

Creating Learning Space to Supplement the English Curriculum

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Abstract

Japanese university students do not have enough exposure to English and do not have many opportunities to use English in their English classes. In this situation, some kinds of places for students should be prepared besides providing English classes. The purpose of this study is to consider the environment where students use English and keep motivation of learning English outside classes. The Faculty of International Studies at Bunkyo University established a self-access center, named the Language Garden (hereinafter referred to as LG). There are DVD players, a big-screen TV with CNN news on and a whiteboard which shows daily English expressions (see Appendix A). Two language learning assistants (hereinafter referred to as LL assistants) are in charge of the room and one native speaker of English is assigned as a facilitator to talk with students who visit there. One of the problems is that only students with high motivation of learning English come to the LG. In the LG, students are not allowed to use their mother tongue. That is the reason why they hesitate to enter the room. To encourage students to visit the LG on daily basis, we would like to discuss how to make the LG a better learning space for students.

Keywords

autonomous learning, a self-access center, learning resources

Introduction

Most English classes at universities in Japan are regulated ninety minute time limit. Therefore, it is obvious that students cannot take enough input and do not have opportunities for output in English classes. Furthermore, students need to learn and use English autonomously to improve their English skills. Some students try to make time for their English study such as reading books, listening to music and watching DVDs. In fact, most university students who have high motivation and are interested in studying English think that going abroad is one of the best ways to improve their

English skills. It is clear that studying in foreign countries is one of the effective ways to learn foreign languages. However, we think that the university teachers and staff should try to make the circumstance like staying in foreign countries so as to use English at school. Therefore, some kinds of places where students can use English on campus should be prepared for students. In order to make a better learning space for students, this paper focuses on how to create a learning space for them on campus.

1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to consider how to create a leaning space where students use English and keep motivation of learning English outside classes.

2 Language Garden

2.1 Rules

The LG has a rule that students are not allowed to use their mother tongue. Japanese students who learn English have to speak in English. If students do not use English, LL assistants caution them not to use Japanese. Equally, when students watch DVDs, they have to select English sounds and subtitles. Students are not allowed to borrow DVDs, however they can borrow books and textbooks for a week.

2.2 Learning resources

The LG has a variety of learning resources: six hundreds DVDs, fifteen hundreds graded readers, eighty comic books, sixty paperbacks, some weekly magazines, foreign language textbooks other than English (Korean, Chinese, Spanish, French, German), board games and so on. In addition to language learning resources, there are ten DVD players (see Appendix B), some tables and chairs, couches, a big-screen TV with CNN news on (see Appendix C) and a whiteboard which shows daily English expressions.

2.2.1 DVDs

DVDs are the most popular materials that students use to learn English. About fifteen students a day watch DVDs on average (see Figure 1). This figure shows that the number of DVDs that students borrow monthly. The LG has plenty of DVDs and these are divided according to categories: Disney, Ghibli, American drama, comedy, action, human drama, other languages and so on. American dramas are the most popular among students in all of the categories in the LG because it is easy for students to watch short dramas during their free time. Disney movies are also popular because English sounds and subtitles are easy for students to understand. LL assistants purchase new DVDs on regular basis. The latest DVDs are “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows part1” and “127 Hours” as of June 2011.

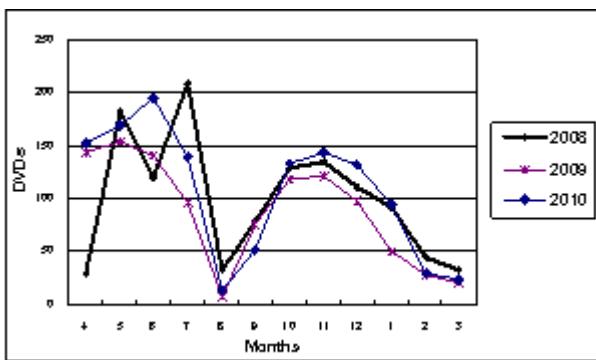


Figure 1: The number of DVDs students borrow

2.2.2 Books

There are fifteen hundreds graded books and eighty comics in the LG. Graded books are divided by categories (movie, romance, human drama, thriller and so on) and levels one to six. Students tend to read books of movies and fairy tales than other categories because it is easy for them to understand stories. As for comics, there are popular comics among young Japanese. For example, “ONE PIECE”, “Nodame Cantabile”, “SLAM DUNK” and so on. In addition to these comics, there are comics of Studio Ghibli’s animated movies: “PONYO”, “KIKI’s Delivery Service”, “My Neighbor TOTORO” and so on. In comparison with DVDs, only about five students a day borrow books and textbooks on average (see Figure 2).

