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Key words : self-access learning, language learning, English learning, international education, evaluation, social learning space, learner beliefs

English Cafe at Otemon (E-CO) is a self-access centre which was established in 2013 in a collaboration between Otemon Gakuin University and Kanda University of International Studies to enhance the language and international education of students at Otemon. Since opening, it has become a vibrant language learning community, where home students, international students and staff come together to support each other's language learning and learn from each other. All students and staff of the university are free to use the facilities to improve their English language skills and many who do become regular users and active members of this community. In this sense, E-CO is not simply a facility for independent learning, where students can complete learning activities or speak English outside a classroom environment, but rather a social learning space (Murray & Fujishima, 2016) where the social interactions which take place in the space are vital for facilitating learning.

This paper reports on one of the most difficult aspects of self-access management, namely evaluation. Given its nature as a social learning space, and the complexity of its nature, it is quite difficult to evaluate the impact of the space, and to pinpoint where it is fulfilling its mission and where it needs to improve its services. Quantitative data such as the number of users only give very simplistic information about the usage, and very little on the impact of the space on learning. In order to gain a more detailed picture, it is necessary to gather more data from a variety of sources.

Morrison's (2005) in-depth study into evaluation of a self-access centre demonstrates the difficulties of evaluating a complex interactional space. Users have different objectives in using the space, and different

stakeholders emphasise different foci for evaluation. The voluntary nature of the space also means it is extremely challenging to control for variables, which is more possible in a classroom environment.

As Gardner and Miller (2015) recommend, any evaluation must provide useful information for the managers of the centre, and should help with decisions such as service provision and scheduling. With this in mind, E-CO has included in its evaluation procedures an annual survey of student usage, which is administered in July each year. This paper reports on the results of the 2018 survey, with some reference to survey results in previous years to give a more detailed picture of how the space is evolving. The survey was designed to collect firsthand data from the users of E-CO about how they use the space and their attitude to it.

Aim of the research

The aim of this research project was to gain insight into how Otemon students are using E-CO and the impact they feel it is having on their language learning. Similar surveys have also been carried out in 2014, 2016 and 2017, and where appropriate comparisons will be made with previous years. The data from this survey provides useful information for deciding E-CO's future focus areas, and how we can address them.

Research questions

The survey was designed to address three areas: students' patterns of usage, their overall attitude to and impressions of E-CO, and their opinions on what kind of impact, if any, E-CO has had on their attitudes and ability to learn about foreign cultures and study English.

This latter question aims to provide data to help us examine to what extent E-CO is achieving its mission, as laid out in its mission statement from 2013:

E-CO aims to:

- foster positive attitudes towards the learning of English at Otemon
- develop students' English language and communicative proficiency so that they can successfully participate in a global society
- foster language learner autonomy and life-long self-directed learning skills
- generate interest in study abroad and cultural exchange programmes
- nurture intercultural awareness and a sense of global citizenship

The specific research questions were as follows:

- Usage: How are students using E-CO, in terms of frequency (how often do they use different E-CO spaces?) and activity (what do they do there?).
- Attitude to E-CO: What do students think are the good and bad aspects of E-CO?
- Impact on English learning: What do E-CO users perceive to be E-CO's...

- ..impact on attitude to learning English?
- ..impact on interest in foreign cultures?
- ..impact on self-directed learning skills?
- ..impact on their English ability?

As it is difficult to control enough variables to measure actual impact, this survey reveals data on student perceptions of the impact E-CO has had on their learning, rather than an objective quantifiable measure of actual impact.

Survey design

The survey was adapted from a previous version of the survey, which had been conducted in 2017. Versions of the same survey were also administered in 2014 & 2016. It was revised based on responses given in the 2017 survey and some questions adapted, added or deleted. In order to allow comparison with previous years, however, the general format was maintained. A mixture of closed and open-ended questions was designed to generate responses which would result in a detailed picture of E-CO usage. It was written originally in English, then a Japanese version was created based on the English original. The translation was agreed by two bilingual speakers of English and Japanese. The survey was piloted with two students and some small revisions made to improve the comprehensibility of the questions.

This research was conducted between July 10th and 25th, 2018. All home students who visited E-CO during this time were approached to complete the survey, and given a paper with the link using a QR code. International students were not included in the survey. The survey was also shared on E-CO's Facebook page. In total 76 responses were received, but only 65 are included in the final data set, as some were incomplete or did not give consent for data to be used in the research.

Respondent demographics

The year groups of the respondents are shown in Figure 1. It is noteworthy that nearly half (47%) of respondents were first year students. In terms of department, International Liberal Arts made up nearly half (46%) of the responses (Figure 2). When the other department in that faculty, Global Japanese Studies, is included, this increases to 56%.

Of the 65 respondents, 19 had taken part in Otemon or self-organised long or short study abroad programmes and 12 were E-CO student staff (Figure 3).

