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Teaching Assistant-led Study Groups as a Platform for Language Learning: Providing New Opportunities for Student Staff in Kyushu University's Self-Access Learning Center (SALC)

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Kyushu University restructured its teaching assistant (TA) system at the beginning of the 2019 Winter semester. The reforms not only meant a fundamental change to employment procedures, but also to the responsibilities and status of TAs throughout the university. One of the main goals of the newly implemented regulations was to encourage TAs to take on increased teaching responsibilities. This paper focuses on efforts made by Kyushu University's Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) to respond to this initiative by introducing a series of regular TA-led study groups. These educational activities were designed to give TAs who worked in the center an opportunity to develop their teaching skills, share their research with students outside their field of expertise, and gain a level of hands-on experience that had not been available previously. TAs were given freedom to put together their own sessions and encouraged to create collaborative, student-centered events. The groups helped students learn more about TAs' academic interests, facilitated discussion, created a new space within the center for language practice, and fostered a sense of community amongst participants.

1. Introduction

Kyushu University introduced a series of changes to its teaching assistant (TA) system ahead of the 2019 Winter semester. The reforms included fundamental changes to training procedures, the status of TA work within Kyushu University, and the responsibilities that student staff would be expected to undertake. A key aim was to provide student staff with more opportunities to teach. This report focuses on an initiative developed by Kyushu University's Self-Access Learning Center (SALC), which attempted to respond to these developments by introducing a series of regular TA-led study groups. SALC devised these educational activities to give TAs an opportunity to share their research with students and gain hands-on experience. The goal was for the study groups to operate as small scale learning communities that promote participant engagement and peer learning. TAs were given freedom to devise sessions that would facilitate collaborative, progressive events. There was an effort made by organizers to encourage interaction amongst peers from "different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds" as a means of introducing a "disequilibrium" that would set "the stage for students to think in different, more complex ways about their experiences."¹

This paper will introduce SALC and briefly describe the previous TA system, while noting the changes that Kyushu University has implemented. Next, the paper will focus on SALC's efforts to provide new opportunities for TAs, details about how student staff affiliated with the center were informed about changes

to their roles, an overview of the study groups that were introduced, and feedback from those in charge. This will help provide context for a discussion into the impact of study groups on community building and language learning, dovetailing into reflections on the role that SALC can play in helping student staff develop their teaching skills.

2. Kyushu University Self-Access Learning Center and Teaching Assistant System

2.1. Kyushu University's Self-Access Learning Center (SALC): Values and Core Services

Kyushu University's Self-Access Learning Center (SALC), which was established in April 2014, operates within Kikan Education (the Faculty of Arts and Science) and promotes autonomous language learning for students outside of a classroom setting. The desire to support intercultural exchange between Japanese and international students from diverse backgrounds underpins the work that takes place in the center.² SALC operates under the guidance of a director and advisor (both faculty members in the Faculty of Arts and Science), three technical staff, and a team of 10 to 15 teaching assistants.³ It is the final group that will be the primary focus of this report.

SALC in Kyushu University primarily supports students who want to improve their English language communication skills in a relaxed, non-judgemental environment. Although not a primary focus, various regular activities have taken place since the center first opened that have provided visitors with the chance to learn languages such as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, French, and Malay. Core services that SALC currently provides include, but are not limited to, English conversation practice, support for international tests such as TOEFL iBT, IELTS, and TOEIC, and study abroad consultation. The center also hosts lectures and stocks a wide selection of study resources.⁴

2.2. Kyushu University's Self-Access Learning Center (SALC): Previous Study Groups

In the past, the center has offered study groups led by SALC staff and Kyushu University faculty members. Professors in the Faculty of Arts and Science have previously run weekly (semester long) study sessions on topics ranging from philosophy to economics inside SALC. No attendance requirement was set for these events. All students were welcome to join, irrespective of academic year or department. This helped establish a relaxed atmosphere. The sessions, which were all primarily introductory in content, attracted interest from both Japanese and international students. Depending on the needs of the participants, the explanations took place in both English and Japanese.

