

# Fostering autonomous English learning: Out-of--classroom learning plan for reading class

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# Fostering autonomous English learning: Out-of-classroom learning plan for reading class

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## Abstract

Education reform in Japan continues to be a pressing issue, and previous efforts appear to have borne little fruit. In this study, the author investigated how out-of-class weekly learning is planned with respect to TOEIC classes (consisting of listening and reading classes), and whether an out-of-class learning plan affects the development of learner autonomy. This paper shows the results of research from the viewpoint of nurturing learners' autonomy in university students' reading classes. The findings suggest that directing students to create personal learning plans definitively leads to developing learner autonomy skills, but there are demonstrable differences in levels of self-awareness regarding weaknesses, which are the autonomous sub-abilities of learners, between successful learners and non-successful learners as measured by performance differentials. The paper concludes by suggesting that an automated system that is designed to accurately determine individual weaknesses may be an effective solution in addressing this performance split; such a system has yet to be developed but presents a potentially beneficial opportunity.

## Keyword

Learner autonomy, Out-of-class learning plan, Reading

## リーディングクラスにおける授業学習計画に基づいた 学習オートノミーの育成に向けて

人間社会環境研究科 人間社会環境学専攻  
ダガン さがの

## 要旨

著者はTOEICクラス（リスニングとリーディングのクラスからなる）で毎週受講生が授業外学習をどのように計画しているかを調査し、授業外学習計画が学習者の自律性オートノミーの育成にどう影響するのかを調べてきた。本研究では、そのうち大学生のリーディングクラスにおける学習者の自律性の育成の観点から調査した結果を示す。本研究によって、授業外学習計画を立てることにより、学習時間が増加し、学習者オートノミーの育成につながる事が分かった。しかし、成績が向上した学習者と、そうでない学習者では弱点の自己認識に相違がみられたため、学習者オートノミーアドバイスWebシステムの構築の際には、個々の弱点を特定し正確にアドバイスする必要があることが分かった。

## キーワード

学習者オートノミー、授業外学習計画、リーディング

## 1. Introduction

Fifteen years have passed since the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology aimed at developing human resources with improving “practical English skills” in 2003. Meanwhile, university education has also been reformed and promoted, such as the introduction of various educational programs, in accordance with changes in educational goals. However, the result is that the average score of TOEIC test continues to rank lowly among other nations, and other positive effects remain limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to focus on the characteristics of learners who improved their English reading abilities and those who declined before and after the classes in order to find out how they develop their weekly plans for outside-of-classroom learning and examine whether or not planning may influence English learner autonomy in reading.

In the language learning process, “learner autonomy” is defined as “the ability to manage one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, p.3), and in recent years, the need for nurturing learner autonomy has also been understood in Japanese language education. According to Aoki (2005), learner autonomy is the ability to make choices about the reasons or purpose, content, and method of their own learning, execute plans based on those choices, and evaluate the results. In higher education, research that leads to the improvement of practical English skills with emphasis on learner autonomy is being conducted worldwide. The reason for this is, first of all, learners can study responsibly with minimal use of teacher support (Ho & Crookall, 1995). Second, learners can learn efficiently using their own learning method (Kenny, 1993; Little, 2016). Third, it can improve not

only language learning but also necessary skills at work (Kshema, 2016). Finally, it is advantageous for learners who are not motivated to become active learners (Little, Dam & Legenhausen, 2017).

According to Alrabai, (2017), students who are not learner-autonomous have a teacher-centered lesson system and are dependent on teachers. Conversely, students who are learner-autonomous are those who can study with responsibility (Little, 1991). In Japan, the definition of Aoki (2005) is common, but Brijs & Clijsters (2006) stated that it is necessary to train semi-autonomous learners (SAL) at the midpoint. According to Brijs & Clijsters (2006), it is important to create opportunities and environments for students to control their own learning in class to develop SAL, and as a practical research based on that, CALL and Self-Access Center has been reported to improve English (Raby, Baille, Bressoux, & Chapelle, 2006; Raby, 2007). However, Smith (2008) believes that using CALL and the self-access center does neither improve learner autonomy or English, because providing such an environment is an autonomy product, so it is not a principle. Therefore, while the definition of SAL is not clear, Benson (2001) proposed six approaches: [1] curriculum (learner-centered curriculum plans), [2] classrooms (portfolio, etc.), [3] instructors (facilitators and advisors), [4] learners (advice on learning methods, etc.), [5] resources (self-access, random learning, out-of-class learning), and [6] technology (CALL, Internet, etc). However, Palfreyman (2003) criticized these approaches as being less effective for Asian students because these are based on Western philosophy. On the other hand, Little (2016) argued that even in relatively collective societies, individuals

are responsible for their own learning with corresponding learning methods relative to their inherent beliefs knowledge, and experience. This implies that the concept of learner autonomy applies equally aptly irrespective of individual or collective leanings.