Findings

Usage

The majority of respondents (46%) said they visited E-CO once or twice a week, with a significant minority coming almost every day (22%) or every day (15%). The students who answered that they have

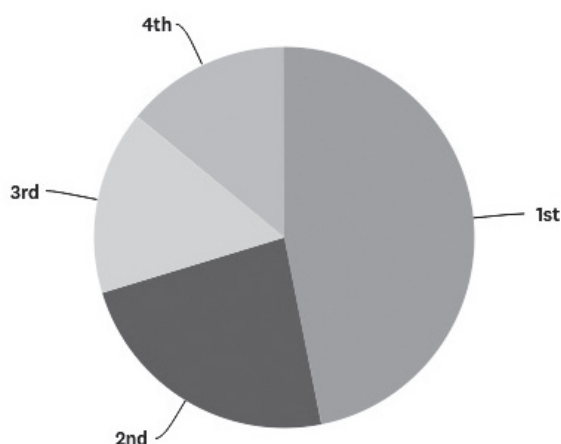


Figure 1 : Year groups of survey respondents

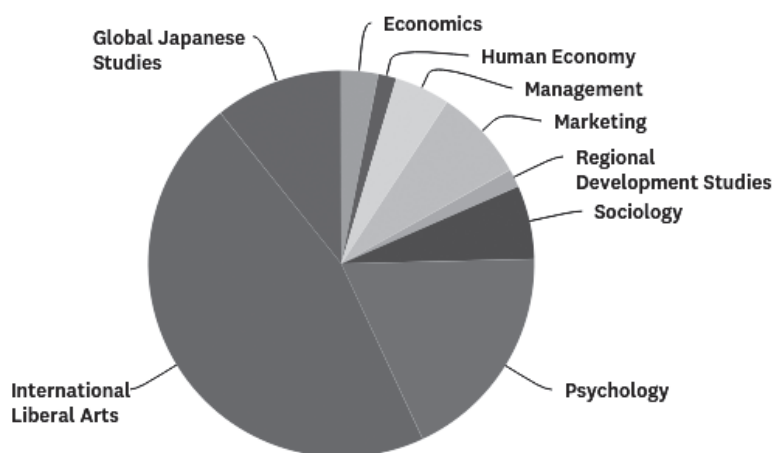


Figure 2 : Department of survey respondents

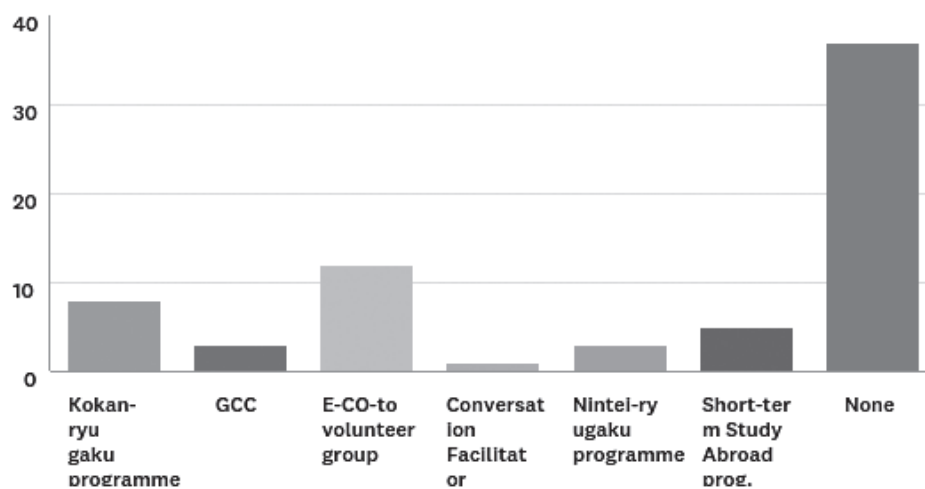


Figure 3 : Respondent participation in E-CO and study abroad programmes.

only been to E-CO once or twice were excluded from the subsequent questions, to ensure that the views of regular users were reflected in the results. While it is also very important to establish the views of students who do not use E-CO in order to improve its appeal (Gillies, 2010), this was beyond the scope of this study.

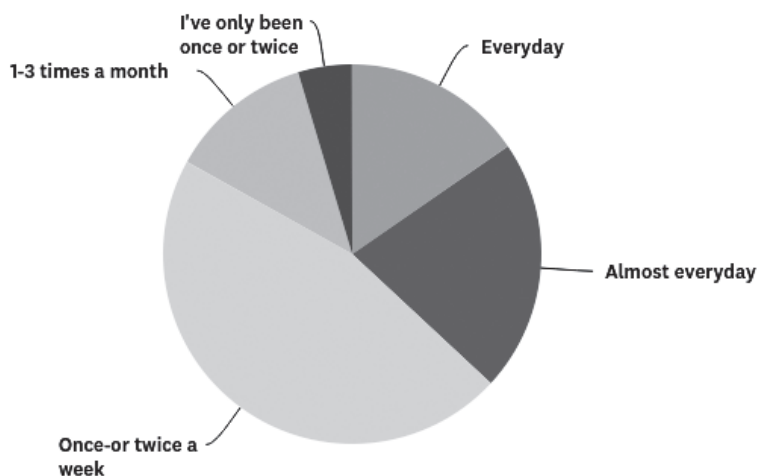


Figure 4 : Frequency of E-CO usage

Most popular spaces Students were asked to state how often they use each E-CO space, on a scale of often, sometimes, occasionally and never (see Figure 4). The most popular spaces were determined by looking at the data for often and sometimes.

As in previous years, the most popular spaces are the Counter and Café Space, although the Café Space is less popular than in previous years. The third most popular space is the Quiet Study Space, as in previous years, which confirms that students use E-CO for individual quiet study as well as for social reasons. It is this multifunctional use of the space which is one of its strengths.

