

ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

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This paper describes an ongoing action research project designed to promote autonomous learning in a required Freshman English course at a Japanese university. Several teachers collaborated to encourage self-access learning using a stamp card system. Teachers used the cards as a way of introducing learning activities that learners engage in outside of class time. At the time of writing, the project was in its second cycle. Significant adjustments were made to the stamp card system at the end of the first academic year. The data from both cycles of research show that the stamp card system encourages more students to make use of the university's self-access facilities. The findings highlight the importance of clear induction with hands-on experience, especially for computer-related study, and the benefits of cooperation among teachers in implementing this approach.

英語の習得には授業内外での大量の学習が不可欠である。学生は学習法を学び、自律した学習者になる必要がある。本稿は、学生の自己学習を支援するために開発したスタンプカード・システムの実践報告である。このシステムによって、多くの学生が、様々な学習法を体験し、授業外でも自己学習を進めることができるようになった。体験による学習法の指導だけでなく、教員の連携による持続的な支援も重要であることが明らかになった。

It takes roughly 10,000 hours of learning or practice to attain expert ability in any given skill (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006). Eaton (2011) applies this concept to language learning and suggests that students supplement formal instruction with self-study, practice in informal contexts, and overseas immersion experiences to get the 10,000 hours of study and practice needed to become fully proficient. Recognizing that a limited number of contact hours will not be sufficient to significantly improve students' language proficiency, many universities in Japan are following the Japanese Ministry of Education's *Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities"* (MEXT, 2003) by setting up conversation lounges to provide places for learners to interact in English in an international atmosphere. Additionally, universities are providing self-access centers which may include study booths, reading areas, and access to online materials. However, these facilities often remain underused. Students may not have the motivation, skills, or experience to make good use of the facilities, and an institutional culture of independent study may not exist.

Some universities in Japan have found a carrot-and-stick approach effective in promoting independent study. Ashurova and Ssali (2007) offer points to students for participating in sessions in their university's World Plaza interaction lounge, and attendance at a World Plaza event counts towards the students' semester grade. Barrs (2010) reveals that one of the factors underlying the success of his university's popular self-access center is that students can earn extra credit for undertaking independent study modules. Heigham (2011) reports that all students on the Communicative English Program at her university are required to attend the self-access language center 12 times per semester to do independent listening, in lieu of a listening course. These papers all suggest that once they have been encouraged or pushed to make use of the facilities, students see the benefits and many then become voluntary users. The requirement or incentive to participate acts as a form of support that bridges classwork and independent study, and helps learners make steps towards developing autonomy.

This paper describes an ongoing action research project aimed at encouraging self-study at our institution.

Setting

Toyo Gakuen University is a private university with campuses in Chiba and Tokyo. The Chiba campus serves approximately 1,200 first and second year-students, for whom English is a required subject. Most students are still at false-beginner or elementary level, despite six years of English language instruction. Motivation levels are generally low.

In 2006, the university opened an *English Lounge* at the Chiba campus. This is a relaxed, comfortable space where students can have natural conversations in English. It is open all day, with *Lounge Time* sessions at lunchtime where students can chat with a native-speaker teacher or intern over a meal. The lounge also serves as a self-access learning center, with learning support and advice available during the lunch hour. The lounge is stocked with graded readers, computers, and other learning resources.

Although the university created this English language environment, the facilities and resources remained underutilized for the first four years. Attendance at Lounge Time sessions was poor; teachers saw the same faces week after week, and attempts to attract more students through special events were largely unsuccessful. Self-reports from students suggested that few learners were making use of the website or the graded readers, or engaging in any kind of independent study. Previous action research projects showed that the student population at this university fail to engage in independent study unless supported by a tracking system which helps learners work towards set goals (Taylor, 2009; Taylor & Birchley, 2008). There was, however, no program-wide system in place to help students manage their independent study.

This was a particular problem for the authors of this study, as we faced this situation directly on a daily basis. The five native-speaker instructors are assigned regular Lounge Time sessions, and one Japanese faculty member sometimes joins these sessions. We found it difficult to generate conversational flow and maintain a vibrant atmosphere in the lounge with so few

students in such a large space, and dealing with the same students so frequently. The sessions were uncomfortable, and we felt disappointed that the lounge was not thriving. We wanted to do more to help our students make the most of the facilities provided for them and make more progress in their language learning.

Research Questions

In 2010, we decided to embark upon a collaborative action research project in an attempt to tackle these problems (Talandis, et al., 2011). The following research questions were devised:

- How can we get our students to study on their own outside of class?
- How can we boost attendance in the English Lounge?

