

# Promoting autonomy through self-access materials design

Matthew Kershaw

Jo Mynard

Lara Promnitz-Hayashi

Marc Sakaguchi

Adam Slobodniuk

Chris Stillwell

Kentoku Yamamoto

Kanda University of  
International Studies

## Reference data:

Kershaw, M., Mynard, J., Promnitz-Hayashi, L., Sakaguchi, M., Slobodniuk, A., Stillwell, C., & Yamamoto, K. (2010). Promoting autonomy through self-access materials design. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2009 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

The self-access centre at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) is one of the main attractions for new students at the university. To keep the centre vital and responsive to students' needs, teachers and learning advisors take on the role of materials designers. Through an ongoing process, these designers investigate effective ways of producing learning materials that aid the development of learner autonomy in a fashion that bridges the distance between the task-based classroom lessons and the demands of language use and development in the outside world. This has led, through principled trial and revealing error, to a number of insights regarding ideal practices. This paper looks at the process of materials development at KUIS and provides examples of materials that have been generated, as well as works in progress. Implications for other teaching and learning environments are also explored.

神田外語大学Self-Access Learning Centreは本大学の新入学生にとって主要な学習施設の一つである。教員とラーニングアドバイザーは、センターを有効かつ学生のニーズに応え続ける施設にするために、教材開発の役割を担っている。教材開発者達は試行錯誤しながら、学生の自立学習の進歩を促す教材開発、学生が授業で学んだことをいかに実社会で活用できるか、そのためのサポート方法を学んできた。これにより、教材開発をする上での共通の理念を見出すことが出来た。この論文では、神田外語大学での教材開発の過程、作成中の教材及び今までに作成されてきた教材の例を挙げる。また、その他の指導及び学習環境との密接な関わりについても検討する。

**F**OSTERING AUTONOMY in language learners has now become an accepted part of language education as learner autonomy plays such a central role in the language learning process (Benson, 2009). One way institutions might enhance opportunities for students to develop autonomy is through the provision of a self-access centre. A self-access centre may consist of a number of features such as materials, staff, systems and support mechanisms for learners. This paper will focus on materials, and in particular language learning materials produced in-house, for self-access use and ways to promote the self-access centre. The authors will examine some of the principles of good self-access materials design and describe how these are implemented in a self-access centre in a university in Japan.



## **The context**

The Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) is an English-only environment intended to provide opportunities to develop language skills and also to facilitate the development of learner autonomy. The SALC contains over 10,000 materials such as books, DVDs, CDs, magazines, and computer-based activities. It also provides equipment, facilities and services to facilitate language study and practice such as multi-purpose rooms, audio-visual equipment, computers, and an advisory service. The SALC also runs activities such as workshops, competitions, and events. All of these are enabled by a team of administrative staff, professional learning advisors, and student employees.

The philosophy of the centre is that learning should be fun and enjoyable, the use of the SALC should be optional and voluntary, and the atmosphere should be warm and inviting (Cooker, 2007). The definition of learner autonomy that the SALC favors is one that emphasizes cooperation with other learners: "Learner autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person" (Dam, Eriksson, Little, Miliander, & Trebbi, 1990, p. 102). As Benson (2001) points out, there is not necessarily a relationship between the provision of a self-access centre and the development of learner autonomy. Effective materials design can play a large part in facilitating the development of learner autonomy and this paper describes the principles behind self-access materials development at KUIS, along with some examples of current projects.

## **In-house materials development**

Self-access materials produced in-house have a number of benefits for language learners (Tomlinson, 1998). Firstly, the materials can be tailored to suit the needs, level, and interests of the target users. Secondly, they can be designed especially for self-access use and can include appropriate instructions, scaffolding, hypothesis testing, and awareness-raising activities. Finally, they can refer and link to other self-access materials in order to further support and guide learners. Tomlinson (2003) points out that materials (designed for both general and self-access use) should be relevant, engaging, visually appealing, achievable, piloted, and proofread. In addition, it is important to adhere to Japanese copyright law when reproducing or changing certain texts. The law for making certain materials available in self-access centres differs from classroom use. Ensuring that all these criteria are met can be very time-consuming. The SALC uses a flow chart (Figure 1) in order to ensure all of the criteria are met.

