

Fostering Learner Autonomy at Akita University: English Programs that Supplement Course Offerings

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Abstract

English language education reform is a significant part of the broader education reform proposed by Prime Minister Abe in early spring 2013. The reasons for this reform are purely economical, rather than pedagogical. That is, the Abe administration thinks Japan needs citizens with a strong command of the English language to help Japan become a global competitor in both the finance world and in scientific & engineering research. There seems to be some agreement among English language education specialists that 2,000 hours of learning English is necessary for Japanese L1 learners to achieve some measure of high level proficiency. This high level of English language proficiency is what Abe's education reform requires to succeed.

Japanese high school students receive about 400 hours of English class time upon graduating from high school. This means that for students to achieve the 2,000 hours called for by education specialists, approximately 1,600 more hours are needed prior to graduating university, joining the work force, and supporting the country's efforts to compete globally. Most if not all universities in Japan lack the finances and personnel to add 1,600 hours of English courses to their course offerings. However, programs like Akita University's Autonomous Language Learning Rooms (ALL Rooms) and the opportunities they offer to students play a significant role in helping students achieve the 2,000 hour goal. This paper describes one of the ALL Rooms's most successful programs, the English

Conversation Circle. This paper provides evidence that the ALL Room's Conversation Circle truly 1) fosters autonomous learning among students, and 2) is a valuable supplement to the university's basic English course offerings.

The ALL Rooms

Autonomous learning, as defined by Benson, refers to learning in which learners demonstrate a capacity to control their learning (Benson, 2011). In keeping with this pedagogical view, Akita University's Autonomous Language Learning Rooms (ALL Rooms) provide a variety of opportunities and resources independent of the university's course requirements. The ALL Rooms contains materials for standardized test preparation such as for TOEIC and TOEFL; has a variety of foreign movies & TV programs (all in English) available on DVD for listening practice & exposure to culture; graded readers for reading comprehension & extended reading practice; and many more helpful resources & tools. All students on campus may use these opportunities and resources to improve their English language ability and for chances to practice using English while on campus.

Aside from the aforementioned tangible resources, the ALL Rooms also offers a program called the English Conversation Circle, or CC. The CC is a chance for students to speak English with their peers, rather than studying individually with books, language software, or other multi-media. More importantly, the ALL

Rooms (and the CC, specifically) provide students with opportunities outside of class for learning English—opportunities that are available to them all through the year, during their entire career as a student, whether as an undergrad or as a graduate student.¹

The important role that CCs have in foreign language learning has been well established by researchers such as Dörnyei who says that, “CCs are a motivating teaching practice, in that they maintain and protect [student] motivation by making learning stimulating and enjoyable, create [or rather, *foster*] learner autonomy, are a strategy that promotes self-motivation, and promote cooperation among learners” (Dörnyei, 2001). Furthermore, a CC can be considered what Benson refers to as “collaborative work” when he says that “various kinds of collaborative work in groups or pairs have also been viewed as beneficial to the development of autonomy, in part because they shift the focus of attention from the teacher to the students themselves” (Benson, 2011).

Conversation Circles: Critical for Supplementing Formal Course Offerings

Just like any other national Japanese university, Akita University’s curriculum has a basic English requirement that all students must complete to graduate—this equates to about three semesters of formal classroom learning. However, over the past year Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s administration has emphasized the need for more English language education from elementary school through university, and for college/university students to speak English with some degree of proficiency and competency upon graduating and joining the workforce.²

But what does it take to reach Prime Minister Abe’s lofty goal for all college/university graduates to become competent English speakers? Researchers at Tōhoku University’s Center for the Advancement of Education

claim that the time required “to learn”³ English is about 2,000 hours (Tachibana, 2012). The same research also estimates that Japanese students entering university typically have 300 to 400 hours⁴ of English education by the time they graduate from high school. Perhaps this 2,000 hour goal is a good starting point for defining what is necessary for university students to do in order to become better English speakers and, subsequently, accomplish what Abe’s education-reforms hope to achieve. If so, then it would appear that Akita University students need to complete approximately 1,600 more hours of English learning hours before they are able to speak English with some degree of competency or proficiency.