Cycle 1: The Intervention

The intervention used in this project was a stamp card system (see Figure 1). Students were invited to earn stamps for participating in a *Lounge Time* session or event, attending a self-study support session, reading a graded reader, learning a set number of vocabulary items using the web application Smart.fm (now iKnow!), and engaging in pronunciation practice using the web application EnglishCentral. The items were chosen to encourage students to explore a range of study methods and develop in all skill areas. Both online applications allow students and teachers to track student progress.

Self-study Card		Name: _____			
Lounge time / event	1	2	3	4	
Self-study support	1	2			
Graded readers	1	2	3	4	
Smart.fm	50	50	50	50	
EnglishCentral	1000	2000	3000	4000	

Figure 1. The 2010 stamp card.

The system was implemented across the Freshman English program, chiefly in the Speaking classes. Program-wide coverage was easily achieved, since the members of this action research group teach the Speaking component of this program for almost all of the approximately 600 first-year students. Cooperation was secured with the one Speaking class taught by another faculty member in 2011, and two classes in 2012.

The program is taught by teams of four teachers, with Speaking and Reading classes held in regular classrooms, and Listening and Writing classes typically scheduled in computer rooms. There are 20-26 students in a class, and the students are divided according to department and level. The stamp cards were distributed in the Speaking classes, and students were set the target of gaining a stamp in every box, earning credit towards their Speaking course grade. There was flexibility as to whether the card was mandatory or optional, and with the amount of class time used for orientation. Some Reading, Listening and Writing teachers also collaborated with the Speaking teachers by promoting the card, providing further orientation, and counting stamps towards their course grades.

Methodology

In the first cycle of this project, teachers utilized the cards over the course of the Spring 2010 semester and gathered usage data and student feedback from an end-of-term questionnaire (see Appendix A). The authors of this study then produced written reflections on the outcomes of this stage of the project, and shared these accounts with the other members of the action research project group. Minor modifications were made before the Fall semester, with more usage data collected, in addition to student interviews. The next cycle of the project began at the start of the 2011 academic year with significant changes to the system. Further data was collected, from usage records and a feedback survey (Appendix B).

Cycle 1: Spring and Fall 2010

Spring Semester

A key difference in the way teachers implemented the stamp cards was the decision on whether or not to make card completion mandatory. Three teachers made it part of the grade, and three gave extra credit for card completion. Data on completion rates supported the mandatory approach (see Table 1). Where stamp cards were optional, the vast majority of students did not attempt any kind of study at all. However, when stamp card completion was required, most students engaged in some study, and 9% earned a stamp in every box.

Table 1

Comparison of Optional Versus Mandatory Approaches

	All	Part	None	Totals
Optional	0.5% (1)	18.0% (57)	81.7% (259)	100.0% (317)
Mandatory	9.0% (24)	46.0% (122)	45.0% (117)	100.0% (263)

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent students.

Collaboration proved to be another significant factor in achieving active student participation. Two of the Speaking teachers persuaded team teachers to promote the stamp card in some of their classes. When we compare the outcomes for these classes, it is clear that collaboration among teachers led to more students earning stamps (see Table 2). For the four classes with no

collaboration, fewer than half of the students submitted a card, compared to 60% of those in which students had this extra support from another teacher, and over 90% when two additional teachers collaborated with the Speaking teacher. Students received more encouragement and more orientation, and had a bigger incentive to earn stamps as they got more credit for their efforts. Also, unlike the Speaking teachers, the Writing and Listening teachers hold their classes in computer rooms, so it is possible to build a regular slot into each class for students to use the web applications. This allowed students to become very familiar with the tools, which enabled independent use.

Table 2

Effects of Collaboration

	All*	Part**	<i>EnglishCentral</i> Average Points	<i>Smart.fm</i> Average Points (Mastered Items)
No collaboration	6%	43%	729	18
2 teachers collaborating	0%	61%	687	48
3 teachers collaborating	86%	5%	4030	189

Note. Total number of classes = 9. *Percentage of students completing all of the card. **Percentage of students completing part of the card.

Average lounge attendance during the Spring 2010 semester increased notably over the previous year, as Figure 2 shows. The influx of students generated by the stamp cards resulted in a more vibrant and attractive lounge atmosphere, which, in turn, provided further incentive to come (see Figure 2).

On the questionnaire, a sizable proportion (9.7%) of the students commented that contact with native speakers in the lounge and opportunities to speak 生英語 [*nama-eigo* = real-live English] led to an increase in motivation. Their comments also indicated that the stamp card gave reluctant students a reason to come to the lounge, and that once students participated in a session they found it a rich experience:

English Lounge は最初は行きにくかったけど、スタンプカードのおかげで、行きやすくなった。身近に英語が感じれた [*sic*]。

[At first it was hard to go into the lounge, but thanks to the stamp card it became easier to go in there. I was able to feel English up close.]

