

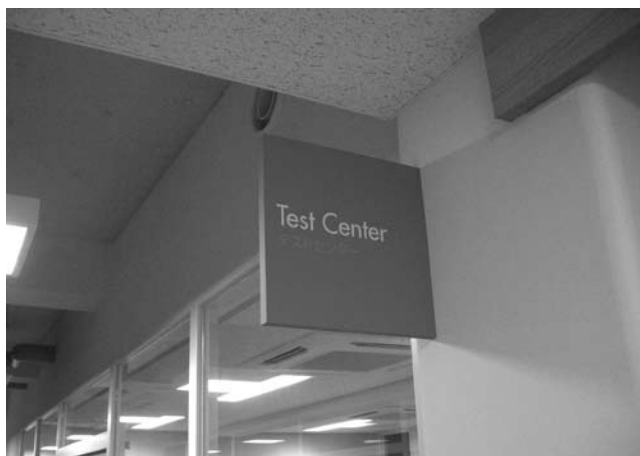
Report on Independent Learning : Self-Access Language Centers at Two Japanese Universities, Student Attitudes and Habits, and Lessons for Tohoku University

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Abstract

This paper reports on fact-finding visits to two Japanese Universities with established self-access language centers in October 2009. It compares and contrasts the facilities, purpose, philosophy, and achievements of their respective programs.



The results of a survey conducted in November 2009 among 760 students taking compulsory English classes (aimed at 1st and 2nd year students) at Tohoku University are also reported. The survey asked students about their current language study habits, attitudes, and needs.

Then the current situation at Tohoku University is briefly outlined and a possible path for Tohoku University to take in considering self-access language study resources is suggested.

Introduction

Independent study is particularly important for languages because of the need for extensive practice in order to gain practical proficiency. In an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) situation, such as the one in Japan, students who wish to develop their practical communication skills must find ways to do so outside of the classroom. Furthermore, independent study allows students to practice in ways that match their learning styles and interests, possibly resulting in deeper and more effective acquisition.

Self-access language centers aim to provide students with resources, support, and facilities to encourage and facilitate independent study and practice of languages. They can be particularly important for foreign students, as these students have a strong need to master the Japanese language.

More and more institutions in Japan and abroad are recognizing the importance of independent study and providing their students with self-access study centers in order to improve student performance and achievement. Two of the better-known ones in Japan are located at Akita International University and Kanda University of International Studies.

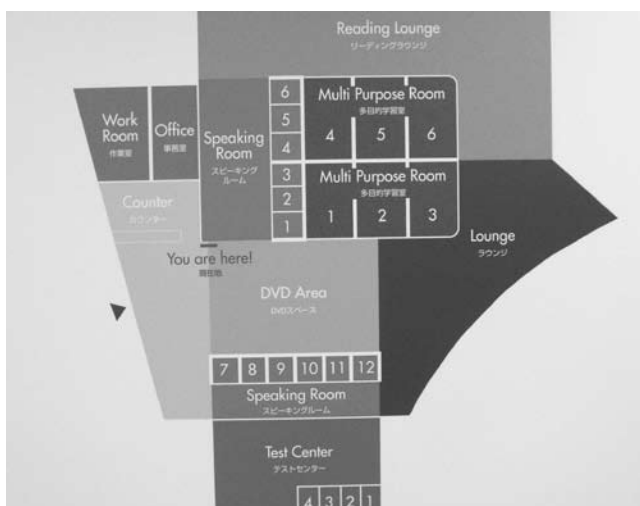
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Visit 1: Akita International University (October 7th)



Akita International University's Language Development and Intercultural Studies Center (LDIC) started in 2004, in a couple of disused classrooms. It had a small budget and provided materials for students to access (films, TV, TOEFL preparation).

In 2008 a purpose-built center was constructed adjacent to the university library at a cost of 17 million yen. The LDIC is now an important part of AIU's English preparation program, and a draw for prospective students.



The LDIC is used mainly to support the initial English training for students entering the university (all classes are conducted in English so students have to quickly reach a high level of proficiency), and as a self-access center for students for the rest of their time at the university. During the initial period

students must spend time in the LDIC each week, but are free to decide on their own course of learning.



Staff report that students are very enthusiastic about watching authentic materials (DVDs and satellite television) and using CALL resources such as Rosetta Stone to practice their language skills.



One interesting fact was that the LDIC does not have any graded readers, as these are judged to be too low-level to be of use to the students.



