

# Self-management in the EFL Classroom in Japan

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## Abstract

One of the most crucial qualities of an autonomous learner is having self-management skills in the learning process. Successful learners meta-cognitively monitor their learning, demonstrate their capacity to manage their own learning and seek to create opportunities to analyze their results. To facilitate autonomous learning, teachers, at first, need to teach self-management strategies. This paper will examine the effectiveness of a self-management tool and suggest ways that teachers can help their students become autonomous learners.

**Key terms:** meta-cognitive skills, self-management tools, autonomous learners, motivation

## 1. Introduction

In a learner-centered educational program, self-management is one of many meta-cognitive skills necessary for students to become autonomous learners. In most formal educational settings in Japan, topic of self-management tends to be disregarded. Teachers concentrate on skills like writing, reading, calculating and knowledge of subjects such as history, chemistry, and classical literature. In elementary schools, some teachers teach learning skills and some teach about appropriate behavior for the classroom; nonetheless, in most primary, secondary, and tertiary schools self-management is not covered.

Recently a number of educators, including foreign language teachers, has been advocating the importance of both learner-centered education and student autonomy. Learner-centered education involves facilitating a class so as to enhance students' involvement in their learning process and reduce their teacher's control over classroom events (Nunan, 1998). Moreover, in a learner-centered class, students are more likely to become autonomous learners and acquire the target foreign language much faster and more effectively than students who are in a traditional teacher-centered class since students' preferred learning styles are often different from their teacher's learning styles (Ellis, 1999). It is claimed that by using some metacognitive strategies, for example, a self-management strategy, students can increase their autonomous learning in various educational settings (Koegel, Koegel & Parks, 1995).

There is no doubt that teachers should respect the uniqueness of each student's learning style, and teachers should encourage students to autonomously manage their studies. Some questions, however, rise in this respect, such as: can students who have not been taught practical self-management techniques properly regulate their own behavior and overcome academic challenges by themselves? Is implementing and promoting self-management culturally appropriate in Japanese education? Do Japanese students appreciate or even recognize the effectiveness of self-management for academic achievement? Finally, what are the culturally and academically most effective ways to promote self-management skills in Japan? In order to support students' self-management, I provided a self-management tool to my students. This paper is contributed to demonstrate the effectiveness and consequences of using the tool and furthermore to answer the

above questions.

## **2. Literature Review**

How can students learn effectively? What are the differences between successful learners and unsuccessful learners? Many psychologists and specialists have tried to answer these complicated questions. Most psychologists today agree that there are two types of strategies are parts of the answers to these questions, cognitive and metacognitive (Oxford 2001, Wenden 1987). Although cognitive learning strategies are necessary for successfully learning foreign languages, this study focuses on metacognitive strategies. Among the six categories of language learning strategies listed by Oxford (2001), metacognitive is one. According to Oxford, metacognitive strategies involve concrete goals and objectives, assessing one's own performance, organizing and concentrating (P.359). Wenden considers metacognitive learning as a way of autonomic learning involving the process of setting objectives, analyzing performance and planning how to reach the goal. Metacognitive strategies are often referred to as tools to enhance the cognitive process of the language learning process. Students with metacognitive strategies can be successful foreign language learners.

Some researchers studying the concept of intelligence realize the importance of such metacognitive strategies. According to those researchers, Emotional Intelligence (EI) can give greater consequence than cognitive and intellectual competencies (Gardner 1983, Segal 1997).

Emotional Intelligence is highly respected in a number of fields in which outstanding performance and/or achievement are required, for instance, business and education. Daniel Goleman is the leading psychologist studying EI. He (1998) asserts there are four components of EI: self-awareness, self-management, social relationship and relationship management. In this study, self-awareness and self-management were taken into consideration when creating the self-management tool provided to the students who are objects of this research.

