KONAN UNIVERSITY

Promoting Learner Autonomy Through a Self-Access Center at Konan University : from Theory to Proposal

Promoting Learner Autonomy Through a Self-Access Center at Konan University: from Theory to Proposal

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Abstract

This paper provides the conceptual and contextual background from which our proposal to establish a self-access center for language learning at Konan University emerged. First, the key notion of learner autonomy is defined, critically examined, and its relationship to motivation is explained. Next, a brief overview of the history and characteristics of self-access centers in Japan is provided. Finally, a more detailed explication of key components of our proposal is offered, along with situational rationales for framing the proposal in the ways that we did.

Key Words: self-access centers, self-directed learning, learner autonomy, motivation

　本研究は、甲南大学において外国語を自主的に学習する場の創設が提案された概念的、状況的背景について紹介する。まず、学習者の自律性に関する主な概念を定義して意義を議論し、学習動機との関連性について説明する。次に、日本における自主学習センターの前歴や特徴に関する概要を述べ、最後に、提案した企画を形にする上で状況的に必要なものと共に、本校の主な企画内容をさらに詳しく解説する。

キーワード　自主学習センター、学習者の自律性、学習動機

Introduction

　Due to changes in language learning theory and practice as well as gradual changes in our student population, some of us involved in English education at Konan University have long wanted to diversify the sorts of learning experiences and opportunities we provide both within and beyond our curriculum.[1] The establishment of a self-access center (SAC)[2] offering language learning materials and assistance to everyone on campus is prominent among the improvements that we have proposed. In settings such as this one, proposals that garner sufficient

interest usually serve as starting points for further negotiation. Because of this, they necessarily tend to be relatively brief and to the point, and this means they often contain assumptions and assertions which cry out for further explication. While this paper includes a copy of our original proposal for establishing a campus SAC (see Appendix), its main focus is to delve deeper into the theoretical and situational context within which the proposal has been drafted. It is hoped that this additional information will not only allow readers to more thoroughly understand what we aim to accomplish with our proposed SAC, but also that those who are contemplating setting up SACs at other institutions might benefit from the provision of this sort of contextual background.

1. Learner Autonomy

One of the primary arguments in support of self-access facilities is that they provide students with opportunities to develop autonomous learning strategies. And yet the term *learner autonomy*, while increasingly popular in educational circles, tends to be rather amorphous; it is not so easy to get a handle on. Reinders and White (2011) suggest that "autonomy is a bit like art; we can't agree on its definition, but we all seem to know what it is" (p. 1). In this article, the term is used to denote a learner who is capable to some degree of being self-directed in his learning endeavors. That is to say, an autonomous learner is one who is not completely reliant on the structuring and guidance provided by teachers in conventional classroom settings in order to further his educational goals.

Europe seems to have been the early leader in making sustained efforts to promote learner autonomy. In a book published by the Council of Europe in 1980, Holec explains that an autonomous learner is one who "is capable of taking charge of his own learning" (p. 4), and this succinct little definition is perhaps the most widely known and quoted one for autonomy. Little (1991), in another well-known definition, also casts autonomy as a type of learner capacity, specifically "for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (p. 4).

1.1 An educational buzzword

Regardless of the nuances of the definition employed, autonomy has clearly become a buzzword in language teaching, and its rise is no doubt at least partly related to the increased prominence of computer technology in educational

settings. Our digital tools give individuals unprecedented access to information and powerful applications, thereby potentially helping to empower learners to take charge of their own learning if they are sufficiently motivated to do so and as long as they have already developed at least a basic capacity for learning autonomously. Educators do, however, need to resist the temptation to treat computers as miracle workers. This is especially true in regards to promoting autonomy, as it is all too easy to confuse effective autonomous learning with students who in fact may be struggling to achieve their learning goals as they sit in isolation in front of individual computer screens. As Schmenk (2005) cautions, we should not "assume autonomy to be a purely situational factor that is triggered automatically once a learner has started working with, for example, a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) program" (p. 112).

So, while undeniably an important factor, developments in technology are not solely responsible for autonomy's elevated status in modern educational spheres. Whether leading or following, trends in one educational field tend to reflect associated changes in other fields and in the broader society, and autonomy has likely emerged from the interaction of a wide-ranging set of developments in areas such as psychology, sociology, science, technology, and global politics. Gremmo and Riley (1995) suggest that among the events in the last century or so that have had a hand in giving rise to the autonomy emphasis in second language education are the wave of minority rights movements, the reaction against the behaviorism model in psychology which led to a convergence on the notion of learner-centeredness in education (see, for instance, Freire, 1972; and Illich, 1970 for seminal examples of this shift), and the rise of a sociolinguistic approach to language pedagogy which emphasizes the pragmatic and communicative needs of individual learners. While the whirlwind pace of technological change has helped facilitate the implementation of programs that strive to develop learner autonomy, the underlying reasons for autonomy emerging as an often cited superordinate goal of education are rooted in a complex tangle of trends and ideologies.

1.2 Autonomy as a cultural construct

Because of the brew of ideologies entailed in the term, Schmenk (2005) reminds us that autonomy can essentially be viewed as a Western cultural construct that deserves to be examined critically before being adopted into language programs, particularly in non-Western settings. She presents autonomy as emerging from the

Enlightenment, tied to the Western ideal of individual emancipation, and mirroring "the 18th-century European dream of leaving behind absolutism and everything else that kept individuals from using their own capacity to make reasonable decisions" (p. 109). The influential philosopher Immanuel Kant employed the term *personal autonomy* to refer to the potential for humans to make rational decisions on our own (Pennycook, 1997), and the notion is now deeply embedded in dominant political and economic ideologies. With its Western pedigree, autonomy, like so many other notions and buzzwords in our increasingly globalized world, tends at times to be presented as a neutral concept when it is not. As an example, Benson (2001) has noted how the constructs of autonomy can at times have an uncanny similarity to descriptions of progressive models of management, thereby suggesting that the way we conceive of autonomous learning is perhaps influenced by dominant ideologies regarding what skills are considered necessary for becoming a successful member of a modern workforce.

