

Discovering Our Self-access Center: From in-country research to a working model

Ann Mayeda
Michihiko Komori
Yoshiyuki Fujisawa

Summary

Interest in autonomous learning in recent years has manifested itself in the proliferation of self-access centers in many different forms all over the world. This is no less true within Japan where local self-access centers showcase a diverse range of applications to this approach to autonomous language learning. A brief overview of self-access typologies and the subsequent classification of four observed models will serve as a framework for the model evolving at Osaka Shoin Women's University. The concept of "peer collaboration" and "learner community" as additional components for the Shoin model of self-access as a parallel but no less essential step towards autonomy will be introduced in tandem with the pedagogical necessity of this addition for the students at this university.

1 Introduction

Following an extensive room remodel, the Self-access Center at Osaka Shoin Women's University (SAC) began with a soft opening with limited hours and staff in November 2006. It officially opened for full-time use in April 2007 with extended hours of operation (10:40-4:10 daily) and one full-time teacher / advisor. The opportunity to visit several self-access centers in Japan in the preceding and succeeding months allowed perspective on not only the physical layout of the SAC but also on negotiating the role it plays in developing the language learning skills of our increasingly diverse student body. This paper will offer an overview of the self-access centers visited and the subsequent framework adopted for the Shoin SAC model based on a revisited definition of autonomy. The last section will discuss some of the activities currently undertaken and our immediate short-term goals for enhancing learner autonomy.

2 Models for Self-access

While there remains considerable difficulty in neatly categorizing self-access centers given the considerable overlap of functions between them, Gardner and Miller (1999: 53) offer the following six typologies for the Individual Learning Centers in Australia:

Model 1 Study centre: narrow focus, complement to classroom work, timetabled into schedule

- Model 2 Withdrawal centre: narrow focus, remedial teaching, teacher recommended
- Model 3 Programmed learning centre: center for improving writing skills, guidance
- Model 4 Drop-in centre: wide focus, choice, guidance
- Model 5 Self-directed learning centre: skills development strategies training, choice, guidance
- Model 6 Learning resource centre: wide range of materials, for fully autonomous learners

The six models have been organized across a continuum according to "degree of autonomy." Model 1, linked strongly with classroom teaching and teacher dependency, would be at one end of the scale and the least autonomous; and Model 6, weakly linked with classroom teaching and stocked with various resources, would be at the other end and the most autonomous (*ibid* : 52). Dependent upon degree of control and direction offered, models 2, 3, 4, and 5 would be located somewhere in-between. In a similar fashion, four other models cited in Gardner and Miller (1999: 54), i.e., the homework-based "Controlled-access" would be on the lower end while the resource-based "Supermarket" and "Open-access" would be at the high end and "Menu-driven" would be somewhere in-between.

While an important criterion for classification should include "degree of autonomy," any discussion on this particular topic of self-access might be viewed as a contradiction in terms. However, many self-access centers would not be fully utilized with only facilities, equipment, and resources. Some degree of controlled intervention often becomes necessary. Many centers have more or less some form of "controlled programs" to make them optimally functional and sustainable and this is evident in the centers observed. For the purposes of this paper "low autonomy" will refer to self-access programs integrated as a part of regular courses and partially or fully controlled, i.e., students are required to use the center at scheduled times for particular assignments and/or take self-access 'classes' for course credit and "high autonomy" will refer to freestanding programs where learners are free to choose when, how, and what they will study with very little institutional control over content and usage.

This classification system should, however, be viewed with some caution. One rather serious flaw is equating resource-heavy with less control and high autonomy. In other words, centers with an abundance of resources and materials and with highly controlled programs cannot be classified under the above typologies. The second one is the moot point of defining or classifying self-access centers solely in terms of degree of autonomy and available resources. Nevertheless the four self-access centers will be briefly examined within the above parameters for their usefulness in further defining an additional component in self-access learning.

3 Brief Analysis of Four Self-access Centers

Four self-access centers were observed in 2006: Sugiyama Jogakuen University (SJU), Nagoya Women's University (NWU), Nagoya University of Commerce and Business (NUCB), and the Self-access Language Center at Kanda University of International Studies (SALC).