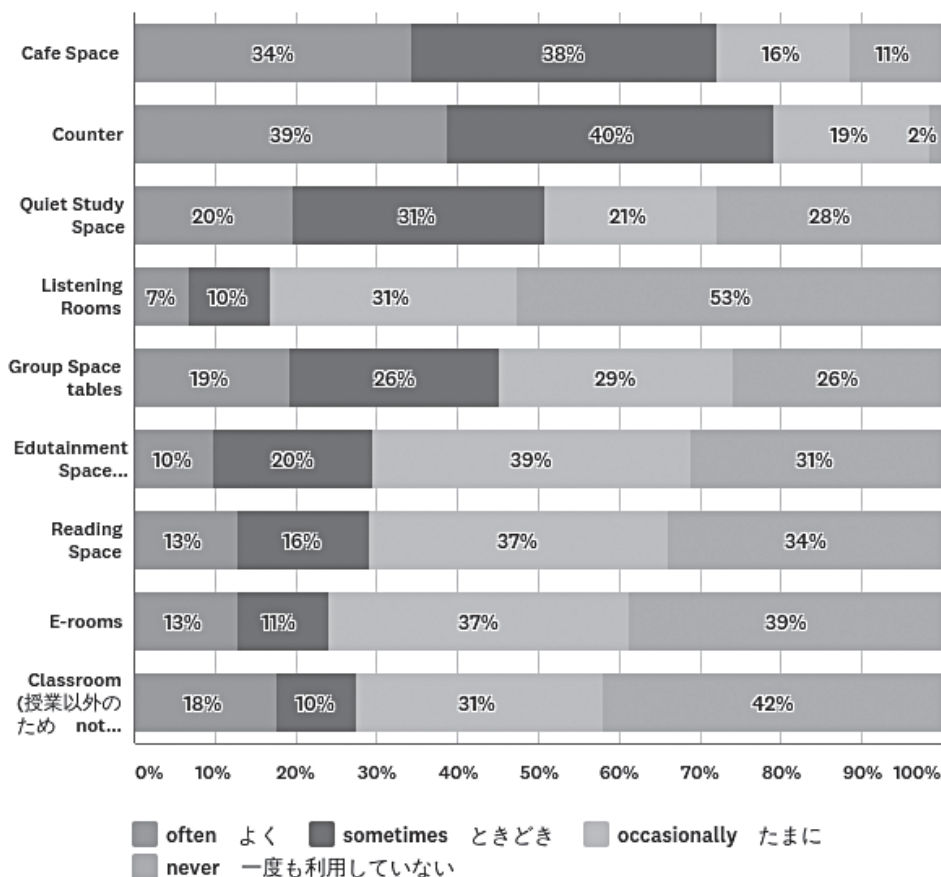


Figure 5 : Commonly-Used Spaces in E-CO

When combining the responses for often and sometimes, having English conversations is the most frequent activity in E-CO, followed by borrowing materials, studying with materials and joining the Easy Chat or Culture Talk practice sessions. These are all activities which fit E-CO's mission. In terms of taking part in Support Services, over 80% have joined Easy Chat at least occasionally, with over half stating sometimes or more. English Practice also shows an increase on previous years, with nearly half of respondents taking part often or sometimes. Compared to previous years, many more students (71%) are borrowing graded readers. This is a result of a collaboration with the International Liberal Arts department, but borrowing is not limited only to students from this department.