Dickinson (1987) recommends that materials for self-instruction should be firstly interesting and varied, have clearly stated objectives and instructions, and also provide feedback or language-learning advice. Commercially produced books, although useful in many ways, are unlikely to truly fulfil these criteria as they were designed for classroom use facilitated by a teacher. Nevertheless, most self-access centres will have some of these books on display, often with the teacher's guide, answer keys, workbook and any accompanying video or audio materials attached. This kind of material will suit some learning styles and provide opportunities to review, prepare for, or build on class work if the material is also used in class.

## **Examples of recent projects**

A number of materials projects have been undertaken at KUIS over the past few years and the projects have focussed on one of

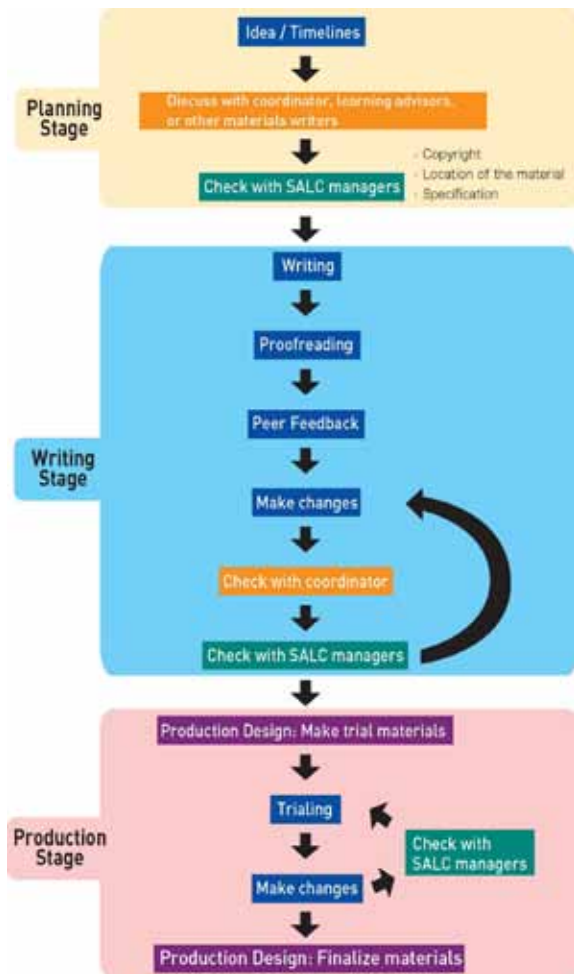


Figure 1. The materials production process

the following aims:

- Creating new materials
- Scaffolding or repackaging existing texts
- Making authentic texts or technology tools more accessible
- Promoting resources that already exist and providing pathways to help students find what they need
- Involving students in creating the materials

This section will discuss some of the projects in more detail explaining how the materials support the goals of the SALC and a practical application of the theory of good self-access materials design.

### Making authentic podcasts accessible

Authentic texts are materials which were originally intended for native speakers and were not designed for language learning purposes (McGarry, 1995). Nevertheless, there are a number of benefits of using authentic texts for language learning, for example, they provide access to the target-language community and to help learners see the language they are studying in a context outside the classroom. Secondly, the texts can be very motivating as the learners are aware that the texts have been written for native speakers (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1988). Thirdly, exposing learners to nongraded, unedited texts from time to time can be beneficial to help them learn to deal with ambiguity or uncertainty (Benson, 2001). However, authentic texts can be challenging for a learner and need to be carefully selected and possibly scaffolded so that learners do not become too frustrated or demotivated. The materials created in this project combined the desire to use authentic materials as self-access listening resources with the recent popularity of podcasts and mp3 players. The materials are based on authentic travel podcasts, as travel generally proves to be a popular theme amongst students.

