

# Nurturing self-sustaining learners: presenting tips on how to learn in e-learning classes

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**Abstract:** An e-learning class, to some students, is an epitome of monotony and a prime example of a boring lesson. Although others find such a class useful because of the handy gadgets for learning that it offers, it is quite a challenge for teachers to make a class like this more appealing than it looks to the dissidents. This current study attempts to examine to what extent exposing students to various ways of learning English has impact on their out-of-class learning. This action research took place in a university e-learning class in the metropolitan Tokyo area in Japan in 2014. Every week, at the beginning and in the midst of a class, the teacher set aside a segment to present various learning strategies, tips on how to keep themselves motivated as well as anecdotes the teacher gathered, using PowerPoint slides, English songs and video footage. The aims of the segment were to 1. provide students with clues for them to be autonomous learners, 2. give them a change of pace, and 3. give a human touch to otherwise dry e-learning class. Data was collected through questionnaires with the aim of measuring the awareness of students' attitudes toward improving learning styles. The results show that quite a few students, including those who were initially skeptical of attending the class, got motivated by the "change-of-pace" segment and started to grope for better ways of learning English.

**Keywords:** *e-learning, the Learning Style Model by Kolb (1976), a change-of-pace segment, learning strategies, learner training*

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## Introduction

According to the survey done by the National Institute of Multimedia Education in 2005, 36.3 percent of the responding universities in Japan had incorporated e-learning classes, with 69.3 percent of those being national universities. E-learning is also referred to by terms including web-based learning and distance learning. There is no set definition. Different researchers define the term in different ways, but the current study adopts the definition proposed by Naidu (2002): educational processes that take advantage of information and communications technology in order to facilitate asynchronous as well as synchronous learning and teaching activities. The class the current study took place in involves both asynchronous and synchronous activities. The asynchronous aspect of it is that at home, students can access web-based materials the university offers and solve practice quizzes at their own pace. The synchronous aspect is that the teacher in the mother classroom transmits information including announcements, English songs and

video footages to the two separate classrooms. There is also a semi-synchronous aspect: students are assigned to the same units of the web-based materials, which students solve at their own pace. These activities are what are done in common in every e-learning classroom in the university. Whether it is in the classroom or at home, the fact remains that students solve problems at the speed they see fit. Here is where a problem sets in: there are students who complain that this is something they can do without coming all the way to university. At the same time, it is true that there are some who like e-learning. What accounts for this difference?

Hu, P. J., Hui, W., Clark, T. H. K., Milton, J., Ma, W., and Tam, K. Y. (2005) conducted longitudinal research investigating the differences in effectiveness and outcomes between English learning in a conventional classroom and in an e-learning environment. Using the Learning Style Model by Kolb (1976), the study, in which 507 freshmen in a major university in Hong Kong took part, tried to find out which of four learning styles (accommodator, diverger, converger and assimilator) benefits most from e-learning. The results indicated that assimilators, who are typically good at inductive reasoning, showed the greatest improvement concerning objective learning achievement, perceived learning effectiveness and learning satisfaction. On the other hand, accommodators, who place value in doing things, and are classified as the opposite extreme from assimilators, benefited less from e-learning. Thus, it seems like any type of activity is liable to run a risk of being demotivating to certain types of learners. In the hope to increase the possibility of making the class more appealing to as many types of students as possible, the teacher in the current study started setting aside the segment to introduce various learning tips to students in an entertaining way and with enthusiasm using PowerPoint slides, English songs and video footage. The teacher also hoped that it would serve as a change of pace as well as a motivator for students to become autonomous learners. Dörnyei (2001) claims that teachers' influence as well as students' knowledge and use of learning strategies are two of the motivational influences that impact students' motivation. This is exactly why the teacher tried to incorporate a learner training segment into the class. However, there are researchers who make dubious claims about the effectiveness of learner strategy training and say that there is no verifiable evidence that the awareness of strategies leads to L2 learning success (Rees-Miller, 1993). In a study conducted in 1985, the students who received strategy training on memorizing words using imaginary and grouping techniques performed worse on tests of recall than those who did not receive the training (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Kupper, 1985). This seems to have resulted from the fact that the students with well-established strategies became confused by adding new strategies to their repertoire. In reality, it is impossible for one advertisement to motivate every customer to buy the product. However, by utilizing the tactics of showing multiple ways of learning English, the possibility of students adopting some of them and incorporating them into their learning could increase. Macaro (2006) states that "successful learning is no longer linked to the individual learner's frequency of strategy use, but to his or her orchestration of strategies available to him or her," and that "strategies do not make learning more efficient; they are the raw material without which L2 learning cannot take place (p.332)." If this holds true, exposing students to a variety of ways of learning

