

# ARE YOU A GOOD STUDENT?

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This paper is based on the responses of 160 first and second year students in the English Department at Kwassui Women's College to a questionnaire which explored their attitudes to their English study and themselves as students. Students were also asked to answer questions about the kinds of study that they do, and about the amount of time per week they usually spend on study, work, clubs, hobbies and social activities. The responses show that the high value that students claim to place on study contrasts markedly with the amount of time that they actually devote to it, and with their study habits.

## **1. Introduction**

This study is part of ongoing research into students' study habits and attitudes to English education and to themselves as learners. The research on which it is based was prompted by comments made by students about conflict between their study and their part-time jobs, and by a feeling on the part of the author that studying is no longer a priority for a substantial part of our student body. In order to determine the validity of this judgement, a questionnaire was distributed to all of the first and second year students in the English Department of Kwassui Women's College. Students were asked to respond to questions about themselves as students, their priorities, study, club activities and part-time jobs. They were also asked to keep records for a week detailing the time spent on various activities.

Responses were received from 160 students, around 75% and 65% of the first year and second year student bodies, respectively. While these percentages are not high enough for definitive judgements to be made about all our students, they are sufficient to show tendencies which need to be taken into consideration in planning effective programmes.

Due to constraints of time and space, not all the data obtained is discussed in this paper; the feedback about part-time jobs will form the basis of further research. This paper focuses on answers to questions as to whether or not the respondents see themselves as good students, and whether this opinion is borne out by the other data they provide.

The questionnaire was written in English, and the students were told that they could answer in English or Japanese. Some did respond in Japanese, particularly when keeping records of their activities for the week, but most chose English, occasionally with annotations in Japanese if they were not sure that their English would communicate. Where student comments are quoted below, quotation marks indicate a translation from the original Japanese; otherwise the comment was written in English.

## **2. Are you a good student? – subjective appraisals**

The questionnaire sought both to obtain information about students' opinions and to obtain more quantifiable data about the time allotted to study as compared with other activities, in order to establish whether what the students claim to believe is borne out in practice. Turning first to the subjective appraisals, three questions on the questionnaire dealt with student attitudes to study and to themselves as students. The students were asked to rank the importance that they set on study compared with various other activities, and to respond to the questions, "Do you think you are a good student?" and, "Are you satisfied with your own study?"

### **2.1. Importance given to study**

Students were asked to rank the following activities in order of importance: college study, part-time job, social life outside college, hobbies or pastimes not related to college, other. In the case of "other" the students were asked to explain what they were referring to, but although a number of them assigned a number to "other," by no means all gave details. The activities were to be ranked from 1-5, where 1 = most important, and the students were told that if one item had the same importance as another they could give them the same number. Quite a few students found it hard to assign priorities and therefore did rank multiple activities equally: as one student who awarded 1 to

several activities explained,

I think all of them may be most important for me.

Even though she may mean “very” rather than “most” important, she is still unwilling to set priorities. Another student, who also ranks her study, job and hobbies in equal first place, comments:

I think that college students are society people half. So, I think that we need part-time job and hobbies or pastimes.

Although a lot of students give equal rankings to activities, however, a very clear pattern emerges in the overall responses.

Table 1. Ranking of importance of activities

	R A N K I N G				
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5
STUDY	113 (71%)	24 (15%)	12 ( 8%)	5 ( 3%)	3 ( 2%)
HOBBIES	28 (18%)	47 (29%)	43 (27%)	25 (16%)	10 ( 6%)
SOCIAL LIFE	20 (13%)	37 (23%)	50 (31%)	30 (19%)	15 ( 9%)
PART-TIME JOB	12 ( 8%)	44 (28%)	31 (19%)	41 (26%)	15 ( 9%)
CLUB/CIRCLE	10 ( 6%)	20 (13%)	30 (19%)	19 (12%)	52 (33%)
OTHER	5 ( 3%)	6 ( 4%)	4 ( 3%)	5 ( 3%)	5 ( 3%)

As can be seen in Table 1 above, the students’ responses put study overwhelmingly in first place, and the suspicion that many students think that their part-time jobs are at least as important as, if not more important than, their studies, receives no support in these findings. Part-time jobs rank only fourth in the “most important” category, and even for second place, part-time jobs fall just behind hobbies and not much above social life. Also, where students assigned #2 to study, there are only two cases in which study takes second place to a part-time job. Of the other students who ranked study as #2, six did not assign #1 to any activity, and the rest were equally divided in putting social life or hobbies first. One of these wrote:

I think social life outside college is important the same as college study.

