Why SALL ?　Targeting the New At-Risk Learners

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Like in the West, social pressures upon the individual in Japan are one of the main causes of high incidences of academic failure and drop out (McNamara, 2001a; 2001b) especially in higher learning institutions that are under greater economical pressure to survive (Kagaya, 1999). At such educational establishments, students are often chosen to aid institutional survival rather than by any measure of their academic ability. 'At-risk' students, who before would not have gained admittance to colleges, are now being sought to fill empty seats. This phenomenon is widespread.

One of the factors affecting social pressures is the current economic crisis facing many colleges and universities in Japan. "The rapid decline in the 18-year-old age bracket of the population—the prime university applicant pool—is behind this situation," with 30% of private colleges and universities falling below their quotas ("Test Eyed," 2003). The fact remains that for these institutions to survive, they must maintain their enrollment. Figure 1 further demonstrates this trend (Mombukagakushou, 2002).

In order to attract students, many institutions are understandably opting for admittance policies that largely ignore students' previous academic performance or entrance exam scores such as the Admission Office (AO) exam (Yamamoto, 2001). In theory, the AO exam should place more importance on applicants' personalities and diversify applicant screening, but in fact it is being used as an open sluice gate for admitting increasing numbers of students, many who previously would have been rejected ("Test Eyed," 2003).

Keeping such students enrolled raises other issues. When students perceive that they are unable to contend with learning tasks, pessimism often results, triggering a lowering of self-esteem and ultimately student drop out (Black, Hyakutake, McNamara, and Shaffer, 2002). A high drop out rate means financial ruin. This raises the question of how those institutions that have used financial enrollment criteria, intend to maintain their new 'at-risk' students without reciprocal changes in their curriculum. They feel such changes are unnecessary or excessive. Fundamental changes in curriculum and teaching methodology to intervene and address the needs of these new 'at-risk' students do appear necessary. However, this kind of reform is not likely to be generated or supported from within a system that does not consider such practices as acceptable.

Self-access language learning (SALL), an approach to teaching and learning developed outside of Japan, is appropriate here, and especially relevant because it provides opportunities for students to customize their learning portfolio. Enabling students to regulate their own learning engenders confidence that they can succeed (Bandura, 1977), preventing sources

Total Number of
18-Year Olds

(Thousand)

