

Ten years of English Café at Otemon (E-CO): Sustaining an autonomy-supportive learning community

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English Café at Otemon (E-CO) の10年間を振り返る
－自律性を支援する学習コミュニティの活性化－

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Abstract

This paper reflects on ten years of English Café at Otemon (E-CO), considering the contributions E-CO has been able to make to individual students at Otemon, the university as a whole, and the wider community. It tracks the beginnings of a new style of learning facility at Otemon, its philosophy, how it has evolved to better meet the needs of Otemon students, and how it has coped with various challenges such as the opening of a new campus and move to new facilities and the Covid-19 pandemic. Possible future directions for practice and research are also discussed.

Keywords: learner autonomy, self-access language learning, community of practice

Since opening its doors in 2013, English Café at Otemon (E-CO) has now been part of the learning and support infrastructure at Otemon Gakuin University (OGU) for a decade. Its establishment has coincided with the growth of self-access learning facilities across Japan. (Of the 58 institutions listed on the Japan Association for Self-Access learning Registry of Language Learning Spaces, over 20 opened between 2010 and 2015 (JASAL, n.d). This paper first explains E-CO's founding mission and philosophy, then describes E-CO's development in 4 phases:

- 1) 2013–2016: Establishing a self-access model for Otemon (A collaboration between Kanda University of International Studies and Center for International Studies)
- 2) 2017–2018: Increased Integration (Institute of Liberal Arts and Academic Affairs)
- 3) 2019–2021: Dealing with change and disruption (A new campus and a worldwide pandemic)
- 4) 2022–ongoing: A new era (Division for International Cooperation and Planning)

E-CO's Mission & Philosophy

Self-access learning centres (SALCs) such as E-CO “are person-centered social learning environments that actively promote language learner autonomy both within and outside the space. Students are provided with support, resources, facilities, skills development, and opportunities for language study and use.” (Benson et al, 2016, p.3). Thornton et al (2021) identify that self-access learning centres in Japan tend to have three main foci, a learner autonomy focus, a language learning and communication focus, and an international exchange focus (Thornton et al, 2021, p.35). E-CO does indeed have all these focus points as part of its mission. In addition, several pedagogical principles influence the way E-CO operates. These principles underlie the following elements of our philosophy of education:

At E-CO, we believe that students learn best when they:

- can develop an interest in the target language and its culture
- have opportunities to use their target language in a relaxed environment
- feel supported by others in their language learning
- can make connections with people from different cultures and backgrounds
- have clear language learning goals
- have opportunities to personalize their language learning experiences, and make their own decisions about their language learning
- have opportunities to reflect on their language learning
- can get feedback on their language learning

Throughout its ten years of operation, staff at E-CO have strived to create a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within a learning environment that meets students’ needs and wellbeing. While our operation has been through several phases, detailed below, these principles have remained an important guide to our practice.

2013–2016: Establishing a self-access model for Otemon (A collaboration between Kanda University of International Studies and the Center for International Studies)

E-CO was originally set up as a collaborative project, under the guidance of the then Center for International Studies (now Division for International Cooperation and Planning), with Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), the leading institution in Japan for learner autonomy and self-access. Three staff with experience of working at KUIS: one administrator, a learning advisor and a senior lecturer, both with MAs in TESOL, were employed to set up and run the new centre, in consultation with staff at OGU. They were involved in the design of the space, procurement of materials and equipment, and established the administrative systems for material processing and borrowing, reservations etc.

From April 2013, E-CO opened its doors, offering the following services:

- 1) Advising sessions (in English and Japanese) to foster learner autonomy and support students interested in English to set and achieve their goals,
- 2) Individual English Practice sessions where students could use English in 20- minute sessions with a teacher
- 3) Group English conversation sessions where students could use English with other students in a relaxed environment, playing games and making friends.
- 4) A workshop programme offering one-off or a short series of group sessions, focusing either on cultural exchange, learning how to learn, or support for qualification such as TOEIC[®], TOEFL[®] or IELTS[™].

In addition to offering these services, the senior lecturer also taught English classes for the newly instigated Global Career Course, a course open to students in the then English Communication department, to study abroad for one semester in their second year of study.