Happily there are some students who do explain that they have a motivation for prioritizing study.

I want to learn English to become my dream.  
I think that I want to acquire English power.

However, the results may be reflective of a feeling that "college study" is the "right" answer, a feeling seen in responses such as:

First I am a student, so I have to study more now.  
I must study hard because I'm a student.

One student who ranks study third behind her club activities and hobbies comments:

I should to study more, I understand. . .

Other students explain that it is important to them to spend time on things other than study, and some rank study first, but equally with other activities.

I think the things except for study is important too. It will help my life from now on.

Although I think study is important, I like to spend a pleasant time with my friend and family.

I want to spend my college life enjoying anything. Because I just can do it in my college life.

Even in cases where study is ranked first, in some cases the comments suggest that this position may be precarious, if not wishful thinking already.

I know college study is most important, but. . .

Recently I forget important thing. It is college study. Every day I do part-time job. I must be on second thought.

Some students admit that what they have written is not actually the case. A student who ranks her own study (other) as #1, job as #2, and study as #3, adds,

This is my ideal, but in practice I don't have enough time to do my own study.

The statistical results, then, suggest that the students place a high priority on study, but within the comments are suggestions that the answers reflect the way they think things should be, and not always the way that they are. The students say that study is important to them; do they then think that they are good students?

## 2.2. Self image

Students were asked to place themselves in one of five categories in response to the question, "Do you think you are a good student?" with the following results.

YES!	yes...	can't say	no...	NO!
16 (10%)	47 (29%)	65 (41%)	20 (13%)	11 (7%)

One student comments that she "can't say" because

I don't know what is a good student.

Many students, however, offer reasons for the evaluation they make of themselves. The factors which the students comment on taking into consideration when deciding on their self-evaluation are attendance, study/homework, attitude/behaviour in class, progress and enjoyment. Whereas some mention more than one of these aspects, there is some cause for concern in the number who focus only on attendance or only on attitude in class.

Among the students who fall into the category "YES!" for this question, one expresses satisfaction with her learning as the reason she can say "YES!" and others explain that they are living up to their own standards.

Yes, I do. I am enjoying study.

I'm doing my best.

Yes, I think. I want to think so. I'm still doing my best.

The second kind of answer occurs only in this category. Even among these students, however, one answer makes it clear that the respondent is not doing her best, even though she wants to think of herself as a good student.

YES! But recently I doesn't study English.

Two students may see themselves as fulfilling the college expectations.

I do not absent from school, and I have never forgot doing homework.

I attend every class. I do my homework every day.

Whereas of course we expect this basic cooperation from our students, we would hope that they would not see this alone is a basis for

answering "YES!" to this question. Of more concern, however, are the ones who focus only on attendance; for example:

I have never been absent from school.

I attend almost class every day.

Perhaps the second student here is only thinking of occasional absence through sickness, but her criterion does not seem ideal as the only factor in a high self-evaluation. Sadly, some students really do seem to believe that the only thing they have to do in order to achieve good English is to be physically present in the classroom, so perhaps such answers are not too surprising. Although it is good if our students have a positive image of themselves as learners, as "learners' perceptions of their own self-competence [have] a strong influence on their motivation" (Hiromori 2003: 174), it would be more encouraging if the opinion seemed to be based in reality.

Among the students who answer "yes..." to the question about seeing themselves as good students, again we have those who focus only on attendance (7), (or in one case, persistent lateness), only homework (5), or both (6). The criteria for evaluation of attendance are clearly individual, however:

I regularly attend classes.

I don't skip a class too much.

i.e. not enough to fail due to the attendance policy? Among some of the students in the "yes..." category, however, there is some awareness that something beyond the minimum requirements may be called for.

I always study for homework and extra study.

I think that I do homework every day, and I am hardly absent from school. Moreover, I try to get more licences.

The absence of this "something else" may mean that you can't answer "YES!"

I don't forget homework, but I have few own studies.

But I don't study review regularly.

There is also some recognition that physical presence alone may not make you a good student, as evidenced by two students who respond "yes..." with opposite logic.

