

# Positive self-perception of Japanese language learners in groups

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It is common to hear that Japanese students are not successful at learning English, but self-identification as part of a linguistically inept group negatively impacts language learning. The existing strength of the Japanese group can be used to increase self-directed learning, which can help to shift students' perception to a more positive self-awareness. This paper describes how we can position students in a language-learning group with both individual and social obligations, in order to achieve this goal.

日本人学生は英語学習で良い結果を出せないとよく言われるが、自分が言語習得に不向きな集団に属すると考えることは、言語学習にマイナスの影響を及ぼす。しかし、日本人学生の自己認識を前向きに変えるのに役立つ自己管理学習(self-directed learning)を推進するために、日本人が集団として持つ本来の強みを利用できると考える。本論では、この目的を達成するため、学生に個人的・社会的責任を持たせる言語学習のグループを作る方法を述べる。

**A**s a teenager I played the violin in Colchester Youth Chamber Orchestra, conducted by George Reynolds, a professional Scottish trumpeter. A master of warm strictness, he was the only conductor I knew who insisted that all sections mastered basic breathing techniques. He conducted entire movements with the orchestra miming, and said, "When you take your seats, you are the best orchestra in the world. Behave like it." So we sat with our backs straight, attentively awaiting his signal. Unsurprisingly, we were not the greatest orchestra in the world, but we were pretty good nevertheless, once performing in London's Royal Festival Hall.

## Why this nostalgic story?

In France, many French people informed me that, "the French aren't good at English." In Japan too, I hear a similar chorus about the Japanese, from teachers, colleagues, and friends.

## SIG Spotlight: LD SIG



The Learner Development SIG <ld-sig.org> is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year with an exciting and innovative conference November 23-24, 2013 at Gakushuin University, Tokyo. We hope you will join us! We are a network of over 200 members with an interest in developing and researching practices that aim to support autonomous learning and teaching (among other things!). We offer chances to get connected with other teachers, students, and researchers through our newsletter *Learning Learning*, online resources, local area get-togethers in Hiroshima, the Kansai and the greater Tokyo area, as well as forums at different JALT conferences. Our current research-based publication projects include *Learner Development: Different Cases, Different Interests and Collaborative Learning in Learner Development*. We also provide conference and research grants for SIG members, as well as SIG membership grants, not to mention SIG subscriptions for teachers and students interested in joining the LD SIG and JALT <ld-sig.org/join>

However, I have met numerous Japanese with fantastic English communication skills. Self-identification with a supposedly linguistically inept group negatively impacts language learning in Japan (and France). Reality and perception are not distinct but are complementary and engaged in an evolving symbiotic jig. Shifting perception towards "I am Japanese and we are good at languages" will therefore positively affect reality. Before they say a word, the Japanese are the best English speakers in the world.

Japanese students are familiar with working in groups (Lewis, 1991; Poole, 2010). School sports festivals demonstrate what a group of students—united towards a common goal—can achieve. From fabricating costumes, to creating props

and choreographing a dance for two hundred students, the result is a stunning spectacle of originality and collaboration. I propose that we should harness the existing strength of the Japanese group (Matsumoto, 1960) and use it towards achieving ambitious learning goals. When a group is formed there is a general swell towards conformity and harmony (Mizutani, 1992) although individuals maintain personal “inner” motives (Doi, 1973). These two elements are interdependent and may or may not be recognised as distinct (Doi, 1985). Individuals can influence group goals and activities, while lateral relations stemming from the individual’s role within the group can encourage self-identification as part of a group that can accomplish demanding language goals.

Individuals have unique roles within an orchestra, some more prominent (percussion) than others (strings). Responsibilities vary from supportive, to leading, to solo, to waiting-attentively-for-your-entry. Never did I see a conductor ask a violinist to perform alone in front of the orchestra, although this did occur in sectional rehearsals. The orchestra’s goals of harmony and synchronisation showcase individual talent only as part of the group. Musicians know when they are exposed; there is no avoiding the practice required. Other parts are more hidden and some minor mistakes can go unnoticed. Likewise, membership in a language-learning group creates a genuine need to do your homework, or at least the bare minimum on which teammates will be relying.