Student involvement

From its inception, student involvement and ownership has been a key principle of E-CO. We believe that to make a successful learning community, members need to feel they have a stake in the running of that community. A group of regular student users was soon established, and in May 2013 the volunteer student group, E-CO-to, was established (named by the founding group of students). While no budget was available to compensate students for their time (this would become available from 2017), these volunteers gave a lot of time to supporting E-CO. Each student who joined had an official counter shift and was trained in simple counter services, supervised by the administrator. As the group became more established, training tasks would also be guided by mentors (more experienced members of the group). Weekly lunchtime meetings were held where students could discuss their ideas for initiatives to improve the centre and plan events to attract users. Their ideas were supported by the full-time staff.

As the staff had experience working in a similar environment at their previous institution, adaptations were made as we got to know the needs and characteristics of Otemon students more deeply, thanks to working daily with students, consulting with staff around the university, and conducting needs analysis and user questionnaires. Early on, speaking aids were developed for group conversation sessions, as many students had little experience of initiating and sustaining conversation in a foreign language, and rarely used English outside E-CO. A comprehensive speaking programme was introduced to support students taking part in individual conversation sessions, and a set of advising materials—learning plans for different goal areas, skill strategy sheets, learning logs, and reflection sheets—were also developed. From 2015 a regular conversation course, running for 10 weeks each semester, was also added to the service programme.



Figure 1 E-CO’s Speaking Programme Worksheet List

In these early years, thanks to its position in the university structure under the Center for International Studies, connections between E-CO and the centre were strong, and E-CO was able to support study abroad programmes such as the Global Career Course, Exchange Study Abroad, and short-term programmes by providing pre-departure English support in the form of classes and workshops, conversation sessions and a Self-Directed Learning Programme, in which students identified specific English goals related to their study abroad experiences, and participated in regular advising sessions and workshops to help them keep their learning on track. However, possibly due to the staff’s position as outside consultants employed by KUIS, integration with the wider university proved challenging from the outset. Informal links were made with individual faculty who were supportive of E-CO’s mission and programmes, and several departments made time for E-CO Orientations within their overall orientations and first year courses, but otherwise collaboration was limited.

2017–2018: Increased Integration (Institute of Liberal Arts and Academic Affairs)

When the contract between OGU and KUIS came to an end in March 2017, a number of organizational changes were made at E-CO. The facility moved from being supervised by CIS to Academic Affairs, and the Program Director was awarded a position as an associate professor in the Institute of Liberal Arts, with responsibility for a Self-Directed Learning Course in the Faculty of International Liberal Arts in 2017, and pre-departure Academic English classes for the Exchange Study Abroad programme from 2018. Two part-

time instructors and an administrator were also hired to replace the KUIS employees in 2017. From 2018, one of the part-time instructors took over the position full-time. Despite the move to Academic Affairs, a close relationship with CIS was maintained.

This new organization allowed greater collaboration with faculty, in particular the Faculty of International Arts. In order to encourage students in this faculty to take advantage of the opportunities presented by E-CO, from 2017 an incentive programme was devised which gave students a small number of points to count towards a class grade. This project was termed the E-CO Passport. The effect of the first three years of the Passport has been investigated from the perspective of student motivation and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) in Thornton (2020 b). This study, which looked at E-CO service engagement and the results of user surveys, found that, in line with many incentive programmes, offering the E-CO Passport had a strong positive effect on the uptake of E-CO Services. However, there was no significant increase in service engagement seen once the incentive of the passport was removed in the second year of study. Overall, students reported that having the Passport encouraged them to use E-CO more often, or to take the first step to use it as they had a clear purpose in doing so.

Service expansion

As E-CO attracted more student users, we were able to expand our services. Thanks to the talents of one of the part-time instructors, Craft Chat sessions were offered along with the usual conversation sessions, in which students could make various seasonal crafts while enjoying simple conversation. These proved popular with less confident students who felt less pressure to communicate but could do so in their own time while cutting, colouring or creating things such as English board games, Christmas decorations and Easter eggs. In addition, two instructors who already teach English classes for faculty were employed for one hour a week each to offer English Practice sessions. This was done for two purposes, to increase the



Figure 2 E-CO on Ai Campus (2017)

variety of English instructors that students can interact with, including Japanese teachers of English who present great role models for our students, and to free up the full-time instructors to offer workshops and other courses.