The format of these sessions proved to be fruitful both to the students and professors. Kyushu University students are presented with the opportunity to take certain courses in English, which is an ambitious but challenging choice for those who use English as a second language. Some may be reluctant to take the leap if their grade record is at stake. The faculty-led study sessions in SALC allowed the participants to experience a setting close to a formal class, but one in which they need not fear the consequences of failing to keep up with the material. For professors new to the university, the sessions served as a “test run” before the teaching of formal courses commenced. Unfortunately, due to the increasing workload of the faculty, it was not possible

to continue offering these study sessions every semester. The advantage of the TA-led approach discussed in this report is that it is far more sustainable and less dependent on the individual circumstances of any particular coordinator, due to the relatively large pool of Teaching Assistants available.⁵

SALC technical staff also ran a “Small Reading Group” in 2016, which saw a small group of six students meet to discuss novels and short stories that had been assigned beforehand.⁶ SALC technical staff and teaching assistants also ran a “Book Discussion” group from 2018 to 2019, which was held on a fortnightly basis. The two-hour long activity was split into two discussions; the first gave students the chance to talk about a book that they liked, while the second focused on a text provided by SALC. Copies of the readings were available for participants to pick up at the center before the discussion. These sessions were held in English in order to help students improve their language abilities. The “Book Discussion” was an example of a study group-style event that had been supported by SALC teaching assistants and technical staff. Although different in aim and scope to the study groups that SALC organized following Kyushu University’s restructuring of its TA system in 2019, they did provide useful insight into how to operate these types of events.

2.3. Kyushu University Teaching Assistant (TA) System

Kyushu University restructured its teaching assistant (TA) system at the beginning of the 2019 Winter semester. Responsibilities for TAs at Kyushu University had previously fallen in line with a system introduced to Japanese institutes of higher education in 1992. The need for TAs in Japan gained momentum in the mid-1980s following a report by the National Council on Educational Reform (臨時教育審議会, Rinji Kyoiku Shingikai, lit.: Ad Hoc Council on Education). This was followed by a findings published by the Council for Higher Education (大学審議会, Daigaku Shingikai, lit.: University Council) in 1991 that looked into implementing methods to develop university education. The report called for TAs to provide detailed guidance to students and concrete measures to ensure the introduction of a new system. The Ministry of Education (as it was then known) responded to these proposals by allocating funds from the 1992 budget to help improve the educational environment in graduate schools.⁷ The system that was subsequently introduced in 1992 aimed to financially compensate graduate students for TA work and provide an opportunity for teacher training. However, as time passed expectations actually decreased.⁸ Ultimately TA work at universities in Japan did not evolve. There was an expectation that students employed in TA positions would receive on-site teacher training opportunities, but in practice simple labour tasks took up a significant portion of work for many individuals.

Kyushu University implemented a new TA system as a solution to the problems that had started to manifest under the previous model. The revised structure, which went into effect in October 2019, operates through Kyushu University’s education innovation initiative. The system is now made up of different levels: basic TA (BTA), advanced TA (ATA), and teaching fellow (TF). Training programs for each level were introduced to offer TAs pathways for personal growth. As mentioned earlier, one of the main goals of the new format was to give student staff more opportunities to teach. The hourly wage for graduate students increased to reflect the added responsibilities that TAs would be expected to assume. The system also made it possible for students in the latter stages of undergraduate courses to work as TAs (BTAs), helping to open up employment positions

within the university to a wider demographic.⁹

3. Teaching Assistant-led Study Groups

3.1. New Opportunities for SALC Teaching Assistants

SALC responded to the newly implemented system by looking into establishing new activities that would allow for TAs to assume greater responsibility. Permanent members of staff discussed the possibility of organizing and running a series of study groups that would give TAs more teaching experience. The content of the sessions would be at the discretion of each TA. However, staff thought that it would be advisable for TAs to think about leading study groups connected to their research topic. There was an expectation that this type of activity would give participants the chance to learn more about TA's academic interests, facilitate discussion, create a space for language practice, and foster a sense of community. Teresa Pica, a prominent scholar of second language acquisition, promotes a learning approach known as “communicative classroom”¹⁰. This approach provided a useful framework when developing SALC's study sessions, which also emphasized social interaction. Pica notes that a key aspect of a communicative classroom is that “learners feel like learners” and that “one way to accomplish this is through providing (...) the opportunity to negotiate, to ask questions, to seek assistance, and to seek help when others cannot be understood.” Implementing a series of relaxed yet intellectually stimulating activities would ensure that students feel free to express themselves and also remain engaged in the topics covered. This in turn would create a space for participants to gain confidence in their English language abilities and improve their speaking skills.

