

[研究論文]

An Investigation of Student-centered English Learning and Learning Styles at a Japanese University

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Abstract

The paper explores the research potential of a relatively new phenomenon in Japanese universities, English Lounges. These lounges are an optimal environment to test assumptions about student-centered learning and student learning styles. Specifically this paper investigates students who prefer a student-centered learning approach, and explores which options they choose when presented with a range of activities. The results show that students gravitate towards activities that match their personal learning style, and actively avoid activities that are a mismatch. The paper shows that not all students prefer a student-centered approach and, even when students have a preference for a student-centered approach, not all students have the same preferred learning style.

Keywords :

English learning, student-centered learning, learning style, affective filter, English lounge

1. Introduction

In November of 2006, Kinki University in Osaka opened the e-cube (E³), an English “playground”, with the objective of breaking down barriers to English learning by encouraging students to come and participate in fun activities in English. Kinki University claims to have been the first English facility of this kind in Japan. These types of facilities have spread to many universities in Japan (<http://www.kindai.ac.jp/e-cube/guide/>).

In October 2011, the Fukui Prefectural University opened the World Café. Neighbouring universities in the prefecture followed, with Jinai University opening their E-Lounge in April of 2012, and Fukui University opening their Global Hub in October of 2012 (<http://www.jindai.ac.jp/blog/2012/04/000500>).

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html, [http : //www.u-fukui.ac.jp/news/news_top/detail_10748.html](http://www.u-fukui.ac.jp/news/news_top/detail_10748.html)).

Despite the rapid expansion of English lounges, to our knowledge, there seem to have been relatively few publications regarding these English lounges (Kanno, 2010 ; Kurokawa, Yoshida, Lewis, Igarashi and Kuradate, 2013 ; Taylor, Beck and Talandis, 2012). In fact there seems to be relatively little academic dialogue on the subject of these English lounges. This is surprising given the increasing focus on student-centered learning.

2. Student-centered Learning

In student-centered learning, the student chooses what, how and why to learn (Rogers, 1983). Since the late 1960's, language teaching has slowly been shifting from a teacher-centered approach, where the teacher chooses what, how and why to learn, towards a more student-centered approach (Littlewood, 1996).

In terms of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching methodologies, this shift has shown itself in a movement away from more highly structured teacher-oriented approaches such as grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual approach, and a movement towards more student-centered approaches such as the communicative approach, task-based learning, and an increased focus on computer-assisted language learning (CALL).

This paper will focus on the communicative approach. The communicative approach is especially appropriate in an EFL environment, as one of the key principles is a focus on providing speaking opportunities outside of the classroom, and allowing students to experiment with how to use what they know (Peyton, Moore and Young, 2010). One aspect of the communicative approach is its orientation towards language learning as a continuous, life-long process. Within the context of a student-oriented approach the goal of the communicative approach is to provide the student with the tools to continue their own language learning beyond graduation and into their future. The communicative approach also focuses less on fluency, and more on communicative competence (Maybee, 2006).

Communicative competence is built through active participation in real communication on subjects that are of interest to the learner, and in using language to achieve real communicative goals (Krashen, 1976,1979). Krashen (1982), in discussing the affective filter hypothesis, states three important moderators of language learning : motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. Students who lack motivation, lack

self-confidence and/or are anxious, are likely to have higher affective filters, and therefore to learn less effectively, even when the input is comprehensible. While these factors are associated with the learner, it is possible to lower affective filters by creating learning environments that promote motivation, encourage self-confidence and reduce anxiety (Krashen, 1982).

The student-centered learning approach requires learners to take ownership of, and responsibility for, their own learning, and some students lack the self-regulatory skills or attitudes that would allow them to take full advantage of this approach, while other students have a preference for a different learning approach (Hannafin and Hannafin, 2010).

Learning styles are likewise not absolutes, but rather represent a series of spectra. What this means in practical terms is that students can learn in any number of ways, but will learn most efficiently from one or more learning styles that match their personal preferences. Mismatch will not necessarily result in no learning, but rather sub-optimal learning (Peacock, 2001).

