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Osaka Shoin SAC: Balanced Development of Our Learner Community

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Abstract

This paper reports on the on-going development of the Self-access Center (SAC) at Osaka Shoin and focuses on the process of implementation of a model outlined in 2007. After providing background information on the framework, an overview of the activities for the past year will be briefly summarized followed by a look at the cooperative and collaborative environment provided to the learners to enhance their self-directed learning skills. The results yielded from a survey taken 15 months after opening appear to indicate that the support offered by the SAC has achieved some of its goals while other areas require more time and resources.

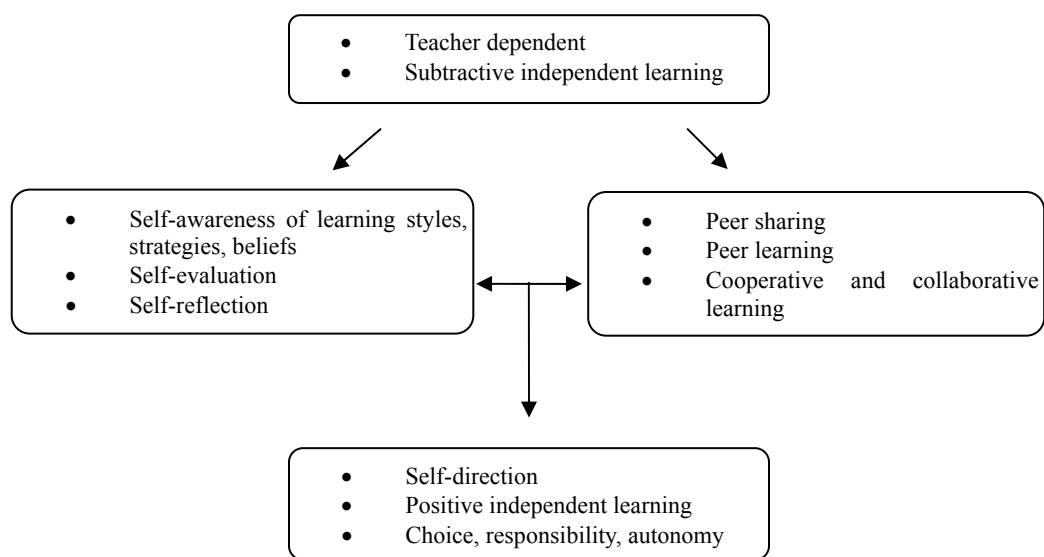
1. Introduction

The principle goal of the Osaka Shoin Self-access Center (SAC) has been to create a setting in which learners are actively engaged in their own process of learning. Active engagement means that learners are able to consider their own needs and objectives, select the way they prefer to learn, and reflect on and act upon the results. This is a lofty goal in and of itself given the learning background of the majority of our students. Such learners, in theory, will be more motivated because they will see the connections between what they are learning and their actual lives. Learners who have the capacity to engage in this process can be said to be autonomous. However, learning languages autonomously should not mean learning alone. Learning a language in order to produce it and communicate effectively requires it to be used, and so a further aim of the SAC is to foster a social aspect of autonomous learning. This paper will explore the path taken in the past 15 months towards this goal under the framework outlined in 2007 (Mayeda, Komori, and Fujisawa, 2008). A summary of the activities promoted to encourage interaction is provided followed by the results of a recent survey indicating cautious success in some areas and limitations in others.

2. The Framework

In Mayeda, Komori, and Fujisawa (2008), the following framework was proposed given student needs, diversity, and the overall size and scale of the SAC.

Figure 1: SAC Framework



Learners for the most part were deemed teacher-dependent and engaged in ‘subtractive independence’ where they studied independently of others but could not be considered independent, autonomous learners who are “able to make significant decisions about what is to be learned, as well as how and when to do it” (van Lier, 1994:13). Rather, the learners were simply doing as told and completing required assignments, albeit alone. If self-access centers are meant to promote learner autonomy; a way of encouraging learners to move from teacher-dependent to learner directed as Sheerin (1991:144) suggests, and if there is not necessarily a connection between self-access centers and the development of autonomy and independence as Benson and Voller (1997:6) points out, then the onus is on the SAC stakeholders to create the necessary pathways to autonomous learning.

