

# Learning by Experience — Connecting Liberal Arts Classes with Language Learning Center

## 教養教育科目と言語学習センターをつなぐ

—協働で学ぶ経験学習—

Megumi TADA\*

多田 恵実

### Abstract

The English Lounge at Hirosaki University, a Japanese national university, is a unique facility that creates a language immersion in English for Japanese university students to have multicultural and linguistic experiences in language learning. Having an English-only policy in the facility, we accommodate students' needs to engage in real English conversation with international students, take short seminars on various topics, consult with faculty members in person, and do homework or self-study activities, which teachers assign in their Liberal Arts English courses. Japanese universities have been struggling to cope with the national demand for raising the English as a second language proficiency level of students. Most are finding this rough, and Hirosaki University is no exception. As one of the faculty members of this facility who also teaches Liberal Arts English courses, I am trying to intertwine the activities of required English classes with those of the language learning facility. Through student questionnaires, taken over three consecutive years, involving students using the language learning center as part of their Liberal Arts courses and responding on the LMS (learning management system) Moodle, I discuss and examine the relationship between the entities, and what students find to be advantages and disadvantages, along with the subsequent effects and possibilities.

**Keywords:** experiential learning, language learning center, ESL, EFL

### Introduction

In this paper, I discuss how we are connecting the Liberal Arts English classes with a voluntary learning facility for students, the English Lounge (EL), a type of Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Hirosaki University and how it helps and promotes students' language learning.

The EL is a learning environment designed to promote the lifelong English language skills of the college students. The EL provides a space that resembles a study abroad experience, where students interact with other Japanese and international students to deepen their understanding of different cultures, in order to improve their English fluency. It is open to students in all five departments, and students can come and visit whenever they have time. As a regional national university in Japan, Hirosaki University students have fewer opportunities to be exposed to international populations. Therefore, joining activities in the English Lounge is the sort of chance that

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\* Center for Liberal Arts Development and Practices, Institute for Promotion of Higher Education, Hirosaki University  
弘前大学 教育推進機構 教養教育開発実践センター

doesn't come too often in their daily lives. It creates a real-life experience for students before they are going into the actual workforce and provides the practical environment to train themselves in English.

### **Background**

Why do students need to have actual experience? One theory supporting the value of experience dates to Anderson in 1980 when he divided human memory into two types—short-term memory and a long-term memory. As he explained “... long-term memory is the repository of all our factual knowledge, and short-term or working memory holds information we are currently processing.” To transform a short-term memory into a long-term memory, requires a long period of repetitive procedures.

Barkley (2010) states, “Research suggests that there is a special window of time during which this transition occurs: the time needed for neurons to synthesize the necessary proteins for ‘long-term potentiation’ (LTP).” Barkley goes on to conclude that “Deep, long-term learning occurs when changed connections result in reformatted structures—whether these structures are described as schemata or neural networks. “...As much as we (and often our students) would like to think that teachers can simply transfer knowledge into learners’ brains, it is just not possible. Students need to do the work required to learn.”

Therefore, students need to actually use the schemata numerous times, and real-life experiences help establish these necessary neuron networks. Peculiarly, Herrigel (1953) connected it with Zen and described it as “...its outward realization must occur automatically, in no further need of the controlling or reflecting intelligence” (p.39) when he came as a professor in a major university in Japan and learned how to perform Japanese archery.

### **The English Lounge**

What does the EL do for students? It is meant for all the students at the college, whether they be graduate or undergraduate, Japanese or international, adult or young-adult learners. It is a language learning center you can access anytime you have a chance; and, it is a place where Japanese students and international students can meet and make friends with each other (Nakamura, et al., 2015).

The EL is located in the General Education Building where the Liberal Arts classes take place. Of the major faculties, the Humanities building is connected and the closest; the facility is also reasonably accessible to the departments of Education, Science and Technology, as well as Agriculture and Life Science. Only the Medical and Health Sciences faculties are located on a separate campus, which is about a 15-minute walk. Of the faculty attached to the EL, three are from the different places in the U.S., and two are Japanese nationals.

So, what can a student do there? Students can attend short classes called “EL Seminars” whenever they have time. They can join the Conversation Circle and practice their speaking skills with the international students that work part-time there. Also, they can bring their homework and have their writing checked for presentations and writing classes. Students can come and go to suit their own class schedules.