English, whether they are related to cognitive strategies (such as reading chunk by chunk) or affective strategies (such as what to do for change of pace), has the possibility to help students add the strategies of their choice to their repertoire, which might lead their L2 learning to success. Besides, compared to the slow-acting process that takes place inside learners when rebuilding their learning style, the “change-of-pace” segment in the class might have an immediate effect of keep students from getting drowsy

## Study

### *Method*

This action research took place in a university e-learning class in the metropolitan Tokyo area in the 2014 fall semester. English e-learning is one of the required courses for freshmen. The students in the current study took lessons in three separate PC rooms, each of which holding approximately 40 students. One classroom had the teacher in it, and the others had teaching assistants. The students without the teacher were able to hear the teacher and see what he showed in the main class. To be fair, the teacher had the students change classrooms on a rotation basis so that they got to see the teacher once every three weeks. The main material used in this course is web-based English listening and reading comprehension quizzes, and the mid-term and final exams are web-based TOEIC-style tests. The teacher has often heard from not a few teachers that this is one of the hard-to-teach classes and some students also have heard that it is a tedious torture through the grapevine from their seniors.

The target subjects consisted of 101 freshmen (39 males and 62 females). The original number of registered students was 126 and the data of those who were present both at the first and the final class was used for this study. It should be noted that the object of this study is not to discuss and judge the pros and cons of web-based classes nor conclude which type of learners benefit from them most, but to analyze how the ten-minute introduction of various learning tips will change the way students learn at home. At the beginning of the semester, a questionnaire with 12 Likert scale items (see Appendix A) was administered. For a period of three months, the teacher, with the hope to bring some variety to the class as well as to motivate students to be autonomous learners (and to add a human touch in contrast with web-based materials), set aside a segment at the beginning and in the midst of each lesson to show PowerPoint slides concerning English learning, English songs and video footages. The contents varied from 1. phonetic characteristics of English (stressed-timed rhythm, liaison, schwa, the flapping sound of intervocalic /t/ and /d/), 2. introducing SLA research findings that students find relevant, 3. the importance of meaningful use of English in their daily life (followed by tips on choosing books for extensive reading), 4. how to memorize new words in a vocabulary book efficiently, 5. various ways of reading aloud and the efficacy of it, 6. the benefits of speaking English slowly, 7. useful websites (TED, for example), 8. what to do for a change of pace during study, 9. showing movie excerpts (starting with the Japanese dubbed version, followed by the English audio with Japanese subtitles, the English audio with English subtitles, and the English audio with no subtitles),

and 10. fill-in-the-lyrics quizzes while listening to famous English songs. For instance, in regard with introducing reading aloud in the classroom, the teacher not only demonstrated various types of the activity (repeating, overlapping, eye-shadowing and shadowing, etc.) but also ushered students into the world of second language research. To cite an example, Birch (2002) and Underhill (1994) say that teachers should use reading aloud as a tool to provide students with feedback on their decoding skills and comprehension. Underhill claims that RA helps students acquire stress-timed patterns of English (Underhill, 1994). By referring to such citations, the teacher aimed to make students believe the credibility and usefulness of the learning strategies that were being introduced. At the end of the semester, the same questionnaire as the one administered at the beginning, with some additional questions was administered.

### ***Measures***

The dependent variable, students' willingness to adopt new ways of learning, was measured using questionnaire item 11 (I try to add new English learning strategies to my repertoire).

### ***Data Analysis***

Students' motivation to improve their out-of-class English learning as measured by Survey 2 ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) was higher than as measured by Survey 1 ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ),  $t(100) = 4.25$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ , two-tailed,  $d = 0.49$  (a medium effect size). The comparison between the first and second questionnaire indicates a clear positive shift in the motivation to improve ways of learning with 36 students increasing by one point, 13 students by two points and two students by three points on the Likert scale. There were only two students whose responses did not change on the Likert scale.

### ***The Overall Trend of the Class***

In response to the new questionnaire item added to the second questionnaire (See Appendix B) "I got motivated through lectures on how to study English, the greatest number of students, 48 (47.5%), responded with "Agree," and 25 students (24.8%) with "Strongly Agree." The phrases most frequently referred to as useful in the free writing part (See Appendix B) in the second questionnaire were "ways of learning" (56 students, 55.4%) followed by "video footages" (43 students, 42.6%), "how to memorize words" (29 students, 28.7%), "graded readers" (25 students, 24.8 %), "English songs" (23 students, 22.8%), "listening" (nine students, 8.9%) and "phonetics/pronunciation" (seven students, 6.9%)."

