

PERSPECTIVES ON SELF-ACCESS IN JAPAN : ARE WE SIMPLY CATCHING UP WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD?

Jo Mynard

Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba (Japan)

Mots-clés

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Keywords

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Résumé

Constatant un intérêt assez récent pour l'auto-apprentissage au Japon, l'auteure explore certaines des raisons pour lesquelles le Japon a eu tendance à être à la traîne par rapport à d'autres pays. Toutefois, sous l'influence de certains changements dans l'enseignement au Japon, des collègues japonais ont récemment apporté des contributions précieuses, en particulier dans les domaines du conseil, de la formation des conseillers et des possibilités d'apprentissage social, qui seront examinés dans le présent article.

Abstract

This paper gives an overview of some perspectives on self-access learning in Japan. Although there seems to be a sudden interest in self-access learning in this part of the world, the author explores some of the reasons that Japan has tended to lag behind other countries. Nevertheless, education in Japan has recently seen some changes which have had an impact on the field. As a result, colleagues in Japan have made some valuable recent contributions, particularly in the areas of advising, advisor education, and social learning opportunities which will be explored in this paper.

Introduction

Japan appears to be going through a boom in the field of self-access, and interest from institutions and educators is rising just as it did in many other countries in the 1990s. In this paper I examine the current situation regarding self-access in Japan in an attempt to understand whether Japan is simply catching up with the rest of the world, or whether as a region, we are making unique or innovative contributions to the field. I will begin by defining what I mean by self-access, and outlining the theoretical underpinnings that support the definition. I will then give an overview of what self-access in Japan looks like, explore why Japan has lagged behind, and give some of the reasons it is catching up. In the final part of the paper, I will examine innovation and future directions for self-access in Japan.

1. Theoretical assumptions about self-access

The field of self-access emerged from the interest in developing learner autonomy particularly outside the classroom by making learning opportunities available to learners that supplemented what was covered in class (Holec, 1981; Holec, 2000). Although this is certainly still an important feature of modern self-access facilities, the way in which we look at self-access has changed somewhat. Instead of being primarily resource centres, self-access facilities are being conceptualised as social learning communities (Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2016; Mynard, 2016) where learners engage in language *use* while simultaneously developing an awareness and control of language learning processes. Self-access is underpinned by social constructivist views of learning (Adelman Reyes & Vallone, 2008; von Glasersfeld, 1989) and learning occurs through interaction with the world and the people within it (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1987). In addition, due to increased opportunities for exposure to different languages which has been facilitated by technological advances, language educators and researchers are beginning to see language learning as a more holistic process embedded into everyday life. This is quite different from viewing learning as something that happens in particular locations, e.g. “in class” or “in a self-access centre” that influenced traditional self-access design. Taking an ecological perspective, we can see learning opportunities

everywhere which are particularly enhanced by using mobile devices. As Benson (2017) notes:

we can no longer think of SACs¹ in terms of a dichotomy between classroom learning and self-access learning, in which self-access learning fills the space of out-of-class learning. The idea of language learning environments is proposed as a possible way of thinking and talking our way out of this dichotomy, and conceptualizing the many ways in which SACs might be situated in the complex worlds of students' lives and learning. (Benson, 2017 : 143).

In addition, the psychological perspectives of self-access learning are becoming more prominently featured in related research, which are in turn influencing practice. For example, by drawing on self-determination theory (SDT) and in particular the basic psychological needs (BPN) sub-theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), we can examine three interconnected concepts of *autonomy*, *competence* and *relatedness* as they occur in self-access. It is important to note that the understanding of the term 'autonomy' within SDT is conceptualised somewhat differently than in interpretations from the field of language learner autonomy. From the field of language learner autonomy, autonomy means that we have a deep understanding of the process and practice of learning and a willingness to take charge of our own learning (Little, 1991). However, one could argue that you need a level of motivation in order to want to exercise autonomy in this sense (Sense 1) (Lamb, 2018). From SDT, autonomy is considered to be a basic psychological need along with competence and relatedness (Lamb, 2018). Autonomy in this sense (Sense 2) is represented through one's thoughts, feelings and behaviours and is an integral part of a person (Reeve, 2016; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). This means that autonomy in this sense (Sense 2) is a pre-condition of motivation (Lamb, 2018) and can then lead to a different conceptualisation of autonomy (Sense 1). Certainly there may appear to be overlap when reading the literature from different disciplines, but the emphasis is different depending on which perspective you use as a starting point. It may be useful to consider the two senses of autonomy alongside motivation in order to understand the potential role of self-access. A self-access centre should be viewed as an 'autonomy supportive' (Reeve, 2016) place where learners can feel connected to people and have a sense of belonging (i.e. relatedness), autonomy

¹ This paper uses the terms SALC (self-access learning centre), SAC (self-access centre) and self-access facility interchangeably.