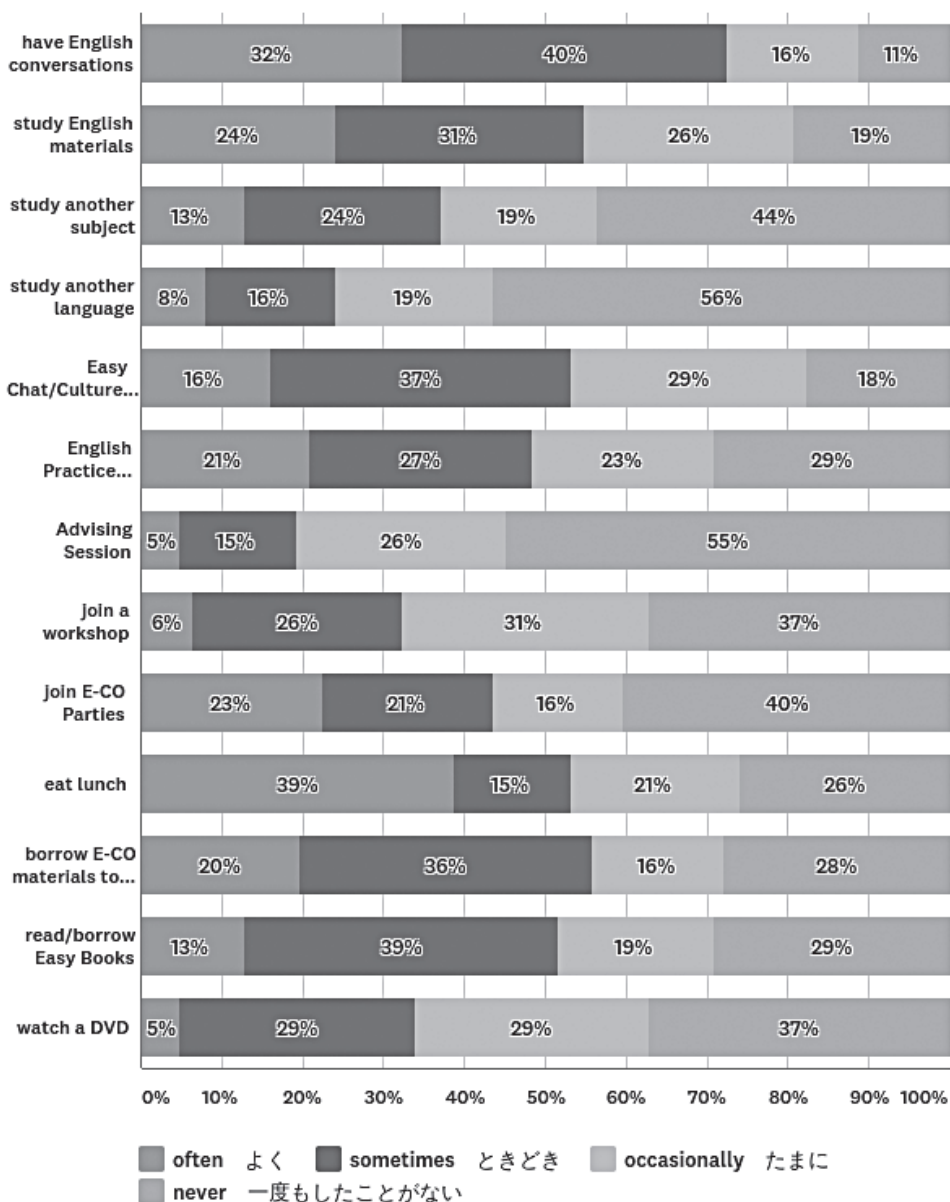


Figure 6 : Frequent Activities in E-CO

However, one slightly worrying trend is the seven students who state that they never have English conversations in E-CO – up from two in 2014 and none in 2016. A more detailed examination of these seven respondents' answers reveals that it is indeed true that most of them do not seem to use E-CO actively for English study at the moment (the most common activities they say they often do in E-CO are eat lunch or study another subject) with one admitting in a subsequent question that they are not interested in improving their English skills. However, further analysis suggests they may be less confident users who need more

support to use English, or may have not made friends in E-CO. More analysis of this groups' responses show that they are more likely to feel intimidated and less likely to feel welcomed by others in E-CO. However, when asked what languages they speak in E-CO, many say they do use English at the counter and with the native-speaker teachers. They also tend to say they want to use more English (5/7) and support language policies which encourage or require English (5/7).

Language Use Students were also asked which languages they use in E-CO. E-CO does not have a strict language policy requiring English only to be spoken, but we try to encourage users to use as much English as they can. According to the survey, students tend to use only English or more English than Japanese at the counter and when talking to foreign staff and exchange students, but use more Japanese with Japanese staff and friends. This is unsurprising, but it is encouraging to see lots of English being spoken at the counter, as these interactions are often with other Japanese students and staff. In order to facilitate this, a sheet of useful phrases is provided on the counter, and student staff are trained to conduct transactions for borrowing and reservations in English whenever possible.

When asked what the language policy in E-CO should be, there was strong support for flexible policies, but also a sense that English should be encouraged (Figure 7). Less than 20% favoured some kind of English only policy, either across the centre, in certain spaces or at certain times. The most popular choice (40%) was for a policy which encourages users to use as much English as they can.

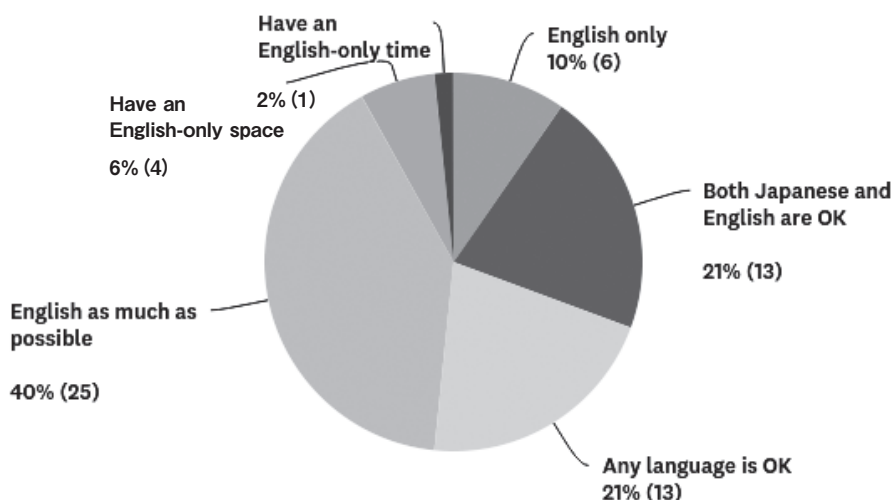


Figure 7 : Language policy preferences at E-CO

In their reasons, there was concern that English-only would be off-putting to potential users who do not have confidence or high proficiency in English, and that exchange students who are learning Japanese should also be able to practice their language skills in E-CO. These findings echo the results of previous research conducted with self-access managers and practitioners (rather than students) by this author (Thornton, 2018).

