

Study logs as an ESL/EFL motivational tool?

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Teachers of English in Japanese universities are faced with many common challenges. One of the most daunting challenges is university students' apparent lack of motivation to practice English outside of class. As many of the other challenges or obstacles are uncontrollable by individual teachers, increasing student motivation is an area that lends itself to experimentation. This paper examines the use of study logs as a possible tool to help increase students' motivation. In these study logs, the participants reported the amount of time they spent weekly practicing English outside of class and the types of related activities that they did. Then they were given a survey about the study logs themselves, and the results of that survey are presented in this paper.

日本の大学では、英語を教えている教員が様々な壁にぶつかる。その数多くの壁の中にたぶん最も落胆させる問題は大学生が授業外に英語の学習する動機の不足である。この問題以外の壁、障害や問題は教員が制御し難いので、大学生に動機を高める方法に力を入れ、実験すべき領域である。本研究は大学生の動機を与える方法の道具としてスタディー・ログの利用の成果を分析する研究である。参加者はスタディー・ログに一週間の授業外の英語学習時間とその内容を記入した。そして参加者にスタディー・ログ自体についてアンケートを配布し、アンケートの結果を本論文で発表する。

THE PRESENT study was conducted in conjunction with another study by Minn (2009b), in which the aim was to measure the amount of time students at the University of Kitakyushu spend practicing English outside of class. This was accomplished by asking students to submit study logs. These data were then used to compare groups that used traditional printed textbooks and groups that used CALL-based (computer assisted language learning) materials. Although the results were inconclusive, they were encouraging in that some groups did spend more time practicing English outside of class with the introduction of CALL-based materials.

As a corollary, this paper focuses on the study logs themselves to determine whether they have some value as a motivational tool. The participants were given a short survey about the study logs, the results of which will be discussed in this paper. The research for this paper was first presented as a work in progress based on data collected in 2007 (Minn, 2009a). By collecting data again in 2008, this provided an opportunity to update and adapt the original paper here.



Research question

The research question of the present study is:

- Do students have a positive attitude towards study logs?

The hope here is that if students have a positive attitude towards the study logs themselves, then they can be used as a tool to help motivate students to practice English outside of the classroom more.

Literature review

There is not an abundance of literature directly related to the topic of study logs. Moon (2003) explains the benefits of learning journals (a more-involved form of the study log) and how they can be applied to many different fields of study:

Learning journals, logs and reflective diaries are terms often used interchangeably. However, the purposes of them may differ slightly. When keeping a learning journal, the emphasis is on making explicit and recording the learning that occurs. Reflective diaries, as the name suggests, are more concerned with demonstrating reflection on an experience, while logs are a record of events that have happened. They usually, however, all have an aspect of reflection in them. (p. 2)

The use of the term “study log” is not as common as learner or learning diary or journal. The decision was made here to choose the term “study log” to distinguish the quality of data received from participants. Moon touts learning journals as vehicles for independent learning, writing, reflection, and metacognition. In the present study, however, the students were only asked to record their activities related to practicing English outside of class and the time spent on those activities. It is a “stripped down” version of learner journals. The students were

not asked to write about their opinions, attitudes, or motivations concerning their language learning.

For an example of using learner diaries to analyze the ESL learning experience, Sim (2006) offers a thorough treatment. In Sim’s study, 17 Chinese respondents wrote in detail about their “motivation, beliefs, attitudes, strategies and affective factors” while studying English in Singapore. It shows how several prompting questions can lead to a more detailed learner diary. That in turn can result in suggestions, implications, and conclusions relating to teaching methodology and curricular adjustments.

Usuki (2001) provides an example of the use of learner diaries in the Japanese university setting. She found that they present an opportunity for more self-analysis for students and interaction between teachers and students leading to “... a positive effect on their behavior and motivation.”

