

A Culturally Responsive Solution to Summer Learning Loss in Japanese University English Language Learners

David R. PHILLIPS

Abstract

When the first and second year English majors reconvened for the start of a new semester, the results of a survey focusing on their use of a self-study guide designed to curb the effects of learning loss during their summer break showed no indication that improvements to their study habits had taken place.

Rather than abandoning this plan of action to increase the students' engagement with English and promote learner autonomy, certain changes were made to the self-study guide in the hopes of helping the students achieve greater second language acquisition success while trying to remedy the age-old problem of motivating learners outside of an academic context.

The following paper will examine and discuss the results of the revised and reapplied plan of action that incorporated necessary changes based on student and teacher feedback to understand if the action taken was successful in achieving and promoting its intended goals.

1. Introduction

While teaching first and second year English majors at a private university in Japan, issues with students forgetting or eschewing their academic responsibilities during long breaks have been posing some educational challenges. During these periods of time away from school and their studies, students may experience second language attrition which can have great effect on their test performance and participation in class among other unfortunate outcomes. This phenomenon is not hardly unique and is often referred to as “summer learning loss” or “learning decay” when referenced in myriad other academic contexts. When considering second language acquisition in particular, however, this learning loss problem is of concern since unlike L1 acquisition, L2 acquisition does not take place at the same rates of success (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010, p. 14). Given that the absence of practice or reinforcement

may result in an initially rapid deterioration of – skill (McCombs, Augustine, Schwartz, Bodilly, Mcinnis, Lichter, & Cross, 2011, p. 17), it was important to find a solution to this problem.

In order to find a possible solution, literature that could help inform a potential learning plan was consulted with the hopes of catalyzing student motivation so that they would in turn autonomously engage with their L2 when school was out of session. These autonomous learning aims sought to raise learner awareness in order to guide the self-selecting of suitable materials, bring about L2 usage outside of the classroom, and most importantly, include choice in all phases of learning so that students could better identify how they like to learn at the individual level (Nunan, 2003, pp. 196-202).

While constructing a plan of action to mitigate possible learning decay during long breaks, the need to cultivate sources informed by the literature that included the experiences and perspectives of the students (i.e., culturally responsive sources) became an essential part of the plan. Furthermore, by focusing on the importance of the students' interests an English Language Learner could find learning opportunities that might stimulate intrinsic motivation, and hopefully, autonomy (Hernández, 2013, p.178; Titone, Plummer & Kieler, 2012, p.39). As a learning plan continued to develop, accommodating for choices that include the interests of the learner became a strategy that seemed central to culturally and individually responsive teaching practices. These practices in turn lend well to the relevance of an activity and contribute to the emergence of favorable attitudes and greater motivation in relation to SLA, which may lead to greater success in L2 acquisition overall (Wlodkowski, 1999, p. 5).

Given the apparent need for finding sources that might capture the interests of the students, a number of the digital tools available that help foster autonomous learning by providing opportunities for self-guided tasks and the extensive exploration of a given area of study were looked to as possible solutions (Lee, 2016, pp. 81-84). In other words, the answer to the problem of summer learning loss absolutely had to incorporate at least some of the vast multitude of tools available at students' fingertips to help them help themselves in the SLA process.

2. Materials and Methods

Based on the literature that was consulted for some guidance, a self-study guide was decided upon as a means to offer students a variety of dynamic and authentic study options that they could engage with when they were not in school. These selections were chosen based in part on the literature, but also based on observations gleaned from time spent in classrooms at Japanese universities: smartphones are, for all intents and purposes, a technologically endowed constant, manga is still quite popular, and American big-budget movies are still a mainstay at the Japanese box office and often talked about during warm-up conversations at the start of class.

All of this information was incorporated into the first phase of this treatment (conducted before the 2017 summer break) which featured five different language-learning apps with two

of which were specifically tailored to the needs of the students. One of the apps in particular, VoiceTube, is designed for both Chinese and Japanese ELLs with thousands of videos in a format akin to YouTube that have a multitude of categories, level-adjustment options, L1 and L2 subtitles, and an option for shadowing the words on the screen. Another featured app, Duolingo, offers language learners opportunities to improve lexical and syntactical knowledge through a game-style format.