The facility is divided into several different

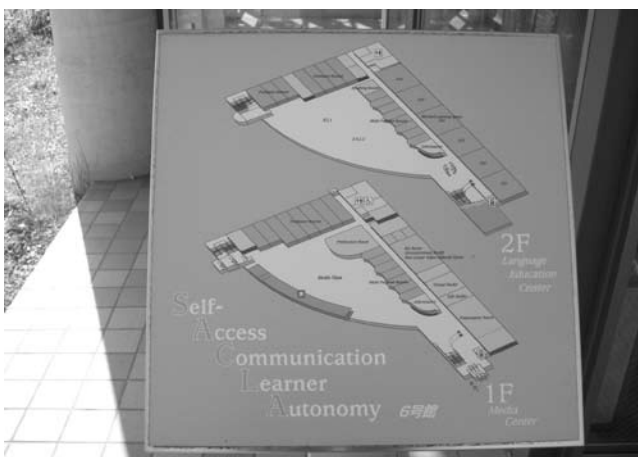
sections according to the various activities on offer. These include group rooms, individual speaking practice rooms, computer stations, reading areas, and TV/DVD viewing stations.



A test preparation center is not part of the LDIC, but has been set up next door. In it, students can access paper-based and computer preparation materials, as well as take mock tests and even sign up for the real ones.

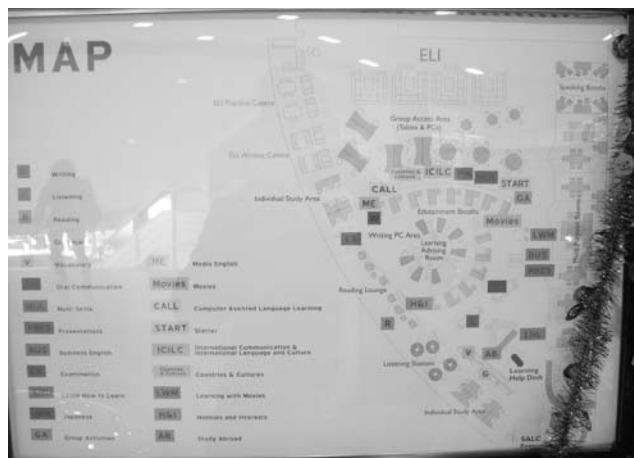
The LDIC has two full-time staff and also employs student advisors. Information on how to use the facility and the various resources is available, and students can ask for advice and help from any of the staff.

Visit 2: Kanda University of International Studies (October 21st)



Kanda University of International Studies' Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) had similarly

modest beginnings. It also started in a disused classroom as a private project started by one teacher in 2001. Now, eight years later, the SALC is one of the university's strongest selling points.



In Kanda's SALC, first-year students are encouraged to sign up for orientation courses on how to learn effectively. These are accredited and take place over the course of a semester. Many students complete the course and then continue using the center individually. This emphasis on training is one of the SALC's key principles.



Learning advisors are available to help students with specific problems or suggest suitable materials. As can be seen in this photo, there is a large staff involved in running the center.

In the SALC, students can read books (including graded readers) and use listening materials. There is a range of worksheets and information sheets, as well as spaces for group work. A range of periodicals, from newspapers to magazines, are also available.



Adjacent to the SALC and complementing it is the English Language Institute (ELI), where students can drop in to practice their speaking skills or get advice on their writing. Many students choose to eat their lunch in the ELI and kill two birds with one stone!



CALL resources are not emphasized in the SALC, and most students concentrate on reading, listening, and group activities.



As well as advisors and managers, the SALC even has a full time designer, tasked with keeping the Center looking attractive and welcoming for students and visitors.

Comparison of Language Centers

The facilities at the two universities mentioned above are both state of the art, well-stocked, and comfortable. Both provide extensive resources and full-time advisory staff.

There are some significant differences between the LDIC at AIU and the SALC at KUIS, however, which should be mentioned.

1. The LDIC features CALL resources and language learning software, while the SALC specifically avoids it.
2. The SALC has a large range of graded readers while the LDIC deliberately does not offer them.
3. The LDIC has a wide range of materials in languages other than English, including Japanese language learning support, while the SALC has a much more limited selection.
4. The SALC offers a very structured learner training program, from its initial accredited course for freshmen to regular lectures given by staff and

visiting speakers. The LDIC does not have a formal program.

5. The LDIC, through its testing center, offers study, practice, and actual test opportunities for students. The SALC offers a test preparation module, but does not have the same range of resources.
6. The SALC, through the ELI, runs conversation salon, learning support, and writing advice activities for students. The LDIC does not provide such activities, although students are encouraged to find language partners to practice with.