Student facilitators

After a trial in 2016, from 2017 E-CO has been able to offer paid work opportunities for conversation facilitators. While students report enjoying interacting with teachers in English, in line with the university's aim to encourage more peer learning, it was felt that both facilitators and students would gain a lot by taking part in sessions with student facilitators. These facilitators are recruited through an interview process, and both Japanese students and international students with good levels of English have been employed as group conversation facilitators since 2017. Student facilitators receive initial training followed by trial sessions where they shadow a teacher in the role, before finally running their own sessions. This initiative coincided with a general increase in the number of English-speaking exchange students studying at OGU, and made for some lively sessions with students sharing their cultures and language. At busy times, one Japanese and one international student were employed together to run a larger conversation group and support each other. In addition to conversation sessions, international students also offered a number of culture workshops, focusing on topics such as Indian dance and music, Finnish food, and Australian Christmas celebrations.



Figure 3 An Indian Culture Workshop at E-CO

E-CO student internship programme

From 2018, E-CO also started an internship programme in collaboration with the Careers Office. Between 2018 and 2019, four students worked at E-CO for over 30 hours per semester, learning administrative tasks and organizing student events. They also helped out at the community outreach events

(see below). Three of these students presented about their experience in English at the National Conference of the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (see below) in November 2019 (the fourth student was still in the middle of her internship at the time of the conference).



Figure 4 E-CO Student Intern Working at E-CO

Community outreach

From 2017, the E-CO instructors also provided several community English classes for local Ibaraki residents, named *Nakayoshi Kyoshitsu*. These were offered in the spring and summer vacations for adults, and at the annual school festival for children, when students were not on campus and therefore not taking as many regular E-CO sessions, freeing up the instructors for these programmes. These ran for three years but unfortunately they were then curtailed by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Collaborations between E-CO and Otomon Gakuin Junior and Senior High School also took place, in particular culture sessions facilitated by E-CO instructors for the *Kakehashi* project to help high school students prepare for their study abroad sessions. International students also joined these sessions.

2019–2021: Dealing with change and disruption (A new campus and a worldwide pandemic)

A new campus

E-CO faced its first major challenge when OGU opened a new campus in April 2019. While exciting news for the university, with a brand new campus opening much nearer the main trainlines, leading to a welcome boost in student numbers, this new campus presented two significant challenges to E-CO: 1) a split in its community over two campuses, and staff required to cover two sites simultaneously, and 2) adapting our services to a new space on the new campus with various restrictions in how it could be used.

Splitting the E-CO community over 2 sites. In 2018, E-CO was more popular than ever before, with high demand for our services and spaces often full, with home and international students mixing together and learning from each other. In terms of usage by faculty, over 50% of the students were from the International Liberal Arts department (and previous to that English Communication department) and, in terms of year groups, first year students represented about half of the total users. Unfortunately, when the new campus opened, we had to split this community in two parts, and each resulting community was less vibrant than the previous whole. Ai Campus was missing the first year students and international students who give E-CO a lot of energy, and the difficulty of branding the new space and raise E-CO's profile on the new Sojiji Campus also resulted in fewer first year students finding E-CO, compared to previous years, and older students from different faculty, many of whom would usually take a senpai role, sharing experiences of study abroad and job hunting.

Adapting services to a new space. E-CO was fortunate to be allowed the partial use of one of the four new WIL Studios in which to run its activities on the new Sojiji Campus. This space had both advantages and disadvantages for E-CO activities. Firstly, the wide-open space and movable furniture made it ideal for bigger events, which were always challenging in the Ai campus facility, where walls, shelves and furniture could not be easily moved. It was hoped that the glass walls would make it easier for prospective users to understand how the space could be used, and make it more welcoming, although feedback from students on this point was mixed. However, the lack of a counter meant that it lacked a focal point for welcoming and orienting new users. Conversely, the size of the space made it more difficult to encourage student interaction, as groups of student users tended to stay within their friendship groups in different areas and tables of the space, whereas on Ai Campus the design of the space explicitly encouraged interaction between different groups. Due to the lack of phone and storage space, E-CO's administrator remained



Figure 5 E-CO in Sojiji Campus

mainly on Ai Campus, so there was a lack of permanent presence in the new space, which was shared with the Faculty of International Arts and any other divisions across the university who wished to use the space. PR and branding was also difficult as paper posters were discouraged on the new campus and it was difficult to distinguish the space E-CO was using from other WIL Studios on the first floor.