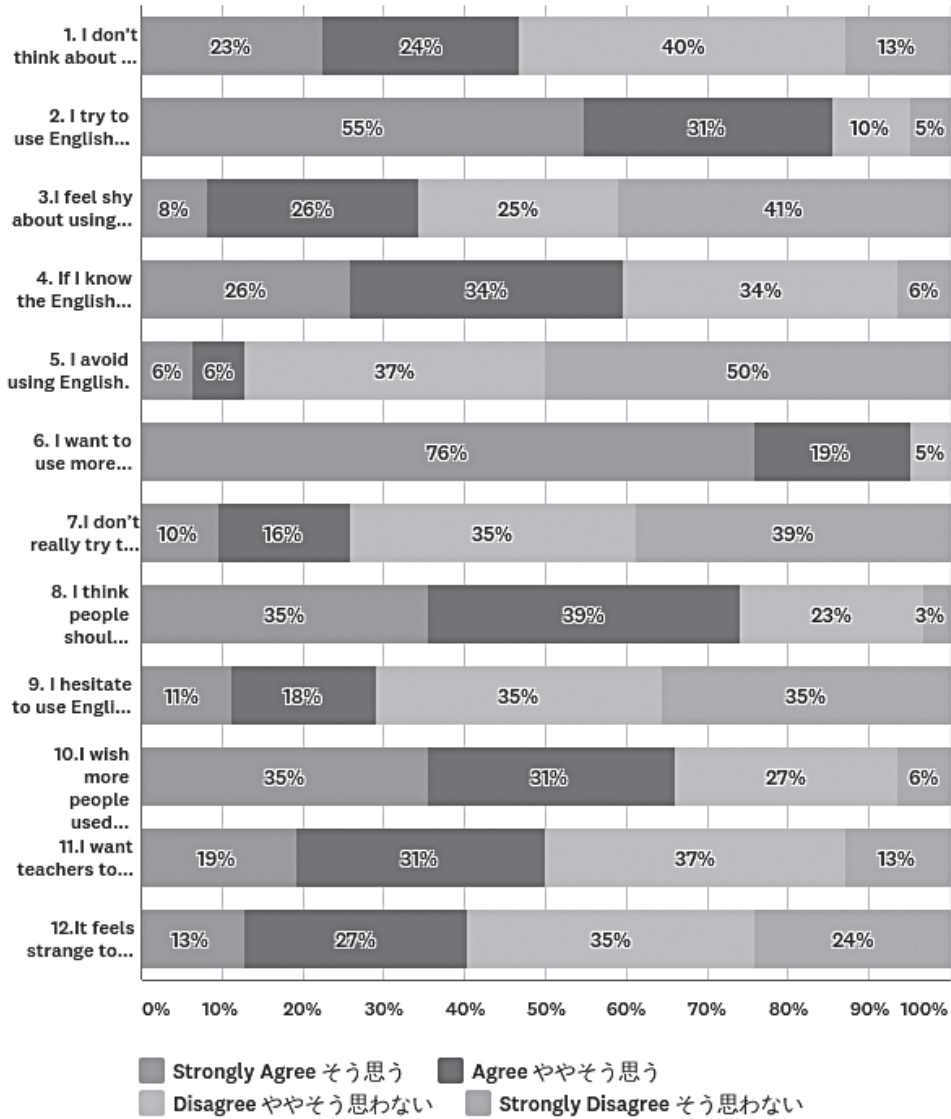


Figure 8 : Attitudes to using English in E-CO

Respondents were also asked about their general attitudes to using English in E-CO (Figure 8). Students are also enthusiastic in wanting to use English: they agreed overwhelmingly (95%) that they want to speak more English, and 86% of learners agreed that they use English whenever possible. Japanese is by far the most common language heard in E-CO however, which suggests that students do not always try as hard as they said in the survey. Despite wanting to speak more, only 50% want teachers to push students to use more English, so it would appear that stricter enforcement of a language policy would not be popular among users.

About 40% of users agree that it feels strange to speak English with other Japanese, so more needs to be done to encourage them to speak English with each other, and to view this as a normal way of interacting

in E-CO. Just under half (47%) agreed that they do not think about their language use, which suggests that E-CO needs to do more to promote awareness of language use. It is encouraging to see however, that this percentage has significantly decreased from last year's survey, where nearly 75% answered the same way.

Attitudes to E-CO

Several questions were designed to elicit user attitudes to E-CO. Open-ended questions were used to elicit good and bad points about E-CO, while Likert Scale questions asked respondents to show their level of agreement with different statements about E-CO.

The open-ended data was analysed to reveal several common themes. 62 responses were received giving opinions on E-CO's good points. As in previous surveys, the responses covered the following categories – see Table 1. Examples from each category are given in the original Japanese.

