

# **The Transformation of a Foreign Language Conversation Lounge: An Action Research Project**

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## **Abstract**

When designing an informal learning space, it is important to consider how the physical environment will affect the user experience (Van Note Chism, 2002; Gee, 2006; Kopek, 2012), and it is beneficial that students, as the main stakeholders, have a voice in the design process (Bickford & Wright, 2006; Lomas & Oblinger, 2006). This paper describes an ongoing action research project in which one faculty member worked closely with university students to redesign an underused foreign language conversation lounge. The impact of this intervention was monitored by usage records and qualitative data from field notes and interviews. Positive and negative findings are discussed, along with ideas for the next cycle of this project.

## **Introduction**

Learning takes place outside the classroom when students interact with other students and with faculty around the campus. The quantity and quality of these interactions is shaped by the campus environment. Scott Webber (2009, pp. 65–71) argues that in the Knowledge Age it is important for workplaces and universities to provide places for people to communicate with each other. In these spaces, incidental and informal learning occurs as people share knowledge and skills, including intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. These kinds of spaces include cafes, lobbies, libraries, and corridors.

As educational practices change, the importance of this kind of informal learning is increasingly recognized. Milne notes that as learning is becoming more social and less structured, more learning activity is occurring outside of classrooms and “informal learning space design is rapidly becoming a primary focus of interest and innovation” (2006, p. 11. 7).

Factors such as lighting, acoustics, aesthetics, and air quality affect physiological and psychological states and thus are important considerations for the design of such learning spaces (Van Note Chism, 2002; Barrett & Barrett, 2010; Kopek, 2012). Good informal learning spaces will have a human-centered design, meeting the learners’ needs for safety, comfort, wellbeing, stimulation, and a connection with nature (Gee, 2006) and the availability of food and drink (Brown & Long, 2006).

Foreign language conversation lounges or salons are a kind of informal learning space for students to gather and interact in their second language. These environments require very careful design because foreign language learners have particular needs which should be taken into consideration. As an English language instructor based in Japan, I have several years of experience working in these kinds of settings, researching how to support learners in these contexts. In a previous study, the co-author and I discuss the difficulties of achieving natural, flowing conversation in these lounge environments, highlighting the fact that learners often experience language anxiety, and feel trepidation about entering a space where they cannot express themselves

easily because of their language limitations (Taylor & Birchley, 2011). To address these issues, we formulated a number of recommendations for the design of conversation lounges, as follows:

- Make the space status-free.
- Use natural light where possible, and where lighting is used, use full-spectrum.
- Use soft lighting.
- Avoid venetian blinds.
- Keep the room well ventilated.
- Add enticing smells.
- Maintain a comfortable, warm ambient temperature.
- Use warm colors for walls and furnishings.
- Avoid any use of red, even in small amounts.
- Use soft seating but avoid sofas.
- Use furniture with rounded corners.
- Carpets are a good idea, but avoid strongly patterned carpets.
- Aim for a sense of order and avoid clutter.
- Include plants, views of nature from the windows, or pictures of natural landscapes.
- Aim for a cozy, non-institutional ‘feel.’
- Provide a variety of resources. (Taylor and Birchley, 2011, pp. 8–9)

These guidelines aim to attract learners to the space, and to reduce anxiety by avoiding elements that heighten stress (such as patterns which induce visual stress, and sharp corners and the color red, which have associations with danger). Conversation is facilitated by using individual chairs rather than sofas, to ensure lounge users can sit at a comfortable angle for interaction. The provision of resources, such as musical instruments and games, supports lower-level learners as it allows students to engage in an enjoyable activity around which some intermittent talk can occur, avoiding the pressure of sustaining an ongoing conversation.

