The Need to Promote and Support Self-Access English Language Learning among Non-English Majors

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Introduction

In the last 30 years, little has been done to implement more effective and motivating ways of teaching English in Japan. However, a few English language educators have been aware of this crucial need. Up to the late 1960s, students' individual propensities in learning had not been thoroughly considered in the foreign language education process. Finding a way to support the inborn characteristics of students was the goal of some revolutionary teachers. Their classes were planned and conducted based on theories proposed by researchers in their studies of the relationship between types of learners and second-language acquisition SLA . I would like to cite 5 major theories that grounded their class plans.

Wilkin et al. 1971 developed the Group Embedded Figures Test by which one can determine whether a learner is" field dependent or" field independent . The test is conducted in the following manner a complex geometric design is presented to the learner. If the subject is able to easily and readily identify the geometric figure within the design, the learner is said to be" field independent," whereas learners who find this task difficult are considered to be" field dependent. " Field independents have been hypothesized as being able to handle classroom activities faster and more successfully due to their ability to more readily comprehend formal rules. However, in SLA, no conclusive results have yet been reached. In 1985, Clahsen was able to differentiate learners into the following two categories " norm-oriented learners, whose concern is to develop knowledge of the linguistic rules of a second language L2 , and" communicative-oriented learners, whose prime interest is to develop effective communication unhampered by skills involved in formal L2 accuracy concerns. Following the proposal of Witkin et al. in 1971, there has been interesting research into the basic distinction between these two types of learners, such as the theory of Bialystok and Sharwood Smith 1985 . In their proposal, since language has both linguistic and pragmatic aspects, learning is subdivided into" competence and " performance. Thus, language acquisition entails both the development of a

knowledge of language rules and control of the knowledge thus acquired. Seliger 1980 found that some learners were " planners who endeavored to organize their efforts prior to performance, while others were" correctors who preferred to aim first for fluency and then to adjust their subsequent performance as necessary. The results reached by most speculations and case studies ended up with relatively communicative-oriented learners. Those in the psychological field, following the pioneering studies of Carroll and Sapon 1959 , have made progress in showing the implications of how individual learner factors such as motivation and aptitude shape the learning process when different learning-task orientations are applied.

   English teachers who have reconsidered their teaching methods and freed themselves from the traditional teacher-directed environments, see that further research and information are still needed concerning 1 how field dependency or independency is related to language knowledge and control 2 how norm- and communicative-oriented learners respond to the language acquisition process, and whether and to what extent both types of learning styles may co-exist in an individual learner and 3 individual learner factors that distinguish the learning process of norm-oriented from communicative-oriented learners.

   Most learners' and teachers' assumptions in Japan concerning English learning and teaching have finally started to change. Educational institutions with English major departments have begun to realize that for faster learning of English as a second language, they need to create an environment conducive to learning, since everyone is, to some extent, conditioned by his or her environment. English teaching and learning have been restricted to time spent in the classroom, homework done outside of class, and some work/research conducted in the library. With the development of software technology and the advent of new teaching laboratory systems, language laboratory learning has changed from simple listening and exercise completion activities to pair and group activities within the laboratory. Sophisticated student-level language proficiency learning programs with plenty of visual effects such as CALL computer-assisted language learning have attracted the attention of language educators. However, since the high cost of such programs has impaired their general adoption and use, they have not attained their expected popularity. Educational institutions facing a gradual decrease in the number of students due to the country's declining birthrate are struggling to make ends meet. Many inconveniently located colleges without appealing facilities and/or learning support systems have been forced to close their doors. The fact is that the current generation of Japanese students demands new, modern, and attractive facilities in addition to human educational support, especially in higher education.