This indicates that the stamp card can help students move out of their comfort zone to try new learning experiences.

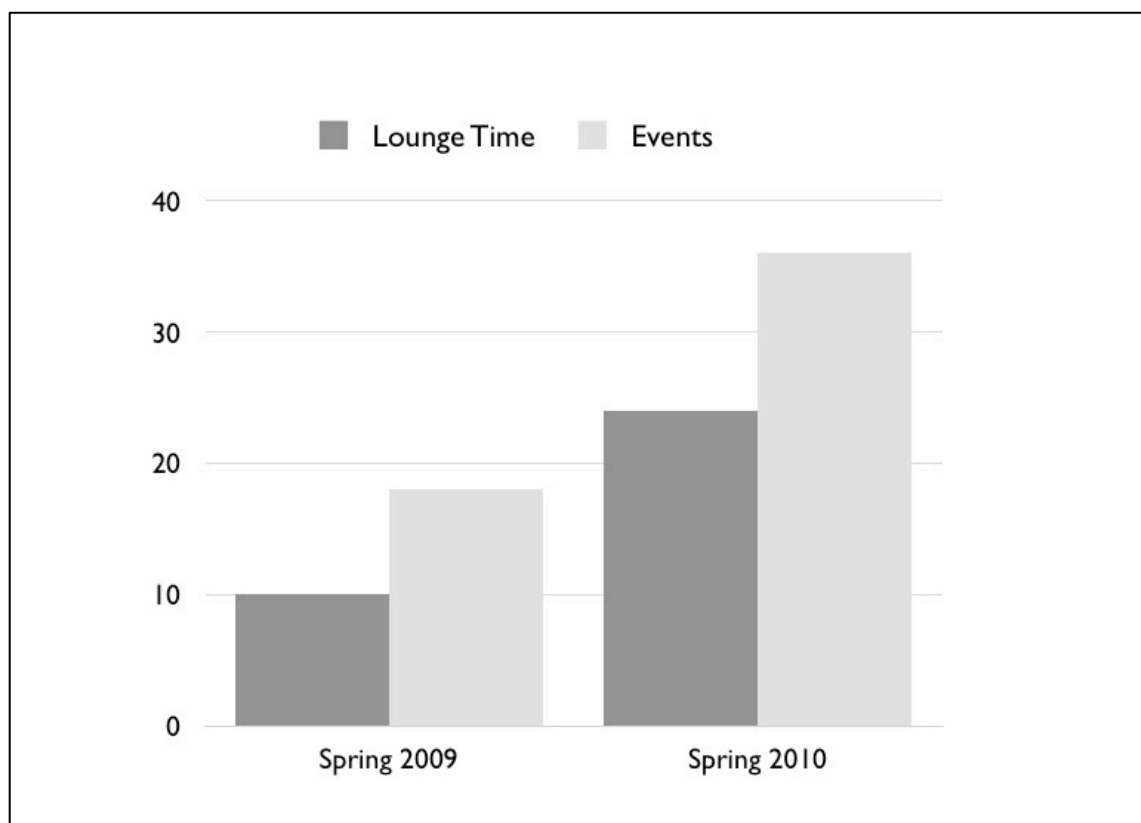


Figure 2. Comparison of the average number of students attending lounge sessions in Spring 2009 and Spring 2010.

Feedback from the questionnaire also helped identify strengths and weaknesses in the system. Some students who attempted activities reported an increase in motivation because they could improve their vocabulary, interact with native speakers more confidently, or discover new and useful learning resources. Students who did not complete the cards cited a lack of time or interest, whilst others had not understood the system or found the activities difficult, which suggested the orientation to the stamp card needed improvement. Despite the improved atmosphere, a number of students stated that it was 入りづらい [difficult to enter] the lounge.

Fall Semester

In response to the results from the Spring semester, individual teachers made a variety of minor changes for the Fall term. For example, teachers created more esthetically pleasing cards by copying the template onto heavier, glossier card or colored paper. Some teachers carried out regular progress checks and took students to a CALL room to familiarize students with the web applications. Two teachers switched from an optional approach to a mandatory approach.

