

Japanese University Students' Study Habits

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Reference Data

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As English language teachers, we are constantly learning and adapting new techniques with the goal of making our lessons more effective. However, there is much less of a focus on what students are doing outside the classroom and few research studies have looked at Japanese students' independent study habits. When and where do our students study, and what methods do they use? Knowing the answers to these questions can help us to enrich our students' education by making the homework we give them more effective and meaningful. I present the results of an anonymous questionnaire that was administered to more than 600 tertiary students across a junior college, a private university, and a public university. In discussing the study habits of Japanese students, I hope to help English teachers be better prepared to facilitate their students' learning both inside and outside the classroom.

英語教師として、我々は絶えず新しい指導技術を学び適合し、学習者にとって指導をより効果的で有益なものにしようと試みている。しかしながら、日本人の学習習慣や授業外での英語学習についての研究はあまり見当たらない。いつどこで学習者は学び、どんな方法を使っているのか。これらの質問への回答を知ることで、指導方法の種類や内容、家庭学習課題を多様にし、質を豊かにすることができるであろう。本論文では、高等教育を受けている学生への匿名アンケート結果を提示し、短大、私立大学、国立大学に在籍する日本人学生の学習習慣について論じる。この情報により、英語教員が自らの指導方法を振り返る一助となれば幸いである。

Since the 1970s there has been a movement to make language learning more autonomous, both inside and outside the classroom. Outside the classroom, self-access learning centres have been established as a way to provide students with the tools

to be more independent with their study (Benson, 2011). However, despite this push for increased learner autonomy, very little is known about the independent study habits of Japanese university students (O'Dowd, 2010).

Because students are expected to study in different ways in university, this topic is especially important for university English teachers. For Japanese high school students, the main focus of their English language education is to learn the grammar and vocabulary necessary to pass highly competitive university entrance exams (Tanikawa, 2011). Upon matriculation, it is common for many students to lose motivation to study English. (Berwick & Ross, 1989). Even for university students who are highly motivated, a lot of it is extrinsic with students doing the minimum to simply pass their English courses (Fryer, Van den Broeck, Ginns, & Nakao, 2016). This lack of motivation may also be exacerbated by the fact that these courses are compulsory in most cases.

However, despite the lack of motivation exhibited by many, most university English courses require students to study outside the classroom (MEXT, 2012). Therefore it is important for university English teachers to understand their students' study habits in order to develop courses with a suitable amount and type of homework to allow for students to succeed in the classroom.

There have been some preliminary studies in this area. For example, in 2018 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and the National Federation of University Co-operative Associations (NFUCA, 2018) investigated the amount of time that students study outside the classroom. However, they do not report on other factors such as how, when, where study takes place, and the length of time spent studying. In fact, very little research exists on students' study habits out-of-class, and I hope to begin to fill that gap in the literature. In this study, I examined the study habits of students at a junior college, a private university and public university. I also investigated how habits changed as they moved from high school into university life.

Background

There are two issues that are central to the change in study habits for the university language learner. First, the motivation for studying English changes from high school to university. For many high school students aspiring to progress to tertiary education, the only reason to study English is to pass the university entrance exams (LoCastro, 1996).

On the other hand, at the university level, although English is still a compulsory course, students are only required to receive a passing grade. Traditionally, students who were able to enter university were almost guaranteed to pass and they did not have to work very hard (McVeigh, 2002). This lack of motivation amongst students was observed by O'Dowd (2010), when he found that students settled for simply passing and receiving credit for subjects, with little care for grades or grade point averages (O'Dowd, 2010). This, in turn, can lead to students having little motivation to study outside the classroom.

The second issue affecting a change in study habits may be the pedagogical style of the university EFL classroom. Secondary English study focuses primarily on grammar and translation in order to pass examinations (Gorsuch, 1998), with little importance placed on communicative competence. With that sort of technical focus on English, students are likely to be motivated by examination success, rather than by a desire to improve their ability to communicate effectively. In fact, many students are not given the chance to communicate directly with English speakers (Benson & Chik, 2010). This focus on learning grammar and vocabulary to pass standardized exams has resulted in conditions where the technique that most high school students use to study English is rote memorisation.

