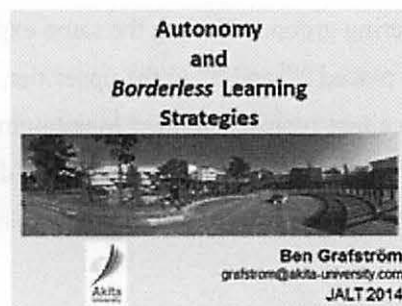# Autonomy and Borderless Learning Strategies[1]

Ben GRAFSTRÖM[2]

Akita University

Slide 01: Introduction

One of the benefits of participating in study groups and conferences like this weekend's JALT conference is not only to discover new educational trends and practices, but also to refresh our understanding of ever-evolving older trends and practices. The goal of this talk, then, is to show how we at Akita University's English language learning center have enhanced our autonomous learning program by applying some older language learning practices—practices that many of you here today are perhaps familiar with in classroom settings but not in autonomous learning settings. I hope that my talk today will be interesting to those who research language learning strategies and/or learner autonomy—you may find it interesting how we have taken these activities which are popularly used in the classroom and have implemented them into our autonomous learning center.

---

[1] *The following is the transcript and accompanying slides from a paper the author presented at the Japanese Association for Language Teaching's 40th Annual International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning & Educational Materials Exhibition. The theme of the conference was "Conversations across Borders." This paper was presented on Monday, 24 November 2014 at Tsukuba International Congress Center (Epochal Tsukuba), Tsukuba, Ibaraki, Japan.)*

[2] *The author may be contacted by e-mail at* grafstrom@akita-university.com.

Whom I'm particularly interested in reaching out to today is other faculty who, like me, are responsible for running their own university's language resource center or find that their language resource center is under-utilized by students. All language resource centers may go through a slump, or have their popularity plateau—certainly, they are affected by trends in education, population, economics, and many more external forces that educators have to deal with year to year. So, what I'm going to be discussing today is how we have attempted to increase learner motivation. We attempted to do this by 1) teaching learners about language learning strategies, then 2) showing learners how to apply the materials in our language learning center for use in the language learning strategies. We are still monitoring our efforts, so today's presentation only reflects the stage we are at now.

Language Learning Centers

Many Japanese universities (and even some high schools) have established (or are in the process of establishing) language resource centers dedicated to foreign language education. While language learning centers may cater to a variety of foreign languages, some are dedicated solely to English. How these language learning centers are utilized by a particular school's language programs and by students varies a great deal—some programs require students to check-in and check-out, thereby monitoring student usage, which is then factored into their grade, while others simply provide the space and resources with which to study/practice a language with no clear directive of how to utilize the resources at hand.

Language resource centers are important for establishing a culture for learning on campus and for allowing students ways to participate more actively in the educational community. Also, they are a means by which a school may foster autonomous language learning among students. By fostering autonomous learning I mean providing language learners with the proper resources they need to pursue language study pro-actively, outside of traditional classes and outside of an established curriculum in accordance with their own individual interests, desires, and goals.

About Akita University's ALL Rooms

Akita University's English language resource center opened approximately 5 years ago. This center is not an extension of the university library. Instead it is a separate entity that falls under the responsibility of the university's Center for Promotion of Educational Research and Affairs and is housed in our Student Support Building. The language resource center's main mission is specifically to foster autonomous English language learning, so it was named the ALL Rooms:

Autonomous Language Learning Rooms.
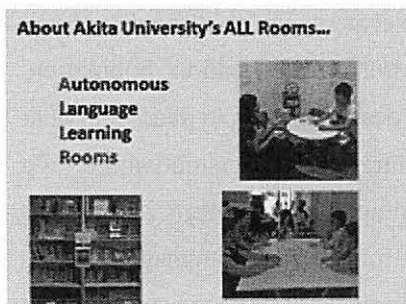
*Slide 02: About Akita University's ALL Rooms*

What is encouraging for me, as an educator is that Akita University's ALL Rooms are a visual symbol of the commitment that the university has to English education.. The university has also designated three faculty positions specifically for administrating the day to day operation of the rooms, manage the budget, and organize the students who staff the ALL Rooms.

