

English Learning Environment Effective for First Year Students

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1. Introduction

In Japan, English education is a matter of urgent concern, and the government has issued several white papers, such as “Japan's Goals in the 21st Century ” in 2000, “The Action Plan for ‘Cultivating Japanese People Who Can Use English’” in 2003, and “Five proposals and specific measures for developing proficiency in English for international communication” in 2011. The 2003 report set goals such as “to be able to communicate in English after graduating from a junior high school or a high school” and “to be able to use English at work after graduating from a university”; similarly, in the 2011 report, “the importance of continuous and consistent English education throughout the elementary school, junior high school, and high school” was stressed.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has encouraged the efficient use of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for English teaching, as well as English proficiency exams such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and the Test in Practical English Proficiency called EIKEN, Japan’s most widely recognized English language assessment, by setting recommended minimum scores for English learning.

However, little progress has been witnessed so far. According to Honjo , “Japanese test-takers ranked 40th of 48 countries in 2013 on their average score on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC),” scoring “an average of 512 points out of a possible 990,” and those under 20 year of age “scored the lowest with 492.” As of 2017, Japanese English proficiency is still rated as “Low Proficiency,” ranking 35th out of 72 countries in the sixth edition of the English Proficiency Index (EF EPI).

2. Question

In the context of university English education, as Bradford described in her article, Japan has seen “a dramatic decline in the number of Japanese students studying abroad”; some consider this to be a reason why English ability in Japan has not improved, but others say the lack of English classes being taught in English may be the problem. Among many other possibilities, little attention has been paid to students’ everyday learning spaces and environments as a possible factor in enabling them for improvement in English. Furnishing good-quality learning environments outside classrooms is indispensable for English education in higher education. Therefore, a number of universities in Japan have created spaces for active study such as learning commons and also remodeled or redesigned their libraries for the same purpose. Many attempts have been made to encourage self-directed learning outside classrooms through e-learning as well.

However, other than the fact that students use these environments for their study activities, little is known about what places students are most likely to use for English studies outside their classrooms, why they choose the places they do when they study English, and what impact each environment has on their learning.

3. Proposal

This paper investigates first-year students’ English study environments not only within but also outside university facilities. I believe it is essential to explore the type of English study environments that are effective for first-year students because the environments they become accustomed to in the first year will continue to be used in the following years and may possibly affect their learning outcomes.

This paper analyzes English study environments used by first-year students and explores students' assessment of each environment to identify effective English study environments.

4. Method

Three questionnaires were used in this study. The targeted university was a private university in Kyoto, comprising eight departments with 12,806 students (as of May 2016). At this university, as part of Faculty-Wide General Education Courses, every student apart from students in the English Department in the Faculty of Foreign Studies must take two compulsory English classes each semester, namely, English for TOEIC (with a Japanese instructor) and English Communication (with a native English-speaking instructor).

The survey was conducted in compulsory English classes, as officially permitted by the university's Liaison Office of Research Organization, in the following manner.

1. Preliminary survey

Period: Jan. 2016, last day of fall semester

Participants: 181 students taking compulsory English class who attended on the last day of the fall semester
94 freshmen (four classes), 87 sophomores (four classes)

2. Survey A (end of spring semester)

Period: July 2016, last day of spring semester

Participants: 133 students taking compulsory English class who attended on the last day of the spring semester
42 freshmen (two classes), 91 sophomores (five classes)

3. Survey B (end of fall semester)

Period: Jan. 2017, last day of fall semester

Participants: 104 students taking compulsory English class who attended on the last day of the fall semester
36 freshmen (two classes), 68 sophomores (five classes)

The response rate for each survey was 100%. Second-year students are included among the survey participants to identify differences between first- and second-year students. Although Surveys A and B were conducted in the same classes each time for the purpose of continuity, there were fewer participants in B than in A due to the accreditation system: students who achieve a certain TOEIC score during the spring semester can be exempted from classes in the following semester. The questions in the surveys focus on the places the students use for English study outside of classrooms. The questionnaire for Survey A was created based on the results of the preliminary survey, and Survey B was designed to cover the aspects that were not covered in Survey A.