In the design of any learning space, it is important that students participate in the design process (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 32; Bickford & Wright, 2006). Giving students a voice in the planning process can lead to a greater sense of involvement and ownership, and a more successful outcome:

Students will likely spend more time in campus learning spaces than anyone else. Learners have a legitimate perspective on what works — and what doesn’t. Finding meaningful ways to involve students in planning and evaluating space design is an effective way to ensure that space catalyzes learning. (Lomas & Oblinger, 2006, p. 5. 10)

La Marca (2010) stresses that consultation is key to the design of effective learning spaces, and that it is vital to consult not only students, teachers, and administrators, but also to consult the literature, colleagues, and the Internet to see other examples of designs.

This paper describes an action research project in which I set out to redesign and refurbish the conversation lounge at the university in which I currently work as an instructor. In the following sections I explain the situation which instigated the project, and outline the project process. Next, I describe the design intervention. I then present the results from this cycle of action research, and discuss the findings. Finally, I consider how

the project can move forward.

## **1 . Setting and background**

When I began working at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University in April 2013, I had six years' experience of working at a university with a foreign language conversation lounge, which, after a shaky start, had begun to develop into a thriving community of language learners. I was excited that my new workplace had a conversation lounge, and eagerly went to the lounge to meet the students. However, on every occasion I visited the space, I found it empty. At the time, I was teaching a number of communication classes which focused on speaking and listening skills, and found the students willing and able to speak English throughout the 90 minute classes. After class, I was approached several times by students who told me that they had experience studying overseas and had worked hard to develop some fluency in English. They were concerned that their English communication skills might be deteriorating, because the only opportunity they had to engage in sustained interaction in English was in my classes. When I suggested using the lounge to meet and have conversations in English, the students seemed hesitant and unenthusiastic.

Clearly, despite there being a demand for an environment in which to use English, the lounge was not serving its purpose. From my visits to the lounge, I felt that the design and general state of the facility could be a major factor contributing to the students' reluctance to use the space. The lounge is a large room, and had previously been a classroom. When I first visited the space, there were hand-made signs on the door reading 'Conversation Lounge' in Chinese and English, with spelling errors in both languages. Inside, there were four round tables, each with four colored chairs. Additionally, the room contained a large number of long desks, each with three hard, plastic chairs (of the kind found in most of the classrooms on campus). Many of these desks and chairs were stacked in piles at the sides of the room (Figure 1 ). There was also a plain gray sofa, and a set of patterned armchairs of a different design, with a coffee table, which had a broken glass surface. There were two AV cabinets, each with a large, old television and VCR/DVD player, one of which was connected to the room sound system and projector. There was a large chalkboard and two pin-boards on one wall, and two whiteboards on another. There was also a chalkboard calendar, of the kind typically found in offices. Otherwise, the walls were bare. There were three movable screens on wheels. There were two institutional-looking, metal storage cabinets, and two metal bookshelves, all filled with books and other materials belonging to the university's Chinese and English clubs. There were several piles of old posters made of cardboard stacked in piles, and a lot of what appeared to be trash (stained, folded rugs and empty cans and bottles, for example). Overall, the place had a disordered, uninviting, and institutional 'feel,' and looked rather like a storeroom.

In an attempt to address this problem situation, I decided to embark on an action research (AR) project, working with students and other stakeholders to redesign and refurbish the lounge. The aim was to create a space which would support informal conversation (in Chinese and English), and which would attract both students and faculty, so that a community of foreign language learners and users could develop and grow. The following section outlines the AR process.

## **2 . Methodology and AR process**

The first step was to consult with the Educational Affairs Office to find out if refurbishment would be



Figure 1 . The Conversation Lounge, Pre-intervention.

permitted and whether funding was likely to be granted for such a project. Once a proposal was submitted, I began gathering the students' ideas on how the space should look and feel.

I carried out ten semi-structured interviews with students from different classes and year groups, asking the students about the places where they choose to spend time socializing with friends. Students were asked to supply photographs of these favorite places. The interviews were recorded to ease note-taking. This data helped inform the design.