The ALL Rooms consist of four, small, office-sized rooms that are about 3 meters by 3 meters each. Also, a large common area/ open-space adjacent to the ALL Rooms which was until now regularly used by the ALL Rooms, but just this past week has been officially designated as ALL Rooms space.

Slide 3: The ALL Room's Expanding Territory

The 1st of the smaller rooms is used as a reception for visitors and as an office for our student staff.
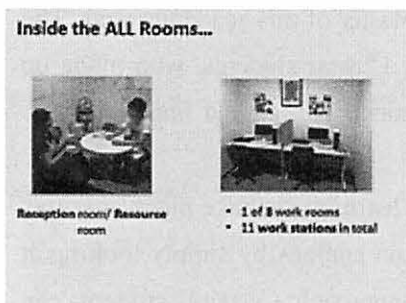
Slide 04: Inside the ALL Rooms

A staff member is on duty there from 10:20~5:40, Monday~ Friday, which means five shifts a day, for a total of twenty per week. This room also houses our resources which range from TOEIC & TOEFL materials, DVDs, books on CD, graded readers, and a variety of other English material—a selection that is constantly growing. The other three rooms have individual student work stations. Each work station consists of a desk with a computer with internet access, microphone & headset, and web-cam. There are a total of eight work stations.

We typically higher energetic, highly motivated Japanese students who themselves have a high level of English proficiency as well as at least 3 international students. The international students may or may not be native language speakers. Our budget has allowed us to maintain 11 staff each year.

The ALL Rooms' promotes non-traditional, autonomous, English language learning on campus. Visiting the ALL Rooms is not a requirement for class. Students do not receive any other rewards or material incentives to come to the ALL Rooms. Therefore, we rely on students who are not only simply interested in English, but who also have the motivation and time to come. First year students typically make up the majority of ALL Rooms' users. But, for a variety of reasons (that are mostly external reasons) students' visits tend to taper down in their 2nd year and by their 3rd and 4th years in school, visitors all but stop coming.
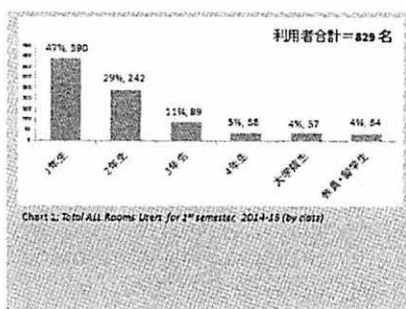
Slide 05: Total ALL Rooms Users for the 1st Semester, AY 2014-15 (by class)

This chart shows the number of visitors by class-year for the 1st semester of this academic year. The chart shows that the ALL Rooms were the most popular amongst 1st year students, who made up 47% of the visits, followed by 2nd year students (29%), 3rd year students (11%), and finally 4th year students (5%).

The difficult part about studying autonomy on campus is that learning can take place anytime, anywhere. So attempting to gauge students' autonomous learning on campus by simply looking at the frequency of visits to our ALL Rooms is perhaps an inaccurate approach. Certainly students can study English at home, in a coffee shop, with exchange students, or any number of ways that all could be included as autonomous learning. These 3rd & 4th year students might very well be continuing their language study somewhere else. Nonetheless, it leaves us, the ALL Rooms' administrators, sometimes worried, since we really rely on the success of the ALL Rooms' approach to learning English.

At the end of last year and the beginning of this school year, we began brainstorming reasons why students stopped visiting as they progress into 4th year students. We came to one conclusion that the ALL Rooms was a novelty to 1st year students, but as they move on, they perhaps stop coming because the resources and activities we provide "get old" so to speak. When we examine the data we collect regarding what the most popular resources are and how visitors spend their time in the ALL Rooms, we noticed that the conversation circle and casual conversation practice with the staff (especially the foreign staff) were the most popular methods students chose to study, or practice, their English.