Figure 1 describes the seminar system. It's basically a short, 60-minute class, but some are closer to the standard 90-minute classes. They are not required courses, however, so they are not for credit. There is usually no homework—no preparation is required, with exceptions for some honor college students who take EL seminars as part of their curriculum for a study-abroad program. Others are free of assignments. The students can choose from a variety of topics ranging from, medicine, humanities, literature, music, business, and international topics, to test-taking classes on TOEIC or TOEFL at different levels.

**2019 前期 ラウンジ教員シフトとELセミナーのスケジュール**

セミナー実施期間は 4月18日(木) から 8月2日(金) までです(それ以外の期間も開催しています。HPをご覧ください)。

	月 曜	火 曜	水 曜	木 曜	金 曜
10:30	Self Study 自学・自習	Self Study 自学・自習	Self Study 自学・自習	Self Study 自学・自習	Self Study 自学・自習
11:30	Self Study 自学・自習	Self Study 自学・自習	Self Study 自学・自習	Self Study 自学・自習	Self Study 自学・自習
12:00	留学生 楽しい英会話	Brian Advanced Speaking	留学生 楽しい英会話	Joshua TOEFL Vocabulary	楽しい英会話 Japanese & Int'l Cuisine Presentations
13:00~14:00	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed
14:30	留学生 楽しい英会話	Hiro TED-ED から始める英会話	留学生 楽しい英会話	Megumi 食社の英語 1、2、3	Joshua Reading US History
15:30	留学生 楽しい英会話	Hiro TOEIC L & R スコアアップ	留学生 楽しい英会話	Megumi TOEFL Reading	Joshua Creative Writing
16:00	留学生 楽しい英会話	Hiro 基礎から大学英語入門	留学生 楽しい英会話	Megumi Art of Film	Joshua Introduction to Psychology
17:00	留学生 楽しい英会話	Hiro 基礎から大学英語入門	留学生 楽しい英会話	Megumi Art of Film	Joshua Introduction to Psychology
18:00	留学生 楽しい英会話	Hiro 基礎から大学英語入門	留学生 楽しい英会話	Megumi Art of Film	Joshua Introduction to Psychology
19:00	留学生 楽しい英会話	Hiro 基礎から大学英語入門	留学生 楽しい英会話	Megumi Art of Film	Joshua Introduction to Psychology

セミナーは、どのコースでも自由に出席でき、途中からでも参加できます。もちろん欠席は自由です。

<http://culture.cc.hirosaki-u.ac.jp/EL/Welcome.html>

Figure 1: Schedule of the English Lounge, Spring 2019

The Conversation Circle is a place that allows students to practice natural conversation. International students who are proficient in English are hired to work in the Conversation Circle. They don't have to be native speakers of English. Nationalities range from American, Canadian, and New Zealander, to non-native speakers of English such as Chilean, French, German, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Malaysian, Korean, Chinese, etc. As Jenkins (2015) calls it "World Englishes," students experience the real live, multicultural world from this little neighborhood at a local university.

Hiring international students as English Lounge Supporters plays an important role these days in the EL. The supporters can be non-native speakers as long as they are open and outgoing, as well as good at making friends and communicating in English. Currently, there are 226 international students at Hirosaki University as of October 2019, but the number of such students who can work in the EL is not always stable, and that leaves the EL staff with a shortage of student workers. Also, a certain level of oversight by faculty members is necessary to mitigate some student issues; however, people who are about the same age are much more comfortable for students to talk to. This helps nurture their communication skills, and they can also form lifelong friendships.

The experience encourages international students to come back to Japan in the future. Several former Supporters have graduated and now teach English in Japan. Also, most of the Supporters are from sister schools, so when our students go study abroad, they have a chance to meet some of these people again, making the relationship mutually beneficial.

We have had some changes in the past regarding what you can do in the EL, but basically, the following are what students can do at the EL. Students can do homework, use a computer, borrow books in English, watch their favorite movies or US TV dramas, and consult with the English Lounge Supporters or faculty. Consultation has become an important part of the EL activities, and many students are taking advantage of it. Sometimes, I do have to admit that students come to talk about their personal issues, rather than things related to English. We also have some fun events from time to time, such as welcome parties, Halloween celebrations, year-end holiday events, Valentine's Day gatherings, sing-along karaoke parties, movie nights, and game nights.