   Most Japanese college students are, unfortunately, known for their inability to communicate orally in foreign languages. Regrettably, even a large number of foreign language majors, most of whom major in English, still graduate from their four-year university programs sadly lacking in communicative skills. Slowly, however a

revolutionary change is underway that recently finds an increasing number of university language departments concerned about this deficiency, committing themselves to building so-called SACs self-access centers to promote self-learning outside of class. Most SACs are well supplied with English materials given that the major demand is for English as a foreign language, whereas cramped facilities are often allotted for other languages taught in the university. What is to be done about the non-English majors Little or absolutely no outside-class educational support is given to them to develop their English or other foreign language skills so that they may confidently deal with the international business world and social life upon graduation. Most of these non-English majors are restricted to English learning conducted in the classroom. Couldn't supplementary ways be devised to encourage natural, effective, and even enjoyable English learning that will not put any extra burden on the institution's budget

Probing beliefs, and attitudes, and preferred learning styles of surveyed non-English majors

In the course of my research into implementing self-access language learning SALL in non-English major classes, in 2000 I published the results of a survey of 2 non-English major groups. One survey was conducted among learners of an elective course of 30 students ranging from freshmen to seniors, and the other among 32 students of a required course of the same school year from the same department. The survey centered on probing student beliefs and attitudes on ways to better learn English, and what learning styles they preferred. Seeking to discover whether students had changed their evaluation of these issues, and how SALL might better fulfill their personal and future professional needs, in 2003, I distributed two types of questionnaires to 43 non-English majors of the same school year from the same department who were taking English as a required course. One was basically the same questionnaire used in 1999 with 3 newly added items. The other was adapted from Nunan's questionnaire 1996 .

Comparison of the survey results obtained in 1999 with those of 2003 revealed virtually no radical differences in students' English learning beliefs and attitudes.

The questionnaire items presented to the students in both the 1999 and 2003 surveys are accompanied by the responses in percentages.

What do you think can be done to improve your English learning skills ?

Some students chose not to respond some statements.	Learners in the 1999 elective course		Learners in the 1999 required course		Learners in the 2003 required course	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
. Working alone at my own pace.	53	13	21	37	23	26
. Working with a partner.	40	33	21	31	23	35
. Working in a small group.	30	20	25	28	28	26
. Learning only from the teacher.	00	100	15	75	19	70
. Working with a partner or doing group work with the teacher available for consultation.	56	6	46	15	42	12
. Working without constant teacher supervision.	16	70	25	62	19	53
. Working with student s who are at about the same English language level as myself.	90	0	71	15	81	9
. Engaging in conversational activities of my choice.	83	10	62	21	53	19
. Engaging in listening activities of my choice.	83	6	62	15	56	12
10. Engaging in conversational activities assigned by the teacher.	86	6	68	9	74	9
11. Engaging in listening activities assigned by the teacher.	86	6	71	12	70	9
The following statements were added to the 2004 **survey.**						
12. Reading materials of my choice directed toward a determined objective e.g., increasing my comprehension					33	16
13. Listening and or reading/viewing materials of my choice toward a determined objective e.g., enlarging my vocabulary					28	14
14. Doing supplemental exercises to learn or review English grammar.					23	9

The following questionnaire was used to survey the students' preferred learning styles. I needed their feedback so that I could better plan my class activities.

How do you prefer to learn?

Score yourself 0, 1, 2 or 3 to show your preferences.

0 no   1 occasionally   2 usually   3 yes

Learning type 1

I prefer to learn by watching and listening to native speakers.

I prefer to learn by talking to friends in English.

At home, I prefer to learn by watching TV and/or videotapes in English.

I prefer to learn by using English outside of class.

I prefer to learn English words by hearing them spoken.

I prefer to learn by engaging in conversations.

Note Highest total score 18   Total

Learning type 2

I prefer to have the teacher to explain everything.

I prefer to write everything in my notebook.

I prefer to learn from a textbook.

In class, I prefer to learn by reading.

I prefer to study grammar.

I prefer to learn English words by seeing them written out.

Note Highest total score 18   Total   [   ]

Learning type 3

In class, I prefer to learn by playing games.

In class, I prefer to learn by looking at pictures, films and videotapes.

I prefer to learn English by conversing with a fellow student.

I prefer to learn English using a computer.

At home, I prefer to learn using audiotapes.

In class, I prefer to listen to and use audiotapes.

I prefer to go out with my classmates and practice English outside the
  classroom.

Note Highest total score 21   Total   [   ]

Learning type 4

I prefer to study grammar.