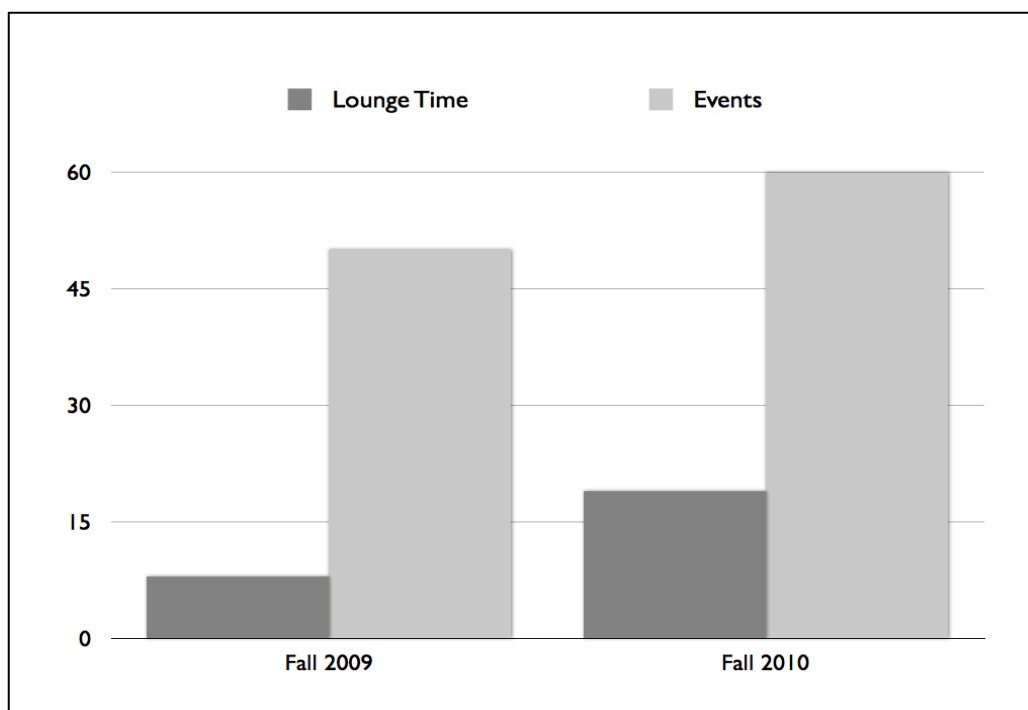


Figure 3. Comparison of the average number of students attending lounge sessions in Fall 2009 and 2010.

Results continued to improve. Lounge attendance increased from an average of nine students per session in Fall 2009 to just over 19 in Fall 2010 (see Figure 3). Furthermore, more students were able to at least partially complete their stamp cards, with 45% of the students completing some or all of the stamp card, up from 35% in the Spring semester (see Table 3).

These results supported the mandatory approach, but showed that the stamp card intervention was failing to change the behavior of more than half the students, and thus needed modification. Our aim was for all the students to engage in at least some of the stamp card activities.

Cycle 2: Intervention Modifications in Spring 2011

Based on the results of the first cycle, a number of changes were made to the stamp card system. First, all teachers made completion of the stamp card mandatory. The card now constitutes 20% of the students' grades in the speaking classes. The card has 25 boxes, and students are asked to fill 20 boxes with stamps. This builds in an element of choice, allowing students to focus on activities which they find more enjoyable or useful. The stamp card was also modified. The vocabulary web application Smart.fm became a paid service, and was therefore substituted with a free vocabulary application, [Quizlet](#). The CD-ROM that accompanies the student textbook was introduced as an item, offering students the option of focusing on grammar. Furthermore, to provide more effective orientation, a bilingual manual was distributed in class, explaining the rationale behind the card system and each study activity, and giving detailed instructions on registering for and using the web applications.

Teachers also provided more effective monitoring by giving weekly reminders to complete the cards.

The results showed considerable improvement. The average number of students coming to a Lounge Time session in Spring 2011 was 33, compared to 24 in the first cycle of the project in 2010, and only 10 in 2009 before the stamp card system was implemented (see Figure 4). The number of students attending events in the lounge also increased from an average of 36 in the first cycle to 60 in the second cycle. The number of students completing all required tasks increased dramatically (see Table 4).

Table 3

Stamp Card Completion Fall 2010

	All	Part	None	Totals
Spring Semester	4.3% (25)	39.1% (179)	64.8% (376)	100.0% (580)
Fall Semester	6.0% (22)	39.0% (217)	55.0% (319)	100.0% (558)

Table 4

Stamp Card Completion Spring 2011

	All	Part	None	Totals
Cycle 1 (Spring 2010)	4.3% (25)	30.9% (179)	64.8% (376)	100.0% (580)
Cycle 2 (Spring 2011)	30.0% (121)	53.0% (245)	17.0% (73)	100.0% (439)

While in the first semester of 2010 only 4% of students managed to complete all the required tasks, by the end of the first semester of 2011, 30% were able to accomplish this. In fact, some students did much more than was required, filling several cards or getting extra stamps on the back of the card (see Figure 5). This indicates that the modifications to the stamp card system were effective in motivating students to engage in independent study. However, the fact that 17% of the students failed to attempt any study at all suggests that teachers need to do more to motivate and support this difficult-to-reach group.

