Self-Access Rooms: Accountability and Mentoring

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As Japanese universities open self-access study rooms to help students develop autonomy in learning languages, Chubu University's Self-Instruction (SI) room has been encouraging autonomous learning for 24 years to over 10,000 students who frequent the SI room for independent study, fulfilling a variety of English language learning goals. In this paper we focus on the role of accountability and mentoring in student attainment of language learning goals in Chubu's SI room. The evolution of the ways that learner accountability has been implemented in the SI room are shown. The current method by which learners are held accountable to their study plans through reporting folders and its success is presented through student feedback. Additionally, the new mentoring service, which provides support through individual counseling and workshops, is described. The success of the mentoring service is shown through student feedback and growth in number of participants in independent learning programs.

　目標言語の習得に伴い自律した学習支援を図るため、日本全国の大学各所でセルフアクセス（自習）学習環境の整備が盛んになってきている。中部大学のSI Room（語学専用自習室）は、24年前から現在に至るまで、1万人にのぼる自主学習者の語学学習に貢献してきた。本稿は、中部大学SI　Roomが、どのように自主学習の持続や目標達成を支援してきたかについて、特にメンターとしての教師の役割と責任に焦点を当てて論じるものである。具体的には紙媒体やオンラインでの学習記録ファイルづくりの促進とそれに対する助言方法、個人に対する自主学習カウンセリングと自主学習者グループを対象として適宜開催される学習体験ワークショップの開催について、その効果の指標となる参加者感想、自主学習利用者増加などとともに述べていく。

CHUBU UNIVERSITY has had a highly successful self-instruction room (SI room) dedicated to supporting students' success in independent language learning for over 20 years. The SI room provides a place for all students at Chubu University in the nine majors across campus to engage in self-directed language learning. Students use the SI room both for teacher assigned tasks and independent language learning. The SI room has been successful in attracting and aiding students who wish to engage in learning languages, as evidenced by the increased growth of its physical environment, staffing, and self-study support services. all of which provide support for autonomous language learning. One of the primary goals of the SI room is to provide students a path to learning independently as it pertains not only to language study but also to independent learning skills that can be applied in any area of study as the students move into adulthood.

Making a **Difference**

The system of the SI room reflects well the current views on the role of self-access rooms in its attention to the importance of a comfortable learning environment (Cooker, 2010) and its abundance of resources such as materials, activities, and support. Because students with a variety of target languages use this SI room, an English-only language policy as described by Barrs (2010) is not applied. All of the resources are selected to accommodate learners of varying levels, objectives, learning habits, and interests (Gardner & Miller, 1999). In addition to the wide variety of materials-based resources, the SI room at Chubu University has computer-assisted language learning, oral recording booths, workshops on independent language learning, and student and counseling and mentoring services for independent language study.

There are multiple reasons why students interested in studying languages independently choose to use the SI room. Surveys given to students who first visit the SI room help them to identify their reasons for using the SI room and assist the SI room personnel to be more helpful to the students. According to the survey, students most commonly use the SI room to

- continue language gains after they return from study abroad;
- prepare for study abroad;
- maximize language study during school breaks;
- overcome weak points in language learning;
- build basic language skills;
- prepare for examinations such as the TOEIC, TOEFL, and Eiken; and
- prepare for international scholarship applications.

Although it is clear that students arrive at the SI room motivated to use its resources, it became apparent in recent years that students often needed additional assistance in achieving their independent language learning goals effectively and satisfyingly. In this paper we will examine the advent of the SI room's counseling service and its accompanying accountability programs designed for independent learners at Chubu University's SI room.

Counseling Information Sources for This Paper

The information concerning use of the SI room counseling services has been gleaned from a focus group and initial applications from students requesting counseling services offered by the SI room's counselor. The focus group consisted of nine students who have been using counseling services and were asked to answer written open-ended questions about their use of the counseling services at the SI room at Chubu University in their native language. The survey was submitted anonymously and translated into English. The information from the applications is actually part of the mentoring process. There are two applications that students seeking counseling assistance at the SI room complete. They complete a questionnaire to request counseling services and arrange an appointment with a counselor and complete another at the first meeting with a counselor or mentor. These questionnaires are referenced and described later in this paper. Additionally, SI room counseling records, which are collected in annual reports to the university, are used to support facts and figures.