Overall category	Sub-Category	No.	Examples
Learning : Enhances English study/ practice	Chance to speak/ be around English	19	だれでも英語を楽しく勉強出来るだけところ 英語を気軽に学べるところ 快適で、気軽に英語と触れ合える 英語だけを使う環境
	Support: materials/ services/ workshops	7	外国語に触れやすい環境作り、または設備が整っている事。 様々な海外や外国語に興味関心を引く取り組みや、工夫があること。 英語の本を借りれることと、英語の指導、練習をすることができるところ。
Social : Meet people	Meet non-Japanese	13	いろんな国の人と巡り会える 留学生がたくさんいて日々英語に触れることができるところ
	Communicate /learn with different people	8	語学の学習を助け合いながら勉強できること。 学年学部国籍問わず英語や国際交流等に興味がある人と知り合え、良い刺激を得られる
	Make friends	3	友達を作れたり、英語を話せる環境が良いです。 新しい友達と出会える
	Meet people who like English	3	英語の勉強意欲が高い人が多い
	Be inspired by people		留学生や英語に興味のある人達と出会える。英語の勉強に対してのモチベーションが上がる
Environment	Relaxed	9	居場所をくれる アットホームで入りやすい 気軽に英語のことについて聞くこと。
	Fun	3	英語を楽しく学べる環境が整っている
	Different	2	非日常が味わえる！（日本国内で英語を使う場面が日常ではないのでECOで話すのはとても良い刺激になります） 外向的であることに否定的な印象を感じさせない
	Good people	9	親切な人が多い。 カウンターの雰囲気が良い、いつもE-COにいる人が面白い！ 先生、先輩が優しい

Table 1 : Good points of E-CO

From this data, it is clear that it is not simply the chance to use English which students find beneficial, but the space itself which is attractive. The community element of E-CO comes through strongly in the data, with many respondents emphasising that the chance to meet, communicate and learn with others, and also be motivated by them is a clear benefit of the E-CO environment.

This is supported by the data from the closed questions, in which 64% of users said that they often or sometimes meet new people in E-CO, 77% that they feel inspired by other users, and 69% that they feel welcomed by other users. However, 45% of users also stated that they sometimes or often feel intimidated by other users. In terms of helping others, 37% state that they often or sometimes do this. While this number is rather low, it may be the result of nearly half of respondents being first year students in their first semester at university, and therefore do not feel they are in a position to help others.

This strong identification of E-CO as a social-oriented space is encouraging, as increasingly more research is available on the positive impact of this kind of community feeling. Both Lave and Wenger's (1991) research on communities of practice, and Murray and Fujishima's (2013; 2016) in-depth studies into self-access users at their institution support the importance of social relationships in keeping motivation and sustaining self-directed language learning activities.

Some respondents identify both the learning focused and social aspects of E-CO, as the examples below show:

英語の本を借りれることと、英語の指導、練習をすることができること。そして、外国の色々な人に出会えることです。

[You can borrow books, get English support and practice. Also you can meet many different people from overseas]

学年学部国籍問わず英語や国際交流等に興味がある人と知り合え、良い刺激を得られる。
語学力を上達する為のサポートが充実している

[Regardless of year, department or nationality, you can meet people who are interested in English or international exchange and be inspired by them. There is wide array of support for improving language skills.]

In terms of E-CO's bad points, 36 comments were received (compared to 62 for E-CO good points). Similar categories appear as in previous years (see Table 2). The most common complaint was that E-CO doesn't feel friendly, especially to new users, and that users do not reach out to people they don't know. This contrasts with the data above, where kind and friendly people featured strongly in the data, suggesting that more needs to be done to reach out to new users, but once they make friends in E-CO, they may have a better experience. The other main complaint about E-CO is the lack of space, which could be viewed as a positive aspect, as it means that the space is popular and even reaching its capacity. Comments of this nature increased

from five in 2016 to ten in 2018. Given this, it is important to make sure there is enough space for potential users in the location on the new campus from 2019.

Category	No.	Examples/Detail
Feels unfriendly /difficult to enter (especially for new people)	13	知り合い同士でしか話してくれず、なかなか話に入りにくい環境であること。 入ったことがなかったりすると入りにくい。 入っても知人にしかはなしかけない。 入りにくいと思っている人が結構いること。
Too small/crowded/noisy	10	人が多すぎる日はうるさくて自習室が静かに利用できない 狭い、easychat等をする時に人が多過ぎて入りにくい
Not enough English spoken, some users ignore purpose of space	3	施設の趣旨が往々にして無視される、 日本人同士は英語を話さない（シャイ）
People are not active/just there for class grade	2	授業や単位のために来てるだけの人が増えた
Practical issues	5	閉まる時間が少し早い There is not the mouse of PC. PC is slow. ワークショップの時間を増やしてほしい。

Table 2 : E-CO's bad points

Impact of E-CO on learning

In answering the questions in this section, students were explicitly asked to consider just the impact of E-CO, not their classes or other aspects, on their learning. 58 students (94%) agreed E-CO has made an impact on their English learning. Of the four students who answered this question negatively, two stated that they haven't been using E-CO enough but two responded that they're not interested in improving their English. This may suggest that in some cases, the social atmosphere which helps to encourage many users to engage in English learning also attracts some who are not interested in using E-CO for the purpose for which it has been established. It is important to identify this kind of student and encourage them to get more involved in language learning.

In the responses to the question about what kind of impact E-CO has had on learning, several aspects can be identified in the data from the remaining 58 students (Figure 9). Of particular note is E-CO's influence on affective factors. The strongest agreement in the data is about E-CO's impact on motivation, (98%), with 72% agreeing that they would not study as much if E-CO did not exist. This supports the research on the importance of affective factors (Bown & White, 2010).