As part of the general education/core requirement system, Akita University requires that all first year students enroll in English for Academic Purposes I & II (EAP I & II). Students take EAP I & EAP II during the first and second semesters of their 1st year in university. The class meets twice a week during the semester, for a total of 30 classes. Each class is 90 minutes long, totaling 45 hours of formal classroom language training in the first semester, and 45 hours in the second semester. Including the 400 hours from high school, students will have approximately 490 total hours of formal English training by the end of their first year at Akita University, assuming a student attends all classes. This leaves their last three years to complete the remaining 1,510 hours (or 503 hours per year, assuming they graduate in four years) of English as recommended by Tachibana’s report. A third semester of English classes (such as EAP III for nursing, physical therapy, & occupational therapy students; *Bunkei eikaiwa* for education & humanities students; and *Rikei eikaiwa* for engineering students) are also offered depending on which faculty students are a part of and what their major is. These classes are only available to be taken once, and are 45 hours (30 classes) each. Table 1 does

1 Post-docs, visiting researchers who are non-native English speakers, and faculty preparing to do research abroad also actively participate in the program.

2 This is referred to in Abenomics as the catch-term *guroobaru jinzai* グローバル人材.

3 The study cited here does not specify which level of proficiency English language learners may reach after 2,000 hours of study.

4 This number seems to refer to the required classroom hours of English class that students need to complete high school, though the article does not specify. This number does not appear to take into account the English class hours required in middle school and for the “foreign language activity” [*gaikokugo katsudō* 外国語活動] classes that have recently become mandatory in elementary schools.

not include the classes beyond EAP I & II, which every student must take. If a student were to take a third semester of English, the required hours would only decrease to 458 hours, or 91.06% of the estimated 503 hours that are needed.

needed to reach proficiency and language competency.

English Conversation Circle: Important Pedagogically and Financially

The ALL Rooms has been offering a program

Table 1. *Estimated hours of English class required for becoming proficient upon graduation from Akita University.*

	After 3 yrs of high school	1 st Year (EAP I & II)	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year	Total
Hours	300~400	90	503	503	503	2,000
			<i>(1,510 hours over the course of 3 years)</i>			

The university will never add enough English classes to the curriculum to make up for these remaining hours needed for students to become competent/proficient English speakers, nor is it financially feasible to hire the faculty needed to cover these additional classes (not to mention the fact that there is not enough qualified personnel in Japan to do so). Therefore, this paper's argument is that ALL Rooms' resources and programs allow Akita University students the opportunity to help compensate for the remaining 503 hours needed, per year.

Needless to say, most students do not enter Akita University with the sole intention of becoming English speakers, nor is Akita University a university that promises to offer English intensive programs.⁵ Therefore it would be futile for the university to hire the faculty and invest in the resources needed to achieve such lofty goals before completely re-writing the university's educational charter. However, there is a core group of students that *do* hold becoming a proficient English speaker as their goal. They are found in all three Faculty (Medical, Education & Humanities, and Engineering) and at all levels (undergraduate through graduate). Thus, the ALL Rooms are an important asset for all three Faculty. No single Faculty can hope to have the resources to add an additional 500 hours of English learning to their course offerings. But, by collaborating with the ALL Rooms, its programs can prove to be a valuable supplement to the formal classes offered to students and significantly contribute to the goal of reaching 2,000 hours of English-learning