Alternative study places listed in the preliminary survey were "Your own room," "University library," "Other facilities on campus (Empty classroom, Learning commons, Lounge, etc.)," "Train, bus, car," and "Other" but in Surveys A and B, such facilities as "Learning commons" and "Global commons" were treated as separate choices, and "Restaurants and cafes" were added to the alternatives.

Using information found on the targeted university's official website, the intended use and roles of its "University library," "Learning commons," and "Global commons" are categorized in Table 1.

Table 1. Intended Uses and Roles of “University Library,” “Learning Commons,” and “Global Commons”

	Roles and supplied services	Location on campus
University library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Learning spaces focusing on learning support services by using library materials (reference services, information literacy education, etc.) -PC room -Group learning rooms and library hall provide space for presentations and discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Near the bus terminal -Easy to use when students arrive and leave
Learning commons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Focusing on active learning and learning support services the library does not provide (ICT support services, support services for Japanese/English writing and presentation) -“Co-creation Space” where the students can intellectually mature by inspiring each other -Facilitating the everyday social activities necessary for mutual communication, such as discussions and presentations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -In the center of campus -Easy to visit between classes
Global commons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Multilingual and multicultural symbiotic spaces -Meeting various needs related to any language, such as “I want to have more opportunities to practice conversations in foreign languages,” or “I want to have a private lesson on English composition.” -Facilitating a variety of activities, such as intercultural events with international students and special events involving speaking foreign languages, especially in English. -Supplying a wide variety of materials to enjoyably learn foreign cultures and languages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -In the center of campus -Easy to visit between classes

5. Results

5.1 Preliminary Survey

From the preliminary survey, the following implications were obtained: 1. regardless of the year of the students, the most selected place for English study is “Your own room”; 2. the place that most students selected as the most efficient for studying English is also “Your own room”; 3. The “University library” was named the most efficient place for English study more often than it was named the most selected place for English study; and 4. the usage rate of the “University library” is not low, but the usage rate of the “University library” for language learning purposes is low. One explanation for this may be that the students mainly use their “own room” instead of the “University library” for studying English, but they recognize the “University library” as an efficient place for studying English.

5.2 Survey A

Survey A showed that the most used place for English study was “Your own room” (freshmen 98%, sophomores 98%), the second was the “University library” (freshmen 67%, sophomores 84%), and the third was “Train, bus, car” (freshmen 57%, sophomores 60%) (see Fig. 1). From Fig. 1, it appears that first-year students use the “University library” less often than second-year students, but first-year students may not have been used to the “University library” since Survey A was conducted at the end of the spring semester. The same assumption applies to “Empty classrooms” and “Student lounges.”

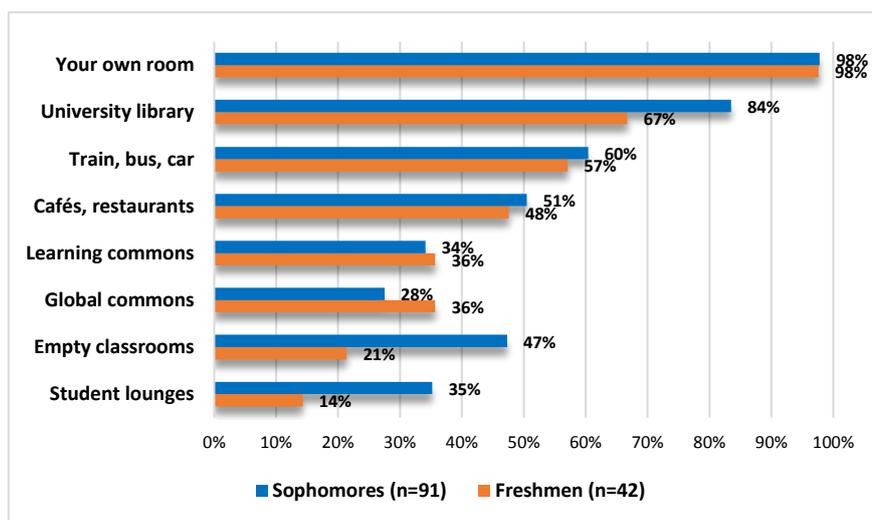


Fig. 1. Places Used for English Study

For the next item, “Please select the place that you found effective for your English learning,” the most selected was “University library” (freshmen 86%, sophomores 86%), the second was “Your own room” (freshmen 85%, sophomores 80%), and the third was “Learning commons” (freshmen 73%, sophomores 68%) (see Table 2). Fig. 2 is a bar graph simplifying Table 2.