Ultimately, the goal of the stamp card system is not merely to achieve student compliance in using the facilities, but to encourage students to develop lasting independent study habits. For this reason we included items on the questionnaire which asked students about their future intentions and expectations. The responses indicated that many students anticipate using one or more of the learning activities over the summer, and also in their second year, when they

would not be required to do so (see Figure 6). It is possible that, even though the questionnaire was anonymous, students were trying to answer in a way that pleased their teachers. Even so, these results are positive, indicating that the stamp card system may have some impact on students' ongoing study habits and development.

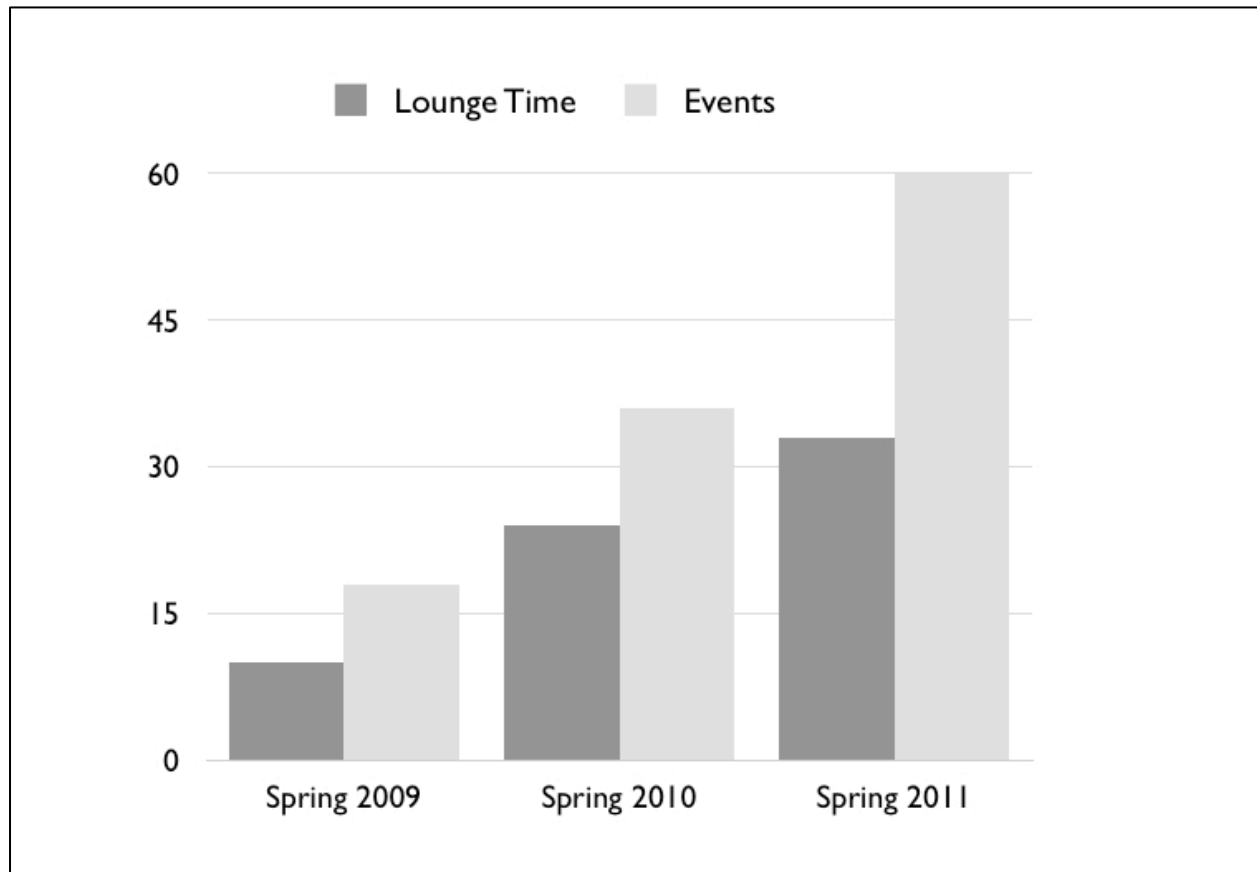


Figure 4. Comparison of the average number of students attending lounge sessions in the Spring semester 2009-2011.