Survey of Tohoku University Students Regarding Independent Language Practice

In the first week of November 2009 a survey was conducted among students in compulsory English classes (aimed at 1st and 2nd year students).

A total of 760 students were surveyed. Questions were asked in Japanese and students were able to answer freely.

All questions referred to language study (English or other foreign languages, or Japanese in the case of foreign students).

The questions were as follows:

- Q 1 現在、授業以外の自習をしていますか
Currently, are you doing any self-study outside of classes?
- Q 2 YESの場合、何の自習をしていますか
If you answered Yes, what kind of self-study are you doing?
- Q 3 NOの場合、これからじしゅうするつもりありますか。それとも、自分にぴったりの教材・サポートがあればしたいとおもいますか。

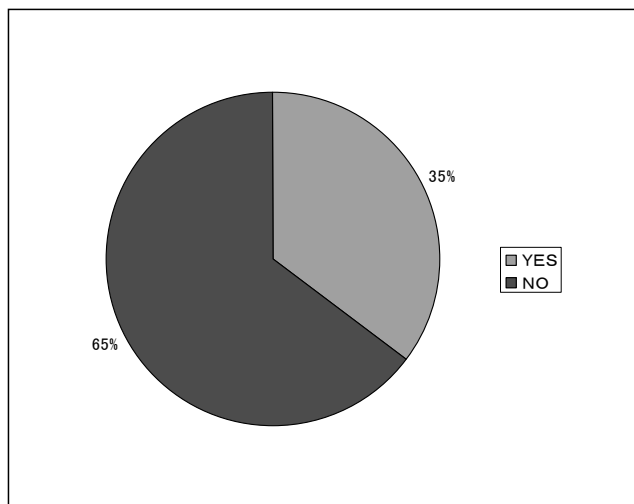
If you answered No, do you plan on doing self-study in the future? Or, would you like to do it if suitable materials and support were available?

- Q 4 東北大学で何か自習の材料や補助となるものがありますか (例えば図書館・語学センター・自習グループなど)。
Are there any resources or support available at Tohoku University (for example, libraries, language centers, self-study groups)?
- Q 5 自習の為にどのような教材や補助が欲しいですか
What kind of materials or support would you like to have access to?

A total of 760 students returned the questionnaires, although not all students answered all questions.

Results

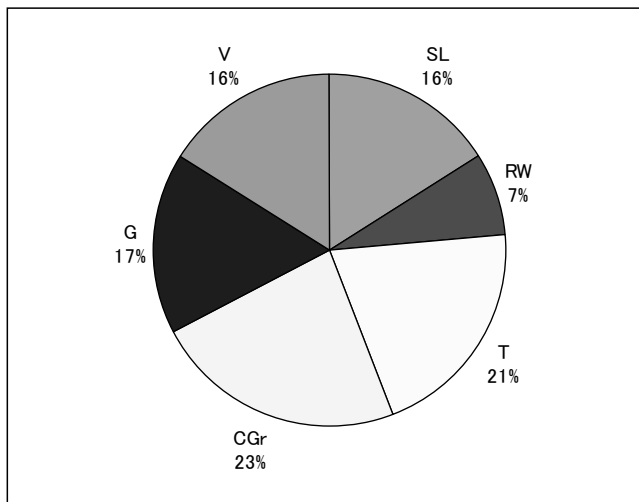
Question 1



QUESTION 1 RESULTS

The fact that 65% of students are not doing any language practice outside of their classes is not surprising, but is still somewhat disappointing.

Question 2



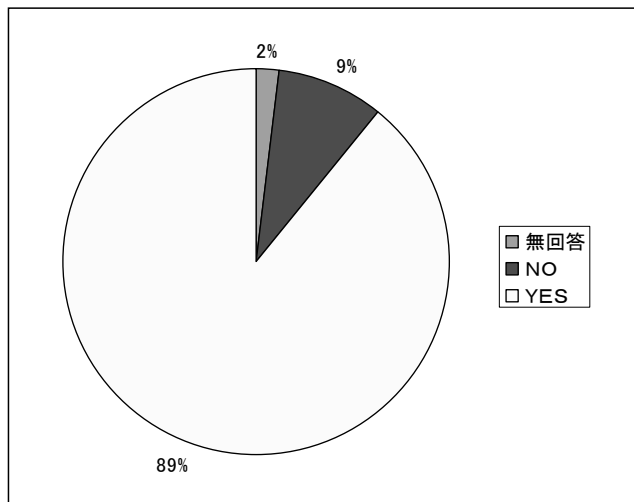
QUESTION 2 RESULTS

A total of 391 responses were given (some students gave more than one answer).