Table 2. Efficient Places for English Study

Study Places	Freshmen	Sophomores
Empty classrooms	33%	61%
	(n = 9)	(n = 41)
Train, bus, car	54%	56%
	(n = 24)	(n = 55)
Cafés, restaurants	60%	58%
	(n = 20)	(n = 45)
Global commons	63%	79%
	(n = 16)	(n = 24)
Student lounges	67%	59%
	(n = 6)	(n = 32)
Learning commons	73%	68%
	(n = 15)	(n = 31)
Your own room	85%	80%
	(n = 41)	(n = 88)
University library	86%	86%
	(n = 28)	(n = 76)

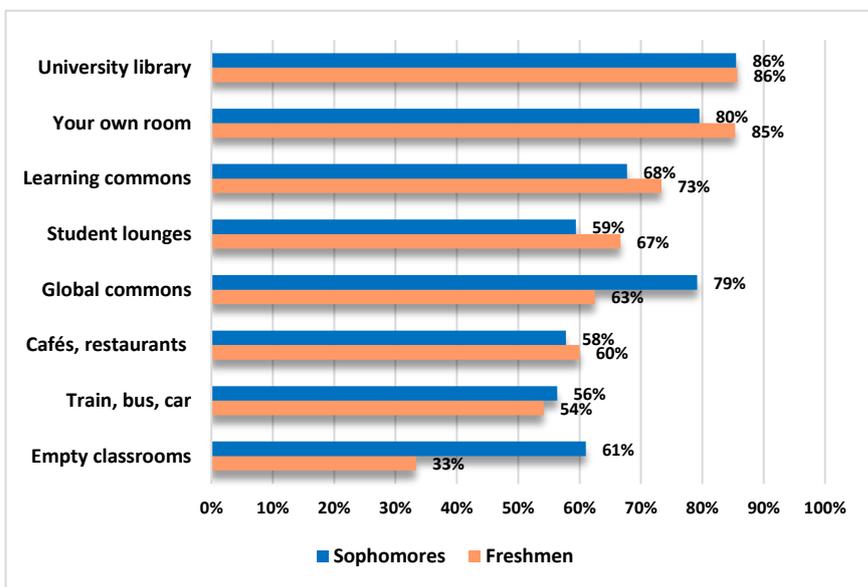


Fig. 2. Efficient Places for English Learning

For the “University library” and “Your own room,” the results were similar to those of the preliminary survey. While the percentage of those choosing “University library” as the most efficient place for English study exceeded the percentage choosing “University library” as the most selected place for English study, the percentage of those choosing “Your own room” as the most efficient place for English study was below the percentage of those choosing “Your own room” for the most selected place for English study.

5.3 Survey B

Overall in Survey A, it seems that every place was seen as efficient, to a greater or lesser degree, since each (except for “Empty classrooms” among freshmen) received a response exceeding 50%. However, to examine this point further, Survey B investigated the places viewed as efficient for specific kinds of study. The answers (125 valid responses) in the free description section in Survey A showed that the students seemed to need “a quiet place where they can totally concentrate” and “sufficient materials supporting self-study” as well as “an environment for listening and speaking (where they can make some noise).” Therefore, a new question was created in Survey B to identify the elements desired by the students in their English study environments.

The student respondents were asked to select 5 elements out of 11 from the most strongly desired for their English-language study environment. Figs. 3 and 4 display the results in a cumulative bar chart. Although the priorities vary depending on the students’ year, on the whole, regardless of the year, “Being able to concentrate (with no distractions such as amusements)”

was the most selected, followed by “Quiet,” “Personal space (carrels, desks with privacy divider, etc.),” and “Comfortable air-conditioning.” Among those three elements, both “Being able to concentrate (with no distractions such as amusements)” and “Quiet” tend not to occur in “Your own room,” which can also be derived from the free descriptions below.

