A Report on the 2nd JASAL Student Online Forum: A Student Facilitator’s Perspective

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**Author Biography**

**Chika Yamane** is a former student in the Department of English at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan. During her time at KUIS, she worked as a member of the student staff at the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) for four years and was on the event team.
This is a report on the 2nd JASAL Student Online Forum written by a student facilitator who organized the event with two other students and the JASAL team. The purpose of this report is not just to keep a record of the online forum, but also to note what I, as a facilitator, experienced during the event and to share the facilitators’ and the participants’ passion for growing language learning communities in Japanese universities.

**Preparation for the Forum**

This forum came into being out of the aspiration of students who had joined the previous online forum, which was held on 4th July, 2020, and hoped to have a further opportunity to talk to students from other universities. The previous forum was held with a focus on the online events that each university held during the pandemic situation and new ideas to support student users in their centers. Like the second forum, it was also organized by student leaders who volunteered.

When the announcement was made for the second online forum, I was looking for a chance to share thoughts on language learning with others. I was thinking it would be great if I could have an online session with other language learners, sharing our struggles and growth with each other. Some of my peers from the SALC (Self Access Learning Center) in Kanda University International Studies had participated in the first online forum, and two of them had taken on a leadership role then. Knowing that, I was motivated to join the workshop as one of the facilitators.

There were three volunteer students gathered, including myself, this time. The two other students were Itsuki Takahashi (Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University), and Minhung Lee (Ryutsu Keizai University). The three of us went through a couple of meetings online and discussed both our personal interests that we wanted to talk to participants about, such as our experiences in different cultures, and also topics about learning and SALCs that we wanted them to share about during the discussion session at the forum. In the second meeting, based on the possible topic lists, we decided to conduct a survey of the participants and asked them what they wanted to talk about with other participants. We used Google Forms and collected students’ opinions. This way of making our event plan worked well, because we could hear participants' needs and interests beforehand, and that helped us to plan the event effectively. I was glad I could hear the voices of the participants as well as the other two leaders in the team because they were also users of the SACs in their universities and knew the joy of having an event or talking in the English language. Having their voices made the direction of the event concrete: We decided to aim for a meaningful event that would give participants a
chance to feel connected during the COVID situation and share their thoughts on cultures, learning tips, and how to make SALCs more welcoming and attractive for users.

The Forum

On that day of the forum, we all came prepared thanks to the survey and meetings. First of all, Jackson Lee, who is a teacher from Toyo University, gave a presentation and taught us how language can be acquired without studying: for example, playing video games and board games with friends in English, and joining English communities in school or online. Participants listened attentively to his presentation, thinking about how easily language can be acquired through their everyday activities and games. It is great to have ways to make language learning fun, and it will encourage students when they feel unmotivated.

After Jackson’s talk, the student forum organized by the facilitators started with everyone giving a self-introduction. There were 14 students, including us three facilitators. I was the MC, and Itsuki helped to manage the breakout rooms. Each of the three of us was a facilitator of the discussion in a breakout room, and we asked the students in our breakout room what their opinions were. We had done a rehearsal before the event, so we all felt ready, and there was more of a feeling of excitement than nervousness among us. It was great to meet with participants from six universities.

Divided into breakout rooms, we all talked about our experiences in other cultures or countries in small groups for 10 minutes. After the discussion, we went back to the main room and shared what had been talked about in the group. It seemed that when it comes to food, we had all had a cultural shock. One student shared his experience at a restaurant in Australia saying the meat came in a huge piece and it was hard to chew. It seems that dishes in other cultures also use different kinds of spices and that makes the taste memorable. I had assumed there would be silence or moments when no one spoke, but it turned out everyone in the group wanted to talk more. I even struggled finishing the conversation in 10-15 minutes each time. In the next breakout room, we talked about our current situation in online classes and problems during the pandemic. Despite the online situation under the pandemic, students shared the silver linings of their situations with each other: joining more online sessions to meet new people and brushing up English skills for exams. We came to the conclusion that it is important to focus on what we can control, such as working on English skills and studying online.

The discussion reached one of the highest points in the final session, when we were talking about what we want to do at our SACs/SALCs in the future. One student shared a
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great way to advertise and attract many participants for events at SACs, which is a system called “stamp rally”, giving students who joined one event one stamp and giving rewards like snacks or messages to people who collected 10 stamps. It was a creative way that worked well and attracted many participants. We hope we can try this system next semester. We engaged in a lively conversation about this and agreed we cannot wait to have events and workshops in our SAC/SALC in person.

Reflection on the Forum

We asked participants to answer a feedback form after the forum, and 80% of respondents said that they felt satisfied with the discussions during the event. The rest said they wanted to talk more during the event. Since participants were in different grades and their interests were varied, it was not easy to organize contents that made everyone satisfied within the limited time; however, during the event, we were able to experience joy in talking to each other and feel connected through our passion for language learning and helping other students to acquire English. Knowing that there are students who are passionate about their community’s development, I hope future forums or events will lead to more conversations about improving the services in each SAC and more interactions with students from other universities that will eventually lead to a greater growth in the language learning community in Japan.

As a facilitator for the event, I joined from the preparation phase. In order to keep in step with the team, deciding on a theme for the event worked well. Although we were not able to meet in person this time, we did not get lost regarding the direction of the forum and could focus on working on the event-planning because the theme was clear. When it comes to the facilitation, time management is key. Since everyone has opinions to share and wants to talk more, it is better to finish the introduction briefly and get straight to the point. I again realized that as with anything, preparation and rehearsal not only make me feel prepared and relaxed but also make the quality of content better. I was able to share this realization with the other two facilitators in the reflection session after the forum, and we all agreed that this is our lesson which will be helpful for any kind of tasks, including holding events, in the future. I feel grateful to everyone who took part in this forum, and I hope future forums will also be held successfully.