In recent years, an increasing number of studies in Japan have focused on learner autonomy. Yamamoto (2011) reported that as a result of incorporating [1] learner-centered curricula and [3] instructor approach, students were still learning by themselves even after the classes were completed. In addition, as for [2] the portfolio that is a classroom approach, the learner's meta-cognitive ability is continuously enhanced through descriptions of the collaborative and reflective learning process, and a sense of responsibility and autonomy for self-learning is nurtured (Kojima, 2010). It was argued that it is effective for fostering autonomy in university students' English learning (Nakatake & Sakurai, 2016). It is pointed out that [1] curricula, [2] classrooms, and [3] instructor approaches incorporated within the class, are shown to be effective for the development of learner autonomy.

As for out-of-class activities to foster learner autonomy, there is a lack of research done in Japan. Nakatake & Sakurai (2016) suggested that [2] classrooms (portfolios) are not as effective for cultivating learner autonomy as using them in class. Thus, Brijs & Clijsters (2006) state that it is important to create opportunities and environments to control their own learning outside the class. Accordingly, [5] resources (self-access center) and [6] technology (CALL) have been proven to improve English (Raby, 2007). However, Smith (2008) criticizes that CALL and self-access centers are products that only provide

environments, and learners who use such environments are already highly motivated. It cannot be claimed that these environments foster learner autonomy and improve English ability. As a result, there are fewer still studies that show the relationships between the development of learner autonomy and improvement of English skills.

Overall, the Benson (2001) approach is effective in developing learner autonomy, but there are few studies that discuss its relevance to improving English, especially in Japan. As it stands, according to a report by the MEXT (2015), the current English skills of high school students are A1 in all four English abilities. Furthermore, Japanese TOEIC scores are reported to be 39th out of 47 countries (ETS, 2017). Consequently, this paper considers a resource-based approach with particular onus on out-of-classroom learning. As such, it initially examines how students organize their learning activities vis-à-vis reading. Following that, it looks further into the matter of how said learning plans influence their self-awareness. Lastly, it provides an analysis of data collected from students to refine the development of a Learner Autonomy Advice System (LAAS), whose explicit purpose is to build student autonomy.

## 2. Method

This paper centered on two preparatory TOEIC classes (Class A and B) who were enrolled in the common education curriculum provided by a national university. The preparatory TOEIC program is compulsory for all first-year students, and is subdivided into a number of individual classes throughout the academic year—divided into a system of eight-

week quarters. Reading (TOEIC II) is currently allocated to quarter two. The entire first-year cohort is broken down into three tiers: upper, middle, and lower classes; students are assigned according to the scores from the English section of their entrance examinations.

Specifically, 60 students from the middle tier of TOEIC II participated in this research; their average proficiency as defined by CEFR criteria was B1. Students from Class A were enrolled in either Humanities, or Law and International Studies. Class B were students of either Economics, Education or Regional Studies (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants by faculty

| Departments           | TOEIC II (Q2)<br>Reading |                   |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
|                       | Class A<br>(n=29)        | Class B<br>(n=31) |
| Humanities            | 11                       | —                 |
| Law                   | 15                       | —                 |
| International Studies | 3                        | —                 |
| Economics             | —                        | 13                |
| School Education      | —                        | 7                 |
| Regional Studies      | —                        | 8                 |
| General Education     | —                        | 3                 |

Data were acquired via quantitative methods through the use of pre- and post-tests, and student questionnaires. The pre-test was sourced from the course's required textbook and comprised of one hundred multiple choice questions (encompassing parts V-VII of the official TOEIC exam). The post-test was delivered in the same manner as the pre-test, and was held in class during the final

week of the quarter. From these two data points, participants were separated into three categories: Group 1: Improved; Group 2: Unchanged; Group 3: Decreased.

