Creating an International Communication Lounge

at Tokai University Sapporo

東海大学札幌校舎における

インターナショナルラウンジ活用の試み

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Abstract

This report describes the methods taken in opening a new, international communication lounge at Tokai University's Sapporo campus. It outlines the first year and a half of the process, from setting up the room environment to creating an academic framework to support student usage of the space. Two faculty members worked closely with students in launching the lounge, creating goals and policies, while working with students to plan events that were open to the entire campus community. Qualitative feedback was collected in the form of instructor field notes and reflective reports written by students. Both positive and negative findings are discussed, and ideas on how to improve the lounge in the future are also considered.

要　旨

　東海大学札幌キャンパスでは，2016 年に学生が自律的な学習や活動を行うことのできる 交流スペースとして，インターナショナルラウンジを開設した。本稿では，インターナショナルラウンジを開設して以降の 1 年半に亘る取り組みの経過と，その成果を報告する。特に，これまでの取り組みとして，本報告の筆者である 2 名の教員が学生と協力しながら，より魅力的な空間づくりを目指し，インターナショナルラウンジを使用して実施した様々なイベントや学生の成長の様子を報告する。さらに，今後取り組むべき課題について論じる。

Keywords: English Communication, Public Space Planning, International Lounge, Self-Access Learning, Internship

キーワード：英語コミュニケーション，公共空間の創造，インターナショナルラウンジ，自律学習，インターンシップ

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1. Introduction

A popular trend in Japanese universities in recent years has been the emergence of English conversation lounges and self-access centers. In campuses across the country, spaces dedicated to English-only environments have opened up in an effort to offer students more opportunities to use the English language outside of the classroom while engaging in casual, intercultural exchange. These highly visible learning environments can promote a school's international appeal while also meeting the Ministry of Education (MEXT) recommendations on internationalizing university education and cultivating "Japanese with English communication abilities" in student populations (Birchley, 2007; Gyenes, 2016; Yoshikawa, 2013).

This paper outlines the opening of the international communication lounge at Tokai University's Sapporo campus. It describes the first year and a half of the process, including initial room set up and drafting an academic framework to support student usage of the space. Two faculty members worked closely with students in launching the lounge, creating goals and policies while working with students, administrators, and other departments to plan events that were open to everyone. Through trial and error, running the international communication lounge was a learning experience for all stakeholders involved. Personal observations from instructor field reports share some of the lessons learned. Qualitative feedback was also collected in the form of personal interviews and reflective reports written by students. Both positive and negative findings are discussed, and ideas on how to improve the lounge in the future are also mentioned.

2. Discussion

Studies have shown the importance of creating "casual spaces" on university campuses. Besides giving students a place to relax, socialize, and study on school grounds, these environments can impact student academic engagement and overall retention (Harrington, 2014). Study lounges and self-access centers can also facilitate student self-study and peer-to-peer learning. They provide an alternative to meeting in crowded lunchrooms or unoccupied classrooms, while giving students a comfortable place to meet, build relationships, and enjoy unplanned encounters. Brown (2005) noted that a well-designed physical environment on campus could impact a student's sense of pride and self-esteem. This feeling of pride can spread, and the whole university campus can potentially become an effective learning space (Brown & Long, 2006).

On the Tokai Sapporo campus, such casual, public spaces are in short supply; student clubs or seminar groups frequently occupy the university's limited, public territory. The need to create an all-access, community lounge space was evident. Students often complained about having "nowhere to hang out" or "having to do homework in noisy lunchrooms" (Field notes, 1/12/2016). As a result, many students tend to leave campus grounds as soon as their classes finish, especially those who are not members of a school club. Finding a way to keep these students on campus, engaged in social activities and casual learning has long been a challenge.