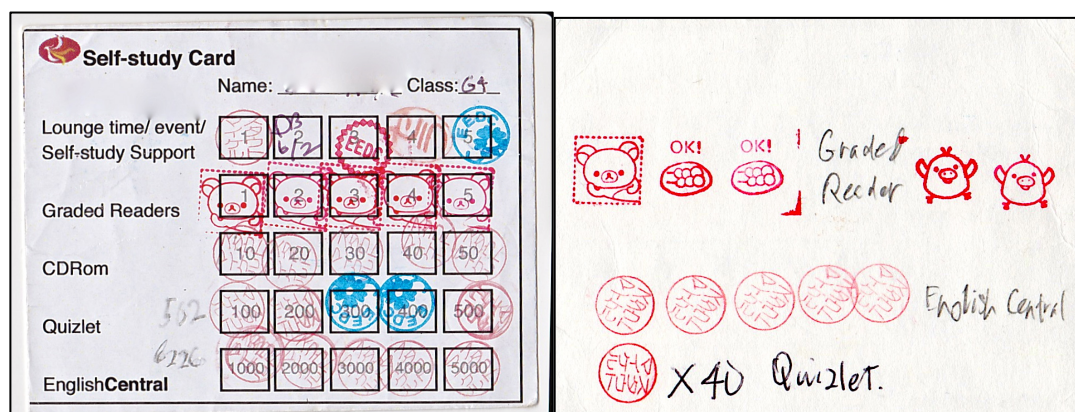


Figure 5. Stamp card with more than 20 stamps.

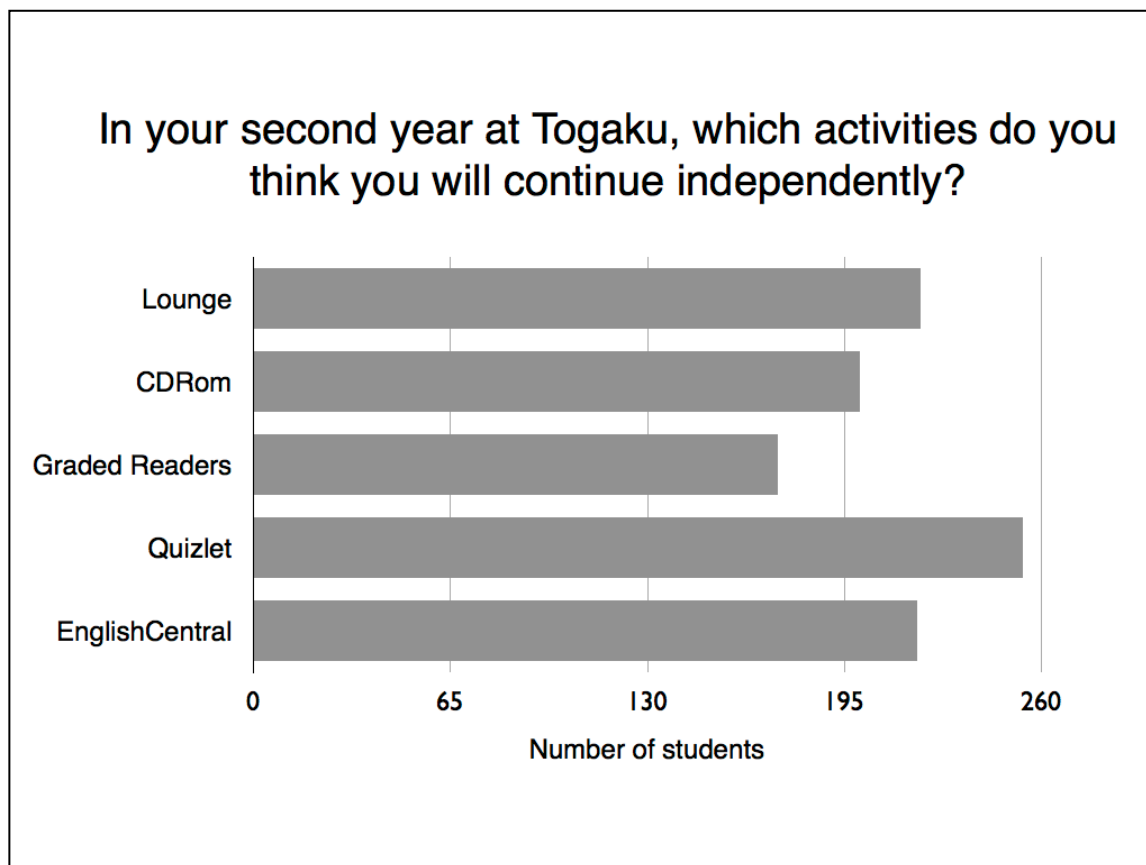


Figure 6. Student questionnaire responses on their future study plans.