After the initial 'settling in' stage of the paper, students were asked to draft their own out-of-class learning plans, which covered weeks four to seven. These plans covered weekly goals, what subject matter they were going to use and how they were intending to use it. Students were also asked to chart their progress by noting whether they had achieved what they had set out to do; this was done via a standardized checklist disseminated in class. As a final check, students were also asked to complete a survey in Japanese at the close of the quarter. This was done to evaluate the efficacy of their learning plans and to highlight any matters for concern vis-à-vis self-awareness thereof. These data were then compared between the three aforementioned groups and a brief quantitative analysis using SPSS was performed.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3-1 Pre and Post-test

This study first compared the overall results of the pre-test and post-test. According to Table 2, one notes that the mean score actually decreased by 2.45% by the close of the quarter. This is perhaps a little surprising, as one might expect that over the course of an academic semester, the cohort should have improved. Nevertheless, the change in the standard

Table 2: Basic statistics for Pre-test and Post-test

|         |           | Mean  | N  | Std. Deviation |
|---------|-----------|-------|----|----------------|
| Overall | Pre-test  | 61.77 | 60 | 12.339         |
|         | Post-test | 59.32 | 60 | 8.846          |

deviation suggests a more compact distribution of grades: a single standard deviation either way (theoretically accounting for 68.2% of the variance) implies a range between 74.1% and 49.4% in the pre-test and 68.1% and 50.5% for post-test. Extending this out to two standard deviations (covering 95.4% of variance) suggests ranges of 86.4% – 37.1% and 77.0% – 41.6% respectively. As a result, whilst it may be disheartening from an educator’s perspective to see the cohort perform (slightly) worse, there is a greater degree of consistency.

### 3-2 Outside-of-classroom learning hours

Upon closer inspection of the time spent out-of-class upon learning before and after implementing learning plans, Figure 1 shows, on average, an extra 54 minutes per week in

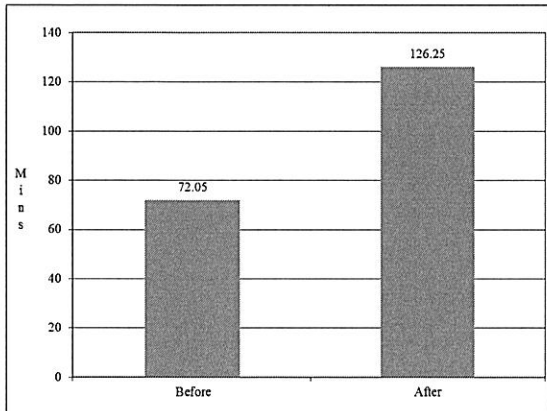


Figure 1: Duration of learning time (minutes) out-of-classroom between before and after producing learning plans

private study: 72 minutes prior to learning plans, 126 after ( $t(58)=7.63, p<.001$ ). The paired t-test reveals a strong correlation between: a) the construction of learning plans, and b) time spent out-of-class on private learning. From this, one can suggest with a fair degree of confidence that directing students to outline their goals and methods in such plans is conducive to increasing autonomous learning hours.

From these data, students were then allocated in three groups based on difference scores to establish if there were any defining characteristics or patterns between the groups (Table 3). Students in Group 1 ( $N=27$ ) improved, Group 2 ( $N=3$ ) showed marginal changes ( $\pm 1$ ), and Group 3 students ( $N=30$ ) worsened. For the following section, however, owing to the small size of Group 2, it was combined with Group 3 to create a so-called Group 2A ( $N=33$ ), which presents therefore a dyadic comparison of those who did better, and those who did not.

Continuing with the analysis, Figure 2 displays the average duration of learning time outside-of classroom between Group 1 and Group 2A. While both are roughly the same size, it is interesting to note a marked increase in private study after implementing study plans. Furthermore, one can also see that members of Group 2A dedicated slightly more time than those in Group 1 both before and after plan

Table 3: Categorized students into groups by pre and post-test result

| Groups   | [Post-test] – [Pre-test]<br>Deviation Value   | Number of students |
|----------|---|--------------------|
| Group 1  | Increased                                     | 27                 |
| Group 2  | Slight changes ( $\pm 1$ )                    | 3                  |
| Group 3  | Decreased                                     | 30                 |
| Group 2A | Unchanged and decreased (Group 2 and Group 3) | 33                 |

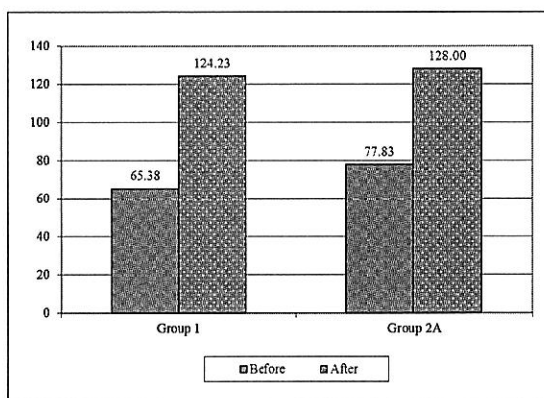


Figure 2: Average duration of learning outside-of-classroom (minutes)

creation. The results of Figure 2 therefore suggest that across the board, learning plans contribute to a sense of responsibility for one's own learning. Whilst this has positive consequences in terms of diligence, one issue that can be inferred from this finding is that students in Group 2A may not necessarily be using their time wisely, which reinforces the need for a system that aids in individually tailoring plans to maximize performance.