Self-aware people have precisely know their own strengths and limitations and other factors which might control their emotions. They also have the ability to assess their own performance and its consequences. People with self-management skills are able to set measurable goals. They favor honest and open criticism and are able to take responsibility for their own actions. They perform methodically and follow through with their work commitments. They take the initiative to accomplish their goals. Optimism and maintaining positive behavior are also vital to self-management. Goleman (1998) also mentioned the importance of motivation. Highly motivated people who are able to maintain their motivation tend to be successful.

## **3. Self-Management Tool**

The self-management tool is composed of four pages (Appendix I). The first page is the record of attendance. Students are required to record the number of times they are absent, come late and leave class early. The second page of this tool is for vocabulary quiz records. The students must write their score and the date of each quiz in the chart and on the graph. Data related to small quizzes is kept on a separate page. The students write the results of their TOEIC practice tests on the fourth page of the tool. Each student is asked to set a goal for scores on TOEIC practice tests after they take the first practice test during the first class of the semester. The average score of all tests and quizzes must also be written on every graph. At mid-semester and at the end of the semester, the total number of their attendances, absences, late-comings and the times they leave class early are counted and recorded. At the same time, the students are asked to calculate their average score for the various types of quizzes and tests they have taken, and all of their average scores are written on

the final page, midterm and final self-evaluation sheets. Using the average scores, the students calculate their midterm and final grade percentage. The equation necessary for the calculation is provided in the midterm and final self-evaluation sheet. A 100 point system is used and letter grades are based on the following: S (90-100%), A (80-89%), B (70-79%), C (60-69%), D (50-59%) and F or fail (<60%). The letter grade breakdown is stated in the syllabus provided to all of the students at the beginning of the semester.

Then, the students are requested to critically self-evaluate their learning. For the midterm self-assessment, the students must write about the problems they have and how they will overcome them. The students are encouraged to utilize their self-assessment to improve their study habits, modify their ways of learning and decide their priorities for the rest of the semester. At the end of the semester, the students review their overall performance for the semester based on their own score results and compare that with the goal score they set at the beginning of the semester. They are also advised to write how they can avoid making the same mistakes. The test score results, average scores and the calculation results eliminate the students' uncertainty as to their performance. Their midterm and final self-assessment are compared with the grade determined by their teacher, and the differences are clearly discussed during the interview between each student and the teacher. This interview session enhances grading transparency, which builds trust between students and their teachers.

The importance of keeping performance records through the semester and the rules and requirements of the class are carefully indicated in the class syllabus, and all of these are also verbally explained during the first class of the semester.

#### **4. Method**

The methodology for the study was designed to clarify the effectiveness and consequences of a self-management tool provided to students learning English as a foreign language in a university. The principal method of collecting data from the students was by a paper and pencil questionnaire (Appendix II).

The questionnaire distributed to the students for this study is composed of 25 items written in Japanese. All are close ended items with a fully anchored rating scale (1 for "Definitely not think so" to 5 for "Strongly think so"). Eleven items (No. 1 to No. 8 and No. 18 to No. 20) are for exploring how much the self-management tool is helpful for enhancing student self-awareness and self-assessment of their test results, requirements for completing the class, and improvement of the targeted English skills. Some items are for exploring if the tool is helpful for motivating the students to perform well in a class, for example, coming to class on time, attending classes, submitting assignments, and receiving high quiz scores. Five questions are asked to elicit students' opinions regarding the efficiency of various tests and assignments to improve their English skills. One question, No. 22, in the questionnaire, asks about their diligence in keeping records with the self-management tool. The last two questions are for determining how students feel toward the overall effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the tool.

Ninety nine students, nearly all of whom were freshmen, took part in this study. They were all enrolled in the Department of Economics in a former national university located in Kyushu, Japan. All students in this department are required to take English courses. The courses are Basic English Reading, Basic English Listening, General English Reading, and General English Listening. The level of the Basic English classes is lower than the level of the General English classes. The students' proficiency level is determined by testing; all freshmen must complete the "English Language Placement Test" given before the first semester begins. The test which is similar to the National Center Test is created by the faculty members of the university. The subjects of this research took a General English listening class in the fall semester of 2005 and a General

English reading/grammar class in the spring semester of 2006. Unlike the Basic English classes, junior high school and early high school level English are not reviewed in General English, English for Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is taught in General English.