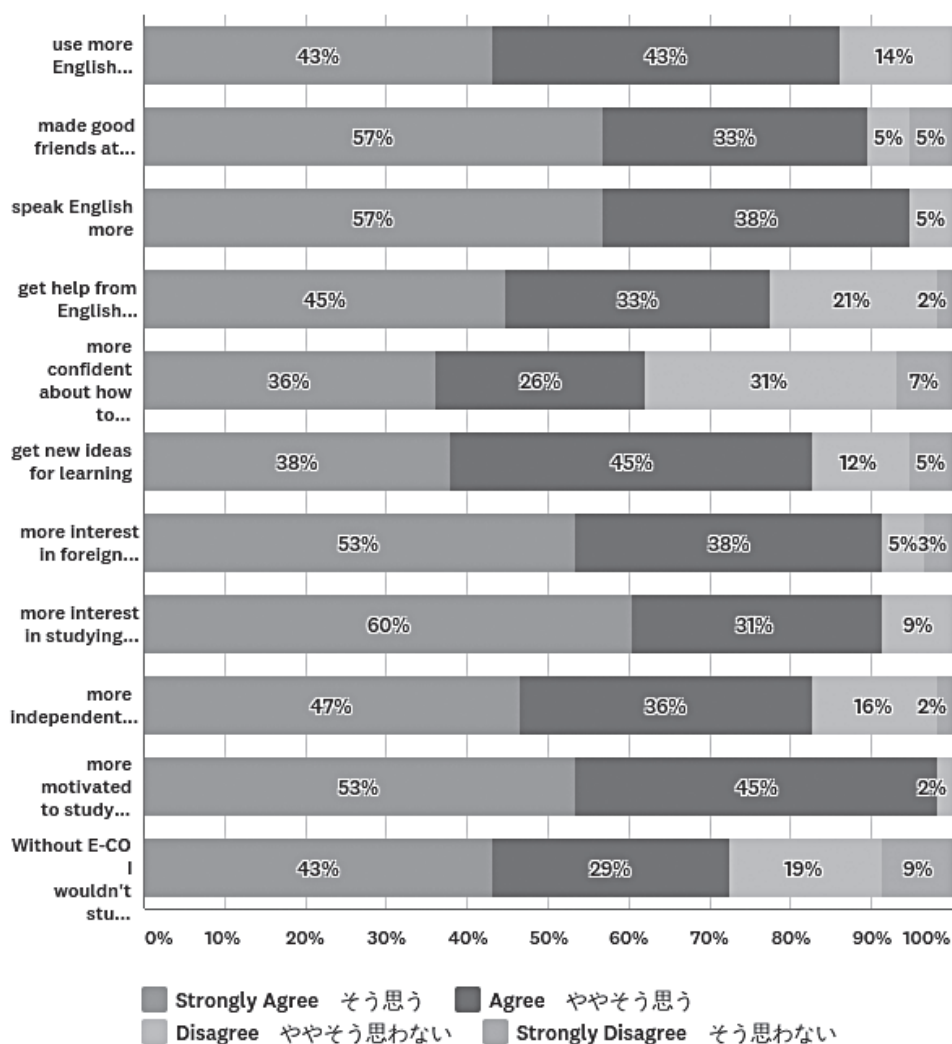


Figure 9 : Impact of E-CO on learning

Strong support is also shown for E-CO's role in encouraging interest in foreign cultures (91%) and studying abroad (81%), although this last figure is slightly lower than in 2016, when it was 96%. The number of respondents who agreed that thanks to E-CO they feel like more independent learners, while still high at 82%, is lower than the 95% who expressed the same feeling in 2016.

There was a lesser effect on student confidence, however, with only 62% agreeing that they feel more confident about how to study. This may be that lower level students who answered the survey often come into contact with others who have higher proficiency than themselves and cannot help but compare their skills. Language anxiety is recognised as a significant barrier to language use, particularly among East Asian learners (Woodrow, 2006). As E-CO is a space which expects learners to use the English they know at the counter or with staff, it is unsurprising that some students lack confidence. E-CO needs to devote more

attention to helping students be more confident in their current abilities. Praising student performance has since been given added emphasis in staff training for English Practice and Group Conversation sessions.

When asked what aspects of E-CO have had an impact on their learning, it is clear that interactions with staff and other users have had the most impact, confirming E-CO's value as a social learning space. The highest number of users report big impact from chatting in English with exchange students (62%) and foreign teachers (55%) (See Figure 10). This is a reverse from the data in 2016, when more impact was accredited to teachers than exchange students. This is likely the result of the significant increase in the number of English-speaking exchange students on campus (from two in Spring 2016, to eleven in Spring 2018).