### Japanese Cooking Project

The Japanese cooking project has been our major, ongoing project in the EL for the past three years. It began in 2017, and the most recent one took place in spring, 2019 (Berman & Tada, 2018a, b, c; Berman, Tada, & Tsuchiya, 2018d). Japanese students in the Liberal Arts English classes plan, make Japanese cooking demonstrations, give personal speeches and get questions from an international audience in the EL at lunchtime. Students are compelled to speak English and to share real experiences with real people in a meaningful way. They talk about something they have ownership of, so they can speak about their own ideas. Originated by Shari J. Berman, the project links the language learning center and Liberal Arts classes closely and comprehensively. We find that it serves as an essential gateway to enhance student learning outside the classroom (Berman, 2017).

### Questionnaire Outcome

I conducted a questionnaire at the end of each term, using the feedback system available through our LMS, Moodle. They were basically the same questions, 29 in total, asking students about how they feel toward English. They were further asked about things that they felt went well with the course or didn't go well. I also asked about what they thought about our group learning system, about learning from a non-native English teacher, about linking the EL with the Liberal Arts course class, and about their aspirations for study abroad, etc. From these responses, I focus on four questions below regarding the connection between English courses and the EL. Moodle outputs the feedback with the students' names which have been anonymized here.

From the 2017 fall classes to the spring term in 2019, I collected 223 valid responses from 358 respondents in 12 courses over four semesters. In the first group of 2017 Fall, there were 59 respondents out of 99 students, in two classes of Speaking for Beginners, and one Writing for Beginners class. In the second group of spring 2018, there were 61 respondents out of 82 students in three courses of Listening for Beginners. In the third group, which is in the fall semester of 2018, 48 students took the questionnaire out of 88 students. In the fourth group, in the spring term 2019, 55 students responded to the survey out of 89 students.

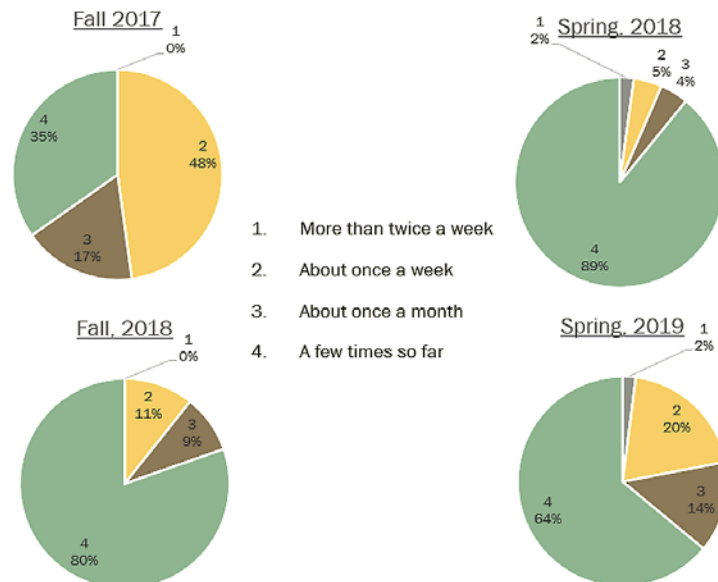
By "valid" responses, I mean, I accepted everything whenever a student actually wrote "something." I didn't judge whether or not the responses were meaningful. Because this is not an interactive kind of questionnaire, the students just left their comments online. Some offered no responses. There were also some responses I couldn't decipher because of the generation gap, simple word mistakes, and other things that didn't make sense. Some of them were in English, but most of them were written in Japanese.

There are 51 classes of freshmen English in the Liberal Arts program from top to bottom. The program is divided into three levels: Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced. It is the policy of Hirosaki University that full-time teachers are responsible for both the advanced and beginners' classes; that is to say, native-speaker teachers for advanced, and Japanese teachers for beginner level. Part-time teachers mostly teach intermediate courses. Out of these 51 classes, I have the lowest tier—classes 49–51. Students in these classes are at the 330 to 466 level in terms of the VELC test, which is, according to the VELC explanatory materials, the equivalent of 225 to 395 TOEIC. Hirosaki University started to use the VELC test to place students in English classes in 2018. The beginner classes make up about 20% of all freshmen.