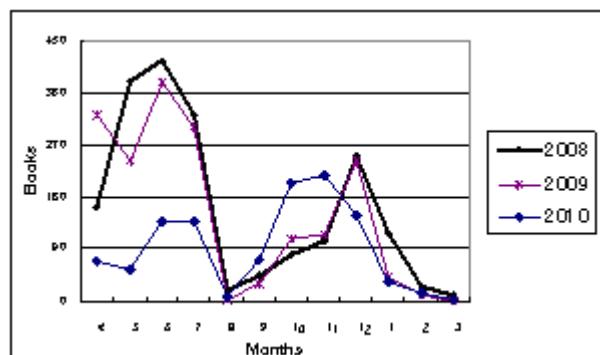


Figure 2: The number of books students borrow

2.3 Facilitators

In addition to the LL assistants, one native speaker of English is assigned each day during lunchtime as a facilitator to talk with students and to support them when they speak in English. Furthermore, one student is also hired as an assistant for the facilitator each day, they are called LG supporters. The LG supporters welcome freshmen and encourage them to speak in English there.

2.4 The number of users

About forty students a day visit the LG on average. Especially, the LG attracts more students during lunchtime: about twenty-five students have lunch and talk with a facilitator and friends during lunchtime. When students have free time, they watch DVDs, play games or talk with friends and LL assistants. Here is a figure which shows the number of students coming monthly in the LG (see Figure 3). Many students use and visit the LG during school term from May to July in spring semester and from October to January in fall semester.

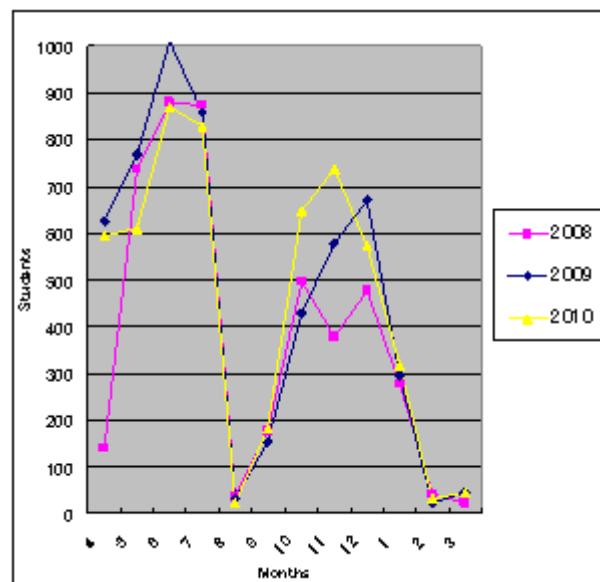


Figure 3: The number of students coming LG

Moreover, we see from the figure 4 that there is a large increase in the total of students coming LG from 2008 to 2010 (see Figure 4).

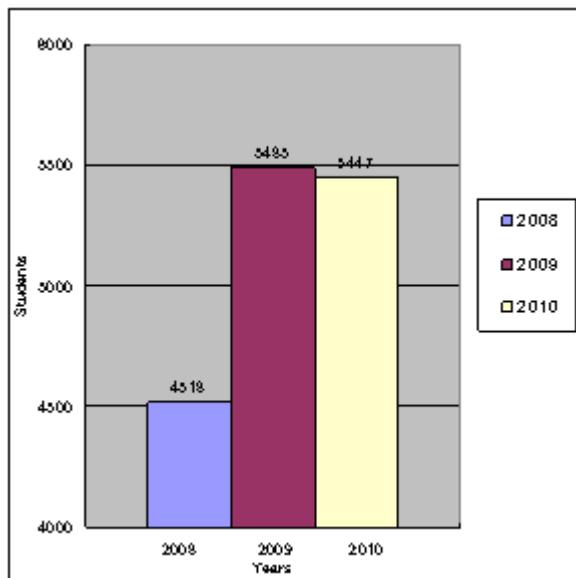


Figure 4: The total of students coming LG

2.5 Events

The LG has seasonal events such as Christmas parties, Halloween parties and welcome parties for freshmen. More than seventy students and a few teachers participate in those parties every time. One full-time English teacher brings his handmade cookies every time and students look forward to eating them. At welcome parties, LL assistants, teachers and senior students welcome freshmen and they can become friends with not only freshmen but also seniors. These seasonal parties can be good opportunities for some students to start visiting the LG.

3 Language learning assistants

3.1 Language learning assistants

The LG has two language learning assistants (hereinafter referred to as LL assistants) who are in charge of the LG and they are in a staff room next to the LG. They help students speak in English as advisors. Students can easily ask them anything about their English study. For example, LL assistants advise students how to choose reference books and how to prepare for TOEIC, TOEFL and so on.

3.2 LL staff room

A staff room for LL assistants is next to the LG. There are a variety of reference books (grammar, listening, pronunciation of English and so on) and textbooks (for TOEIC, TOEFL, examinations of languages other than English) in the room. Students

can borrow these books for a week.

