

< NOTES >

The self-access center at Tsukuba Women's University

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Abstract

This paper considers self-access learning and documents the setting up and operation of a self-access center for students of English at a four year college in Japan. Different types of self-access centers are considered.

Introduction

Self-access centers for foreign language learning are now increasingly commonly found in universities, colleges and language schools throughout the world. In Japan, where such centers are still relatively thin on the ground, the importance of fostering independent study habits and promoting self-access centers has come to be appreciated. Administrators and teachers have realized the importance of self-access centers for a number of pedagogic, economic and practical reasons. Furnishing users with the chance to exploit a selection of materials and machines, that would otherwise have remained underutilized, builds on students' learning experience providing both an important back up to and extension of what is done in class. The benefits of a well-run and well-used self-access center are almost incalculable to students, teachers and administrations alike. The development of self-access study centers is becoming a major trend in the world of English as a Foreign Language. In recent years, a number of studies of language learners have found that language learners who are successful display the trait of taking personal responsibility for progress in their studies and are not overly reliant on the teacher and what happens in the classroom. In the words of Rubin (94),

Language learning must be an active process. Learners who make a conscious effort to practice their foreign language and who seek out opportunities to use what they have learned are more successful than learners who assume a passive attitude and rely on the teacher to do the whole job.

Rationale

The rationale for the establishment of a self-access center at Tsukuba Women's University was based upon a number of reasons which are discussed below. Firstly, it is well-known that Japanese students when they reach university have rarely had any significant exposure to aural/oral skills in English. This is the result of emphasis in high schools being firmly placed on items of grammar and vocabulary of the type found in most university entrance examinations in Japan. It should be noted, however, that in recent years changes in the English curriculum at high school brought about by the Ministry of Education have meant that the situation has changed somewhat. The Ministry of Education's new curriculum consists of Communication A, speaking, Communication B, listening and Communication C, debate. The majority of high schools are using either the A or the B curriculum, but there is little concrete data concerning when and for how long they are being used. What is undoubtedly true is that the threat of university entrance exams, only a handful of which carry a listening comprehension component, still looms large in the consciousness of students, parents, teachers and administrators. Despite such recent changes, first year students majoring in either International Relations or Comparative Culture at Tsukuba Women's University have considerable problems with listening and speaking skills, particularly when compared with their counterparts from other Asian countries. Students take six hours of English a week in their first year; three hours of which with a native speaker focus on listening and speaking and three hours a week with a Japanese teacher of English focusing mainly on reading and grammar, but also with some listening. At the start of the academic year which is in April, students take an English placement test and are divided into ten levels. Although there is a considerable gap in ability between levels 1 and 10, it is fair to say that students on the whole have similar language problems; namely low levels of listening and speaking ability. Thus one of the leading rationales for the self-access center has been to create an environment that will help learners to develop listening skills on either a remedial or developmental basis. Of course, it is generally accepted that it is of considerable importance to instill in students an autonomous learning style. That is to say that autonomous learning is important in that it increases student motivation, independence and enthusiasm. In the words of Sherrin (89),

The most effective way of developing favorable attitudes towards independence in learning is to give learners successful experiences of independent learning in contexts such as self-access centers. The likelihood of the success of the experience can be increased by the teacher working closely with learners initially helping them to specify very clear objectives, in helping them to select appropriate materials to meet those objectives, and by the teacher ensuring that learners are well-prepared to use the materials.

Students have different psychologies and personalities. They also have varying motivation levels. Teacher led classrooms often run into difficulties because of the different characteristics and learning styles of students. Some students are quicker than others and different students have

different preferences concerning the type of work that they want to do. In a self-access center, students can work at their own pace, making their own decisions, and study preferences can be easily accommodated. It is the experience of this author that students who are reticent in class often make greater use of the self-access center than students who are more extrovert and at ease using English. Perhaps the lack of pressure in the self-access environment explains the behavior of such students.

Type of set-up

Self-access centers have a number of different systems. Miller & Rogerson-Revell (93) provide a useful list of four main types.

1: Menu driven

This system is based on a comprehensive card index system that requires little teacher input.

