
Essays on Instruction and Curriculum

Establishing a Self-Access Center in a Japanese University

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This article traces the development of the Self-Access Center at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business Administration. It also looks at the resources that are now available in terms of hardware and materials, and how the materials are linked to the curriculum. Finally, it looks at current figures relating to SAC attendance and use.

Self-Access in Brief

Over the past four years the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business Administration (NUCB) has been building up a Self-Access Center (SAC). This is in common with many other universities and language teaching institutions throughout the world. A valid question to ask therefore would be why a Self-Access Center is now considered such a necessity in language learning. Both Shirin (1989), and Gardner and Miller (1999) in their excellent books on the subject give many very clear reasons why self-access has become such an important part of many language programs. For example, self-access allows students to choose and use materials on their own and at their own level; it also allows students to correct and assess their own performance; students are able to put extra time into their language learning outside the regular classroom; students can gain an independence in the development of their language skills.

One can summarize the logic of some of the main arguments for self-access language learning in the following way:

- students are different in terms of motivation and the speed and way in which they acquire the target language;
- a Self-Access Center allows them to work at a pace that suits them and on materials that they choose;
- students are free to spend as much time as they like on a task and to move to a new task if they wish to.

These points can be summarized thus:

- self-access language learning provides students with autonomy and a great degree of choice.

It would be wrong, however, to think that self-access language learning is going to make the teacher redundant or that life is made easier for the teacher with the introduction of self-access. Both Shirin, and Gardner and Miller warn that any attempt to cater more for the individual needs of students inevitably involves a lot of hard work and effort from teachers in terms of the provision of materials and in the general change of attitude and approach that is

required of both teachers and students. Four years ago the SAC Committee at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business Administration was appointed to start a SAC. The hard work had just begun.

Location, Staffing, Hardware and Materials

In establishing a Self-Access Center it is of fundamental importance that a suitable location be found. It is also vital to know what hardware, materials and general resources will be made available, what you actually want the students to do there, and how this will be linked to the curriculum. The initial goals at NUCB were that the Self-Access Center should be a place to extend what the students were doing in the classroom and to give opportunities for language practice. Gardner and Miller (1999) point out that self-access language learning is not a cheap undertaking precisely because the cost of hardware, staffing and materials, while not replacing the teaching process and teachers' salaries, is, in fact, additional.

Location

It was decided that the NUCB SAC should be located outside the Language Center where formal instruction takes place and teachers' offices are located. It was instead housed in the Information Center (Library) where adequate space was available. This decision was a fortunate one. The SAC has flourished in this location. It is able to draw on the other resources of the Information Center while establishing its own identity. The SAC already occupies a large area (one quarter of the reading area) and there is additional space available within the Information Center for future, planned development.

Staffing

Currently the NUCB SAC has one full-time bilingual Japanese member of staff who acts as SAC Coordinator. This role has continued to develop over the past three years. The following are some of the functions that the SAC Coordinator fulfills:

- liaison with the library administration and staff;
- liaison with members of the Faculty of Foreign Languages with regard to the planning and development of SAC use in relation to courses;
- planning and supervision of the expansion of facilities, including hardware;
- supervision of the ordering of new SAC materials and the preparation of materials recommended by teachers;
- liaison with students in the planning of their study programs. This is mainly done in English with the students of English.

The SAC Coordinator is helped by a part-time Japanese member of staff who deals with much of the SAC administration including the registering of students and the keeping of data files on all aspects of SAC activity. This administrative work is done in close consultation with the SAC Coordinator.

Most of the SAC materials, such as readers, are ordered under the general umbrella of the library. They can, therefore, be checked out through the library circulation desk for home study in the same way as other resources in the library.

There are also student helpers who work on the preparation of materials, such as

worksheets, under the direction of the SAC Coordinator and Faculty members. This has enabled the SAC to produce a considerable body of material for students to work with in a relatively short time.

Hardware

At present the NUCB SAC has the following facilities (see Diagram 1):

- 30 booths (work stations) with both cassette players and CD players;
- 12 of the booths also have MD facilities;
- 6 of the booths have headsets with microphones for students to record their voices on audio-cassette.