Discussion

This action research project has been a journey for the participating teacher-researchers, and has impacted on our evolving beliefs about how best to foster independent learning in our student population. We have grappled particularly with the issue of learner autonomy, which we define as the learners' freedom to choose how to learn and the ability to carry out their learning plans. This requires the learners to be proactive, to "explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals [and] take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities" (Little, 2002). As teachers, we believe that we should empower learners by encouraging autonomy. Thus, when our English Lounge was first opened, we felt strongly that we should not force learners to make use of the facilities but instead attract them to the lounge by promoting the space and being as welcoming as possible. We also believed that we should not require university-level students to engage in any particular form of independent study outside of class time, but offer a wide range of effective and attractive resources and let students explore them and find for themselves which activities best suit their learning style. However, the failure of this approach led us to re-evaluate our stance.

It was clear that although we had given the students complete freedom in choosing how to learn, students were not able to take responsibility and exercise those choices. There were a number of obstacles for the students to overcome. Firstly, the majority of the learning resources were online, yet many students struggled even to recall their passwords to log on to the campus computers, and could not remember how to access or use the applications they were introduced to in classes. More importantly, students lacked the experience to create their own learning plans, and without any incentive to engage in independent learning, busy students failed to make time for study. Moreover, due to lack of use, the English Lounge became a somewhat stigmatized place. Students were embarrassed to be seen eating lunch with a group of teachers in the middle of a large, empty room. Overall, a culture had developed in which not studying was the norm.

The stamp card intervention aimed to tackle these obstacles, and the results indicated that it was successful. The card system made it easier for students to create a learning path by setting achievable goals and restricting the students' choices to a limited range of activities. The students could still choose when and where to study, and had considerable scope for choice within those activities (e.g., there are many genres and levels of graded readers in the library, and a choice of over 2,000 videos to study in EnglishCentral). The system gave students a reason to learn, as card completion counted towards the students' semester grades. When students had an incentive to study, they made use of the lounge and computer facilities. In turn, this increased usage rate reduced any stigma about coming to the lounge. Also, students felt the need to learn how to use the web applications, and weaker students sought help from teachers and peers. It was common to see students helping their friends access and use the applications, and working collaboratively.

As teacher-researchers we accepted that our freshman students need a structured system to help them develop autonomy, but some of us felt uncomfortable with making the stamp card mandatory. At the start of the study three teachers made the cards optional, believing that we cannot help the students learn to take responsibility for their own learning if we remove that responsibility from them. After the first set of data was collected, it was clear that the optional approach was not successful. Two teachers switched to a mandatory approach, but one teacher resisted, believing that his students could find in themselves the motivation and initiative to engage in the study activities if he promoted them more enthusiastically. Only after the second collection of data did this teacher change his views, accepting that our students are not ready yet to take on this responsibility, and need the experience of engaging in the stamp card activities for a sustained period to develop the skills, habits, and awareness needed to take charge of their own independent study.

As this project progressed, we realized the power of group action research to generate institutional change. We found a shift occurring in the culture of our campus. Entering classrooms before lessons started, we sometimes found students talking about the stamp card, discussing their motivation levels for different activities. Our students began voluntarily posting about their graded readers on Facebook, and the lounge became an increasingly

popular place to spend time. The students now have a social and psychological environment which supports independent study. This change would not have been possible if only one or two teachers had introduced the stamp card system with their students. Only a small percentage of students would have received the cards, and this would not have had the same effect on the school culture. The fact that the system has been implemented program wide is the key to its success.

Moving Forward

The project continues to impact positively on student learning behavior and the developing culture of independent learning at our institution. It is clear that a long-term commitment is required to sustain and deepen this process. The next cycle of this project will aim to improve student participation rates further through securing greater cooperation from other teachers in the Freshman English team. The project group also aims to strengthen the practice of extensive reading in English on campus by building stronger links between the stamp card activities and classwork. As the 2012 student intake moves into their second year, it will also be possible to explore how far these students continue to study English independently without the stamp card system to motivate them.

Daniel Beck, Darrell Hardy, and Keiko Omura are still based at Toyo Gakuen University, which has campuses in both Chiba and Tokyo. **Clair Taylor** now teaches at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University and **Gerald Talandis Jr.** now teaches at the University of Toyama. **Michael Stout** will start teaching at the University of Tsukuba in September. As a group, their research interests span a range of areas including vocabulary learning, CALL, literature, project-based language learning, and online communities of practice. They share a keen interest in self-access learning and passionately believe in the power of action-research as a transformative tool for bringing about positive change in educational institutions.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire Handed out to Students at the End of the 2010 Spring Semester

基礎英語1-4A Semester 1 Questionnaire

Class _____

Your English teachers would be very happy if you could answer these questions in English or Japanese. It may take about 5 minutes.