In terms of degree of autonomy, the self-access center programs at SJU and NUCB could be considered less autonomous with more “controlled access” than the others. SJU is a medium-sized university and offers a Communicative English Program requiring freshman, sophomore and junior students to use their center several times a week. In addition, freshmen and sophomore students attend classes conducted in the self-access center. Heighman (2004: 19) in describing her work at SJU argues:

Not everyone agrees with required self-access work, but I believe most students need to be well trained in using a center before they understand its benefits. Unless it's required, self-access is a lost opportunity for many.

The NUCB self-access center is akin to a large library with a wide range of materials, audio-video equipment, computers and many programs for specific purposes. With some degree of support from Apple Computer, NUCB has complete control over student access to the center through computer-aided technology (Monk and Ozawa, 2002). Although the size, amount of resources, and the equipment contained in this facility would be considered generous by any standard only 40-50 students used the center just five years ago. To counteract this negative trend a new self-access policy was instigated in 2004 that required attendance in the center through the scheduling of a “self-access period.” Attendance is strictly enforced with non-attendance affecting the right to sit for exams. This has resulted in a four-fold increase in use with an average of 180 students using the facility daily. Monk and Ozawa (2005: 128) details their policy as such:

Students are required to attend their SAC period a minimum of 9 times during the first semester of 13 weeks and a minimum of 10 times out of 14 weeks in the second semester. Students sign in and out on an attendance sheet which is kept at the SAC counter. They are also required to register attendance on a computer which is similarly kept at the SAC counter. If they do not attend the SAC the required number of times, they lose the right to take the final examinations in certain specific courses for that semester.

Both NUCB and SJU share the view that self-access center usage should be systematically encouraged and controlled with links to regular classes.

In contrast, NWU and the SALC seem not to have as strong a link with regular courses. Instead, these two centers actively promote language study under an advising system. Kathi Emori, center director at NWU, refers to her role as a "personal English-study counselor." Students are not so much given answers but given direction in their learning. The NWU center is comparable in size to SJU with seating to accommodate 30 students comfortably. The center promotes several self-designed study plans for TOEIC/TOEFL exams, preparation for study abroad and the like, each intended to encourage students

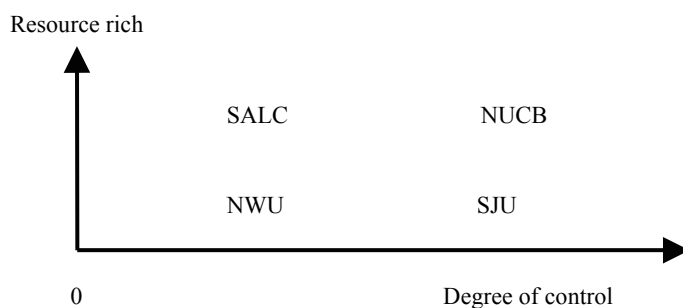
with a concrete course of action for their studies. Each plan requires students to work out their own study schedule in achievable chunks with achievable tasks using much of the materials available in the center.

The SALC is similar to NUCB in terms of size and number of programs. However, the similarities appear to end there. Their programming approach places a clear emphasis on language advising. As stated on their website (<http://www.kandagaigo.ac.jp/kuis/sacla/about/index.html>) the SALC places an emphasis on an “individual language study counseling system” (個人レベルで相談できる、まさに英語の保健室), quite similar to the goals of NWU. They also offer a "SALC module," a 16-week program which includes two advising sessions. Module scores are used in part for the evaluation of freshman English classes. This, however, is more the exception than the rule with links to regular classes generally weak.

The SALC environment is well organized and inviting. Students take a SALC placement test once a year and all of the learner resources are color-coded by level and neatly arranged on the shelves accordingly. Approximately 300 students use the SALC daily. Another salient feature is their wealth of human resources. Thirty-eight native English-speaking teachers work on a rotational basis, individuals with various titles such “production designer,” "learning advisor," "assistant manager," and “material writers” are also on staff. In addition, a team of seven individuals are responsible for researching and analyzing the SALC programs.

Based on the above description the four self-access centers can be neatly plotted on a grid in terms of abundance of resources and degree of controlled access in the figure below.