A learning style is highly individual, influenced by an individual's physiological variables, such as brain structure, cultural variables, prior learning experiences, and of course individual psychological variables. Learning styles are stable characteristics and rarely change (Liu, 2012).

One of the major problems when discussing learning styles is that there is no standardization, and a wide variety of learning inventories and theories are used, with seemingly no clear consensus, making comparison between research difficult (Kirkpatrick, 2011).

For this study the Felder-Silverman model was chosen. This model was adopted because of its reliability and validity (Fung and Kwan, 1993). The Felder-Silverman model consists of four dimensions, sensing or intuitive, visual or verbal, active or reflective, and sequential or global. There are similar dimensions in other models. For example, the active or reflective dimension resembles the dimension of the same name in Kolb's Experiential learning model, and contains elements that are similar to the extravert or introvert dimension in the Myers-Briggs type indicator. Given the lack of standardization in learning styles research, these parallels should increase the utility of this research by allowing researchers to find similar dimensions for comparison and validation purposes (Felder and Spurlin, 2005).

Here is a brief overview of the four dimensions and their associated characteristics, quoted directly from

Felder and Spurlin (2005) :

- *sensing* (concrete thinker, practical, oriented towards facts and procedures) or *intuitive* (abstract thinker, innovative, oriented towards theories and underlying meanings) ;
- *visual* (prefer visual representations of presented material, such as pictures, diagrams and flow charts) or *verbal* (prefer written and spoken explanations) ;
- *active* (learn by trying things out, enjoy working in groups) or *reflective* (learn by thinking things through, prefer working alone, or with a single familiar partner) ;
- *sequential* (linear thinking process, learn in small incremental steps) or *global* (holistic thinking process, learn in large leaps).

(Felder and Spurlin, 2005, p. 103)

The Felder–Silverman model will be used throughout this paper to code various activities and behaviours in order to impose a framework for easier analysis, and easier comparisons with other research.

3. The World Café

The new English lounges offer an opportunity to investigate the student–centered learning approach and the learning styles adopted by students learning English as a foreign language at university in Japan. These rooms provide a space for study and various study–oriented activities. Students are free to choose how often they visit the English lounge, how long they stay, and which learning activities they engage in while in the room. There is a great deal of talk about student–centered learning, but these English lounges embody this approach, providing resources and leaving it up to the students to choose which resources they utilize and how often. This section will introduce the various learning activities offered at the World Café in Fukui Prefectural University, what percentage of students made use of these activities and to what degree.

The World Café is a large (15 meters x 11 meters) room on the Fukui Campus of the Fukui Prefectural University. The World Café has 11 part–time student staff, who work on a shift system with one student staff member on duty at a time, 2 English first–language instructors, and a Japanese administrator. The room is open Monday to Friday, from 12 : 00 noon to 6 : 00 pm, and is closed during the University holidays and other public holidays. The World Café is next to the computer–assisted language learning room, and close to the library. The Fukui Prefectural University has another, smaller, English lounge, called Ocean’s X, at the Obama campus. The Obama campus is more than a hundred kilometres from the main

Fukui Campus, which makes it difficult for students there to visit the World Café.

3.1. English Positive Environment

One of the roles of these English learning centers is to make English a part of students' everyday lives, and to provide opportunities for students to be exposed to English positive environments on a daily basis. The theory behind this is that regular exposure to English will lower affective filters to the learning of English. The act of choosing to visit an English positive environment, even if the students do not participate in specific learning activities, is a significant action, especially where there are many other areas on campus to sit and relax. The eventual goal is to shift English from EFL to English as a Second Language (ESL). The difference between a foreign language and a second language is a matter of context. A foreign language is a language that is not widely used in the environment. In the context of ESL the second language does not necessarily mean that this is the second language the person has learnt. Rather, a second language is one that is not native to the learner, but is widely used in the environment. The difference between EFL and ESL is often presented as a clear divide, but should rather be considered a continuum, with EFL and ESL as two extremes. One of the objectives of the World Café is to provide an environment where English is normally used. This would provide a context where English is closer to ESL than EFL. (Bahrani, 2011, Gilquin and Granger, 2011)

Following Krashen's (1982) hypothesis about affective filters, the environment at the World Café has been formed to encourage motivated students by making it entirely voluntary, with no pressure to participate. This allows students to participate only when they are motivated to do so, as motivation to study English is not a constant and varies over time. The range of activities in the World Café also allows students to participate at different motivation levels. On days when they are tired or demotivated, they can still maintain their English learning routine by coming to watch a video, or merely sit in on during one of the group activities, without being pressured to do more. The next factor is anxiety.