We then came to the conclusion that although we have all these resources like graded readers, writing materials, and others, that students had no idea how to utilize them. That is to say, the administrators' beliefs about how students would utilize these autonomous learning tools did not in any way actually match how students were utilizing them (or, "were *not*," I should say). Instead of opting to come to the ALL Rooms to use the learning materials that we provide, the users mostly came for English conversation with our student staff, and avoiding using the materials.

Many students, who have the motivation and the interest to learn English, simply do not know the best methods for learning. Just because students have attained a particular rank on the *Eiken*, or have scored high enough on the English portion of the Center Exam or on our university's entrance exam English section does not necessarily mean they are "learning." What we decided to do was to start a program through the ALL Rooms that introduces students to a variety of Language Learning Strategies.

When I joined Akita University in 2012, the ALL Rooms already had a pretty nice website that served to advertise the ALL Rooms as well as to offer some resources to users. The website listed 52 language learning strategies, providing a brief explanation of each one, the steps to follow to perform each strategy, as well as a video clip demonstrating the strategies' methods in action. The 52 language learning strategies, found at *www.akita-u.ac.jp/allrooms/learning/index.html*, are divided into 6 categories (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Vocabulary, and Grammar) and are a mix of both metacognitive and task-based strategies. Here are some screen shots of the website:
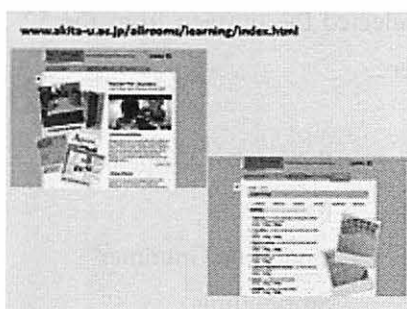

Slide 06: ALL Rooms' Website Screen Shots (Homepage & Language Learning Resource page)

Although the website cost a lot of money to set-up, the ALL Rooms' administrators and staff took a very passive approach to applying the website's resources to the ALL Room's users' autonomous learning experience. The website appeared to be more of a propaganda tool rather than a resource for autonomous learning. What we wanted to do was implement these strategies into our autonomous learning program in a more direct/ pro-active way, but in a manner that did not threaten the spirit of autonomous learning.

We devised a three-step system for promoting our users' autonomy through implementing these strategies. The first step was to train our student staff in the learning strategies (who until this point were themselves unfamiliar with them). The second step was to have users identify what aspects of language learning that they wanted to focus on. The third step was then having the staff introduce the appropriate learning strategy to the respective user.

Every year we hold a staff development weekend for our ALL Rooms' staff. This year it was held February 8th ~9th at an inn outside of Akita. It was at this time that we trained our staff in thirteen learning strategies.
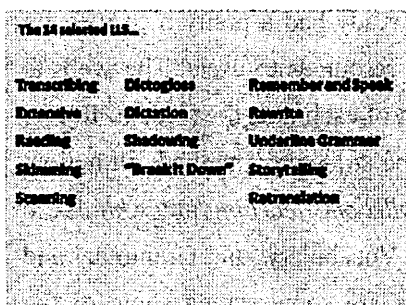
Slide 7: The 14 Language Learning Strategies that were selected

Another faculty member who also administers the ALL Rooms selected the thirteen from the 52 learning strategies listed on our website on which to focus. They were:

Transcribing	Dictogloss	Remember & Speak
Extensive Reading	Dictation	Rewrite
Skimming	Shadowing	Underline Grammar
Scanning	"Break It Down"	Storytelling
		Retranslation

Each of the staff was told to select a learning strategy, learn it first themselves, then, for the training session, not only teach the rest of us how to perform the strategy properly, but actually bring the necessary items so that we could all perform the strategy for ourselves. By doing the strategies for themselves, our staff got a real sense of what was required to perform these tasks properly (in terms of time, materials, and necessary language skill). I can say with confidence that upon returning from our staff development weekend, our staff had a real understanding of how these language strategies worked, as well as pro's and con's for each.