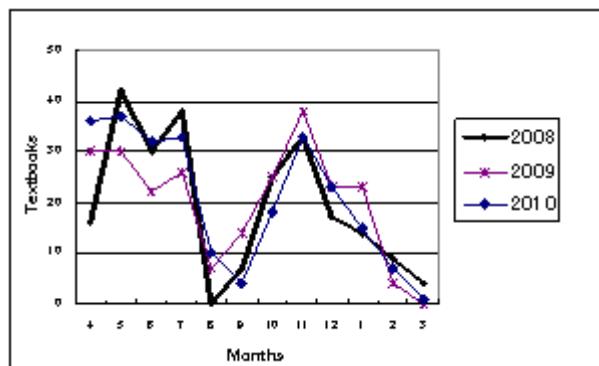


Figure 5: The number of textbooks students borrow

4 The English curriculum and the LG

4.1 English curriculum

Freshmen need to take eight compulsory English classes: four classes in spring semester and four in fall semester. Two of these classes are Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) classes and the rest of two classes are English for International Communication (EIC). All the freshmen are divided into six levels based on the score of CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication) is worth a mention. CASEC is a standardized test for evaluating English proficiency level. There are four sections — knowledge of vocabulary, knowledge of phrasal expression and usage, listening ability of understanding of main idea and listening ability of collecting specific information. The freshmen should take CASEC test three times a year in April, July and January. After taking a CASEC test, the classes are rearranged into six classes based on their scores. What is more, students can see how their English skills have improved by taking a CASEC test. Apart from compulsory classes, students are required to take ten elective classes, including other languages such as Chinese, German, French, Spanish and Korean. In addition to that, six classes named English for Specific Purpose (ESP) besides CALL and EIC are offered. Students need to get at least eighteen credits in total to graduate. As we mentioned before, it is likely that many students have limited opportunities to improve their communication skills on a daily basis in term of language output because of class hours and the number of students per class. The LG plays an important role in order to supplement the opportunities for students to use English outside classes.

4.2 English teacher training program

Three years have passed since the English teacher

training program for prospective teachers of junior and senior high schools was introduced as part of the curriculum. In order to review junior and high school English grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, the students are recommended to make use of the textbooks and NHK radio English programs with CDs that are available in the LG. The LG has functions as a resource bank to help students find useful teaching materials. Moreover, these materials in the LG help students come to good ideas of organizing their teaching plans.

4.3 Study abroad and volunteer programs

The Faculty of International Studies focuses on experimental learning, for example, volunteer activities and studying English in foreign countries. Before starting in the spring semester, sophomores take part in the three-month-study-abroad program either in the U.S. or in Australia. After they come back to Japan, they are required to give “study abroad program follow-up presentation” at the LG. This is a good chance to exchange ideas and to foster friendship among students. In summer vacation, some students go abroad to brush up their language skills or to participate in volunteer activities. After summer vacation, in the fall semester, International Week is held in the LG. International Week is the one of the events that students who have been to abroad can share their experience in the LG. There are many advantages for those students to share their experiences in English. Moreover, the audience is encouraged by their presentation.

5 Conclusion

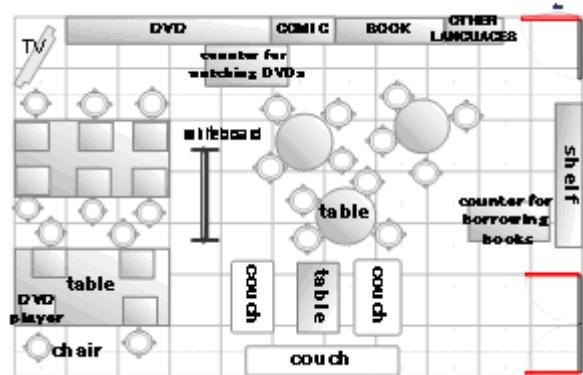
We see that coming to the LG enables university students to have opportunities to use English besides their English classes. One of the reasons is that there are many learning materials to attract students, such as DVDs, books and comics which are quite familiar with students, in the LG. Furthermore, students can talk with one native speaker of English during lunchtime on weekdays. However, in fact, there are many students who hesitate to enter the LG, or it may be the truth to say that students do not have confidence in using English. To encourage students to visit the LG on daily basis, we would like to propose that informal mini lectures or workshops are held and an extensive reading club is provided regularly. In addition to that, some students who often visit the LG give us some useful ideas to develop the LG. Recently, many university students enjoy reading and writing comments on SNS (Social Networking Service) or a blog such as FACEBOOK and Ameba blog that is a very popular in Japan. It may be worth

using it and sharing the information about the LG. We would like to discuss how to make the LG a better learning space for students at PAAL conference.

References

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Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C

