

Research Note

The Learning Support Wing: The Advantages of an Island of English in a Japanese University

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Introduction

Write it all down writes Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1963). So I will (try to remember) how it all began before the beginning as most things do. One starting line was when a full time faculty member, Sakai-sensei, began to move a visionary idea forward. That was to create a new department to meet the needs of what many believed was a true desire of students more possible, to graduate with the ability to use English socially and to find jobs using English. Part of that idea was to create an English center.

There was for many years at Chukyo University a Department of English Language and Literature (DELL). Because there were so few English skills classes it was decided that a new department should emerge with a heavier concentration of English language classes to meet those perceived needs of students. In April 2002 a new Department of World Englishes began, with a curriculum that could be developed providing students with more opportunities to learn English. Part of this visionary approach was to create a holistic setting, beyond classrooms, where English learning could be enhanced.

In 2000-2001, the concepts for such a setting were developed. In 2002, the Learning Support Wing (LSW/L.S./Wing) opened as one of those opportunities for students in the newly created college. Rules set by fulltime faculty from both of the new departments, the Department of British and American Cultural Studies (BACS) and the Department of World Englishes (WE), were decided upon that primarily only allowed students from WE to truly utilize the L.S. Wing.

Now as meetings are taking place that could change curricula in the School of World Englishes, it would seem appropriate to review and share what value the Learning Support Wing has provided for students over the years. The Wing was created by the commitment of interested faculty and has evolved over these many years. For anyone spending time at the Wing over these many years of its existence, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence and theoretical reasoning that show while there was resistance to making the L.S. Wing an 'English-Only' center, this English-only center has offered students a "supportive environ-

ment" and helps them to prepare for a modern career using English.

Sakai and D'Angelo described the Wing as a "unique facility for Japan, which consists of an entire floor of one building" (p. 325). This article focuses on the common student study center part of the Wing. This paper first provides a background of the Wing, then examines the theoretical frameworks to justify the existence of the Learning Support Wing, followed by a review of what goes on there and the benefits to students.

Historical background

Initially, the name of the Wing was going to be the World Englishes English Center but the university requested that the word 'center' not be used because of the many 'centers' already at Chukyo. The Learning Support Wing was decided upon and the Wing has lived up to its name.

The setting of the 'Learning Support Wing' and its purpose has remained much the same since it opened in 2000, as a facility, described by French and Herschler (2010), that consists of "gathering areas, lunch tables, computers administrative offices, a classroom, and cubicles for students and desks for part-time teachers" (p. 78). The goals of the LSW have remained, "to create a dynamic English atmosphere for the students, as well as a place part-time teachers can work, relax, and hold their office hours. By giving our students a place to meet their teachers outside the classroom, we hope to further the program goals" (p. 78). Full-time teachers spend time there as well. The program goals of the former Department of World Englishes have remained even as the Wing has become open to the three current senkos of the School of World Englishes.

That holistic setting provided at the LSW, where 'holistic' is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as a place "characterized by the belief that the parts of something are intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole" seems to have worked well as it promotes "competence in a holistic setting, focusing on development of learning skills and of learning attributes (confidence, motivation and independence) which facilitates students' future learning endeavors" (Finch, 2000). Put more simply by Sakai & D'Angelo (2005), "the real value of the Wing is that students make a home of it" (p. 325).

Evolving Wing

Through persistent efforts from Professor Morrison, the Wing has become an English-only island. After some years of trial and error with English-only rules, the L.S. Wing, has evolved from having an English-only rule on even numbered days to English-only everyday.

Ten years later, in 2014, a newly reorganized School of World Englishes began with three new departments (senkos) formed. Fortunately, new rules were agreed upon that allowed

all students in the new 'School' of World Englishes to fully utilize the L.S. Wing. Full-time faculty representatives from each senko, Professors Armstrong, Moriyama, and Morrison held numerous meetings to reorganize a new floor plan of the Learning Support Wing. In those discussions about changes at the Wing, Moriyama reinforced the original goals of the LSW when he shared his belief that a "social environment is a worthwhile learning environment in addition to the regular language classroom" (p. 2). With a fine framework already in place, the environment of the Learning Support Wing improved.

