

New Learning and Teaching Modalities: The Reinvented Learning Spaces at ELF Study Hall 2015, Tamagawa University

ELF Study Hall における新たな学修環境に関する考察と評価

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ABSTRACT

There has been a wellspring of interest in recent years in the quality and character of learning spaces and their overall impact on teaching and learning processes. As the trend of academic institutions, from primary to tertiary, introducing new learning environments that blend innovation, technology, and flexibility continues, research that evaluates and enhances their post-occupancy use becomes increasingly critical. This article provides a brief overview of the newly constructed learning spaces at the ELF Study Hall and describes their influence on language teaching and learning based on surveys administered to 1610 students and 29 teachers and personal observation of the spaces. There appears to be a significant link between student satisfaction with the learning spaces, especially with various attributes of the new facilities, and a perceived impact on language learning. This preliminary report is meant to guide future investigation on how new learning spaces influence pedagogical choices and learner experience in an ELF-informed language program setting.

KEYWORDS: Active learning, Learning spaces, Learner experience, Student perceptions, ELF pedagogy

1. THE NEW LEARNING SPACES

This article provides a brief overview of the new learning spaces in the ELF Study Hall 2015 building of Tamagawa University and some initial impressions of how the spaces enhanced ELF-informed language pedagogy and learning. Extensively renovated to support innovative language teaching and learning, the building houses the Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF) which administrates the campus-wide English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) program at Tamagawa University. The spaces were opened in April 2016 after almost a year of planning with input from a small team which included the CELF director and faculty members, interior designers, and university administrative staff. The discussions focused on creating an environment for optimal learning through classroom ambience, furniture, and equipment. The pre-renovation lecture-style classrooms did not match the collaborative nature of ELF classes, inhibiting teachers from moving beyond teacher-centered pedagogies. The team placed a high value on creating learning spaces that had not only modern and welcoming aesthetics, but moreover, had a high degree of flexibility that supported a wide range of classroom learning configurations. This involved focused deliberation on the selection of various classroom components and attributes, including aesthetic considerations (layout possibilities, temperature, sitting ergonomics, acoustics, whiteboard projection visibility, color schemes, and curtains), classroom furniture (i.e., desks, chairs, and whiteboards), audio-visual equipment (projectors, audio-visual consoles, and Wi-Fi Equipment).

Prior to the renovation, the classrooms were larger lecture-style halls which had regimented rows of desks and chairs that were immovable—an aesthetic of the Post-World War II era which emphasized rigid functionalism and encouraged passive learning through restricting the mobility of both students and the teacher. When engaged in group work activities, chairs could only be oriented towards the front of the classroom, impeding students from facing each other, while long tables prevented teachers from easily approaching students. The classroom, built to accommodate over 50 students (see Figure 1), was overly expansive for the language classes that averaged around 24 students. In short, both students and teachers were physically and socially constrained from freely entering into modalities of teaching and learning processes, apart from those associated with a teacher-fronted lecture.

1.1 New Classrooms

Twenty-one large lecture classrooms (up to 80m²) that were previously used by ELF were renovated into multi-department use classrooms and the stationed tables were replaced with long moveable tables and colorful chairs. However, these rooms are no longer used for ELF classes.



Figure 1. Before and after (Multi-department use classroom).

Instead, faculty office spaces were converted into 22 smaller classrooms of 38m² and 8 classrooms of 49m² and specifically designed for ELF classes. The new rooms were equipped with the ergonomic-friendly movable chairs and desks which are conducive for interactive learning, wireless internet capability, expansive whiteboards, and ultra short throw projectors.

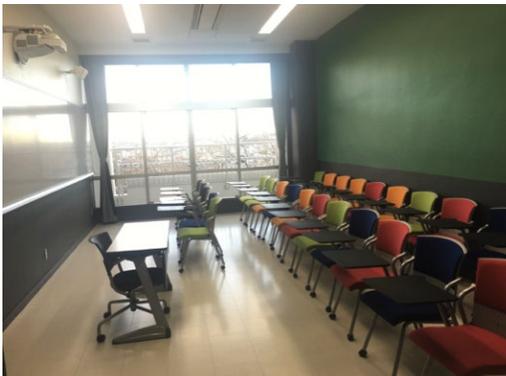


Figure 2. New ELF classrooms.

