Autonomous Learning versus Guided Learning in Japanese SALCs: A Preliminary Survey

日本の SALC における「自律的学習」対「補助的学習」
―予備調査の結果―

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Abstract
This working paper begins by presenting an overview of trends in Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) research, demonstrating the prevailing pedagogical ideal to be one of "autonomous learning." It then goes on to provide the results of a Japan-based SALC survey in order to shed light into the realities of SALC management and the implementation, to varying degrees, of what the author calls "guided learning" in those spaces. While respondents tended to emphasize autonomous learning ideals, the data reflects a gradated application of guided learning techniques and resources, suggesting that the latter deserves more serious attention in the literature.

Keywords: self-access, guided learning, autonomous learning, SALC

The fundamental premise of Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) style education is that learners are provided with open access to extra-curricular study resources (most commonly for language education purposes). SALCs thus are generally understood to operate independently from credited courses. Walk through any SALC or Language Learning Center, or peruse their website, and one will find textual materials (test preparation tools, graded readers, authentic texts), computers, audio visual resources, conversation lounges, and seasonal events and activities to be staples of SALCs in Japan. The variety of resources is key to the facility's effectiveness, as it aids each student in tailoring her experience to her unique learning style and goals.

SALCs first began to gain popularity in Japan only beginning in the early 2000s, taking over the role of more conventional and restrictive language laboratories (Mynard, 2016, pp.332). While the Japan-based *Studies in Self Access Learning Journal* has been providing high-quality research on the topic of self-access learning *theory* since 2010 (https://sisaljournal.org/), the relative newness of the SALC paradigm in the Japanese higher education context begs periodical review of self-access learning *practice* as well.

In terms of theory, self-access studies have been dominated by the topic of "autonomous learning." Congruent with the philosophy of "self access," autonomous learners are motivated, self-reflective, and take responsibility for their own learning goals and progress (Fabela-Cárdenas, 2012; Thornton, 2016; Tassinari, 2017; Noguchi, 2014; Mynard & Stevenson, 2017). Some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that a successful paradigm of autonomous learning achieved in a digital space may even supplant the need for physical SALCs in the future

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(Alzahrani & Wright, 2016). Researchers have argued that faculty are best utilized in the role of "learning advisors" to instruct learners how to manage their own learning (Horai & Wright, 2016), as well as in the capacity of writing tutors and editors (LaClare & Franz, 2013). The predominance of literature on theory does not to mean that researchers have ignored the logistics of SALC management and its relationality to the university at large, however. To the contrary, there have been a number of articles on this topic as well (Birdsell, 2015; Mynard, 2016; Bibby, Jolley, & Shiobara, 2016; Mayeda, MacKenzie, & Nusplinger, 2016; Marland, 2011; Adamson, Brown, & Fujimoto-Adamson, 2010; Barrs, 2010).

Such ample research provides a compelling ideal or mission statement for SALC directors to apply when shaping their programs. Yet, none of the extant literature on self-access learning available to this author has (1) broadly surveyed the actual conditions of SALC praxis in Japan, or (2) seriously considered an alternative or parallel pedagogical paradigm to autonomous learning and learning advising.

The impetus for the present project was an observation of data from the author's own SALC,[1] which clearly demonstrated a more complex distribution of resources and pattern of usage than one would expect from the perspective of the theoretical research described above. Based on data collected from student sign-ins between 2014–2017, each year between 705–939 unique users accessed the space between 4927–5008 times:

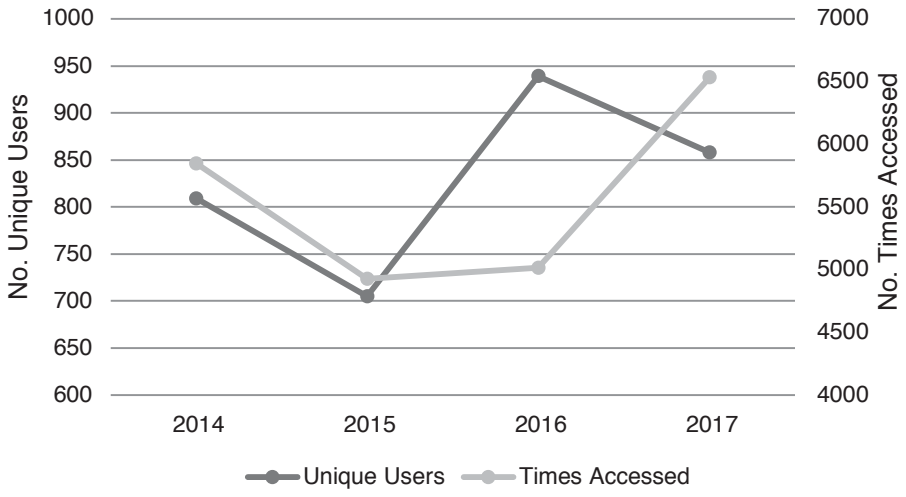

Figure 1. Hirosaki University SALC, unique users vs times accessed, 2014–2017.

