

The Importance of Learning spaces for Language Education

— Based on observations at universities in Japan and Hong Kong —

言語学習におけるラーニング・スペースの重要性

— 日本と香港の事例を基に —

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Abstract : 大学における学習環境の見直しが近年増加している。これまでの教室のスタイルやデザインを変え、指導方法にあったスペースを作ることで教える側と学ぶ側の学習効果が向上することに繋がった研究的な成果が出ている。これまで訪問した香港と日本の施設を調査し成果に繋がる要素はなにかを探った。あらゆる施設で様々な取り組みが行われている中、インターネットやパソコン、スマートフォンの普及が学習効果に大きく影響している。現在大学でICT（情報通信技術）を導入し、様々なハードウェアやソフトウェアを活かして授業を発展していることが共通点として上げられる。

Keywords : ICT, EFL, Social Learning Spaces, learning commons, Student engagement

I Introduction

Learning spaces are constantly evolving and we have spent the last year exploring the different types of design and philosophy in order to increase the engagement of IPU students into their education.

We hope that this report will help IPU in renovating, upgrading and building new learning spaces. Our ultimate aim is to create a conversation between all educators about the best way to exploit learning spaces, ICT tools and existing classroom.

This report is a sum of our observations and visit to numerous universities in Japan and abroad.

These learning spaces are separated accordingly into Self Learning Spaces and Learning Commons.

In December 2015, we attended the JASAL (Japan Association of Self-Access Learning) meeting. We had a chance to reflect on the importance and the creation of such a space by discussing what they expect of a Self-Access Learning space. By creating our own Self-Access Learning space or Learning Common,

IPU has a chance to join this national association and participate in the conversation about the importance of these special places for students to meet and improve their English skills.

Research Questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences between all cases?
2. What are the best learning space design practices?
3. How can a good learning space increase student's motivation and autonomy.

II Methodology

This study is based on factual observations on the ground and discussions with the various people who are in charge of these learning spaces. We documented these visits by taking numerous pictures and gathering all the available documentation about these spaces. The observation is based on notes taken

during our visits.

We will compare the data we gathered.

III Case studies

Case A (Japan)

University A has a Self-Learning Space. The space is open for all students interested in learning English, but it also offers the options to learn French, German, Chinese or Korean. The center has a core of permanent staff supported by volunteer students. English teachers are also supporting the University A Self-Learning Space by spending one lunch time a week at the cafe on a rotating basis.

Students are allowed to eat lunch inside the learning space and it's a popular meeting point for all the foreign students.

The learning space has an enclosed classroom and during the day, the rest of the space is shared between instructors, student instructors and people who want to consult newspapers or study. The center has a large screen television playing CNN or the BBC.

The learning space has its own collection of books and academic resources. The book collections include resources for foreigners who want to learn about Japan.

The main space of the learning space can easily be reorganized for conferences and presentation.

Case B (Japan)

We attended a conference at University B about ICT. The university combined their computer room with a resource center where it is possible to rent English DVD. While the main purpose of our visit wasn't to visit a Self-Learning Space, we were surprised by the ICT.

University B offered all the attendee at the conference a quick and easy guest access to their WIFI system. The wifi coverage was extensive with a wifi router in every single room.

The electronic attendance system was also present in every room. University B students only need to

touch their student card on a card reader when they walk in a classroom. This type of system is a real time saver and facilitates the real time management of attendance.

The in-class ICT equipment included over-head projector in every classes and a comprehensive and easy to use amplification system and connectors for computers and microphone. The system was labeled in Japanese and English and offered clear and easy instructions.

Case C (Japan)

University C offers their students a standalone Self Learning Center which is a new 3 stories building a couple of meter away from the main campus. The language center has its own permanent staff that is independent from the English Department.

The mission of the center is to support the students in improving their TOEIC score, preparation for international presentations and writing academic papers in English. The space also works as a meeting and social space for foreign students and Japanese students.

The first floor of the center is an open public space which is shared with the office of international studies for the student seeking an experience abroad. Like many universities, the University C has a network of international universities where the student can further their study.