Thus the above framework was conceptualized to promote a Center that moves students from teacher-directed and subtractive independence to self-directed, positive independence and able to engage in choice and responsibility for what they choose to learn. The model moves through a concurrent process 1) of raising learner awareness of individual learning styles and suitable strategies, exploring personal beliefs about language learning, and engaging in self-reflection activities; and 2) of peer and group sharing in the form of cooperative or shared learning models and experiences. While the former contributes to raising self-awareness by encouraging insight into becoming active learners based on personal engagement gained through self-evaluation and reflection of appropriate tasks, learners still need to be shown what to do upon acquiring this knowledge and are thus continually dependent. The latter might encourage learners to become motivated through the enjoyment of active and collaborative learning via study groups and interaction while working toward a shared goal.

Autonomy and responsibility requires active involvement and this parallel step allows for dynamic and active learning to take place, which in combination with self-awareness might lead to a more efficient

route to autonomy, or what Karlsson et al (2007: 47) refer to as a “social community of autonomy”. Within this environment students can study alone or in pairs or in groups, supported to a greater or lesser degree by the learning advisor, teachers, or peers, depending on specific needs at the particular time. This social community building aspect becomes important as the learners use language to develop their learning and studying skills in collaboration with others.

3. Overview of the Year

The SAC opened for full time use in April of 2007 with an open learning advisor (this author) appointed full-time in order to better facilitate the interrelationship between self-access resources, classroom teaching and learning. The space can accommodate 17 students comfortably and stays consistently busy throughout the day. Movement is fluid with usage high during second period and peaking at lunchtime. The steady stream of students begins around 10 am and continues until the advisor closes the door at 5 or 6 pm. (Official hours are from 10:40 – 4:10 daily.) The SAC averages 20-25 students a day including those who come in more than once a day (See Section 4 survey results).

3.1. Monthly Themes and Events

To draw students into the SAC, monthly activities and themes have been scheduled coinciding with school events or holidays. Events have included Halloween in October, Thanksgiving in November, and Christmas in December. The English Department has hosted a Shakespeare production in May and during the month the window display and surrounding area were designed with a Shakespearean motif and students were invited to play a card game involving Shakespearean quotes during their free time throughout the month. In June, students who had participated in study abroad programs were invited to share their experiences for Study Abroad Month. These and other events have served to generate interest in the SAC.

3.2 Classroom Links

Fostering a habit of visiting the SAC early on was deemed particularly important for first year students. Consequently, students have been compelled to use the SAC via links with course content. Some of the links include the availability of graded readers for extensive reading assignments, optional remedial grammar assignments for students less confident in their ability to cope with grammar classes, and pronunciation practice assignments with the learning advisor for an Essential English course. In addition, some out of class assignments must be completed using materials and human resources available only in the SAC such as CDs, DVDs, storybooks, and teachers.

The SAC has also served as a link for more closely connecting the part-time teachers with the students. Several teachers have made classroom materials available in the SAC for students who may have missed classes or wish to review content while others have encouraged students to practice their

presentation skills with the help of the learning advisor and other students before their final presentations in class. Students have also been encouraged to seek help from the learning advisor in completing homework assignments. All of this has added value to classes by allowing students to reconnect with materials and resources without the physical presence of teachers normally available only on their scheduled teaching day.

3.3 SAC Learning Programs

The SAC provides independent study plans and programs for students who wish to pursue their own studies or improve in particular areas. For example, TOEIC® or TOEFL® study plans are available for students preparing for these exams; a study abroad plan is available for students preparing for overseas study, as are fluency focus plans and other skill-based programs. The plans are optional and flexible enough to accommodate all levels and are negotiated between the advisor and the learner after identifying specific goals and jointly agreeing on a set of focused actions and activities.