"Unique users" refers to the number of unique students who utilized the SALC during that academic year; "times accessed" shows the number of actual instances of access. Thus, in 2014 about 800 students used the SALC a total of about 6,000 times. This chart does not reveal the distribution between users, which range widely.

Eight categories of usage were recorded, including "event," "consultation," "resource borrowing," "DVD viewing," "conversation circle," "writing feedback," "computer," and "seminar." Of these, only "resource borrowing" and "computer" appear at first glance to be fully "autonomous" activities—meaning initiated and controlled by the student user—as the conversation circles are led by paid exchange student supporters (and sometimes faculty), and the rest of the categories are primarily organized and guided by affiliated teaching faculty. As postulated below, in

[1] The English Lounge in Hirosaki University, Aomori Prefecture.

actuality, every single one of these activities falls along a spectrum between guided and autonomous experiences. Either way, even a cursory examination of the data reveals a sustained high percentage of access for the purpose of more explicitly non-autonomous activities: conversation circle (1st), seminars (2nd), and writing feedback (3rd):

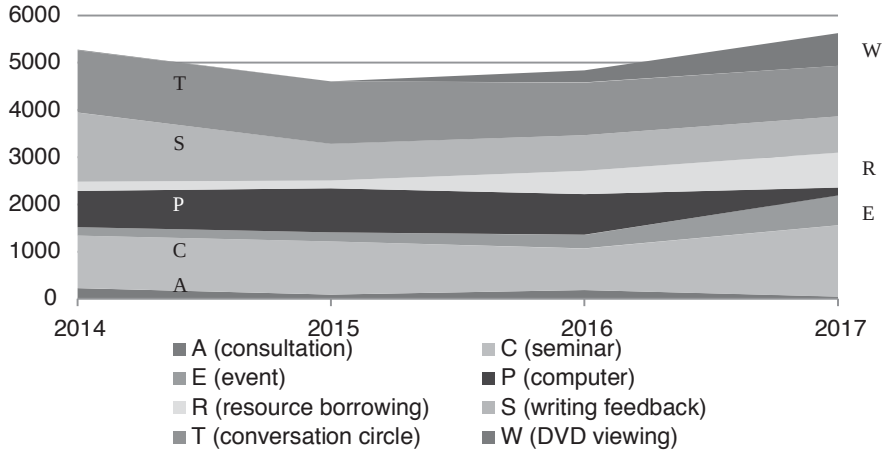

Figure 2. Hirosaki University SALC use divided by eight categories, 2014–2017.

Following this observation, the author began to informally investigate other SALCs and their websites to determine whether this disparity between the autonomous-learning ideal and the actual usage of the facility was unique to his institution. This preliminary investigation suggested otherwise, and this report contains the results of a more formal survey of Japanese SALCs.

Method

The data presented below is the result of a survey of currently active SALCs throughout Japan. It was conducted with the intention to illuminate the actual conditions of practice—the degree to which the autonomous learning ideal is being realized—versus the application of what may be alternatively termed experiences of "guided learning."[2] All of the institutions contacted were discovered on The Japan Association for Self-Access Learning homepage (https://jasalorg.com/), which contains a database of 41 self-access language learning centers across the country, with websites, contact information, and some simple details regarding facility resources. Using the information from that database and on SALC homepages, I was able to send the survey to 40 institutions, 18 of which responded. All of the SALCs are located in Japan and vary in size and resources from extremely minimal (2 faculty, operating just 8 hours a week) to massive (20 faculty, operating fulltime).[3]

The survey was designed to ascertain several general categories of information.[4] The first section was intended to delineate the scope of the facility—how many faculty work in it, how many student supporters (foreign or domestic) there are, how many students access the space in a given year, etc. The second section surveyed "classes" (defined as any kind of seminar, workshop, or any other session held in a SALC with a faculty instructor) within the SALC, including the frequency of sessions and type of contents. This was followed by a section on "peer-to-peer

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[2] This term is borrowed from informal correspondences with researcher/educators Roxana Sandu and Shari Berman.

