

## **Exploring Language Tables: From a Voluntary Coordinator's Viewpoint**

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### **Abstract**

In 2016, ICU Language Tables were initiated to provide an environment where students from different backgrounds could meet and practice speaking various languages in a casual environment. This endeavor was carried out by voluntary coordinators including two student coordinators from ICU Hub, a club on campus, and the author as an instructor of English for Liberal Arts (ELA). This is a report of this endeavor from autumn 2016 to spring 2017 based on one coordinator's reflection and students' responses. The report will first present an overview of the existing problem, ICU Hub, Language Tables, similar programs in Asia, and similarities with Tandem Learning. Then, eight issues derived from the author's observations and notes will be discussed. Additionally, students' comments from a small-scale survey will be presented. The report will conclude with several future recommendations for improving designing an environment for students from various backgrounds to meet and practice target languages.

### **Background**

#### ***Existing Problems***

In an EFL environment, students often say that they do not have opportunities to practice speaking English outside of class. At the International Christian University (ICU), there are students from various backgrounds, speaking different languages as they grow up; however, they do not seem to easily mix with each other. There are roughly three types of students: students who enter in April (April students); those who begin in September (September students); and international students. According to one campus minister at ICU, they tend to band together with students who speak the same languages or have similar backgrounds, as though there were walls between them. Similarly, one first-year April student living in a dormitory commented that she did not have many opportunities to speak English because English-speaking students in her dorm tended to talk with students who were already proficient speakers of English and that September students usually became fluent in Japanese when they became juniors. Several students involved in Hub, a club at ICU, observed this separation both in culture-exchange events for international students and Japanese students, and in regular classes offered in English.

Furthermore, there are several other possible reasons for the separation. The campus minister observed that an increasing number of students seemed to stay for a shorter time, for example, one term, which tended to result in difficulties for April students in building friendships with them. Moreover, helping language learners speak better requires patience, and students are busy with their assignments and activities. Unless they are committed to

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volunteering selflessly or looking for opportunities to talk to students from different backgrounds willingly, language exchange rarely happens naturally. Besides, there is difficulty in matching the needs among students. More than 80% of the undergraduate student body are April students and regarded as English learners (“Number of Current Students”). Consequently, it is tough to meet the expectations of English learners, Japanese learners, and learners of other languages.

### *ICU Hub*

ICU Hub is a club on campus where students voluntarily serve as coordinators to connect Japanese students and international students. In the year 2016 to 2017, they were mainly involved in four activities: arranging conversation partners, running Green Cafe (a weekly program for students from different backgrounds to meet in a relaxed atmosphere), coordinating short trips over weekends for international students, and planning an event for ICU festival. They are willing to serve other students wherever they find needs and to create a platform where students from different backgrounds can meet. Various administrative offices and Japanese Language Program have appreciated their service for international students.

To meet the needs of diverse students, the author contacted ICU Hub in May 2016 and asked a possibility to hold language tables. Several staff members informed her of their former plan to organize lounges, where Japanese and international students could come and talk together; however, they had not adopted it up to that point. They welcomed the author's idea, and two students volunteered to become coordinators. Thus, ICU Language Tables (LTs) were launched in September 2016.

### *Language Tables*

The author first heard about language tables from Professor Naoki Onishi at ICU. He used to attend a university in the U.S. that held language tables in the cafeteria where signs of different languages were placed and participants, not only students but also professors, were required to speak the designated language at each table. There are several colleges in the US which hold language tables on a large scale such as Middlebury College, Princeton University, Duke University and UC San Diego (Forbes College, 2017; International House; “Language Tables”; The Academic Advising Center, 2017). These programs are also called Language Corner (e.g., Cornell University) or Happy Hour (e.g., Ramapo College of New Jersey) (The Cornell Public Service Center Language Expansion Program, 2017; The Roukema Center for International Education). A Google search for the terms “language tables” and university returned about 20,400, and the terms “language tables” and college about 16,200. They are mostly programs coordinated by universities, and proficient or native speakers host tables for each language, and those hosts decide when and where to meet. At UC San Diego, the tables are open even to the public and people in the community can participate in them (International House). According to Professor Masahiro Takahashi at Middlebury College, a well-known institution for its language education in the US, language tables are one of the main activities in the language program. Professors join them actively, and the students' participation is counted in their grades (personal communication, December 29, 2016).