Incoming College/
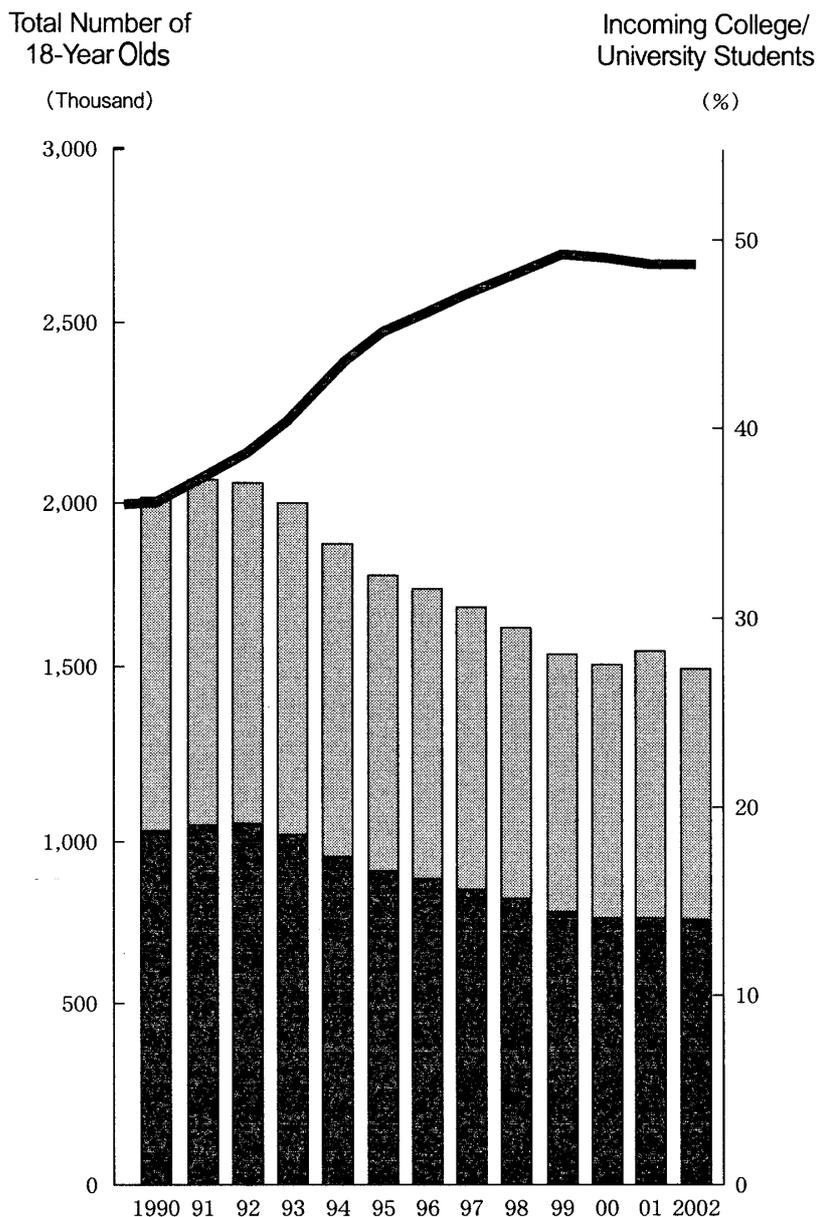University Students

(%)

Figure 1: The number of 18-year olds and percentage of incoming college/university students

Adapted from Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, 2002

of student anxieties and distress that may lead to their dropping out.

SALL, as seen by the authors, is not defined by a specific learning space or set of materials. Rather, it describes the method in which teachers, students, technology, and learning materials interact. From this perspective, the teacher's role changes from the traditional rostrum lecturer to an observer/counselor—a guide who provides necessary feedback. Currently support for this kind of educator is rare, but like it or not change is coming, fueled by an increasing population of the new 'at-risk', who are now becoming valued as the economic lifeblood of many institutions.

Survey Procedure and Results

A survey was conducted to investigate how SALL is currently contributing to college/ university education in Japan, and how other institutions may be adjusting their programs to address the challenges of potentially 'at-risk' students.

75 colleges and universities selected among the members of the Japan Association for Language Education and Technology (LET), who had registered as having a language laboratory or language learning center, were surveyed (see Appendix). Of the institutions selected, 35 were in the Kanto district, 7 in the Chubu district, 23 in the Kansai district, and 10 in the Kyushu district, bringing the total to 75. A survey with three questions was sent to each institution early in October 2002, and 35 responses were returned by the end of December. The percentage of those responding was 46.7%.

Question 1. Does your institution have a self-access center or any facilities equivalent to it?

To the question above, 19 institutions out of 35 answered 'yes', which accounts for 54% of the respondents and 25% of the total institutions questioned (see figure 2). The names of these facilities varied from institution to institution, and included the terms LL, CALL, audio-visual room, language center, and multi-media center. The existing facilities are assumed by the researchers to be instrumental in the implementation of SALL as well as providing other educational services.
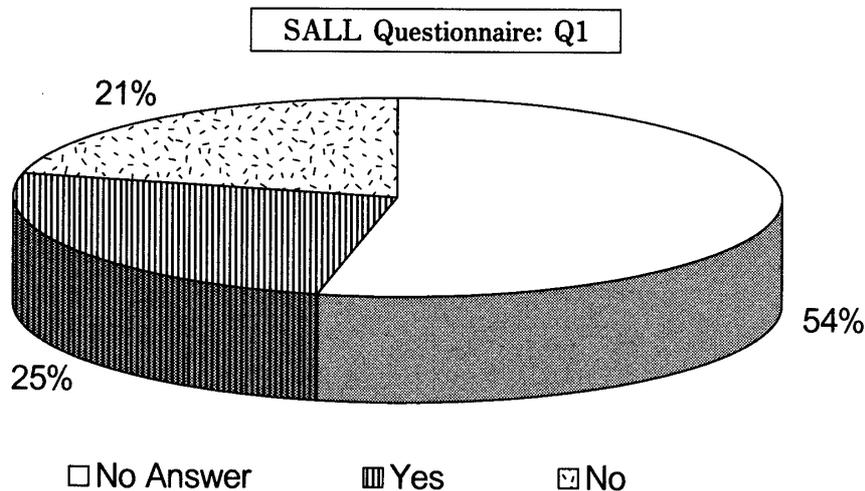

Figure 2: Does your institution have a self-access center or any facilities equivalent to it?

Question 2. Have you introduced SALL programs into language education?