At home, I prefer to learn by reading English books.

I prefer to study English by myself.

I prefer to have the teacher let me discover my mistakes on my own.

I prefer to have the teacher to assign us problems to work on.

At home, I prefer to learn by reading magazines and newspapers.

Note Highest total score 18   Total   [   ]

Add up your score for each section and insert the number in the Total box. The
highest total indicates your learning preferences.

Table 1

The following statements proposed by Nunan 1996 were presented to students who answered the questionnaire for self-assessment.

Type 1   If you have a high score in this section, you are probably a good communicator. You enjoy interacting with people and using the English you have learned in a natural way.

Type 2   If you have a high score in this section, you probably enjoy learning English in class. You prefer the teacher to guide you through the language learning process.

Type 3   If you have a high score in this section, you probably enjoy learning English by exposure to examples. You enjoy learning with other people and regard learning a language as fun.

Type 4   If you have a high score in this section, you probably prefer learning English by studying it in detail. You prefer to work by yourself and discover how to use the language on your own.

Students who scored 0 in any of the learning types were asked to explain why they did not prefer engaging in those activities. They wrote their explanation in English or Japanese.

Results in percentage of learning types

The 4 learning categories into which the 43 surveyed students fall are shown in percentages.

	Surveyed non-English majors in the 2003 required course
Learning type 1	26%
Learning type 2	21%
Learning type 3	35%
Learning type 4	16%

A few students collaborated by clarifying the reasons they did not feel they entirely belonged to any of the categories proposed by Nunan 1996 . The following are the collected responses to statements translated into English.

Learning type 1

*Questionnaire statement	I prefer to learn by using English outside of class.
Student's response	How and where can I learn using English outside of class similar response from 3 students
*Questionnaire statement	At home, I prefer to learn by watching TV and/or videotapes in English.
Student's response	Can't I learn by watching videotapes at school I don't have a VCR only for my personal use at home.

similar response from 2 students

Learning type 2

There were no student responses to this type.

Learning type 3

*Questionnaire statement	In class, I prefer to learn by looking at pictures, films and videotapes.
Student's response	Can't I choose a film I like and learn English from it at school similar response from 2 students
*Questionnaire statement	At home, I prefer to learn using audiotapes.
Student's response	I'd prefer to learn English using audiotapes at school as a homework assignment.
*Questionnaire statement	In class, I enjoy listening to and using audiotapes.
Student's response	I enjoy singing English songs. similar response from 3 students

Learning type 4

*Questionnaire statement	I prefer to study English by myself.
Student's response	What can I study What should I study

The above responses are suggestive of the roles teachers are expected to play in self-learning and self-access language learning.

The results obtained in surveys with non-English majors support a major principle this investigator has been developing over the years, i.e., English teachers of non-English majors should consider self-access learning as an available option for their classes. Later in this report, I will explore and propose some basic procedures in this regard.

Current English teaching and learning environments in Japanese universities

A considerable number of non-English majors, especially that group composed of students taking English as a required subject, prefer to relax during most of a 90-minute lecture, which is not surprising since they are only interested in accumulating credits. Thus, they find a teacher-directed class more comfortable. A good number of students, even those with a relatively good command of English as well as those who could improve if more effort were expended, lack the willingness to practice. A growing apathy toward not only studies but also life as a whole is a matter of great concern among educators. Is there no way to remedy poor motivation and apathy

Students have been accustomed to teacher-directed environments from their earliest days at school. Thus, self-access learning is still a new and unfamiliar process to many or most university students in Japan. There are some possible factors to