For a fuller account of how E-CO adapted to working across two campuses and in a new space, see Thornton (2020 a).

In 2019, the new campus was also the site for the National Conference of the Japan Association for Self-Access Learning (JASAL), chaired by E-CO's Program Director, and at which Otemon students



Figure 6 Delegates at JASAL Conference Held at Otemon Gakuin University, November 2019



Figure 7 E-CO Student Staff presenting at the Student Forum at the JASAL conference



Figure 8 E-CO Student Intern Presenting a Poster at the JASAL Conference



Figure 9 Student Volunteers at the JASAL Conference

contributed as conference volunteers and student presenters. They took part in the poster session of the conference along with academics from across Japan and beyond, and a designated student forum. This conference brought 150 delegates to OGU, 90 of them of foreign nationality, so student participants and volunteers had a great experience communicating with people they would not usually have the chance to talk to, and experiencing professional presentations and workshops in English.

In addition to the conference, eight student staff also participated in a student conference at Konan Women's University, at which over 70 students from 13 institutions across Japan gave presentations and engaged in discussions about their self-access volunteer and staff experiences.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Just as staff were adjusting to the new space on Sojiji Campus and preparing for the new academic year with orientation and welcome activities for students on both campuses, the world was hit with the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic, and all our preparations had to be reconfigured to adapt to a new, online world. Students were prohibited from campus and all classes moved online. While the pandemic was a huge



Figure 10 E-CO Student Staff attending the JASAL Student Conference at Konan Women's University, October 2019



Figure 11 E-CO Student Staff giving an English Presentation at the JASAL Student Conference

ordeal for everyone, it presented particular challenges for self-access environments, as documented by Peña Clavel et al. (2020). The value and effectiveness of self-access programmes are driven by the student communities we can foster and encourage, and the connections made between different members of the community of practice, which sustain motivation for language learning, promote intercultural understanding and general student well-being (Kushida, 2020). Not being able to meet in person was a huge challenge to self-access programmes across Japan and the wider world (Davies et al., 2020).

Going online. The online world was not entirely new to E-CO. We had offered limited online sessions in 2018 to students preparing for study abroad, and we had had an online presence in the form of a website and blog since opening. Several social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) were

already active, and we had introduced a project communication app (Slack) for the core staff team and student staff when the new campus opened in 2019. When the pandemic hit we quickly opened up our systems for students to make session reservations, got to grips with online conferencing tools such as Webex and Zoom, and moved all our services online. For full details about our experience adapting the pandemic see Thornton (2021).

While university campuses partially reopened from September 2020, restrictions on face-to-face sessions at E-CO were in place until the end of the 2021 academic year (with temporary relaxations in line with the spread of the disease at different times). This severely affected our ability to attract and maintain students, as many new students did not find out about our services (despite promotion attempts) or were too overwhelmed with online classes and other matters caused by the pandemic to engage fully with extracurricular programmes such as E-CO. The students we did reach, however, expressed clear appreciation for the connections and support E-CO was able to provide at an extremely difficult time.

Positive effects of the pandemic. The changes forced upon us by the pandemic have had some permanent positive effects on our ability to provide services for Otemon students. Online sessions are now a regular part of our services, so students can access our support from home. This has been particularly useful during vacation periods, and there has been a significant increase in the number of students taking both group and individual sessions throughout the long vacation periods in spring and summer. We also launched a teletandem online language exchange programme between Otemon students and students studying Japanese at our partner schools. Students are paired with a student overseas and meet once a week to exchange language and learn about each other's cultures. This teletandem programme is now in its 5th semester. More informally, we instigated online drop-in sessions (E-CO Hangout, Peer Chat, Multilingual Chat), supported by student staff, which international students and Otemon students could attend without reservations and mix freely in an online environment.

Students were also able to participate in online activities with students from other universities, with Otemon students taking part in three online forums and conferences, sometimes acting as team leaders, and in one case giving an English presentation online to other students from all over Japan. This has increased the number of opportunities for inter-university exchange.