【Sophomores】

- I used to do English assignments in my room, but I could not concentrate because there were too many distractions.
- I can concentrate at my place only if I am really forced to because I live by myself without being monitored by my parents.
- I often have trouble concentrating in my room because I am all by myself, surrounded by various distractions such as the TV and my smartphone.
- When comparing my room and the university library, I can concentrate more in the latter place because it is really quiet with plentiful materials.
- I wish I had a place to study more because I often cannot concentrate at my house due to distractions.
- It is not a good idea for me to use my room when I study because I cannot concentrate with all the distractions around, and I cannot help using items such as my smartphone and game system. I cannot stay focused because my room is basically a place to be relaxed.

【Freshmen】

- When I study English in my room, I can manage to concentrate but there are distractions, and also I cannot consult with other people and get help with my studying.
- I can concentrate on doing homework in my house, but I cannot keep concentrating when I have to do assignments that require long-term concentration, such as a full-length TOEIC practice test, because there are distractions such as the TV and my smartphone.
- I often have trouble concentrating in places like my house where there are lots of distractions, but I think I can study more efficiently in environments such as the library where many people are studying.
- It is easier for me to study in the library than at home because the library is quiet with other people studying around me.
- When I study English outside classrooms, my concentration does not last long in an environment with the TV and my smartphone.

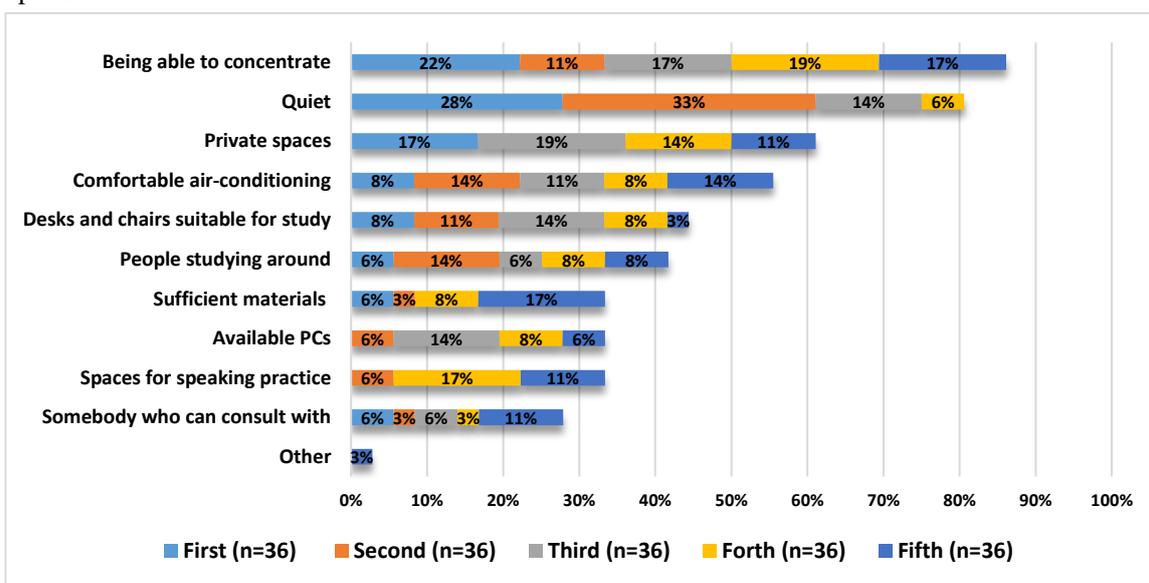


Fig. 3. Elements Desired by Students for Their English Study Environments (Freshmen)