account for this. For example, their instructors' teaching attitudes stem from the way they themselves studied, and from the teacher training courses they took. Of course, teachers are not the only ones at fault. In Japan, culturally and socially submissive and less aggressive characteristics have always been highly regarded. Individualism was discouraged, while group harmony was supported. The traditional cultural norms that characterize Japanese behavior have hindered an awareness of the need to educate children while developing and affirming their individuality. Encouraging them to become creative and promoting debates in class have not been features of Japanese primary education. Japan's post-war social, economic, and cultural environment in which the great percentage of teachers currently working were brought up and educated called for almost heroic individual efforts, in support of which no special training was provided. Teachers and students in those days strove strenuously to nurture their in-born and acquired skills so as to be recognized as valued individuals in the nation they were given the opportunity and mission to rebuild. Although teachers currently in their late fifties and sixties do take training courses and seminars to update their teaching skills, many of them comment that they still feel uncomfortable implementing new learning styles. The pressure to and at times the fear of adopting and introducing new teaching methods/procedures in their daily teaching poses for some of them psychological barriers too strong to overcome, and they find it difficult to accept them. The vicious circle prevailing in the current Japanese educational environment is perpetuated by the new generation of teachers in their twenties and thirties who themselves were educated by those same inhibited post-war teachers still active. These young English teachers, usually more flexible and adaptable to changes, find themselves increasingly questioning the traditional teaching and learning approaches. It is encouraging to find developing, however slowly, a firm and stable attitude among both young and even some veteran teachers to create new learning environments. To better achieve improvements in teaching and a more promising professional future for current students, promoting, encouraging and training them to become more autonomous learners is a MUST.

Proposing procedures to encourage SALL

In the 2003 subject class, five years after my first survey, I was not surprised to notice that learner resistance towards autonomy, as reported by Sinclair and Ellis 1984 , was still prevalent among a considerable number of students. This attitude was clearly manifested during our weekly warm-up sessions when students were divided into small groups of 4 and used their individual 60-word free-topic written assignments as material for a 20-minute listening and question and answer period. In spite of my instructions on how to conduct that activity and to adopt the recommended learning attitude, I observed while circulating among the students that some were not involved in their tasks and were quite obviously slacking off. In this

particular class, the learning atmosphere was somewhat different from the one in classes surveyed and observed in 1999. Especially noticeable was a change in the attitude of male students, who were more frequently caught chattering with classmates sitting next to them. Especially between activities or when pairs/groups had completed their assigned tasks and were awaiting directions to start a new activity, some male students began talking loudly among themselves, at times disrupting another group's work. Such rude behavior exceeded the acceptable limit and they had to be reprimanded since verbal warnings were not sufficient. On the other hand, female students remained much quieter, and even when they chattered, it was only occasionally and in a discrete fashion. Teaching Japanese university male and female mixed classes over 20 years has convinced me that the universal belief that women are more talkative than men is losing ground year by year. In the context of a teaching and learning environment, disciplining both male and female university students' classroom behavior is an issue that needs to be addressed.

In the face of growing learning diversity and weakening of traditional Japanese rules of behavior, there is an obvious class with stagnated English teaching and learning environment in Japanese universities. Thus, there is a compelling need for teachers to reform teaching systems with the understanding and support of their educational institutions. What kind of corrective actions can be taken

Proposal to teachers of immediate actions and procedures for reform

- Explain to students that, since they are required to take English courses to graduate, the teacher is concerned to make their study time as pleasant and productive s possible .
- Propose a combination of teacher-directed and self-access learning, explaining that both learning methods can be equally effective.
- Make students aware of their role in the overall self-access learning process.
- Provide examples of self-learning procedures, e.g., explaining what they could profitably learn and practice, or making it clear that they can actually choose the kind of language usage they need and would prefer to work on .
- Assure students that learning activities can also be done using computers, and encourage their use whenever they express interest or enjoyment in doing so. Activities done on a keyboard with a screen monitor to look at may better capture their attention and interest, given that their generation seems to be addicted to the use of cellular phones. Autonomy in learning can be developed by the assignment of problems and the weekly submission of homework. In the production process, students have to use dictionaries books or software types , check meaning, spelling, usage and other linguistic matters without a teacher to assist them. Thus students learn to be responsible for the completion and submission of assignments.
- Distribute" Learner Profiles with the following items 1. goal 2. learning activities/ materials followed by subitems, date, activities whether speaking or listening, number of students involved in the activity and reason for choosing that specific

activity and 3. self-assessment followed by evaluation grades ranging from A+, A, B, C, or F, and comments. And explain how these Learner Profiles work.