In summary, the monthly events, activities, and course content links are an attempt to guide the students into the SAC and create an environment conducive to peer sharing, learning, and collaboration—all falling under the social community dimension of promoting autonomy while the individual study programs and advising sessions encourage students to realize the self-awareness dimensions of autonomy. A survey taken in July 2008 reveals some of the tentative results of these efforts.

4. Survey Results and Discussion

The following distribution of English department students responded to a questionnaire at the end of spring term 2008 (Table 1). Fourth year and non-English department students were not surveyed, as their SAC attendance figures were deemed minimal.

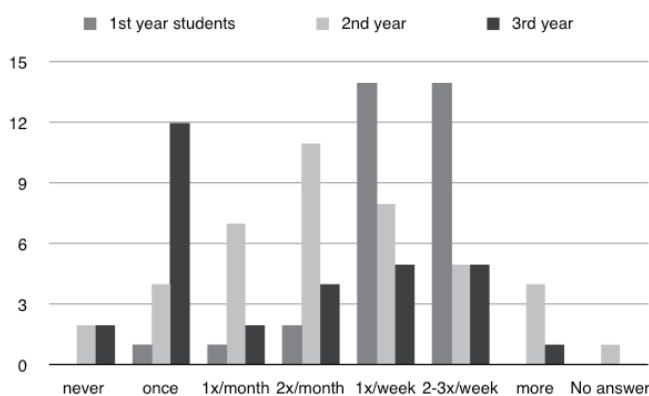
Table 1

Student Year	# of respondents	Total # in year
1 st year	30	31
2 nd year	42	48
3 rd year	31	42

The breakdown of SAC usage by class year is shown in Figure 2. The results indicate nearly all first-year students, or 30 out of 31 (32 counted, indicating double answers), 39 out of 42 second-year respondents, and 29 out of 31 third-year respondents have been to the SAC at least once. In terms of total student number in the three years, 96 out of 121 students, or 81%, have used the SAC at least once. This breaks down to 96% of first-year, 81% of second-year, and 69% of all third-year students. The first-year student percentage is not surprising due to the requirement to complete pronunciation assignments in the

SAC. Second-year students had no required assignments but often sought help in the SAC. It is worthy to note that the second year students were the first to have a fully operational SAC in their freshmen year and were required to use the facility for class assignments during this time. This may have contributed to continued usage in their second year. Usage drops to 69% for the current third year students. However, this class did not have full exposure to the SAC until last year and no previous assignments were required which may have contributed to this decline. It may be interesting to note second year student usage next year as this may lend itself to a correlation between early required exposure to the SAC as a contributing factor in continued non-required use.

Figure 2: Frequency of Visits



How are students using the SAC? First- and third-year students most frequently spent their free time in the SAC (Figure 3, p.45). While this number was high for second-year students, they more often visited the SAC to seek help for assignments. This was mainly attributable to two part-time teachers, one who instructed his students to get help from the learning advisor when problems arose with assignments and the other who asked students to practice presentations in the SAC. Although this type of SAC usage was not required, the tasks required by the former teacher were simply beyond what the students could reasonably undertake. In the beginning only a few students sought help for the assignments. As the semester wore on, it became clear that they required more support to pass the class indicated by a deluge of requests for clarification, word processing queries, and proofreading. Some students required help with resubmissions while others simply did not understand the overall scope of the questions. This placed an unreasonable burden on the learning advisor resulting in a request for the teacher to spend more in-class time working with his students.

The outcome of this was both positive and negative. Due to the heavy demand placed on the advisor, students were forced to wait for her availability or to turn to other teachers for help. This ‘waiting time’ served as a stimulus for students to begin sharing information with peers, rather than waiting for individual help from the advisor. In this way they began to teach and learn from each other and in the process helped clarify what they knew themselves. This interaction served as a strong impetus for collaborative learning.

Later on, students were observed working through assignments together before seeking the help of the advisor. These instances of ‘shared autonomy’ increased during the term. Although the demands this particular part-time teacher placed on the students were unreasonably high, the students were able to rise to the challenge with the help of the SAC.