The SI Room Counseling Service at Chubu University

The counseling service at Chubu University started informally in 2006, when students began requesting advice and assistance with their autonomous learning. Word spread quickly about the benefits of obtaining assistance from an experienced counselor (who also happened to be an English teacher and the assistant director of the Chubu University Language Center). Due to the increase in requests for assistance, formalization of the coun-

seling process became necessary in order for the staff to more efficiently serve students. By 2010, it became clear that standard systems needed to be implemented to better serve both students and staff in the counseling process. The formalization served to standardize procedures and create a predictable workload for the counselor. Table 1 shows the growth of demand for SI room counseling services.

Table 1. Growth of SI Room Counseling Services at Chubu University

School year beginning in April	Number of counseling participants
2006	2
2007	3
2008	4
2009	13
2010	34
2011	43
April-October 2012	25

Reasons Students Request Counseling

Students access counseling services for their independent language learning study for a wide variety of reasons. Counseling in the SI room is limited to students who have already attempted independent language learning through the SI room on their own. The counseling is entirely at the students' request and is neither encouraged nor discouraged. According to students' initial application questionnaire, the common reasons that students seek counseling for independent study include

- teacher recommendation,
- a sense of not studying efficiently,
- disappointment in target language improvement,
- difficulty maintaining motivation,
- changes in availability of previous learning methods, and
- a new commitment to language learning goals.

For the most part, the students have encountered a cathartic realization that leads them to seek intervention in their autonomous language learning experience.

Assisting Students with SI Room Counseling

The intent of the SI room counseling service is to help learners in several ways. Students are encouraged to set goals for their language learning. Additionally, students are asked to reflect on their previous language learning strategies in order to identify issues and define new approaches. Students are helped to design and adjust their self-study programs and habits through introduction to materials. They are assisted in finding appropriate scaffolding to support their language learning goals. They are encouraged to use methods of accountability including using commercial English tests such as the CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication) and the TOEFL tests. This assistance is designed to encourage students to maintain the best possible environment to effectively reach their independent language learning goals.

In order to receive the help available from the counseling service, students use the SI room counseling in systematic ways. Most students meet with a counselor in order to interact concerning short- and long-term goals, previous and current language study habits, and current materials being used, and to receive advice about ineffective study methods and materials. Additionally, students are given the option to maintain a

record of their study activities in order to help them continue to be motivated, troubleshoot problems, and note productive and unproductive changes in their independent language learning.

Best Practices of the Counselor or Mentor

The SI counselor must be prepared to assist students with keen insight and observation in the SI room. The counselor must be knowledgeable about available materials and learning styles in order to best fit them to students' needs and goals. As discussed by Kato (2012), the SI counselor must engage in excellent interactive practices to best assist learners. The counselor must be encouraging and comforting as the student is frequently encountering some difficulty or vulnerability in the autonomous language learning process. The counselor needs to be ready and willing to be observant and timely with feedback in order to recognize learners' counterproductive study habits. It's important that the counselor be aware of and able to clearly share successful self-study models with learners so that learners are able to integrate successful methods into their learning. Finally, the self-instruction counselor must be willing to accept learners' choices to alter or abandon plans for whatever reason.

The SI counselor not only uses observation and insight, but also uses students' information to better individuate advice and counsel. In the application for counseling services, students are asked to provide information that can help the counselor such as when and where students study, general information about availability, and information about language learning goals and challenges. After looking at the counseling application form (see Appendix A), the counselor prepares ideas and materials in order to consult more deeply with students at the counseling appointment. At the appointment, students complete a self-instruction counseling form (see Appendix B) that includes more specific and immediate goals and a chance for students to note the materials that interest them. This could include information about preparing for upcoming examinations, achieving a certain level in classes, and the particular skills the student is interested in building. In this process, the students not only provide information for the counselor, but also reflect upon their own habits and behaviors that contribute to both their autonomous language learning success and difficulties.