To this question, 16 institutions out of 35 said 'yes', which accounts for 46% of the respondents and 21% of the total institutions questioned (see figure 3). The most common way to implement SALL is to assign some self-access tasks as homework, and 10 institutions (63%) chose 'homework' in addition to other choices. Not only special facilities for SALL, but

also regular classrooms are frequently used as the learning venue for this kind of study (see figure 4). Facilities that are open to students with no teacher guidance or teacher regulated study programs exist in 3 institutions.

Three institutions out of 35 require SALL study of their students and give them credit for this work. Two institutions out of the three provide SALL programs as an elective course as well as a required one. Another 4 institutions provide SALL programs only as an elective course. Unrestricted SALL study for which no credit is given is allowed in two institutions (see figure 5).
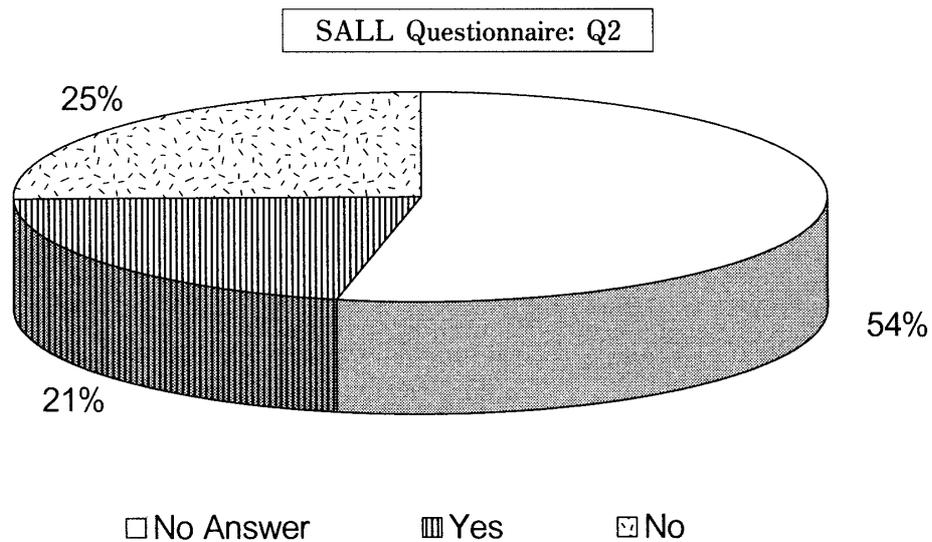
SALL Questionnaire: Q2

25%

54%

21%

□ No Answer   Ⅲ Yes   ☑ No

Figure 3: Have you introduced SALL programs into language education?