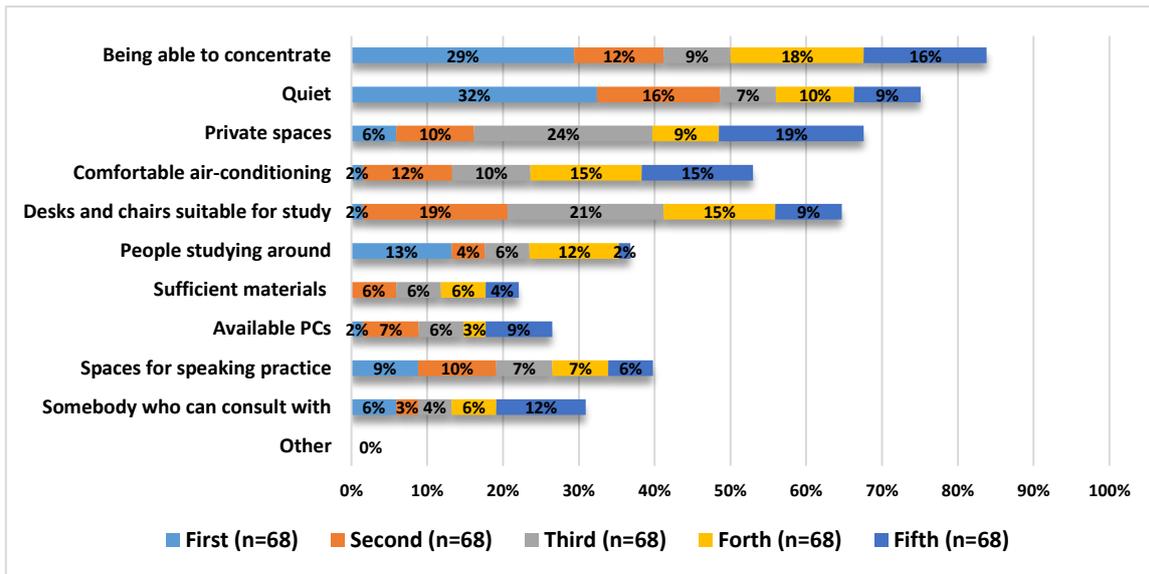


Fig. 4. Elements Desired by Students for Their English Study Environments (Sophomores)

The total percentage of students desiring “Quiet” in their study areas exceeds 80%, but at the same time “People studying around” reaches approximately 40% in both freshmen (Fig. 3) and sophomores (Fig. 4). It seems that students require a quiet environment with a certain atmosphere in order to maintain their motivation, and to be able to sense other people also studying nearby. Similar comments are found in the free description: “I can concentrate better with the others nearby than being all by myself,” “I think quietness is important, but sometimes I couldn’t concentrate when it was too quiet, so I felt the best place is a quiet place, not a place without any sounds.”

On the whole, no remarkable differences between freshmen and sophomores were found, but slightly higher percentages were observed in the responses of freshmen for “People studying around,” “Sufficient materials,” and “Available PCs.” The percentages of sophomores selecting “Desks and chairs suitable for study,” “Spaces for speaking practice,” and “Somebody who can consult with” exceeded those of the freshmen.

The next item, “English learning,” is subdivided into six categories, namely, “Memorizing English vocabulary/grammars,” “Working on English exercises or practice tests such as TOEIC,” “English listening practice,” “English conversation, pronunciation, or presentation practice,” “Reading Comprehension (extensive reading, intensive reading),” and “English composition.” The respondents were asked to select the place or places that they found most suitable for each category of English learning. The results are shown in Figs. 5 and 6.

Regardless of the year, the most selected place for “Memorizing English vocabulary/grammars” was “Your own room,” followed by “Train, bus, car,” but it can be assumed that “Train, bus, car” is not effective for other types of English study. Similar comments were seen in the free description section, such as “Studying for a short time on public transportation like buses and subways improved my power of concentration and memorization,” “I realized that the best place to memorize words would be on the train by making use of that travel time.”