### ***The Changes***

Below are excerpts from the free writing answers of the students (all pseudonyms) whose change in response in the second questionnaire in regard with questionnaire item 11 ("I try to add new English learning strategies to my repertoire.") was worth studying closely.

### ***The Change in Masaki***

In response to questionnaire item 11, in the first questionnaire, the answer was "Rarely,"

but it was “Very Often” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Masaki wrote, “The information on websites that comes in handy in studying English. Because the teacher showed us tips on how to make English learning more enjoyable, I am having fun compared with the tough time I had preparing for entrance exams.” Responding to the question “Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months?”, Masaki wrote, “The motivation to want to learn English and speak it grew. I want to continue studying English, like it better and be able to speak it better.”

### ***The Change in Saki***

In response to questionnaire item 11, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Often” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Saki wrote, “I liked it that the teacher introduced tips on learning English, subdividing them into those on how to improve listening, how to read fluently, how to increase vocabulary and so forth. They were what I had not heard of before, looked easy to try my hand at, and were really intriguing.” Responding to the question “Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months”, Saki wrote, “It used to be that I was never able to get out of my mind the preoccupation that English is merely a tool to pass entrance exams. Therefore, I disliked reading difficult English sentences and have avoided doing it since entering university. However, the teacher, with an interesting approach and easy-to-understand explanation, introduced English songs and manga. It brought out my desire to learn English. I would like to continue studying little by little.”

### ***The Change in Mami***

In response to questionnaire item 11, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Rarely,” but it was “Often” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Mami wrote, “Thanks to the information on learning strategies, recommended websites such as TED and effective ways to brush up vocabulary, I became able to study more efficiently. As for TED, I am grateful to the teacher for selecting some of the recommended footages because there too many to choose from on the website.” Responding to the question “Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months?”, Mami wrote, “The desire to read, speak and write English grew stronger. Keeping the information the teacher gave me in mind, I will keep on studying English after this e-learning class ends. Thank you very much.”

### ***The Change in Yui***

In response to questionnaire item 11, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Rarely,” but it was “Often” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Yui wrote, “Because the teacher inspired me every week by showing us how to learn English, I was inclined to take new approaches to learning English and have actually put some into practice. In high school, I got sick of cramming one grammar point after another. However, I came to catch a glimpse of the fun

side of learning English. The detailed information the teacher gave us such as the knack of memorizing new words and the recommended books were useful.” Responding to the question “Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months?”, Yui wrote, “I became able to approach English from various different angles. The TED website is really interesting and I watch it as if I read a book. I got motivated to get a higher score on the TOEIC test. I will take advantage of the free time I have during the upcoming spring break and study more.”

### ***The Change in Aoi***

In response to questionnaire item 11, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Sometimes” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Aoi wrote, “I would often exhaust myself by searching in vain for my guiding principle of English learning, which was demotivating. I was glad I found a lot of learning strategies in the classroom that I would like to try myself. What was stimulating to me was the fill-in-the-lyrics quizzes using English songs and fill-in-the-script quizzes using movies.” Responding to the question “Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months?”, Aoi wrote, “I had been trying to spend as much time as possible watching English movies with subtitles when this e-learning class started. As I have noticed that the amount of time spent on it has been on the decline, I would like to get my pace back on track.”

### ***The Change in Eri***

In response to questionnaire item 11, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Rarely,” but it was “Often” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Eri wrote, “What I found useful was the fun ways of learning English. They are different from what I was used to when preparing for the entrance exam: cramming knowledge into my head. The conventional way of studying you do at your desk is mentally exhausting, but the ways introduced here were something that I felt like trying.”

### ***The Change in Yuko***

In response to questionnaire item 11, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Sometimes” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Yuko wrote, “I am terribly sorry to tell you this, but I was already familiar with the learning strategies introduced in the classroom. That said, I am happy that I was able to reconfirm that my approach was right. Besides, the contents of the PowerPoint slides the teacher provided were superb and quite entertaining. I hope he will continue giving such lectures.”