With the exception of "*English Time*" there is never any pressure on students in the World Café. Students choose which activities they want to partake in, how often, and for how long. On their first visit students will often just have a cup of coffee, exchange a few words with student staff or the English instructors, and then leave. Early experiences showed that simply introducing the activities available in the lounge was preferable to putting any pressure on students to participate, and that students who were pressured mostly did not return. The lack of pressure encourages an environment where students are relaxed and the anxiety usually associated with studying English is reduced. The final factor that Krashen identi-

fies, self–confidence, is addressed by focusing on communicative English over perfect English in an effort to encourage students to develop confidence in their communicative ability, as well as maintain their interest and motivation by allowing them to steer the conversation to issues that they want to talk about rather than stopping the flow of conversation with corrections. The most commonly used corrective technique is rephrasing, where an error is corrected by rephrasing what they just said, and allowing them to hear the correction. Rephrasing builds self–confidence since it allows correction in a way that engages the student, affirms that they were understood, shows that the instructor is interested and paying attention, and avoids any direct criticism of them, instead emphasising that they achieved their communicative goal, albeit imperfectly.

Since opening in October 2011, the World Café has had more than 20,000 visitors. As the Fukui Prefectural University is a public institution, the World Café is open to both students and members of the public. The World Café tracks attendance by categories, identifying regular students, exchange students, members of University staff (administrative and academic staff are included in the same category) and members of the public. The vast majority of the visitors to the World Café are students. As Figure 1 shows, 81.8% of visitors were regular students, followed by 8.9% being foreign exchange students, with visiting staff making up 5.9% and members of the community the final 3.4%.