### ***Similar Programs in Asia***

Efforts to create an environment where students can participate and practice speaking English have been made in different schools in Asian countries. English Villages are immersion programs where participants use English to join activities and gain cultural experience (“Overview”). They are popular in Taiwan and Korea, where English-speaking paid staff offer activities or work in shops, and students are required to speak English. They target younger children, such as elementary school students, and put more emphasis on learning English through entertainment programs and experience in a mock city (Li, 2013; Hong, 2016). Sadly, some of the English villages in Korea recently had to shut down due to financial restraints and a decrease in the number of visitors (Hong, 2016). In Japan, an English village is opening in Tokyo in 2018, targeting high school or younger students (Takeuchi, 2016).

At the university level, the number of similar programs has been rapidly increasing in the past decade. E-cube at Kinki University is a center established in 2006 where paid English speaking staff perform a variety of entertaining activities to provide opportunities for students to practice speaking English (Kindai University Eigomura E3 [e-cube]; Osaki, 2015). Nanzan University runs World Plaza in Nanzan English Education Center in 2007, where Japanese students can discuss with international TAs in various languages, such as English, Chinese, French, German, Spanish, and Swedish without using Japanese at all (Nanzan English Education Center). Osaka Jogakuin College offers English Speaking Lounge established in 2007, aimed at students enjoying speaking English in a relaxed, non-academic atmosphere. Paid English-speaking staff join sessions in evening hours twice a week, having a general conversation and arranging seasonal events occasionally (Bramley, 2008). At Lunch Time English established in 2010 at Ryukoku University, both Japanese and international students are encouraged to communicate in English and understand each other's culture (Tokuda, Ohba, Sakaguchi, Seo, & White, 2015).

“English Café” is a common name for similar programs. Shinshu University has held one during lunchtime every week since 2013. Japanese and international students voluntarily meet, one of the participants gives a ten-minute speech and asks questions, and participants are later divided into small groups to discuss a given question (Fujita & Lai, 2017). English Cafe at Meiji University started in 2016. They coordinate two types of activities: “Cultural Exchange” is initiated by international students and held three days a week, where they introduce their countries in English through presentations, singing, and dancing, and in “Discover Japan,” registered participants introduce Japan in three to four consecutive weeks (“2017 nendo”; “Kokunaigai ibunka”). Multilingual Cafe has been held every day at Osaka University since 2011; English cafe is on two days in a week, and cafes for other languages such as French, Spanish, German, Korean, and Chinese are organized on the other three days in a week (Osaka Daigaku Zengaku Kyoiku Suishin Kiko CELAS, 2017; Osaka Daigaku Zengaku Kyoiku Suishin Kiko CELAS, “Multilingual Café”).

### ***Similarities with Tandem Language Learning***

ICU Language Tables have a similar aim to Tandem learning in that they both promote foreign language learning reciprocally, autonomously, and collaboratively. Tandem learning is a language exchange method established in Germany, and in Japan, Japanese language education employs this method extensively (Wakisaka, 2015). In Tandem language learning, learners are arranged in pairs to meet regularly, traditionally face to face, or recently

online, to study each other's language (Little, 2015). They split one session into two parts and learn language reciprocally. They are not professional teachers, but volunteers, who may or may not be native speakers (Vassallo & Telles, 2006). Language Tables at ICU are also organized based on reciprocity. Coordinators divide one session into two parts so that Japanese learners and learners of English or other languages can spend an equal amount of time in learning from each other. All hosts are student volunteers, and not all of them are native speakers. One significant difference from Tandem learning is that one host usually has several participants at a table. Concerning autonomy and collaboration, in Tandem learning, a participant and a proficient speaker collaborate in the partner's learning process and can freely decide the content, the place, the time, the way to learn, the length of one session, and the frequency of the session (Vassallo & Telles, 2006). Language Tables at ICU is less flexible due to the limited number of hosts and the scarcity and schedule of coordinators; however, hosts and participants can talk freely on any topic they prefer to discuss. Coordinators bring suggested topics only to help their speaking practice.