After years of requesting the designation of an all-access, public space on campus, it became a reality in 2015 when campus administrators transformed a room previously filled with gym equipment into an

international communication lounge. Old sports equipment and exercise machines were cleared out, and the spacious room was renovated with new flooring and wallpaper. Additionally, computer Wi-Fi was installed along with a ceiling-mounted video projector. Several departments donated tables, chairs, bulletin boards on wheels, a white board, magazine racks, and a 20-gallon fish tank, complete with tropical fish. Aesthetically, the new international lounge was a bit of a hodgepodge in terms of matching furniture and overall design sense, but nobody seemed to mind. It was a welcomed addition to campus facilities, and initial enthusiasm for the space was strong. Early planning meetings in March 2016 focused on how to inform students about the new lounge space, how to manage the event schedule, how to communicate event requests between departments, what the usage guidelines would be, and what additional equipment would be good to buy.

The new, international lounge was designed to be a multi-purpose, public space, where all departments on campus could hold events. It is important to note that the lounge was not limited to English language related events; it was meant to serve all student populations and all types of activities. Throughout the 2016 academic school year, the lounge lived up to its stated purpose and was used to hold a variety of campus events, including Open Campus sessions, visits from area high schools, study abroad briefings, club activities, class projects, job seminars, thesis presentation practice sessions, a medical health check day, international friendship events, a *KAKEHASHI Project*[3], and a community event called *To-Collabo*[4], which was open to the outside public. In addition to all of these activities, the 15 events hosted by Internship B, which was a class of the international communications department, in spring semester 2016 added to the mix. The international lounge at Tokai Sapporo was a busy, and frequently booked public space in its first year of operation.

In planning the international lounge set up, researching the approaches taken at other universities, both domestic and abroad, was helpful. Besides getting ideas on how to set up the physical environment of the room, reading about the various challenges and success stories different schools experienced proved to be invaluable. For example, at Simon Fraser University, public spaces on three different Canadian campuses were upgraded from 2007 to 2015. In renovating these spaces, SFU administrators researched the works of urban planner William H. Whyte and the Project for Public Spaces (pps.org). SFU recognized that student social spaces depend on the greater community to take pride in the spaces and help with the upkeep of the spaces (SFU, 2007). Table 1 lists the strategies for SFU's student lounges that were adapted from PPS's Eleven Principles for Creating Great Community Places. The original strategies were reframed to apply to student social spaces on SFU campuses. They serve as an excellent model in collaborative planning and public space design.

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[3] The *KAKEHASHI Project* is an international cultural exchange program between Japan and North America, sponsored by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. The program sends Japanese students to North America while inviting North American students to Japan in order to promote international understanding between countries. The *KAKEHASHI Project* tagline is "The Bridge for Tomorrow".

[4] *To-Collabo* is a comprehensive name of projects Tokai University has been working on with local communities since being chosen as one of the universities designated for the "COC Project (Center of Community Project)" by Japan's Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

Table 1: Eleven Strategies for Students Lounges (Simon Fraser University, 2007, p.8)

Strategies	Steps to Take
a. The Community is the Expert	Ask and collect feedback from the students on what they feel is important. Collect feedback from Facilities staff on security, maintenance.
b. Create a Place not a Design	Ensure the place is welcoming and comfortable, introduce management changes to develop effective relationships between activities.
c. Look for Partners	Consult with Young Alumni, Facilities Management key personnel, departmental administrators, Student groups, etc.
d. Observe how the spaces function	Continue monitoring to observe how the spaces are being used (or not used) and evolve and adapt.
e. Have a Vision for the Social Spaces	Keep a clear vision of what lounges are to the campus and what the image is about.
f. Experiment in small ways	Experiments with small changes can be accomplished in a short time such as seating, artwork, lighting, etc. to test what works.
g. Plan spaces "intentionally" to "triangulate" activities	Intentionally place features to create opportunities for social interaction e.g. put seating, vending machines, newsstands together.
h. Expect challenges	No one is the "keeper" of a public space. Develop and nurture community responsibility. Discuss and problem-solve to overcome barriers.
i. Form follows Function	Look for the form (not the design) that supports the functions.
j. Money is not always the Issue	Furnishings, plants, etc. are inexpensive improvements with big impact. Involving students and partners in programming can also reduce costs. It also creates enthusiasm and costs are viewed more broadly in relation to overall benefits.
k. You are never finished	Be open to the need for change in strategy as needs change over time; have a flexible management to make the changes when required.