1.2 New Media Classroom

A more expansive learning space (80m²) called the New Media Classroom is envisioned to support more intensive collaborations; it features four wide screen monitors that permit various projection possibilities, round tables that are scalable to various group sizes, and portable white boards for group work. Teachers noted that the room's spaciousness and large circular tables facilitated presentation preparation, speaking assessment, student collaboration, active learning, and project learning, while the multiple video-monitors enhanced on-task behavior.

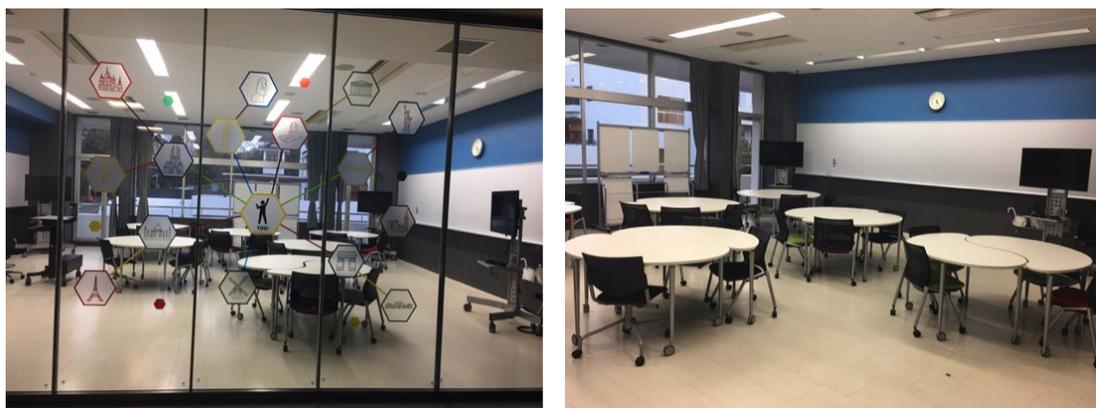


Figure 3. New media classroom.

1.3 ELF Lounge

In addition to classroom renovation, a new area for student learning and relaxation was created. The ELF Lounge includes a “Self-Study Zone” that has booths for small group or individual work, a “Tutor Zone” for tutor sessions for individual learning needs, and an Active Learning Zone that encourages various learning configurations. The Active Learning Zone can also be converted into event space for seminars, presentations, and for informal community activities. In this past semester, it has been used for faculty development, the university festival, and other events. Also, teachers have utilized the space for class presentations and various workshops for students.

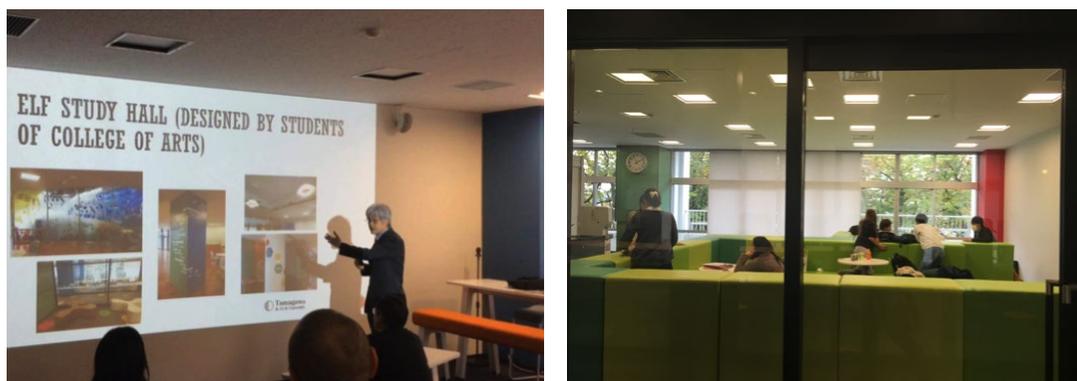


Figure 4. New ELF Lounge.