Though face-to-face language-exchange gatherings are remarkably increasing in number, research available on this subject is sparse compared to computer-mediated cross-cultural communication and intercultural language study encounters on the Internet (Acar & Kobayashi, 2011). Reports on similar endeavors at the university level are also limited. Thus, there is a need for detailed reports on efforts made in this area.

### Data Collection

One of the voluntary coordinators, who is the author and an ELA instructor of the university, mainly recorded the issues and questions in her reflective journal. She also took notes of comments in the meetings with Hub students, a campus minister who was involved in Green Cafe, and LT coordinators. Coordinators conducted a survey in June 2017 by sending a questionnaire to thirty-six students who participated Language Tables from Autumn 2016 to Spring 2017 and received seven responses. The data were collected anonymously. By reading and rereading the data, eight issues in the journal and notes and five themes in students' responses emerged. Comments in the responses were translated by the author.

### Discussion

The following section first presents eight issues that emerged from the journal and notes, and then themes in students' responses.

**1. Schedule.** The frequency of LTs in a week or a term needed adjustments according to logistical conditions. Initially, we planned to hold tables almost every day during different periods of a day, depending on each host's availability; however, due to the difficulty in finding enough volunteer table hosts and the participants' class schedule, holding tables during lunchtime on only one of the days in a week was possible. Following the example of UC San Diego, tables were held from the second week to the week before the last week of the classes. Ending the LTs one week before finals seemed to be useful for student coordinators to prepare for their term-end assignments in classes.

**2. Location.** Though holding LTs in a classroom was acceptable, it presented problems with serving food and drink. Initially, coordinators hoped to hold LTs in the dining hall in Dialogue House or the lounge on the first floor in Diffendorfer Memorial Hall. Since students fully occupied them during lunchtime, coordinators decided to hold LTs in a small classroom of the main building on campus. It was suitable to accommodate three or four groups and easy to access since most of the classes were held in the building. The author brought snacks and bottles of drinks to create a fun and casual atmosphere. These refreshments seemed to help participants to feel relaxed and open more comfortably to talk with people they did not know because student coordinators asked the author to continue to bring them whenever she asked if they were necessary. Bringing drinks, however, became impossible later because the author could not bring hot drinks when it became colder in winter.

Another problem was recognition among students. They could not see our activity easily in a classroom. In the spring of 2017, due to the scarcity of the Hub staff, LTs began to be held on the lawn in the middle of the campus next to Green Cafe. It was in the open air, and more students noticed our activities. One campus minister brought drinks and snacks for Green Cafe every time, and participants for both programs enjoyed his generosity.

**3. Structure.** Dividing one period into two sessions was successful; however, coordinators needed to ask participants to state their preferences explicitly. The period of the time in the lunchtime was split into two sessions by languages, devoting the first 20-minute session (12:50-13:10) for Japanese tables and the last 20-minute session (13:10-13:30) for English or other languages. Initially, there were more international students than Japanese students, and we continued to hold Japanese tables in the second session or added only one English table. Later, the number of April students increased and the staff asked the participants at the end of the first session whether they wanted to have tables for English or other languages. Then Japanese students tended to look around and say, "I'm fine with any tables. We can continue to have Japanese tables" though they originally came to practice English. Those students stopped coming after a while, and coordinators realized Japanese students could not tell what their real needs were; therefore, coordinators began to ask which table the participant wanted to join before the tables started or at the time participants showed up. Then, participants began to tell their preferences more directly.