Throughout the duration of this cycle of the AR project, from May 2012 to the 'relaunching' of the space in October 2012, I engaged in an ongoing consultation process. This involved liaisons with the Educational Affairs Office, the General Affairs Office, and the Student Affairs Office; informal chats with full and part-time faculty members, and formal discussion at faculty meetings, in addition to consultation with students. With the aim of involving the students as much as possible, I met with students from both the Chinese and English clubs to discuss their needs and preferences. I also introduced the project in each of my classes, inviting students to stay behind after class to discuss design ideas. These students were encouraged to talk about the project with students from other classes, and encourage any interested students to get involved. A loose team was formed, although the students' busy schedules meant that it was impossible for all of the members to meet at once. Ad-hoc meetings took place in small groups or on a one-to-one basis, with students looking at furniture and poster websites, measuring the room and furniture, visiting the nearby home and garden center, and transporting furniture. Later, these students helped me to assemble furniture, alongside a member of the school's office staff and another faculty member. They also were involved in the design of posters and fliers to advertise the space.

From the outset of the project, I kept field notes, recording incidents, suggestions, developments, problems, and feedback.

A log was kept one month prior to any changes to the lounge, recording the first name of each student visiting the space, their school year, and the duration and nature of their visit (see appendix). This provided a baseline to compare with the post-intervention usage rate. The log was kept for two months after the lounge was relaunched.

Finally, at the end of the semester, a small number of the users of the room were interviewed, including faculty and students.

### 3. The intervention

The intervention in this AR project consisted primarily of changes to the interior of the room, including partial refurbishment. As the first step, most of the existing furniture was removed. Members of the English and Chinese clubs were recruited to help transport unneeded furniture to a store room.

Some furniture was retained, partly because the administration was reluctant to dispose of fairly new, good quality furniture and partly because these items had some value for the space and for the students. These items included the movable screens and wall pin-boards, which provided useful surfaces for posters. One whiteboard and the large blackboard were retained. This decision was made after careful consideration; the boards make the room look like a classroom and create a strong institutional 'feel' which is not ideal for a lounge. However, field notes showed that students actively used these boards, writing up language related problems and comments for other students to respond to. Student consultation also revealed a strong desire to keep the boards. The (lockable) AV unit (with a CD/DVD player connected to the room speakers and a projector) was retained, and the projector replaced. This unit provided a means to play background music and show movies, as well as providing a place to store valuables.

Seating was an important consideration, and the new design offers the students a variety of seating options. After consultation, I decided to keep the existing round tables, each with four colored, soft, upright chairs. The chairs are comfortable and attractive, and round tables allow participants to sit at an angle which best supports interaction (Mehrabian & Diamond, 1971). Incorporating ideas from the initial interview data, in which students expressed a wish to relax and literally 'put their feet up,' a set of black, leather sofa chairs was purchased, including a one and a two-seater sofa and two chaises longues. One of the existing sofas was also kept, due to budget constraints. Additionally, a floor seating area was created with rugs, soft underlay, beanbags, and cushions, to provide a place where students could take off their shoes and unwind. The sofa and floor area each have a low coffee table with rounded corners.

The budget allowed for the purchase of a range of smaller items which help to set a relaxed, non-threatening mood, and to attract students and faculty to the space. Tea and coffee making facilities were set up, with a money box for donations to cover the cost of the supplies. Students selected three large plants to set on the floor, several potted plants, and a number of very small plants placed in the center of each table. Students were invited to select posters from a range of natural scenes in English and Chinese speaking countries. Small lamps provide soft lighting and an aroma burner provides pleasant smells. A guitar and an iPad were donated by faculty members, along with several graded readers and study books. Some DVDs requested by students were purchased, in addition to a number of board games and other recreational goods such as *Jenga* and packs of cards. Three wooden shelving display units store these resources and also the materials belonging to the English and Chinese clubs. Following the suggestion of a student, a clock was fixed to the

wall. The total cost of all of the purchased furniture and accessories was ¥440,000.

By chance, the project coincided with some campus-wide general renovations, which included all the walls being repainted and curtains replaced. The walls were all painted an off-white color, and it was not possible to negotiate a different color choice for the lounge. Following negotiations with the administration, the students in the project team were allowed to choose the color of the curtains for the lounge from a range of eight choices. The students were encouraged to select a warm color, and they decided on a soft peach shade.