I don't play truant and I don't sleep.  
Sometimes I sleep in class.

Other students who focus on classroom behaviour, or on attitude more generally, say:

I go to school every day and I attend all my classes. But sometimes I talk with my friends during a class.  
"I take the classes that I am interested in seriously."  
I have enthusiasm for English.

Turning to students who "can't say" if they are good students or not we find that although they may sometimes have enthusiasm for study they do not maintain it, and they are aware of inconsistency in their study patterns.

I sometimes do not study and I sometimes study for long time.  
There is difference between doing and not doing.  
Sometimes I study harder, but others I won't study.

Here too some students are aware of both positive and negative aspects of themselves as students, and of the fact that physical presence and the minimum effort to pass are not enough.

I attend classes every day. But, I sometimes fall asleep.  
I do the minimum of study, but I don't study in class actively.  
I almost every day go to college and only a few days I was absent, but in the class I'm not a good student, I think.  
I like English, but I don't do my best.

A number of students raise the issue of achievement, and focus on lack of success as the reason why they "can't say."

My English skill is still poor.  
I participate in English class, but sometimes I can't speak English much. I want to learn English much.  
Now I can't understand what native speakers say.  
I think I could do homework. But, I could hardly possible talk with any English teachers.  
I want to do English study more and more and I want to learn many English knowledge. But now, I don't learn English as yet.

In the last case here, the student could be referring to lack of effort rather than lack of result when she says she doesn't learn. Others

blame lack of time for failure to study, but may be willing to take responsibility for doing something about it.

I have a part-time job every day. So, I neglect study that should be given precedence.

Now I am busy in part-time, so every day I can't study English. I must study and I must make my time.

The students who answer "no..." and "NO!" mention sleeping and talking in class and non-attendance, but focus mainly on lack of effort. In two cases, the student has a goal but is not being inspired to make efforts; in a third she knows that she ought to be motivated to study, but is not doing so.

Although I want to study abroad, I don't study sufficiently. But I must study for myself.

I don't do study hard for my dream.

"Although my English level is shamefully low for a college student, I'm not making any effort."

Two slightly different perspectives acknowledge in one case that greater effort was made in the past, and in the other that desirable results are not being achieved.

I don't study English harder than when I was in high school.  
My study and exam record is wrong.

This brings us to the question of whether or not the students see their study as being satisfactory.

### 2.3. Satisfaction with study

Students were asked to respond to the question, "Are you satisfied with your own study?" Many students did not comment on their answers, and among those who did, the most frequent comment is "I should study more," reflecting the fact that the responses are generally negative.

YES!	yes...	can't say	no...	NO!
5 (3%)	14 (9%)	40 (25%)	64 (40%)	36 (23%)

Some students took the question to refer to only self-initiated study, and as in general the responses to the questionnaire indicate that this is largely not taking place, a negative result here is not surprising.



Some comments, however, can be taken to allude to study in general. There is reference to both the quantity and the quality of study. For example, as regards quantity the following remarks are typical. (The figure in parenthesis is the stated weekly study time.)

I want to study and I think that I must study more. (2 hours)

I think it's not enough now. (3.5 hours)

My study is not enough because of my part-time job.

What is seen as "enough" is very relative, however. One student, who already studies 28 hours a week, says "yes..." she is satisfied with her own studies, but that she is going to increase her study time.

A significant number of comments relate to the quality or effectiveness of study.

I have no good own way to study.

I haven't found meaning of study at college.

I need to study more practical. I'll try to study much better way.

I don't know the best way of studying English.

I do my own study, but it is not effective.

Because I don't know whether my way to study English is right.

I don't know how to study English.

The last comment is from a student who says that she works fifteen hours a week and studies two, but whether the lack of study is arising from frustration, or whether she has not put in enough effort to really know whether or not she can succeed is open to question. Considering that all of these students have had Study Skills classes, and should have learned about effective study techniques and tried out different study methods, such remarks are disappointing; on the other hand, without the Study Skills classes there would probably be more such comments, and, happily, there are some successes.

Yes, I am. Although I didn't know how to study at first year, I can study with good way now.

There are also cases where finding English difficult is inspiring further effort. One student who is satisfied with her study reports that she studies because she can't keep up with her classes if she doesn't. Another who answers "yes..." regarding being satisfied says,

Because I don't understand English structure and English words,

I must acquire.