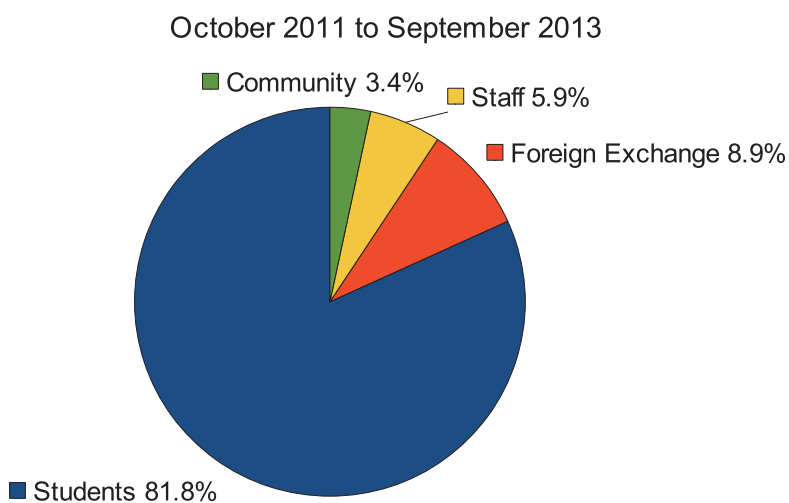


Figure 1 : World Café Visitors by Type

October 2011 to September 2013

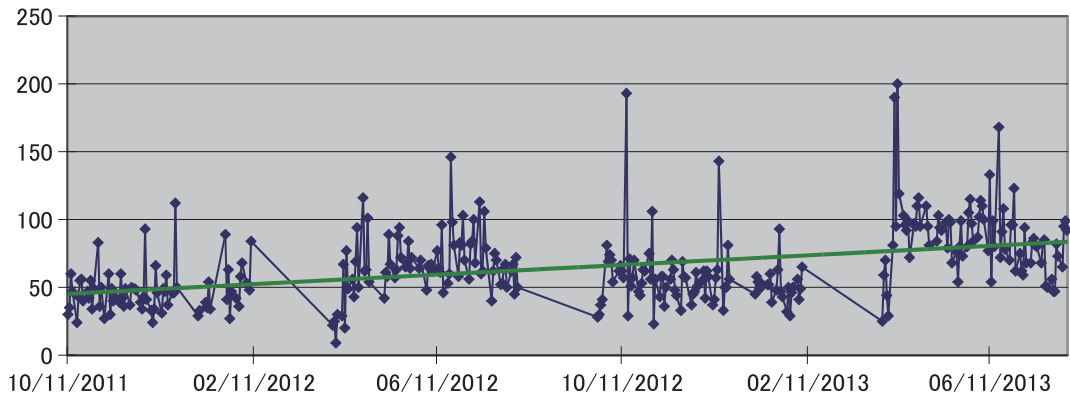


Figure 2 : Number of Visitors per Day

Visitor numbers have increased gradually over the two years since the World Café opened in October 2011. For the first month the number of visitors averaged 46 per day, but this number has increased steadily, averaging 70 visitors per day in the last month. The full pattern can be seen in Figure 2. The green line across the figure is the trend line.

These are not unique visitors. A survey of students at the World Café revealed that 40% of students came to the World Café every day, 50% a few times a week, 5% once a week, and 5% a few times a month.

Most of the students (75%) had been attending the World Café regularly for more than a month but less than 6 months, with a further 20% having attended the World Café for longer than 6 months but less than a year, and 5% for more than a year.

What this shows is that students tend to enjoy the World Café sufficiently to return repeatedly. Since one of the goals of the World Café was to get students to practice some English every day, the fact that 95% of visitors are returning to the World Café on at least a weekly basis is a positive result in terms of encouraging everyday English use for these students. There does seem to be some drop-off in attendance over the long-term, but this may in part be a result of students becoming busier in their second and subsequent years of study, and having less free time, or a result of some of the students shifting to the very distant Obama campus in their second year.

An English-positive environment is not all that the World Café has to offer. There are numerous learning activities for students to take part in.

3.2. Speaking with Staff or English First Language Instructors

In terms of the Felder-Silverman model a preference for this activity would suggest a verbal and reflective style (Felder and Spurlin, 2005).

There are two English first-language speakers who work at the World Café every day, and there are also student staff who are encouraged to speak English with the other students. Of the students who visit the World Café, 90% take advantage of the opportunity to speak to the staff in English. Speaking frequency and duration vary from student to student, as can be seen in Figures 3 and 4. These sort of unstructured, casual conversations are referred to as “free-talk”.

