

# Using Guided Self-Study to Improve Students' Motivation

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## 1. Introduction

It has been famously said that 10,000 hours of meaningful practice are required to master any useful life skill. While the validity of this statement has been cast with skepticism, it is certainly true that mastering a language requires an immeasurable amount of time. It is also true that the amount of time devoted to English education in Japan is not sufficient enough for students to master the language. Furthermore, whether or not that time can be considered "meaningful practice time" is a separate issue, though in the researcher's experience, many of the instruction hours in junior high and high school are geared towards test taking, and not acquiring practical language. That having been said, either students need to take language learning into their own hands at some point, or they need to pursue some sort of language learning outside of secondary school, if they have any hopes of achieving proficiency. But do students know how to study meaningfully? Will they take the time to do so? If the answer to either of these questions is "no" then a third question needs to be addressed: Should universities not take responsibility to enable students to be able to answer both questions positively?

## 2. Research Rationale

The subject of this research was a second-year class of university students, during the first semester of a course called Communicative English. All of the students are foreign language majors who are presumably interested in learning English. My students' average score on EIKEN IBA was 858 (with a high of 949 and low of 782). There were thirteen students enrolled in my class, although attendance from a few of them was somewhat sporadic.

From the researcher's observations, students do not really have a solid grasp on how to study language on their own. As long as they are told what to do and how to do it, they can make their way through their assignments. However,

whether given time to “talk freely” or try something on their own, more often than not, students have difficulties figuring out what they need to do or how to get the task started.

Through secondary school, students are required to learn what they are told to learn (i.e., how to pass entrance examinations). Once the grind of cramming for entrance examinations is complete, students at long last get a chance to experience some freedom. They can earn their own spending money. Class attendance is not monitored as carefully as it was in grade school. Their time is, to an extent, their own. However, upon graduating from university, the typical career path for Japanese students will have them starting their careers with many long work days and very little time to pursue their hobbies or acquire strong skills to enhance their lives. As such, English language acquisition often takes a back seat to work life, thus leaving students with whatever language they have acquired in university as their lone foundation.

With this in mind, I wished to present my students with some kind of starting point which they would be able to use to propel their English language acquisition outside of my classroom, and beyond their years of formal education. I wanted to exploit their newfound sense of freedom, as well as a flexibility in class curriculum to allow them to explore language learning on their own.

### **3. Research Questions**

- What kind of study materials and learning methods do Japanese university students choose for themselves when given freedom to choose for themselves?
- What sort of motivational effect does in-class free study time have on Japanese university students?

### **4. Method**

At the beginning of the research period, I administered the Agawa/Takeuchi survey (Appendix A) to ascertain their perception of their motivation levels. I then thoroughly explained to students the rationale behind giving them the freedom to choose their own study materials and learning methods. I gave them a variety of options, showing them practically how they could use the resources to study on their own. I also explained the expectations I had for them, and what

## Using Guided Self-Study to Improve Students' Motivation

they needed to do at the end of the research period. Students were given some class time, as well as a week between classes, to figure out what they wanted to study and how they would study in class.

I had already used Google Documents\* with my class, so they were familiar with how to establish their "online notebooks." These documents were shared and editable by the teacher. Students began their documents with a statement about the purpose of the time, the resources they would use, and the method they intended on using. Then, they dated their work and used the document as a space to make whatever notes they wished to make: new vocabulary, idioms, grammar points, language tips, and more.

Every Friday for the final 30 minutes of class, students were to take out their self-study materials and work from their computers at their self-appointed projects. They were free to use the Internet, multimedia materials such as DVDs, and whatever else they needed to accomplish the tasks they set for themselves. This self-study project continued on for ten weeks, at the end of which they were to present to the class their self-study projects.

As facilitator, I was able to monitor students from the administrator's computer desk, where I could open the documents that students were working on as well as periodically view their entire computer screen. With twelve students in the class, it was a bit tricky to keep a proper eye on every student, but I made sure I checked in on each student at least twice during the study time. I added comments, made suggestions (about both their written work and their study methods), and ensured they were staying on task.

Finally, at the end of the course, I administered an online anonymous survey (Appendix B) to see whether or not this use of class time had any effect on their motivation levels.

- *Google Documents is an online word processing software which allows Google account holders to create, edit and share document files. Google also has similar software for spreadsheets (Sheets) and slideshows (Slides). It allows users to work seamlessly from various work stations -- home computers, work computers, tablets, smartphones -- without ever having to save or carry the work with them. What's more, a shared document can be worked on by multiple users simultaneously, and users can comment on each other's work, make suggestions, edit, and even*

*chat within the document itself.*

## **5. Results and Discussion**

Of the twelve students who frequently attended my class, seven of them chose to study English through music. Most of them listened to songs several times through while following the English lyrics. Some also found a Japanese translation of the song lyrics and cross-referenced while listening. One student, however, took a different approach. He said he wanted to work on his listening skills more than his vocabulary. He would listen to the song several times, typing out whatever he heard, and adding words to his document with every subsequent listen.