[3] For comparison, the Hirosaki University "English Lounge" falls somewhere in the middle of this sample, with five affiliated faculty and regular hours of operation five days a week.

[4] Quantitative survey data results can be found in the appendix.

contact," through which the degree of student involvement in the SALC as a communal learning space was probed. By asking about who (regular students, exchange students, faculty) participates in conversation circles, who uses the SALC as a social space, who gives special presentations in the space, etc., respondents provided data regarding a more liminal type of "autonomous learning," or "semi-directed learning," which is touched on in the discussion section at the end of this report. The final comments section of the survey offered a more open-ended opportunity for written responses, as well as two rating scale questions regarding the respondent's perception of (1) degree of the students' autonomous-versus-guided experience in their SALC, and (2) the overall effectiveness of these two education strategies.

Discussion

As the author's current operational definition of "guided learning" is still developing, the survey was intentionally worded to leave the key term "guided" open to a certain degree of interpretation. Providing a more explicit definition may have been overly restrictive, as some respondents interpreted the term to include learning advising, which the survey did not address directly. For example, in the final comments section, one respondent wrote "You haven't asked about what I consider to be the most important aspect of guided learning - advising sessions!" which they identify as "a core element of our curriculum." Another alludes to learning advising more tangentially, writing "Many students have a goal but don't know where to start. Some people need help with a very general question such as 'How can I improve my English?'... the methods of guidance [i.e. learning advising] are not touched upon this survey." Learning advising is an important aspect of many SALCs, and therefore should be considered as a part of guided learning or semi-guided learning in the future.

Guided learning, just as any other learning paradigm, like active learning, constructivism, etc., must occur in degrees, not in absolutes. Learning advising is unique in how its primary goal is producing better learners, but it should be recognized as a guided means to an autonomous ends. On the other hand, more conventional classroom-style guided learning typically (often as institutional mandate) holds the primary goal of producing better speakers/readers/writers, etc., guiding learners via assigning specific texts, contexts, and activities. Classes are offered in SALCs of 44.4% of the respondents, meaning that this latter type of instructor-led guided learning is far from uncommon in self-access spaces. (What this preliminary data does not reveal, however, is the specific quality of instruction. For example, should the driving ethos be "active learning," then learners should be expected to have greater autonomy within the strictures of the classroom format.) The inclusion of a faculty member or designated student helper in conversation circles (multiple respondents also mentioned conversation practice by appointment) adds another form of guidance, as learners are supported, prompted, or led by the presence of an expert. In a more extreme interpretation, one could argue that the curation of texts, technological resources, and audio-visual materials constitutes a form of guidance (or, negatively, the restriction of learner autonomy). Regardless, it seems apparent that autonomous learning and guided learning exist on a gradated spectrum.

So, what shape does this spectrum take in practice, in Japanese SALCs? The following graph depicts the answers to the two rating scale questions in the "final comments" section, above:

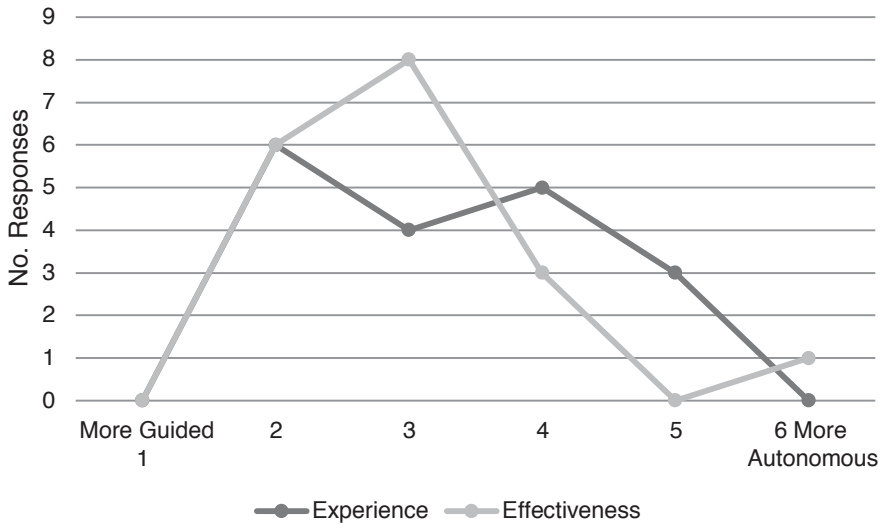

Figure 3. Self assessment of autonomous versus guided learning in Japanese SALCs, experience versus effectiveness.