There are plans to provide more of the booths with cassette recording facilities. DVD equipment will also be installed in the near future.

In the SAC there are also:

- 24 video stations;
- A TV lounge showing CNN and BBC World Service Television. Students can listen through headphones which are provided.

Students are encouraged to bring their own laptop computers to complete assignments in the various booths. On the floor above the SAC in the Information Center there is also a Global Access Room (GAR) with 52 Macintosh computers and 15 Windows compatible computers where students have continuous access to the Internet.

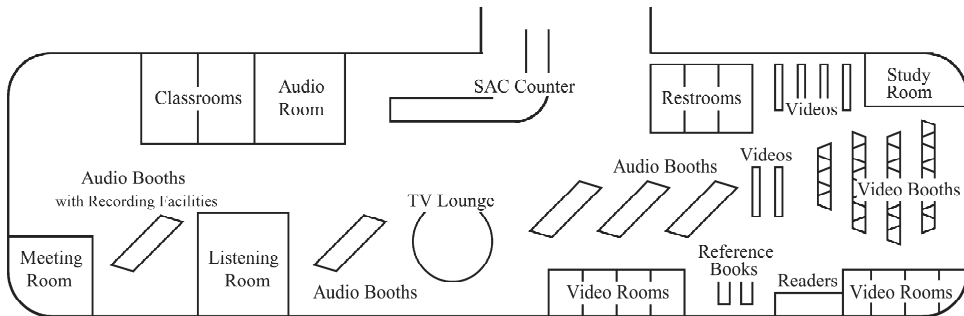


Diagram 1: Layout of NUCB's Self-Access Center

Shirin (1989) writes that when considering the layout of a study center, the size of the room and the area available play a crucial role. If one fairly large room is available, then it can be divided into convenient sections related to the various kinds of activities which will be taking place. It is also necessary to think carefully about the organization of the available space. There needs to be room for the housing of books, self-access materials and equipment. Working areas are also necessary for private study with as much privacy as possible. Large areas can be broken up into smaller ones, using bookshelves, partitions and screens. It is also necessary to consider the movement of people through the study center and the amount of noise that will be produced by the various activities.

We have been fortunate at NUCB in having a large area that is occupied by the SAC and, as mentioned above, having additional space that might be utilized for further development. The room is divided into areas for the various kinds of activities (see Diagram 1). For example, at one end of the SAC there is a distinct video area where students can watch videos while listening through headphones. There are also small rooms at the side of the SAC with video players. In the main body of the SAC there are four sets of six audio booths configured to give students a certain amount of privacy. Here students are able to do work on their listening skills or private study. At the opposite end of the SAC to the video players there are six audio booths with recording facilities where students can record and listen to their voices.

Shirin notes that the noisiest part of any library or study center is inevitably the entrance area. Activities which involve talking, such as the lending and returning of books, audio-active labs., etc. should, therefore, be grouped near the entrance so that the study center becomes progressively quieter as you progress into it. This would mean that the most studious activities would be located as far away from the entrance as possible. The question of noise has inevitably arisen in the development of NUCB's SAC. With this in mind, the audio booths with recording facilities, for instance, are located in a quiet corner so that students can record in relative privacy and without interfering too much with other activities. However, there is still a general noise problem when the Self-Access Center is crowded. This will have to be dealt with in future development. It is partly caused by inadequate sound insulation in the small video rooms and the lack of adequate partitioning in other areas.

Materials

The following are some of the materials that are now available to students in the Self-Access Center:

- Copies of all the textbooks taught on courses in the Language Center of the University;
- Multiple copies of all the audio-cassettes of courses taught in the Language Center;
- Worksheets and answer sheets accompanying many of the courses taught in the Language Center;
- 2,030 Graded Readers published by Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Longman Publishers and Penguin Publishers. 1,200 of these are audio books with audio-cassettes;
- Over 100 books to prepare students for various English examinations such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and Eiken (an English proficiency test for Japanese speakers);
- Foreign language books and cassettes teaching Korean, Chinese, Thai, Indonesian, Vietnamese and the major European languages;
- Over 100 videos in English, 15 of these with English and Japanese scripts;
- 10 Japanese videos with English subtitles;
- Grammar and phonetics exercises on worksheets accompanied by audio-cassettes;
- Books and audio- and video-cassettes to teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP) such as general business, tourism and computer languages.

