

Heigham, J. (2004). Starting Up Self-access: An Interview with Juanita Heigham. *The Language Teacher*, 28(6), 17-19.

Juanita Heigham is director of the Communicative English Program and Self-Access center at Sugiyama Jogakuen University in Nagoya. In this interview she talks about the experience of recently establishing a self-access center.

TLT: So, Juanita, can you begin by telling us something about the university where you work, about the teaching/learning environment and the kind of program that you direct?

JH: Sugiyama Jogakuen University is a medium-sized, private, women's university. Our program, the Communicative English Program (CEP), is part of the Department of Foreign Studies in the School of Cross-Cultural Communication. All of the 200 or so participants in it are either English majors or they are non-majors who elected to take the classes. So the students are fairly enthusiastic. The program includes five communicatively-based English classes, or koma, each week for freshmen, three classes for sophomores and two for juniors. All classes are taught by native English-speaking instructors, the majority of whom are part-time; however, the program is tightly coordinated, and the teachers usually teach more than one day each week, which means they teach more than one skill area. Additionally, the teachers communicate with each other regularly about the curriculum and students' progress or problems. The teachers know what is going on in other classes and can support skills taught by different teachers. I think this kind of teacher communication and support is essential to our program. And since one of our main goals is to help our students develop the skills they need to be independent learners, the recycling of key skills is extremely important.

TLT: And what role does self-access have in promoting independent learning in the program?

JH: Well, our self-access component plays a very important role. Since I saw my first independent learning center a number of years ago, I have been trying to provide self-study opportunities for students. My first step toward this goal at Sugiyama was to put together a small library of graded audio materials for students to use in our traditional language lab. Instead of teachers controlling a recording for their students in the lab, the students chose materials from the library that were interesting to them and at their level, and then they listened to them independently. From there, I began to work on developing a separate center. We now have that center, and in order to support the students, we have a required 1-semester learner-training course that tries to assist them in developing the skills they need to be independent. Here again, many of the teachers in the program have gotten involved and contributed ideas to the curriculum of this course. Something else I should mention is that in the self-access classes, the teachers conduct regular conferences with the students about their work for the class. These conferences also include discussing student problems of performance or attitude, which are reported to the students' self-access teacher by other teachers in the program.

TLT: Can you describe for us what your self-access center actually looks like?

JH: Our program is fairly small and so is our self-access center, about 80 square meters. The center has equipment for 25 students, which includes 13 tape/CD players, 10 video players and 2 computers; it also has a raised floor to house electrical cords. A

teacher's desk and a meeting table for student conferences are set on a platform at the front of the room. The small number of computers may surprise some people, but we chose to have only two for several reasons. First, we already have a computer lab where students can freely take advantage of language-based websites. And second, computer software is expensive. With a limited set-up budget of 3 million yen, and an annual materials budget of 600,000 yen, having a large variety of audio and visual materials was a better option for us than having a limited amount of computer-based materials. In the center we have a materials library that, to date, consists of about 80 titles divided into five levels. We had hoped to have our graded reading materials and reference books in the center, but space only allowed for the reference books. As part of their self-access class, students are required to do extensive reading, so space for the graded readers was a concern for us. To solve this problem, we put the readers in the main library. Initially, I was disappointed that we couldn't keep the readers in the center, but now I like the system we have. The students have easy access to nearly 1,000 books, and keeping track of those books is not something our teachers have to worry about. I'd like to add that we got these books over a period of several years, using some of our department's library budget. Most departments have a library budget, and if your program doesn't already have graded readers in the library, I'd suggest you try to use this budget in order to get some.

TLT: My next question is about student attendance at the self-access center. Could you tell us to what extent your students are required to participate in self-access?