The lessons are designed to enable the students to utilise podcasts for listening practice, pronunciation practice and simply learning new words and phrases. The lessons are available in the Listening and CALL (computer assisted language learning) sections of the SALC. In addition, mp3 players are available at the SALC counter for students to listen to the podcasts.

The podcasts used in this series of lessons are generally around 15 minutes in length. However, the students are not expected to listen to the whole podcast. The lesson is divided into six parts, each containing a short extract from the podcast. The total listening time is therefore approximately 8 minutes, and the students are advised to complete as much or as little as they want at any given time.

There is a general introduction to each lesson designed to get the students thinking about the location of the travel podcast. Following this, each individual part of the lesson begins with a summary of what the listener will hear in the particular extract and attempts to activate schemata by asking students to imagine themselves in a similar situation or think about a time they have had a similar experience. This is followed by a short vocabulary section, including example sentences, to scaffold certain vocabulary items. Finally, the students listen to the appropriate segment of the podcast and attempt a number of comprehension questions.

There is a full answer sheet provided at the end of the whole lesson. In addition, the podcasts are also fully transcribed so subsequent to listening and attempting the questions, the students are encouraged to listen repeatedly with the aid of the transcripts. Furthermore, the transcript for each part of the lesson also includes extra information to explain any interesting culturally specific points the students may not be aware of.

Finally, a number of pronunciation exercises are incorporated into each lesson. Some of the comprehension questions, and additional *Pronunciation Point* boxes, are designed to specifically

raise awareness of certain pronunciation points. In addition to this, there are general opportunities for shadowing and practicing native-like pronunciation and intonation.

One issue to be aware of before starting a project like this is copyright laws. Whereas there are no copyright issues when using podcasts in the classroom, a SALC is a public space and therefore requires permission from the podcast owners in order to reproduce them. Furthermore, the right to use official images may not be given. Copyright-free pictures can be found on the Internet, but may not sufficiently meet your needs. One way to get around this is to use pictures taken by yourself, friends, or colleagues wherever possible.

### Promoting CALL

Two SALC CALL materials development projects currently underway at KUIS are an online writing web resources page and communicative exercises utilizing Skype. The writing web page gives students access to online resources to help them in any area of writing that interests them. It provides students with information about assistance with writing they can receive in the SALC, such as through the Writing Centre, with links to videos explaining the sign up and teacher consultation process. Students can also click through to online student forums where they can discuss and share their writing with their peers. In addition to directing students to online and real world materials within the SALC, students are presented with a range of online writing resources suitable for any English level, from how to use grammar to guidance on writing essays. The website seeks not only to promote student use of the SALC and its resources, but by making both in-house and external materials available in the one location it is seeking to give students greater control over their study options.

The Skype student exercises seek to build learner confidence in telephone style conversation through structured scenarios they may face in real life. While students are given guidance for their conversations, they are encouraged, through the task design, to create an original conversation and not merely mimic example texts. During the trialing stage students responded positively to the exercises, finding them beneficial and many expressing a desire to use these exercises in the SALC. The dialogues that arose proved to be varied with students taking control of the conversations and often expanding them beyond the activity parameters. In addition to the language goals of the exercises, students are gaining valuable experience in using emerging technologies and increasing their computer literacy skills in English.

Skype (along with other common computer applications and Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, chatrooms, and email) is an example of a “Mindtool” (Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999). Mindtools are “computer applications that have been adapted or developed to facilitate critical thinking and higher-order learning” (p. 152). Many self-access centres, including the SALC at KUIS, contain CD ROMs or online software designed for language instruction, testing or practice. A Mindtool performs a different function as it allows a learner to be more engaged in knowledge construction and provides opportunities, stimulation, and amplification of cognitive processes (Jonassen, 1996). The tools can be manipulated by the learners to express what they already know, but in new ways. In other words, these tools can “...help learners reorganize their knowledge in a manner that results in deeper understanding” (Lajoie, 2005, p. 87). Skype provides a tool for learners to use and personalize the language that they have learned and to become more confident in using the language.