It was decided that TAs would be asked to volunteer to create student-centered sessions (up to two hours in length). There was to be no set format for the groups. The type of learning community that SALC was hoping to create through this project is usually formed when students gather for two or more classes.¹¹ Unfortunately, this would not be the case for this series of SALC run study groups as the set number of weeks in a semester, coupled with budgetary considerations, meant that it would only be feasible for each member of staff to take responsibility for one to two sessions. It was also felt that asking TAs to take on more sessions might interfere with their other responsibilities. Furthermore, the belief was that regardless of the amount of sessions, they would still primarily be made up of students, who could stimulate each other's learning experience. TAs leading these groups would ensure a certain level of supervision. This would prove valuable for all concerned, as it would allow for a more in-depth review of participant's progress.¹²

3.2. Establishing Teaching Assistant-led Study Groups

An email was sent out to SALC TAs to ask if they would be interested in planning and running a study session for the coming semester. The topic was also discussed at a SALC TA meeting, which was held in Spring 2019.¹³ TAs who wanted to take charge of a study group were encouraged to contact SALC's technical staff with the dates that they wanted to work and the general theme of their sessions. During the 2019 Spring Semester, teaching assistants were asked to take charge of two sessions. The study groups were to be held across two weeks (one session per week). For the following Winter semester, TAs took charge of one-off

sessions. Study group leaders were given autonomy over the name, content, pace, and overall design of their sessions. SALC technical staff were available to discuss possible topics with TAs who stated a desire to take charge of a group, but were not yet certain of the specific themes they wanted to explore. This proved an important phase of the implementation process as community building can involve a level of shared responsibility at the planning stage.¹⁴ The preparation stage of these study sessions necessitated a level of interaction between regular staff members and TAs that fostered a sense of community among the team.

The possibility of running study groups was also open to technical staff, who would also be on hand to cover if TAs could not make any of the sessions for which they had volunteered. It is also worth mentioning that all SALC technical staff at the time of writing this report had past experience of working as TAs in SALC, which allowed for a better understanding of the perspective the position involves and smoother communication between the various roles. The sessions led by the technical staff not only filled any gaps caused by scheduling circumstances, but also provided an example of how a study group can be organised, for the benefit of those TAs who were less confident designing such an event.

SALC employs TAs from a diverse range of academic backgrounds and this was reflected in the subject matter that the staff wanted to cover in the study groups. TAs held sessions on topics that included gender, sexuality, the #Metoo movement, neurolinguistics, film, economics, language and pop culture. Once the full list of presenters and topics was decided for the coming semester, a schedule was put together. Efforts were made to promote the activities both inside and outside of the center. Posters were made for each study group and these were put around Kyushu University's Ito campus. They were also posted on SALC's website and social media accounts for those students not regularly on campus.¹⁵ The professors who support the running of SALC also helped promote the events to their classes, while the Kikan Education's Support Office (運営支援係, Unei Shien Gakari) sent out information to the student body.

4. Overview of Study Groups

This section will provide an overview of some of the SALC study groups that took place during the 2019 to 2020 academic year.

4.1 Study Group One

Date: May 23rd, 2019

Topic: Stereotypes about sexuality

Coordinator: SALC TA

Number of participants: 6 (including staff)

This study group functioned as an open discussion, with a PowerPoint presentation running concurrently to offer context and ensure that proceedings did not stray too far off topic. The activity began with an icebreaker that gave all the participants a chance to find out a little bit more about each other. Rather than starting with straightforward self-introductions, the TA in charge of the study group decided to ask those present to create a profile of another attendee based on appearance alone. The mini game helped establish a key principle that

was explored in the session, specifically the idea that the preconceived notions we have about others might not always be correct, and also set the tone for a fun, relaxed study group. The leader of the session created a detailed presentation, which explored related topics and provided direction for the discussion. The group covered a wide range of issues, from stereotypes that exist in modern society to misconceptions about sexuality in the animal kingdom. The event lasted close to two hours, ensuring that all participants had a chance to speak, develop their communication skills, and express their opinions.