The layout of the room was decided by students, following consultation with the administration. In interviews, several students expressed a preference for a very open room, where they could easily see other users and felt able to join any group easily. Others expressed a preference for cozy, private spaces, and I observed students in the pre-intervention stage of the project using the screens to create distraction-free study spaces. The layout needed to meet both the need for privacy and the need for openness. Additionally, the administration required all areas of the room to be visible through the glass panels in the doors, with no area fully enclosed by screens. Therefore, screens and plants were used to create areas which offered some sense of privacy, but still allowed visibility and access (see Figure 2).

Signage was another important area to consider, and this was inherently tied to policy decisions. Before this project began, signs outside the lounge indicated that any student could use the facility, and that students using the space should speak English and Chinese. However, many students and some faculty seemed unclear about who could use the room. As the lounge is located in the building used mainly by the foreign languages department, it was sometimes assumed that students from the education department could not enter. Some students believed the room was a clubroom exclusively for the use of the members of the English and Chinese clubs. Another difficulty was that the administration considered making the room available only when booked two weeks in advance, in line with classroom booking procedures, which would have prevented any spontaneous interaction from taking place. These issues were discussed in faculty meetings and the policy clarified. It was decided that the lounge would be open to all students from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. unless reserved in advance for a class or for club activity, and that food and drink would be permitted. A reversible sign was made for each door, showing if the room was open or a class or meeting was in progress, and I also hung whiteboards in the corridor for room-booking and for advertising events. I worked with students to design a large poster advertising the new room design, which was displayed outside the lounge. Several more posters were displayed around the campus. We produced fliers, and requested faculty members to distribute these in classes. We also designed posters in the lounge, advertising the refreshments policy, language policy, and mission statement.

The intervention was initially limited to the redesign of the physical environment, but the focus of the project widened to include the setting up of a team of student volunteers to act as lounge staff. The need for this service arose as the project evolved. The students in the English and Chinese clubs and the students on the project team became concerned that the new design may attract students to the space who might not respect the purpose of the room. They were concerned that students might use the room to sleep, or to relax with their friends using Japanese. They were also concerned about the possible theft of the resources, the risk of damage to the furnishings, and litter. To avoid these situations, a team of students was recruited and given basic training. They were provided with name badges and a roster was devised so that one or two staff members managed the lounge in each class period and at lunchtime. The volunteers were encouraged to enforce



Figure 2. The Conversation Lounge, Post-intervention

the language policy and rules, to maintain the space, and to promote the facility through a *Facebook* group. On the request of the lounge staff, I also spent every available lunch-break in the lounge and visited frequently to support the students in their new roles.

The next section outlines the results of this intervention.

#### 4. Results

The log shows that the number of people using the lounge increased following the intervention. The average number of people visiting the lounge prior to the redesign was 1.45 per day. After the reopening of the lounge, the average number of recorded visits per day was 16.45 in the first month and 16.35 in the second. As the researcher, I decided not to record in the log any of my own visits to the lounge, as I made very frequent visits to observe, to collect data, and to support the lounge staff. These figures also do not include periods where the lounge was booked for class use; in the second month, the lounge was twice used for classes, which involved an additional 36 visits. The field notes suggest that actual number of visits was higher than the recorded number, due to some lounge users failing to record their visit in the log book.

The log and field notes help to build a picture of how the lounge came to be used in the two months following the redesign. Students from every year group made use of the lounge. 14% of visits were made by freshmen, 30% by second years, 36% by third years, 6% by fourth years, and 15% were made by faculty, post-graduate students, and extension center students. This finding was expected; freshmen have busier schedules with fewer free periods, and fourth years spend a lot of time off-campus, busy with job hunting activities. There was considerable variation in the length of the visits. The shortest recorded visit was one minute, and the longest 210 minutes. Although all students recorded the time they entered the lounge, many ne-