JH: At Sugiyama, attendance at the self-access center is required for all students in the CEP. And for freshmen and sophomores there is an actual class period scheduled during the week. Not everyone agrees with required self-access work, but I believe most students need to be well trained in using a center before they understand its benefits. Unless it's required, self-access is a lost opportunity for many. For our classes, there is a native English-speaking teacher in attendance whose primary job it is to have monthly conferences with each student to review the required records of their self-access work—which includes their listening work in class, and extensive reading and conversation taping for homework—and discuss their progress in the program as a whole. One thing I learned early on is that students need a lot of explanation, training, and support to help them understand the value of self-access work. While I was teaching a class at another university, the program directors had students complete a questionnaire about their well-equipped center. One of the common student comments was more or less, "What is the point of my going to the center?" From this experience and others, I have realized that students need a lot more than a brief introduction to independent learning, if that learning is going to be successful. It is hoped that through the training and guidance of the teachers during the first two years of our program, students will develop strong skills that will allow their future independent work to be productive. After these two years, juniors are required to attend the self-access center weekly, but when they do it is up to them. In addition to the regular self-access class allocation times, the center is open a number of hours each week, with a Japanese assistant, either for students to attend to fill a class requirement, or for completely independent work. It seems, on the whole, that most students are learning the benefits of self-access work. This is only the first year we have had the center and the learner-training course, but so far, we are very happy with their impact on our students.

TLT: You're clearly pleased with the way self-access has benefited the students. But what were some of the problems that you came across while trying to establish your self-access center?

JH: A quality self-access center cannot be built in a hurry. It took well over a year to get our center completed and there were endless meetings, setbacks and changes in plans. Before you set out to build a self-access center, you really have to have a very clear picture about what you want it to be. Since I was the coordinator of our project, everyone came to me with all sorts of questions that needed immediate answers, and somehow every issue turned into an emergency. If you are not clear about what you want, you won't be able to make decisions quickly. Others might end up making them for you, and most administrators don't have much of an idea about what a self-access center is. Planning and designing a center is no small job, and you really need to do your homework before you start. Seeing other centers is a great place to begin. You can see a lot of things in action that way.

TLT: And would you say it was difficult to persuade those with authority to sanction self-access?

JH: Well, as for my experience, Sugiyama realized that in these competitive times, keeping current with language teaching trends was important to their survival, so without too much difficulty, I was able to gather enough support for the building of the center. Our first hurdle was finding the space. We had gotten approval for the center, but it was challenging to find space that everyone in our School—I mean here the School of Cross Cultural Communication—agreed could be used for it. I made the mistake of moving ahead when a space was tentatively allocated for the project; I designed three centers before one was actually built. It was a waste of time. Different sized and shaped rooms dramatically effect the equipment you can use and the materials you can house. You must be certain of your space before you take any further steps.

TLT: So before you began, did you have a clear vision of what the center might look like?

JH: Yes, but actually, my vision of a self-access center and what we now have are quite different. I dreamed of a large center with state-of-the-art equipment, the latest audio-visual materials, pleasure reading books, magazines, newspapers, reference books, study space and a full-time attendant. That's not what I got. We have a center now, and based on our limited budget, I'm pleased, and it provides students with many opportunities they wouldn't have had without it. But, I had to make a lot of compromises and some of them I didn't like. I can definitely say to anyone thinking about starting up a self-access center, "Be ready to compromise, you'll have to." There are lots of challenges along the way. I think that the greatest challenge for me during the project was dealing with the clerical staff. For example, the planning team would have meetings and make decisions that we all agreed on. Later, things would be built, or delivered, and we would be shocked, because they were not what we had planned. The clerical staff often got things confused and made sudden decisions without checking with anyone else. Perhaps the biggest problem that resulted from this is our DVD players. They are all region 2; we can't use DVDs from the US. We had asked for region-free DVD players, which are easy to get for educational institutions, and

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anyone building a self-access center should be sure to get them, but somehow when the order was placed, that special request wasn't made. I'm in the process of trying to replace our DVD players because their usability is far too limited. So, you should see every form for every order before it is made, even if you discussed each order item by item before the form was completed. Many things can go wrong that you would never, ever expect. But any frustrations you might experience during the development of a self-access center are worth it. I think that providing these independent learning opportunities for my students has been the most gratifying thing I have done in my career.

TLT: Juanita, you've given some really useful information and helpful advice for those of us who are planning to develop self-access facilities. Thank you very much.

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