This sort of problematizing of emergent buzzwords such as *learner autonomy* is a necessary step for better grasping their possible implications and avoiding unintended consequences. The key, it seems, is to admit their roots in particular cultures and ideologies in order to appropriately adjust them to fit the contextual contours of the society and teaching situation in which they are being implemented. For example, when it comes to the promotion of autonomy in tertiary education in Japan, here is a partial list of the questions that ought to be explored:

- *To what degree does Japanese society, particularly the companies which will eventually employ many of our students, desire graduates with autonomous capacities?*
- *What level of experience, if any, have students entering the institution already had with self-directed learning?*
- *What sorts of learner autonomy strategies and activities might students resist, and what might be the cause of that resistance?*
- *To what degree do the goals of learner autonomy conform to or conflict with the goals of dominant educational constructs in Japan?*
- *What possible stigmas, if any, might be associated with pursuing a self-directed course of learning in a Japanese setting?*

While such situational questions can never be fully answered because the

context itself is always evolving, they ought to be at least kept in mind while attempting to promote learner autonomy in non-Western environments in order to try to avoid some of the pitfalls of becoming an unwitting agent of the homogenizing forces of globalization. As Schmenk (2005) warns us, failure to critically examine its ideological roots puts the potentially empowering notion of learner autonomy in jeopardy of devolving into little more than a globalized logo with little content.

1.3 The autonomy and motivation connection

While some of the movements and ideologies that lie behind the notion of autonomy have been enumerated above, it should also be noted that learner autonomy dovetails smoothly with another emergent buzzword in education: motivation. The role that motivation plays in language learning began to receive wider attention roughly thirty years ago with Gardner's (1985) classification of integrative as opposed to instrumental reasons for motivation, as well as Deci and Ryan's (1985) explanation of intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation. While all sorts of motivation can have positive effects on learning outcomes and situational variables are an important factor, in general it can be said that it is the intrinsically motivated learner studying a language for integrative purposes who is likely to make the most impressive strides.

As Dickinson (1995) suggests, an integrative attitude in which the learner is motivated by a desire to join the target culture or at least effectively communicate with other target language users can be seen as one specific type of intrinsic motivation. That is to say, such a learner is essentially making efforts to learn the target language for her own reasons rather than for whatever extrinsic rewards (e.g., course grades, monetary compensation) might be available to her. Of course, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be felt by a single learner in a given learning context. The two types of motivation are not necessarily in opposition, and it is perhaps better to envision them as the two extremities of a continuum rather than as a dichotomy. At the risk of oversimplifying, we might say that when it comes to the motivation component of language learning, it is the degree of intrinsic motivation which a learner brings to a learning situation that has the greatest potential effect on the learning outcome.

The link between intrinsic motivation and autonomy is particularly strong and synergistic: motivated learners are more likely to take advantage of self-directed

learning opportunities made available to them since they recognize their intrinsic value, and learners who have had positive experiences with autonomy will likely become more motivated to continue in self-directed paths. Moreover, as Dickinson (1995) has explained:

> Two important conditions for the development of intrinsic motivation are: first, that learners perceive the learning environment to be "informational" rather than "controlling" −that is that the environment supports the learner through informative rather than evaluative feedback. The second is that the learning context is autonomy supporting in that it facilitates self-determination on the part of the learner. (p. 166)

Thus, as educational institutions around the world search for ways to improve learning effectiveness, many of them are experimenting with ways to better reap the benefits of intrinsic motivation by providing more opportunities and support for self-directed learning in ways which put informational resources at students' fingertips while not necessarily entailing an evaluative component. And one of the clearest indicators of this trend over the last few decades has been the spread of SACs on campuses for language learning purposes.

2. The Trend Toward Self-Access Centers

As Morrison (2007) points out, the crucial role that a successful SAC plays on a campus is actually dual in nature since it helps to develop independent learning skills among students at the same time that it fosters language learning. While improvements in language proficiency can be achieved in more conventional classrooms, such a setting does not typically offer extensive opportunities for strengthening autonomous learning strategies. This twofold benefit, then, is perhaps the most persuasive argument in favor of SACs: they provide an environment that allows skills and strategies which lead to learner autonomy to take root while students are engaged in improving language proficiency. Thus, it is not surprising that as learner-centered theories have taken center stage in pedagogy and as the development of learner autonomy has gained increasing currency as an important goal of education, the idea of augmenting traditional classroom experiences with SACs has become more and more popular.

2.1 A brief history of SACs

Pinpointing the exact date and place of the first SAC is not entirely feasible because they seem to have emerged piecemeal in the 1960s and 1970s from the dying embers of the language laboratory boom that had been sparked by the audiolingualism movement. As behaviorist models of learning fell from favor, the labs that were based upon that comparatively mechanistic view of psychology and cognition were gradually neglected. Those facilities were sometimes transformed into "resource centers" or "language libraries," and from them early versions of what we now recognize as SACs evolved. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that the Council of Europe's establishment of the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Languages (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy in the late 1960s and similar facilities set up at Cambridge University around the same time were among the earliest and most influential SACs (Morrison, 2007; Gremmo and Riley, 1995; Sheerin, 1991).

Early versions of SACs were usually limited in scope: Often they were simply places for students to work individually on extra materials that teachers did not have time to cover in class (Curry and Mynard, 2014). But by the 1990s, SACs generally offered the range of services we now commonly associate with them, including opportunities to learn via social interactions, individualized assistance based on learner needs and preferences, and a focus on learner autonomy and strategy training.