SALL Questionnaire: Q2-i

Number of responses

12

10

8

6

4

2

0

	Classroom	Center	Homework	Other
	7	7	10	5

Figure 4: Ways and venues to implement SALL

SALL Questionnaire: Q2-ii

Number of
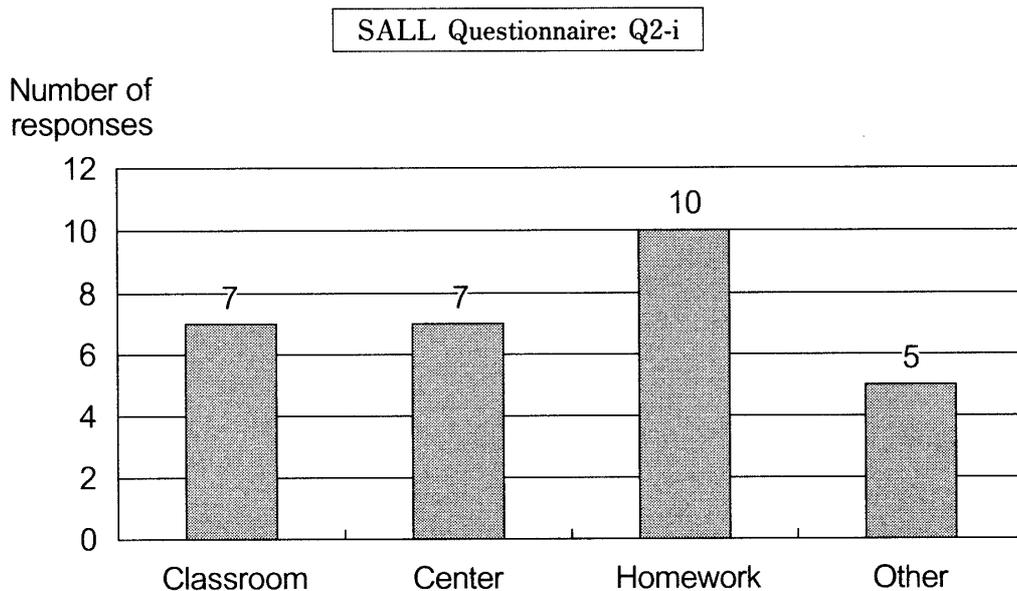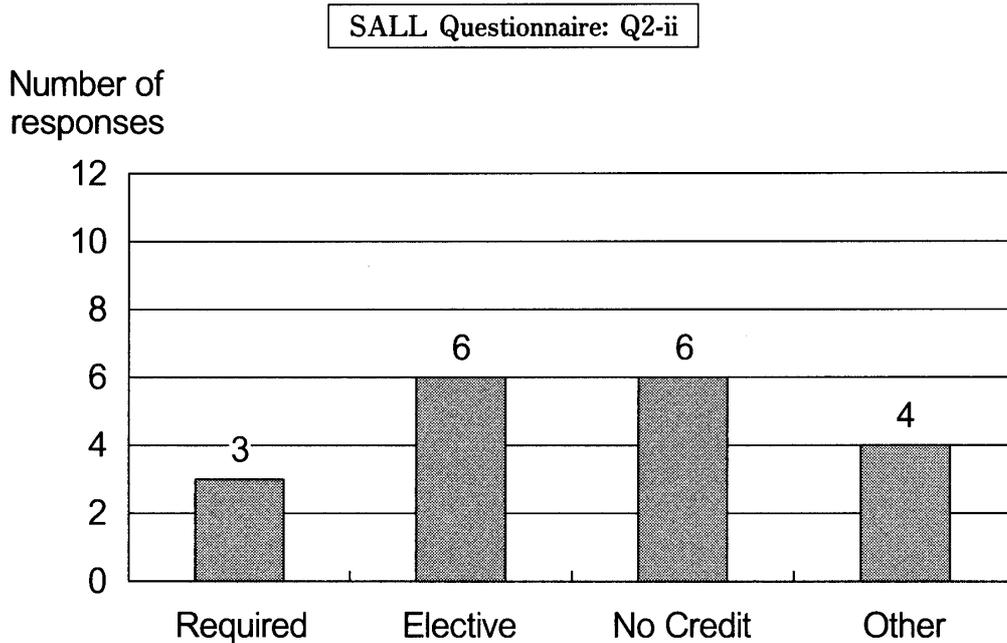responses

Figure 5: Location of SALL in the curriculum

Question 3. What is/are your specific program(s) to raise English competence of at-risk students in your institution?

24 out of 35 institutions (69%) responded to this question. Organizing students according to their English competence as determined by a placement test ranks first among the various distinctive programs individual institutions have attempted, reportedly being used by 8 institutions according to the survey. Standardized tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and Eiken have been used as a placement test as well as a course objective (5 institutions). Class activities and self-study using multimedia (7 institutions) and e-learning on computers (3 institutions) are other approaches being used to raise English competence of 'at-risk' students. A few institutions provide some remedial courses in addition to their regular English courses.

Conclusion

The existence of SALL facilities in 54% of the responding universities indicates there is an implicit need for such approaches. In 16 institutions, although implemented in different ways, SALL has become part of the language curriculum. SALL is adaptable to the particular needs of an institution and its individual students.

The new 'at-risk', however they may be defined, do exist. The fact that 69% of the surveyed institutions had programs to target such students supports this claim. The use of SALL activities as a form of remedial education in 7 of those institutions also supports this, which raises the questions: What is remedial education, and what assumptions are being made by institutions that use the term, given the negative connotations that it can have? These issues require further attention.

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Appendix
Survey Questions
SALL アンケート

大学名（施設名）

住所　〒＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

Ｑ１．貴学にセルフ・アクセス・センターもしくはそれに相当する施設・設備はありますか？

　　　・ある　　　施設名：＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

　　　・ない

Ｑ２．貴学では SALL を外国語教育に導入していますか？

　　　・導入している

　　　　　ⅰ　教室で／センターで／宿題として／その他

　　　　　ⅱ　必修／選択／単位にならない／その他

　　　・導入していない

Ｑ３．貴学が独自に取り組んでおられる学生の英語力を底上げするための方策がありましたら教えて下さい。

今後詳細な質問などに対応していただける方がおられましたら，連絡先を書いてください。

担当者＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

e-mail＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

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