- Inform students they may critique the self-access activities they will be engaged in.
- Train students in self-access learning through simple activities in class.
- Proceed to assignments. Cf. examples of listening and speaking activities in Appendix.

Concluding Thoughts

Teachers of English courses encounter in different classes either students of varied skill levels or those who were previously screened and grouped according to their ability. Other groupings have become more common such as classes comprised of students who wish their teachers to conduct lessons solely in English, in English but with explanations in Japanese, half in English and half in Japanese, and mostly in Japanese with practice only in English.

The situation of English courses for non-English majors has also changed in some universities, but still not enough care is exercised. In some institutions, English language ability may be screened and/or the choice given of the type of English, e.g. elementary English conversation, everyday conversational English, English for foreign travel, etc., with students given that choice before classes are formed.

Whichever type of class teachers are assigned, grouping according to students' motivation, interests or needs seems to be almost impossible. How to handle class discipline has added to the list of education problems. Students' classroom behavior has also changed with the times. As I previously described, both male and female students of the current generation seem to enjoy engaging in random chatter with no regard for the rules of classroom discipline unless they are reprimanded. Students with unique and at times aggressive personalities enjoy showing off. The formerly submissive, passive, and quietly attentive Japanese students are gradually giving way to more assertive and very outgoing individuals. In terms of course objectives and goals, teachers are urged to identify individuals with learning problems and to apply different strategies so that satisfactory learning goals can be achieved.

My proposal to introduce self-access language learning does not alleviate the current student learning diversity and at times difficult to handle students' class behavior situations. This proposal involves cooperation among learners, teachers and institutions. My surveys, class observations and actual teaching have reinforced my conviction that, all in all, appropriate self-access systems characterized by their flexibility are excellent tools suited to the current generation and its needs. In order to provide a flexible learning context, teachers need to first assess their assigned class to measure the level of self-access activities they realistically can apply. Then, they must prepare the students, gradually training them and creating classroom conditions that provide a variety of choices capable of meeting their expectations. In such an

active atmosphere, students with low motivation are strongly influenced to acknowledge the need to participate and take more responsibility for their learning when engaging in classroom activities. Later, by critiquing their self‑access learning experience, they learn to appreciate the importance of a habit of self‑reflection which helps them redefine their goals as both learners and individuals.

As we see a sufficiently high number of teachers working on the construction and reconstruction of practices for the development of such an autonomous learning context, and trying to create an environment where both learning and self‑satisfaction co‑exist, the institution must cooperate to establish a more comfortable setting for students to readjust their attitude toward achieving maturity both as language learners and individuals. An interactive classroom context between teachers and learners cannot be realized without such support from educational institutions.

Although self‑access learning starts in the classroom, numerous other options are available. Activities in SACs, not in conventional libraries, are also suitable settings for English study and learning. With increasing numbers of SACs available to English majors, why not also allow non‑English majors to utilize those facilities I envision the need to create English or language SACs on every university campus to build up learners' target language learning confidence and skills. I see SACs providing a simulated real world where students are given the chance to choose what they are interested in, need, and prefer to learn. Such SACs may function as environments where student autonomy and responsibility are developed and valued. As institutions set up new computers facilities to meet the need to develop more up‑to‑date electronic communication systems suited to students' future needs, SACs can be cost‑effectively introduced using textbooks, books, cassette tapes, video tapes, DVDs, magazines, newspapers and other materials that can be gradually reorganized. The final point I wish to make is the absolute urgency for every college and university to open a SAC, an independently functioning learning facility different from the conventional library or audio‑visual library corner/center.