Suggesting discussion topics was useful while topics needed to be carefully chosen. The first day of LTs was "Snack Party" to attract many participants, adopting the idea from Lunch Time English at Ryukoku University (Tokuda et al., 2015). In the following weeks, coordinators brought several sets of everyday topics and placed them on the table. They were, for example, your hometown, your favorite food, or a country you have visited. Participants could choose any topics they liked to discuss. When we began to hold two sessions divided by different languages, coordinators began to suggest a topic for each session. After the winter term, we had a time for reflection from participants, and one constructive suggestion was to bring a wider variety of topics since there was a tendency to bring a topic related to holidays or seasonal events around the time. Coordinators began to search for more ideas about topics to energize the conversation.

**4. Staffing volunteers.** Continual efforts were necessary to find language hosts who were proficient speakers of different languages. In the beginning, two students in Hub and one ELA instructor voluntarily served as coordinators, organized the schedule, and made announcements about LTs. We first tried harder to invite international students in order to find table hosts for English or other languages; therefore, Japanese tables were held first.

Student coordinators even discussed possible cases where too many April students who wanted to speak English might come, and there might be fewer hosts for English. They concluded that they would need to make announcements about a possibility of groups where all participants might be English learners at different levels and practice speaking English without native speakers or international students. Therefore, we first asked students who preferred practicing speaking English to register by emails. Registration, however, turned out to be unnecessary because not many English learners came in the beginning due to the difficulty in advertising, and eventually a few Japanese students who were proficient in English and international students began to join regularly. Although English was not their first language, those international students, one from Germany, two from France, and one from Spain, volunteered to be English hosts. At the same time, coordinators received a few requests to learn French or Spanish, and whenever hosts were available, we held French or Spanish tables. Since there were many short-term international students, it was difficult to keep finding volunteer hosts who could speak target languages and stay committed to our activities. Every time committed volunteers serving faithfully returned home, coordinators had to find new volunteers again.

Another problem was finding committed student coordinators. The two students who served as coordinators from autumn 2016 were juniors. They continued to serve even after they became seniors. They tried to recruit younger students, but at the end of 2017 spring, only one sophomore student was willing to volunteer for the coming year.

**5. Advertising.** Support from different offices and departments was essential in raising awareness about LTs among students. Making announcements of LT activities was difficult at the beginning since they were mostly student-led activities. The author did not know there were not any official websites where students could post their events on campus in the autumn of 2016. The biggest help came from administrative staff at Graduate Office Academic Affairs Group, International Office, ELA director Yuko Iwata, ELA instructors, and WL director Daniel Quintero. They made announcements by emails and in classes about LT activities, which significantly contributed to the increase of participants. The student coordinators later began to use several different methods such as Facebook, Line, emails, and a website. Since LTs moved to an outdoor location, it appeared to become easier for students to notice because many of them passed by the area.

**6. Goal settings.** Goals became clearer as time progressed. From the beginning, coordinators placed more emphasis on speaking practice than cultural exchange or learning other skills of languages. Some participants, however, turned out to be neither able to speak their target language at all, nor planning to take language courses offered at the university related to the the program they were in or their short stay in the university. Some concerns were raised about our voluntary actions to help those students because it might cause conflicts with language classes taught by professional instructors. With further consideration, coordinators realized the goals of LTs should be indicated as helping students practicing speaking skills in a casual environment. At the same time, the instructor's involvement should be minimal, and students should be leading the activity.

Another incident that clarified our goals was when Green Cafe and LTs were held next to each other on the lawn in the middle of the campus. There seemed to be confusion among participants because some came to attend Green Cafe to relax or talk with anyone freely. Others came to LTs, being eager to practice speaking target languages in groups. Holding

exchange events at a different time and location would be suitable when they have different goals.

**7. The size of the groups.** Smaller groups were advisable for active participation of language learners (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Coordinators assumed the size of the groups at one table would ideally be three people, that is, one host helping two participants. In fact, one host had three to five students. Initially, we did not divide the participants into groups because the total number of participants was small. Several hosts were talking with each other and participants joined the big table. It turned out that participants tended to be quiet and only listen to native speakers talking to each other without speaking up. They seemed to be overwhelmed by the fast rate of speech and rapid turn-taking. Therefore, we began dividing them into smaller groups. Participants were observed to feel more comfortable joining the conversation and have more chances to speak at each table.