In recent decades, the spread of SACs has been particularly evident in Southeast Asia and South America, while their momentum in Europe has not abated (Morrison, 2007). To understand the scale of SACs being incorporated in language education worldwide, consider the following representative numbers: By the turn of the century, there were already over 200 SACs established at universities in Mexico alone, in 2004 the Thai Ministry of Education set up SACs in 80 high schools across that country, and in Hong Kong every single tertiary institution now has its own SAC (Gardner and Miller, 2011). In much of the world, it seems that having a SAC on campus is now the rule rather than the exception.

2.2 SACs in Japan

The growth in self-access language learning facilities, in both number and prominence, has also been clearly evident in Japan. Reflecting this trend, a decade

ago The Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) devoted a special issue of its main publication, *The Language Teacher*, to the topic of self-access learning.[3] Kanda University for International Studies in Chiba was among the first Japanese universities to establish a full-fledged SAC in 2001 (with a greatly expanded facility opened in 2003), and it has emerged as a leader in the field through its publication of the *Studies in Self-Access Learning (SiSAL) Journal*, a quarterly peer-reviewed international journal dedicated to the advancement of self-access language learning in general and to SACs in specific. Underscoring its leadership role, Kanda now offers a consultation service for new SAC projects through its External Language Consultancy Center, and at least two other universities have now relied on them to provide experienced staff and the necessary expertise for establishing their own SACs.[4]

Another prominent SAC in Japan is Kinki University's English Village (*Eigo Mura* in Japanese), also called the E-cube, located in Osaka. With an average of 700 students visiting it per day (Ieki, 2013), this SAC is remarkable for its large scale and prominent position within the university. An entire building is dedicated to housing it, and besides offering most of the typical self-access services, learners can also enjoy periphery facilities such as a basketball court and cafe with an extensive menu. The point is to allow students to experience a full range of everyday activities in a completely English environment within the greater Japanese context. While the Kanda SAC arguably contributes more to the field in terms of sound research and expertise, Kinki's English Village has been a media darling since its inception in 2006. It is frequently featured in prominent magazines and on national television and radio programs in Japan,[5] and its high profile can be credited with helping to spread awareness of SACs among the general public.

While very few institutions are able to devote entire buildings to a SAC facility, SACs of various sizes are now quite common among universities in Japan. Also, the rapidly decreasing population of college-age youths in Japan is causing even formerly conservative institutions to try just about anything in order to attract new students, and this will likely lead to more and more innovative SACs popping up across the country. In an era of cutthroat competition for a shrinking pool of potential students, Kinki University is one of very few institutions enjoying an increase in enrollment applications, and many speculate that its commitment to its large-scale English Village SAC is partly responsible for this rise in popularity and reputation.

3. The Genbun Center's Proposal: Konan Loft[6]

Konan University opened a small-scale, state-of-the-art satellite campus in 2009 at which a suitably-sized SAC was included in the facilities from the beginning.[7] However, the larger main campus, with roughly 10,000 matriculating students and now approaching its 100th year, has never had a self-access center for language learning, nor any sort of sizable dedicated space for English study available to all students beyond the classroom.[8] While not an internationally-focused institution per se, roughly 100 Konan students per year choose to study abroad in our exchange programs with universities in English-speaking countries, and most of the nearly 50 international students who join our campus each year are native speakers of English, and so a solid core of interest and need upon which to build a wide-reaching English language SAC can be said to already exist. Moreover, in the university's mission statement the founder of Konan, Hachisaburo Hirao, expressly stated his educational goal of fostering young people who can succeed on an international stage upon graduation.[9]

In the past couple of decades, Konan's Institute for Language and Culture (established in 1994 and abbreviated to *Genbun Center* in Japanese) along with the Konan International Exchange Center (established in 1990) have been at the forefront of trying to fulfill this international aspect of the university's mission. Hence, the English faculty of the Genbun Center began proposing the establishment of a SAC facility in 2012, and the proposal now appears to be on its way to becoming realized.[10]

Our original proposal has been included in its entirety (see Appendix), and a few of its more salient points are remarked upon below. As is the case with most proposals that involve a need for significant funding, it has subsequently undergone intense scrutiny and a series of revisions. Numerous additional documents have been submitted, particularly to further explicate staffing requirements, the complete range of proposed student activities, and the situation of SACs at other universities in Japan. Nevertheless, the original version is being included here because it provides an unadulterated window onto the core principles which informed how we first conceived the role of the proposed SAC facility on our campus.

3.1 Key terms: autonomy and motivation

The rationale of our proposal is primarily couched in terms of increasing learner motivation. The notion of learner autonomy can be said to be implied throughout the proposal, but that specific terminology has not been expressly used except for one instance of the word *autonomous* within the *Main Purpose* section. The primary reason behind this rather cautious phrasing was a consideration of audience. After all, the term is far from self-explanatory or uncontested. For administrators who may not be thoroughly familiar with the consequences of the general paradigm shift toward learner-centeredness that has occurred over the past few decades in educational spheres, it was thought that the term *learner autonomy* absent of most of its accrued connotations might be difficult to grasp at best, and misconstrued at worst. For example, it could possibly be construed by some to suggest that the presence of qualified learning advisors is not an essential part of a SAC facility since *autonomy* in its most basic sense denotes *able to do by oneself*.

The notion of motivation, on the other hand, is arguably less likely to be misconstrued, and our Japanese university is a typical one in the sense that the problem of students with seemingly low levels of motivation is on display in one form or another nearly everyday on campus. Also, Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2000) splitting of motivation into *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* types is an easy enough concept to explicate in just a few sentences and serves as a helpful frame for indicating the kind of opportunities that a SAC can provide for potentially strengthening learner motivation in ways that traditional classroom settings cannot. Specifically, a well-run SAC that actively encourages significant degrees of self-determination among learners can foster intrinsic motivation by providing an atmosphere in which students not only encounter English in new ways but can also begin to re-conceptualize the role that English might play in their lives. So, while the goal of learner autonomy is not overtly emphasized in our proposal, it has certainly had a large part in shaping it. The proposal has been written under the belief that autonomy and motivation are entwined in a symbiotic relationship that has been touched upon earlier in this paper and has been explained in much greater depth by Dickinson (1995).