Three students chose to watch scenes from a movie during the time given. Some chose to watch with English subtitles on, pausing the movie to look up words and phrases they did not know, while others watched with no subtitles and tried to hear and understand as much English as they could without any visual assistance.

Two students chose to watch English language instructions online. They chose the YouTube channel "Bilingirl Chika." At times, they keyed in on particular situations (ordering food, apologizing for something, etc.) while at other times they focused on specific phrases and their variations ("What's up / What's happening / What's going down").

The Agawa/Takeuchi questionnaire administered at the start of the course produced results that showed that students had a fairly strong interest in acquiring English.

On the Psychological Needs Scale (autonomy), 100% of students felt very strongly in favor (5) or somewhat in favor (4) in all areas except the last one: that the teacher has created an environment which makes it easy to ask question. Two of 13 students answered "neutral" or "I disagree." It can be concluded that students felt their autonomous choices would be honored in this class. As for their competence, it told a completely different story. Where in their autonomy the results leaned more towards "very strongly," the competence scores weighed more heavily in "agree" or neutral, especially when it came to their satisfaction with their efforts in class. Perhaps this reveals that although students' desire was strong, their ability to follow through on their own was lacking. Finally, in terms

## Using Guided Self-Study to Improve Students' Motivation

of relatedness, most students felt that the class atmosphere encouraged good group and pair work. Two answered "neutral" and one disagreed.

As for the English Learning Motivation Scale, most students disagreed either somewhat or strongly about their motivation being external. However, their internal motivation was not necessarily very solid either, with many students choosing "neutral" as their answer for questions about English study stimulating them, bringing happiness to them, or enjoying listening to English conversations. They did, however, identify that studying English was something that they knew would benefit them, either presently or in the future, as nearly every question on the survey regarding identity yielded over 90% of students agreeing strongly or somewhat with the statements.

In the post-course survey, nearly 82% of students said they enjoyed the self-study program, with 64% of them saying they believed their English ability improved somewhat or significantly. Another 27% said they thought their English improved, but only a little. As for how the self-study period affected their interest in learning English, 73% said it deepened their interest. None expressed a reduction in their interest. The question of highest interest to me was whether or not their time spent learning English outside of class had changed as a result of self-study. Only 36% said that they were studying more, while 55% said their studying time outside of class remained unchanged. Unfortunately, it is difficult to draw a conclusion about whether or not that means the self-study time was successful.

### 6. Conclusion

Students by-and-large chose passive learning techniques for themselves. That is, they did not choose methods that required them to produce language. However, I believe this is due in part to the relatively low level of proficiency that they had at the start of the school year, as well as their confidence in producing English. Many students chose to listen to music by artists that they really liked, not basing their decision on anything else, such as lyric quality or level of difficulty. As such, they may not have learned very much useful language. (For example, one student learned new lyrics from twelve different Eminem songs. The phrases he noted will likely never be uttered from his mouth, nor will they likely enter his ear canals in any "real-life" situation.) However, since the point of self-

study was to try to shift their external motivation to internal motivation, this is not necessarily a bad thing.

I was impressed and surprised at the seriousness with which some students chose their materials, though. Many showed a genuine interest in improving their foundation by watching “online English lessons” instead of just being entertained by pop culture.

On the whole, it was extremely difficult to determine if this self-study time changed any student’s motivation from external to internal. The initial survey seemed to indicate that their motivation was not completely external to begin with, but it was difficult to measure whether or not their motivation changed over the course period. I was encouraged (and I’m sure some students were, too) by some of their presentations at the end of the semester, in which they were able to teach the class some of the new English they learned, as well as the new vision they saw for acquiring English on their own in the future.

The intention behind this self-study period was good; however, the research was severely limited in the following ways: (1) The lack of quantitative data makes it difficult to reach meaningful conclusions; (2) The small sample size and particularities of this class (sporadic attendance due to self-discipline issues, low proficiency level to begin with, and so on) bring the validity of the data into question.

Perhaps this study needs to be done on a larger scale in conjunction with other classes. It could also seek to measure a change in students’ attitudes towards learning English with more easily measurable data points.