Shirin (1989) writes that a lot of work goes into the production of worksheets and instruction sheets, etc. and it is, therefore, worth taking some trouble to ensure that they last as long as possible. To this end at NUCB we have taken care to plan the storage of materials. All worksheets, for example, that are for use only in the SAC are carefully laminated and stored in boxes and cupboards and made available during SAC opening times to students. The course-related worksheets that can be taken away are photocopied on a regular basis, and again displayed in file boxes and made available to students.

The stock of audio-cassettes has grown rapidly and these are stored either at the SAC administration counter or in open-access cassette drawers in special cabinets. Video-cassettes are displayed on shelves or are available through the circulation counter of the Information Center. The Information Center's security system ensures that audio and video materials are not removed where it is not permitted.

Learner Predisposition

There has been recent discussion in the popular press and professional journals of the poor English language levels of Japanese students relative to their Asian counterparts, and many articles trying to explain the failure. A recent article, for example, was found in the previous issue of this journal (Reesor, 2002). It would therefore have been valid to ask, when embarking on building up a Self-Access Center for the study of languages in Japan, whether in fact it is worth the effort. Once the Self-Access Center has been established, would students be more active and predisposed to take the initiative in using what is available or would they be passive? And would their level of competence improve? Gardner and Miller (1999) suggest that some learners may be more inclined or predisposed to self-access learning than others. Riley (1988) writes of the predisposition of whole identifiable groups and nationalities rather than just of individuals. He found, for instance, that Danes, Americans, Moroccans and Vietnamese all had different reactions to a self-access project. The Danes were the most successful in completing the project satisfactorily. The Americans found it difficult to organize themselves and understand the purpose of the tasks, even though they were in favor of the project. The Moroccans and Vietnamese were unable to complete the tasks.

Gardner and Miller (1999) suggest that four definite factors influence learners' attitudes towards self-access. They are: the teachers, the educational institution, the peer group and the society in which the learners live. Teachers are clearly seen as an important influence because it is they who will probably introduce students to self-access learning. Gardner and Miller argue, among other things, that teachers who have a commitment to self-access learning will probably communicate their enthusiasm to their learners and the results will be better. Gardner and Miller also contend that institutional attitudes to self-access can be a very important influence in the way that self-access is introduced, or whether it is introduced at all. In highly structured institutions, the introduction of self-access needs to become a policy issue. In cases where funding is required for self-access resources, the institutional influence becomes even more important.

At NUCB, at all stages, institutional commitment to the success of the Self-Access Center has played a central role. Because of its financial investment, the institution wishes to see results in terms of numbers of users. If students will not attend of their own volition, then some form of inducement must be introduced. Over the past three years various methods of inducement have been used including what might be considered coercive measures in the form of precise records of attendance being kept for later awarding of credits.

It is true in our experience that, following the Riley model, our Japanese students, in general, behave in a certain manner in relation to self-access. They are not naturally predisposed to self-access without some form of necessity or prerequisite being imposed on them. We have found that, as a group, they respond most positively to teacher intervention in

the form of set tasks relating to specific courses. This also, of course, is backed up by the “institutional” influence in that those learners who spend more time on the prescribed tasks are more likely to gain the credits awarded by the institution. The majority of our students are not in general “self-starters” who would go to the center of their own volition. It must be pointed out, however, that there is a minority who do go, and this number is increasing.