These results were difficult to interpret, as the student responses consisted of 44 different categories. In the chart above they have been consolidated into six areas: vocabulary (V), speaking and listening (SL), reading and writing (RW), test preparation (T), class-related work and grammar (CGr), and general (G). For a breakdown of the specific items see Appendix A.

Class-related study (both preparation before classes and review of previously studied material) and test preparation are the two largest categories, but the low proportion of students practicing reading and writing is particularly surprising. It is the lowest category, despite its relative importance in academic contexts.

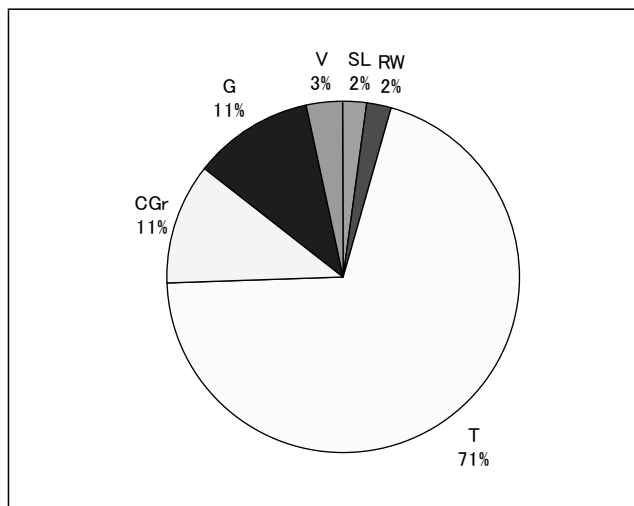
Question 3



QUESTION 3 RESULTS

Question 3 asked students who are not currently doing language self-study if they would be interested in doing so in the future: 89% of them replied in the affirmative.

Some students specified the kind of study they would like to do (90 responses). See Appendix B for details and the chart below.

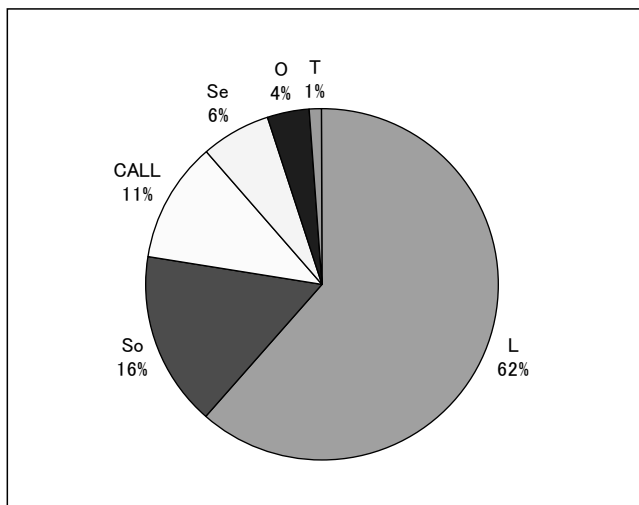


QUESTION 3a RESULTS

Testing was by far the most popular option, probably reflecting student anxiety about the TOEIC and TOEFL tests they take as part of their second semester English grade. On the basis of this result

alone, a case could be made for providing students with test preparation materials and advice.

Question 4

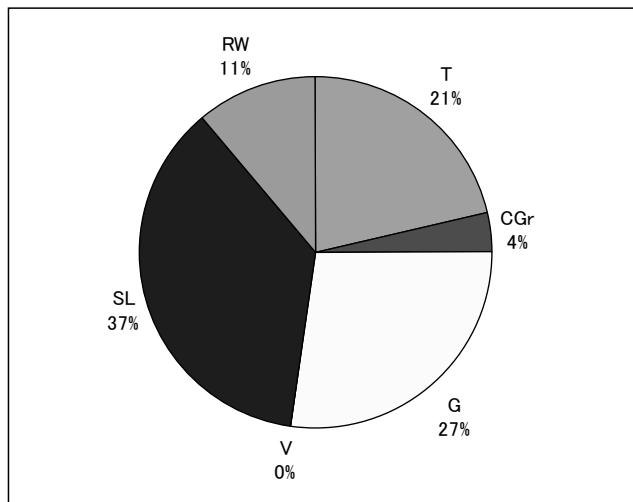


QUESTION 4 RESULTS

Again, students responded to this question with 28 different items, which were then consolidated into six categories: library (L), social (So), CALL, self-access center (Se), other (O), and testing (T). For a detailed breakdown see Appendix C.