Orchestras have a conductor, but our conductor—George—often left his podium so that we were forced to listen and communicate together. I wanted to increase self-directed learning as I left the podium during summer vacation, so I decided to trial a system, positioning students as a language-learning group. The procedure is outlined below.

## Materials

### Calendar for August

1. Numbered activities in four categories; reading, writing, speaking, and listening. For example, *Listening: 13: Listening to news*
2. Numbered resources, corresponding to the activity numbers above. For example, 13 = <voanews.com/learningenglish/home>
3. Spreadsheet to record study time, by skill, with a brief description of activity. The four

skills are colour-coded. The weekly total per skill, weekly sum total, and monthly grand total study time are automatically calculated.

## Procedure

1. Considering existing commitments, students individually decide how much time to allot to independent English study.
2. Students calculate their total planned study time per week and write this on the calendar.
3. Weekly deadlines are established and a monitor is nominated for each week.
4. Students must email the monitor (a) total study time for each skill, (b) total study time for the week, and (c) the percentage this represents of their planned study (a student planning on studying ten hours who studies eight, notes 80%).
5. The monitor contacts anyone who is late sending this information. He or she writes a report of the group’s achievements and emails it to members of the group and the teacher(s). This includes (a) the group’s sum total of study time for each skill, (b) the group’s grand total study time, (c) the average percentage goal achieved and (d) the student who attained the highest percentage of their planned study time

The spreadsheet shows students if they are studying a suitably balanced diet, while the resources page provides choice, minimizing time wasted looking for resources. Social obligations are created between group members since a student who fails to complete her target hours lowers the group percentage average. Receiving the group’s total study hours may inspire further collective achievement, potentially motivating students to achieve a new group best. Making students explicitly aware of how much time they spend studying nudges the trajectory of perception towards “mastering English takes dedicated practice”. Working as a group, students can begin to experience that they can become the best English speakers in the world.

## References

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# Autonomous learning: How can I help my students foster it?

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Japanese high school students are not usually given the opportunity to take charge of their own learning in large mixed level classes, but are required to take many exams while at the same time developing their English competence. This gives the students a negative attitude towards English. On the other hand, when they are placed in situations where they need to communicate with people from abroad, they use English as much as possible in order to make themselves understood. This paper describes such students' attitudes towards English and their learning environment and also considers ways to improve their autonomy.

日本の高校のクラスは一般に生徒数が多く、個々の能力にも開きがあるとされている。また、生徒自ら選択し学ぶ機会が十分に与えられているとは言いがたく、いつも小テストや定期考査などの試験に追われているのが実情で、それが英語学習態度にもよくない影響を与えている。その一方で、英語を使って意思伝達を図りたいという姿勢は随所に見られ、そこで得られた成功体験が前向きな学習態度につながっている。本論では、そのような生徒の前向きな英語学習態度をどのようにクラスでの自律的な英語学習に活かせるかについて考察する。

**T**he English classes in my school are organised according to a curriculum and syllabus in order to help develop the students' language competence. Following the introduction of the new curriculum by the

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT), the school syllabus has changed and new teaching methods and activities have been introduced in order to provide the students with more exposure to English in the classroom.

Traditionally, the Japanese English classroom is teacher-centered, each class normally consisting of 35 to 45 students of mixed competence. Teachers tend to be perplexed at how to deal with such groups and find these conditions taxing. Within a limited number of class periods, students are required to read English newspapers, books, and MEXT-authorized English course books, and also to increase their knowledge of grammatical rules and apply them to their practice of English conversation or essay writing. This may be why some students feel that it's difficult to keep up with the classes. They are also required to take numerous weekly mini-tests and term examinations, whose marks directly affect their grades. The results of these tests tend to influence the students' attitudes towards English. Those with poor results have negative attitudes towards English, asking why they have to study English even though they are Japanese and don't have to use English in their daily lives.

However, the students do like to use English when they communicate with people from over-