## Photography wall

The SALC has a large array of self-access resources available for students to use based on their own needs and interests. There was a desire to create a fun interactive activity whereby the students themselves could be involved in the process rather than just using the final product; the end result being something which also added a visual impact to the SALC. With this in mind, the SALC Photography Contest was created. Students were able to submit a photograph based on a set theme, along with a paragraph about the photograph. The photograph was submitted in JPG format and the paragraph was limited to 150 words.

After the planning and initial set up was completed, the first contest was conducted over the summer vacation. It was heavily scaffolded and two teachers judged the entries. Three winners were selected and profile pages along with their entries were displayed on a wall specifically designated for the contest. As the wall is located at the entrance to the SALC, it has generated a lot of student interest. The second contest had the theme of “Student Life” and this time students themselves voted for their favourite entry. This put the voting process entirely in the students’ hands with no input from teachers. Again prizes were awarded to the top three entries and one randomly selected voter also received a prize. By gradually shifting the responsibility from the teachers to the students, it was hoped that in time, students would be able to set the themes and run the contest themselves.

The second contest saw an obvious increase in student interest as awareness of the competition rose. The first contest was judged by teachers and there were no pictures placed on the wall except for the final three winners. In the second contest all the entries were placed on the wall making a gallery that encouraged students to stop, look and vote for the entry they liked the best. By making the voting completely student oriented,

interest in the photography contest has not only risen but has also added visually to the SALC.

### Promoting SALC materials and services

As mentioned in the introduction, the SALC has a wide range of resources available for the students to use. With so much on offer, it is easy to imagine that a student new to the SALC may feel overwhelmed by the many choices. Students may not always have a clear idea themselves of what they want or need. They may not know what is best for their own language learning—most language learners do not (Nunan, 1997). Furthermore, the resources the students actually see and recognize in the SALC are just a fraction of what is really available. And finally, even if they do know a particular resource exists, they may not be familiar with it and may not know how to make the most effective and efficient use of it. We cannot and do not expect our students to jump headfirst into the world of self-access without any guidance or support.

Benson (2001) reminds us that “fostering autonomy does not imply that we simply leave learners to their own devices, but that we actively encourage and assist them” (p. 75). One way in which we attempt to assist students in their use of the SALC is to provide pathways into the resources and to provide scaffolding for the self-access process. Students are informed of what is available and given suggestions or advice on how best to adapt those resources to their own learning styles, needs, and preferences.

Dissemination of this information is done through a variety of means: newsletters, signs and posters around campus, a bulletin board, leaflets that are both made available for students to take freely and also handed out in classes, the SALC student website, announcements through e-mail, a SALC orientation tour or lesson for all new students, advice and suggestions provided by

teachers in their classes, and finally, the learning help desk.

This year, several members of the self-access materials development team have been working to create yet another way in which we attempt to provide those pathways into the system and the guidance that students need. In production now is a video which provides students with information about the aforementioned resources that are available in the SALC.

This video takes its inspiration from the video monitors on some trains in Tokyo. The videos seen on the train provide a constant stream of information to a captive audience that can watch the video for a short time and leave, then come back and view a separate segment of the video at a later time. Following this example, the video being created at KUIS is intended to be shown on a continuous loop at places around campus where students often congregate, such as group study areas in the SALC, the student cafeteria, and in the halls between classes.

The video is quite simple: a series of basic PowerPoint-type slides with information about the various materials, facilities, activities, and people in the SALC; pictures of these resources; and maps of the SALC to guide the students to these resources. The video also includes excerpts of interviews with teachers, SALC staff members, student workers, and SALC users giving recommendations and advice, as well as sharing their own experiences.