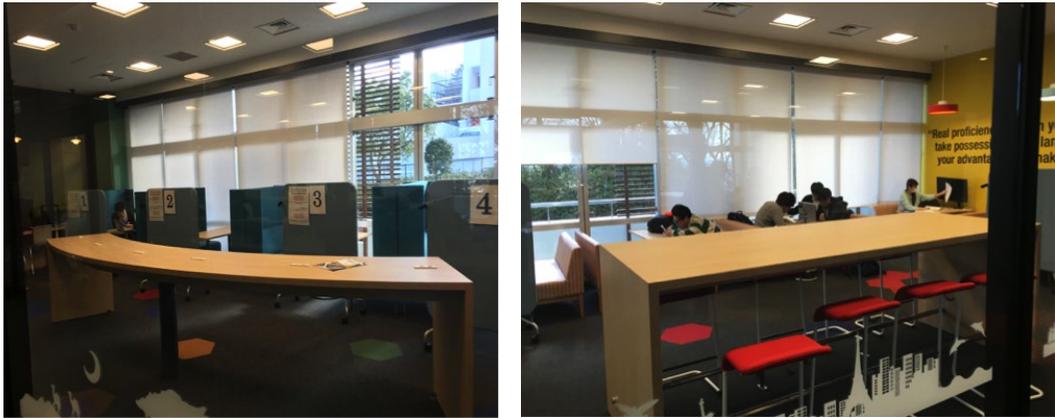


Figure 4 (continued). New ELF Lounge.

2. NEW LEARNING SPACES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON LEARNING

Byers (2015) stated that “it is commonly claimed that teachers’ utilisation of space makes a difference to pedagogy, and therefore, must impact on student learning outcome” (Joint Information Systems Committee, 2006, as cited in Byers, 2015, p. 34). At the same time, how teachers can organize and orchestrate the learning that occurs in a space is contingent on any given space’s unique physical and technological affordances and constraints. In the case of our newly renovated building, the new learning spaces allowed for a wider range of learning activities than previously was possible. This seems to be reflected in the surveys results—most students and teachers found that the new spaces impacted learning. More than 93% of the 724 students surveyed thought that the ELF Lounge and Active Learning Zone has impact on their English learning (Table 1). Another survey revealed that over 60% of 1589 students felt that the new classroom size and flexible seating possibilities impacted their learning (Table 2). Similarly, 63% of 43 ELF teachers who completed a survey mentioned that these attributes were supportive of their teaching. In terms of how teachers’ current classroom practices, collaborative active learning approaches (group work, pair work, and project-based learning) were largely favored over whole-class lecture approach which align with the new classrooms’ affordances for group engagement (Table 3). The new classrooms were often found to stimulate pedagogical changes with some teachers reporting that they are considering more collaborative pedagogical approaches. Taken together, the survey responses, observations, and anecdotal evidence all appear to indicate that the new classrooms positively influenced student learning while also expanding teacher’s pedagogical repertoires; and that the ELF Lounge showed moderate use which affirms the need for strategies to increase student awareness of this learning space. We recognize that these tentative findings show only broad trends in relation to the new learning spaces but still suggest that the new learning spaces are well received by students and teachers alike.

Table 1

Student survey results for impacts of ELF Learning space

	High Impact	Impact	Some Impact	Low Impact	No Impact	Total	Weighted Average
Learning space	25.14% 182	42.27% 306	25.97% 188	5.11% 37	1.52% 11	724	2.16

Table 2

Student survey results for impacts of size and chair formation on learning

	High Impact	Impact	Some Impact	Low Impact	No Impact	Total	Weighted Average
Classroom size	24.61% 391	37.19% 591	24.92% 396	10.89% 173	2.39% 28	1,589	2.29
Classroom chairs	25.36% 403	40.59% 645	24.10% 383	8.62% 137	1.32% 21	1,589	2.20

Table 3

Teacher survey results for classroom approaches

	5 Highly Valued	4	3	2	1 Least Valued
Whole-class lecture	20.7%	24.1%	34.5%	13.8%	6.9%
Group work	75.9%	24.1%	0	0	0
Pair work	72.4%	24.1%	3.4%	0	0
Project based learning	62.1%	34.5%	3.4%	0	0
Learning Management System	24.1%	37.9%	24.1%	6.9%	6.9%

3. A LOOK FORWARD

This initial report serves as a stepping stone for future in-depth research articulating the relationship between the new learning spaces, learning experience, and pedagogy within the ELF paradigm. In other words, how do the affordances of the new learning spaces support ELF-informed curriculum and pedagogical approaches? There is a need for a more detailed understanding of the relationship between specific attributes of the learning environments (i.e., aesthetics, furniture, technology, and etc.) and pedagogy. We hope to establish a baseline understanding through more data sources. The new learning spaces are an important step for providing ELF students with state-of-art facilities that support learning and teaching innovation. We agree with Yang,

Becerik-Gerber and Mino's assessment that "student satisfaction and performance in higher education classrooms continues to be a critical initiative among educators and researchers" (2013, p. 171), but how this is realized in the ELF classroom remains relatively unknown and the focus of future research. More scholarly attention needs to be devoted to examining how learning spaces can be better designed and utilised for ELF teaching and learning.

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