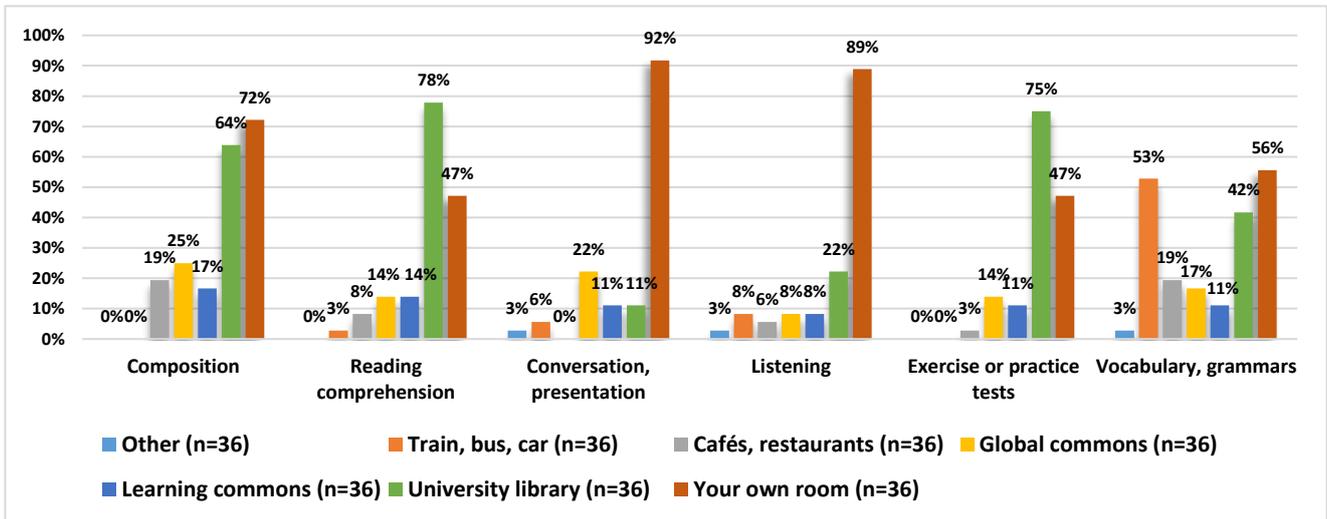


Fig. 5. Places Effective for Each Type of English Study (Freshmen)

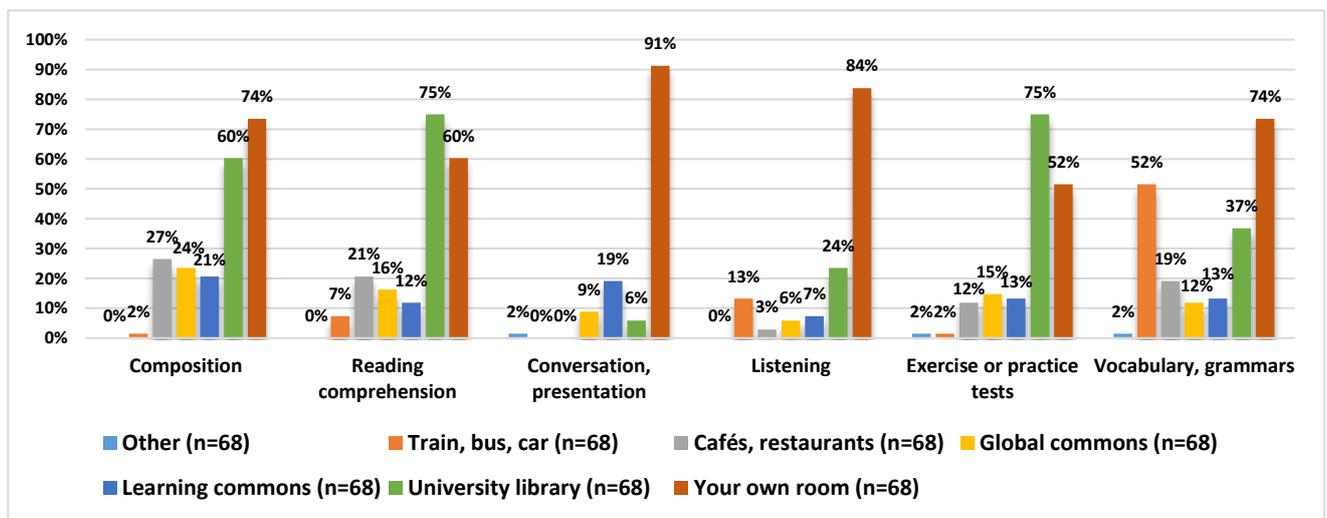


Fig. 6. Places Effective for Each Type of English Study (Sophomores)

Overall, it is clear that “Your own room” is considered an effective place at a certain level (more than 47%) for every type of learning, but above all, this study location was seen to be overwhelmingly popular for “English listening practice” and “English conversation, pronunciation, or presentation practice.”