The self-study guide also featured recommendations on how to use music for the purpose of studying with instructions for establishing lyrical comprehensibility (see Appendix). A list of best-selling and top-rated graphic novels were also added along with options for Graded Readers and Screenplay Books that allow language-learning movie viewers to read movie dialogue from popular American films with L1 translations and contextual explanations of idiomatic language used throughout the movie. In order to provide students with basic interpersonal communication opportunities, a list of venues for English communication were included in the guide as well. All of these options were provided under the guise of choice and the notion that there surely must have been at least one study option for every type of learner.

The black and white printed self-study packet was given to approximately 130 first and second year English majors with a brief description of its contents just before the start of summer break. Despite the wide variety of options contained within the first version of the self-study guide, the survey results collected when the students returned in the fall showed that no students had used or even remembered it (Figure 1).

For the second treatment conducted before the summer of 2018, the self-study guide (see Appendix) was streamlined, the word count was reduced, the language was simplified, color was added, and three of the apps were removed in favor of a new app, HelloTalk, which allows millions of language-learning users to connect, communicate, and co-operatively learn their respective L2s in an online community. Moreover, this revamped guide was given to the approximately 180 first and second year English majors two weeks before the beginning of their break with extra time taken to describe and demonstrate the contents.

Changes were also made to the survey from the first treatment which centered on three main questions (1) *How much did you study per day during the summer break?* (2) *Did you use any of the recommendations in the self-study packet?* (3) *If no to question 2, why not? If yes, what option did you use and why?* The answer to question 1 was given on almost all of the surveys. However, the answers to questions 2 and 3 were largely left blank, which perhaps indicated a lack of understanding. With this information, it seemed necessary to make changes to the survey questions administered after the second treatment. The survey questions for the second treatment included a 1-5 ranking about time spent studying per day as well as self-study guide usage (e.g. 1-*not at all*, 2-*very little*, 3-*some*, 4-*a lot*, 5-*quite a lot*). This ranking component was added in addition to the above questions to support comprehensibility and triangulate the questions. The results of the surveys collected in the fall of 2017 and 2018 are shown in the results section below (Figures 1-3).

3. Initial Results

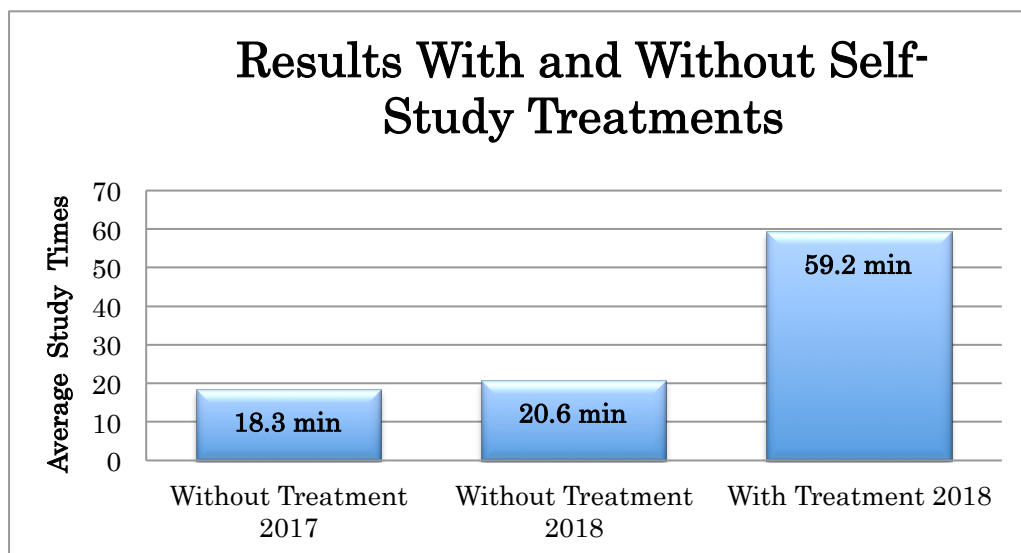


Figure 1. Survey results in an aggregate mean comparison of average study times. The left column: students who did not use the self-study guide during summer 2017. The middle column: students who also did not use the self-study guide during summer 2018. The right column: students who did use the self-study guide during summer 2018.