Surveys were administered to all students who attended the last class of the semester. During the class, the students submitted their self-management record sheets, and each student's record sheets were evaluated for the second time; the first assessment of their record sheets took place in the middle of the semester. Then, their score for the record sheets was immediately added to their final evaluation. After that, each individual student was informed of his or her final grade and asked to answer the questions in the survey. The researcher explained both verbally and in writing to the students that their final grade would not be altered based on their response to the questions. Therefore, the researcher believes that the respondents did not feel any pressure when responding to the questions.

## **5. Results and Analysis**

The questionnaire was given to all students who attended the last class of the semester and collected during the class time: therefore, the response rate of the students' questionnaire was 100%. The breakdown of the subjects of this study is 31 females, and 68 males.

The following are the results and analysis of mean responses and SD values of the students. Agreement ranged on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 5 indicates strong agreement. Therefore, mean responses of less than 2.5 indicate general disagreement and of more than 2.5 general agreement (the all mean and SD values are shown in Table 1 in Appendix III).

It is essential to know to what degree students were satisfied with tasks and materials provided in class. A lack of satisfaction with various tests and classroom tasks and a lack of confidence in the ability of those assignments to improve their English skills could demotivate students. Those demotivated students will not perform well in a class and will not manage themselves to be successful learners. According to the results of the questionnaire, most students are satisfied with the efficiency of tests and classroom tasks; the all mean values are close to 4. The mean of the mean values of Item 9 to 12, which ask the respondents about their satisfaction level regarding class tasks and tests, is 3.86. The range in the SD values of items 9 to 12 is not significant. This range indicates small differences among the students' satisfaction levels with class tasks and tests. Most students are almost equally satisfied with the tasks and tests.

The results of the eleven items, No. 1 to No. 8 and No. 18 to No. 20, which attempted to elicit information about the degree to which the self-management tool is helpful for enhancing student self-awareness in class performance, show the students found the tool to be very beneficial (mean score of 4.23). The small range of mean scores for the types of class performances (3.76 to 4.51) seem to suggest that the self-management tool was almost equally beneficial in promoting self-awareness.

The standard deviation of two item results, No. 1 and No. 20, is slightly larger than the standard deviation values of the other items. Item one relates to a student's awareness of how he or she is doing in comparison with other students. The reason why the standard deviation is larger than the others might be ascribed to the grading system. Regardless of the students' place in their class, students who received points of 60 and above passed the class. Therefore, some students did not compare their class performance results with others. Item No. 20 is "Setting the target score for practice tests and keeping records of the practice tests were helpful to recognize the difference between my score and the target score." Since the practice tests are only worth 5% of the final grade, some students might felt reluctant to make so much effort to achieve their target score. The

fact that the university only encouraged, but did not require, students to take TOEIC, might also make the students reluctant to study hard for the practice tests.

Self-awareness is only the first step to approach success in class. After students realize how they are doing in a class, they need to motivate themselves to take action towards obtaining a better grade. Except for one item in the questionnaire related to practice tests, No. 21, the mean score range of 4.29 and 4.56 indicates the efficiency of the self-management tool to enhance motivation. The small differences among standard deviation values and high mean scores for the students' motivation related items in the questionnaire indicate that regardless of type of tests and tasks, the self-management tool worked positively for enhancing students' motivation.

Overall, students found the self-management tool effective for self-management and learning English (mean value of 4.12 and 4.33 respectively). Because students recognized the efficiency of the tool, there was a high level of diligent record keeping. Students need to believe in the usefulness of a tool and actually experience benefits of using the tool, for example, the improvement of test scores. Such tangible results increase the motivation of students to be consistent in their record keeping.