Figure 1



As previously stated, all of the self-access centers cannot be described solely in terms of levels of autonomy based on degree of control and amount of resources. A factor not yet introduced in this discussion is the level of learner collaboration or cooperation as a variable in self-access and autonomy. One important but sometimes neglected function of self-access centers is to develop a “community of learners” where students can study in peer groups or with senior students and cooperate toward the objective of developing incentives to their language study. From this perspective the SALC offers a

language exchange program between foreign and Japanese students allowing them to connect and learn from each other, and also offers the use of “group study” rooms. NWU and SJU both have a dictation program where students record their English on tape or MD and exchange it with partners for feedback.

While one of the original intentions of the Shoin SAC has been language advising, in the process of working with our learners and watching the dynamics of their interaction and reaction, the SAC is slowly creating its own identity as a place that puts an emphasis on the importance of peer collaboration and the development of a learning community as an additional prerequisite to learner self-direction. Thus while taking into account the many dynamics of self-access in the Japan context, it behooves us to go back and review our definition of autonomy.

4 Autonomy Revisited

How do we make the SAC uniquely ours? What do our learners want? What do we want for our learners? What do we, as educators, feel is lacking within our learners in order for them to make the leap to autonomous learning? Assuming that autonomy is the goal and if self-access is a widely used and recognized concept for an approach to encouraging autonomy, then it becomes necessary to clearly define autonomy as it relates to the students at Shoin. Our role as educators is to prepare our learners to be fully functioning members of society in the hope that they will have the “ability to take charge of their own learning” (Holec, 1981: 3). According to van Lier, autonomy has two central features: “choice and responsibility” (1994: 12). “The autonomous learner,” he adds, “must be able to make significant decisions about what is to be learned, as well as how and when to do it” (ibid: 13). Holec (1988) states that learner responsibility is a prerequisite to self-directed learning. So how do we go about doing all this within the Shoin framework?

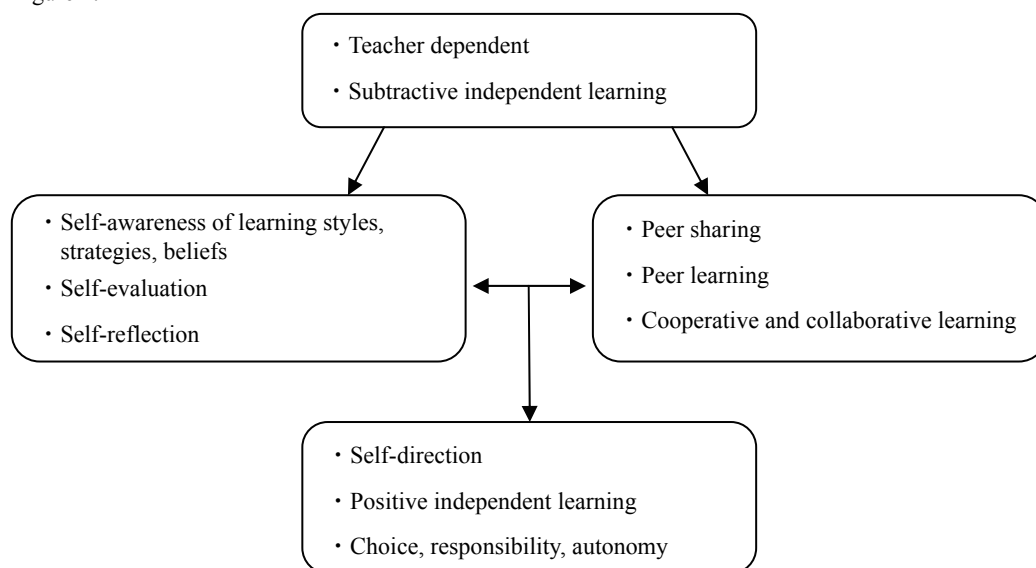
The term ‘independent learning’ is often used interchangeably or in the same context as autonomy. Sheerin (1997) views it as an educational philosophy and process, whereas Gardner and Miller (1996) regards it as one stage in a process in which learners are moving towards autonomy in their learning. In both instances, ‘independent learning’ is seen as a positive attribute. However, if independent learning can be defined as working individually on specific projects or tasks self-directed or otherwise, then an alternative, negative view might also emerge. That is, students are often seen working independently on homework or other classroom assignments in the library, in computer rooms or the CALL room. They study alone without benefit of study groups or any sort of collaborative learning. Even when students are given a group assignment, they often parcel out the work and complete self-contained portions independently often resulting in little group interaction and collaboration, quite the opposite of what was intended. They are, in a sense, already ‘independent learners’ but they are not truly autonomous under the above definition. They are simply doing what is required, albeit independently. This sort of ‘subtractive independence’ has a negative effect on autonomy and self-direction and is not what should be encouraged in the SAC. Other facilities such as the library and computer rooms are available for this and should be

used accordingly.