The results in Figure 1 show a rather dramatic 187% increase in study time for students who used the self-study guide compared to students who did not. The 134 students surveyed without the self-study guide treatment in summer of 2017 studied an average of 18.3 minutes per day. In the recent survey for the summer of 2018, 67 of the 172 students surveyed who reported having not used the self-study guide (without treatment) studied an average of 20.6 minutes per day. From the same summer 2018 survey results, 105 of the 172 students surveyed who reported that they did use the self-study guide (with treatment) studied an average of 59.2 minutes per day.

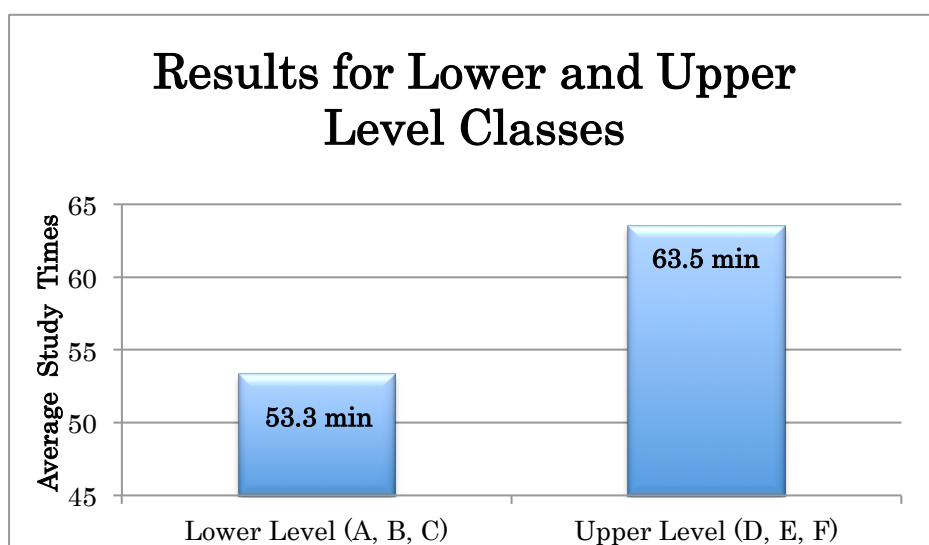


Figure 2. The 2018 average study times of students who used the self-study guide (i.e., with treatment) divided into lower level (A, B, C) and upper level (D, E, F) English language proficiency groups.

The results in Figure 2 show a 19% differential between the lower and upper level groups that used the self-study guide with an average of 53.3 minutes studied per day for the 45 lower level students and an average of 63.5 minutes studied per day for the 60 upper level students.

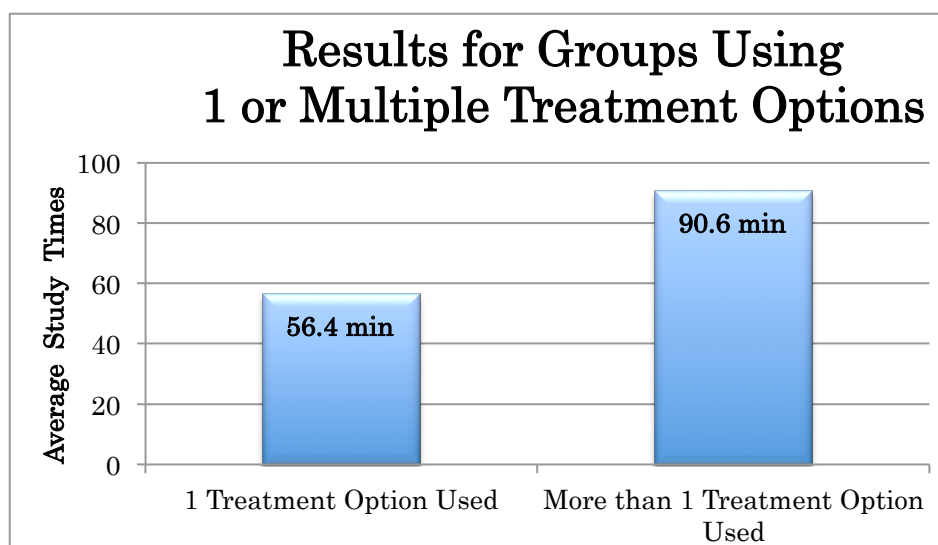


Figure 3. Two groups within the 2018 survey: students who used only one of the recommended self-study guide options and students who used more than one of the self-study guide options.