On the other hand, at the university level many of the classes place a much greater focus on communication (Katayama, 2015), and this difference in engagement, means that many students often find themselves lost and unmotivated in classes where they are required to think for themselves and perform proactively in English (Abe, 2013). They are also often unsure about the best ways to study English for these classes, and are apt to revisit the rote memorization techniques that they used in high school. Despite MEXT's 2013 directive aimed at encouraging instructors to use communicative language tasks in high school English classes, many teachers continue to use grammar and translation-based teaching methods (Bartlett, 2016; Humphries & Burns, 2015).

As educators, one of our key goals should be to try to better understand the motivation and study habits of our students in order to develop material that both stimulates and motivates them. One good way to do this is by encouraging a more autonomous approach to learning English. Benson (2011) stated that "autonomy is a legitimate and

desirable goal of language education" (p. 2) and Richards (2015) further claimed that successful learning is what takes place both inside and outside the classroom.

In order to do this effectively, we must also try to make the best use of the resources at our disposal. In the modern English classroom, this includes the Internet and technology that has been developed to help facilitate language acquisition. Computers, tablets and smartphones can all be used autonomously outside of class to complement in-class learning (Benson & Reinders, 2017), and it is incumbent on English educators to make the best use of these to motivate students.

However, in order to promote learner autonomy and encourage our students to study by themselves outside the classroom, we first need to know where, when and how our students prefer to learn. With a better understanding of how students spend their time studying, teachers can be better equipped to plan their lessons and assign homework that encourages student engagement.

Research Questions

For this project, I investigated the independent study habits of students by examining the methods they used to study English, when and where they studied, and for how long. Data were gathered via a questionnaire based on O'Dowd's (2010) research that investigated the study habits of students at two universities. The questionnaire also investigated how time devoted to studying changed for students after university matriculation. The following research questions were developed in order to gain a greater understanding about students' study habits:

- RQ1. What study methods do university students in Japan use to study English?
- RQ2. When and how much time do students spend studying?
- RQ3. How, and to what degree, did students' study duration change from high school after they entered university?

Methods

Data Collection and Analysis

For the purpose of this study, I designed an anonymous questionnaire, using closed questions and several Likert-type scale questions. The questionnaire, titled "Study Habits," (see appendix) was distributed to students at a junior college, a private and a public university in the Chubu region. The data were collected from 625 students in fall

2017 and spring 2018. In order to collect precise data and avoid any misunderstanding, it was administered in the students' native Japanese using Google forms. Students were given time to complete the questionnaire at the end of class. It was made clear that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and that it would not affect their grades.

The data collected through the questionnaires were automatically assembled onto spreadsheets that were then checked for any potential response inconsistencies. One student's responses were deleted as they contained inappropriate answers and language. Frequency counts were then used to tally the data.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 23 items, seven of which were taken from a previous questionnaire by O'Dowd (2010); the remainder were developed for this study. A few changes and additions were made to Question 5, which investigated preferred study methods. All questions except for Question 10 were closed questions that asked the students to choose from a list of options. In Question 10, students were asked to give their opinions using a 4-point Likert-type scale. Four points (1 - *strongly agree*, 2 - *agree*, 3 - *disagree*, and 4 - *strongly disagree*) were chosen instead of five to avoid the neutral response, as this has been shown to provide more accurate data (see Edwards & Smith, 2014).

Findings and Discussions

The Participants

The questionnaire was completed and returned by 625 students from three institutions. There were 105 responses from the junior college, 192 responses from the private university, and 328 from the public university (see Table 1). The respondents from the 2-year junior college were all English majors; the respondents at the other institutions were a mix of different majors.

Table 1. Overview of the Participants (N = 624)

Gender	Junior college (n = 105)	Private university (n = 192)	Public university (n = 327)	Average
Female	100.0%	60.4%	18.3%	59.6%
Male	0.0%	39.6%	81.7%	40.4%

Learning Methods

Table 2 shows the various learning methods that students use to study English. The most popular study method across all three institutions was *study during class*. The data also indicated that the primary aim when studying for most students was to complete the materials required of them. At the private university, the second most popular method was *doing assigned homework*; at the public university it was *reading the textbook*, both of which would have been assigned to them by their teacher.

