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## Short Research Papers

# The History and Development of a Self-Access Conversation Lounge

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Seikei University's self-access lounge is called English Chat Time (ECT), and sessions are offered for 30 minutes at lunchtime, using materials such as conversation cards and board games, or engaging in discussion on a range of topics. An instructor oversees the sessions, which are conducted by two international teaching assistants (TAs). Instructors exhibit a wide range of practices ranging from full control and participation to heavy reliance on TAs. Due to the current pandemic, TA involvement is no longer possible, and the program has moved online, which presents a new set of challenges. The goal of this project is to critically examine ECT from the teachers' perspective, looking at the program's development since its inception in 2010, and improve the efficacy of ECT sessions through increased student attendance, improved retention, more teacher engagement during sessions, and more balanced interaction with students of all speaking levels, in order to create community among participants outside the classroom.

成蹊大学のセルフアクセスラウンジはイングリッシュチャットタイム(ECT)と呼ばれ、会話カードやボードゲームなどの資料を使ったり、さまざまなトピックについて話合ったりして、ランチタイムに30分間のセッションが提供される。2人の国際ティーチングアシスタント(TA)によって行われるセッションに、講師が責任を持つことになっている。完全な管理と参加からTAへの大きな依存に至るまで、講師の実践は多様である。コロナウィルス感染により、TAの関与が不可能となり、プログラムはオンラインに移行し、そのために、一連の課題が新たに生じた。本研究の目的は、参加者たちが教室外でコミュニティを築くことができるよう、2010年開始以来のECTプログラムの開発について、その内容を教師の視点から批判的に検討すること、そして、学生の出席率や定着率を向上させ、セッション中の教師の関与を増やし、様々なスピーキングのレベルの学生同士がよりバランスの取れたやり取りをすることによってECTセッションの有効性を高めることである。

The purpose of self-access language lounges is to provide opportunities for students to practice speaking the vehicular language outside of class in an informal environment. At the Institute of International Studies at Seikei University, a private university in western Tokyo, the self-access conversation lounge is known as English Chat Time (ECT). This paper reflects the first phase of a tripartite study, courtesy of a research grant from the university. In the long term, the project will look at ECT from the perspectives of teachers, students, and international teaching assistants (TAs), but this paper focuses only on the teachers. Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the nature of the intended research, and the program has been required to move online. The name was changed to Zoom Chat with Teachers (ZCT) in order to distinguish it from the regular face-to-face ECT format. The focus at the time of this writing is on the program's history, most recent in-person situations, and possible future directions. The results of a survey of the instructors, which was conducted in order to understand the teachers' perspectives and obtain their feedback on their role in ECT, will be discussed, and possible future directions for the program will be suggested.

ECT was started in 2010 with the goal of providing students with opportunities to practice speaking English outside of class. Learner autonomy has been a major curricular goal at the university, reflected in the research of professors including Dr. Chika Hayashi (2018) and in required courses such as "Freshers' English," which until the 2019 academic year introduced all first-year students to ways of learning English independently outside of class time. In addition to ECT, there is an extensive reading corner in the library, a lunch and break room called "Global Square," and a wealth of online resources. ECT is an integral part of this focus on encouraging independent learning.

Until 2016, all sessions were one hour long, held during a regular class period Monday through Friday. Students were asked to pre-register, but walk-ins were never turned away. Although it was possible to come for 30 minutes (the first or second half of the session), students rarely availed themselves of this option. In 2017, a trial of 30-minute lunchtime sessions was added. Two 30-minute sessions were determined equal to a single one-hour session, and most instructors were

scheduled with a combination of both. By the end of the 2019 academic year, it was clear that students preferred the lunchtime sessions. This was apparent from the substantial increase in attendance.

ECT sessions currently remain 30 minutes long during lunchtime. Until the end of 2019, they were supervised by a full-time contracted instructor, but discussion, games, and other activities were facilitated by two international teaching assistants (TAs). A major unfortunate effect of the pandemic is that it has become impossible to hire TAs, because the number of international exchange students has decreased severely. This created a challenge, forcing teachers to plan and facilitate the sessions alone.

ECT scheduling is carried out in the following way: at the beginning of each semester, teachers are asked to state which days and times they prefer to be scheduled for sessions. In any given academic year there are eight to ten full-time contracted instructors with the job title of Associate Lecturer, or *Jokin Koshi* in Japanese. Instructors are required to teach seven 90-minute weekly classes (*koma*) per semester, plus one *koma* of ECT. Although the semester is 15 weeks long, in practice this means each instructor only supervises an average of six one-hour sessions of ECT per semester.

The role of the ECT coordinator is firstly to interview exchange students that are interested in becoming TAs and to check their overall English fluency and suitability for the position. Not all TAs are from English-speaking countries; the most recent group in 2019 included TAs from China, France, Germany, and Spain. Their varieties of English are viewed as an asset for the students, but an important part of the selection process is to ensure that successful candidates have enough confidence to facilitate conversation in English. The coordinator then organizes training sessions for TAs at the start of each semester. The maximum number of trainees at one time was twenty, and the minimum number was three. The TAs are paid slightly more than Japan's minimum wage for each session.