The negative side to this was that the advisor could only offer ‘quick fix’ solutions for their immediate questions and needs. As Gremmo and Riley (1995) rightly note, advisors are not ‘surrogate teachers’ who simply provide language tutoring in a different context. Mozzon-McPherson (2007: 80) recommends advisors to use caution under pressure and to not give in to learner requests for short-term solutions to language problems. She continues to note that this can often result in a level of dependence on the advisor, with the same students returning for more easy answers. During this time, it became clear that the advisor was perceived as a language teacher, proofreader, Word-savvy computer technician, or simply someone students could turn to whenever they had any sort of linguistic problem; a step away from the role of an advisor as a “facilitator of learning with the goal of getting the students onto the next step of effective learning, and not just someone providing the ‘right’ answers” (Rubin, 2007).

The top three responses (Figure 3), ‘help with assignments’, ‘free time’ and ‘talk with native teachers’ can all be categorized as social units; the next two, ‘self-study’ and ‘watch TV/movies’ can be considered independent activities in a social environment, pointing to the SAC as cautiously successful in creating a space for a ‘social community’ of learners.

However, participation in ‘SAC learning projects’, which go hand and hand with individual advising sessions, is minimal with only one vote (Figure 3). While the students come to the SAC overwhelmingly to see the advisor, it is not for individual study plans and advising sessions, the exception being TOEIC/TOEFL test preparation under ‘SAC program materials’ (Figure 4). It appears few students take advantage of the study plans and advising sessions tailored for individual learning needs.

This seems to point to a lack of adequately addressing the left side of our framework (Figure 1, p.40): the need for learners to possess a level of awareness of the learning process, their own attitudes toward learning, their responsibilities and roles in the learning process and their strengths and weaknesses as learners, all essential components in promoting self-directed learning and autonomy. Thus while the majority of students (68%) see the benefits of the SAC for their studies (Table 2, p.46, below), they are not necessarily developing their own learning agendas.

Figure 3: Why/how do you use the SAC?

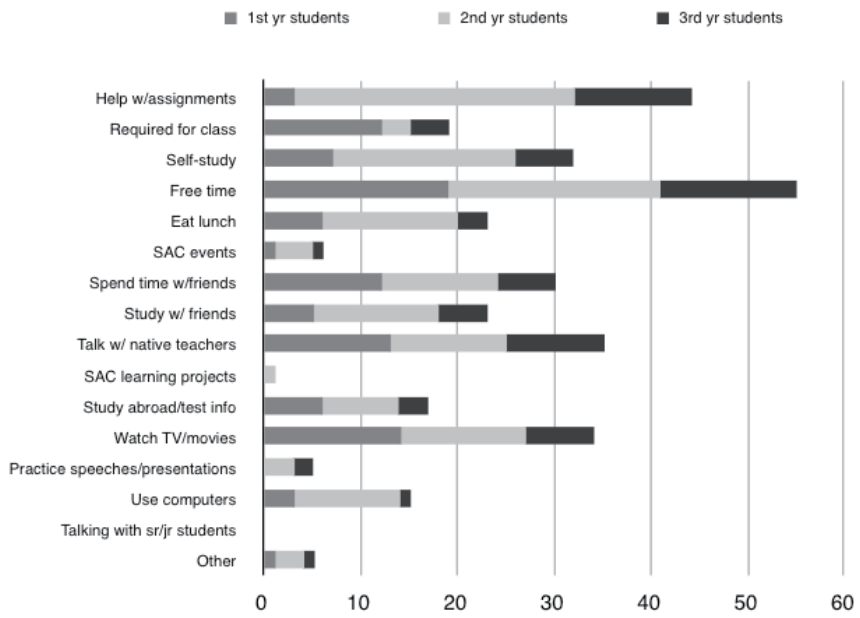


Figure 4: What/who do you usually use in the SAC?