【Sophomores】

- I found that no study environment outside the classroom is suitable for English pronunciation practice. Even in a private study room at the university library, which did not have soundproofed walls, it was difficult for me to tell if my pronunciation was correct or not because I had to practice it in a whisper.
- In my opinion, for practice in improving your pronunciation, such as shadowing training, having your own place where you can practice aloud is the most suitable. Actually, when I prepared an assignment by memorizing and reciting English passages, I practiced in my house with a loud voice without any hesitation, which led to a good result.

【Freshmen】

- I think it would be helpful if there were headphones available in the PC rooms on campus because my English assignments in the fall semester were mainly for the improvement of my listening ability.
- I think I would be able to work on speaking assignments with all my strength if there were soundproofed rooms where an individual student could practice speaking aloud without worrying about other people being around. I feel shy about

practicing out loud in the presence of other people.

More than 75% of students (both freshmen and sophomores) selected the “University library” as a place that was effective for “Working on English exercises or practice tests such as TOEIC” and “Reading comprehension (extensive reading, intensive reading)”; this was greater than the percentage choosing “Your own room.”

Furthermore, students were asked to answer an additional question regarding the “University library,” namely, “If some exercise books or guidebooks for the compulsory class assignments were available in the university library and you were allowed to freely choose one from the several selections and to work on it in the designated area for the assignment inside the library, do you think the learning effect will be enforced more than the status quo? Please select only one response to this question. *Please assume that the only students who are actually imposed the assignments can use those materials, and it will never happen that any necessary materials are not available to you.” This question was posed to determine whether the students considered the so-called “reserve-book system” in university libraries to be useful for delivering the expected effect on their learning if they had the chance to use it for compulsory English classes (it is currently not available to them).

The results are shown in Table 3. Taking the three responses, “Will be enforced dramatically,” “Will be enforced at certain extent,” and “May be enforced a little” as “Yes,” 94% of freshmen and 97% of sophomores considered that assignments using a “reserve-book system” in the library would be effective for improving their study outcomes.

Though it was presumed that the students, as digital natives, would prefer e-learning assignments that they could work on anywhere with an Internet connection, rather than being restricted to the library, the students gave unexpected responses to the question “If you should be able to do your assignments on e-learning basis (everything online without any print materials), do you think the learning effect will be enforced more than the status quo?”

From Table 4, only 64% of the freshmen and 62% of the sophomores thought that e-learning assignments would be effective for improving learning outcomes. In other words, while only 6% of freshmen and 4% of sophomores selected negative responses for the reserve-book system in the library, 34% of freshmen and 35% of sophomores selected negative responses for e-learning.

Table 3. Expected Learning Effect for Assignments Set in the Library

	Will be strengthened dramatically	Will be strengthened to a certain extent	May be strengthened a little	Will have almost no effect	Will have no effect	Total
Freshmen	5	17	12	2	0	36
	14%	47%	33%	6%	0%	100%
Sophomores	10	32	24	1	1	68
	15%	47%	35%	2%	2%	100%

Table 4. Expected Learning Effect for Assignments on an E-learning Basis

	Will be strengthened dramatically	Will be strengthened to a certain extent	May be strengthened a little	Will have almost no effect	Will have no effect	Other	Total
Freshmen	2	13	8	10	2	0	35
	6%	37%	23%	29%	6%	0%	100%
Sophomores	3	18	20	20	3	2	66
	5%	27%	30%	30%	5%	3%	100%

*No responses from three respondents (one freshman, two sophomores)

**Two respondents selected “Other,” specifying “It depends on the person.”

Discussion

Let us review the results above.