The first question about the EL is, "How often did you come to the English Lounge this semester?" The options are divided into four responses, according to the Likert Scale answer choices as follows; 1. More than twice a week, 2. About once a week, 3. About once a month, 4. A few times so far. Numbers 1 and 2 would be categorized as frequent EL visitors.

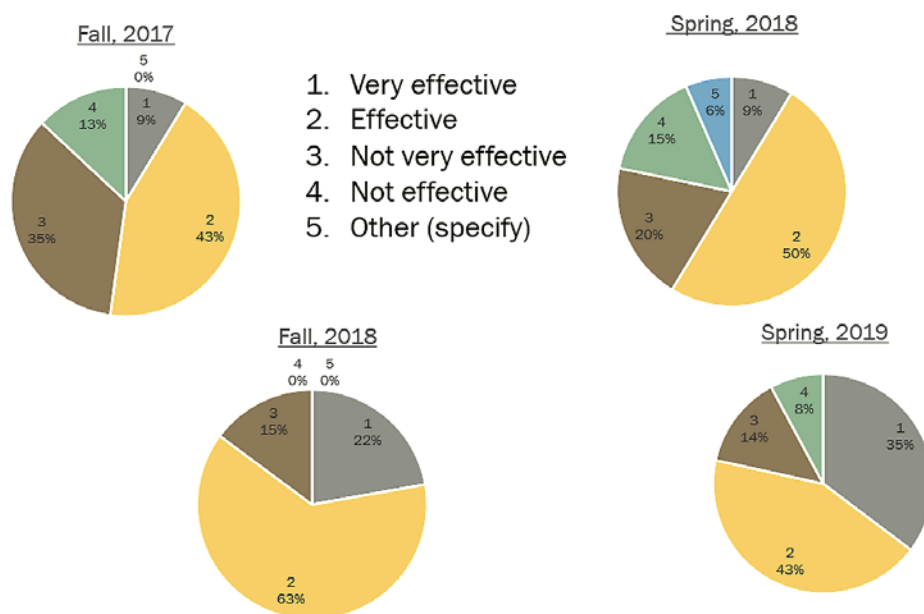
As you can see in Figure 2, the results were disappointing. Out of the four groups, the earliest group, fall 2017, reported the highest rates of EL attendance, with about half of the students coming at least once a week to

the English Lounge. Both spring and fall of the 2018 semesters were at the bottom. Neither group went to the EL very often, with only 7 to 11 % going at least once a week. The most recent one, spring 2019, turned out to show a significant increase, to 22%, with beginning students coming to the EL often.



**Figure 2: Question No. 14 How often did you come to the English Lounge this semester?**  
(From Fall 2017 to Spring 2019)

The next question of interest is No.15. “Do you think it’s effective to use the English Lounge as part of your English course, for example, speech and assignment help, presentation preps, etc.?” The levels are divided into four again, adding one extra category, “other,” for free comments. I regret to say that this option, “other” was redundant because it turned out to overlap with the last two questions regarding the EL. I’ll explain this in a later section.



**Figure 3: Question No. 15. Do you think it’s effective to use the EL as part of your English course, for example, speech and assignment help, presentation preps, etc.?** (From Fall 2017 to Spring 2019)

Here we had a surprising divergence with the number of visits in the beginner classes. In every one of the groups, the most significant number of students answered that their experience at the EL was positive - Very effective or Effective. The percentage increases from 52% in fall 2017, 59% and 85% respectively in spring and fall 2018, and then close to 80% in spring 2019. I might as well speculate that the beginner students are reluctant to come to the EL, but once they do, they find the opportunity rewarding. The key is whether or not you can create a habit of coming to the SALC.

We can look at some comments in the “other” column here. As I mentioned, it was redundant, so that’s probably why students didn’t write many comments in fall 2018 and spring 2019. The comments here echo the responses of 18 and 19 and pretty much summarize the content.

The students say that they like the friendly, relaxing atmosphere; the faculty and international students are kind, helpful, and encouraging, and it’s a good chance to listen to authentic English and practice English conversation. One student says, “It was my first time to have spoken with English native speakers (NS). It was hard to make myself understood in English, but NS tried to encourage me to speak, so I felt good.” Another student says that it was good to have an opportunity to speak with NS. On the other hand, getting themselves inside the EL requires a lot of courage, especially for beginner level students. They say, “It’s not easy for beginners’ level to come in the English Lounge,” “It’s troublesome to go there,” or “I’m afraid of going there.” The beginners feel that it is a place for super-good students, and therefore they feel discouraged from walking in.