### 3-3 Relationship between test scores and learning hours

Having noted that study plans correspond to greater commitment, it naturally follows to determine how effective this extra time was with respect to student performance. A Pearson correlation performed on the two groups, however, shows that the relationship is very weak ( $r=0.029$ ). Additionally, the significance figure of 0.830 suggests that changes in learning hours do not significantly affect performance by way of group categorization. One can infer, therefore, that simply increasing the amount of time on studying does not yield increases in performance for the involved participants. This leads to the more interesting proposition that

the matter of how time was spent may be more influential.

One interesting observation not conveyed by the correlation, however, is the variance of study time by group. Figure 3 indicates that the amount of time devoted to private study is more clustered in Group 1 than in Group 2A, which adds to the intrigue surrounding the behavioral differences between the two.

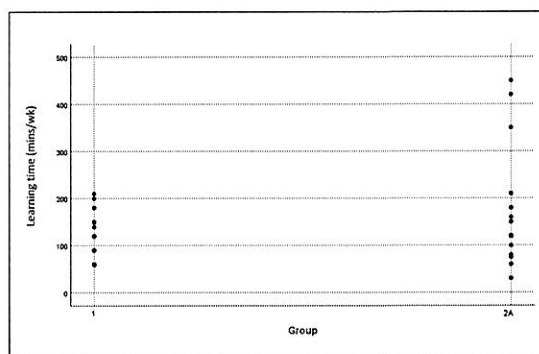


Figure 3: Learning time per week by group

### 3-4 Students' self-awareness on their weakness and corresponding action

As mentioned above, following the pre-test students were asked to generate study plans. This required students to analyze their own performance, identify what they thought to be their weaknesses, and chart corrective actions themselves. Specifically, this entailed setting goals, sourcing study materials, and adopting learning strategies; these actions were done autonomously and without guidance from the instructor.

Returning to the initial tripartite delineation in Table 3, a correspondence analysis shows that students who improved (Group 1) most commonly specified their weaknesses as vocabulary, slow information processing, and difficulties with longer passages. Students who worsened (Group 3) also appeared to

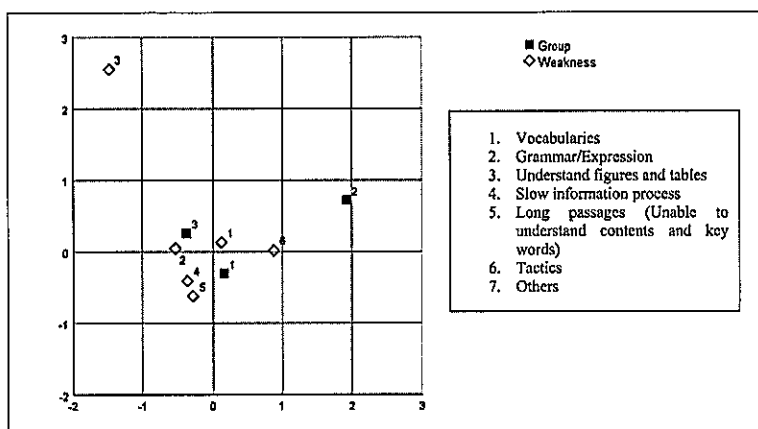


Figure 4: Student's awareness on weakness by groups

have a strong impression of their weaknesses: vocabulary and grammar. Those who exhibited negligible change (Group 2), however, seem to have little grasp of where they have issues as this data point appears to be far removed from the other points on Figure 4.

Attending to the matter of improvement, Group 1 and Group 3 demonstrate a clear perception of the types of materials needed to boost performance. Group 1 displayed a preference for vocabulary books and individually purchased materials. Group 3 opted more for textbooks, on-line learning, and grammar books. In both these cases, the choice of material

coincides with their perceived challenges. Again, however, the data point for Group 2 features as an outlier on Figure 5—implying that these students are not certain what types of materials are necessary. This result displays logical consistency as if one is unsure where they are going wrong, identifying the appropriate response is infeasible; whether this is the beginning of Socratic wisdom, however, is not captured by the data.