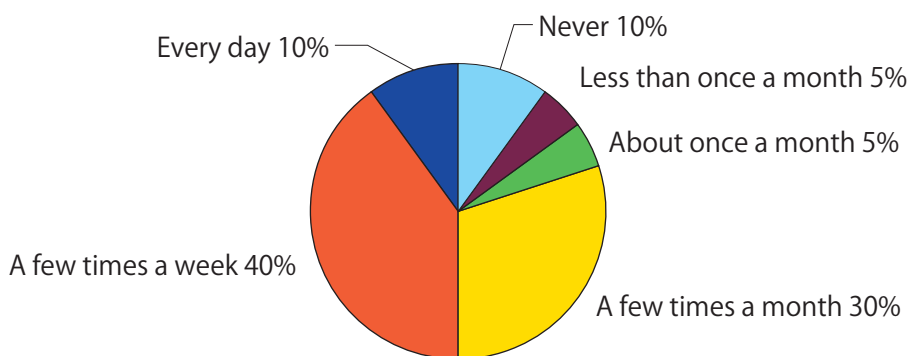


Figure 3 : Free-Talk Frequency

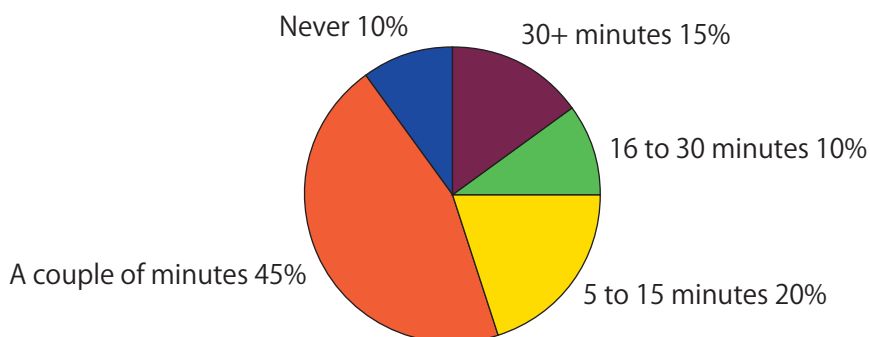


Figure 4 : Free-Talk Duration

The majority of students (40%) engage in free-talk a few times a week to a few times a month (30%), and 10% of students every day. Students are required to speak some English every time they visit the room. For example if they want a free cup of tea or coffee they have to request it in English, but these sort of brief interactions were not considered as sufficient to qualify as free-talk. Many conversations (45%) will last only a couple of minutes, but some students regularly converse for 30 minutes or longer in English (15%). It is always stressed that students should only speak for as long as they are comfortable speaking, and then take a break. This policy is premised on the idea that it is better for students to speak English for a few minutes and then return the next day to speak again, rather than feeling pressured into speaking English for 30 minutes once and then never returning.

3.3. Mini-Eikaiwa (Short communication classes)

In terms of the Felder-Silverman model participation in this activity would reflect a preference for a verbal and active learning style (Felder and Spurlin, 2005).

Every week four short conversation classes (mini-eikaiwa) are offered during lunch-time. The classes are led by one of the English first language instructors, and the pattern is typically to introduce a topic and then encourage the students to discuss it and give their opinions. The discussions are limited to 30 minutes in order to allow students time to pack up their lunches and get to their next class on time, although often a few students who do not have class after lunch will stay behind to discuss the issue further.

The mini-eikaiwa discussions are quite popular, with 15% of students attending twice a week, 30% once a week, 20% once every second week, 5% once a month, 15% less than once a month, and 15% never having attended the conversation classes. The popularity of the conversation classes, with 45% of students participating at least once a week, seems to mirror the popularity of free-talk, with 50% of students speaking English at least a few times a week. There was no correlation between the student's frequency of participation in free-talk and their frequency of participation in mini-eikaiwa classes ($r=0.39$, $n=20$, $p=0.09$), indicating that the students who preferred to participate in free-talking were not necessarily the same as those who chose to participate in the structured mini-eikaiwa classes, and which activity they chose was a reflection of personal preference.

3.4. English Time

In terms of the Felder–Silverman model participation in this activity would reflect a preference for a verbal and active learning style (Felder and Spurlin, 2005).

English time was proposed as a means of discouraging students who weren't interested in English but sat in the World Café drinking the tea and coffee and speaking to their friends exclusively in Japanese. Often a group of friends would come into the World Café, but one or two students in the group were not interested in English, and so they would pressure the rest of the group into only speaking Japanese. As a means of weeding out these disruptive students English Time was implemented. English Time was held every day for 30 minutes, with the time varying slightly depending on occupancy and the presence of undesirable elements. The tables were reorganized and everyone was encouraged to join a large discussion in English for 30 minutes.

What was observed was that while this did discourage the undesirable elements, who tended to leave the World Café rather than participate, it also tended to result in some of the very capable free-talk participants also leaving the room, while others stayed to participate in the group discussion. Statistical analysis by Pearson product-moment correlation supported this observation, showing a significant strong positive correlation between frequency of participation in English time and frequency of participation in the mini-eikaiwa discussions ($r=0.75$, $n=20$, $p=0.00$), but no significant statistical relationships between the frequency of free-talk and the frequency of mini-eikaiwa group attendance ($r=0.39$, $n=20$, $p=0.09$), nor the frequency of free-talk and the frequency of English time students ($r=0.17$, $n=20$, $p=0.47$).

There was also no correlation between English speaking duration and either of the other two activities. What this shows is the distinction between learning approach and learning style. All of the students preferred a student-centered learning approach, but had different learning styles, as expressed in their preferences for different types of learning activities.

3.5. Monthly Events

In the Felder–Silverman model, these activities would be described as verbal and active (Felder and Spurlin, 2005).