3.2 Staffing considerations

Students visit a SAC for a range of purposes and carry with them varied

levels of familiarity with such self-directed environments when they walk through the door, and so an ideal SAC has a variety of staff there to welcome and support them. That is to say, instead of having just a single category of worker in the facility (e.g., all teachers or all peer advisors), needs will best be met when the people who are staffing the SAC collectively cover a wide range of interests, ages, professional experiences, and expertise. This is why our proposal (see Appendix) calls for a mixed staff including TEFL-qualified advisors, reception workers with clerical skills, and student assistants who serve as models of English usage in addition to the actual assistance that they offer. These assistants are to be hired both from our pool of exchange students as well as regular Konan students who have achieved impressive levels of English proficiency either through their own efforts or thanks to study abroad or other living abroad experiences.

No matter how eye-catching and state-of-the-art the body of material and technological resources in a center may be, they will not be utilized to their full potential if students do not know how to take advantage of them. In fact, a major impetus for resource centers evolving into full-service SACs in the 1970s and 1980s was the realization that such facilities can only be successful if they offer sufficient learner training opportunities (Gremmo and Riley, 1995). Experience has clearly shown that trained teachers who have a background in second language acquisition as well as classroom experience are the backbone of a successful SAC, and Curry and Mynard (2014) who manage Kanda University's SAC predict that interest in the field of advising will grow stronger in the coming years. We believe the presence of at least one advisor during all hours that the SAC is open is absolutely necessary to ensure an optimal learning environment, and in our proposal we call them *coordinators* because they will need to have a hand in all aspects of the facility in order to offer the best possible support when advising learners. These coordinators, in their advising role, will help students to identify their language goals and needs, recommend and familiarize students with resources and strategies, and regularly provide feedback and encouragement.

Our SAC proposal process, now entering its third year, has been a fairly drawn out one, and it is fair to say that a major sticking point in negotiation thus far has been the staffing issue. Since the running cost of employing a number of professionally trained teachers to work as advisors in our SAC will represent the biggest part of the financial burden placed on the university in the long term, it is understandable that administrators might hesitate to commit to this part of the proposal. However, while willing to compromise on just about every other aspect

of the proposal, this is the one area that we insist is absolutely necessary to guarantee a successful SAC facility. In the information gathering phase that preceded the writing of the proposal, one message that came across clearly and repeatedly in our many correspondences and site visits was that, more than any other factor, it is the quality of the advising and coordinating staff that will make or break the venture. Cooker and Torpey (2004) underscore this point by calling the learning advisor staff the most valuable resource of a SAC.

Finally, no facility for students should be considered complete without student involvement. Stated differently, in order for the student body to feel a sense of true belonging in and ownership of their SAC, some of them ought to be employed there and involved in important decision-making processes (Lomas and Oblinger, 2006; Cooker, 2010). Deep and broad student involvement helps guarantee that learners see themselves as stakeholders in the project, and it also helps ensure that the SAC is well-known among the student body and that it continues to grow and develop (Curry and Mynard, 2014). At Konan University, we are fortunate to have a well-established exchange program providing a steady stream of international students to our campus.[11] We already employ some of them as part-time conversation tutors, and our proposal calls for relocating the tutoring program in the SAC while also expanding its scope. In addition to the exchange students, we envision some of our Konan students with exceptional English skills will also be working in the SAC as general assistants. Their main duty will be to circulate the room in order to greet, assist, and encourage their visiting peers, but they will also be involved in nearly all aspects of facility management, especially the planning and promotion of SAC activities and events.

3.3 Cafe and lounge area

While the budget for a proper staffing arrangement presents the biggest hurdle our proposal faces in financial terms, the call for an inclusion of a cafe in our SAC facility is likely the most unorthodox aspect of the proposal from a conceptual standpoint and therefore represents a different sort of hurdle. Some would uphold the conventional view that environments for work and play (or learning and relaxing) ought to be strictly separated in order for the former to be maximally effective, but the current trend in both work and educational building design is in fact toward more multi-use spaces (Brown and Long, 2006).[12] In education, many institutions are attempting to implement all sorts of policies and action plans in

order to foster a more learner-centered campus, but perhaps since the vast majority of educators and administrators do not have expertise in architecture or interior design, the potential benefits inherent in a reconceptualization of the physical learning spaces is sometimes overlooked in the process.

As Gee (2006) points out, at any given moment each human's level of physical and psychological comfort strongly influences their sense of well-being, which in turn greatly affects how creative, productive, and engaged they can possibly be in the tasks at hand. At the risk of overgeneralization, I would argue that most of us trained in education tend to focus primarily on the complexities involved in fostering sufficient psychological comfort among our students while at times perhaps not paying enough attention to the more basic needs of physical comfort. For example, no matter how well crafted and student-centered a particular lesson is, learning will probably be far from optimal if the classroom temperature is too hot for comfort. It is a simple but important point, and it may be more accurate to say that teachers do not so much "overlook" the physical environment but rather that they are accustomed to putting up with its shortcomings since in typical institutional settings they rarely have much control over the physical characteristics of the spaces in which learning occurs.

Setting aside conventional preconceptions of what educational spaces look like, it seems intuitive and almost undeniable that food and drink, through the potential comfort and opportunities for communion that they provide, help create an environment in which humans feel at ease and can interact with one another in deep and meaningful ways. Of course, learning does not always involve socializing, and well-designed learning spaces "need to balance the dual and opposite human needs for community and solitude" (Gee, 2006, p. 7). Our proposal (see Appendix), in order to offer a full range of potential learning opportunities, emphasizes that the various zones in the facility need to be clearly demarcated. Yet even when it comes to solitary learning, consider all the individuals who visit their local Starbucks or other such cafe for purposes other than socializing. Whether doing homework, reading a book, or just contemplating life while sipping their coffee or tea, many people obviously derive comfort from such environments and find them amenable to getting things done.