My thesis—that there is at minimum a divide between autonomous and directed learning practice in Japanese SALCs, and additionally the possibility of a practical critique of autonomous learning as the ideal method of SALC education—is supported by this data. The data suggest that the reality of SALC spaces in Japan is slightly biased toward guided learning (55.6% versus 44.4%); but, more importantly, that respondents as a whole felt more strongly that guided learning was more effective than autonomous learning in their facilities (77.8% versus 22.2%). The reasons for this evaluation are unclear, and one may speculate any number of cultural, institutional, and pedagogical explanations.

Of course, it bears stressing that, with the small sample size of 18 respondents, and the incremental nature of the rating scale questions, this survey does not repudiate the growing body of research into the effectiveness of inculcating autonomous learning habits, nor does it suggest that SALC coordinators must change course toward guided learning entirely. What it does demonstrate is the necessity to review SALC mission statements versus their achievement in practice, consider applying appropriate forms of faculty development in order to achieve those ends, and suggest that the topic of "guided learning" merits additional attention in the discourse of SALC education.

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Appendix: Survey Results

Facility Background

How many teaching faculty work in/for your SALC, part-time or otherwise?

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
1–3	10	55.6
4–8	5	27.9
15–20	3	16.5

Regular students work in the SALC (paid or volunteer)[5]

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
No	4	22.2
Yes, paid	9	50
Yes, volunteer	6	33.3

Exchange students work in the SALC (paid or volunteer)

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
No	12	66.7
Yes, paid	5	27.8
Yes, volunteer	2	11.1

[5] Questions throughout the survey allowed respondents to provide multiple answers (e.g. both paid and volunteer student workers). Percentages displayed here reflect the ratio of the given answer versus all respondents.

Approximate student access per semester

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Unknown	2	11.1
50–100	2	11.1
101–500	6	33.3
501–1000	5	27.8
>1000	3	16.7

How are students encouraged to access the facility?

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Coffee/tea	5	27.8
Extra class credit	10	55.6
Mandatory assignments	12	66.7
Offer subscription services	1	5.6
Fun events	16	88.9
Outreach activities	7	38.9
Location	1	5.6
Amenities	1	5.6
SNS advertising	1	5.6
Freshman orientation	2	11.1

Writing feedback/editing services

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
No	4	22
Yes, by faculty	14	77.8
Yes, by students	1	5.6

Classes

Does your SALC offer instructor-led classes?

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Yes	8	44.4
No	10	55.6

For regular credit (i.e. toward graduation)?

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Yes	1	5.6
No	17	94.4

Class offering frequency

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Never	10	55.6
Once/month	1	5.6
Mult/month	4	22.4
Mult/week	2	11.1
Once/day	0	0
Mult/day	1	5.6

Class attendance (8 responses)

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Regular students	8	100
Exchange students	2	25
Community members	0	0
Staff/faculty	3	37.5

Class Offerings

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Test-oriented	7	38.9
Content-and-language integrated	4	22.2
4-skills based	4	22.2
Multi-media focused	4	22.2
English for special purposes	5	27.8
Yoga in English	1	5.6

Peer-to-peer Contact

Conversation circle participants

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Regular students	16	88.9
Exchange students	6	33.3
Faculty	7	38.9
No answer	2	11.1

Gives presentations, puts on events

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Regular students	10	56
Exchange students	6	33.3
Faculty	13	72.2
No answer	2	11.1

Prepares materials/leads class sessions

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Regular students	4	22.2
Exchange students	2	11.1
Faculty	11	61.1
No answer	7	38.9

Uses the SALC as a social space

Answer	Respondents (no.)	Respondents (%)
Regular students	18	100
Exchange students	8	44.4
Faculty	3	16.7

Final Comments

In your estimation, to what degree is your typical student SALC experience Guided or Autonomous?
(lower numbers = more guided, higher numbers = more autonomous)

Answer	1	2	3	4	5	6
Respondents (no.)	0	6	4	5	3	0
Respondents (%)	0	33.3	22.2	27.8	16.7	0

In your estimation, what is the relative effectiveness of Guided versus Autonomous elements in your SALC?
(lower numbers = more guided, higher numbers = more autonomous)

Answer	1	2	3	4	5	6
Respondents (no.)	0	6	8	3	0	1
Respondents (%)	0	33.3	44.4	16.7	0	5.6