Other related terms include independent learning, autonomous learning, self-directed learning, self-access language learning (SALL), and learner motivation. There is a considerable amount of material regarding the topic of learner motivation. See Thanasoulas (2002) for an introduction to the field as it relates to the foreign language classroom. Additionally, Conttia (2007) offers a study that aims to: “identify cognitive and psychological factors which differentiate learners’ levels of development of autonomous learning,” and “explore the impact of social and contextual influences on learners’ exercise of self-control in course-based SALL” (p. 1).

Methodology

Participants

The data were collected in 2007 from six first-year oral communication classes from six different majors at the University of Kitakyushu, a public university operated by the city of Kitaky-

ushu in Fukuoka Prefecture located in the southern Japanese island of Kyushu. The students' majors were economics, human relations, law, international relations, business administration, and English. The total number of participants in 2007 was 186. Each class met once a week for 90 minutes and had an average size of about 31 students.

In 2008, data were again collected from six first-year oral communication classes belonging to the six majors listed above. The total number of participants was 173. Again, each class met once a week for 90 minutes and had an average size of about 29 students.

The 2007 groups and 2008 groups were assumed to be similar enough to be used in this study due to the fact that they matriculated into the university under the same conditions for each of their major departments. Each department major administers an entrance exam and has its own entrance requirements for English ability. In addition, during the first semester of the first year, each student is required to take the TOEIC at least one time. A *t* test of the TOEIC scores showed that there was no significant difference between the six groups from 2007 to 2008 (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' TOEIC scores (1st semester)

Course	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	df	<i>t</i>
2007 Economics	32	395	95.79		
2008 Economics	26	421	60.00	53	1.24
2007 Human Relations	37	404	88.96		
2008 Human Relations	40	384	93.01	75	0.98
2007 Law	19	396	91.57		
2008 Law	26	373	53.69	27	1.00

Course	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	df	<i>t</i>
2007 International Relations	22	543	96.55		
2008 International Relations	24	527	111.07	44	0.53
2007 Business Administration	31	415	84.64		
2008 Business Administration	28	390	72.53	57	1.24
2007 English	25	610	67.78		
2008 English	21	582	114.03	31	1.01
2007 Overall	166	453	119.06		
2008 Overall	165	435	113.41	328	1.42

Materials and procedures

Over a 3-week period, students were asked to describe and quantify their activities related to practicing English outside of class. A Microsoft Excel sheet was emailed to each student. It contained spaces for the students to fill in such as their name, student number, time outside of class practicing English for each day of the week, and a description of those activities for each day of the week (the activities that the students reported included the following: did homework, practiced English using the textbook, watched a movie in English, listened to music in English, etc.) The total time was calculated automatically in the Excel sheet. The students did this short, weekly study log three times during a three-week period in June and July, 2007 and 2008 (See Table 2 for an example), the 10th to 12th week of the 15-week first semester.

This format was designed to be very simple in order to encourage high numbers of respondents and to avoid any negative backlash from students (e.g. complaints to the university administration) associated with a long, burdensome assignment.

Table 2. Example of the study log data

Week 3							June 27 Fri	June 28 Sat	Total hours practicing English
		June 29 Sun	June 30 Mon	July 1 Tue	July 2 Wed	July 3 Thu			
Student number	Name	0	0	0	1	0.5	0	0	1.5
2008123123	Joe Tanaka				I practiced English using LEI.	I did homework for Dan's class.			

Since the classes are worth only one graduation credit among the numerous credits students are required to take, there was reluctance by this researcher towards requiring a longer learner journal in addition to the students' normal homework load. It was felt that an overly disproportionate amount of homework, projects, or journals in comparison to students' other classes may have been met with resentment and may have had the opposite effect of original intentions.

After the study logs were collected, a short survey about the study logs was distributed to the participants. It featured a series of statements to which the respondents indicated their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The survey was comprised of the following statements:

1. The study logs motivated me to study more.
2. The study logs made me realize how much I study English.
3. The study logs are useful for my English study.
4. I want to continue doing the study logs.
5. I don't want to do the study logs.