Student User Response to SI Room Counseling

The nine students who participated in the written focus group questionnaire have identified several ways in which the SI room counseling has helped them to achieve their autonomous language learning goals. All students mentioned using specific materials better and improving study procedures. One student said that she spent less time studying and more time learning, while another mentioned that he now proceeded without unproductive learning. Students unanimously mentioned that persistence in independent study was increased through use of SI room counseling with one student stating that she tackles self-directed learning more aggressively than ever before. The students have found greater direction and in turn self-sufficiency through using the counseling services.

Accountability in Independent Language Learning

In addition to meeting with and advising students in how to proceed with their independent study, the SI room counseling service at Chubu University also offers students the option to maintain accountability by using paper-based folders. In the folders, students track their language learning habits with the SI room counselor. While computer-based Google Docs folders were attempted originally, student compliance became an issue. Although it seems counter intuitive, students' preferences leaned toward using hard copy, and the use of manila folders

with paper inspired greater compliance among students (see Appendix C). The self-study folders provide students and counselors a visual tracking of study time, frequency of study, material use, students' self-evaluation, and brief counselor feedback.

As has been mentioned by Tassinari (2012), the evaluation from both student and counselor are important to students' recognition of both successes and areas to be attended to in their autonomous language learning. Students encourage themselves and are encouraged by the counselor in numerous ways by tracking their study behavior in their SI room folder. In the folder, in the first column, students track their study time. This helps students to see when they need to adjust the amount of time or time of day being used for independent study. The next column encourages students to identify the location that they study in order to recognize locations that are more and less productive. In the third column, students record the materials that they have used. In the fourth column, students comment on their study plans and evaluate their adherence to meeting goals. These comments give the counselor insight into the student's learning process and the counselor may suggest adjustments should the student request assistance. The ranking system helps students to be more aware of the intensity of their study and may indicate a need for different materials.

The counselor plays a direct role in making the folders interactive and keeping the students aware that someone is observing their behaviors. The interaction is focused on simple response to retain the autonomous nature of each student's activity. The goal of the interaction is not to create voluminous information from the counselor, but to maintain an environment of accountability. In Figure 3, the counselor has posted a brief note suggesting a change in scheduling. The colored stamps indicate to the students that the entry has been viewed. Brief casual comments encourage, acknowledge, and affirm students' challenges and successes. The counselor does not intend to

inhibit the autonomous nature of the students' study, but does seek to provide a presence to enhance accountability.

The seven of the nine focus group participants who used the folders found them to be beneficial in several ways, including strengthening self-assurance in their directions and building in additional more immediate motivations to continue studying. Students mentioned that maintaining the folders served to increase their confidence in their chosen method of autonomous language learning. Additionally, students mentioned that even the superficial monitoring of the folders proved sufficient to help them maintain energy simply by being observed by a third party. One focus group respondent mentioned that it was great encouragement to continue to study when another person was observing. The folders also helped students to identify ways in which they could study more. As one student said, "I think that it made me feel I must work harder, and has led to continuing self-directed learning."

Conclusion and Future Directions

The counseling services for autonomous language learners in Chubu University's SI room have been growing consistently since they began in 2006. The formalized systems implemented in those years have served to guide students toward more efficient and effective independent language learning. Additionally, students have been inspired to greater persistence through concrete measures of accountability. The formalization of this system can be used in any mentoring environment or self-access room to inspire best practices of counselors and participants.

All indications imply that the use of mentoring services will continue to grow as students maintain their commitment to learning languages independently. To accommodate growth and to improve upon the current model, several plans have been made. A peer counseling service administered through a

student network is being discussed to provide student generated independent language study advice, especially related to materials selection. Additionally, because the work of the SI room counselor is intense, additional mentors will be trained to offer feedback and support. Support for additional trained counselors among the faculty and student population are being developed at this time.

Future studies will include a quantitative study of successful and unsuccessful independent language learners and its implications for the counseling procedures used in the SI room at Chubu University. Further investigation will also center on the role of workshops and group activities in student persistence and success in autonomous language learning. Continued attention to the ways in which a mature self-access language-learning center evolves and adapts to student and community needs will be addressed in future research.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Self-Instruction Counseling Application Form

Appendix B
Self-Instruction Counseling Form

Appendix C
Figure 3. Sample Self-Study Folder Page