The interviews have been edited extensively to remove the stops and starts, retakes, and unclear responses typical of unrehearsed interviews in order to present the information in as clear and quick a manner as possible. In addition, the interviewer’s questions have been replaced with slides displaying the interviewer’s comments and questions in writing. This is followed by a movie clip with audio of the interviewee’s edited response to the question. This allows for a great amount of freedom in the video design, creation, and editing process. The order of questions and responses can be changed, and separate responses

from a number of interviewees to one particular question can be shown one after the other. Finally, to allow for the possibility of no-audio, muted showing, abbreviated subtitles that are timed according to the interviewee's responses are included.

The video may succeed in reaching a part of the student population that the other methods we employ for the dissemination of information about SALC resources may have missed. We believe it will be attractive to students and in tune with the modes of communication they are most used to. Given this information, our students will hopefully feel less daunted by self-access materials and will eventually discover what works best for them.

### Turning workshop recordings into self-access activities

Self-access learning workshops are regularly offered in the SALC. Given by English teachers and learning advisors, these workshops invite students to explore topics related to popular activities and materials in the SALC, such as "How to watch movies" or "How to improve TOEIC scores". All workshops are open to the entire campus, and they often fill to capacity with interested students. Filming the workshops could offer a range of benefits. For instance, compared with other forms of material designed for the SALC, these workshop DVDs require relatively little extra effort to make, since the workshops are already in place. In addition, these DVDs increase the degree to which the material is made self-accessible, as the students can choose to "attend" the workshop any time they wish (and this is best facilitated if the workshop handout is adapted for DVD viewing as well).

Perhaps the greatest value of these filmed workshops is that they include the students. Throughout the DVD, the teacher-presenter must remain aware of her or his audience, respond-

ing to difficulties that arise and making sure that the lesson is getting across with clarity. Also, the presence of the students allows for much more persuasive self-access material. A student viewing the DVD sees peers going through the activities, and this can enhance feelings that "if they can do it, so can I." For similar reasons, students' contributions to the workshop, if invited by the teacher-presenter, can have much more impact than anything a supposed "expert" might have to say.

### Using authentic music resources

This final project also capitalizes on the intrinsic interest of authentic texts; this time the authentic texts take the form of music. In an effort to maximize the utility of the SALC's collection of English music CDs to support students' autonomous learning, song worksheets are being created. Since these song worksheets have the potential to draw on students' intrinsic enjoyment in listening to specific songs to provide opportunities to develop their English, it is important to create worksheets for songs that the students are interested in. Therefore, it is beneficial to conduct a survey to find out which songs and artists are popular among the current student population to help guide decisions of song selection for the worksheets. At KUIS, students in the SALC were surveyed since students who already visit the SALC are more likely to be the ones to use the song worksheets.

When creating the actual tasks for a song worksheet, particular care must be given to the format and type of tasks in order to adhere to copyright restrictions. Since the song worksheets will be used outside of the classroom, Japanese copyright law prohibits the reproduction of a song's lyrics and it prohibits providing an Internet link to a webpage containing the lyrics. As such, cloze activities (i.e., gap fills) cannot be used. However, one method that can be used to overcome these restrictions is to create a pre-listening vocabulary exercise followed by a post-listening comprehension task. For example, a pre-listening ex-

ercise can have students match key words, phrases, and idioms used in the song to their correct meanings. Once students have completed the exercise, they should be able to compare their answers to an answer key on the back of the worksheet. Students can then be instructed to listen to the song and try to answer the comprehension questions in the post-listening section. A more communicative post-listening task can have students discuss the meaning of the song with a friend. Furthermore, different types of songs can be used to focus on different aspects of language. For instance, songs that have a lot of reduced speech, such as *bringin'*, *gonna*, and *'cuz*, can be used to raise learners' awareness of the difference between spoken and written English. A pre-listening task focusing on reduced speech can list the reduced forms of the words or phrases (*wanna*, *goin'*, *hafta*) and have students write down the written forms (*want to*, *going*, *have to*).

Once a song worksheet has been created, it is important to pilot the worksheet with students to ensure all the instructions are clear and the tasks are achievable by the target population. In addition to receiving feedback on the worksheet itself, the piloting phase can be used to gather more information about other songs that students want to learn from.