Figure 6 provides further evidence of this logical consistency. The correspondence analysis reveals that Group 1 made use of silent reading, reading aloud to themselves, skim

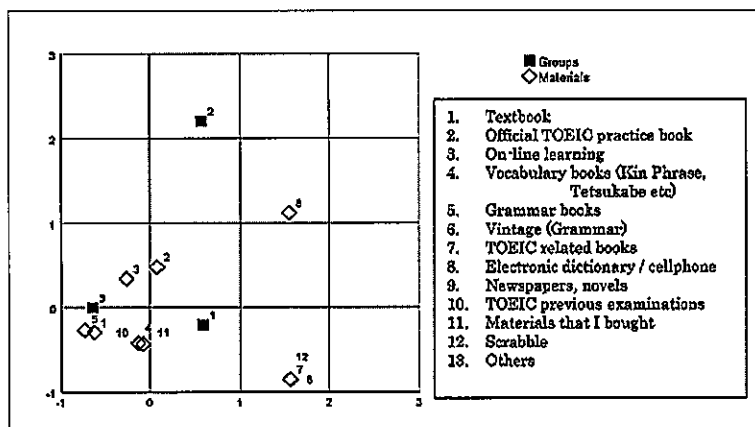


Figure 5: Relationship between groups and learning materials



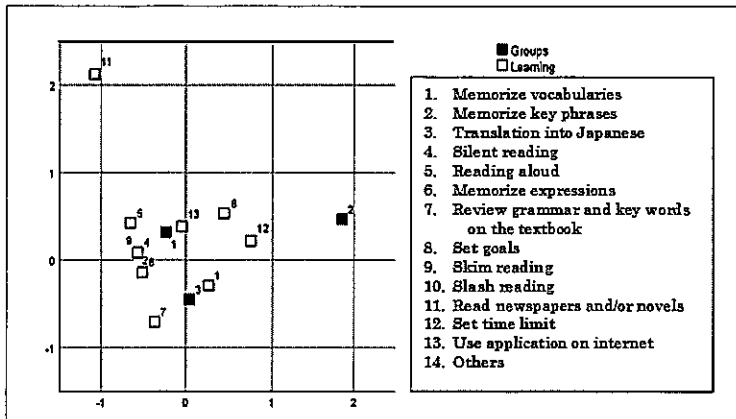


Figure 6: Relationship between groups and learning pedagogy

reading, and internet learning. For this group it is apparent that their correct appraisal of the situation and resulting action led to increases in performance. Nevertheless, the same cannot be said for Group 3: their chosen strategies were to memorize vocabulary and review grammar exercises and key words from the textbook. In light of their perceived shortcomings (vocabulary and grammar) one would expect to witness increases in performance, yet this to not manifest. One possible explanation for this result is that these students failed to accurately appraise their true weaknesses and thus pursued the wrong course of action. Once again, Group 2 appears to be rudderless, not knowing which direction to go.

In summary, the findings for groups 1 and 2 display a rational outcome: correct identification of problem areas and corresponding actions led to improvements, and inaction (owing to a lack of bearings) results in the mere treading of water. Group 3 provides a conundrum in the sense that it is logically consistent with Group 1, but the evidenced declines in performance raise questions about the accuracy of their self-appraisals. This could be an interesting topic to pursue in further research.

#### 4. Conclusion

Focusing on two preparatory TOEIC reading classes at a national university in Japan, this paper sought to track student performance and measure the impact a resource-based approach might have upon them. Following a pre-test, students were directed to construct learning plans for themselves that called for self-evaluation of academic weaknesses, and the identification of study materials that help alleviate these issues. It is important to note that these plans were designed and implemented without supervision or consultation from the instructor.

The paper found that the use of study plans is strongly related to increased time spent in personal study. However, results from post-testing showed that just under half of the participants improved whilst the other half worsened. It would seem that the key distinction at play is the ability to correctly identify individual weaknesses and respond accordingly: some can do it, others cannot.

In light of these findings it is evident that the role of the instructor would likely play a key role in assisting those less able to self-reflect in

recognizing their shortcomings. Nevertheless, economic realities, being what they are, often skew the teacher/student ratio to such a degree that such personalized advice may be difficult to provide, if feasible at all. This is where technology, with its rapid scalability, can offer a solution. The development of a system that algorithmically processes data inputted from users to assist in accurately determining student weaknesses could be an important arrow in the educator's quiver.

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