Happily, some students report that they are satisfied with their study because they are making progress towards a goal.

I aimed that I will pass the English exam Pre-1.  
I always study for TOEIC and TOEFL

Some students, however, feel pressured for time.

I can't do my own study much besides homework  
There is no time to do own study because there are many homework.

In the first of these cases the comment can be taken as a statement of fact. Elsewhere the student explains that she is saving to go to driving school, does her job 23-25 hours a week, and studies 5 hours a week. She comments, "I think study time is shorter than work time." The second student's comment, however, reads more like a complaint, and seems to be representative of the feelings of a growing number of students who indicate that homework is an imposition which interferes with their work activities. This student says that she works 25 hours a week, and studies 2.5 hours a week, which does not really suggest that the lack of time for her own study can be blamed entirely on homework. This student feels that she needs to work, and her answer to the question "Are you a good student?" is "no?" because she does not study, but others are not so clear on this point, as evidenced by the information in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between self-image and satisfaction with study

		ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH YOUR OWN STUDY?				
		YES!	yes...	can't say	no...	NO!
DO YOU	YES!	3	4	5	0	4
THINK THAT	yes...	1	7	13	21	5
YOU ARE	can't say	1	2	14	33	13
A GOOD	no...	0	1	6	7	6
STUDENT?	NO!	0	0	1	2	6

If we compare the students' answers to the question, "Are you satisfied with your own study?" with their answers to the question, "Are you a good student?" it becomes apparent that for the respondents who think that they are good students there is not a

particularly close correlation between them. It would be nice to believe that the large number of respondents who say that “YES!/yes...” they are good students, but who are undecided or negative with regard to their own studies, feel this way because they are challenging themselves to achieve higher standards than they are as yet attaining. However, given the proportion of respondents who think that the conditions of being a good student are satisfied by attending class regularly and doing the necessary homework (as discussed in Section 2.2 above), it seems more likely that these students do not see their own study as essential to being a good student. This is something that seems to have developed quite recently. Four years ago in a survey of first year Kwassui students, although some students commented on the fact that they only studied when teachers required it, they did not see this as acceptable. At that time it was possible to say,

How negatively the students who feel that they do not do anything out of their own motivation rate themselves seems to depend on whether they focus on “I only do what is required of me” or “At least I do what is required of me”, but all of them appear to recognize that only doing what you are asked to do does not make you a good language learner. (Norris 2000: 160)

Certainly, the question that the students were responding to in that survey referred to how they saw themselves as language learners rather than as students in general, but as most of the respondents in the present study focus on their English learning, a comparison would seem to be valid, and it is not encouraging.

### **3. Are you a good student? – more objective evidence**

Whereas self-image is an important factor in being a successful learner, it is difficult to quantify. However, evidence of the effort to learn should be visible in the time spent on study and the types of study done, and this information provides more objective data. The students were asked to respond to the questions, “About how many hours a week do you usually study outside class time?” and, “Do you do homework/review regularly/prepare for classes/do your own study?”

### 3.1. Hours given to study

The students were asked to say about how much time they spend on study outside the classroom in a week, and also to keep records for a week on how long they spent on study, part-time jobs and club activities. Although some students' estimates were borne out by their weekly schedules, some studied considerably more than they stated, which would be encouraging except for the fact that it transpired that the week chosen for the records included tests for the large numbers of both first and second year students who have elected French, and that many of the "extra" hours were concentrated, just-before-the-test French study. According to the information given on the questionnaire, the students spend anywhere from zero to 30 hours a week on study, and an average of 5 hours a week. According to the actual records, in the week in question, whereas the range was not very different at anywhere from zero to 28 hours per student, the average was close to 9 hours. As one student who reported that she usually studies 2-3 hours a week, but who logged 19 hours in the week in question, commented,

Every day I study English a few minutes, but if I have to do homework, I do it.

Given that a Ministry of Education report has recently announced that 41% of the 3rd year high school students they surveyed studied very little or not at all outside class time on weekdays (Mombukagakusho, 2004), we should perhaps not be surprised that many of our students say they do very little study. What is interesting, however, is that some of these are among the ones who see themselves as good students.