**8. Attendance.** The number of participants steadily increased as the year progressed (See Figure 1). At first, the number of international students was more than Japanese students. Later, the number of English learners increased, corresponding to the time when announcements through emails and classes from different departments increased. LTs were held 22 times in total in 2016-2017: eight times in the autumn of 2016, eight times in the winter of 2016, and six times in the spring of 2017. While Japanese tables were held every time, the frequency of English tables increased in following terms (See Figure 2). The average number of participants for different language tables also increased except for Spanish tables (See Figure 3). One Spanish host had been willing to join throughout the year; however, she was not able to participate in the spring term of 2017 due to her schedule. Though there was one participant who was willing to join a Spanish table, it was not held because of the lack of hosts.

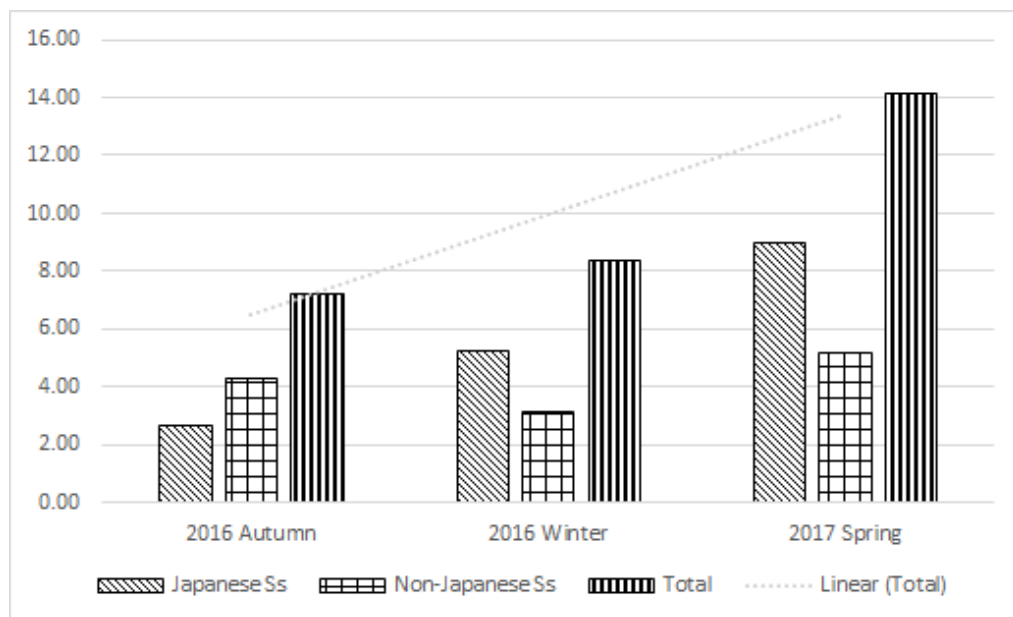


Figure 1. Average number of students.

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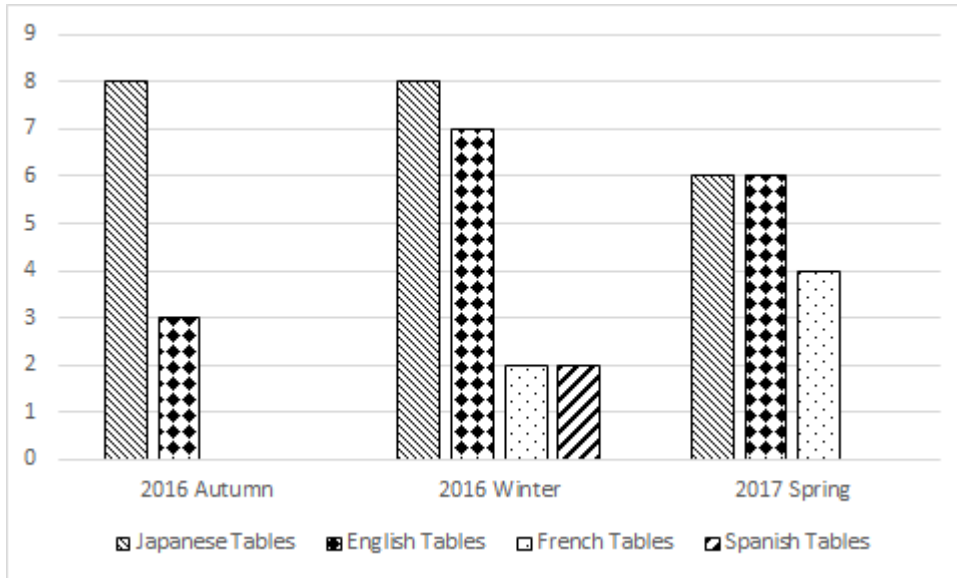