“Your own room” appears to be overwhelmingly popular (Fig. 1) among “English learning places,” and the “University library” seemed to be the place that most students selected as effective among “English learning places” (Fig. 2) when the term “English learning” was not categorized any further. However, after I subdivided “English learning” into six categories, it appeared that students distinguished the places they used for each type of learning (Figs. 5, 6). By analyzing the responses to “elements desired by the students for English learning environment” and the answers in the free description section (33 valid responses from freshmen, 59 from sophomores), certain reasons for distinguishing the places can be extracted.

First, “Being able to concentrate (with no distractions such as amusements)” and “Quiet” were the top two responses selected for “Elements Desired by the Students for English Learning Environment” (Figs. 3, 4), and it is clear that those two elements are not likely to be included in “Your own room” by looking at the students’ comments from the free description. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the “University library” that does have those two elements, would tend to be selected for “Working on English exercises or practice tests such as the TOEIC” and “Reading comprehension (extensive reading, intensive reading),” both of which require long-term continuous concentration (Figs. 5, 6). Those students who denied learning effects (Table 4) from e-learning assignments might have thought that assignments given on this basis would not be effective if they were required to work on them in places not containing those two elements.

Second, 30% to 40% of respondents chose “Spaces for speaking practice” for “Elements Desired by the Students for English Learning Environment” (Figs. 3, 4). Since there are several facilities on campus that include the elements of “Spaces for speaking practice,” such as the Learning commons or Global commons, it was thought that the students would use these for the purpose of practicing speaking out loud. However, “Your own room” was overwhelmingly selected for the place to do “English listening practice” and “English conversation, pronunciation, or presentation practice” (Figs. 5, 6). I believe that a reason for this is the lack of equipment and facilities elsewhere in the university, but, at the same time, the psychological factor of feeling shy about speaking out loud in front of others could be a greater issue.

Third, “Train, bus, car,” which appeared to be less effective than other places in Fig. 2, was the second most selected place in Figs. 5 and 6, followed by “Your own room,” for “Memorizing English vocabulary/grammars.” The comments from the free description section show that public transportation such as trains and buses are considered effective for the type of learning that requires short, sharp concentration, such as that required for memorizing English vocabulary and grammar.

Conclusions

The implications of this study are as follows:

1. Students distinguish the places they use for several types of English study, considering not only practical but also psychological effects.
2. The ways that students distinguish places for different types of study do not necessarily match the university’s intended uses and roles for these facilities.
3. The environment that freshmen find effective for each type of English study is not likely to change as they go from being freshmen to sophomores.

Considering these implications, the university should note the below when offering facilities for students’ English study:

1. It should design facilities not only from the aspects of equipment or practical functions but also from the aspect of the student’s psychological status when working on each type of English study.

2. It should conduct regular surveys of student use and the effects of all facilities for English study to examine any gaps between the intended uses and roles of the facilities and the actual use made by the students, to improve the learning environment.
3. Since students' learning styles, attitudes, and psychological reactions established in their first year will likely persist through their remaining years at the university, guides and education in related facilities should be provided in a careful manner, particularly for freshmen.

Based on the results of this study, for example, since the "University Library" is considered the most effective environment for "Working on English exercises or practice tests such as TOEIC" and "Reading comprehension (extensive reading, intensive reading)" and is also expected to have a positive effect through the "reserve-book system" for English class assignments, more effort should be put into improving its learning effects by maintaining and enforcing an environment suitable for those types of English learning and by collaborating with the instructors of compulsory English classes.

As for facilities like the "Learning commons" and "Global commons," which were originally created for students to "speak out loud," "directly interact with people," "practice oral presentation," and "have discussions with other people," measures should be taken to alleviate the tendency for students to feel shy about practicing a foreign language out loud in the presence of other people.

This study identified the environmental elements that freshmen found effective for several types of English learning. Furthermore, it demonstrated the possibility of making freshmen's English study more effective by creating an English learning environment with careful consideration of students' learning styles and psychological systems of learning behavior.

Further research should be conducted to:

1. determine whether students' English abilities actually improve in the places they find effective for learning English by analyzing their TOEIC scores in the spring and fall semesters, and
2. verify the statistical significance of the results of this study by conducting another continuous survey with a larger sample next year.

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