called the "Conversation Circle" for the past few years. This English conversation group used to meet once a week for 90 minutes in the open student-space located on the second floor of the university's Student Support Building. However, as of the beginning of the school year in spring 2013, the ALL Rooms increased its CC program to twice a week. The ALL Rooms based the decision to increase the CCs for two main reasons: 1) the time it was being held (Tuesdays at 4:10pm) was not convenient for many students eager to participate, and 2) the original Tuesday group was becoming too large for effective conversation practice, so a second weekly CC was needed. As for the first issue, the university schedules its classes on a block schedule, each block consisting of 90 minutes. So 4:10pm is when the 5th block of the day begins. Holding the CC at this time is convenient for students, since they may casually and naturally go from class, right to the CC. However, depending on what year a particular student is and what their major is, the 5th block on Tuesdays may be class time. Also, a student's 4th block may be held on another campus, making it hard if not impossible to get back in time to participate in the CC. Holding a second weekly CC seemed like a reasonable answer to these problems. The second issue was more of a practical issue—as the group became larger, faculty and student staff who attended the CC noticed that opportunities for participants to speak diminished as the number of participants rose. After informally polling the participants, the ALL Rooms' three faculty members (Yō Hamada, Randy K. Checketts, and I) and

⁵ The university does plan to launch a special English intensive program in AY 2014-15, but the details of this program's English course offerings are not yet clear (as of January 2014).

the 9-member student-staff decided on a second, more convenient time to hold the CC. The 5th block (4:10pm) on Thursdays seemed to be the most convenient, since by that time of day, most students were on campus and purportedly available.

Unlike when students use other ALL Rooms resources, the CC is static, meaning its start and finish are defined using the same block schedule as a normal class. Also, we may easily count how many students participate in it. Therefore, its contribution as a supplement to formal English learning on campus is more easily measured. For example, students tend to use the ALL Rooms' TOEIC practice books and graded readers sporadically, making their time spent learning-autonomously difficult to monitor.

Each CC is 90 minutes, and students have the option (and are encouraged) to attend both each week. As for measuring what impact that attending the CC has

that participation is free for students and that ALL Rooms' funding is not such a burden on the university, Table 2 proves the economical value that the ALL Rooms' CC has to the university.

When I joined the Center for the Promotion of Educational Research and Affairs, mid-year in June 2012, the CC had already been operating for a few years. After observing how the CC operated for two semesters, I came to two conclusions: 1) there appeared to be little or no structure to how the CC was managed by the student staff, 2) while "autonomous" in theory, management and operation of the CC appeared to have strayed from the goal of "fostering autonomy." Attendance was low, and erratic, and the topics selected by the student managers did not seem to have a sense of purpose, were boring, and not "authentic" topics that native speakers would have. Also, despite offering a second CC each week, attendance declined for both

Table 2. *Conversation Circle as a supplement to formal language classes and its contribution to the desired goal of 2,000 hours of study.*

	After 3 yrs of high school	1 st Year (EAP I & II)	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year	Sub. Total
Formal Class Hours	300~400	90	443*	443*	443*	1,819
CC once a week		45	45	45	45	180
Est. total:						2,000
<i>*(1,330 hours over the course of 3 years)</i>						

on reaching the goal of 2,000 hours of English learning, Table 2 supposes that a student attends the CC once a week, for all four years, which would be 45 extra hours a year—that is the same as taking 4 *extra* English classes prior to graduation. Convincing the university to add 4 extra English classes across all three Faculty would probably not be very successful. Although there are many proponents of foreign language education in the administration's hierarchy, the funds just do not allow for it. Judging by just this one example, the CC program, the ALL Rooms' contribution to alleviating the burden of extra English classes for Akita University students is both tangible and clear. As Crabbe's research shows, the promotion of autonomous approaches to language learning is justified on economic grounds (Crabbe, 1993), not only pedagogical. Keeping in mind

the Tuesday and Thursday sessions. Therefore, over semester break I began working on a plan to implement some changes to the CC in order to re-align it with the spirit of fostering autonomy. Then I planned on implementing these changes at the start of the 2nd Semester of AY 2013-14. By doing so, I hoped that the number of participants would increase and become more consistent and that the CC would become a legitimate supplement to students' English language learning on campus.