Table 2. Learning Methods Used (by Percentage; N = 624)

Learning method	Junior college	Private university	Public university	Average
Inside the classroom				
• Study during class	73.3%	67.5%	61.4%	64.6%
• Note taking	40.0%	21.5%	14.3%	20.7%
• Talking to the teacher	26.7%	20.4%	3.4%	12.5%
• Asking the teacher questions	17.1%	11.0%	3.1%	7.9%
Outside the classroom				
• Reading the textbook	43.8%	47.6%	48.3%	46.8%
• Doing assigned homework	59.0%	55.5%	38.9%	47.0%
• Memorisation	49.5%	36.6%	32.4%	36.2%
• Checking dictionaries	43.8%	31.4%	30.8%	32.9%
• Revision by myself	24.8%	24.6%	17.1%	20.5%
• Cramming	26.7%	12.6%	14.6%	15.9%
• Do practice tests	24.8%	20.9%	14.3%	17.9%
• Studying in the library	22.9%	10.5%	6.9%	10.6%
• Doing extra homework	21.0%	15.2%	4.7%	10.6%

Note. Individuals gave multiple responses. Percentage is of individuals in that school category.

Table 3 shows the methods that students use to study English on their own, outside of work required by their course. Results showed that the students at the junior-college

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and private university preferred auditory or visual methods such as *listening to foreign music* and *watching DVDs and movies* compared to the public university students. The popularity of these methods was particularly prevalent amongst the junior-college students where *listening to foreign music* was as popular as *study during class*. Other study methods included talking to foreign friends, playing English games, debating in English, and watching YouTube.

Table 3. General English Use (N = 624)

Learning method	Junior college	Private university	Public university	Average
Writing letters or email	20.0%	6.3%	1.9%	6.3%
Listening to foreign music	73.3%	38.2%	22.7%	35.7%
DVDs and movies	45.7%	30.4%	12.1%	23.2%
Surfing the Internet	19.0%	15.2%	10.9%	13.5%
Watching English TV programmes	20.0%	12.6%	6.5%	10.6%
Reading foreign books	32.4%	26.2%	10.1%	18.8%
Reading English newspapers	1.9%	12.6%	5.6%	7.1%
Listening to study CDs	14.3%	5.8%	4.7%	6.6%
Practice speaking skills	24.8%	17.3%	3.7%	11.4%
Listening to the radio	12.4%	7.3%	2.8%	5.8%
Other	0.0%	2.5%	2.7%	2.2%

Note. Individuals gave multiple responses. Percentage is of individuals in that school category.

These results from the students' responses provide additional support to previous studies (Berwick & Ross, 1989, O'Dowd, 2010; Rubrecht, 2004) that have indicated that students tend to be extrinsically motivated to study English: The majority of students spent more time on *college study activities* and *course related study* than *general English use*. This may also explain why most students who completed the homework were less likely to review for class. Given these results, it may be better for teachers to assign homework and review it in the following class, rather than to expect students to prepare for class on their own.

The data also show us how students at different institutions often employ different methods when studying English. This corresponds to an earlier study by Mochizuki

(1999) that highlighted the different learning strategies used by students of different majors. One example of this is the popularity of music and DVDs with junior-college and private university students. ESL educators at these types of institutions may want to consider setting some assignments or homework that involves having students listen to music or watch a movie, then asking the students to interpret particular English lyrics or passages of dialog. These types of activities could potentially serve to engage students in English, and allow them to study in ways that they prefer to engage with the language.

Study Time

Similar to the results from O'Dowd's (2010) study, the most popular time for study across the three institutions' students was *late at night* (see Table 4). *At home after dinner*, and *on the way to school in the train and bus* were also popular. Many students have a busy schedule with study, part-time jobs and extracurricular activities, which could explain why they usually study later in the evenings (NFUCA, 2018). *On the way to school in the train and bus* poses a particular opportunity for teachers, as homework can perhaps be designed to be something that students are able to do while on the go.

Table 4. Times of Study (N = 624)

Time of study	Junior college		Private university		Public university	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Early morning	11	10.5%	15	8%	24	7.5%
On the way to school, in the train or bus	76	72.4%	89	47.3%	83	25.9%
At lunchtime	7	6.7%	15	8%	37	11.5%
At school between classes	9	8.6%	24	12.8%	59	18.4%
After class at school	30	28.6%	33	17.6%	66	20.6%
At home before dinner	33	31.4%	28	14.9%	30	9.3%
At home after dinner	60	57.1%	90	47.9%	115	35.8%
After watching TV	24	22.9%	28	14.9%	28	8.7%
Late at night	56	53.3%	100	53.2%	127	39.6%
Other	1	1%	4	2%	13	4%

Note. Individuals gave multiple responses. Percentage is of individuals in that school category.