Sheerin (1991:144) refers to self-access as a means of promoting learner autonomy; a way of encouraging learners to move from teacher dependent to learner directed. However, as Benson and Voller (1997: 6) points out, there is not necessarily a link between learning language in a self-access center and the development of autonomy and independence. If this is necessarily the case then learners must go through several steps in the process as outlined in Figure 2 below.

This framework follows a continuum from passive to active learning. Teacher dependency and subtractive independence both promote passive learning as the learners are bound by what they are asked or required to do and thus often go through the motions of completing assignments but do not actively engage in self-direction or choice. Teaching about individual learning styles and suitable strategies, becoming aware of beliefs about language learning, in addition to engaging in self-reflection activities all contribute to raising learner self-awareness but may not necessarily decrease dependency. While it might provide insight into becoming active learners based on more personal engagement and enjoyment gained through awareness of appropriate tasks, learners still need to be shown what to do upon acquiring this knowledge. A parallel dichotomy proposed in the framework below combines individual self-awareness tasks with peer and group sharing in the form of cooperative learning models. Learners might become more motivated through the enjoyment of active learning via study groups and working toward a shared goal. Autonomy and responsibility both require active involvement and this step allows for dynamic and active learning to take place, which in combination with self-awareness might lead to a faster route to autonomy. This is the link that the Shoin SAC should actively promote through its activities.

Figure 2:



5 The Shoin SAC

Like other self-access centers, the SAC provides needs analyses, individual profiles and learning plans all designed to encourage self-awareness and initiate active and engaged language learning but on a much smaller scale. Unlike the other four centers, however, the SAC can only comfortably seat 15 students, 20 at best for a lecture with no individual study areas. This places a severe limit on the amount of resources available and the ability to accommodate a variety of activities at any given time. It is stocked with a few of the resources found in the library and the computer rooms such as graded readers, novels, movies, Internet access, language learning software, etc. but what makes it somewhat unique is the emphasis on additional links and activities that build a sense of community among the learners. It is a place where learners can find value from learning with peers and ‘near-peer’ role models (Dörnyei and Murphey, 2003) and/or seek help with teachers or a learning advisor. It is a safe environment where learners should feel free to take risks and eventually develop some of the qualities of successful language learners. Esch (1996) points out that it is often more important to focus on the environment rather than the methodology or materials when thinking about how to develop autonomy.

While the term ‘peer pressure’ is often used in a negative sense, the influence of peer pressure can be advantageous. Gardner and Miller (1999: 12) states:

Peer pressure is recognized widely as an important influence on learners. Where groups of learners have successfully used self-access learning other learners are likely to want to try it.

To illustrate an example of positive peer pressure, a learner came to the SAC seeking help on developing reading fluency and pronunciation. She was given the task of listening to an audio recording of a picture book and taught to engage in shadowing and repetition exercises with an emphasis on pronunciation and intonation. This culminated in the learner’s own audio recording of the book. If the quality of the final recording was high enough to serve as a model for other learners, it was then included as a resource with the original book. The model recording was then used as an authentic resource and viewed as a more realistic goal for other learners. The learner came in several times to practice alone or to work with the advisor. Her friends inevitably asked her what she was doing in the SAC. She responded by explaining her desire to improve her reading and pronunciation skills and that she was advised to engage in this task because of her fondness for children’s literature. The fact that it was voluntary and not a requirement for a particular class, seemed to impress her friends. Upon observing the session three friends decided they would like to try the activity as well. The word spread and at one point over eight learners were at various stages of reading practice and recording. This project is still on going and has been very successful for not only creating learner-generated motivation but has also helped create useful resources in the SAC. This example of positive peer pressure may have only been made possible in the SAC.