New changes included the sequestering of computers into the adjacent classroom and the creation by Professor Armstrong of a new 'Self Access Learning Center' (SALC). It is a room where teachers and senpai can be available to help students improve their English. In a recruitment sheet for student volunteers, Armstrong wrote "It was designed as a study and consultation area where students can listen to music, read and watch movies for enjoyment and learning; complete worksheets on grammar, writing and vocabulary; do online listening practice on computers or iPads; browse our collection of graded readers and real [native speaker] books; receive one-on-one writing guidance; and use TOEFL and TOEIC CD-ROMs on computer." Among other changes, part-time desks for faculty were moved to the side and a stand-alone wall was removed combining two areas into one larger common area.

While the Wing has changed, it still remains a place where "students feel welcome to come and mix freely with faculty and peers" and where another unintended plus emerged over the years; students can "be a valuable source of feedback and feel more relaxed to approach faculty with concerns and criticisms than they do in a classroom environment" (Sakai & D'Angelo, p. 325).

Wing Activities

The big idea of having students join in fun activities with teachers 5th periods on Tuesdays and Thursdays originated in the (BACS) Common Room years prior to its start up in the L.S. Wing. During most activities, BACS smaller Common Room was packed with eager students. It seemed only natural to continue this approach in the newly designed L.S. Wing, so these activities have been made available to students of all three senkos in the School of World Englishes and others. Refreshments are served and the atmosphere is relaxed and varied.

Teachers are asked to offer an activity each semester. Teachers are kindly and creatively accommodating. At these after-class activities, students can have fun with English, learn things, and get exercise if it is a zumba or yoga session with educational, cross-cultural experiences in English. Activities include mixers with visiting international students early each term, spelling bees, story telling, travel tips, movie viewing with discussions, board games, music with an open mike, listening to new and classic Canadian music, and tea and

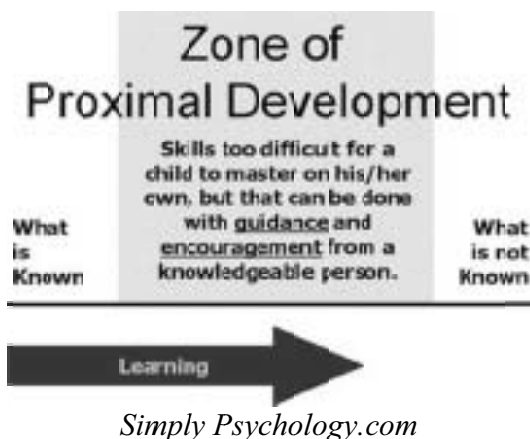
sweets with trivia gatherings among many others. Students have the opportunity to get to know their teachers in these out-of-the-classroom activities.

A newer type of activity has recently been put into play with students from the Senpai Talk Project (STP). Those senpais are now being scheduled for Wing Activities each term. Wing 'Senpai Activities' are organized by different groups of senpais, providing those in attendance with fun, creative and educational activities. The enthusiasm and excitement brought to these well-organized activities is exceptional.

Theoretical reasoning

A primary approach for WE students to improve their English language skills is through the use of English - a communicative approach. This process combined with a belief held by many teachers that every learner is a teacher, along with the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' and van Lier's 'AAA' model of education validate that learning is taking place at the Learning Support Wing.

Over the years, the Wing has been providing what Vygotsky (1978) states is necessary for 'cognitive development' to take place, an environment for social interaction to occur. Vygotsky's theory suggests development takes place in social and cultural contexts.



In various ways, the L.S. Wing has been providing those social and cultural contexts.

According to Finch (2002), "Breen & Candlin (1980: 95) first defined language learning as 'a process which grows out of the interaction between learners, teachers, texts and activities', and Allwright (1984b), in his 'interaction hypothesis', suggested that interaction might even be the learning process."