In a language learning environment, an important benefit of providing a staffed cafe (as opposed to just a row of vending machines) is that it provides opportunities for using the target language for transactional purposes. The constraints of conventional classrooms and learning materials necessitate that

much of the English practice our students receive is interactional in nature, and when they eventually encounter English in the real world, whether it be through a trip abroad or perhaps in a future work environment, many of the initial situations they find themselves in tend to be transactional. A welcoming cafe counter in a comfortable SAC can offer students meaningful chances to try out typical speech acts such as ordering menu items and requesting clarification in a supportive environment that has the potential to feel much more real to them than a typical role play they might be asked to perform in a classroom.

An additional advantage of adding a comfortable cafe corner to a SAC is that it is one important way in which the facility can feel "different" to students, especially in comparison to typical university classrooms and libraries. Providing this sort of relaxed ambience at which students might choose to spend their free time anyway regardless of the learning opportunities within reach is one important way of enticing them to further explore the facilities and materials (Cooker, 2010). In essence, the aim of a well-designed cafe (or at least a lounge area that mimics some of the desirable ambient features of a cafe and permits food and drink consumption) is not ultimately about keeping learners' bellies full; instead, it is about trying to maximize the physical comfort that learners can experience in the facility. Physical comfort is a precondition for effective learning, and institutions that purport to follow a learner-centered approach to education cannot afford to ignore it. As Brown and Long (2006) remind us:

> The emphasis on learning means that we must also think about the learner. Learning spaces are not mere containers for a few, approved activities; instead, they provide *environments for people*. Factors such as the availability of food and drink, comfortable chairs, and furniture that supports a variety of learning activities are emerging as critical in the design of learning spaces. (p. 1)

3.4 Graded readers

Over a decade ago, we introduced an extensive reading component to our reading courses in the Genbun Center. We have accumulated several thousand graded readers from a variety of publishers as the main materials for this large-scale project, and the extensive reading program has generally been a success. A number of handling problems related to the graded reader books, however, have never been satisfactorily resolved: namely; storage space, loss of books, and on-site assistance as students select titles.

Currently, because we do not enough shelf space in a single room to house all of the graded readers, the books for our students in the intermediate reading course are shelved in the main library whereas the ones for our elementary course students are kept in a resource room in a separate building. From the student perspective, this means a change in locations and checkout procedures from one year to the next. Moreover, the resource room is rather small and tucked away in a somewhat inconvenient corner of campus, leading many of our elementary reading teachers to fetch the books themselves and check them out to students in class. While it is the best we can do under current circumstances, the resulting problems of this system are that students are sometimes confused when they search for the room on their own, they do not always have a wide range of title choices when teachers bring a subset of the collection to their class, and the selection process in classrooms regularly eats into valuable class time. On top of this, while the books housed in the library are checked out like any other library book, the elementary course readers are checked out using simple paper lists, resulting in far less follow-up when books are not returned by students. Because of this, several hundred readers are lost each year, leading to an unwelcome running cost that ought to be avoidable.

The above problems can all be mitigated if all of our readers could be housed together in a conveniently located SAC that is equipped with a barcode or similar type of computerized checkout system for keeping track of the materials. Another very important advantage to housing all the graded readers in a SAC is that there would be on-site assistance available for students as they try to select appropriate books. One of the crucial characteristics of a fully realized extensive reading program is choice (Day and Bamford, 1998), but for learners to be able to make choices that not only suit their English ability but also have a high likelihood of suiting their interests and thereby fostering a genuine enjoyment of reading in a second language, they need to understand the graded reader system. Unfortunately, many learners do not. First-year students, especially, would benefit from some on-site assistance since they are typically introduced to graded readers at the same time that they are bombarded with the tons of other information from all directions that newcomers to university life receive. Due to their lack of familiarity with the readers and possible confusion caused by information overload, it appears that many of them are not always making very informed choices.[13] Stuck with having to read an unsuitable book, extensive reading can come to feel like any other undesirable learning chore from the learner's perspective, and most of the key

potential benefits of participating in a long-term extensive reading program will not be realized by those who make poor choices.

Because of this, simple and friendly interventions by SAC staff at the graded reader selection stage ought to have a very positive impact on the overall success of the program. For example, while the basic concept of short books offered on a graded scale of increasing English complexity is easy enough, different publishers all have their own systems of gradation. Other information such as genre and variety of English is usually available somewhere on the cover or inside flap of the book, but where exactly that information is located again differs quite a bit by publisher as well as by series. In an ideal SAC that houses graded readers, staff will keep an eye on learners who are browsing the materials and approach those students in a friendly manner to make sure they understand the subtleties involved in the choice. Of course, this sort of assistance is to be offered in English at a level that the learner can understand and with books in hand, thereby realizing the dual objective of eliminating confusion while also providing learners with yet another positive encounter in English upon their SAC visit.

Thus, in order to meet storage needs, to mitigate loss of materials, and also to provide better and more timely assistance to the students participating in our graded reader program, in our proposal we have identified this extensive reading support function of our SAC as one of the main reasons for its establishment. It should also be mentioned that, while not explicitly stated in the proposal, an important ancillary benefit to housing our graded readers in our SAC is that it will guarantee a steady stream of visits to the SAC. The impact should be especially strong among first-year students, since all of them are enrolled in the elementary reading course and therefore need to regularly check out graded readers. Thus, even students who might be hesitant to make use of a SAC on their own will have a reason to stop by the facility now and then and, as long as we can provide a comfortable and supportive atmosphere, some of them will hopefully be enticed to try out the other materials and services on offer as well. Administrators are understandably concerned about whether or not the number of students who will actually end up using the proposed SAC will justify its costs, and in negotiations thus far this idea of tying our SAC to an already established reading program has been one of the key points in our ability to guarantee an acceptable level of projected facility usage.