Once TAs are selected, the coordinator schedules instructors for ECT sessions. After asking their availability and top three schedule preferences, he schedules at least one session each weekday. More sessions may be scheduled per day at different times if more than one instructor is available. After completion,

the schedule is sent to the International Studies Office, where the TAs' schedules are arranged. The office then schedules the TAs to pair them with the teachers and advertises ECT on campus and the university website.

Originally, as was the case at many educational institutions, online lessons were only expected to continue for a few weeks. However, by the end of May it became clear that all classes would be taught remotely for the entire spring semester. ECT had been cancelled during the shift to emergency remote teaching, so it was decided that an online equivalent to ECT would be offered in the latter part of the semester. Due to the extraordinary and stressful circumstances at the time, teacher participation was not made compulsory. This resulted in only four of ten teachers taking on the task. The ECT coordinator decided that the name should be changed to "Zoom Chat with Teachers" (ZCT) to reflect the fact that it would be quite different from the regular in-person ECT sessions.

Overall, the teachers' feedback about the ZCT concept was positive, and comments ranged from "good" to "fine" to "very different". Because there were no TAs, one teacher commented that there was a greater need for instructors to engage with the students, especially as three of his four ZCT sessions were conducted with a single student. Also, since all teachers were working remotely from home and only interacted with students in their own online classes, they commented that they had no way to publicize the sessions except to their own students. This may have been a major reason for the low attendance rate.

## **Methods**

A survey (Appendix) was conducted in August after the end of the spring semester. An anonymous Google form was sent to current and former full-time instructors who had facilitated ECT before the pandemic. The survey consisted of Likert ratings, followed by a free response section for comments. Ten instructors responded, four of whom participated in the first online ZCT sessions. After the results of the survey were collected, an interview was conducted with the instructor who had been most strongly involved in starting the ZCT sessions.

## Results

This section summarizes the survey results, and the data itself is available upon request from the authors. The responses indicated that nine of ten teachers had a positive attitude toward ECT, although one admitted honestly that it depends on the individual personalities present at each session and the interaction among those individuals. When asked whether they enjoy ECT sessions, all the instructors responded that they enjoy ECT at least somewhat. Also, instructors are unanimous in feeling happy about facilitating ECT as opposed to being required to teach an eighth class. Contractual obligations for instructors at other Japanese universities are often higher, with 12 or even 14 *koma* per week not unheard-of.

Instructors gave a range of responses regarding their level of involvement in ECT sessions. Some teachers actively participate in discussions, games, and other activities. Some simply observe, which most likely suggests how competently the TAs were managing the sessions and how willing and able the attending students were to speak up and participate actively. A few instructors offer language suggestions and corrections.

As stated above, not all TAs speak English as their first language, so it is not uncommon for the TAs to request such help directly, or for students to need help understanding the varieties of English spoken by the TAs. This variety is generally viewed by instructors as a benefit that gives students the opportunity to become exposed to a range of vocabulary and pronunciation. Indeed, the authors of this article are from the U.S. and Scotland, and thus both are so-called “native speakers”, but obviously our usage of English differs greatly.

Instructors’ responses to the question, “How much structure and guidance would you like to have for online Zoom sessions?” clearly indicated that no one wanted to conduct their sessions according to a prescribed format. However, the majority were in favor of having guidelines such as an online repository of recommended activities and a list of discussion topics. A few stated that they would rather manage sessions on their own and do not require additional guidelines or support.

## **Instructor Participation in ZCT**

Most of the instructors did not participate in online ZCT. Four instructors agreed to conduct some sessions, and in the fall semester presumably all will be required to do it, since it is a contractual obligation. This will most likely mean that instructors who did not participate in the spring term will be scheduled for sessions twice a week. On some days, two instructors will be assigned and will split the students into two breakout rooms if a sufficient number of students attend. In terms of research, this will be a shift from teacher to “learning advisor”, which is a term commonly used in research on self-access learning (Bibby, Jolley, & Shiobara, 2016).

## **Discussion**

By way of reflections and thoughts on the research so far, an important point to remember is that “self-access learning should be truly self-access”, meaning that by definition students cannot be required to do it (Cooker, 2010; p. 7). This guiding principle is stated explicitly to all new instructors at orientation when they start working. Teachers are encouraged to promote ECT, and new ways to continue promoting it are being implemented now that the lounge is online. These will be discussed in more detail below.

One way of encouraging students to attend ECT, mentioned by one instructor in her comments, is that she allows her students to submit a short reaction paper about their experience of attending ECT. Students receive points towards a grade in her class. Thus, they are not awarded points for attending ECT, but they do earn points for submitting the reaction paper. This is presented by the instructor as one way among several that students can earn extra points for using English outside of class. This particular instructor has had a range of responses from students. One student who was very dedicated and attended ECT at least once or twice every week even decided to keep an ECT journal for the whole semester. This served to reinforce his language learning experience and provided valuable insight into the student’s perspective on ECT.