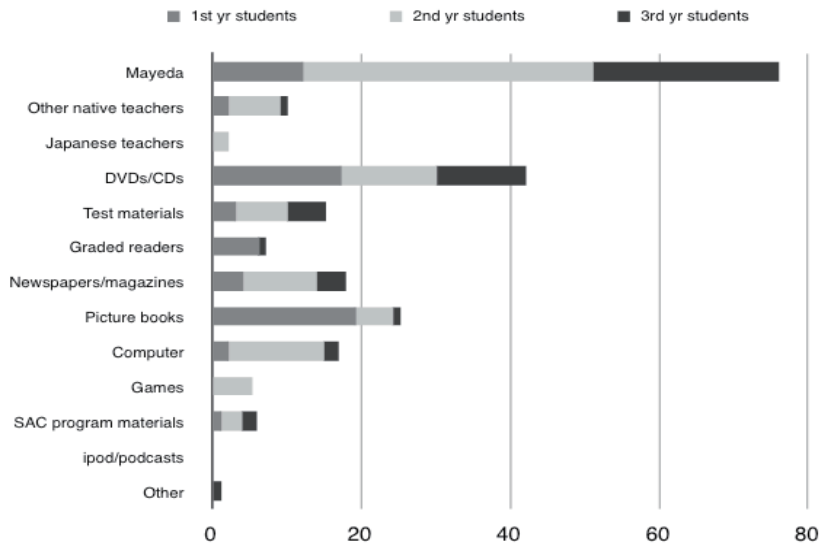


Table 2: Is coming to the SAC beneficial for your studies?

Question 7: Is coming to the SAC beneficial for your studies?				
	1st	2nd	3rd	Total
Yes	25	38	19	82
Not so much	4	2	6	12
No influence		2	3	5
No answer	1		3	4

It is also interesting to note that more than half of the students (56%) have not attended any monthly events although many (45%) appear to be aware of them (Table 3). The participation figure for second-year students is relatively high (38%) and although the survey was intended to gauge the four months from April to July 2008, this number indicates participation by students in the previous year. It should be noted that the responses from first-year students reflect only the four months of attendance since April 2008.

Table 3: How about SAC events?

Question 10: How about SAC events?				
	1st	2nd	3rd	Total
Take part in them monthly	0	0	0	0
Have participated in some	4	18	11	33
Never, but aware of monthly theme	20	21	14	55
Not aware of them	6	3	4	13
No answer			2	2

The June 2007 “Study Abroad” event was largely successful with student presenters exemplary in sharing their experiences with a full room of participants. This particularly benefited the first year students who were considering study abroad opportunities at the time. Suffice it to say, some of these students are now participating in those programs. However, this same event in June 2008 was met with less success. Although the lineup of student presenters was impressive, even more so than in the previous year, the main reason for the decline was, in this author’s opinion, due to a lack of enthusiasm by the teachers. Despite the same method of advertising with posters in addition to messages sent to the entire faculty, many students were not aware of the event. This may be attributable to the fact that the SAC is no longer considered ‘new’ so teachers with little or no stake in its success saw less need to advertise. This underscores the importance of teacher support and involvement throughout SAC development and the impact it has on the learners. Mozzon-McPherson (2007:69) states it succinctly:

The establishment of a SAC is not a ‘one-off’ activity which makes independent learning possible. It requires a continual dialogue amongst the different stakeholders to ensure effective use of its resources and facilities, avoid its obsolescence and fossilization, to encourage its integration in learning and teaching structures.

While we can show a measure of success in improving the social dimension that face-to-face learning spaces provide in the critical role that groups and communities play in fostering students' ability to progressively and purposefully advance their foreign language abilities, we still need to improve and highlight ways for students to learn about individual awareness as learners in order to foster 'balanced' autonomy.