Let me explain the following two questions. “No. 18. Share a good experience at the English Lounge. No.19. Propose something that needs improvement at the English Lounge. Share it with us.” The comments here are free-style and not very detailed. Some of them are too brief to understand. Others can be so blunt that I couldn’t precisely categorize the comments in a qualitative, analytical way. Still, in these four groups, from 2017 to 2019, very broadly, you can see that answers can be grouped in a category of students who were thankful for chances to learn in a language center, in real-world like circumstances—those appreciative of their exposure to authentic English and grateful to the faculty and/or to the international students on duty for being kind and encouraging. Basically, we have “Listening” and “Reading” classes in the spring term and “Speaking” and “Writing” classes in the fall term, so the fall term has more comments about the benefits of getting speeches and writing checked.

Another group of comments has to do with learning about other cultures. In 2019, the most recent one, the students were explicitly impressed by cultural similarities and differences because they had a chance to talk with international students through the Japanese cooking presentations.

After making a demonstration, they could talk with the audience, which included international students, so there were a lot of questions like, “How do you make konnyaku yam? We don’t have it in our country.” “Why do you put sugar in your omelets?” Also, after the Japanese cooking presentations, we had international cooking presentations this time by French, American, New Zealander, and Malaysian students, and the local students learned about those cultures in detail through their cooking presentations as well. The comments shown here about the cooking presentations say, “It was a good experience to listen to international student presentations,” “I learned about a variety of other cultures,” “I learned a lot from attending different presentations,” “I love that French dessert,” “Great to listen to presentations in English,” and so on and so forth.



**Table 1: Question No. 18. Share a good experience at the English Lounge.**  
~Fall 2017, Spring 2018, Fall 2018, & Spring 2019~

Fall 2017 (27 comments)		Spring 2018 (20 comments)	
Faculty/international students were kind, helpful, encouraging, talking with NS is good, etc.	23	Faculty/international students were kind, helpful, encouraging, talking with NS is good, making friends with NS, etc.	11
Coming to EL was a requirement in the English course, but I seriously realized the needs for the future	1	Learned basic English we cannot learn in English courses	2
Found a lot of English books/books in my speciality	1	Learned about the world	2
I was afraid to go in the EL first, but once I came, I felt very comfortable being in the EL, so I'll suggest other students coming to the EL too	1	Could overcome the fear of speaking in English	1
		Felt the atmosphere of foreign countries	1
		Could learn English free of charge	2
		Easy to come in	1
Fall 2018 (29 comments)		Spring 2019 (27 comments)	
Learned basic English, understood grammar, felt English closer, etc.	11	Faculty/international students were kind, helpful, encouraging, etc.	4
Can talk in English, learned authentic English, spoke with NS, etc.	10	Joined cooking events	12
Faculty/international students were kind, helpful, etc.	5	Joining the seminars was good	7
Had English writing checked, consulted with a teacher	4	Got to know about different cultures	1
Easy to come in, friendly atmosphere, fun events, keep it as it is	3	Learned a lot about presentations	1
		Teaching is detailed	1
		It's cool there	1

If you look at Table 2 about Question 19 here, you can see some comments regarding the downside of the EL, things that students feel it is necessary to change. In every one of the groups, beginner students say that the EL is not easy to go into, both physically and psychologically. One issue is the actual space. Attempting to expand would be quite difficult without proper funding. The students complain about space. When there are events such as student presentations, or some seasonal events such as Halloween, or Christmas, space is just too small for the numbers of students. When there are some popular events, such as the Japanese cooking presentations, international cooking presentations, South East Asian Business presentations, etc. the seminar room feels really cramped with 40 to 60 people overflowing out into the conversation area, leaving so many people who cannot join or cannot hear every word being spoken. We can't do much about that with the current budget.