(Sense 2), and competence. BPN can be explored in advising dialogues and activities in a SALC and learning advisors can support learners in developing language learner autonomy (Sense 1).

2. What self-access in Japan looks like

Broadly speaking, there are three types of self-access centers in Japan (Mynard, 2019). Type 1, or a 'Social-Supportive SALC' is a dedicated centre, often purpose built, housing facilities and spaces especially designed for developing language learner autonomy. Most importantly, a Type 1 SALC hires specialised staff, engages in research, and invests in developing a learning community. There are many such centres in Japan according to the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL) Language Learning Spaces Registry (<https://jasalorg.com/lis-registry>). Most of these were established after 2008.

A Type 2, or 'Developing SALC' might be an earlier stage version of a Type 1 facility. Often Type 2 facilities lack institutional recognition or funding and are run on a casual or voluntary basis, by enthusiastic teachers and students. Although such centres are often very limited in scale and scope, they can be very effective at promoting learner autonomy, and can be centres for innovation (Mynard, 2019).

A Type 3 SALC or 'Administrative Centre' is likely to be a dedicated and often purpose-built space, but it does not fully support students nor promote language learner autonomy. A Type 3 facility lacks sufficient specialist human resources, which means that there is little support for the development of language learner autonomy, community development, or focus on research and innovation. Unfortunately, Type 3 SALCs are often created for promotional purposes rather than pedagogical ones and lack ongoing investment.

3. How Japan has lagged behind

Whereas self-access facilities have been an important part of language education in institutions in many countries in the world from as early as the 1980s, they are still relatively scarce in Japan. Although there are around 8000 universities in Japan, only 44 of them have registered self-access facilities with JASAL. The main

reason Japan did not embrace the widespread introduction of SALCs as other countries such as the UK, Thailand, Mexico, and Hong Kong did, particularly in the mid 1990s, relates to beliefs about the teaching and learning of languages. Until relatively recently, the teaching of languages in Japan was treated as if it were a content area rather than a communication tool. In fact, grammar-translation methods are still used in some places in Japan, and not all teachers in schools have adopted communicative approaches to teaching languages that were mandated by the Japanese government in the 1990s (Otani, 2013). There is also still the widespread focus on *teaching* rather than on *learning* with the belief that learning takes place only where there is a teacher present (i.e. in the classroom). In fact, in general there is minimal support for outside class learning in Japanese educational institutions when compared with other countries (Yamada, 2014). With these widespread beliefs, it is little wonder there has been minimal investment in self-access facilities.

4. Why Japan is beginning to change

Despite the continuing beliefs about teaching and learning that are generally incompatible with the introduction of self-access, change is beginning to occur and there are two main drivers behind this shift. Firstly, Japan is experiencing a decline in birth rate which means there are currently fewer 18 year olds entering universities than before. For decades, universities have been guaranteed student enrollment numbers, but this is no longer the case, and competition - particularly among mid-ranking universities - is fierce. As Torikai (2001) writes:

[Administrators] can no longer sit back and select students to enter their universities. They now have to fight for more students to apply, and if they don't attract enough students, it is not unlikely that they go bankrupt. For the first time in history, universities in Japan are forced to consider the needs of the students in order to survive. (Torikai, 2001 : 10-11).

One way to compete in the shrinking market is to appear more attractive than rivals, for example, by focussing on students' needs and providing resources and new facilities such as self-access centres.

A second reason for the growing interest in self-access is the increasing focus that the government is putting on promoting practical English skills. This has been triggered by an awareness of how poorly Japan ranks internationally in global measures of English (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2015). This is becoming more of a priority as the country prepares for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games.

5. Ways in which Japan is innovating in self-access

As we have seen, for various reasons, there is now an increased interest in self-access in Japan and, in this section, I would like to investigate two of the ways in which it could be said to be leading aspects of the field.