Results

Average responses for each question

The responses from the survey were transferred to a Microsoft Excel sheet using a five-point Likert scale. "Strongly disagree" responses were entered as one point, and "strongly agree" responses were entered as five points to create a range of one to five. The results of the survey are listed below in Table 3. It should be noted that there is a considerable amount of debate concerning the use of Likert scale data as continuous (a.k.a. interval) data versus ordinal data; however, according to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), "we often use the term "continuous" ... whether the measured scale itself is continuous or the variable is to be treated as if continuous" (p. 7). Jamieson (2004) details the debate and states that "treating ordinal scales as interval scales has long been controversial" (p. 1217). She concludes that Likert-type scale data should not be treated as interval. For the purposes of this research, in addition to the mean and standard deviation data, the median, mode, and range data are included to address both sides of the debate.

For Question 1 of the survey, the average for the 2007 and 2008 groups was 3.38 (between "neutral" and "somewhat agree") indicating that the students felt that the act of doing

study logs did help them increase their motivation to study more. There was no significant difference between the groups except for the economics majors. The mode was either 3 or 4 among the groups (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for Q1

Major	Year	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	med.	mode	range	df	<i>t</i>
Int'l Rel.	2007	26	3.42	0.50	3	3	1		
Int'l Rel.	2008	27	3.59	0.69	4	4	3	47	-1.020
Busi. Ad.	2007	30	3.23	0.57	3	3	2		
Busi. Ad.	2008	25	3.32	0.56	3	3	2	52	-0.569
Human Rel.	2007	44	3.25	0.78	3	3	4		
Human Rel.	2008	40	3.00	0.68	3	3	3	82	1.568
English	2007	29	3.41	0.98	4	4	3		
English	2008	25	3.40	0.68	3	4	3	51	0.058
Law	2007	26	3.38	0.57	3	3	2		
Law	2008	28	3.50	0.84	4	4	4	48	-0.594
Econ.	2007	31	3.77	0.67	4	4	3		
Econ.	2008	28	3.25	0.89	3	3	4	50	2.542*
Overall		359	3.38	0.74	3	3	4		

For Question 2, the average was 3.86 (very close to “somewhat agree”) indicating that the students agreed that the study logs made them realize how much they actually study English

outside of class. Incidentally, in the aforementioned paper, “CALL effect on time outside class practicing English” (Minn, 2009b), the average amount of time practicing English outside of class reported by students was only 1.18 hour per week. There was no significant difference between the groups, and the mode response was 4, “somewhat agreed” (Table 4).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for Q2

Major	Year	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	med.	mode	range	df	<i>t</i>
Int'l Rel.	2007	26	4.08	0.69	4	4	3		
Int'l Rel.	2008	27	4.15	0.60	4	4	2	50	-0.401
Busi. Ad.	2007	30	3.43	0.63	4	4	2		
Busi. Ad.	2008	25	3.64	0.81	4	3	3	45	-1.042
Human Rel.	2007	44	4.02	0.63	4	4	2		
Human Rel.	2008	40	3.73	0.88	4	4	4	70	1.773
English	2007	29	3.97	0.87	4	4	3		
English	2008	25	4.08	0.76	4	4	3	52	-0.518
Law	2007	26	3.85	0.54	4	4	2		
Law	2008	28	3.68	0.98	4	4	4	43	0.782
Econ.	2007	31	3.97	0.66	4	4	2		
Econ.	2008	28	3.79	0.79	4	4	3	53	0.959
Overall		359	3.86	0.76	4	4	4		

For Question 3, the average was 3.33 (between “neutral” and “somewhat agree”) indicating that the students felt that the study logs were somewhat useful for their English study. There was no significant difference between the groups except for the human relations majors. The mode was either 3 or 4 among the groups (Table 5).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for Q3