5. Other Contributing Factors

When discussing the lack of adequate counseling for promoting learner awareness, other factors must also be considered outside of the scope of the questionnaire results. The time constraints imposed on the learning advisor via a teaching schedule and departmental duties, administrative and advising responsibilities in SAC operations, in addition to the required physical presence in the SAC during open hours, determines how much can be devoted to focusing on developing learner awareness programs and activities. One of the qualities of a good adviser is not to impose or prescribe fixed parameters, but ask and trigger replies and solutions from the learners, which function best on the learner's own terms. It also requires a major change in orientation from a culture of teaching to one that focuses on learning and on learner independence (Pemberton and Toogood, 2001; Clemente, 2003 cited in Rubin 2007). Learners must also overcome the expectation of the advisor to take on the teacher's role, or what Riley (1999) refers to as "membership." Consequently, the role with each group and each learner seeking advice must be constantly renegotiated which all requires a great deal of time to develop. It is often easier and more efficient to prescribe or give ready answers to problems but ideally the advisor should offer advice and insights based on individual student situation, learner history and attitude to learning, and then allow the learners to find their own answers. For autonomy to 'happen,' time needs to be allotted for not only promoting individual learner awareness, but also for developing the role of the learning advisor as a 'facilitator for learning' and not just another teacher that the learners can stay dependent upon.

Space limitations may also be a contributing factor in the limited interest in individual advising sessions. As there is no private, partitioned-off space for these sessions, some students may not feel comfortable discussing their English abilities within earshot of peers, particularly given the amount of daily activity in the SAC. Thus realizing any measure of success in the promotion of learning plans may be limited by the time constraints on the learning advisor and the current physical configuration of the SAC.

6. Suggestions for Improvement

The following suggestions are offered for improving the current situation in the SAC:

1. Development and implementation of a study skills class taking place in the SAC. This class would be limited to 10-12 students at a time where an introduction to the SAC resources and ways to use

them would be conducted along with learner appropriate awareness activities.

2. Creation of appointment-based sessions with the learning advisor. Currently all queries made to the advisor have been on a drop-in basis. A block of time could be set aside for advising appointments allowing more individual time to develop learner profiles and the advisor-advisee relationship.
3. Hire more advisors to share in the responsibilities and to give learners more opportunities for interaction with English speakers.
4. Request a larger room with separate areas for socializing, independent study, and a private advising area.

Although some of the areas in need of improvement are not easily resolved, particularly those that require large monetary output, other problems can be alleviated by a creative balance of human resources and the willingness of the department and university to support our vision of autonomy.

7. Conclusion

Learning an autonomous approach is not a simple transmission of knowledge or skills, but a collaboration in the attempt to express meaning for learning purposes. As Burrows (2008:17) notes, “the strength of social and affective dimensions often determines the level of participation among students”. Learners’ knowledge and attitudes are the key to language success, and involving them in the collaborative process, through incorporating their cognitive and learning preferences and through social interaction with peers in a language learning environment, is essential. This combination of group and individual teaching spaces illustrate the critical social role of groups and communities in fostering students’ ability to progressively and purposefully advance their foreign language abilities.

The role of the SAC and the learning adviser should be viewed as a pedagogic ‘tool’ in both maximizing latent student potential and as a bridge between students, traditional forms of teaching (seminar and lectures) and spaces for learning (classrooms and CALL rooms). So while the criteria of choice, adaptability and accessibility (Esch, 1996) are partly addressed in the organization of the SAC, the ability to create conditions for reflection and collaboration requires skilled personnel to realize them (Mozzon-McPherson, 2007:69). In this context, advisers have a significant highly skilled role as mediators between traditional models of teaching delivery and a transformed model in which dialog is a pedagogic tool in developing learners’ understanding of the mechanics and contextual role of language learning.

The continuing focus of the Osaka Shoin SAC has been to explore ways to replace a culture of dependence with a culture of interdependence, not independence. We continue to show that there are many sound practical reasons for offering self-access as complementary to or as an alternative to classroom teaching, especially in an institution such as ours where existing learning needs are too great or diverse to be met by traditional methods. The evaluation of SAC use and the process of feeding back

outcomes and actions arising from learners and teachers are activities in which all the members of the teaching staff should be fully engaged. Arguably, this is an essential illustration of the synergy between learning spaces, learners and pedagogues.

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