3.5 The role of technology

Technology is increasingly seen as a crucial component of a well-designed SAC because of its potential to *support* the learning process, but it should not be allowed to take center stage. It is important to remember that technology is not the essence of self-access, nor does a SAC necessarily need to be a high tech facility (Gremmo and Riley, 1995; Sheerin, 1991). A room full of learners individually peering into digital screens might resemble certain libraries, revamped language labs, resource centers, or computer labs, but will fall short of serving as a fully realized SAC. This is mainly because language learning is essentially a social process and so, unlike those other facilities, a successful SAC is primarily a social place that is able to offer visitors a sense of community (Curry and Mynard, 2014).

Another important point to keep in mind about technology is that it is increasingly mobile and will still be undergoing rapid change in the foreseeable future. Thus, while some sort of computing and other technological access ought to be offered to visitors in a SAC to support their learning efforts and to broaden the multifunctional capacities of the learning space, over-investment in equipment such as static desktop computers and other heavy machinery that will likely become outdated in a relatively short time span presents a potential design risk. Also, since these days most students carry some form of digital technology with them, an ideal SAC facility would offer ways of integrating their smartphones and other mobile devices into the services offered on- and off-site. One way of doing this is to provide an online presence to the SAC which learners can access anytime and from anywhere. The types of services that could potentially be offered online are too numerous to list, but a few of the more obvious ones include language learning platforms oriented toward the target learning community, social media presence, SAC resource archives, appointment scheduling, and event announcements. This online component is emerging as one of the most important directions in state-of-the-art SAC development (Curry and Mynard, 2014), but again we need to keep in mind that a virtual space can never fully replace a physically present community when it comes to language learning, and the online component works best in a supportive role.

When provided in moderation, the availability of carefully selected services offered via a digital platform within a SAC can arguably be an enticement and potential source of motivation for some learners. And technology itself, when used

wisely, can help facilitate the development of learner autonomy while supporting students' language learning efforts. Simply procuring a bunch of computers for unguided and unregulated student use, however, is unlikely to lead to the desired learning outcomes. To the contrary, as Murray (1999) and Reinders and White (2011) have pointed out, unrestricted access to information via technology can even be counterproductive since, when not offered in conjunction with a proper degree of timely assistance and feedback, it can inhibit learners from taking responsibility for the learning process and thus make it harder for autonomous learning skills to take root.

Our proposal (see Appendix) reflects this view that the technological component of a SAC is important but secondary. The need for technological devices is not overtly emphasized in the various sections of the proposal, but their presence to a certain degree is implied in several passages. We have, however, explicitly mentioned the possibility of a SAC website as a supportive virtual portal to the services and activities that the SAC offers.

Having witnessed my share of CALL classrooms and other expensive technology-centered educational tools and facilities lose their luster of newness in a surprisingly short time and shift all too soon from asset to liability in the eyes of teachers and students, a final word of caution on this topic is offered: Because we find ourselves living in an era of unprecedented technological development and change, it is all too easy to make poor decisions in this area and to throw too much money at shiny new digital tools when some of that money could perhaps have been better spent on materials and resources with proven track records, foremost among them being human resources. Opinions differ greatly on what the future has in store for us in terms of the shifting relationship between education and technology and so, in order to remain responsive to the evolving relationship, our proposal is purposely rather ambiguous on this topic. As previously mentioned, the first version of our SAC proposal was submitted over two years ago, and in the meantime technological innovation has continued to leap forward. When the SAC is actually built, it will of course need to house a moderate amount of selectively chosen digital devices, and the key is that they will need to operate on flexible platforms that can be reasonably expected to adapt to future waves of innovation which are surely on the horizon.

My own prediction about the evolving role of technology in education is that the tide is about to turn. Our digital tools are now so mobile that technology no longer needs to be associated with particular locales. For instance, the number of

students at my university who carry smartphones around with them wherever they go now appears to be well over 90%,[14] and there is less and less that separates these devices from fully functional computers. For most of them, technology is simply a fact of everyday life and not something that will lure them into using a SAC or any other facility. We need to shift our focus from the provision of access to technological tools to that of integrated support services which aid the learning process (Brown and Long, 2006). Additionally, I predict that focusing on something that our students cannot easily find elsewhere is what will ultimately prove most attractive: namely, a welcoming and supportive English learning community beyond the classroom. From the educators' point of view, once the potentially negative effects of digital ubiquity on neurocognitive development and social skills are more widely known (see, for example, Carr, 2011 and Turkle, 2011 for extensive documentation of these effects; as well as Mach, 2013 for a concise overview), many of us will eventually come to value gathering places such as university campuses as a human-centered respite from our digital lives. Digital tools will still play a major role in these physical locales, but it is the opportunity that campuses provide for encountering and being stimulated by a living and breathing community that we will come to appreciate more and more. Forward-thinking institutions will realize the implications of technology approaching its point of saturation in society, and programs and facilities that emphasize human-centered learning will more and more be marketed as such. These are among the considerations that have lead us to submit a proposal that keeps technology in a subordinate role in our SAC, even while recognizing its powerful potential to facilitate learning.

3.6 Other environmental considerations

Regardless of their stance on the provision of digital devices, certainly one goal that carefully conceived SACs share is that of offering a friendly and comfortable ambience which both invites and supports learning activities. Learning involves not only focused attention but also peripheral perception (Gee, 2006), and the ways in which our senses are stimulated as well as the degree of that stimulation are crucial factors in establishing an inviting atmosphere in which learners feel both relaxed and alert. Yet my impression as shaped by numerous site visits and discussions with SAC stakeholders is that many SACs fall short in this regard. The factors that contribute to creating the right sort of atmosphere can be

subtle and are sometimes overlooked when setting up a SAC. Also, in many instances, the space that houses a SAC had previously served another purpose and certain unfortunate architectural features of that prior facility are unavoidably inherited.