Smartphones and Study

As can be seen in Table 5, more than 75% of students indicated they enjoyed using their smartphone to study English. Rather than relying on methods that depend on traditional pen and paper, which can be difficult for students to do during their commute, EFL teachers could benefit from familiarizing themselves with smartphone-based educational activities. Studies have shown that smartphone-based study is enjoyable for students (White & Mills, 2014) and it is also an effective way to improve their ability (Burston, 2015; Wu, 2014).

Table 5. Enjoyment of Smartphone Use for Study (N = 624)

Feeling about smartphone use	Junior college		Private university		Public university	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
I love it	13	12.4%	39	20.3%	83	25.5%
I like it	65	61.9%	114	59.4%	153	46.9%
I don't like it	24	22.9%	31	16.1%	74	22.7%
I hate it	1	1%	5	2.6%	0	0%
No response	2	1.9%	3	1.6%	16	4.9%

Note. Totals do not add to 100% due to rounding.

Study Time Before and After University Matriculation

As can be seen from Table 6, the majority of students experienced a decline in time devoted to study after entering university, with 81.9% of the students reporting that they studied less, and only 4.3% reporting that they studied more than in high school. The junior college students reported only a slight difference in time devoted to study; the public and the private university students showed the greatest decline. This may be due to the difficulty of the public and private university entrance exams, which are more competitive than those required to enter a junior college. A much larger percentage of junior college students also reported an increase in their study time after matriculation compared to the private and public university students.

Table 6. Study Time Before and After University Entrance (N = 624)

Change in study habits	Junior college		Private university		Public university		All schools	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
More now	18	17.1%	7	3.6%	2	0.6%	27	4.3%
The same	30	28.6%	18	9.4%	29	8.9%	77	12.3%
Less now	54	51.4%	165	86.0%	293	89.9%	512	82.0%
Inconclusive	3	2.8%	2	1.0%	2	0.6%	8	1.3%

Note. Incomplete responses were counted as inconclusive.

The results of this survey are very similar to a survey carried out by NFUCA in 2018 investigating the study habits of 10,980 students studying at national, public, and private universities. That survey reported that the average daily study time outside of classes was 52.3 minutes. This was 38.2 minutes for humanities students, 60.7 minutes for science students, and 83.2 minutes for medical, dental and pharmaceutical students. These figures show that students are failing to fulfil the MEXT requirement of 1.5 hours out-of-class study time per week for each 1-credit class taken (MEXT, 2012).

Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed the independent study habits of English language learners in order to fill a gap in the literature around Japanese university students' study habits. The questionnaire results yielded both similarities and differences across the three different institutions investigated. The greatest difference found was the disturbing decrease in study hours after matriculation, with more than 80% of students reporting a decrease in study after university entrance. Previous research (Berwick & Ross, 1989; Rubrecht, 2004) has shown that after years of intensive study with the ultimate goal of passing challenging and competitive entrance exams, students often lose their motivation, and often have no goal other than finding a job before graduation. The decrease in student study time after matriculation shown in this study offers further support to this observation.

The results of the study also provide some interesting insights into the most popular times that students study, along with the methods they use. Although the amount of time students study had been previously investigated (NFUCA, 2018), popular times for study and the methods used were not. *Completing teacher assigned homework* was

indicated as being the most popular type of out-of-class method for studying English. This provides further evidence to support the contention that many students do not feel motivated to study English on their own.

This study has a number of limitations, the most prominent being that the data were self-reported and retrospective. Therefore, it is impossible to gauge the accuracy of the data reported. It would be ideal to replicate the study also interviewing some students to help triangulate the data.

It may also be prudent to conduct a needs-based analysis with particular students in the classroom to discover how and when students prefer to study, and then devise appropriate out-of-class assignments to match their preferences.

It is also worth noting that the study lacks a balance in the number of participants from each institution, and that there is an imbalance in the sex of the respondents, with males greatly outnumbering females. Furthermore, rather than focusing on English or non-English majors, the respondents were made up of a mixture of majors. In the future, it would be ideal to replicate this study while attempting to better balance these factors.

However, despite these limitations, the study did yield useful information for educators regarding the current state of students' study habits across different institutions. EFL teachers, clearly need to reflect on these results, and consider the study methods and times that are most popular. To take advantage of these methods in our courses and maximise the effectiveness of our teaching for different groups of students, we also need to consider which methods would be the most effective for each specific group when planning classes at different institutions. In doing so, the aim would be to see an increase in motivation.