In addition, van Lier (1988), scholar, author, teacher, and professor of educational linguistics, formerly at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, argued for the practical

model of providing extracurricular opportunities for students to interact within the parameters of their educational framework consisting of awareness, autonomy, and authenticity. As explained below, the Learning Support Wing has functioned with the principles of van Lier's framework providing daily opportunities for students with practical and educational value.

Lier's approach, examined by Carmichael (1997) explains how the educational 'AAA' triad curriculum model where there is an 'A' for awareness where learners are "aware of the process of paying attention to new experiences and relating them to existing knowledge; autonomy, the impetus to learn, involving choice and responsibility on part of the learner; and authenticity, when a learner is motivated by a genuine desire to learn, rather than being compelled by some external force to do so."

Awareness in learning

When students gather in the Learning Support Wing, awareness needs to be and is present simply for people to be socially engaged. Students must and do pay attention and they bring their experiences and relate them to any others present there (other students and faculty). Be it at lunchtime, during a free period, or during Wing Activities and at any table, learning can be seen taking place or being reinforced with the guidance and encouragement by what Murphy (1996) calls 'near peer role modeling.'

Autonomous learning

Student visits to the Learning Support Wing is voluntary; autonomy is, therefore, always present. There is a sheet distributed to all first-year students in one senko that allows for students to receive extra credit if they have lunch or attend a Wing Activity and have the sheet initialed by any teacher but it remains a voluntary endeavor on the part of students. For teachers, that sheet serves as a way to encourage students to get to know the Wing. Because many students wish to go to their part-time job or attend a club activity, providing the lunchtime option to receive extra credit is fair in that it is possible for any student to visit the Wing.

Students engage in conversation, work at computers, study, and movie watching. They do homework or do reading, etc. All is done of their own volition. Clearly, student's self-motivation is key. Even with reminders by faculty to use English only, it clearly appears that students do have a genuine desire to improve their English skills in a place where a wide variety of topics are constantly being discussed or covered in Wing Activities that take place most weeks on Tuesday and Thursday after classes. Indeed, the Wing provides a setting for autonomous learning.

In an unpublished Survey Monkey questionnaire done more than 10 years ago by Haynes

and Ferguson, students were asked if they agreed or disagreed with this statement: "Using English in the Wing will help me to improve my English." Of the 262 respondents, 244 said "yes" (93.1%).

Those entering the Wing decide who they are going to sit with and what they are going to be doing while there. It is a place for interpersonal construction, furthering each learner's movement towards English language acquisition.

Authenticity in learning

Authenticity covers much in the field of language learning and teaching. For this paper, the social situation space provided students, the L.S. Wing, is considered to be authentic. The Learning Support Wing was conceived and created by teachers, with all its component parts with hopes that students would take advantage of having the opportunity to use English in a real-world setting by visiting there. That has happened; students continually visit the Wing and are interacting in a real-world setting. It is not a make-believe setting where people are pretending to be an English setting. Inner and Outer-Circle English speakers bring their own variety of English along with their identity as people from whatever culture they have come from. Cultures and language is mixed and integrated into an authentic environment.

For the most part, students visit the Wing because they feel at home. It is an island of support where they are surrounded by others who are similarly motivated.

There is an apparent show of enthusiasm, from students for immersion into this English setting, visible to teachers. In fact, students who have regularly visited the Wing are remembered most, years later, by teachers who have also spent time there. With no lack of enthusiasm on the part of students, it becomes an enjoyable place for teachers to interact with students on real-life topics. We find ourselves able to sit and enjoy interacting with motivated learners.

Student near peers and teachers give guidance, encouragement, and support to those wishing to improve their English.

The Benefits

In discussing the benefits, it should first be acknowledged that the idea and evolution of the L.S. Wing has not been perfect, as few things are. A large number of students do not visit the Learning Support Wing for a variety of reasons; one primary reason expressed by students is their lack of confidence. Perhaps if English skills teachers would more often encourage students to visit the Wing, there could be an increase in the number of students who could benefit from doing so. After all, Kurt Vonnegut (2013) also wrote, "We have to con-

tinually be jumping off cliffs and developing our wings on the way down."