Simply creating a new, public space on campus does not guarantee that students will use it. Many community spaces fail after the initial novelty wears off and curiosity wanes. Designing an effective public space can be quite difficult to accomplish, because the complexity involved is seldom understood. As

urban planner William H. Whyte famously said, "It's hard to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished." (Project for Public Spaces, 2009).

3. Description of Methods

In order to ensure regular usage of Tokai Sapporo's international lounge and get students involved in the decision making process, a class was created to provide an academic framework around managing the newly opened space. This class was called Internship B, and in spring semester 2016, nine Japanese students registered for the course. All students were English majors pursuing a degree in international communications. The ages and year in school among the participants ranged. Four students were enrolled in their second year, three in third year, and two in fourth year. The English proficiency of all participants was in the intermediate range. The Internship B class focused on running the international lounge, and officially met a total of 30 times (15 weekly planning meetings and 15 weekly events) over the course of a fifteen-week semester. To facilitate regular communication among participants, the Internship B class created a Facebook group page. Meeting notes, photos, and event posters were shared using this app. At the start of the semester, guidelines from the class syllabus defined the goals of the project, and served to create a shared vision for all stakeholders.

3.1 Weekly Planning Sessions

The Internship B course required students to hold weekly meetings in English to plan future events, reflect on recent successes and failures, and discuss suggestions for improvement. In the first 4-5 weeks of the semester, students were heavily reliant on teacher support; they needed constant reminding to take meeting notes, log their participation and attendance, plan ahead for upcoming events, forecast potential problems, and create flyers to advertise events. After several weeks of delegating duties and modeling the structure of the meeting, students became more familiar with teacher expectations and what their roles demanded. Around mid-term, students were noticeably more confident in planning lounge activities, reflecting, delegating tasks and relying less and less on teacher assistance (Field notes, 6/6/2016). By the end of the semester, clear leaders had emerged, and meetings and events sailed along smoothly. It was encouraging to see students fully engaged, actively collaborating in event planning and facilitation for the lounge.

3.2 Room Set Up

As mentioned earlier in this report, the international lounge at Tokai Sapporo was newly remodeled at the end of 2015. Most of the university's budget for this space was spent on new flooring, walls, media equipment and IT infrastructure. Very little money was available for room furnishings, so old furniture was donated from different departments on campus (Fig. 1). One instructor from the Design department spent considerable time salvaging long wooden tables from a storage room. Seeing that these tables were well worn on the surface side, he ingeniously removed the table legs and flipped the table surface over,

using the pristine underside as the new tabletop. Another instructor salvaged plush sofa seats from a local building demolition, providing a more comfortable option to sitting in hard, wooden chairs. Other instructors also donated an old file cabinet and magazine racks. These racks were filled with old English language magazines, Hokkaido tourist information, TOEIC study materials, and university publications. Late in 2016, the Marine Biology department donated a tropical fish tank to the lounge, and department students were given the task of regularly maintaining it. Vertical partition panels / bulletin boards were donated by the International Communications department in an effort to add more posters and warmth.

Fig. 1: Lounge Set Up

3.3 Weekly Events

Throughout the spring semester, students planned and facilitated events that were open to the whole campus. Some of these events were suggested by the instructors, especially during the first four weeks of the semester. Events were usually held in the late afternoon, from 4:40pm – 6:10pm on Fridays. A few events, such as TOEIC Week, were scheduled on multiple days during weekday lunch periods, so the total number of events held exceeded the 15-event Internship B requirement. During the semester, Internship B students helped create, publicize, and facilitate a variety of event activities, including student presentation sessions, Korean culture night, game night, sharing personal stories, and dramatic improvisation skits (Fig. 2, Fig. 3, Fig. 4). For each of these events, students created publicity flyers that were posted around campus or uploaded to SNS sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snap Chat, and LINE. These posters were also sent to teachers at Tokai Sapporo High School and encouraged high

school students to join in the events (Fig. 5).