**Table 2: Question No. 19. Think of a proposal for things that need improvement in the English Lounge**  
~Fall 2017, Spring 2018, Fall 2018, & Spring 2019~

Fall 2017 (26 comments)		Spring 2018 (24 comments)	
Wish it were easier to go into the English Lounge (comments about ambience, more space, schedule, etc.)	18	Make it accessible/make an easier class even for a beginner level students who cannot speak English (comments about ambience, more space, schedule, etc.)	20
Need more books, more English comics, more PCs	3		
Need detailed schedule/wish it were open 1st period and after 5th period	2	Didn't know how to use the EL/Needs explanation in Japanese	2
Not many people so I hesitated to go in	2	Don't want to be forced to go there/Don't want to be counted as grades	2
Too many people and could not talk with the international students	1	"Personally, I think it was easier to go to a teacher's room rather than coming to the EL"	1

Fall 2018 (26 comments)		Spring 2019 (22 comments)	
Wish it were easier to go into the English Lounge (comments about ambience, more space, easier classes, etc.)	18	Need more space	10
Need more space	5	Make it more accessible for students who are not good at English	5
Need schedule change (1st period, after 5th period)	2	Schedule change (lunchtime not desirable, weekend classes)	3
Need more plans to have students visit EL with friends	1	Fun events	1
Need more PR	1	Make Liberal Art classes tie up with the English Lounge, e.g. with international students	1
		Don't change, keep it as it is	1

However, psychologically, we may be able to lower the barrier of coming into the EL by explaining the schedule to the beginner class students early on, by having them choose seminars that are the right level for them, and by inviting lower-level students into the Conversation Circle. We also need to have international students work with us to target lower-level students. We have tried to have special days or times featuring circles for lower-level students, but they have never gained momentum.

There are some contradicting comments about making going to the EL one of the requirements in the Liberal Arts courses. In spring 2018, two of them said that they don't want to be forced to come to the EL, but in 2019, there was even one student who suggested making Liberal Arts classes that were held in the EL by, for example, inviting international students to the classes (Table 2). This comment came as a surprise to me.

## Discussion

Here are some of the hypotheses I have drawn from looking at all the comments by the students: Beginner level students are not very confident about their English; most likely, they might have had many negative experiences with English in the past, as is often cited and claimed in the media, so I cannot blame them for that. Even though some of them say they hate English, they still feel the joy of making themselves understood in English once they are exposed to it. My colleague Professor Berman says, "As the expression goes, 'you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink;' but, if you never show the horse the river, the horse will never know about it." That's why, even though the students say they wish that coming to the Lounge were not required, we as teachers should encourage them to come."

I don't have clear statistics, but the number of teachers not part of the EL team who send their students to the EL for make-up or special lessons continues to increase every semester. Students come with their teacher's individual form for the EL faculty to sign so that they can earn extra credit in their English classes. By coming to the EL, they have new encounters and learn new things, not in an intimidating way. I don't think we should be discouraged by such negative comments. People go to the dentist because they need treatment, not because they believe it will be an enjoyable experience.

We should keep making improvements to create an even more authentic atmosphere and expose students to it. This is all still necessary. Looking at all the comments I introduced from the questionnaire, I'd like to emphasize that if you have the resources, whether they be people or materials, you will find it very useful to create/implement this type of language learning center outside your English classes. It is very rewarding and good for your students. However, lower-level students will need more basic seminars in such a facility so that they can have access to the appropriate level of input.

In our entity, the issue of making it "easier to walk in"—an "accessible" environment—is something we



need to improve immediately, in both physical and psychological terms. To make an even more international environment, recruiting more international students is a must—to the extent that they are available, and it doesn't interfere with their own classes.

Also, properly explaining the advantages of using the language learning center during English class is necessary to increase attendance, to improve student metacognitive skills, sense of appreciation for the EL. Without it, students don't see the need and the effectiveness of linking it to their own learning. After three years of focusing on connecting the language center and liberal arts classes, I think I am finally doing a reasonable job of explaining the EL to the students at the start of the course. The fall semester statistics are forthcoming, and I hope to see student agreement on this issue. In 2019, some of the students wrote in their comments and said they “tentatively” or “for the time being” had decided to believe me and do their classwork in the EL. I had said that the EL was a very good tool for improving their English abilities, and some of them even mentioned this point in their questionnaire responses; they said visiting the EL was good and effective for their learning. I am more and more convinced that the stronger the explanation beforehand, the more students will trust me and be compliant with my expectations.

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