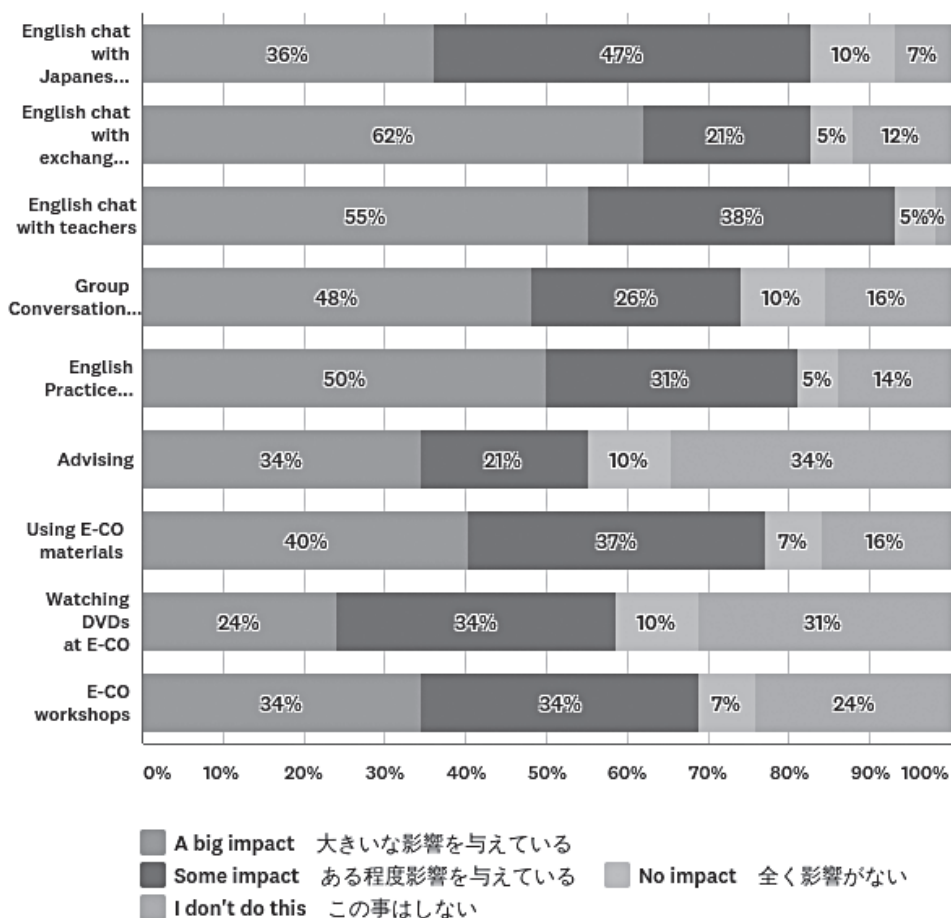


Figure 10 : Relative impact of different E-CO activities on learning

Discussion

Importance of E-CO as a social learning space.

Numerous response patterns in the data support the view that the social aspect of E-CO is key not only to its popularity among users, but also to its impact on learning. This is not a surprise, given that providing an opportunity for communication and interaction (in any language) is a main part of E-CO's mission, but respondents differentiate between the communication they have in structured sessions, and the informal communication that takes place between all users and staff. In general, greater impact is assigned to communication between the different people in E-CO (Japanese users, exchange students, teachers & staff) than the materials and services provided for formal learning. In addition, in the open-ended questions, positive comments about E-CO also strongly reflected the social opportunities available – to make friends from a variety of different majors, year groups and nationalities, and to be inspired and motivated by them. The data supports the idea that E-CO has become what Lave and Wenger first described as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which more recently Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) have defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis,” (p. 4).

This highlights the importance of the relationships people make in the space, and the fact that E-CO is far more than the sum of its functions and services offered. In order to maintain a similar impact on learning and improvement of English skills of Otemon students, it is important that this social aspect of the space is supported and fostered on both campuses from 2019.

Combating impression of a closed atmosphere

However, we must be careful not to ignore the potential negative aspects of such a Community of Practice for those who find themselves on the outside. Data from the open-ended questions echoes that from previous years that this community can appear unfriendly or closed to those who are not members of it. While many comments suggest this is often a temporary impression which is overcome by friendly encounters in the space, it is nevertheless important to try to dispel this image among potential users. As this aspect has also been highlighted in previous years, staff training on how to greet and help new users, and a new E-CO helper system where existing users agreed to talk to and help new users in April and May this year, have been introduced. It is hard to tell as yet what effect this has had, as the number of comments on this issue has remained constant.

Conclusion

The E-CO user survey is one source of important information used to evaluate how E-CO is functioning. Data from this survey is added to quantitative data about the number of users of the space in general (via a card reader) and each individual service offered, in addition to borrowing records to build a picture of E-CO.

By comparing data over several years, trends can be identified. This helps E-CO management to determine priorities and introduce procedures and activities to encourage positive trends and to try to reverse potentially negative ones. This study points to several areas that need some attention:

- Strategies to encourage students to interact with users that they do not know or are new to the centre, in order to create a friendlier atmosphere for new or less frequent users.
- Ways to help users feel more confident in using English
- Better promotion of advising services
- Ways to increase users' awareness of the language they use in E-CO, to encourage more English use and appropriate use of Japanese to communicate effectively

The data from this study is largely consistent with that of previous years, and confirms the importance of the community created by the space and its users and staff. While there are a few small changes which may indicate fewer students who use E-CO regularly are actively engaging with the language learning and international exchange opportunities presented to them, the results are largely positive and point to the significant contribution E-CO is making to the English learning of the vast majority of its users. In order to attract more people to use the space to improve their language skills or global communication skills, further research should include studies of non-users, rather than regular participants, in order to find out what can be done to encourage them to take an interest in English and broaden their horizons.

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Abstract

When attempting an evaluation of a self-access centre, multiple data sources are required to gain a detailed picture of a complex interactional space (Morrison, 2005). Voices of the actual users of the centre, for whom the facilities have been established, are an important source of information. This paper reports on the results of the 2018 usage and impact survey of users of English Café at Otomon (E-CO), the self-access centre at Otomon Gakuin University. It addresses three main research questions: how do students use the space, what do they think about it, and what kind of impact do they think using it has had on their language learning experiences? The data reveals areas of focus for improving E-CO in the future, aspects of the space which need to be considered as its functions partly move to the new Global Studio space to be opened on the new campus in 2019.

