Mediating effects of spaces, materials, and people: Lessons in developing places for self-access and autonomous learning

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Through the ecological lens, opportunities for action are referred to as affordances. Affordances in a particular environment may vary for different individuals dependent upon how they make sense of and interpret the semiotic budget or collection of ”signs” in an environment. In terms of language learning, these signs are not only inherent in physical artifacts such as traditional language learning media, but also include what can be gleaned from the greater physical environment and social climate. Thus, possible actions in a particular place are mediated by the physical space, the media and tools, and social aspects (as well as a complex web of prior knowledge, experience, and beliefs that learners bring with themselves). The collective actions in and beliefs about a space determine the place it will become. Given this knowledge, the presenter wants to more deeply understand the place that the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at a university in Japan has become for its users and why, with the hope that there are lessons to be learned informing the design, development, and management of places for self-access learning and autonomous learners, and seeking to further align the centre’s reality with its goals and ideals.

The presenter will analyze data collected from the first phase of an ongoing, longitudinal and comparative ethnographic study for the Research Institute of Languages Studies and Language Education. Phase one consists of a year of study to understand the strongest and most active mediators of learners’ actions in and beliefs about the current SALC. Key findings and insights will be highlighted in the presentation, as well as how they can be used to inform the institution’s design, development, and management of a new building primarily composing the new SALC, where the second phase of the study will then take place in the coming academic year.

Keywords: learning environment design, self-access, autonomy.