4.2 Study Group Two

Date: June 6th, 2019

Topic: #MeToo movement and women in Chinese history

Coordinator: SALC TA

Number of participants: 9 (including staff)

The TA in charge of this study group prepared a comprehensive talk that took students through the various stages of the #MeToo movement. During the lecture-style session the TA asked thought provoking questions to engage the participants in the topic. Time was also left aside at the end of the event for further discussion. A PowerPoint presentation was utilized to help outline the history of the movement and explain key terms. Incorporating a discussion of some of the main related phrases ensured that students had context for the event and helped teach the participants new vocabulary. The talk began with information about the background of #MeToo, the importance of social media in the topic, and the role of celebrities in helping the movement gain wider recognition in society. Related issues such as consent and victim blaming were also discussed, along with the criticisms that have been directed at the movement. The study group also incorporated a section on gender norms in modern China. The majority of students who participated were not studying majors directly related to the subject matter, which meant that the students got a chance to learn about a modern day issue from an academic perspective outside of their discipline.

4.3 Study Group Three

Date: July 11th, 2019

Topic: Film studies

Coordinator: SALC Technical Staff

Number of participants: 22 (including staff)

This well-attended study group welcomed students from various faculties. The technical staff responsible for the session showed the participants clips from famous movies on a big screen and then broke them down in order to analyze the key frames. A PowerPoint presentation was used to introduce the movies and offer information about the topics that were covered. The technical staff in charge opened up the session for discussion after most clips and asked the students numerous questions about the content of the scenes. The goal of the study group was to highlight what students can learn from watching movies, how films are made, and the thought process that goes into producing a scene. Showing clips from numerous well-known films

throughout the study group meant that the students had context for each stage of the lecture and subsequent discussion. Exposing the participants to different forms of media also provided them with an opportunity to hear various kinds of English and practice their listening skills.

4.4 Study Group Four

Date: February 21st, 2020

Topic: Immigration

Coordinator: SALC Technical Staff

Number of participants: 8 (including staff)

Although this study group included some Japanese students, most participants came from other countries. This meant the topic was something they could relate to on a personal level. The meeting began with defining some relevant vocabulary, namely the terms “immigrant” and “expat,” and how they differ in relation to location and social class. What followed was a discussion of the socioeconomic background of the immigration policies of Japan. The coordinator explained that Japan is struggling with a low birth rate, which makes it unclear whether the future workforce will be sufficient. Encouraging immigration was put forward as one solution, but the participants also discussed alternatives such as stimulating domestic population growth and expanding automation. This discussion included specifics about the economic approach of Shinzo Abe’s cabinet, including the sets of policies known as “womenomics” and his signature “Abenomics.”

4.5 Study Group Five

Date: February 7th, 2020

Topic: Refugees

Coordinator: SALC Technical Staff

Number of participants: 5 (including staff)

This group also began with an explanation of some key vocabulary. In this case, the concept of xenophobia was introduced as a social sentiment against accepting refugees coming from another country. The concept was compared to other related words expressing resentment towards certain groups of people, in particular to homophobia. In the next step the participants brainstormed different reasons why people become refugees, which included political conflicts, human rights violations, climate change, and economic hardship. The coordinator then introduced a list of countries, which either have accepted a large number of refugees, or, conversely, have been a major source of refugee migrations to another region. Having established this global background, the group then focused on Japan as a country that grants refugee status to a relatively low number of applicants. The group discussed why that is the case. The participants came from a variety of backgrounds and each had unique fields of interest. They did not simply answer the coordinator’s questions to the best of their ability, but also contributed information that was new to the coordinator. This made the event a collaborative experience, as opposed to a traditional one-directional form of learning.

5. Future Implications

5.1 The role of SALC in Providing Teacher Training

Whether or not TAs in Kyushu University are afforded the chance to teach classes connected to their field of expertise can depend on a number of factors, including the curriculum, course, and research interests of the supervising faculty member. SALC's decision to run the series of educational activities discussed in this report was inspired by a desire to provide TAs with an opportunity to use their research in a tangible manner, assume greater responsibilities in a university setting, and develop their teaching abilities. The skills acquired will be useful for student staff irrespective of future involvement in academia. The ability to conceptualize an interactive activity, prepare an event aimed at a specific demographic, ensure its smooth operation, select accessible materials, and facilitate discussion are transferable skills that can serve TAs in any field.