### ***The Change in Masako, Shin and Rie, who started attending the class reluctantly***

There were three students who explicitly admitted to their initial suspicions about why they needed to take the e-learning class. However, after three months of taking the class,

they all expressed their satisfaction with the “how to learn” segment in the class. Masako wrote, “Before taking this class, I was unconvinced as to why I had to come all the way to university on Saturday to take an e-learning class. However, it turned out to be fun because I was taught the phonetic knowledge (such as unstressed vowels) and effective ways of learning English (how to brush up vocabulary and how to improve listening). Also, it was fun to learn some trivia such as native speakers’ way of saying this and that. I came to feel I was happy to have come to university on Saturday.” Shin’s comment was sharper than Masako: “As for the e-learning class itself, like everybody else probably did, I thought it was not worth taking it because you could do it at home. I really think so. Nevertheless, the segment the teacher provides in the intervals of each lesson, introducing ways of learning and English songs, was really interesting. They were what I can make use of for my out-of-class learning.” Rie also made a candid comment on e-learning: “I was not able to make sense out of coming to university early in the morning to do something I could do at home. However, watching movie footage with Japanese and English subtitles alternately was fun. With the activity, I felt myself absorbing English. Before, I had no idea as to how to learn English in a fun way. Now I have a feeling that I can make learning fun by listening to English songs while reading their lyrics.”

### ***Discussion and Conclusion***

In the current study, the teacher incorporated the short, “change of pace,” motivational segment into an e-learning class. As for motivation to reform out-of-class learning, there were 51 students out of 101 whose points on the Likert scale increased by one to three points. Even the three students who initially showed hatred towards e-learning, mostly because of the asynchronous nature of the lesson, completed the free writing part of the questionnaire on a positive comments, saying that the motivational segment was effective. It seems safe to say that the introduction to various ways of learning English in the classroom contributed to the out-of-class learning of the students to some, or great, extent. Considering the somewhat dry aspect of a class where students work on a computer, the segment that the current study tried incorporating might have served as some spice. It might have had an impact on some types of students, who otherwise could have stopped coming to the classroom. However, it is true that there existed students who showed little or no reaction at all. It might show that such learner training has little or no impact on certain types of learners, or it is just that people interpret things differently in general. To judge what types of learners react to and benefit from such learner training would call for refined, longitudinal quantitative research.

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## Appendix A

～Listening～

1. I feel confident in listening to English passages.

「英語を聴くことに自信がある。」

Strongly agree      Agree      Slightly agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree

2. I know how to improve my listening comprehension.

「リスニング力を上達させるための方法を知っている。」

Strongly agree      Agree      Slightly agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree

3. I translate into Japanese while listening to English.

「英語を聴きながら日本語に訳してしまう。」

Very often      Often      Sometimes      Rarely      Never

4. I have a hard time comprehending linked words.

「英語の音の繋がりを聴くのに苦労している。」

Very often      Often      Sometimes      Rarely      Never

5. I incorporate reading-out-loud into my out-of-class learning.

「自宅学習の中で音読を取り入れている。」

                                                                                         
Very often              Often                      Sometimes              Rarely                      Never

～Reading～

6. I feel confident in reading English passages.

「英語を読むことに自信がある。」

                                                                                         
Strongly agree              Agree                      Slightly agree              Disagree                      Strongly disagree

7. I know how to improve my reading comprehension.

「リーディング力を上達させるための方法を知っている。」

                                                                                         
Strongly agree              Agree                      Slightly agree              Disagree                      Strongly disagree

8. I read English books and/or newspapers to gain information (for pleasure).

「情報を得るため（楽しみのため）に英語の本や新聞を読んでいる。」

                                                                                         
Very often              Often                      Sometimes              Rarely                      Never

9. When I read, I move my eyes from left to right, without having my eyes go backward and forward.

「英語を読む際、目をキョロキョロさせることなく、語順通りに左から右に読んでいる。」

                                                                                         
Very often              Often                      Sometimes              Rarely                      Never

10. I read chunk by chunk instead of reading word by word.

「単語ひとつひとつではなく意味の区切りで塊（かたまり）として読んでいる。」

                                                                                         
Very often              Often                      Sometimes              Rarely                      Never

～Others～

11. I try to add new English learning strategies to my repertoire.

「英語に関する新しい学習方法を試してみることがある。」

                                                                                         
Very often              Often                      Sometimes              Rarely                      Never

12. I like studying English.

「英語を学ぶのが好きだ。」

Strongly agree      Agree      Slightly agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree

**Appendix B** (The questions added to the second questionnaire)

～e-learning～

13. I got motivated through using NetAcademy.

「Net Academy を利用することで英語を学ぶやる気が出た。」

Strongly agree      Agree      Slightly agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree

14. I got motivated through lectures on how to study English.

「英語学習法についての講義を聞いて英語を学ぶやる気が出た。」

Strongly agree      Agree      Slightly agree      Disagree      Strongly disagree

～Free writing～

What did you find useful in the e-learning class? Please feel free to write any comments (in much detail as possible).

この授業で役に立ったことは何ですか？ご自由に（具体的に）お書きください。

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Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months?

この授業を通じてご自身の中に起こった変化がもしあれば、ご自由にお書きください。

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