To make best use of the times that students spend studying, teachers should also aim to set tasks that can be done during transit, including tasks that use mobile devices. They should also encourage students to be more autonomous in their learning outside of class, as this will form the foundations for lifelong learning.

By adapting our pedagogies to better meet students' habits and needs, EFL teachers can help them to complete the required homework that will lead to success in the classroom. Hopefully, that success will, in turn, help motivate the students to be more willing to study English outside the classroom, and in doing so, it is hoped that this virtuous cycle will see students' growth, both as autonomous learners and as speakers of English.

Bio Data

Lauren Landsberry has been in ELT for more than 15 years, holds an MA in applied linguistics from Monash University and is currently undertaking further study at Macquarie University. She teaches at several universities throughout Nagoya and her interests include bilingualism, world Englishes, SLA, and teacher development. <laurenlandsberry@gmail.com>

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Appendix

Study Habits Questionnaire

(English translation of the survey. The original survey was given in Japanese.)

This questionnaire is investigating student study habits. Please answer about your regular study habits. This questionnaire is voluntary, anonymous and individual answers will not be used for anything other than research purposes. Your participation shows your consent that the data collected may be used in presentations and journal articles. Thank you for your participation.

1. What year are you in?

- 1st year
- 2nd year

2. How do you see yourself as a learner?

- I'm not good at learning new things
- I'm an average learner
- I'm a good learner, I like to learn
- I'm a very good learner, I love to learn

3. What are your grades like?

- Mostly As
- Mostly As and Bs
- Mostly Bs
- Mostly Bs and Cs
- Mostly Cs
- Cs or less

4. Are you better or worse at studying English than other subjects?

- Better at English
- Better at other subjects
- About the same

5. How do you learn? (more than one answer is ok)

- Study during class
- Reading the textbook
- Revision by myself
- Notetaking
- DVDs and movies
- Talking to the teacher
- Cramming
- Listening to the radio
- Listening to foreign music
- Writing letters or email
- Memorization
- Reading foreign books
- Doing assigned homework
- Checking dictionaries
- Doing extra homework
- Studying in the library
- Practice speaking skills
- Asking the teacher questions
- Reading English newspapers/ magazines
- Watching English TV programmes
- Surfing the Internet
- Listening to study CDs
- Do practice tests

6. When do you study? (more than one answer is ok)

- Early morning
- Lunchtime at school
- At home before dinner
- After watching TV
- Only at school after class
- At school in between classes
- At home after dinner
- Very late at night
- In the train/bus to and from school

7. How long did you study daily for the university entrance examination?

- Less than one hour
- 1 to 2 hours
- 3 to 4 hours
- More than 5 hours
- Other _____

8. How long do you study each day now?

- Less than one hour
- 1 to 2 hours
- 3 to 4 hours
- I only study before exams
- Other

9. Do you prefer to study alone, with a study partner or a group?

- Alone
- With a partner
- With a group

10. Please rate each item on how your opinion matches

- I study better alone
(Strongly agree ○ ○ ○ Strongly disagree)
- I study better in groups
(Strongly agree ○ ○ ○ Strongly disagree)
- I study better during class
(Strongly agree ○ ○ ○ Strongly disagree)
- I do better in my classes when I work in groups
(Strongly agree ○ ○ ○ Strongly disagree)
- I do better in my classes when I work alone
(Strongly agree ○ ○ ○ Strongly disagree)

11. Are you able to study for at least half an hour without getting up, having a snack, watching TV or touching your phone?

Always Generally Hardly ever Never

12. Do you preview/review for each class everyday?

Always Generally Hardly ever Never

13. Do you start studying for exams at least three days beforehand?

Always Generally Hardly ever Never

14. Can you finish your exams at school within the time given?

Always Generally Hardly ever Never

15. I'd like help from my teachers in learning better study skills?

Yes No

16. My family gives me financial support for my studies.

Always Generally Hardly ever Never

17. My family gives me emotional support for my studies.

Always Generally Hardly ever Never

18. Do you have a smartphone?

Yes No

19. Do you use it for studying?

Yes No

20. If yes, do you like using your smartphone to study?

Love it! Like it Don't like it Hate it!

21. Do you have a quiet and comfortable place to study?

Yes No

22. Do you regularly attend class?

Always Generally Hardly ever Never

23. Do you always give assignments in on time?

Always Generally Hardly ever Never