The second floor is the main floor of the language center. The students have access to a collection of books and DVD. The students can borrow books. The second floor also offers small meeting rooms and areas where the students can watch DVDs (Picture 1).

The third floor offers a dedicated consulting area where students can reserve a block of time with an English instructor. The consulting services cover different topics: speaking abilities, TOEIC, academic writing, self introduction and basic English lessons.

The center has a limited number of foreign students, but they concentrate on helping their high international mobility students who are expected to present and attend international meetings.



Picture 1

Case D (Japan)

University C Self Learning Space offers their students an opportunity to practice their English in a dedicated space. Like University C, the space is independent from the English Department and has its own staff. Both University C and D have student volunteers.

The space at University D is divided into a cafe type space in the entrance, a general meeting area toward the back, a smaller separated classroom and enclosed studying spaces. Noise management seems to be one of the basic issues facing all these centers. The mix use nature of these types of Self Learning space bring together students who want to talk and other who are interested in studying silently.

We noticed an effort for the University D staff to provide plenty of electrical outlets for the students to charge their devices. The center has a lending system where the students can borrow iPads loaded with educational applications. The iPads need to be maintained by the volunteers.

It was noted that the independence of the center from the English department created tension between the teachers and the center staff.

Case E (Hong Kong)

University E spared no expenses in the field of Self-Learning Spaces and ICT. Their language center is also running the general English program at the university and the language center is just an extension of their effort. While University C and

D had barely any contacts between the English Department and their center, the University E model is based on complete integration.

Their language center is staffed by teachers and dedicated employees who are responsible for the day to day activities. The center offers blocks of time for the students to improve specific English needs.

The center at University E is not solely focused on English and offers all the students the possibility to study Mandarin, Cantonese and other languages like French or Spanish.

The consulting desk had an ingenious double screen system where the instructor can easily share his screen with the students.

The center also had its own books and DVD which the students can consult.

The center had numerous self access computers including a few Apple computers which are used by owners of iPhones, iPods and iPads (Picture 2).



Picture 2

Their multi floor library was also well connected with WIFI and they offered numerous work stations including dedicated PC and Apple rooms.

Case F (Hong Kong)

University F brand new Learning Common is a massive 2 floor structure. While not solely dedicated to English Learning, it has dedicated spaces for students to learn English. The massive space was split in different usages. The Learning Commons has numerous collaborative enclosed spaces, vast open spaces, silent studying area, many computer stations and plenty of electrical outlets for the students to

recharge their devices.

The learning common serves as a hub for the students to meet friends, study, collaborate and seek consulting for their English skills. The ICT support office was also located within the walls of the learning common, making it the place for the students to come if they have question about ICT.

The English department mission encompasses all aspect of learning English and like University E, they offer different levels of consulting.

University F has a system where students can request a block of time with a teacher, a native speaker or a graduate student.

University F used digital signage in many ways and it included a beautiful video wall used to project artistic pictures (Picture 3).



Picture 3

University has a separate space for international students which double as a functioning coffee shop. This second space is more conducive to noisier activities like concert or lectures. The international center doubles as the study abroad department where students can seek advice on study abroad possibilities.

Commercial visit

Uchida office in Osaka

We had a chance to visit the office of Uchida in Osaka. Uchida opened his doors and showed us their classroom for the future.

Their seamless 3 projectors interactive whiteboard system is technically impressive. The electronic white board offered countless possibilities, but I am curious to see if this system exclusively runs on Window PC or can also be used with Apple OS or Chrome OS.

There is no doubt that these electronic whiteboards are precious ICT tools, but we believe that interoperability is crucial.

Uchida seem to be keen on the promotion of their swivel chairs which we are currently using in our multipurpose room.

Kyoto Sangyo University

Following the visit to Uchida, we visited KSU to see their brand new Learning Common space. The KSU space is built on two floors with a vast open space on the first floor which uses the multiple projector system. The projection was a little bit dim due to the natural light filtering through the large windows.

The big room had nice Uchida tables and chairs which can easily be reconfigured.

The learning common features collaborative seats on two floors. The pod can be used by students. Each pod has its own white board and on the second floor, a connection to a widescreen TV (Picture 4). None of the students were using these TV which I am sure teachers could easily use.