Monthly events are held at the World Café, primarily as a means of publicizing the World Café and raising awareness of the room both within the University and the broader community. Events celebrating

common holidays are held, such as Christmas and Easter parties, but there have also been presentations from foreign speakers, such as a presentation by doctors from Malawi in Africa about medical conditions in the country. The format for these events is normally a short presentation followed by a game or activity, and then approximately half the time is reserved for people to mingle and speak in English. Snacks and drinks are usually served.

Surprisingly less than half of the students surveyed regularly attended the monthly events. Only 35% of the students attended every month, with a further 20% of students attending every second month. Fifteen percent (15%) of students attended three or four times a year, 5% once a year, and 25% of students had never attended a monthly event.

3.6. Movies

In the Felder–Silverman model, these activities would be described as visual and reflective styles (Felder and Spurlin, 2005).

There are two types of movies offered in the World Café. The first type is movies that are played constantly on the wide-screen television in order to provide English background sounds to support the English-speaking ambience in the World Café, to allow students taking a break something to watch, and to allow for learners with a more passive learning style.

The second type is videos that have been installed on one of the five laptop computers in the World Café. Produced by Sourcnext, these videos have a number of features for English learners. For example, in addition to traditional subtitles that translate the whole phrase, they also have features such as, word-for-word translations, a function to play-back and repeat a particular phrase, are capable of bookmarking phrases for review, and can display both the Japanese and English subtitles simultaneously. The videos on the laptops range from movies such as “Forrest Gump” and “Harry Potter” to documentaries such as “An Inconvenient Truth” and episodes from the Discovery Channel.

The videos are very popular with students, with 95% of the students having watched at least one. On average, students watched 2.73 videos each.

3.7. TOEIC

In the Felder–Silverman this activity would be described as sensing, reflective and sequential styles (Felder and Spurlin, 2005).

The Fukui Prefectural University has identified improving students' English skills as a strategic objective in their six year plan, with a focus on the TOEIC test as the means of measuring progress towards this goal. As a result, the World Café has been promoting the TOEIC test. The idea was to make a new TOEIC worksheet available every week, along with a stamp sheet to measure their progress.

The answers were printed on the back of the worksheet, but students were encouraged to take the completed worksheet to an instructor so that their sheet could be stamped. This also provided an opportunity for students to ask questions about any of the test items that they did not understand.

This was a new project and 50% of the students took worksheets, with the average student finishing 3.6 worksheets over a 15 week period, indicating an erratic approach to the use of this resource. It should be noted that more than 100 copies of each worksheet were printed for each week, and almost all of the worksheets were taken, so there are some inconsistencies between the questionnaire data and the reality. It is possible that students took worksheets and didn't finish them, but it was also noted that some students who were not regular World Café visitors dropped by every week to pick up worksheets and then left. It is therefore possible that this type of activity appealed to students who were not attracted to studying in the World Café on a regular basis.

3.8. Books

This activity would be coded on the Felder–Silverman model as visual, reflective and global (Felder and Spurlin, 2005).

The World Café has a wide variety of books for students to read, including Lonely Planet travel books, more than 50 Penguin graded readers (levels 2 to 6), Japanese comic books such as Naruto and One Piece in English, as well as dual medium Japanese–English copies of Peanuts, amongst other books.

The books have shown some popularity amongst students, and a Book of the Week campaign was started to promote awareness of the books in the World Café, with a poster each week showcasing some of the books. Of the students visiting the World Café 20% had read at least one book, with students averaging

2.75 books.

4. Methodology

The data used in this paper was a combination of standard attendance data collected over three years, in addition to a questionnaire given to the students at the World Café.

4.1. Sample Size and Selection

The questionnaire was left on the tables in the World Café for students to fill in anonymously. On the day in question, there were a total of 83 visitors, so the 20 responses reflects a response rate of 24% of the students who visited the World Café on that day.

The survey was conducted on a single day, but from the visitor frequency data we can estimate the total number of students who visit the World Café over the period of a month, and from the visitor frequency data the confidence interval of the sample can be calculated. Conservatively approximately 564 individual students visit the World Café in a month out of a total population of 1625 students attending Fukui Prefectural University (*Fukui Prefectural University : guidebook 2014*, 2013). At a 95% confidence level the sample size of 20 students gives a confidence interval of ± 22 .