2022–ongoing: A new era

(Division for International Cooperation and Planning)

In early 2022, it was learned that, in line with some restructuring taking place at the university, E-CO would move both its affiliation and its space. From April 2022, E-CO has once again been brought under the supervision of the Division for International Cooperation and Planning (previously the Center for International Studies). This has allowed us to build a closer relationship with staff supporting study abroad and exchange programmes once again. In terms of space, E-CO now operates in a different WIL Studio on

Sojiji Campus, which is a shared space with several other groups and faculties. While this has slightly reduced the space available for materials and some of our activities, it has enabled a much greater degree of collaboration with other faculties, and helped more groups around the university become more familiar with our programmes. Thanks to this closer relationship, in summer 2022, E-CO students took part in a collaborative community art project (PLUS Project) organized by the Faculty of Regional Development Studies, which involved using English to communicate with visiting artists from Germany.

An improved space

In the new space we have a superior counter area, which has enabled the administrator to move their base from Ai Campus to Sojiji Campus, providing a more regular presence for the majority of our users on this campus. Conversely, service provision on Ai Campus has unfortunately become much more challenging, as E-CO's space is now being used as a quiet study space, with E-CO activities only taking place at set times throughout the week. This has prevented the organic community of learners so vital for success to emerge on Ai Campus, although individual students are accessing the services regularly, both in person when staff are available, and online.

This year has also seen a push to encourage more multilingualism, and a greater emphasis on student-led workshops and sessions.

Promoting multilingualism

Despite its name, E-CO has never been purely an English-focused facility, and we have always promoted multilingualism and provided materials for other languages, especially those taught as official subjects (Chinese, French, German) or through seminar and cultures classes, (such as Vietnamese, Korean, Spanish). Starting in 2021, E-CO offered online sessions for learning both Korean and Chinese, and a short series of workshops about France and French culture in person on Sojiji Campus, run by international students from these countries. In 2022, these have continued in person on Sojiji campus as regular sessions (see the posters below).

In addition to these student-led sessions, the E-CO Program Director speaks French and German, and one of the part-time instructors is also a German instructor, so individual sessions have been offered in these languages too. While take up is low, there have been some students interested in getting support for these languages.

Student-led workshops and sessions

Students have always played an important role facilitating conversation sessions, but some group conversation sessions were always facilitated by full-time instructors. From 2022, the majority of conversation sessions have been run by students (with instructors being involved only when no students are available). Students have also been more involved in running culture and language sessions (see above), and peer-learning sessions where a group of students share their goals and support each other to reach them, through regular online contact and occasional face-to-face meetings (see posters below).



Figure 12 Posters for multilingual sessions at E-CO

WIL Project participation

Another way in which student involvement and leadership has been encouraged in addition to the regular activities of the volunteer staff team and the conversation facilitators, has been through participation in the university wide WIL Projects. In 2022, students from E-CO student staff, along with



Figure 13 Posters for Peer-Learning Sessions at E-CO

some other interested students set up the OIDAI Global Team to design and deliver an international exchange event during the school festival. Between July and November 2022, students planned and organized events on both campuses. Their activities included: conducting a needs analysis survey among OGU students, recruiting and training international students to deliver mini-culture sessions, liaising with staff and students across both campuses, designing PR materials and T-shirts, and delivering their planned events on both campuses over the two days of the festival. On completion of the project, students have



Figure 14 OIDAI Global Team Students Running Children’s Multilingual Session at Sojiji Campus for School Festival 2022



Figure 15 OIDA Global Team Student Running Chinese Session at Ai Campus for School Festival 2022

written individual and a group report of the experience and will give a formal presentation about it to university management at the end of the year.

Conclusion: Looking to the Future

Over ten years, E-CO has made a valuable contribution to university life at Otemon Gakuin University, provided a much-needed social support network and academic services to promote language learning, learner autonomy and intercultural exchange. It has weathered the storm of coronavirus and adapted to a new campus environment and several different management structures, all the while delivering core services to students without interruption. In the coming years, the university is moving forward with its digital transformation programme, expanding its provision with the opening of the new Faculty of Law and a move to incorporate more science-based programmes including AI-focused courses, and will open a new campus building on the Sojiji site in 2025. As more students aim to study abroad at prestigious institutions overseas, E-CO can support their efforts in preparing for these experiences, while also providing support for overseas internship programmes. As we recover from the pandemic, we expect to be able to play a larger role in the local community, through language education and intercultural exchange with local residents. E-CO must adapt to provide services which best serve the new student body, by collaborating with faculty and university departments, and ensuring that our services suit and reach those who see themselves as global citizens with a role to play in the emerging global society in Japan.

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