Fig. 2: Student Presentation Event in the International Lounge, 2016

Fig. 3: Examples of International Lounge Events, 2016.

(Clockwise from top, left to right: Poster Workshop, Korean Culture Night, and Game Night.)
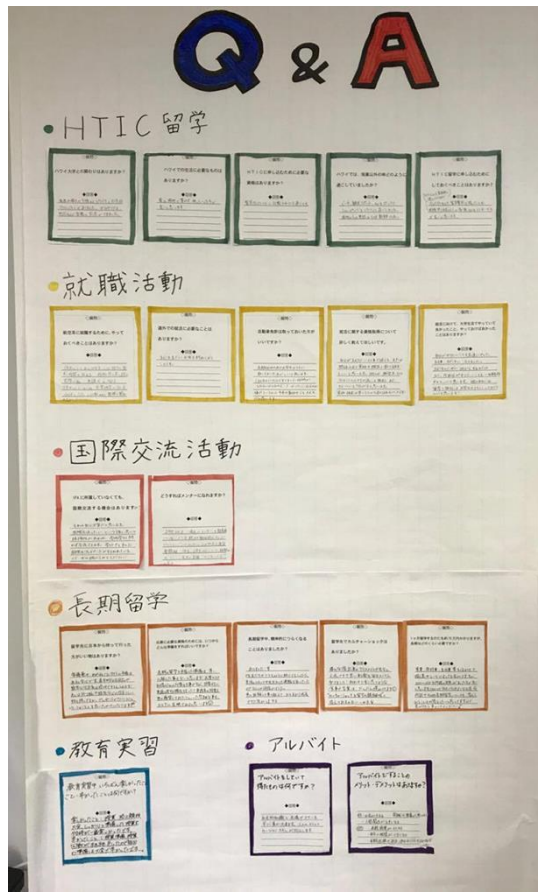
Fig. 4: Q & A Poster

Fig. 5: Examples of Event Publicity Posters, 2016.

3.4 Other Internship B Requirements

Besides hosting weekly planning meetings and lounge events, the Internship B course also required students to complete other tasks. For each event held, students created surveys and collected data to use in their final written reflections. These surveys were either paper-based or written in digital format, and typically asked for demographic information and qualitative feedback on the activities held. Another document that students submitted at the end of the semester was their participation log sheet. Using this log sheet, students kept accounts of their participation in weekly meetings and events. At the end of the semester, this document was collected to verify that students attended at least 30 classes, as required for Internship B credit. The culminating assignment due at the completion of the semester was a final reflective report. Here, students were asked to submit a four to six page report in English, commenting on what was successful or what was most challenging. Findings from collected survey data, personal interviews with other students, and photos from the lounge events were encouraged for these reflective reports.

4. Findings

2016 was a modestly successful year for the international lounge at Tokai Sapporo. The Internship B course in spring semester provided organizational scaffolding for managing the space. It also allowed students to experience both success and failure in a direct and meaningful way. Course surveys collected at the completion of the semester showed that all interns held favorable opinions about the 15-week class. The final reflection reports also revealed both positive and negative feelings towards the approaches taken in planning and facilitating international lounge events. These feelings can be seen in the comments of registered Internship B students:[5]

"I think [this semester] [6]everyone has been able to grow. I was able to learn to be responsible for myself. I tried to adapt myself to new surroundings."

"I think I very enjoy the international lounge this semester. I could get more English skills."

"I have learned that planning a 90-minute activity is very difficult."

"Through the activities of this internship project, I learned many things. [There still are] some issues we need to solve. I have heard that some students, especially freshmen, are afraid whether or not they have to use English perfectly [while in the lounge]. I want to tell them that the answer is NO, and that students

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[5] Permission to use student quotations was obtained in writing prior to the publication of this report.
[6] English in square brackets in students' comments were added by researchers to clarify the meaning.

can improve [their] English skills together.”

"We need to find a way to attract more students to the lounge events. [In many cases] only a few people came. Most participants were Internship B students. Attracting students from other departments is a big, difficult problem.”