Besides providing access to basic comfort-inducing human needs such as food and drink as touched upon above, a well-designed SAC takes into account such features as the color scheme of walls and floors, furniture variety and mobility, ergonomics, lighting, acoustics, air quality, and the incorporation of natural elements. While a detailed discussion of the impact that each of these factors can have in helping to shape a desirable learning space is beyond the scope of this article, Barrett and Barrett (2010) provide empirically-backed advice on how to make wise design decisions, and Gee (2006) emphasizes the ways in which these design features can be employed to create a maximally human-centered learning environment. In our proposal (see Appendix), we make it clear that having a large and versatile space that incorporates a range of learning zones and that can be reconfigured for multiple learning purposes is one of the keys to the success of the SAC. Above all, the SAC should not only feel inviting to students, but also feel significantly different from other campus environments (e.g., classrooms, libraries, cafeterias) in order to trigger responses in them other than the limited range of learning and socializing behavior patterns they have perhaps been conditioned to supply by their prior learning experiences.

In its ideal form, in order to supplement rather than simply repeat the sorts of learning opportunities available elsewhere on campus, students entering the SAC will peer in with a tinge of excitement as they feel themselves positioned on the threshold of an unfamiliar but welcoming world. The design of the room, the attitudes of the people working there, and the variety of the materials on hand will all serve to invite learners to leave their preconceptions about educational settings at the door and to open themselves to experimenting with a different and more self-directed approach to language learning.

Notes

1) In this sentence and elsewhere in the text, I have used plural pronouns (we, us, our) even though I am writing this article as a single author. This is because a number of my past and current colleagues have played significant roles in the planning and proposal process. In fact, our departed colleague, Paul Ross, began sharing his hopes for establishing a self-access center at Konan more than a decade ago.

2) Terminology for this sort of facility can be confusing. *Self-access center* (SAC) seems to be the most widely used term in relevant literature, and this paper follows suit. However, it is also common to see *self-access language center* (SALC) or *self-access learning center* (also SALC), and less frequently *self-access language learning* (SALL) is used when not referring to a specific locale. To complicate matters further, Curry and Mynard (2014) suggest that all of these terms are less than ideal since *self-access* implies working alone but the clear trend in such facilities is toward emphasizing the assistance available on site and the community aspect of language learning. Also, many SACs are adding a significant online presence to the services they offer, so the physical location as implied by the term *center* is coming to be seen by some as too restrictive.

3) This special issue is the June 2004 (Volume 28, Number 6) issue of *The Language Teacher*.

4) The two full-scale SACs that have been set up with expertise from Kanda University are located in the English Communication Center (*www.h-bunkyo.ac.jp/university/academic/human/becc.html*) at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University and the International Learning Center (*www.sojo-u.ac.jp/silc*) at Sojo University in Kumamoto.

5) The media appearances average about ten per year, and a full list of them is available on Kinki University's E-cube website (*www.kindai.ac.jp/e-cube/media*).

6) The name *Loft* originated in the fact that, when the SAC was first proposed, we were hoping to be housed in the top floor space of one of the campus buildings that was available at the time and, among its various meanings, the term *loft* connotes a wide open and welcoming space used for creative purposes. It now appears, however, that our SAC will actually be housed on the ground floor of one of our most centrally located buildings. While we have continued to suggest alternative names for the proposed SAC throughout the negotiation process (see, for example, the first note of the Appendix), the name *Loft* has thus far stuck. Also, whether the final name is *Konan English Loft* or *Konan Language Loft* depends on resolving another as of yet undecided aspect of the SAC: namely, whether or not it will offer English language support only, or also include support for the other foreign languages taught on campus.

7) The satellite campus, known as Konan Cube, is located in Nishinomiya and is home to the Hirao School of Management. Its SAC is called the O-Zone and a brief introduction to it can be found on the Cube website (*www.konan-cube.com/facilities/campus.html*).

8) The Genbun Center does have a self-study room (*jisshu shitsu*) available to students, but it is not a true SAC because the target language is not used, there is no provision for social interaction, and the staff is not trained in either teaching or advising. Generally, it is simply a place where students can check out materials or use one of the desktop computers therein provided.

9) In Japanese, Mr. Hirao's founding motto is 世界に通用する紳士・淑女たれ (*sekai ni tsuyo suru shinshi shukujotare*), which roughly translates as *Gentleman and ladies who are able to successfully circulate in a global society*.

10) As of the writing of this article in December 2014, our SAC proposal has been officially approved and the facility is scheduled to open in September 2015. However, a number of important details, especially in regards to staffing, remain to be worked out.

11) One source of repeated frustration for us has been that, although we are fortunate to have a comparatively steady supply of English-speaking international students on our campus who are eager to be involved in these sorts of projects, without a SAC we are only able to employ a few of them each year as tutors. This causes some of them to travel to nearby institutions in order to work part-time at SACs at those schools instead. This is inconvenient for the exchange students and, perhaps more importantly for our university,

a major waste of English-speaking human resources on our campus. The situation will no doubt be greatly improved when we open our own SAC.

12) Examples from the corporate sphere include IT giants Google and Apple. Both are well known for their reconceptualizing of traditional work areas into multi-use spaces that blur the lines between work and play in order to enhance the creativity and productivity of their workforce.

13) While admittedly anecdotal, every year I make it a point to talk to my students about the graded readers they are carrying around for their reading courses, and I am usually surprised and dismayed by the number of them who are not aware of such things as the lexical difficulty level and genre information of the books they have chosen. This includes students preparing to study abroad in our programs in Britain and North America who are unaware that they can choose books written in either British or American English. Because of this, I believe a little assistance at the time of selection can make a very positive difference for many of them.