glected to record the time they left, so the data for the duration of the visits is incomplete. From the available data, the average visit was 52 minutes and the majority of the visits were made during the lunch hour. The lounge was used both for conversation and study. The log data shows that 34% of visits were for conversation, 9% were for self-study, 1% for group study and 9% for club meetings and club events. 10% were visits made by the student staff, who while carrying out their staff roles also engaged in conversation and study. 41% of visits were recorded as “other,” and almost all of these users recorded the purpose of their visit as “lunch.” Field notes show that these students were typically engaged in conversation or group study as they ate. The fact that students regarded lunch as the main purpose of their visit shows the importance of having a policy that allows food and drink to be consumed in the lounge.

The data from the field notes and interviews provided useful feedback about the quality of the interaction in the lounge and the users’ experience of the space. The feedback from the users of the space was generally very positive. When asked in the post-intervention interview how they felt in the lounge, all of the students and faculty described the space as “comfortable” except for one student, who responded in silence with a thumbs-up gesture (Post-intervention interview, M). Field notes show that visitors to the lounge evidenced enjoyment of the space, and that their first impression of the lounge was that it was a place with a homey, non-institutional feel:

The student exclaimed, ‘Like a home!’ (Field notes, 9 /27)

I saw one of the students hugging the orange beanbag. (Field notes, 10/ 4 )

Received an email from one of the part-time teachers about the lounge. He wrote, ‘Great couches and chairs! Much appreciated!!’ (Field notes, 10/ 5 )

This contrasts with one of the students’ descriptions of the lounge before it was refurbished, in which he described it as “*sappuukei*” [bare, drab, dreary, bleak] (Pre-intervention interview, M). However, some comments indicated that more can be done to improve the atmosphere. One field note records the following comment from a faculty member: “O said, ‘It’s a bit big to be really cozy’” (Field notes, 10/19) and two students stated that the lounge was sometimes “too silent” and suggested using more background music (Post-intervention interviews, M; T).

The data show that the refurbished space provided students with opportunities for interaction in their foreign language which had been lacking before. In the pre-intervention interviews student responses indicated that they did not speak English outside the classroom:

I never speak English with my friends on campus. Only in class. (Pre-intervention interview, K)

I seldom speak English outside class. Only when we are kidding. (Pre-intervention interview, Y)

I don’t speak English with my friends. (Pre-intervention interview, R)

Following the relaunching of the lounge space, students gathered to speak in English with faculty and with each other. Data from the field notes and interviews suggest that the majority of this interaction was light chat. Students talked about their classes and studies, part-time jobs, travel, hobbies, weekend plans, their lunch, and other “basic stuff” (Post-intervention interview, O). There were also occasions where deeper or more ex-



tended conversations took place; students reported sharing stories about romantic relationships, teaching each other how to play PC games, discussing teaching methodologies (many of the students plan to become junior high school teachers) and living abroad. Students also reported talking in depth about a seminar class and a masters' thesis with faculty members. The provision of an attractive space for foreign language conversation to occur generated some energy and enthusiasm among the users of the lounge:

I feel relaxed and excited at the same time. It's weird, you can relax but also [you feel] excited because everyone is practicing English you know, that is something I wanted to see, so something is happening and it's very exciting. I wanted to have that kind of space at my last university but we couldn't and here we can, so it's very exciting. (Post-intervention interview, J)

It makes me get more motivation for speaking English when I come here. (Post-intervention interview, N)

One of the faculty members explained that the comfortable surroundings helped reduce some of the difficulties experienced when trying to sustain conversation with non-proficient English speakers:

...also you feel like you have to fill in those awkward silences so you tend to speak more than I should be speaking... but I think you know, nice carpet and you're lying, you are not standing face-to-face, you are kind of relaxing and that kind of eliminates some of the uncomfortableness. It's OK to be silent and sitting because you are relaxing. (Post-intervention interview, J)

The lounge both created opportunities for foreign language interaction and facilitated it.