## 6. Conclusion

Learner autonomy is important in the learning process because it allows flexibility in terms of different learning style among students. Autonomy in how students manage themselves is also ideal since preferred self-management strategies vary among students. Unfortunately, Japanese students' lack of knowledge in self-management strategies makes autonomy difficult or even impossible. Moreover, because of the Japanese collectivist culture, autonomy could be difficult to implement in Japan. However, this should not discourage teachers from facilitating students to manage themselves. Students need teachers to assist them in various ways with learning about or developing the habit of self-management, for example, teachers can provide self-management tools. Once students realize the importance of self-management, they start changing their own behavior by reducing or eliminating negative actions as well as by maintaining appropriate actions.

Further research is needed to elucidate what degree students' diligence in record keeping affects their final grades. In addition, examining the correlations between the changes in test and assignment results and the satisfaction level regarding the self-management tool might reveal to what degree the tool influences the students' grades. Moreover, the differences in the significance of the correlation between the students' grades and various forms of the self-management tool might show which form is most effective to improving students' class performance.

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**Appendix I**

Self-management Tool

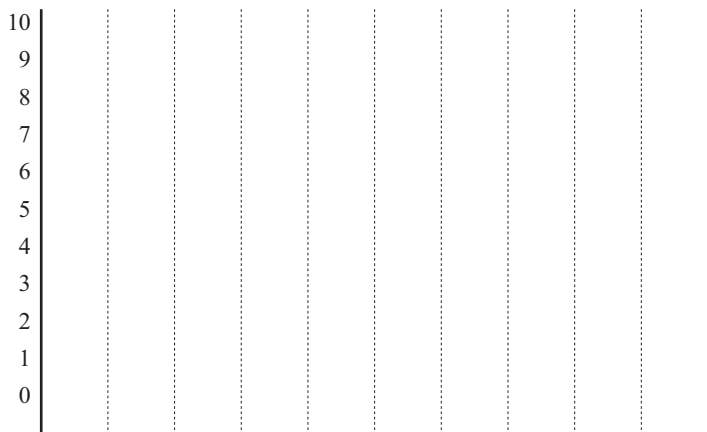
A Record of Attendance

Date															Total
Absence															
Attendance															
Late															
Early Leave															

Total	Mid-term	Final
Absence		
Late		
Early Leave		

Vocabulary Test Scores

Scores



Date (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/)

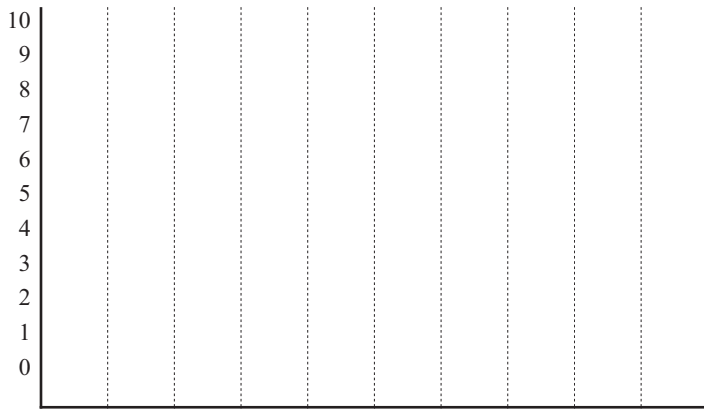
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Date									
Score									

	Mid-term	Final
Total Score		
Average		

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Quiz Scores

Scores



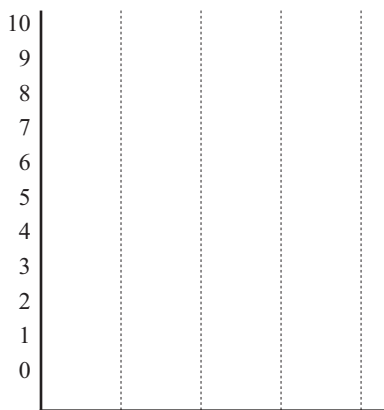
Date (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/) (/)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Date									
Score									

	Mid-term	Final
Total Score		
Average		

Practice Test Scores

Scores



Date (/) (/) (/) (/) (/)

	1	2	3	4	5
Date					
Score					

	Mid-term	Final
Total Score		
Average		

Mid-term & Final Self-evaluation

	Evaluation (S/A/B/C/D/F)	Comments
Mid-Term Self-evaluation		What are reasons for the grade?  What will I do to improve the weak points?
Final Self-evaluation		What are reasons for the grade?  What will I do to improve the weak points?