Major	Year	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	med.	mode	range	df	<i>t</i>
Int'l Rel.	2007	26	3.50	0.65	4	4	3		
Int'l Rel.	2008	27	3.37	0.79	3	3	3	50	0.653
Busi. Ad.	2007	30	3.10	0.80	3	3	3		
Busi. Ad.	2008	25	3.32	0.69	3	3	3	53	-1.092
Human Rel.	2007	44	3.36	0.78	3	4	3		
Human Rel.	2008	40	2.98	0.66	3	3	3	82	2.472*
English	2007	29	3.62	0.82	4	4	3		
English	2008	25	3.21	0.72	3	3	3	51	1.947
Law	2007	26	3.50	0.65	4	4	2		
Law	2008	28	3.25	1.00	3	3	4	47	1.094
Econ.	2007	31	3.48	0.72	4	4	3		
Econ.	2008	28	3.32	1.06	3	3	4	44	0.551
Overall		359	3.33	0.80	3	3	4		

For Question 4, the average was 3.06 (very close to “neutral”) indicating that the students were somewhat ambivalent about continuing the study logs for a longer period of time. There was no significant difference between the groups except for the human relations majors again. The mode ranged from 2 to 4 among the groups (Table 6).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for Q4

Major	Year	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	med.	mode	range	df	<i>t</i>
Int'l Rel.	2007	26	3.15	0.67	3	3	2		
Int'l Rel.	2008	27	3.00	0.92	3	2	3	48	0.696
Busi. Ad.	2007	30	3.07	0.83	3	3	3		
Busi. Ad.	2008	25	2.92	0.91	3	3	3	49	0.620
Human Rel.	2007	44	3.16	0.81	3	4	2		
Human Rel.	2008	40	2.38	0.90	2	2	4	79	4.200*
English	2007	29	3.21	1.05	3	3	4		
English	2008	25	2.76	0.83	3	3	3	52	1.746
Law	2007	26	3.04	0.87	3	3	3		
Law	2008	28	3.21	0.99	3	4	4	52	-0.692
Econ.	2007	31	3.55	0.81	3	3	3		
Econ.	2008	28	3.32	0.82	3	3	4	56	1.069
Overall		359	3.06	0.91	3	3	4		

Question 5 was actually very similar to Question 4, except that it was negatively phrased. This was used as a device to confirm the students' feelings about the study logs as an activity to do in association with class. The scale was inverted so that "strongly disagree" responses were entered as five instead. The average was 3.22 (between "neutral" and "somewhat disagree") indicating that the students somewhat disagreed with the statement that they do not want to do the study logs. There was no significant difference between the groups, and the mode response was 4, "somewhat disagree" (Table 7).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for Q5

Major	Year	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	med.	mode	range	df	<i>t</i>
Int'l Rel.	2007	26	3.58	0.76	4	4	3		
Int'l Rel.	2008	27	3.26	0.76	3	4	2	51	1.520
Busi. Ad.	2007	30	3.17	0.65	3	3	2		
Busi. Ad.	2008	25	3.12	0.78	3	3	3	47	0.238
Human Rel.	2007	44	3.00	0.84	3	4	2		
Human Rel.	2008	40	2.63	0.90	3	3	4	80	1.977
English	2007	29	3.07	1.00	3	4	4		
English	2008	25	2.96	0.93	3	3	4	52	0.414
Law	2007	26	3.27	0.78	3	3	3		
Law	2008	28	3.29	0.90	3	4	4	52	-0.072

Major	Year	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	med.	mode	range	df	<i>t</i>
Econ.	2007	31	3.68	0.54	4	4	2		
Econ.	2008	28	3.57	0.88	4	4	4	44	0.551
Overall		359	3.22	0.86	3	4	4		

Comparison results of each major

Further analysis allows us to see some differences among the six majors. The English and economics majors seemed to feel the most positive about the study logs as a motivational tool, while the other majors were somewhat lukewarm about Question 1 (Table 8, Figure 1). For Question 2, most of the majors agreed that the study logs made them realize just how much they actually practice English. Regarding Question 3, the law majors indicated most often that the study logs were useful, while the other majors were mostly neutral. For Question 4, the law majors again most often said that they wanted to continue doing the study logs, while the other majors were mostly neutral. The responses for Question 4 were somewhat contradictory to Question 5. The international relations, English, and economics majors most often said that they disagreed with the statement that they don't want to do the study logs while the business administration, human relations, and law majors were mostly neutral.