Although a considerable amount of foreign language interaction occurred in the lounge, the students did not always follow the language policy. The degree to which students followed the language policy varied from student to student, with some students reporting that they spoke in Japanese only about 20% of the time, and others as much as 90%. This negative finding will be discussed in the following section, which explores the issues which arose in the course of the action research and evaluates the outcomes of this first cycle of the project.

## 5 . Discussion

The results of this cycle of the action research project show that making improvements to the physical space led to a greater number of students using the lounge, and that the comfortable environment supported foreign language use. The data show that the environment drew both faculty and students into the space, enabling both student-faculty and student-student communication. Overall, this was a positive outcome, but there is still room for improvement. There were some quiet days, with low numbers of students using the space. Also, the lounge, based in a building used primarily by the foreign language department, attracted few users from the education department. This suggests that further changes need to be made, both to the physical space, to make it easier to enter, and to the way it is publicized.

The findings also showed that although the students were drawn to the space, they did not always follow the language policy. The interview data show that this problem was primarily a staffing issue. The members of the student staff team were aware that they were supposed to enforce the language policy, but found it difficult to carry out in practice:

We are scared to warn them, to tell them. When they sleep, we tell them [to stop], they say 'OK, OK!'

and they changed their mind, it's OK. But we can't tell [them], 'Don't speak Japanese!' (Post-intervention interview, K)

I saw students speaking Japanese but I didn't say anything. It's my bad point. [...] They are new students and... I am a human! I am familiar with English relationships and notice this English system, and I think that one month later they will start speak English more comfortably, maybe. (Post-intervention interview, D)

The volunteers were afraid to approach other students, and their comments show that some hoped that the problem might disappear without intervention. Without enforcement of the language policy, students continued to speak Japanese. The lounge staff members themselves also spoke Japanese at times, setting a poor example to other users.

Strange and Banning (2001, p. 36) stress that although the physical environment is important and shapes the behavior of users of the space, the "environmental inhabitants" also influence the other users. They argue that it may not be enough to refurbish a learning space if there is no change to the people ecology. In this project, the setting up of a team of volunteer student staff was a secondary consideration, with the redesign of the space as the primary aim. However, the findings indicate that staffing is an important issue, and that recruiting volunteer student staff with minimal training to enforce the language policy may not be adequate for the lounge at this campus to function well as a center for foreign language conversation.

The findings from this AR cycle also highlighted the importance of staffing in maintaining a comfortable lounge environment. Many of the plants died through lack of care, and most days the coffee machine and aroma burner were not used, and background music was not played, so the environment was not as comfortable and appealing as it could have been. The field notes also show that the student staff frequently failed to wear their name badges, and did not carry out some aspects of their role, such as playing background music, watering plants, organizing refreshments, and welcoming students. When interviewed, several students explained that they did not know how to operate the coffee machine, iPad, or AV system and had avoided using these appliances. These findings and experiences suggest that the selection process for student staff and the training they are offered need reconsideration and development.

There were indications that students at this campus have the potential to develop skills as lounge staff and facilitators. During the course of this cycle of the project, some of the student staff became involved in a project in which they made an iBook about the lounge. A number of the student staff also attended a local conference (Student Involvement in Self Access Centers) in which they were able to meet student staff from a range of universities in the country and spend a day sharing stories and reflecting on their role. Both of these activities led to the students developing a greater awareness of their role and a sense of responsibility.

## 6 . Reflections

The project process was a learning experience for me, which was both challenging and rewarding. I will outline some of the successful aspects of the process and highlight some of the difficulties. This information may be useful to others embarking on similar projects.