It is acknowledged that there is an inherent bias in this sample. Students who visited the World Café are naturally oriented towards student-centered learning, and 95% of the students sampled visited the World Café on at least a weekly basis. Students with a student-centered learning style represented an estimated 35% of the student population of Fukui Prefectural University, 564 students out of 1625.

4.2. Method

Descriptive statistics have been presented in the text when introducing each of the activities. It is hoped that this information will provide guidance to other academics attempting to engage the interest of learners with a preference for a student-centered learning approach.

One final set of data will be presented, the students' self-evaluation of the impact of their attendance at the World Café on their English ability.

To the question :

Do you think the World Café has helped to improve your English level?
How much?

Ⓐ Not at all Ⓑ A little Ⓒ A moderate amount Ⓓ A lot

ワールドカフェはあなたの英語の上達に役立っていると思いますか?
どの程度ですか?

Ⓐ 全然 Ⓑ 少し Ⓒ まあまあ Ⓓ とても

Of the students surveyed, 10% answered Ⓑ “a little”/“少し”, 50% replied Ⓒ “A moderate amount”/“まあまあ”, and 40% chose Ⓓ “A lot”/“とても”.

A Pearson product–moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the various activities in the World Café and the student’s self–evaluation of their English improvement. There were no significant correlations between any of the activities and English improvement.

Of the seven regular activities offered at the World Café (Free talk with instructors, mini–eikaiwa, English time, books, movies, monthly events and TOEIC worksheets) students, on average, participated in 4.95 of the 7 activities to varying degrees, and students displayed a strong preference for one or two of the activities (as evidenced by frequency of use). Therefore it is unsurprising that there was no strong correlation to any single activity or set of activities. The lack of correlation shows that learning was more a matter of matching the student’s individual learning style, than any single activity being universally beneficial.

5. Discussion

The results from the study show that 90% of students found the World Café environment helpful in improving their English. This does not necessarily mean that all English lounges will produce similar results. There are a great many variables, such as the attention given to reducing affective filters to learning in the World Café.

There is an assumption in much of the research that a student–centered approach is the best approach for all students. Sustaining a student–centered approach is as much a matter of selecting the correct resources as it is a matter of student preferences. One can provide an excellent activity, but it may not be of

interest to a significant number of students because it simply does not suit their individual learning style. This research shows that this approach is not preferred by all students.

A good example of the impact of learning styles in this paper was the relative popularity of verbal-reflective activities (for example, free-talking with an English first language instructor) as opposed to the popularity of verbal-active activities (for example, mini-eikaiwa classes and English time). The statistics showed that it was not a matter of English level, but rather a matter of personal learning style preference.

A preference for a student-centered learning approach does not override learning style preferences, and this may be why much of the research being produced on student-centered learning is producing problematic results. Current thinking seems to make two unproven assumptions. First, the assumption that all students are interested in, and capable of, engaging in student-centered learning over the medium to long term. Second, the preconception that the type of activity is irrelevant, so long as it is student-centered. CALL research is particularly guilty of this, offering just a single activity, or single type of activity, to a group of students, and assuming that because it is student-centered, this will overcome any personal learning style preferences. The personal learning style preferences also play a critical role in how well students learn.

What this research showed was that, when offered open access to a student-centered English lounge, only 35% of students chose to utilize this approach, showing that a student-centered learning approach is not the preferred learning approach for all students. Secondly the students were offered a range of student-centered activities, but not all students chose the same activities, but instead showed a strong preference for learning activities that matched their personal preferred learning style. The lack of any significant correlations between English improvement and any single activity showed that while students found the activities helpful there was a great deal of variation in which activities they involved themselves in and to what degree.

In education there is no single best way to teach all students, whether in traditional teacher-oriented education or in the current trend towards student-centered education. A range of activities should be offered that appeal to a variety of learning styles. A substantial percentage of students seem to have a preference for student-centered learning. However current CALL-oriented approaches to student-centered learning are insufficient, and should be incorporated into English learning centers, as this paper demonstrates that offering a range of learning activities to appeal to a range of learning styles is essential.

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