It seemed that the most successful international lounge events were effective because they carried a broad appeal across different departments. Poster night, for example, drew students from Design, Sports, and the International Communication department. The creative enjoyment of making art while listening to English language music was a surprise hit. While English language was used in creating the poster text, students were not strictly forced to use it while communicating to each other. The learning environment was very low pressure, relaxed, and fun (Field notes, 4/27/16). Another success was Korean Night, which invited a foreign language instructor and his seminar students to lead a variety of cultural activities, including traditional games and a Korean writing workshop using Hangul character stickers. In this event, students mostly used Japanese and Korean language to explain and communicate (Field notes, 7/1/16).

4.1 Challenges

Less successful lounge events seemed to be those focused on using only English. Generating buzz about these events and actually getting students to attend was a continual challenge. For example, TOEIC week, Skit Night, and Show & Tell were events that actively encouraged students to speak English. Even though the environments for these events remained friendly and casual, the fear of having to use English 100% of the time may have been unappealing for many students, leading to low turnouts. Drawing the attention and interest of students with low English proficiency is an uphill battle. Likewise, attracting students from other departments or those with non-English majors continues to be problematic at Tokai Sapporo, as it does in university campuses across the country (Bramley, 2008; Gyenes, 2016; Taylor, 2014). While many instructors actively encourage their Japanese students to use English outside of the classroom, the reality is that most students have little or no need to use English (Barker, 2004). In setting up an English lounge at Hirosaki University, Yoshikawa (2013, p143) admitted the following:

"While the English Lounge (EL) should make every effort to reach a wide student body, the fact remains that if students do not like English, and feel no need to improve their English skills, they are unlikely to take advantage of the EL. Accordingly, the EL should ensure that programs are offered not only to the low-level student, but also to the student who is motivated to improve and expand their EFL competence. In this way, the EL will find its success.”

Breaking down psychological barriers and minimizing the fear of using English outside of the

classroom is one of the biggest challenges for instructors in Japan. It requires a great amount of instructor patience and encouragement, constant experimentation, and a willingness to accept modest progress, no matter how small or incremental a victory might be. The Internship B course in spring semester gave a small number of students a real taste of responsibility, an active role in event management, and a chance to reflect on their collective efforts. It allowed them to create a number of engaging, public events that strengthened participants' English skills in enjoyable ways. The basic framework of Internship B also proved to be a good model to replicate in the following fall semester, when the course was no longer offered. Although the number of student-created lounge events dropped in fall 2016, students gathered to conduct lounge event-planning meetings, engaged in event promotion and publicity, and conducted post-event surveys to gather feedback. Many of the key organizers in these fall events were the very same students who learned leadership roles in the Internship B course (Field notes, 11/15/16). Looking back, the first year of the international lounge at Tokai Sapporo was both hit and miss. While several positive outcomes were achieved, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

5. Looking Ahead

Opening and managing the international lounge at Tokai University Sapporo was a good learning experience for students and teachers alike. Through experimentation and improvisation, several new things were tried for the first time, and the room was regularly used throughout the year. Managing the space in the Internship B course was a great opportunity for students to practice problem solving, time management, and group decision-making skills while using English in non-academic settings.

5.1 Challenges

For a select few, the international lounge space has provided many positive social interactions and learning experiences. The ongoing challenge is that very few students are interested in using the space. Students often split into social groupings according to their clubs or academic majors. Finding ways to capture student interest and increase participation among different departments and across different social groups continues to be a work in progress. Moving forward, there are still several things that need to be considered and developed further, as outlined below.

5.2 Mission and Vision

Defining the mission and vision for the international lounge is an important step in charting its future development. It allows stakeholders to plan for the future and understand what is expected between administrators, departments, instructors, and students. Currently, the mission and vision is vague and ill defined. In March 2016 meetings, it was agreed that the international lounge at Tokai Sapporo was to be shared by all students and all departments on campus. As mentioned earlier in this report, several different departments have used the space for various events, mostly without incident or complaints. Most of the time, however, the room sits empty and unused. On days it is booked for activities, it is usually the

International Communications department students or Internship B laying claim to the territory. Before the purpose of the space can be fully realized, it is important to ask many difficult questions:

・Is the international lounge meant to be an all-purpose room for the entire school, or should it be mainly used for language learning activities ?