### Conclusions and recommendations

Since the 1980s there has been a steady increase in interest in the theory and practice of autonomy in language learning. Investing in a SALC is one way to provide opportunities for individualised learning while fostering learner autonomy. This paper has highlighted the need for ongoing attention to the materials within the centre to ensure that the materials are meeting the needs of the students. Materials may need to be repackaged or provided with additional scaffolding. Authentic texts can be extremely motivating resources, but may need some additional support for learners. Finally, as the centre gets bigger, it may be less easy for students to find items so there is a need for constant

promotion of the materials. Constant work such as this helps to maintain the positive energy of a SALC, particularly if students are involved in the selection, piloting and development.

### Bio data

**Matthew Kershaw** is currently in his second year as a lecturer at KUIS in Chiba Prefecture. He also taught in the south of Japan before graduating with an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Liverpool in 2007. <matthew-k@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>

**Jo Mynard** is the director of the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) and assistant director of the English Language Institute. She has an EdD in TEFL from the University of Exeter and an MPhil in Applied Linguistics from Trinity College, University of Dublin. She has worked in Spain, Ireland, the UAE, and Japan. <joanne-m@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>

**Lara Promnitz-Hayashi** is in her first year as a lecturer at KUIS in Chiba. She has been teaching in different Japanese educational settings for over 10 years. She completed her MA in Applied Linguistics from UNE in Australia and her research interests are bilingualism and codeswitching. <lara-p@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>

**Marc Sakaguchi** is a second-year lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies. He has taught English in Japan for 13 years and during that time received his MA in TESOL from Teachers College, Columbia University, in Tokyo. <marc-s@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>

**Adam Slobodniuk** is currently teaching at KUIS. He received an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Newcastle, Australia, in 2003. <adam-s@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>

**Chris Stillwell**, a senior lecturer and self-access materials designer at KUIS, has contributed two chapters on using film for language learning to the TESOL Classroom Practice series. <stillwellc@aol.com>



**Kentoku Yamamoto** is a first-year lecturer at KUIS. He received his MA in TESOL from the Monterey Institute of International Studies in 2008. <kentoku-y@kanda.kuis.ac.jp>

## References

- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education.
- Benson, P. (2009). Making sense of autonomy in language learning. In R. Pemberton, S. Toogood, & A. Barfield (Eds.), *Maintaining control: Autonomy and language learning* (pp. 13-26). Hong Kong University Press.
- Cooker, L. (2007). The Self-Access Learning Centre at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), Chiba, Japan. *Independence*, 41, 29-32.
- Dam, L., Eriksson, R., Little, D., Miliander, J., & Trebbi, T. (1990). Towards a definition of autonomy. In T. Trebbi (Ed.), *Third Nordic workshop on developing autonomous learning in the FL classroom*. University of Bergen. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from [http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/dahla/archive/trebbi\\_1990](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/dahla/archive/trebbi_1990).
- Jonassen, D. H. (1996). *Computers in the classroom: Mindtools for critical thinking*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill.
- Jonassen, D., Peck, K., & Wilson, B. (1999). *Learning with technology: A constructivist perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lajoie, S. P. (2005). Cognitive tools for the mind: The promises of technology Cognitive amplifiers or bionic prosthetics? In R. J. Sternberg & D. D. Priess (Eds.), *Intelligence and technology: The impact of tools on the nature and development of human abilities*. (pp. 87-102) Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Little, D., Devitt, S., & Singleton, D. (1988). *Authentic texts in foreign language teaching: Theory and practice*. Dublin: Authentik.
- McGarry, D. (1995). *Learner autonomy 4: The role of authentic texts*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Nunan, D. (1997). Designing and adapting materials to encourage learner autonomy. In P. Benson & P. Voller (Eds.), *Autonomy and independence in language learning* (pp. 192-203). Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.
- Tomlinson, B. (1998). *Materials development in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, B. (2003). Materials evaluation. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (pp. 15-36). London: Continuum.