

# Designing Autonomous Learning to Accommodate Diverse Learners in an English Writing Class

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## 1. Introduction

A new era of “universal college admission” is said to have begun in Japan, beginning in approximately 2007. This popular phrase, which was coined by the Central Education Council, a panel of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, refers to the fact that the number of prospective students for higher education, including junior colleges and universities, will be almost the same number of those matriculating in 2007 due to the declining birthrate and a plateau in the number of applicants for higher education. Because a surfeit of universities now compete for a declining pool of students, the average level of university entrants is declining in Japan, resulting in students whose poor command of English and lack of motivation makes it difficult to instruct them and assess their progress. This paper summarizes the work of a team of university instructors and researchers that created a curriculum and classroom materials for autonomous learning pedagogy to help students learn according to individual objectives and skill levels. The subjects are initially poorly motivated students at an English writing course at a private Japanese university.





## 2. Framework for Developing Materials

The concept for designing autonomous learning was based on an underlying symbolic approach (Nishinosono and Togo, 2006), first applied to a remedial class for independent study (Togo, 2007). The current research expanded that approach to a classroom course using student tutors.

The team created a metaphor easily understood by the students: the steps involved in

washing up, eating breakfast and preparing for school each morning. Team members divided the textbook exercises into segments according to different writing skills, and assigned each skill a metaphor, as seen in Table 1. Points from 1 to 4 are assigned in each segment according to levels of performance, and each student keeps track of her study history on a Learning Menu.

**Table 1. Segments and metaphors in an English Writing Class**

Segment No.	Contents of Segments	Metaphors
Segment 1	Training about English grammar	
Segment 2	Training about writing paragraphs	
Segment 3	Training about combining sentences with proper conjunctions	
Segment 4	Training about joining sentences to display unity	

## 3. Methodology and Implementation

### 3.1 Profile of class

The curriculum developed by the instruction team was implemented in the following class.

#### English Composition I

- Required class for non-English-major freshmen in a private university

1: Kyoto Notre Dame University

2: Ritsumeikan University

3: Institution for Learning Development

4: Mukogawa Women's University

5: Kansai University of Nursing and Health Sciences

6: Bukkyo University

- 15 times in a half-year semester
- 44 female students including 7 retakers
- The textbook is *Get Ready to Write 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Longman).

### 3.2 Self-Study Process

The team prepared a Learning Menu, a Study Guide, and an Answer Guide to allow students to study autonomously.

The self-study process proceeded as follows:

1. Creating a study plan (1<sup>st</sup> class only), and first composition
2. Reconfirmation of individual study plans
3. Solving textbook exercises
4. Questions for Tutors
5. Self review
6. Reviewing individual study progress and adjusting plan for the next class
7. Revising one's own composition, which is commonly assigned at the end of every chapter

### 4. Tutors

The team developed learning materials that each student could follow at her own pace, facilitated by a student tutor who played an intermediary role. The tutors were the only students who directly conferred with the instructor but they were also obligated to help other students. Becoming a tutor was also the only way to receive the top scores in the final course evaluation. In short, this was mainly chosen by more highly motivated students.

### 5. Results and Discussion

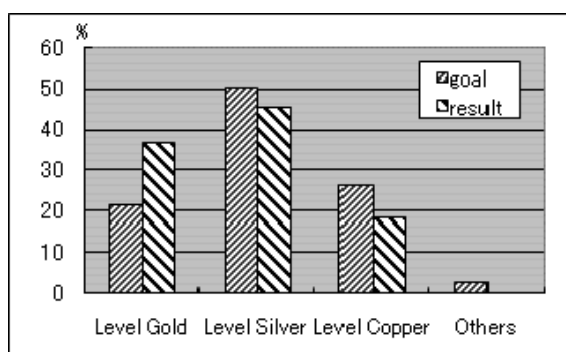


Chart 1. Students' Level

The most notable result in Chart 1 is the percentage of students who assigned themselves a "Gold" level as their final evaluation, based on objective performance-based criteria (Table 2). Although initially only one fourth of the students aimed to receive a "Gold," in the end nearly 40% concluded that their performance was worth a "Gold" grade. This can be regarded as an indication that the team's course design positively affected their motivation and this enabled many of the students to have a positive attitude about their last writing assignments.

Table 2. Criteria for Students' Final Evaluation

		Each Student's Workload (total points)			
		60-69 Points	70-79 Points	80-89 Points	90 Points and over
Levels	Gold	70*	80	90	100
	Silver	65	75	85	95
	Copper	60	70	80	90

\*The number is the final score.

### 6. Conclusion

This paper suggests the efficacy of some measures to help less-motivated students to study English autonomously. More effective measures should be taken by instructors of Japanese private universities to expand opportunities for these students. Our team intends to continue refining the course while implementing it in the classroom.

### References

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