Integration into the Program

SAC work has gradually been integrated into course work more and more over the past three years. Materials design, production and access all reflect this fact. Students can revise material from classes or prepare for new classes. They can also prepare for the mid-semester and end of semester examinations. The integration of the SAC into the curriculum particularly affects the first and second years in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. Let us look at the first year. At present the following seven courses are taught in the first year:

- English Conversation
- English Listening Skills
- Reading
- Basic English Writing
- English Speaking Skills
- Computer Applications
- English Grammar/Testing

Five of the courses definitely require SAC attendance and have the following materials that are exclusively available through the SAC:

1. English Conversation
 - Course audio-cassettes

The course audio-cassettes are used in the classes and for revision for the mid-semester and end of semester examinations. It is not possible for students to borrow the audio-cassettes for home use so revision and additional listening activities must therefore be completed in the SAC.

2. English Listening Skills
 - Course video
 - Course audio-cassette
 - Oral drill audio-cassettes
 - Additional worksheets
 - Answer sheets

The course video, audio-cassette and oral drills used in this course are only available in the SAC and cannot be borrowed for home use. Students can record the oral drills in the SAC using recording facilities identical to those used in the Language Center during classes. Additional worksheets from this course are also available for students to use in the SAC or to take home for practice and revision.

3. Reading
 - Graded readers
 - Audio books

First-year students are required to read a certain number of readers or listen to audio books in the SAC as part of their reading course. They must then complete book reports. Some of the readers (not the audio books) are available for loan from the Information Center.

4. English Grammar/Testing
—TOEIC CDs, MDs and audio-cassettes

The SAC has all the recorded material for the first-year testing course. This must be listened to in the SAC. Certain other TOEIC practice books are available for borrowing.

5. Basic English Writing

First-year students complete a 750 word reflective report on their experience of the extensive reading program (see Meister, 2001).

Further examples of the integration of SAC work and courses can be found throughout the curriculum. In the second-year, for instance, students must work on phonetics exercises with worksheets and audio-cassettes. They then record the exercises and listen to their own voices. The audio-cassettes of the ESP courses on business English in the second, third and fourth years are also only available in the SAC. It is clear that as courses develop and the curriculum becomes more established the role of the SAC in the total program will increase.

Student Attendance Figures

The following four tables and charts reflect the dynamics of participation in the SAC with regard to attendance and the activities undertaken by students. The figures give details of the total number of hours that students have spent in the SAC, the daily distribution and comparison of SAC users, the average number of attendances per month, and the distribution by activity.

Table 1: Total Hours Students Spent in the SAC

Department	TNORS**	Total Hours Students Spent in the SAC*			
		April	May	June	Total
English	365	1,158	1,905	1,751	4,814
Asian***	64	84	139	120	343
Koryo	72	134	190	207	531
Total	501	1,376	2,234	2,078	5,688

* A SAC attendance is prescribed as a one-hour period.

** TNORS—Total Number of Registered Students (1st, 2nd, and 3rd year students only)

*** 80% of the Asian Studies students' attendances were in preparation for the English Conversation and English Listening Skills examinations, and for TOEIC.

Table 1 illustrates the fact that the policy of relating attendance to work for specific courses is proving effective in certain areas. A very impressive total number of 4,814 attendances was recorded in April, May and June 2002 for students majoring in English. The highest monthly total for the English majors was in May with 1,905 attendances. This can be explained by the fact that at the end of May and the beginning of June students were preparing for the TOEIC

examination and the mid-semester examinations.

The total number of attendances of Asian Studies students for the three months was 343. Work is to be done to increase this total. A more adequate range of materials is to be prepared linking what is being done in the classroom with additional and reinforcement activities carried out in the SAC.

The monthly total for students in Koryo International College (a two-year junior college for women students) rose between May and June 2002. Students of the college receive two credits for fifty hours of SAC attendance.