The involvement of the students throughout this project was beneficial for students in that students felt a sense of ownership of the space, and in that the design project process itself created opportunities for stu-

dents to use English in a practical way outside of the classroom. Over the course of the project, students communicated with me in English via email, by writing messages on the message board on my office door, and through face-to-face communication. The project process generated situations which created the need for students to use a variety of language functions, including planning, exchanging information, problem solving, teaching, and apologizing. This field notes record some examples of the language produced:

R said, “Clair, I have to apologize!” and showed me that he had torn the poster and had repaired it. I was very impressed with his use of English. (Field notes, 10/18)

The plants wouldn’t fit in my car, so we borrowed a van from the Home Center. Y had to show me how to drive it — role reversal of teacher power positions! (Field notes, 9/27)

At times, pronunciation and other language difficulties occurred, which provided opportunities for learning:

The students mistook “rug” for rack and began looking at rack shelves. They also mistook “cupboard” for carpet. When I gave them the tape measure, they read me measurements in inches, even though we are shopping in Japan and will need centimeters. (Field notes, 24/7)

However, one problem was that the lounge is used both for Chinese and English conversation. As I am unable to speak Chinese, interactions with the Chinese-speaking users of the lounge had to be conducted in either English or Japanese, which caused some tensions:

When I walked in [to the lounge during the Chinese club meeting hour], the students pointedly said, “*Ni hau.*” I felt uncomfortable for crashing the meeting and speaking in the wrong language. We spoke briefly, and I explained in a few words about the project, and we agreed on a date to talk more. (Field notes, 7/9)

On reflection, it would have been better to have carried out this project with a Chinese-speaking research partner, so that the Chinese-speaking students could have benefited from having similar opportunities to use their Chinese skills, and also have felt better represented.

Budget was a serious issue for this project. I had underestimated the amount of money required in the initial request for funds. To cover the costs for this cycle of the project, it was necessary to use funds from individual faculty members’ research budgets. My colleagues were happy to help, but this created additional paperwork and made the process more difficult. There were also some needs which I had not anticipated, and some of these needs could not be met within the constraints of the budget. One difficulty was that I purchased coffee and tea making equipment, but the room has no water supply. Student staff had to take an elevator to a kitchen on another floor each time they needed to fetch water or wash cups, and some members of staff were reluctant to do this. This difficulty in accessing kitchen facilities meant that hot beverages were not available to users every day, even though hot beverages were one successful way of attracting students and faculty into the space. The installation of kitchen facilities would have solved this problem, but was beyond the scope of the requested budget. The limitations of the budget may also have reduced student involvement and ownership of the space to some extent. When selecting furniture, the students consulted did not always have a real choice, as we needed to select the most affordable items. The initial budget request should have been higher, allowing for more flexibility.

Policy was another area which presented difficulties. As reported in section 3, shortly after I embarked on this project, plans were being made to convert the room back into a classroom. Later, the administration

planned to introduce a booking system, which required two weeks' notice to use the room. This would have prevented any unstructured, spontaneous use by faculty and students, and it is likely that fewer students would have made use of the space, and it would have been difficult to form an active learning community. The renegotiation of this policy was critical for the lounge to serve its purpose as a hub, as a base or "third space" (Oldenburg, 1991), a place for students to relax, build relationships, and enjoy serendipitous encounters with other English and Chinese speakers. Another area of policy which needed to be renegotiated was library policy. The lounge has a projector and screen, and is an ideal setting for students to enjoy foreign language DVDs together. However, at the start of this project, library policy prevented students from taking DVDs out of the library. As a result, the projector was rarely used. Following discussion, the library now allows students to check out DVDs to be watched anywhere on campus. One final problem in terms of policy was the needs of the English and Chinese clubs. These clubs store their belongings in the space, hold meetings and events in the space, and were consulted throughout the design process. At the faculty meeting, it was decided that clubs could have priority when wishing to use the lounge, and could close the room to hold meetings. In practice, this caused problems, as the English club activities began at 12.30, the busiest time for the lounge, when students and faculty were already settled in the space, eating and talking together in English or Chinese. Club members then asked these users to leave, mid-conversation and mid-meal, in order to hold a club meeting. These meetings were typically held in Japanese. This created tensions, and the policy needs to be amended.