お手数ですが、以下の簡単なアンケートにお答えください（約5分）。日本語でも、英語でも結構です。

1. How many stamps did you receive for each activity below?

以下の項目で、それぞれいくつのスタンプをもらいましたか？

- Lounge time/event _____
- Self-study support _____
- Graded readers _____
- Smart.fm _____
- EnglishCentral _____

2. What do you think the purpose of the stamp cards is?

このスタンプカードのねらいは何だと考えますか？

3. Did you find the stamp card motivating? Why or why not?

スタンプカードを使うことで、英語に対する意欲が上がりましたか？

理由も教えてください。

4. If you didn't use the stamp card, why not?

スタンプカードを使わなかった方への質問です。なぜ、使わなかったのですか？

- I was too busy 忙しかった
- I was not interested 興味がわかなかった
- I did the activities, but I forgot to get a stamp 活動はしたが、スタンプをもらうのを忘れた
- I lost my stamp card and didn't replace it スタンプカードを紛失して、新しいカードをもらわなかった
- What is a "stamp card?" スタンプカードそのものを知らない
- Other (please write) その他 _____

5. How can the stamp card system be improved?

今後、スタンプカードをより良くするためにはどうしたらいいと思いますか？

Thank you for your time!

ご協力ありがとうございました。

Appendix B

Questionnaire Handed out to Students at the End of the 2011 Spring Semester

基礎英語とスタンプカードに関するアンケート Kiso Eigo Semester 1 Stamp Card Questionnaire class _____

Your English teachers would be very happy if you could answer these questions. It may take about 2 minutes.

お手数ですが、以下の簡単なアンケートにお答えください。（所要時間2分）

1. Which KisoEigo teachers talked to you about the Stamp Card? Please circle Yes, No or Can't Remember
基礎英語の担当教員はスタンプカードについて説明しましたか？「Yes」か「No」か「覚えていない」に○を付けてください。

Did your KE1 (Grammar/Writing) teacher talk to you about the stamp card?	Yes No Can't Remember
Did your KE2 (Reading) teacher talk to you about the stamp card?	Yes No Can't Remember
Did your KE3 (Listening) teacher talk to you about the stamp card?	Yes No Can't Remember

2. Which teachers gave you class time to do Stamp Card activities, such as reading a graded reader, Quizlet, EnglishCentral, or the CD-ROM? Please circle Yes, No or Can't Remember.
どの基礎英語の担当教員が、授業内でスタンプカードの課題（グレイディッドリーダー、Quizlet、EnglishCentral、またはCD-ROM）のために時間を使いましたか？「Yes」か「No」か「覚えていない」に○を付けてください。

Did your KE1 teacher give you class time to do Stamp Card activities?	Yes No Can't Remember
Did your KE2 teacher give you class time to do Stamp Card activities?	Yes No Can't Remember
Did your KE3 teacher give you class time to do Stamp Card activities?	Yes No Can't Remember

3. Did you get enough training for the computer activities on the Stamp Card? Please circle Yes or No.
あなたは、スタンプカードの、パソコンを使った課題に取り組むために必要なパソコンの訓練を受けましたか？
「Yes」か「No」に○を付けてください。

Did you get enough training for using the CD-ROM ?	Yes No
Did you get enough training for using Quizlet ?	Yes No
Did you get enough training for using EnglishCentral ?	Yes No

4. Which activities will you use in the summer vacation? Please circle Yes or No for each.
夏休み中は、以下の課題の中で、どの課題に取り組みますか？「Yes」か「No」に○を付けて下さい。

I will use the CD-ROM in the summer vacation.	Yes No
I will use Quizlet in the summer vacation.	Yes No
I will use EnglishCentral in the summer vacation.	Yes No
I will read graded readers in the summer vacation.	Yes No

5. In your second year at Togaku, which activities do you think you will continue independently? Please circle Yes or No for each.
2年生になってからは、以下の課題の中で、どの課題を自主的に使い続けますか？「Yes」か「No」に○を付けて下さい。

I will continue coming to the English Lounge	Yes No
I will continue using the CD-ROM	Yes No
I will continue using Graded Readers	Yes No
I will continue using Quizlet	Yes No
I will continue using EnglishCentral	Yes No

Thank you for your time!