The results in Figure 3 show an increase of 61% in average times studied per day between the 77 students who chose to use only one recommended self-study option for an average of 56.4 minutes studied per day and the 28 students who chose to use more than one recommended

self-study option for an average of 90.6 minutes per day.

It is important to note that some of the survey results were not included when calculating the averages due to the incomprehensibility of the answer provided. For example, when answering the survey question “How much do you think you studied per day on average (please write a total minute or hour estimate)?” some students responded with answers that were too difficult to understand and thus not included.¹ Other survey results were not included because of the incredulous nature of the claims. In reference to the same aforementioned question one student answered with an implausible claim in terms of time spent studying.² If reported answers were incompatible with other answers which elicited the same information but in a different way, they too were not included in the survey.³ Two other survey results could not be included since the reported answer to the question above might be considered communicating while traveling more so than studying.⁴ Also, it’s possible that these reported hours may have skewed the data since they were much longer periods of time than anything else that was reported, with or without the self-study guide treatment.

In terms of how students utilized the options in the applied treatment, it was interesting to see that 51 of the 105 students who used the recommended options reported only using VoiceTube. Although this app comes highly recommended, and even won a Facebook App Award in 2017, it might be the case that it was chosen by many students because it was the very first self-study option listed in the guide. It’s possible that the survey results might turn out differently if the order of the self-study options were rearranged in subsequent treatments.

4. Discussion

The results of this most recent survey show a significant increase in the amount of time the students spent studying per day during their summer break. This is perhaps due to the fact that more time was spent with the students to explain the contents of the self-study guide in greater detail rather than assuming a categorical aptitude for the apps and exactly how to engage with the variety of options listed in the guide. Furthermore, simple changes like adding color and deleting verbose English text may have helped the students to better attend to the descriptions and instructions. Despite these positive outcomes, there are still quite a few ways in which this action plan could improve going forward.

When considering the reliability and validity of this research, it is an imperative to continue fine tuning the survey questions and design to safeguard against unreliable, self-reported information and a lack of comprehensibility. Perhaps in this particular educational context it might be best to conduct the survey in the students’ L1 to ensure that

¹ “50/100,” “30 hours per day,” and “0.5”

² “21 hours a day”

³ “3 hours per day; 6 hours per week” or “50 minutes per day; 50 minutes per week”

⁴ “6 hours per day: I talked with foreigners while abroad.”

they understand exactly what they are being asked and how to answer the questions properly. To this point, it appeared as if a few students did not understand the questions based on their responses to the survey. In one example, a student reported having spent no time studying at all, but then said they thought “VoiceTube was very useful.” In another example, in response to the question “Which of the options in the self-study guide did you use the least, why?” a student wrote, “I use VoiceTube most” with no further explanation. These responses seem to underscore the need for making changes to the survey which could further prevent any lack of understanding.

In order to establish greater reliability, it may also be necessary in the future to work with a smaller sample size so as to avoid relying so heavily upon helpful colleagues to administer the survey and self-study guide without having an in-depth knowledge of its contents before it is disseminated to students. It is impossible to know at this point exactly how the self-study guide was explained or demonstrated to students when it was handed out, but there were signs that either it wasn’t explained or that students simply didn’t feel the need to give it a second glance once it got stuffed between the copious amounts of other handouts and printed papers in their binders and backpacks.

One student responded to the survey question “Which of the options in self-study guide did you use the most?” by saying, “maybe reading newspaper isn’t enough (sic).” This response in particular speaks to concerns about the explanation provided by the teacher who administered the guide and survey, but also to the above mentioned problems with comprehension. All told, there were actually three mentions of newspapers in one class and two mentions of magazines in another. All of which seem to indicate that those students were not fully aware of the self-study guide’s contents since newspapers and magazines were not listed. In other cases, based on two student responses, it seemed as if they were not sure what exactly the self-study guide was: “I didn’t know the self-study packet (sic).”