Figure 2. Number of times LTs are held.

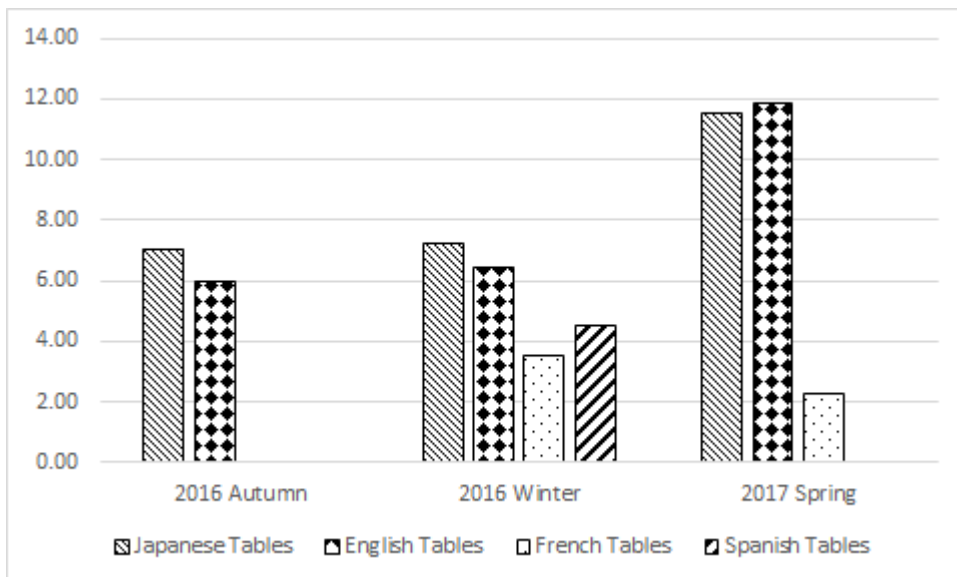


Figure 3. Average number of students at each language tables.

### ***Student Responses***

In order to further investigate perception of participants, responses were collected from all years of undergraduate and graduate school. Although the number of respondents is small, they are a combination of students from a variety of backgrounds: one first-year student, two sophomores, two juniors, one senior, and one post-grad. They can be categorized as four April entrants and three international students (Table 1). They went through different levels of English or Japanese programs in the university: one Stream 4 student (intermediate),



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Table 1  
*Respondents' Comments, Preferences for Topics, and Preferences for Languages*

Student (Category)	Comments for reasons for participation	Preferences for topics	Languages they want to practice	Other comments
Student A (April)		Everyday, Academic	English, Korean, Chinese	“I enjoyed meeting various people.”
Student B (April)	“I happened to pass by LTs.”	Everyday, Academic	English, French	
Student C (April)		Everyday	English	
Student D (April)		Everyday	English, French	
Student E (International)	“I wanted to share my language.”	Everyday, Academic	Chinese, English, French, Japanese, Korean	
Student F (International)		Everyday, Academic	Japanese	
Student G (International)		Everyday, Academic	English, Japanese, Spanish	

three Stream 3 students (high intermediate), and 3 Japanese Language Program students. Six out of seven respondents joined LTs more than three times, which suggests they were regulars who often joined LTs.