14) This figure is not a result of careful research, but simply my impression based on informal class surveys that I conduct every year. In fact, I suspect that 90% is an overly conservative estimate. Over the last few years, in my classes of usually 25 to 30 students, typically only one or two of them answer that they do not have a smartphone, and in most cases it is because they have a regular cell phone instead. In spring of 2014, for example, out of roughly 240 total students, only one of them did not have any sort of digital mobile device.

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Appendix

English Loft[1] Proposal

An initiative to increase opportunities for all of Konan University's Okamoto Campus students to encounter and use English beyond the classroom, thereby strengthening their motivation to pursue English study.

Rationale

Second language acquisition results from a successful combination of two things: 1) *time* spent diligently studying and practicing the target language within an effective curriculum; and 2) the earnest *motivation* to improve which the learner relies on when encountering the language. Motivation consists of two types: extrinsic motivation refers to external "awards" (such as a high course grade or

better job prospects) that the learner sees as a potential benefit to study; whereas intrinsic motivation refers to the learner's internal image and attitudes about the subject being studied.

In study abroad situations, both study time and intrinsic motivation tend to be maximized, and this accounts for the dramatic gains that are made by students who go abroad. Regarding study time, for the vast majority of Konan students who do not study abroad, The *Genbun* Center cannot by itself increase the number of hours students are required to spend in our language classes because those decisions are determined by the various departments. However, the *Genbun* Center can provide a new environment on campus that offers all students more opportunities to encounter and use English in informal and enjoyable ways, thereby especially helping any students with a residual "English allergy" to develop more positive attitudes about English study. Such an environment by itself is insufficient for dramatically increasing English ability, but it can serve as a crucial center of support for students as they take English courses and explore opportunities for encounters with English outside of the classroom.

Description

A large, multi-purpose room on campus that supports independent English learning. The focus is not simply on providing English materials, but on providing a complete English *environment* in which students can encounter English in various ways. English is used for *everything* in the room (posted notices, forms for students to fill out, special events, OS of computers, ordering and paying for a drink, assistance from staff, etc.). A wide variety of English-based activities from individual study to chatting in groups are encouraged, and the room design supports such multi-purpose usage.

Main Purposes

- Provide Konan students with more on-campus opportunities to use English.
- Assist students in discovering a wide variety of self-study English materials.
- Develop independent and autonomous language learning habits.
- Store our graded readers[2] and all other English-related learning materials in a single place where English-language assistance is available for students.

Student Activities
- Discover English self-study materials (graded readers, DVDs, magazines, books, newspapers, comics, test prep materials, etc.)
- Do English homework and group projects.
- Visit with tutors for English help and support.
- Chat in English.
- Participate in events.

Hours and Staffing
- Open every weekday for easy access (for example, weekdays from about 10:00 am to 6:00 pm).
- A coordinator[3] position is established (English competence required; TESL qualifications desirable); one coordinator is always present in the room.
- One English *sennin* serves as director,[4] while all English *sennin* and *tokunin* teachers participate in staffing.
- Student assistants (exchange students and Konan students capable in English) are hired part-time as extra staff for the busiest times.

Basic Policies
- Use only English in the room.
- Sign in and out; declare purpose of visit when signing in.
- Food and drinks in permitted area only; no sleeping, etc.
- Staff can tell students to leave if rules are not followed.

Keys to Success
- Clear rules that apply to everyone and are actively enforced.
- Clear demarcation of "in" and "out" for room and zones.
- Awareness, support, involvement, and encouragement from faculty in all departments.
- High profile on campus (posters, website presence, etc.)
- Integration with courses in *Genbun*'s English curriculum.
- A room large enough (approximately 200m^2) to allow for multi-purpose usage, with versatile furniture and equipment that can be arranged into various layouts.
- Design and decor that appeals to students and appears significantly different from a typical classroom setting.

- Student-to-student English usage.

Uniqueness
- Variety of zones and seating arrangements to accommodate everything from serious individual study to relaxed chatting in English.
- Compared to *Genbun's jisshu-shitsu*: English-only environment, larger, communication encouraged, room to relax.
- Compared to *Genbun*'s tutoring program: Focus is wider and includes independent learning; our current English tutoring program is incorporated into this new environment, and non-tutor staff mostly help visitors to become familiar with available materials rather than providing extensive individual tutoring.
- Compared to KIEC's *ajisai* room: larger, quiet study is possible, focus is on our Konan students more than on exchange students or exchange programs.

Possibilities
- An English Loft website that actively announces events and serves as a portal to online English learning.
- "Passport" or other system for recording visits and earning credit in some classes.
- Cafe corner: allows for more practice in transactional English usage (e.g., ordering and paying for food) in a pleasant and supportive setting.
- Events such as "Movie Time," "International Cooking Class," and "Mini-Lectures" hosted by teachers, exchange students, and members of society.
- Cooperation with KIEC regarding promotion of study abroad.

[1]Name is only temporary. Other possibilities: English Hub, English Plaza, Language Loft, Language Garden, Konan PARC (Personalized Assistance and Resources for Communication), Konan PLACE (Personalized Language Assistance and Communication Exchange), Konan SPARC (Support, Personalized Assistance, and Resources for Communication), Konan SCILL (Support Center for Independent Language Learning)

[2]Graded readers are thin books in which the English vocabulary is controlled to meet the abilities of students at various levels in order to improve fluency in English. All 1st year Konan students, and all students enrolled in our Intermediate English courses read an average of four of these books per year. Currently we have approximately 1,500 graded readers, but roughly 400 are lost each year as students neglect to return them. To overcome the problems inherent in managing this large-scale lending project, barcode reading equipment and doorway security detector equipment will be necessary for effective implementation.

[3]Coordinator duties: Greet visitors, monitor sign in and sign out, assist and encourage students, enforce rules, organize materials, compile usage data, plan events, maintain website, assist with events, meet regularly with Director, etc.

[4]Director duties: Oversee all aspects of the room, manage budget and events, devise and carry out plans for full and effective usage of the facilities, hire and train staff, meet regularly with Coordinator(s).