## **Current Situation**

One issue for teachers and students everywhere during the 2020 academic year was that the move to online teaching was sudden and unexpected, and most were stressed and unprepared. It has been announced by Seikei University that as a rule, classes are online for the 2020 fall semester, and ZCT has just been scheduled at the time of this writing. It is expected that it will be better organized overall, because the teachers now have some experience and a better idea of how to use technology to facilitate students' communication online. (Update and not part of the original presentation: Classes were undertaken online for the fall semester and as expected, the organization was smoother and teachers were more comfortable with the technology, resulting in more interest by students reflected by an increase in the number of students attending sessions.)

A few possible future directions include, firstly, having all teachers contribute to a shared repository of materials such as recommended YouTube videos, discussion topics, and downloadable handouts. Another possibility is using motivated university students as facilitators, since for now there are still no exchange students to hire as TAs. The possibility of networking with other universities and conducting joint ZCT sessions has also been discussed between one teacher and several acquaintances who work at other universities in Japan. This might be problematic for administrative reasons, except that since ZCT is being conducted online, people could theoretically join from anywhere. Finally, in the interest of encouraging independent learning, this can be used as an opportunity to introduce students to online resources that they can self-access, such as websites, YouTube channels, and Netflix shows in order to further their interest in the topics covered in the sessions.

When face-to-face sessions eventually resume, we may be able to accommodate several of the comments which suggested having regular Japanese students attend TA training, so that TAs can practice in a realistic atmosphere. Until now, the trainees were asked to pretend to be beginning-level students. This idea has merit and is worthy of serious consideration, although it will require some extra planning to implement.

Another valid suggestion was requiring all teachers to attend one or more

TA training sessions, which would help teachers to understand their roles and clarify what is expected of them. Furthermore, ongoing refresher training for TAs would prove useful to remind them of what they are being paid to do. Also, more frequent feedback from TAs through a questionnaire would be helpful, and ways to obtain such feedback will be considered seriously in anticipation of resuming in-person sessions, whenever that becomes possible. Finally, a better, more assertive advertising campaign and clear signs around the campus would help direct students to where ECT is being held.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers are generally satisfied with ECT and are happy to conduct ECT instead of being required to teach an additional class every semester. The survey generally clarified teachers' expectations and their perceived roles in ECT. Teacher involvement in the sessions is largely active, with a wide range of teaching styles being exhibited even within each session. These different styles should meet the needs of a wide range of students.

Also, most teachers would generally appreciate some structure and guidance, probably in the form of an online repository of suggested activities and a list of prepared discussion topics. Teachers now have more online teaching experience, are more confident conducting ZCT sessions, and will be able to incorporate technology more effectively even after it becomes possible to hold in-person sessions on campus. As the saying goes, forewarned is forearmed, and we plan to adopt this as our motto going forward, as we work to meet the language learning goals of our students even in a changing, unpredictable environment.

## **References**

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Hayashi, C. (2018). Report on the development of learner autonomy in Freshers' English: Personal goal setting and learning plans for English language learning. *Bulletin of Seikei University*, 51(3). <http://hdl.handle.net/10928/1256>

## **Highly recommended resource**

*Studies In Self-Access Learning*, Kanda University of International Studies.  
<https://sisaljournal.org/>

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## **Appendix**

### **ECT Questionnaire**

Quenby and Jamie are doing some research on how to improve the quality of ECT sessions and would appreciate your spending a few minutes on answering the following questionnaire. All answers will be completely anonymous. Thank you very much for your time. We appreciate your feedback.

1. What is your overall feeling about ECT? \*
  - Very positive
  - Somewhat positive
  - Neutral
  - Somewhat negative
  - Very negative
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you enjoy attending ECT sessions? \*
  - Yes
  - Somewhat
  - Maybe
  - Not really
  - No
3. Are you happy doing ECT sessions instead of an extra class (ie 7 classes and ECT sessions instead of 8 classes)?
  - Yes
  - No
4. Describe your involvement in the ECT sessions. Check all that apply. \*
  - I actively participate in discussions
  - I actively participate in games
  - I actively participate in activities
  - I tend to just observe and not actively participate
  - I offer language suggestions and correct student's mistakes
  - I help TAs and offer them suggestions

5. Do you have any opinions or suggestions regarding ECT?  
(free response)
6. How could TA training be more effective?  
(free response)
7. Did you participate in online Zoom Chat with teachers this semester?
  - Yes.
  - No.
8. If your answer to number 7 is yes, how did the online environment affect the experience?  
(free response)
9. As it is likely that we will have to do online Zoom Chat sessions (without TAs) next semester, how much structure and guidance would you like to have for online Zoom sessions?
  - I'd like to have a set format (for time, activities etc)
  - I'd like to have general guidelines (e.g. a folder of suggested activities, discussion topics etc)
  - I'd rather decide by myself how to manage the sessions.
10. What would facilitate the online experience for you as a teacher?  
(free response)