2: Supermarket

This system offers the learner the opportunity to look around and choose what to study. Materials are displayed under clearly marked categories, listening, reading etc.

3: Controlled access

Learners are directed to a specific set of materials which are closely connected to what is covered in class and classified accordingly.

4: Open-access

This type of center is commonly part of a library and may sometimes be separated from the main library or classified along with other materials.

Of the above four systems, the self-access center at Tsukuba Women's University is closest to the 'supermarket' system. At present the system concentrates mainly on listening materials, of which there are several varieties. There are about 50 listening units consisting of audio cassettes, and question and answer sheets. These units are roughly divided by color code into elementary, intermediate and advanced levels. Clearly, the range and variety of materials are the most crucial part of setting up a self-access center. Materials can be written by the teachers at the school, but this can be very time-consuming. Alternatively, commercial materials can be used. Laws concerning copy right need to be kept to and a simple, student friendly system of cataloging and cross reference needs to be set up. In the case of the self-access center at Tsukuba Women's University,

the majority of the material used is of commercial origin. For students taking external examinations in English, there are test taking materials for the following examinations:

TOEFL

Cambridge, Key English Test

Cambridge, Preliminary English Test

In addition, there is a selection of video tapes ranging from videos that accompany textbooks to commercial movies with or without subtitles in Japanese. As a rule, students are not directed to specific materials by their teachers. Of course, this varies from teacher to teacher, but students are generally free to choose whatever they want to study. It is felt that one of the most important hurdles to overcome is to convince students of the need to use the center and more importantly of taking responsibility for their learning. It would appear that many students recognise their own weaknesses in listening skills and are actively using the self-access center as a means of developing those skills.

Layout and setting

In 1996, a fledgling 12 place self-access center was established at Tsukuba Women's University. In April 1997, the facility was extended and moved to its present location where it can now accommodate twenty people using audio cassettes, four people using VCRs and three people using computers. The reading area seats four.

The center is open for approximately twenty-two hours a week and is available to all students in the university. The center is always staffed by a member of the English department who is on hand to give advice on material selection and technical difficulties. There are specific areas for audio, video, computer and reading materials from which students may freely choose. On entering the room, users are required to sign in, giving their name, faculty and duration of their visit. The response of the students to the self-access center has been very positive. On average, students seem to spend an hour and a half at each session in the center. This reflects the fact that lectures at the university are an hour and a half long and many students use the facilities at the center when they have free time between lectures. Occupancy of the places in the center in the first term from April to July ran from between 40 to 75 per cent depending on the time and day of the week. Since for the most part, students are under no compulsion to use the center, we consider this to be a good rate of occupancy. In the future, when the importance of independent learning is more fully appreciated by the administration, staff and students, it is hoped that use of the center will be scheduled into the curriculum. In other words, groups of students will be assigned specific times during the week in which they can make use of the center. A teacher will be in attendance and students will receive credits for the self-access course. This will probably require a slight modification of materials, particularly answer sheets, so that students' work can be assessed fairly before credits for the course are given.

When setting up a self-access center, a number of decisions need to be taken concerning the size of room and its location, equipment, furniture and so on. As a general rule, the center needs to be inviting. It should be relatively informal and decorated in colors that are warm, friendly and relaxing. Due to budgetary limitations at Tsukuba Women's University, the self-access center has not always developed in the way that the staff would have wanted. The absence of any screening to partition parts of the room into smaller independent units has meant that the room is too open-plan to offer much privacy to students. In the future, it is hoped that this can be overcome by the use of study booths. Tables, for the most part, have been borrowed from other rooms with a resulting lack of appeal.

Conclusions

A fledgling self-access center with twelve places was set up at Tsukuba Women's University in 1996. This was subsequently extended to accommodate approximately thirty people. The system resembles most closely the "supermarket" model described by Miller & Rogerson-Revell (93). Level of occupancy at the center has been encouraging. However, the center still has a long way to go in terms of developing appropriate and effective materials and providing the right atmosphere for independent study. Student reaction has been positive and it is hoped that a more detailed examination of students' choices and study approaches can be undertaken. Additionally, it is hoped that future developments in terms of materials can go ahead after input from current users. This will require a system of actively canvassing students' reactions and views on existing materials.

References

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