#### Appendix A - Agawa/Takeuchi Survey

5 = strongly agree; 4 = somewhat agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree;  
2 = somewhat disagree; 1 = strongly disagree

#	Factor	Question	5	4	3	2	1
1	Autonomy	The teacher in my English class respects my opinions about class.	12	1	0	0	0
2	Autonomy	The teacher in my English class explains the purpose and value of activities and assignments.	9	4	0	0	0
3	Autonomy	I think the English teacher understands students’ feelings.	10	3	0	0	0
4	Autonomy	The English teacher encourages us in our English studies.	8	5	0	0	0

Using Guided Self-Study to Improve Students' Motivation

5	Autonomy	I think the English teacher considers our point of view during class.	11	2	0	0	0
6	Autonomy	I think there are times when I achieve a sense of fulfillment from the effort I put into my English class.	5	5	3	0	0
7	Competence	I feel a sense of accomplishment at times during English class.	6	5	2	0	0
8	Competence	I'm satisfied with my level of effort in English class.	1	2	9	1	0
9	Competence	The English teacher has created an atmosphere in which it is easy to ask questions.	6	5	1	1	0
10	Relatedness	I think my English class has an atmosphere in which group activities, pair work and cooperation are apparent.	4	6	2	1	0
11	Relatedness	I don't understand the purpose of studying English.	0	1	0	2	10
12	External	I have to study English because of tests. It can't be helped.	0	0	4	2	7
13	External	I study English in order to get university credits.	1	0	5	2	5
14	External	I study English because I have been told to do so.	0	0	2	3	8
15	Internal	I study English because I feel a sense of stimulation from learning English.	3	5	5	0	0
16	Internal	I study English because of the joy I feel when I can understand something that I previously couldn't.	4	3	6	0	0
17	Internal	I study English because it feels good to hear English being spoken.	1	3	7	1	1
18	Internal	I study English because it feels good to be able to speak English.	2	4	5	1	1
19	Identity	I study English because I think English is important in my personal growth and maturing.	8	3	1	0	0
20	Identity	I believe English is important for my future.	10	3	0	0	0
21	Identity	I study English because it is an important subject for my career.	9	1	1	2	0
22	Identity	I study English because I think it is useful in various situations.	12	1	0	0	0
23	Identity	I study English because I want to be able to use it.	10	3	0	0	0
24	Identity	I study English because if I don't, I will have troubles in my future.	6	4	1	2	0

## Appendix B - Post-Project Survey

- 1) Did you enjoy the self-study time?  
a) Very much   b) Somewhat   c) Neutral   d) Not really   e) Not at all
- 2) What did you think about the amount of time devoted to self-study?  
a) Too long   b) Just right   c) Too short
- 3) Do you feel like you used the time well?  
a) Yes   b) Some days   c) No
- 4) Do you feel like your English ability improved through self-study?  
a) Very much   b) Somewhat   c) A little   d) No change   e) Worsened
- 5) Through self-study, did your interest in English change?  
a) Deepened   b) No change   c) Weakened   d) I don't know
- 6) Did your time studying English outside of class change as a result of self-study?  
a) Increased   b) No change   c) Decreased   d) I don't know
- 7) Do you feel like you picked up some tips or techniques for learning English through self-study?  
a) Very much   b) Somewhat   c) Neutral   d) Not really   e) Not at all
- 8) How was the guidance provided by the teacher?  
a) Awful   b) Somewhat lacking   c) Normal   d) Good   e) Excellent
- 9) If you have any particular comments about self-study, please leave them here.

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## Abstract

Students in Japan have, by and large, learned English in junior high and high school classes designed to help them pass the university entrance examination. For some students, this type of learning provided enough satisfaction for them to continue learning English in university. However, for many students who must continue sitting in foreign language classes for their first two years of tertiary education, the formative years of English education have left an indelible mark on their psyches.

Though many teachers (including those in junior high and high schools) have attempted to motivate students to achieve excellence in English language ability, the harsh reality is that Japan still lags behind the rest of the industrialized world in English language ability, particularly in oral communication. With most Japanese adults entering a workforce that will demand an overwhelming amount of time and energy from its workers, there simply is not enough time in an average Japanese adult's life to build on the English skills they acquired during their years of formal education.

As someone who picked up the Japanese language almost entirely on his own, I wanted to help my students start getting their own vision for learning English independently. If they knew how to acquire language without the need for a classroom teacher, there would be much greater hope for them to improve their abilities outside the classroom. However, they would also need to be coached on how to learn.

This research project looks at how the teacher devised a plan for his students to learn on their own, independently from the teacher, during class time. It looks at what kinds of projects students devised for themselves and how it changed their approach towards language learning. It also discusses the limitations of the project and how it may be honed to generate more meaningful data in the future.