With a SAC on each campus, I foresee the English language education of non‑English major students progressing as follows

○ English teaching   ▨ in-class learning
◌ English learning   ▦ outside-class learning
◌ SALL (Self-access language learning)
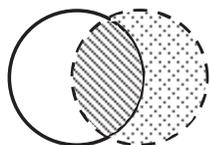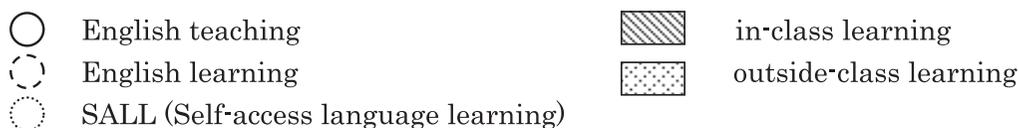
Figure 1   Traditional teacher-
           directed environment
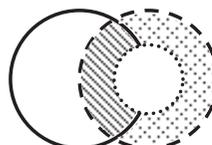
Figure 2   After SALL awareness
           From teacher-directed to
           self-access learning
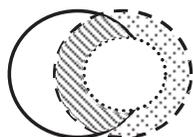
Figure 3   SALL using SAC
           facilities

Figure 4   SALL after new
           English learning
           environment is in
           place

It is my hope that in my continuing survey to gather information on students' learning styles, content needs, and preferences while promoting English self-learning among non-English majors will raise awareness of the value of learning autonomy and the consequent hoped-for command of English language skills.

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Appendix

Speaking Activities

. Situational conversations such as take place when shopping, ordering at a restaurant, asking for directions, riding public transportation, etc. Students read the model dialogs provided, check the unfamiliar vocabulary, then write out their conversations and practice, memorize and tape record their role‑plays.

. Situational conversations using language functions such as starting a conversation, agreeing and refusing, complaining, etc. Students follow the same procedure as in activity number one.

. Solving problems. Letters of consultation as those in the Ann Landers newspaper column are provided. Students check the unfamiliar vocabulary, discuss, and prepare solutions, practice and tape record their suggestions.

. Discussing topics. Problems on a variety of topics are provided. Students study a topic, check the unfamiliar vocabulary, discuss, and prepare a formal presentation of their ideas, tape recording them.

. After taking a short excursion outside the classroom, students return to the class, prepare their observations and, after practicing them, tape record them.

. Using the telephone. Models of both business and personal calls are given. Learners write out their own telephone calls, including openers and closers and other language functions. They practice and tape record their role‑plays.

. Memorizing social rituals which involve short conversations frequently repeated in everyday situations. These ritualistic conversations rarely convey much real information. They are composed of short sentences in a very limited number of exchanges. Everyone uses them when handling situations such as apologizing, both giving and receiving compliments, offering congratulations, accepting a gift, etc. Learners memorize the conversations and tape record their role‑plays. I should note that the situational conversations in activity number 2 are of a different nature and contain a more extended exchange of information.

. Interviews. Students prepare their own list of questions, practicing and memorizing them. One student interviews another. When the interview is finished, the learners reverse roles. The interviews are tape recorded.

Note   The students were instructed that in the final stage of their practice, in the tape recording of the presentation or role‑play, they were not allowed to read their manuscripts.

Listening Activities

. General daily tape‑recorded conversations are accompanied by printed exercises to practice and reinforce listening comprehension, and expand vocabulary. Learners listen to the tape and work on the exercises. The procedure can be repeated as many times as the learners wish. When they are convinced they have done their best, they turn in their work sheets.

. Telephoning in English. Tape recorded general and business telephone conversations are

accompanied by exercises to check comprehension and expand vocabulary. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.

- Narratives. Tape recordings and printed comprehension questions are provided. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.
- Mini-dramas. Tape recordings and printed comprehension questions and parts of scripts to be completed are provided. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.
- Lectures on world issues. Tape recordings of lower intermediate level materials are provided together with comprehension questions. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.
- Songs. Tape recordings and exercises to enlarge vocabulary are provided with sheets to complete the words of songs. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.
- Short reading passages on a variety of topics. The recordings and exercises to check comprehension and enlarge vocabulary are provided. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.
- Five-minute quizzes for TOEIC. Tape recordings and work sheets are provided. Instructions to the students are the same as for number one.

Note
- For many of the listening activities, a transcription exercise was provided to practic precise comprehension.
- Students engaged in listening activities 1, 2 and 7 were told they could, after completing their practice, undertake speaking activities, creating and presenting their own conversations following the models in 1 and 2, and writing and presenting their opinions for activity 7. If opting to do these speaking activities, they would have to work in pairs for activities 1 and 2, and in pairs or groups of up to 3 students for activity 7.