The experience of setting up these study groups has shown that Kyushu University's SALC and similar institutions can provide TAs with valuable teaching experience even if the work takes place outside of a classroom. The events create a semi-formal setting where students receive no grade or score for their participation, but where the TAs nonetheless act in the capacity of paid employees of the university, and as such are expected to maintain certain educational standards. This format acts as a stepping-stone between completely informal, unsupervised peer learning and managing a formal curriculum. Initiating new intellectually stimulating events not only broadens the work experience of the staff affiliated to SALC, but also helps ensure that the center can offer students a variety of services. This in turn creates more opportunities for staff and students to deepen mutual bonds.

5.2 Study Groups as a Platform for Community Building and Language Learning

The study groups were conducted in English in order to provide participants with a chance to familiarize themselves with academic English in a range of disciplines. All the sessions included either a discussion or question and answer session, which meant that students had the chance to speak English and develop their communication skills. Participants did not need to register in advance and were under no obligation to stay for the entirety of the session. Furthermore, during the Spring 2019 semester, students were welcome to attend just one of the two-part study groups. They did not need to commit to participating in both. The rationale was that a relaxed approach to registration would set the tone for welcoming study sessions. The decision not to grade the students further underlined SALC's commitment to cultivating an open, relaxed space for the events. The approach also tied in with the center's ethos of autonomous learning.

The atmosphere of the activities offered the platform for students to learn about research being carried out by graduate students at Kyushu University, develop a rapport with SALC TAs, and talk with other participants. The events also had the somewhat unexpected benefit of allowing staff within the center to learn more about their colleagues' research projects and academic interests. SALC affiliated faculty and / or technical staff attended at least part of all the study groups. A number of SALC TAs also participated in sessions run by their workmates. The groups encouraged forming connections between fields and facilitated interaction between staff. Each TA structured their sessions differently, ensuring that most learners would be able to find

stimulating content and gain exposure to forms of English that might not otherwise be possible. The study groups welcomed all levels, from beginners to native speakers. The sessions that set aside time for icebreakers and questions and answers were particularly well suited to more beginner level speakers. While those that utilized presentations and placed greater emphasis on discussion proved thought provoking for higher-level speakers.

5. Conclusion

The implementation and operation of these sessions highlight the need for centers within universities to create progressive educational activities, which give TAs the opportunity for growth. Kyushu University's SALC and similar centers that operate outside of traditional classroom settings can utilize their status to develop flexible events that offer student staff the chance to cultivate skills that will benefit them in future endeavors.

There are multiple benefits that come from creating opportunities for TAs and students to interact. Activities that facilitate exchange help cultivate new bonds between students in different years and departments. Establishing a sense of community between student staff and participants serves to create a more learner-friendly environment where users feel at ease to practice their language skills without having to worry about making mistakes. In keeping with Pica's assertion that communicative classrooms require "an environment which is guided by projects and tasks whose completion depends on all participants,"¹⁶ efforts were made to ensure that participants were asked to grapple and work through the questions put forward within a relaxed, accommodating setting. Overall, the structure of the study sessions in SALC facilitated an open yet supervised discussion, which fits in with Pica's description of a communicative classroom and aligns with the idea of community building in education.

Creating a variety of events also ensures that students who use SALC have choice. Students have different interests; the triggers that stimulate interest in language learning are not uniform. Implementing a range of activities that offer opportunities for students to practice English ensures that the needs of all are met. To conclude, the advantages of the study group approach make it worth continuing in the future. A major challenge that lies ahead is moving forward with the transition from face-to-face interaction to a strictly online environment, while ensuring that the attractiveness of the study group to students and its effectiveness as a learning method are not sacrificed.

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- 3 With graduate students completing their courses at different times, the number of TAs SALC employs tends to fluctuate.

- 4 Ibid, 114-5. SALC was operating online at the time of writing. Core services were made available online to students throughout the 2020 Spring semester in an attempt to limit the spread of the New Coronavirus. However, university-wide restrictions meant that students could not access all SALC services at that time. For example, the center could not readily lend study materials, such as textbooks and magazines, to users.
- 5 The Tandem Learning Program, also supervised by SALC, is another example of utilizing peer-centered learning in a sustainable effort to complement the regular work of the faculty. For details see Wakisaka, M., Hayashi, T., Kitagawa, N., Wolanski, B., Harada, K., and Cai, Z., The significance of tandem learning in a Japanese university, *JASAL Journal*, 1 (2020): 104–128.
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