Another instance previously observed in ‘English lounge’ sessions, a precursor to the SAC, also served as an impetus for creating the center. A mixed group of five learners (2nd through 4th year students) gathered in the lounge once a week to work on a focused fluency activity. The lounge teacher introduced this activity to them a few weeks earlier but the learners were responsible for deciding whether or not they would continue in the following weeks. On one occasion when no one would make a decision, one student finally declared, ‘Come on, come on, let’s do it.’ “Besides, this isn’t class, we’re not going to be graded on it so it’ll be fun.” “Now we can really learn something.” These comments clearly reveal what learners will choose to learn and not learn. It reflects the view of Scharle and Szabo (2000: 4) who comments that in order to foster learner autonomy, learners need to develop a sense of responsibility and also they must be encouraged to take an active part in making decisions about their learning; it is only in this way that real learning can occur and be retained. Needless to say the session was very productive for all the learners that day.

Another way to encourage collaboration and develop a sense of community among the learners has been to hold monthly SAC events based on a particular theme. In June 2007, “Study Abroad Month” was highlighted and promoted through activities that included inviting student guest speakers to talk about their participation in the various study abroad programs offered through the university. These sessions allowed space and opportunity for upper classmates to share valuable information with lower classmates, or ‘near peers,’ who were just beginning to think about study abroad opportunities. One guest speaker who had participated in a one-year study abroad program also discovered positive value in speaking in front of her peers. After her presentation she spoke at length with freshmen students interested in taking the TOEFL exam. By the end of their discussion she had made tentative plans to offer TOEFL study skills sessions for these students in the SAC. The sessions were set up and advertised for the following month. While the freshman students were pleased and encouraged by this offer, the fact that the senior student volunteered to teach these sessions from her own realization that it would develop her teaching skills and improve her own English skills was equally impressive. It should be noted that this student had been somewhat unchallenged by some of her classes due to her high English proficiency and had been looking for ways to commit and challenge herself elsewhere, thus she took advantage of this opportunity. The end result was self-direction, responsibility, and motivation on the part of both the senior student and the freshmen students. Learning from and sharing experiences with peers may have been lost, had it not been actively promoted.

Reference is often made to these “instances of autonomy” when negotiating directions for the SAC and in some respects these instances serve as a guiding philosophy. The SAC is a place that encourages this type of peer interaction: teaching, learning, connecting and collaborating. More research should be devoted to this particular area of self-access in order to find new ways to connect and encourage students toward autonomy.

6 Future Development

The SAC should serve as a safe and structured environment outside of the classroom that supports independent initiative promoted in the classroom context. Learners can work with their peers, get feedback and practice speeches for presentation classes, brainstorm ideas for senior theses, or simply form study groups. But first they must realize the merits of this interaction through structured SAC activities that encourage peer sharing. The SAC should also serve as a place where students can reach out to teachers or peers for help and support and in this regard the room size may be a blessing in disguise. If the environment and the relationships need to be nurtured before students are willing to take risks with different learning behaviors then the space limitation may actually be more conducive for these attitudes to develop more quickly. If this sort of ‘learning community’ can be nurtured through the SAC in tandem with individual initiative then it may be possible to promote more individual study plans, paving the way for a unique mix of independent and collaborative learning that ultimately leads to more self-direction, more autonomy. The researchers and stakeholders involved in the Shoin SAC will continually search for ways to guide learners through the steps from teacher dependent and “subtractive” independent learning to peer sharing and collaborative learning alongside gaining self-awareness of learning styles, strategies, beliefs and engaging in self-evaluation, self-reflection, and finally on to self-directed and positive independent or autonomous learning. Learned habits take years to develop, thus unlearning them will take time, and while recognizing that change does not occur overnight, constant awareness of our shared goal should keep the SAC progressive and productive.

7 Conclusion

Investigating the various forms taken in self-access learning in Japan has allowed us a unique opportunity to engage in thought-provoking discussions on what autonomy means to us as educators and what it means for our students. It is often easy to define what we don’t want for our students. It is, however, more challenging to define what we do want and to put those definitions into concrete action plans. By forcing us to look carefully at what teachers and students are doing to both promote and suppress autonomous learning we search for new ways to enhance and counteract it. By constantly questioning our path to autonomy, we slowly pave the way for a tailor-made SAC uniquely suited for our student body.

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