Fostering Autonomy through Conversation Circle Activities

During Week 1 of the 2nd Semester of AY 2013-14, I met with the ALL Rooms staff members who were in charge of managing the CC.⁶ The purpose of

the meeting was to discuss setting clear conversation topics and advertising them in advance so that students who planned on participating in the CC would have the opportunity to prepare to discuss the topic on their own, prior to the CC. Since the pedagogy driving the ALL Rooms views language learners as active participants in the language learning experience (to use the words of Horwitz, 1999) and defines autonomous learning to that in which learners demonstrate a capacity to control their learning (Benson, 2011), the staff and I decided that we should ask the CC participants what topics they would like to discuss, rather than decide ourselves. After polling the participants, we would then create a calendar indicating which topics would be discussed at which meetings.

At the Tuesday CC in Week 2 of the second semester, we distributed a survey of open-ended statements to the participants who attended that particular day's CC. The number in attendance that day was 5. There were 8 CCs in October and the average attendance was 5.5 people, so in hind sight we believe that this seemingly low number actually gave us a fair representation of participants' feedback. Also, these 5 participants ranged from 2nd year students to faculty researchers, and was a mix of male and female participants, which represents the range of likely CC participants.

Instead of asking directly, "What would you like to talk about?", the hand-out that we used had three open-ended statements. The participants (n=5) were asked to complete the statements with as many sentence-endings as they would like, and to give as much or as little detail as they like. These were written responses. We made our goals clear, stating that what they write down would be used to select conversation topics. We encouraged them *not* to discuss what they wrote down, that is, to do it silently without being influenced by other's opinions. But, we did encourage them to use dictionaries, electronic dictionaries, or write in Japanese if they desired. We allowed approximately 10 minutes at the end of the CC for the participants to complete

the survey. Appendix A shows an example of the hand-out used to collect the responses from the participants. After collecting the surveys, I coded the participants' responses, the results of which are in Table 3.

After coding the responses, I noticed that 8 topics appeared more than once in the feedback—those topics appear with an asterisk (*) in the table. I immediately selected these responses as CC topics. Some of the responses, such as those connected to "travel" appeared in all three responses to the statements, but were not necessarily written by the same participant to complete each of the statements. This was also taken into account when identifying popular responses. Also, I interpreted "Trips I've taken" as having a different meaning than "travel" or "travelling;" the latter perhaps implying future plans, whereas the former clearly means trips the speaker has already taken. Having an ALL Rooms staff member do a second coding, then comparing the two may have yielded different results. In the future we will do it that way, although we probably do not have to be too scientific about it.

After coding the responses, I presented the results to the CC staff. The four staff made pairs: one to manage the Tuesday CC, and one to manage the Thursday CC. Each pair consisted of one Japanese staff and one foreign student staff. The two pairs were then asked to decide on the conversation topics for the rest of the semester by using the results of the survey. They prioritized topics that received more than one response (appearing with an asterisk in the table), then they filled in the remaining CC sessions with the responses that were only generated once. Tuesday and Thursday topics within a given week did not have to be the same, which was also a new guideline that we implemented this semester. There were two ideas behind this: 1) participants could potentially come to both the Tuesday and Thursday sessions, which would potentially make talking about the same topic twice boring and thus not encourage participating, and 2) if we had two different topics each week, students may want to participate in both sessions each week.

⁶ Typically, 1 to 2 students would manage the CC. Even though there are always 3 foreign students on the ALL Rooms' staff, they would not necessarily be responsible for the CC program. One of the first changes that I implemented was requiring that at least one foreign student staff member and one Japanese student staff member must collaborate together and be present at each CC.

Table 3. Coded responses to the CC topic survey.