It appears from these results that more could be done to inform students of resources available for language self-study. While most students are aware of the library as both a place to study and a source of material, relatively few are aware of social options such as circles and study groups, and even fewer of the CALL options provided by the university. The language self-access center was only mentioned in 6% of responses. Informal surveys among teaching staff indicate that they are no better informed than the students.

Question 5



QUESTION 5 RESULTS

Question 5 asked students what resources they would like access to for language self-study purposes. The 75 items were consolidated into the six categories used for questions 2 and 3. See Appendix D for details.

The general category (G) was particularly substantial here because it included all the items that were not readily classifiable, but the most significant result is the demand for speaking and listening practice, with 37% of responses involving either speaking or listening. Testing was again very popular, presumably for the reasons mentioned above.

Situation at Tohoku University

Tohoku University does not at present have a central language resource center. Its resources are spread among several different locations and institutions, including but not restricted to:

1. University libraries
2. Language center
3. Multimedia building
4. Center for International Exchange

5. Departments
6. Student groups
7. Individual staff members

Student knowledge of and access to these resources is currently limited and there is no formal program to train students in their use or provide advice regarding language learning.

Informal surveys of teaching staff (full- and part-time) show that not many of the teachers are aware of these resources either, so they are unable to provide students with potentially helpful advice.

Particularly in response to the use of standardized tests (TOEIC and TOEFL) to determine grades for compulsory English classes in the second semester there is considerable student interest in self-study materials and guidance, and demand for language advisors and resources.

Recommendations

In view of the information reviewed above, I would like to make the following recommendations:

1. Publicize existing resources by informing students and teaching staff.
2. Conduct further research into student needs and attitudes.
3. Trial new resources, particularly test preparation materials and language advisory staff.
4. Consolidate resources into a single language center to take advantage of economies of scale.
5. Institute a learner development program for students with language learning seminars and courses run by university staff and visitors.

6. Plan and create a self-access language center to meet the needs of Tohoku University students. This will probably be quite different to the centers mentioned in this article, although it could incorporate the best elements of both.

Conclusion

Having examined and compared the facilities at two Japanese leading language institutions, this article went on to examine the results of a survey of student attitudes and study habits. It then considered the current situation at Tohoku University and made some suggestions for possible developments.

Self-access language facilities can make a significant difference to students' practical language abilities, providing that they meet student needs and are seen as relevant and useful.

Tohoku University students are aiming to become leaders in their fields, and are highly motivated. Providing them with resources and practical advice for language self-study would be an effective way to strengthen our core programs and improve the quality of our graduates.

Further research into the needs of our students and the best way to meet them is needed. This will allow the University to create a truly world-class language support program.

Appendices

Appendix A (self-study students are currently doing)

| | |
|--------------|----|
| ボキャブラリー | 63 |
| TOEFL | 42 |
| リスニング | 33 |
| 授業の予習 | 32 |
| TOEIC | 30 |
| 授業の復習 | 27 |
| リーディング | 21 |
| ドイツ語 | 13 |
| 英語 | 12 |
| 宿題 | 10 |
| 文法 | 10 |
| 教科書を読む | 9 |
| ラジオ英会話 | 8 |
| 問題集 | 7 |
| Linc English | 6 |
| 洋画 | 6 |
| フランス語 | 6 |
| スペイン語 | 5 |
| 試験勉強 | 5 |
| 参考書 | 4 |
| 和訳 | 3 |
| 英語以外の第二言語 | 3 |
| インターネット教材 | 3 |
| 外国人と話す | 3 |
| 塾の予習 | 2 |
| 英文読解 | 2 |
| アニメ | 2 |
| ビデオ | 2 |
| 洋楽 | 2 |
| 中国語 | 2 |
| 日本語 | 2 |
| 資格 | 2 |
| 英語で日記 | 2 |
| ライティング | 2 |
| ゲーム、チャット | 1 |
| pod cast | 1 |
| リンガフォン | 1 |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| 英会話本 | 1 |
| 先生に会話練習をお願いしている | 1 |
| シャドーウイング | 1 |
| 英会話スクール | 1 |
| 発音練習 | 1 |
| 模試テキスト | 1 |
| 英検 | 1 |

