts on the new SALC layout (that were largely positive), many other insights and recommendations surfaced. This was likely to have been enhanced due to the unique positionality of the interviewer as a member of the student community. Insights from case studies such as this one add depth to other data collected from larger scale surveys (e.g. Wongsarnpigoon & Hori, 2017) and observations (e.g. Burke et al., 2018).

Although the starting point for the research was to investigate students' views on the effectiveness of the new layout, a far deeper analysis was uncovered in this project highlighting the importance of always involving student stakeholders in research related to the SALC. This final excerpt from the interview with Participant A captures this point:

“I think everyone should think about the SALC more. Only students can improve the SALC because we are the ones who use this facility. Instead of just coming and enjoying, maybe they should think about what we can do to make the SALC better. That's what I'm thinking right now.” — Participant A

Future Research

Given that the participants were varied in terms of their experiences with both SALCs, it is important to note that this research was conducted, and exists, in a moment of transition. With this in mind, it is necessary to do another version of this study with a student

population that has only known the SALC in its current iteration. In addition, drawing on opinions from non-regular regulars, or non-users, would offer an additional understanding to the student experience at KUIS in relation to the SALC. Other researchers might also be interested in doing a comparative study between the SALC, and its various facilities, in comparison to other study spaces in the surrounding area. Future research could address the features (i.e. facilities, technology, seating) and social benefits of the SALC, say compared with a nearby cafe.

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Notes on the Contributors

Allen Chen is an undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in American Studies and Sociology at Occidental College in Los Angeles, CA, USA. Through IES Abroad Tokyo, he studied at KUIS for a semester during Fall 2017.

Jo Mynard is an associate professor and the Director of the SALC at KUIS. She holds an M.Phil. in Applied Linguistics from Trinity College, University of Dublin, Ireland and an Ed.D. in TEFL from the University of Exeter, UK.

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Appendix

Interview questions

Relationship to KUIS and the English Language

1. Which year are you in at KUIS?
2. Which department do you belong to?
3. Why did you choose to come to KUIS specifically, instead of other more traditional colleges/universities?
4. What is your motivation for studying English?
5. How has your English improved since attending KUIS?
6. At KUIS specifically, what has improved your English the most?

Usage of KUIS 8, SALC, and The English Lounge

7. How often do you use KUIS 8 (not including work or classes)?
[5-6 times a week / 3-4 times a week / 1-2 times a week / once a month / 4-6 times a year / 1-2 times a year / never]
8. How often did you use the English Lounge this semester?
[4 or more times a week / 2 or more times a week / once a week or less / once a month or less / never]
9. Has this changed since last semester?
[more often now] [less often now] [it's about the same]
10. What do you normally do in the English Lounge?

Critical Conception of The English Lounge

11. Are there are other places in SALC where you feel more comfortable using English?
12. What about these spaces make it conducive to using and learning English?

The Yellow Sofas

13. Did you notice that the furniture arrangement changed in September?
[yes - what changes did you notice?]
14. Since the yellow sofas are now more dispersed throughout the second floor, do you find yourself using the space differently? In what way are you using the space differently?
15. Why do you think we made changes to the layout?
16. What is your opinion of the new layout?

Recommendations for SALC

17. Do you have any recommendations for further changes or improvements regarding the layout of the English Lounge?
18. What other changes do you recommend for the English Lounge as a whole?