・What do other departments on campus think about the space, and what are their ideas for using it? Are they even interested in using it?

・What should the language policy for the room be?

・If the lounge is meant to be designated an English-only zone, how can this policy be enforced in a positive way? (Creating English-only signs and posters is cute, but is this really an effective method for getting students to use English while visiting the room?)

・Was this space created for the purpose of improving students' English skills? If so, how exactly are students supposed to improve?

・Are there resources available for this language improvement goal?

・Who will pay for these resources? Can this be shared among several departments?

・Should additional self-access study materials be added?

・What is the best way to manage these self-access study materials?

・Should the lounge have daily hours of operation?

・Should the door be locked outside of these operational hours?

・Should we consider hiring student staff?

・Is hiring student staff allowed?

・Is there a budget for this?

There are many more questions to ponder in regard to running the international lounge. But first, a clearly defined mission and vision statement must be established. All stakeholders should be given a chance to weigh in on these stated goals, to assure a shared sense of purpose and greater buy in.

5.3 Environmental Upgrades

This report has discussed the role of physical space in student involvement and community on campus. Admittedly, additional research in this area is needed. While the international lounge at Tokai Sapporo is a welcome addition to public space on campus, several things could be done to improve the physical features of the room. Purchasing better furniture would be a good place to start, replacing some of the worn out tables and wooden chairs. Adding a microwave oven and coffee maker might be a way to draw more students to the room, especially during lunchtime. Installing monitors and cable TV (such as J-COM) would allow for English language television, movie and news broadcast viewing. Smaller budget items

such as plants, a low coffee table and an area rug might give the room a more comfortable appeal.

5.4 Adding Self Access Materials

In researching what other Japanese universities have done in setting up lounge space, a common feature to all of them was the presence of student self-access materials. The I-Chat Lounge at Osaka Gakuin University, for example, has bookshelves of "browse-able" reading materials, DVDs, and board games for students to self-select and use at will. At Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University, instructors want to add more technology equipment in the lounge, thinking a few academic stations with computers might be good for class projects, self-study, and video conferencing with other universities (Taylor, 2014). At Tokai University's Shonan campus, several instructors have developed a graded reader library where students can borrow books and read English stories for pleasure. Their model of setting up the graded reader library should be further examined and considered for adoption at Tokai Sapporo. Adding more materials to the lounge would also require adding locking cabinets and drawers for security and theft prevention. Strategies on how to best manage self-access materials would also have to be explored. More research on this topic is called for, and will no doubt serve to enhance our lounge methodology and practices.

5.5 Year Two of the Lounge

In spring 2017, the international lounge began its second year of operation. Two additional native English-speaking teachers joined the Internship B class, which added additional student support and new ideas to the class. One significant upgrade was the creation of a class website through the Weebly application (http://tokaiinternshipb.weebly.com/).   On this free website, students can create a website, manage the course, schedule future events, log their attendance record, and upload photos. While it requires a bit of training to familiarize students with Weebly, instructors agree that it ultimately leads to a more organized internship class, and students can gain useful computer skills that may serve them in the future.

6. Conclusion

This report has described the development of a new, international communication lounge over a year and a half. With the help of faculty and students, an empty place has been changed to a comfortable community place. Engaging students in promoting the lounge use in the Internship class was also effective, as students continued to use the lounge and organized some events.

Moving forward, it will be interesting to see how the international lounge evolves at Tokai University Sapporo. Instructors and the university administration must work together towards a shared purpose and a common goal. If this purpose and these goals are not clearly defined and understood, it is impossible to know which direction to move next. Should we allocate more funding for self-access materials? What can we do to better utilize this shared, public space? Is the purpose of the lounge to create more English speaking opportunities outside of the classroom? How can we make the English more relevant and

potentially more useful in the eyes of our students? Increasing student motivation and getting them to make the leap from merely learning the language to actually using the language will be the ultimate challenge.

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