In response to: In the future, I will need English for...	# of like-responses	In response to: I want to be able to talk about ___ in English.	In response to: At the Conversation Circle, I think talking about _____ would be interesting.
*Presenting my research/thesis	3	*Movies	2
*Traveling to other countries	3	*Science	2
*Making foreign friends	2	Daily life	1
*For work/teaching	2	Teaching	1
[for a] happy life in a foreign country	1	News	1
Speaking about Japanese culture	1	TV	1
Communicating	1	Fashion	1
		Japanese culture	1
		Traveling	1
		“International conversation”	1
		“a happy life”	1
		*Other countries’ cultures	2
		*International marriage	2
		Traveling	1
		Food	1
		Heritage	1
		Impressive places in the world	1
		Movies	1
		Trips I’ve taken	1
		Dreams	1

Results

According to past records collected by the ALL Rooms, participation in the CC is always high at the beginning of the semester, and then it would drop significantly around mid-term exams and before long breaks. This semester’s records have surprised the entire ALL Rooms’ staff. Table 4 shows the CC participants’ turn-out for the first few months of the semester.

What surprised the ALL Rooms’ staff this semester is that not only was there a 40.90% increase in participation from October to November (from 44 to 62), but that that number remained about the same in December. This is despite mid-terms exams in

average number of CC attendees gradually increased from 5.5 in October to 10 in December. The ALL Rooms’ student staff and the three faculty members in charge of overseeing the ALL Rooms are extremely proud of these results.

There are many potential factors as to *why* the CC program experienced this success. The overall learning-culture on campus does not appear to have changed by any measurable extent this semester, so the CC has not become “trendy.” If it did, then I posit that the numbers in October would have been high right from the start, instead however, they are simply average when compared to previous semesters. Therefore it

Table 4. Trends in CC Attendance for the fall 2013 semester.*

Month	# of Conversation Circles	# of participants	Mean
October	8	44	5.5
November	8	62	7.75
December	6	60	10

*as January 1st, 2014—numbers do not include January & February 2014

November and the long winter break in December. Also, even though the total number of participants decreased by 2 in December (from 62 to 60 participants), the

would appear as though something done differently in November and December is responsible for the rise in users.

In October, there were *no* established topics, *per se*, which is how the CC has operated until now, according to ALL Rooms' records, the information that has been passed down by word of mouth among each year's student staff, and my own observations. In the past, the staff member in charge of the CC would choose the topic usually right before the CC (rarely getting input from others). The staff member would prepare little to nothing prior to the CC. Consequently, participants would not prepare anything either, since they would have no idea what the topic would be. Finally, the topics rarely reflected what participants wanted to talk about or what they were interested in.

Therefore the major change between October's CCs and November & December's seem to be:

1. Participants had a direct role in choosing topics in which they were interested to discuss in English.
2. The staff set a clear agenda (using the participant-generated responses) and specified which topics to be discussed on which dates.
3. Upcoming topics were publicized in advance at CCs and online (allowing for participants to prepare for the topic, if they wanted to).

According to recent research from Tōhoku University, student-generated topics encourage student participation (Eichhorst, 2012). Our newly implemented method of polling ALL Rooms' members participating in the CC in order to decide on discussion topics appears to prove this research and account for November and December's success rates.

Further Consideration

As a team, the ALL Rooms' faculty advisors and student staff are constantly working together to deepen our knowledge of language learning, learner autonomy, and to improve upon the programs that we offer students. With this in mind, fostering autonomy through the CC will continue. Ways by which we can improve our understanding of autonomous student's needs include but are not limited to the following:

- 1) Refine the survey we use to collect ideas for potential topics.
- 2) Collect feedback from participants after each CC to gauge their interest in the topics.
- 3) Collect feedback from participants after each CC to get an understanding of how much they feel they were able to contribute to the conversation.
- 4) Collect feedback from participants at the end of the semester to measure how much they think they improved/not-improved over the course of the semester.

By attempting to undertake this deeper research into learner autonomy and the CC, not only may we discover how autonomous learning programs like this benefit individual learners, but how they may benefit the university as a whole—in terms of conforming to educational policy and in terms of cost benefits to the university.

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Appendix A

**ALL Rooms Conversation Circle
Fall 2013**

In the future I will need English for...

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

I want to be able to talk about...

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

...in English

At the Conversation Circle, I think talking about...

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

...would be interesting.