The primary reason for participating in LTs was practicing speaking skills as stated by six out of seven respondents. Two respondents claimed they wanted to make new friends. One respondent expressed meeting international students as one of their reasons. One respondent

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stated professors' or instructors' recommendations as one of their reasons. Other reasons were "I wanted to share my language" and "I happened to pass by LTs."

Overall, most of the respondents were satisfied with LTs and joining LTs contributed to an increased interest in other cultures or willingness to communicate. Six students stated they had fairly or considerably enough time to practice speaking the target language at LTs. All the respondents expressed enjoyment of LTs, and five felt pleasure at serving as hosts. Five students reported their interest in other cultures and willingness to communicate with people from different backgrounds considerably or significantly increased through LTs. One student remarked, "I enjoyed meeting various people."

Concerning topics, six respondents stated everyday topics coordinators brought were useful. All respondents claimed they preferred to talk about everyday topics. At the same time, they also wanted to discuss academic topics as can be seen in the five out of seven students indicated preferences for academic topics. This result was a surprise because coordinators assumed that participants must be tired of discussing academic issues in classes and would prefer everyday topics to discuss in a casual environment.

Next, all respondents selected language courses in the university as the place to practice speaking target languages. Club activities ranked second to practice speaking different languages, chosen by half of the respondents. Three respondents mentioned classes on campus (regular classes offered by the university) as a place to practice speaking skills. Other places such as home, dormitory, or outside campus received two responses each.

Regarding language preferences for LTs, six students including one international student expressed their need for English tables. Three students expressed desires for French or Japanese tables and one student for Spanish tables. Two respondents requested Korean and Chinese for future possibilities.

### Conclusion

In this section, the author would like to present five suggestions related to the issues and themes raised above. Though some of the following ideas may not be easily incorporated, it is her hope that they will contribute to succeeding in and sustaining similar endeavors made in the future.

First, recognition of LTs and understanding of the goals among the faculty would be desirable. Although they are familiar with ELA and WL instructors, LTs are less known to other professors and instructors yet. LTs are not activities to threaten their language teaching jobs, but would rather support them by providing more opportunities to speak target languages. Participating in LTs might encourage students to realize their necessity to take formal courses by encountering proficient speakers of various languages. The content of LTs will not be overlapped with formal classes if participants share different types of stories from official classes. At Middlebury College, to sensitively meet the needs of various participants at Language Tables who have different personalities, professors and TAs tend to discuss different topics from formal courses. Though professors do not talk about personal matters frequently in the classes, they have spontaneously begun to share them at language tables so that participants can enjoy speaking in foreign languages (M. Takahashi, personal communication, December 29, 2016; September 19, 2017).

Next, the author would like to ask the faculty to encourage students to participate in LTs. The number of students increased after offices and departments began to announce LTs by email and in classes. Uneven distribution of student participation among different

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disciplines or years of university was displayed in similar programs in other universities, depending on how strongly they undertook the promotion of the programs (Bramley, 2008; Tokuda et al., 2015). Announcements made by the faculty is one of the keys to the success of the program.

Third and most significant, there should be a system to continue to recruit students who can serve responsibly and regularly as coordinators and hosts. With more hosts, the number of participants at each table can be smaller, and the participants can have more opportunities to practice the target languages. Since LTs were a volunteer program, even committed hosts sometimes did not appear; therefore, coordinators were not sure whether different tables could be held until the last minute and some tables were not held even when there were participants who came to join them.

Furthermore, the structure of LTs should continue to be modified to meet students' needs and sustain their interest. Since academic topics turned out to be of interest to them, we should include them at LTs. Entertaining events or opportunities to give a presentation followed by a discussion in small groups can be possibilities to consider in the future.

Finally, it would be preferable if the location of LTs is close to a place many students pass by and participants can have easy access to snacks or drinks. The number of participants in English Cafe at Shinshu University continued to increase without advertising their events heavily since it was held in a room in their library and many students often passed by the room (Fujita & Lai, 2017). If students can participate in LTs while eating lunch or snacks, they can relieve their tension and express themselves more easily in a target language. Many similar programs in other universities are held in rooms where food and drink are available.

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