5.1. Advising and advisor education

Advising in language learning (ALL) (sometimes called counselling) is a vital part of self-access and is defined as the one-to-one transformative dialogues that help learners to reflect deeply on their language learning processes in the pursuit of language learner autonomy (Carson & Mynard, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2016). Autonomy here is defined as a willingness to take charge of one's own learning (Benson, 2011). The field of advising in language learning has been around from the early days of self-access in the 1980s, thanks to research and explorations of our practice, professional learning advisors know more about the processes than ever. Recent research conducted by colleagues in Japan has related to (1) advising dialogue (e.g. McCarthy, 2010; Mynard, 2010; Mynard & Thornton, 2012; Rutson-Griffiths & Porter, 2016; Shibata, 2012; Thornton & Mynard, 2012); (2) The roles of advisors (e.g. Aoki, 2012; Lammons, 2011; Morrison & Navarro, 2012; Yamamoto, 2018); (3) advising in context (e.g. Carson, 2012; Horai & Wright, 2016; Sakata & Fukuda, 2012); (4) emotions and feelings in advising (e.g. Yamashita, 2015); advising and identity (e.g. Yamamoto, 2017); and (5) advisor education (e.g. Kato, 2012, 2017; Kato & Mynard, 2016). This interest developing an awareness of the powerful role of advising dialogue in transforming learners seems likely to continue. For example, the 2018 Independent Learning Association conference was held in Kobe, Japan in September 2018 and the theme of the three-day event was 'voices and agency' with all three plenary talks centering around the role of dialogue.

5.2. Opportunities for community-based language use

The second area of innovation relates to developing opportunities for language practice through community building. Torikai wrote the following in 2001, yet it is still true today:

Japan is not a multilingual society where you need some common language to communicate with each other. Rather, this is quite a homogeneous country where Japanese language prevails. (Torikai, 2001 : 11).

There are so few face-to-face opportunities for learners of languages in Japan to practice speaking those languages, that one key role of self-access centres in Japan has been to create such opportunities. In many cases, English language practice is provided for learners by the provision of some kind of English cafe or English lounge. Whereas the goal of a conversation lounge might be modest, it has had the effect of providing the impetus for the move towards SALCs becoming social learning communities. In fact, researchers in Japan are realising that social connections are the most important role of a SALC. For example, Hughes, Krug and Vye (2011) investigated SALC use in a university in Saitama, Japan, and discovered that whereas learners might initially visit the SALC because of a learning need, the reason they came back and became frequent users was for social reasons. Murray and Fujishima (2013; 2016) and Murray, Fujishima, and Uzuka (2014) found in their ethnographic studies in a university in Okayama, Japan, that one of the most important reasons that students came to the SALC was that it was a place to make friends. Social gatherings in SALCs provide opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation (Bibby et al., 2016) which is important for the eventual development of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). SALC events are one way of providing an easy introduction to a community that Japanese students tend to need (Burke et al., 2018; Croker & Ashurova, 2012; Gillies, 2010; Hughes et al., 2011; Murray & Fujishima, 2013, 2016; Murray et al., 2014; Mynard, Kushida, Lyon, & Sampson, 2017).

6. Future directions

Self-access centres in Japan are focussing on community-building and exploring ways in which language practice opportunities can be offered, but this certainly needs more attention. For example, methodological and experimental work still needs to be done in relation to language policy guidelines (Imamura, 2018; Thornton, 2018). Requiring learners to use only the target language in a given space does seem like an overly controlling position to take in a space that encourages the development of learner autonomy (Mynard, 2019). On the other hand, creating certain conditions for target language use may be appreciated by learners in a country where there really are so few opportunities for actual language practice.

Another under-represented area of self-access research and practice is the way in which learners can be encouraged to develop ownership over the space. This can be promoted through the development of learner-led events and communities, and through promoting learner-led research or at least collaborative research, especially if the research leads to changes in a space (e.g. Chen & Mynard, 2018).

Drawing on psychological theories is another area for further development of the field of self-access, and colleagues in Japan might be well placed to contribute to this in a significant way. The third Psychology of Language Learning Conference (PLL3) took place in Tokyo in June 2018 and this inevitably inspired Japan-based researchers to draw more systematically and robustly on the psychological factors associated with self-access learning. This could involve the exploration of alternative theoretical approaches such as SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), positive psychology (MacIntyre, Gregerson, & Mercer, 2016), directed motivational currents (Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2016) and the L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, & Ushioda, 2009) to name but a few. To date, research in self-access has generally lacked a psychological depth that would be particularly useful in understanding our learners needs.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to describe the current situation related to self-access learning in Japan. By examining some of the activities that colleagues are engaged in in Japan, it seems apparent to me that although the region initially lagged behind in the field, this is certainly changing. Japan lacked investment in resources to support learning outside the classroom until very recently, but the current levels of interest have led to several examples of innovative practice and much potential for future work that could contribute to the development of the field.

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