Now that our staff was trained in a number of language learning strategies, the second step was to get the ALL Rooms' users to try some of them and to incorporate them into their regular autonomous learning regimen. Two ways we could spread the idea of using these learning strategies to our visitors are 1) visitors choose which ones sound good to them, and 2) we somehow assess the visitor's needs, then make an appropriate recommendation for them. They both have pro's & con's. For example, if visitors choose which one sounds good to them, then they may only be catering their learning activity to their strength, rather to their weakness. Inherently this is not wrong, but some would say that time spent studying should be for improving weakness in one's language

ability in order to improve all around language capability. As for assessing a visitor's needs, our student staff is simply not capable of doing that—they are limited by their own language ability and such an assessment really needs a more professional approach that we are not capable of offering at this time.

Luckily, a method for gauging student's weak points and strong points is already in place, but, unfortunately, until this year had never been fully utilized by the ALL Rooms administrators. Each year, our 1st year students in the compulsory English for Academic Purposes course take the Assessment of Communicative English Placement Test (ACE Placement).
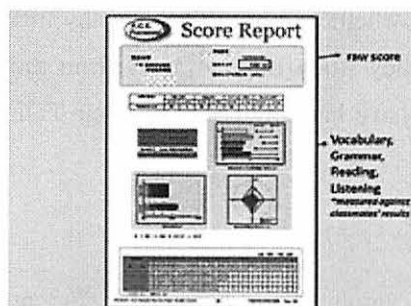
Slide 8: Example of a Student's ACE Placement Score Report

We then use the students' raw scores to divide them up into classes ranging from Basic to Advanced. The ACE Placement assesses students' vocabulary, grammar, reading, and listening skills, the results of which are then given to the students and look like the report shown in Slide 8. Students can immediately see in which areas they performed well, or not so well. Also, they can see how they performed relative to the rest of their incoming, 1st year classmates. This year upon returning the placement test results to the students we encouraged them to take their score sheet to the ALL Room's at which point our staff could recommend learning strategies to them based on their weakness, according to the test.

This brings me to the 3rd step of introducing English Language Learning Strategies into students' autonomous learning practices. Upon reading the visitor's ACE Placement results, our staff could readily recommend to them appropriate Language Learning Strategies to fit their needs. And since the staff had already performed many of the learning strategies themselves already (at the staff training weekend back in February) they could act as a study-buddy the first few times until the visitor got the hang of the specific learning strategy themselves.

Monitoring Progress

In terms of monitoring the progress of our endeavors: this is a big issue. Unfortunately my colleague and I are not full time ALL Rooms' administrators—we both have teaching positions (as opposed to research positions), so our time is really monopolized by our course duties. For now, we are content with training the staff in these learning strategies and encouraging them to teach the strategies to the ALL Rooms' users. My colleague and I have spent a lot of time simply training the staff in these strategies. Finding more time to monitor the transmission of these methods to visitors and keeping track of how much time and how frequently each user performs them is a massive undertaking. The next step is indeed to collect some sort of feedback from the users both before and after they've practiced the learning strategies, and assessing whether or not they have any influence on 1) how often they use the ALL Rooms, 2) how often they study English *away* from the ALL Rooms, 3) and for some, whether or not these approaches have had any effect on their TOEIC or TOEFL scores.

Closing

In summary, if the goal is to foster autonomous learning among Akita University students that continues beyond the class room and the required language classes needed to graduate, our student language-learners need to be given the proper tools and resources to make their autonomous learning possible—that is they need to know the correct approaches to addressing their weak points as well as approaches that match their interests. This can be achieved through instructing them in a variety of language learning strategies.

Simply having an English resource center/ autonomous language learning center is not enough to foster autonomous learning on campus. Students need to be taught how to utilize our resources as well, so that they may be able to learn autonomously. At Akita University we have implemented a system for training students in language learning strategies so that they can continue their English language learning independently, outside the classroom. And in so doing not only have we contributed to fostering learning autonomy amongst our student body, but have also helped create a better learning community on campus.