Table 8. Overall mode data for each major and survey question

	Int'l Rel.	Busi. Ad.	Human Rel.	English	Law	Econ.
Q1-motivated me	3	3	3	4	3	4
Q2-realized time	4	3	4	4	4	4
Q3-useful	3	3	3	3	4	3
Q4-want to continue	3	3	3	3	4	3
Q5-don't want to	4	3	3	4	3	4

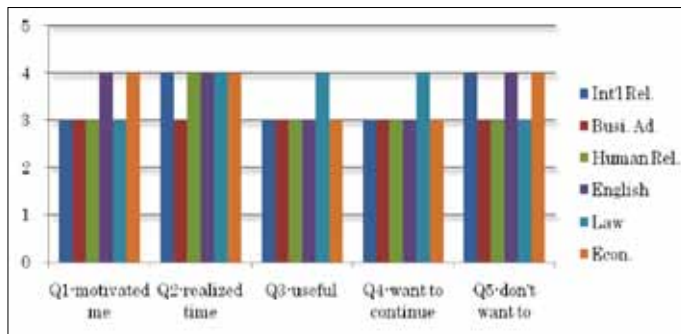


Figure 1. Mode data for each major and survey question

Discussion

The original research question of this study was:

- Do students have a positive attitude towards study logs?

The answer to that question is “maybe.” The survey results indicated that the participants were generally positive about

the study logs. Therefore, study logs warrant consideration as a motivational tool in ESL/EFL classrooms. The survey results indicated that the study logs helped increase students’ motivation to study English, made them realize just how much they studied, and were viewed as useful enough to continue doing. Somewhat surprisingly, the students’ responses indicated that they did not want to stop doing the study logs. However, it can certainly be argued that the mode data indicate less positive attitudes than the mean data. In fact, the mode data indicate much more neutral feelings towards the study logs than the mean data.

The study logs show promise as a motivational tool, but they may be too simple. The format was originally designed to be very simple to encourage a high number of respondents. However, this cautious approach could be changed incrementally by making the study log more detailed and letting it cover a longer period of time. If this were to take place, it would probably be more appropriate to call it a learner journal or diary. By using the journal or diary label, it implies that learners would have to write more reflectively about their feelings, attitudes, and experiences including thoughts about the process of learning itself (Moon, 2003; Huang, 2005).

Regarding the comparison of the different majors, it is difficult to make solid conclusions. Although it is interesting that the different majors did tend to have consistent results from one year to the next within majors, the reasons for the differences between majors can only be guessed at based on the experiences and impressions of the teacher. The English and international relations majors belong to the Department of Foreign Languages, so they enter the university by passing higher language examination requirements than the other majors. The TOEIC scores show that they are in the 500-and-above level, while the other majors are in the 300-400 level. They have chosen majors that require many more English classes in their respective curriculums,

so it can be assumed that they expect and want to take English classes. The other majors are only required to take one English conversation class per semester during their first two years.

The economics, business administration, and law majors had very similar results which may point to the fact that they are streamed into different classes based on placement tests. In other words, if from year to year, these students are placed into classes or groups based on standardized tests, the placed groups will have similar abilities and motivational characteristics. The groups in this study were placed in the highest levels in their respective majors, so they can be expected to be the most motivated of their peers within their majors. The human relations majors, however, were not streamed and had larger class sizes. They happened to be the least positive about the study logs.

Incidentally, as a five-point Likert scale was used for analyzing the survey results, it is possible that too many students chose the neutral option. Using an even-numbered scale forces respondents to pick a side. That also has its drawbacks in that it may force participants who do not have an opinion either way to choose an opinion (Brown, 2001). If another survey is conducted regarding study logs as a motivational tool, an even-numbered scale warrants consideration, and the results could be compared to this paper's results. It is hoped that this can be carried out in the next academic year in addition to refining the study log itself.

Informed consent

The author hereby declares that the research subjects gave their informed consent.

Bio data

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