**Appendix II (Questionnaire)**

1. As a result of recording my score, I was aware of the average score for the whole class and was conscious of my score being higher or lower than the average score	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
2. As a result of recording my score, I noticed that my scores were going up or down	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
3. As a result of recording my homework score on the graph, I noticed how many times I had not submitted my	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
4. As a result of recording my test score on the graph, I noticed how many tests that I had missed.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
5. As a result of recording my test score on the graph, I noticed the improvement or decline of my grammar skills.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
6. As a result of recording my homework scores, I noticed the improvement or decline of my grammar skills.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
7. As a result of recording my practice test scores, I noticed the improvement or decline of my grammar skills.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
8. As a result of recording my vocabulary test scores, I noticed the improvement or decline of my vocabulary.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
9. The vocabulary tests were effective in improving my vocabulary.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
10. The practice tests were effective in improving my grammar skills.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
11. The assignments were effective in improving my grammar skills.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
12. The quizzes were effective in improving my grammar skills.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
13. As a result of keeping records of my number of absences and my coming late, I was motivated to come to class on time each time.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5

14. As a result of keeping records of my test and homework scores, I was motivated to study harder to get higher scores.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
15. As a result of keeping records of the average scores for the entire class, I was motivated to study harder to get higher scores.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
16. As a result of keeping records of homework, I was motivated to complete homework.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
17. The mid-term self evaluation was helpful for motivating me to study harder.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
18. The mid-term self evaluation was effective in making me realize how I was doing and what I should work on to receive a better grade at the end of the semester	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
19. The final self evaluation was effective in making me realize how I did during the semester	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
20. Setting the target score for practice tests and keeping records of the practice tests were effective in making me recognize the difference between my score and the target score.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
21. Setting the target score for practice tests and keeping records of the practice tests were effective in motivating me to reach the target score	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
22. I diligently kept all records throughout the semester	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
23. Generally speaking, I think that using and completing self-management record sheets positively affected our study.	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
24. I think that completing the self-management record sheets was helpful for learning English	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5
25. I think that completing the self-management record sheets was helpful for self-management	1 ⇔ 2 ⇔ 3 ⇔ 4 ⇔ 5

**Appendix III**

Mean Values and Standard Deviation Values (Table 1)

Item	Mean Value 1	SD	Item	Mean Value 1	SD
1	3.76	0.92	13	4.56	0.81
2	4.29	0.73	14	4.42	0.79
3	4.30	0.78	15	4.36	0.80
4	4.24	0.87	16	4.29	0.91
5	4.12	0.86	17	4.39	0.85
6	4.17	0.78	18	4.46	0.69
7	4.20	0.77	19	4.51	0.67
8	4.35	0.80	20	3.86	1.01
9	3.97	0.92	21	3.79	0.96
10	3.63	0.80	22	3.90	1.11
11	3.89	0.80	23	4.25	0.84
12	3.86	0.74	24	4.12	0.86
			25	4.33	0.83

Mean Values For Collected and Categorized Items (Table 2)

Item	Mean
No. 1 to No. 8 and No. 18 to No. 20 (The efficiency of the self-management tool in enhancing student self-awareness in class performance)	4.23
No. 9 to No. 12 (Satisfaction level regarding class tasks and tests)	3.86
No. 13 to No. 19 and No. 21 (The efficiency of the self-management tool to enhance motivation)	4.30