Appendix B (self-study students would like to do)

| | |
|----------|----|
| TOEFL | 43 |
| TOEIC | 20 |
| 授業に関するもの | 10 |
| 英語 | 7 |
| 語彙 | 3 |
| 本を読む | 2 |
| リスニング | 2 |
| ドイツ語 | 1 |
| イタリア語 | 1 |
| スペイン語 | 1 |

Appendix C (resources students are aware of)

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| 図書館 | 222 |
| 自習室 | 23 |
| Linc English | 11 |
| M棟 | 8 |
| 友人と教え合う | 7 |
| CALL教室 | 7 |
| 授業のテキスト | 5 |
| コーヒアワー | 5 |
| コンピュータ室 | 5 |
| PC、インターネット | 4 |
| 留学生との交流 | 4 |
| 英語サークル (EZ) | 4 |
| 購買の語学コーナー | 3 |
| CALL教材 | 3 |
| TOEIC対策の教材 | 3 |
| 自習グループ | 3 |
| スピーキングラウンジ | 3 |
| 新聞 | 3 |

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| チューター | 2 |
| B棟（川内北） | 2 |
| web ocm | 2 |
| 先生 | 1 |
| TOEFL | 1 |
| 食堂 | 1 |
| 学内コンピュータからアクセスできる英語教材 | 1 |
| 英語の雑誌 | 1 |
| 交流センター | 1 |
| conversation partner | 1 |

Appendix D (resources students would like to have)

| | |
|--------------|----|
| リスニング | 66 |
| TOEFL教材 | 31 |
| わかりやすい教材 | 30 |
| ネイティブと話す機会 | 26 |
| リーディングのための教材 | 24 |
| 練習問題、問題集 | 24 |
| 英語の本 | 21 |
| CD | 20 |
| TOEIC教材 | 18 |
| 単語帳 | 14 |
| 英語を話す機会 | 12 |
| スピーキング教材 | 10 |
| 質問できる環境 | 8 |
| DVD | 8 |
| 教材選択のアドバイス | 8 |
| 日本語訳付きの教材 | 6 |
| 文法書 | 6 |
| 参考書 | 6 |
| 推薦テキスト | 6 |
| 英語本のリスト（推薦） | 6 |
| 教科書 | 6 |
| プリント | 5 |
| CD付き教科書 | 5 |
| 英会話教材 | 5 |
| 自習室の増設 | 4 |
| 図書館利用時間の延長 | 3 |

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| 情報の公開 | 3 |
| 教材の価格を安くしてほしい | 3 |
| 学内に気軽に勉強できる施設 | 3 |
| コミュニケーションスキル上達に役立つもの | 3 |
| 能力を評価してくれるもの | 3 |
| 自宅からCALLの授業などが受けられる | 3 |
| 詳しい解説書 | 3 |
| 時間 | 2 |
| 英語のTA | 2 |
| 補講 | 2 |
| 英語が好きになるようなテキスト | 2 |
| リスニングソフト | 2 |
| 第二言語用の問題集 | 2 |
| 英作文の添削 | 2 |
| TOEICなどの試験対策 | 2 |
| 課題 | 2 |
| 飲食しながら勉強できるスペース | 2 |
| 視聴覚ブース | 2 |
| 英字新聞 | 2 |
| 試験の過去問題 | 2 |
| 冷暖房完備の図書館 | 1 |
| ローカルな英語が身に付くもの | 1 |
| 自宅で指導してくれる人 | 1 |
| 英語の発音を練習できるもの | 1 |
| 文法チェッカー | 1 |
| ノート | 1 |
| 読み書きのためのもの | 1 |
| 洋書 | 1 |
| 留学に役立つもの、実力テスト | 1 |
| リスニング機器 | 1 |
| ワーク | 1 |
| スポーツ | 1 |
| 受験英語ではない教材 | 1 |
| フランス語のリスニング教材 | 1 |
| Net Academyを自宅でも | 1 |
| 第二言語の資料、教材 | 1 |
| 会話練習システム（パソコン） | 1 |

| | |
|-------------|---|
| 検定の案内 | 1 |
| 無料の教材 | 1 |
| 速読本 | 1 |
| 自習グループ | 1 |
| 語学セミナー | 1 |
| パソコン教材 | 1 |
| TOEFL教材コーナー | 1 |
| スピーキング講座 | 1 |
| シャドーイング本 | 1 |
| ディクテーション本 | 1 |
| ノート | 1 |
| 目標 | 1 |