Table 3. Correlation between self-image and hours of study

		HOURS PER WEEK SPENT ON STUDY				
		0-2	3-7	8-14	15-21	22+
DO YOU	YES!	2	9	4	0	1
THINK THAT	yes...	12	20	10	3	1
YOU ARE	can't say	12	42	7	2	1
A GOOD	no...	8	9	4	0	0
STUDENT?	NO!	2	9	0	0	0

The majority of students say that they study for an hour or less a day

on average, and as Table 3 shows there does not seem to be any correlation between the amount of study done and whether the students have a high opinion of themselves as students or not.

In the week when they were keeping records, for many of the students a lot of their study time was taken up with review for French tests, much of it concentrated and at the last minute. "Successful graduates of any academic institution are people who have succeeded in organizing themselves in such a way that they have realized their full potential" (Smith and Smith, 8), but are our students achieving this? What do they have to say about their usual study patterns?

### 3.2. Study habits

The students were asked to say whether they do homework, review regularly, prepare for classes and do their own studies. The results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Kinds of study activities engaged in

	YES!	yes...	can't say	no...	NO!
Do you: Do homework?	64 (40%)	79 (49%)	14 ( 9%)	3 ( 2%)	0 ( 0%)
Review regularly?	4 ( 3%)	31 (19%)	56 (35%)	57 (36%)	10 ( 6%)
Prepare for classes?	25 (16%)	84 (53%)	32 (20%)	15 ( 9%)	5 ( 3%)
Do your own study?	15 ( 9%)	42 (26%)	48 (30%)	42 (26%)	13 ( 8%)

Whereas 89% of the students are positive about saying "YES!/yes..." that they do homework, and 69% that they prepare for classes, only 33% claim to do their own study on a regular basis, and only 22% are actively reviewing. Doing homework, then, is seen as a necessity. As one student comments,

I think that it is a lowest line to do homework.

Preparation is also largely seen as necessary, particularly as the students frequently seem to take this to mean preparation to do a presentation or to be called on to translate, though some students have realized that preparing aids understanding.

I can't take the class without preparation.

"Because I'm not preparing for classes, I can't keep up."

Review, however, is not being prioritized by many students. As "frequency has a big impact. Do it often, and it's easier to remember"

(Murphey 1998: 22), such students are not helping themselves to succeed. Although in their Study Skills classes all students will have been exposed to the kind of information about remembering found in study skills handbooks (e.g. Lengefeld, 1986: 29), which suggests that it is important to review material within 24 hours, and then to go on reviewing at increasingly longer intervals, some are still making comments such as:

I do homework but I scarcely do review.

“I do any homework I’m given, but as for preparation, review and my own study, sometimes I do it and sometimes I don’t.”

I do my own study and review before the midterm test or final test, but regularly, I don’t study for many hours.

Some students realized when they completed the weekly records that they were not doing very much study, or not much review, and this is something that we might be able to use for consciousness-raising about study habits. Roby (1999: 3) comments that “self-monitoring and reflection are established, codified practices for Japanese learners,” so the use of action logs is not something new to them.

Most of the comments that students made were along the lines of “I should study more,” and some recognize that progress will not occur without effort.

I want to talk fluently, so I must study more.

We might hope that this student, and others like her, will actually do something about it.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The majority of the students who were surveyed say that study is important to them. Quite a number see themselves as good students. This is positive, and a foundation on which we can build, but at the same time, unfortunately, there seems to be a fairly widespread belief that if students are physically present in the classroom and are doing the homework that is required, then they are behaving as good students should. This means that there is a discrepancy between what many of the students think is acceptable as “good” student behaviour and the kinds of behaviour and effort that their teachers would like to see because they are necessary for successful language

learning. More study is required, and of a different nature, if many of the students are going to be successful with language learning.

In the past, most students have seen attendance at class as a given, and the effort as needing to start from that; today many seem to feel that just being there is a major part of the effort. Is it coincidence that this tendency has come about at the same time that we have started publishing our grading policies for each class, showing the students that in many classes their attendance counts for part of their grade, and in some cases a substantial part? Perhaps we are sending out the wrong signals if we are helping the students to continue to believe that attendance is more than the prerequisite to learning.

On the other hand, if the trend among high school students continues to move towards less study, we are going to have an uphill struggle to get our college students to do more, and are going to have to work to make the most of every minute of class time, while continuing to encourage students to use the time that they make for study as effective as possible. We may come to appreciate even more greatly students like the one who made the following comment about her studies:

“I’m doing more than I did first semester.”

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