A possible solution to ensure that every student receives a copy of the guide and that it doesn’t get lost when added to their collections of other academic papers would be to send it out in a digital file via mass email. Another possible solution that must be considered if assistance is required in order to conduct this research with a large sample size again is to make sure that all the elements of this action research plan have been properly explained in great detail first before other teachers are asked to apply it. It is clear that even though perhaps a little more time was taken to explain the contents of the self-study guide and the questions on the survey during the second treatment, much more time should be taken to introduce this guide and discuss the survey before it is administered the next time.

In addition to collecting more data based on this research plan, further data collection should take place during the school year so that a comparison of total study times when school is in-session can be compared to the study times when students are on break and this treatment is applied. It might also be interesting to see how different age groups respond to this self-study guide and if greater success might be found within varied groups.

5. Conclusion

The initial findings of this research appear to show that students who utilized the suggestions in the self-study guide did on average spend more time studying and interacting with English than students who did not utilize any of the suggestions. These findings are encouraging and seem to show that the initial aims of increasing first and second year university students' engagement with English in a culturally responsive way that promotes learner autonomy and helps stem the effects of summer learning loss were achieved. These goals were achieved after changes were made to the first version of the self-study guide and a slight increase in time explaining the contents of which took place before applying the treatment.

While this research plan features many of the latest available resources in language learning technology it is most assuredly subject to changes as technology and language learning tools also continue to change. The contents of the study guide as it exists today might become completely different in the near future in order to stay culturally responsive, relevant, and in-step with the interests and experiences of college-aged students or other populations to which this research might be applied. The need to stay ever-relevant in order to connect with new groups of students as they enter universities with new interests and experiences will be a challenge for all language teachers going forward.

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Appendix

Listen, Watch, and Read

Apps

VoiceTube

This app is free, it offers a wide variety of entertaining videos with Japanese translations, and allows you to adjust the language level to suit your needs.

HelloTalk

HelloTalk is one of the best options to help you learn and communicate with native speakers of English. Also, since you will learn new English language and have a chance to use it, this app is both an input source and an output source. For this app, use good sense and **use an avatar for privacy**. Watch this tutorial for help: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZq_Qx06P8c

Duolingo

Duolingo is a free app that allows you to improve your grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation in a fun and dynamic way.

Music

Choose **any song with English lyrics** that you like, **look up the lyrics, print them**, and then use all the sources at your fingertips to **make translations into your native language**. To help you fully understand the meaning and proper usage of all the lyrics you will probably have to use (1) your Japanese to English dictionary, (2) an English dictionary, and (3) sentence example searches online at **dictionary.com** or **wordsinasentence.com**.

Comic Books (Graphic Novels)

Comic books provide you with lots of visual context to help support your understanding while you are reading, you should still use the same sources used to help you translate music lyrics (see above): Japanese to English dictionary, English dictionary, and sentence example searches. You can find them in our department library or online. Please see the last page for a list of recommendations from a variety of genres.

Graded Readers

There is a wide variety of levels and genres to choose from at your local bookstore, and remember to choose something that you would like to read.

Screenplay Books (セリフ集スクリーンプレイ)

Study English while watching your favorite movies. You can find them in our department library, online, or your local bookstore.

YouTube Videos

Learn an instruction-based skill by watching Youtube in English. You can learn **a magic trick, a new recipe, a life hack, arts and crafts, or anything that interests you.**

Speak and Write

HelloTalk

This free app (see the first page) is one of the best choices for helping you improve your English by connecting you with native English speakers.

Help a tourist

As we get closer to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, you will see many more tourists at the train stations and around the city. If a family looks like they are lost, try to offer help.

Talk with a friend

If you have a friend who is also studying English or who speaks English well, try setting aside time to practice your English conversation.

Travel or study abroad

Traveling or studying abroad is a very effective way to practice your English and to experience a variety of different types of English that are spoken around the world.

Attend an international festival

There are quite a few international festivals held every summer in Yoyogi Park and many other locations around the Tokyo area that provide you with great opportunities to meet and chat with people from a variety of countries and cultures.

<https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/things-to-do/things-to-do-in-tokyo-today>

<http://www.yoyogipark.info/>