Picture 4

The second floor mezzanine has some classroom space out in the open.

The 100% open architecture seems a noise pollution problem waiting to happen.

Their ICT department lends computers and tablets to the students. We noticed an innovative printer which can be used by the students. The students can use their personal account or their own device to connect to the printer.

IPU students, especially in our university often ask their teachers to print their homework or exercises. An easy access to a password protected printer would save the IPU staff precious time.

IV Reflections about learning spaces

Best ideas from the visits

- The integration of a language center with the English department seems to be the best solution for supporting the students and integrating extracurricular activities and regular lessons.
- High quality wifi coverage seems to be a must for the best ICT environment.
- Separate spaces are a solution to avoid the issue of noise pollution
- Dedicated English consulting desk with double screen.
- The students appreciate books about TOEIC written in Japanese, for Japanese.
- When it comes to workstations, a mix of different computers is the best: PC, Chrome OS, Apple OS
- The best learning-space or learning common is places where the students are comfortable.
- The ICT set up is easy to use and offer the same connections in every room.

The question of autonomy and motivation

The common thing between all these learning spaces is to increase the student motivation and autonomy while providing them with a place where they can meet.

The learning commons and learning spaces are all flexible places where it is easy to redesign the layout of the space according to the need.

The students are able to find in these spaces the tools they need to collaborate, create and self study.

We also found out that all these spaces are offering strong support systems to the students who are able to customize their learning with the help of teachers, animators or tutors.

These spaces concentrate all the self learning material and resources in one place, combining the role of library and multimedia room.

Design lessons from the business world

Major companies like Google and Facebook have all been adopting open space and highly modular space design as a way to encourage collaboration and innovation. This type of design has also been implemented in many American universities, notably at the Media Lab at MIT and Stanford.

If we want our two students to think like entrepreneurs, we need to provide with the same kind of creative spaces available in the best companies in the world.

The maker space mentality is now the norm in business school in America and we hope that this type of simple modular design will be adopted in IPU new business school and Global building.

Current state of ICT at IPU

The classic classroom layout is the norm at IPU (White board in the front, students sitting in rows). The only ICT is the overhead projector.

While this classical layout is adapted to traditional lessons, it's less than perfect for student centered and project based learning.

IPU currently has 3 PC rooms equipped with Window PC. Most of the rooms in our university are equipped with overhead projectors. Room 3 and 4 don't have any projectors.

The Window PCs are slow, inflexible and rarely updated.

Our observations let us believe that we need to diversify our ICT offering by mixing up different operating systems such as Apple OS, Window and Chrome. The current trend in America is to deploy inexpensive Chrome based computers and after a one year trial, we can confirm that these computers can

easily replace our current computers.

Bibliography and references

Design ideas and improvements for IPU

With the new construction and renovation of the Global Campus, we hope that extensive wifi coverage will become the norm at IPU.

The learning spaces of the future will need to be modular and the teacher will be able to adapt each classroom to his need and teaching style.

From our observations, the minimum setting should be of one projector per room and sound system. WIFI should be available in all classrooms. The current coverage inside Philosophia is less than perfect with room #2 having almost no coverage. If we want to give our students a positive ICT learning environment, the level of ICT needs to be standardized and available everywhere.

V Conclusion

The relation between space and our mindset is undeniable and if IPU want to adopt new pedagogical goals such as active learning and project based learning, we will need to align the new classes with these new approaches.

When it comes to learning space design, we believe that it's more important to be inspired than to simply copy a model from an existing university. The creation of a learning space is closely related to the creation of a narrative which should be unique and adapted to the need of the students. (BOYS, 2015) mentions that: " *If universities and colleges are to be less influenced by external pressures, and more able to respond effectively to their own internal dynamics, they need to 'learn' more effectively from what they already do.*"

We sincerely hope that our visits to all the universities will spark a discussion on designing the future of IPU learning spaces.

Learning spaces and learning commons are now at the center of all the universities we visited and we wish for IPU to be able to showcase such an inspiring space in the near future.

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