Another area of difficulty for me was the management of the multiple roles this AR project required me to take on. The student staff had asked me to spend time in the lounge, as they did not feel confident in their new student staff positions. I agreed to support them, and spent most lunch-breaks in the lounge, speaking with students in English. At times, I noticed the student staff failing to carry out the job they had agreed to do; neglecting to play background music, or failing to remind students about the language policy, for example. At these times, I wanted both to observe and record the problem (in my role as a researcher), ignore the problem and continue the conversation I was having (in my role as a conversational partner), remind the student staff of their duties and support them (in my role as the student staff recruiter and trainer), and to put the background music on and remind the students about the language policy myself (in my role as a faculty member, highly invested in the project, and aiming to make the project a success). The issue was complicated further due to the fact that many of the students who had been involved in the design process (and later become student staff) were also taking my classes. In class, I needed to maintain a teacher-student relationship, which was different from the relationship we formed as project team collaborators. The juggling of multiple roles continued to be a challenge throughout this cycle of the project, and highlights the staffing problem as the main issue to be tackled in the next cycle of this AR project.

The final section of this paper sets out ways in which this project could progress as it moves into its second cycle.

## 7. Ways Forward

There are a number of ways the lounge redesign intervention can be modified to potentially increase the number of students making use of the lounge space, and further improve the experience for the users.

First, changes need to be made to the way the lounge is publicized in order to attract more users, particularly from the education department, since few students from this department made use of the lounge. Strange

and Banning (2001) point out that physical environments not only facilitate certain behaviors, and make them more probable, they also communicate symbolically the values of an institution. In particular, they argue that posters “send a message of belonging” (2001, pp. 22–27). If students do not identify with the people they see in the posters, they do not feel that they belong in the space. In the first cycle of the project, all the students in the poster and fliers for the lounge were members of the foreign language department. In the second cycle, posters and other promotional material could feature students and faculty from both departments. The posters should be displayed in the buildings used by each department. The amount of publicity should also be increased to attract more students. Methods could include promotional videos, a webpage, and increased use of fliers, with faculty and student staff becoming more involved in this process. Learners of Chinese should be targeted as well as learners of English.

Secondly, improvements need to be made to the training and management of the staff team. The volunteers need more training, with clearer goals and targets, and opportunities to connect with other student staff and reflect on their roles. If funding can be obtained, payment or reward for carrying out the staff role may lead to more commitment and professionalism. At the SISAC conference (mentioned in section 5), the student staff brainstormed a number of ways they could develop their roles, and these ideas could be incorporated into the next AR cycle. One of the students’ ideas was to improving communication between staff members and building a stronger sense of a staff team through using social networking sites. They also suggested having the staff run lounge events and structured sessions, such as movie nights and discussion times with pre-determined topics. The students also recommended that they get more involved in publicizing the lounge, visiting classes to promote the facility. The staff suggested setting up a video link with lounges and Self-Access centers at other universities, using *Skype* or another web-based service. The staff hoped that the opportunity to communicate in English (or another language) with different students would be stimulating, and also help the staff develop a wider sense of community with other student staff and language learners, which might create opportunities to develop ideas and strategies to help the lounge thrive. These ideas would all help the staff to develop autonomy, and help the users of the lounge grow into an independent, student-led community of learners.

Finally, when funding becomes available, further AR cycles could involve improvements to the physical space which were beyond the budget of this first cycle of research. The floor could be carpeted to improve comfort and acoustics. Glass doors or walls would allow passing students and faculty to observe the activity in the lounge, which may attract more users, and make it easier for apprehensive newcomers to enter the space. A sink with running water could be installed to facilitate the provision of hot drinks. A microwave would also attract more lunchtime users to the space. To enhance the comfort level in the room further, more cushions and artwork could be added, and plants could be replaced with hardier varieties. Since the lounge is also used for study, it would be useful to provide more technology equipment. A desktop computer would make it easy for students to communicate by video link with other universities and engage in project work. A set of iPads stored in the lounge would allow more students to make use of language learning applications.

With improved publicity, staff training, and further adjustments and enhancements to the physical space, it may be possible to attract more students to the space and to encourage more foreign language interaction in line with the lounge’s language policy and primary purpose.

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## Appendix

## Usage Log

[illegible]