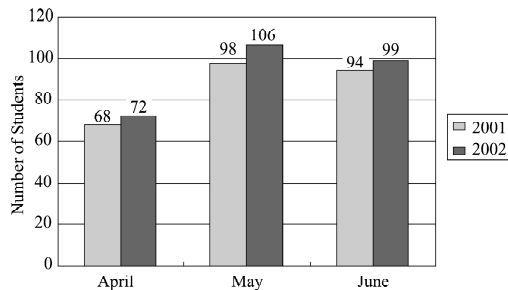


Chart 1: Average Daily Number of SAC Users

Chart 1 shows that SAC daily attendances for the start of the academic year 2002/2003 are higher than for the year 2001/2002. Average daily attendances in May 2002 reached 106 compared with 98 in May 2001. This again reflects SAC activities being integrated into more courses in the curriculum. The May total illustrates the fact that students were preparing for the TOEIC and mid-semester examinations. We hope this upward trend will continue as more and varied work relating to course examinations becomes available to students across all years.

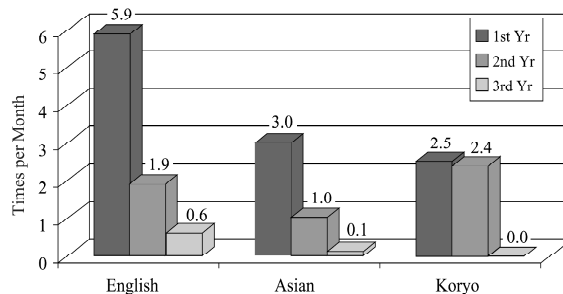


Chart 2: Average Number of Attendances per Month (April-June 2002)

Chart 2 illustrates that first-year students majoring in English recorded the highest number of SAC attendances on a monthly basis for April, May and June 2002. Every first-year English major attended on average 5.9 times per month in April, May and June 2002.

First-year Asian Studies students attended on average 3 times per month for that period.

At present, work is being done to improve the second-year monthly attendance average of English majors. For example, more worksheets and audio-cassettes are to be prepared for the second-year listening course following the model used in the first year. Measures are also to be taken to improve the Asian Studies figures.

Both first- and second-year students in Koryo International College receive credits for SAC attendance. This may help to explain the consistency in attendance averages in the two years.

Chart 3 illustrates the fact that students enjoy listening in the SAC and the listening facilities are in constant use. Higher listening scores in the TOEIC reflect the fact that in

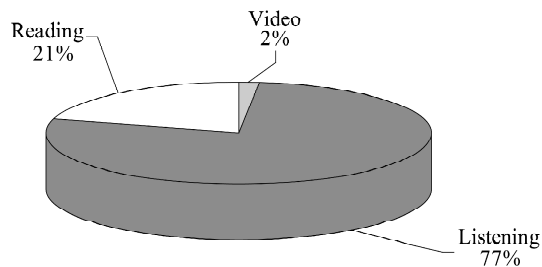


Chart 3: Distribution by Activity (April–June 2002)

- * Some of the listening activities include “Audio Readers.”
- ** Students registered for listening may also be borrowing a book for home reading.

general students’ listening skills are improving. This improvement in listening skills can be explained by systematic practice in the classroom being linked to very definite activities in the SAC.

Maintaining and Developing the System

As has been seen, the Self-Access Center has a clear and very important role in the language program at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business Administration. The relationship between the classroom and the SAC is already very productive and it is intended that it be even more so. This will be achieved in part by more and better hardware. For example, the number of listening booths with recording facilities will be increased and as has been mentioned, DVD systems will be installed.

As far as materials are concerned, more worksheets and audio-cassettes will be produced to increase and improve the links between work done in classes and work done in the SAC. A good example of this is the determined effort that is to be made to raise TOEIC reading and grammar scores. The SAC will play a vital part in this. More copies of readers will be obtained for the SAC, including multiple copies of set texts. Reading efficiency and examination practice will be affected as all students in a year will be examined on those specific set texts. The importance of SAC attendance will be made clearer and more forcefully to students.

The increased availability of materials and technical possibilities for varied self-study, as well as the success they can relate to SAC use, appears to be changing students' attitudes. Many students, who in previous years would not have visited the SAC, now enjoy trying the various activities. In the future as more possibilities become available in terms of hardware and materials, will we see more students taking the initiative and going to the SAC of their own volition to improve their language skills? At present a survey is being constructed to look closely at student attitudes. The results will help in the planning of future development and, it is hoped, strengthen the role of the SAC in the language program as a whole.

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