World Englishes pedagogical benefits

The School of World Englishes has not overlooked the resources available to our students in our own environment. Teachers from Inner and Outer-Circle countries use the teacher-desks at the L.S. Wing. Over the years, teachers from Canada, France, Japan, the Philippines, the U.K., the U.S., and Zambia, have held seats there, providing a rich bounty (Morrison & White) of English varieties for our English learners.

In recent years, an increased exposure to English varieties is also enhanced as visiting students from China, Italy, and the United States spend more time at the Learning Support Wing. All in all, developing familiarity and acceptance of varieties of English, including their own Japanese variety is important.

At the L.S. Wing, students are given space to see and know themselves as learners. It allows for noticing of their own development and linguistic output while increasing familiarity and appreciation for world Englishes. From a world Englishes perspective the L.S. Wing also promotes the value of English interaction with other non-native speakers and native-speakers alike. WEs students can engage with one another or with native speakers, or simply just sit and listen.

Benefits to students

What are the benefits? We can naturally surmise that confidence is increased, motivation is enhanced, and independence is increased as students increasingly interact using English. They can then learn further what demands their own learning requires.

Those entering the L.S. decide who they are going to sit with, what they are going to be talking about, and what they are going to be doing while there. It is a place for interpersonal construction, furthering their English language acquisition. Students decide for themselves their own appropriate social interaction level, thus their own learning. The level of learning taking place would logically mean students are interacting within their own 'zone of proximal development.'

Moriyama's research describes how "providing an informal learning experience outside the traditional language classroom works well as alternative means for learners where students share the same goals of speaking the target language." Students choosing to immerse themselves with the target language have "proved successful in promoting learners' proficiency in the target language" (Genesee, 1985; Snow, 1990).

Over the years, students who visit the Wing as first-year students continue to visit there in their second-year. The number of third-year students decreases, however, those students visiting are those that have gone there during their first and second-years. Students who are

clever enough to realize that exposure to and using English beyond curriculum requirements will often visit the L.S. Wing. They choose whether or not to enter for the purpose of increasing their interaction English skills, and to interact with their seniors and with teachers who expand upon students' exposure to varieties of English and cultures from around the world. Students work towards their goals by using English resulting in increased knowledge, independence, and confidence in an English-speaking world, even if it is only an island.

Moriyama explains further the value for English learners immersing themselves in an English-speaking world is based on the "underlying assumption that the more you speak the target language and live within an English speaking culture, the better you become at using that target language."

Students can take advantage of working in pairs, in a group, or by themselves. Students are sometimes sharing, or planning, or practicing for speaking for a class or presentation, creating Power Point slides, or discussing academic and social issues about Japan and the world outside of Japan, or linguistics. The topics can be anything. Learners are working with others to build their knowledge and use of English. Wing learners' continual visits there show success and feelings of success, thus providing further continued returns.

Benefits for the university

For years, staff members from our university's admission office have brought high-school teachers, high-school students accompanied by their teachers, and even parents to the Learner Support Wing at which time all can see and hear English in use in the various activities taking place there. In addition, during Open Campus days, all interested parties can visit the L.S. Wing to feel the holistic environment provided for English learners.

The L.S. Wing is also used as a setting for photo opportunities, which in itself, indicates appreciation by staff, teachers, and students.

Conclusion

One of our reasonable goals here in the School of World Englishes is to have students make progress in their abilities to use English, to add value to their university learning experience. The learning opportunities provided at the Learning Support Wing, an active English learning center, must be recognized as an integral part of our English learning curriculum. The L.S. Wing helps prepare students for any goals they may have in being able to use their knowledge of English for their future challenges.

Students need to be continually informed and motivated to benefit from the advantages offered by visiting there. Educating students on the various ways that are available for them to be responsible for their own learning remains an important and continuous task.

The educational concepts put forth by van Lier and others, whereby students can bring their knowledge and prior experiences towards their own cognitive development gives credence for teachers to encourage students to visit the Wing, a place where those who wish to benefit by the building of their confidence and their increasing English abilities. It is also, of course, an island to build friendships.

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