Giving a Wide Variety of Support to EFL Online Learners

Eiichiro Tsutsui[1], Kazuharu Owada[2],
Norifumi Ueda[3], and Michiko Nakano[4]

[1]Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Hiroshima International University
[2]Tokyo College of Music, [3]Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Komazawa University,
[4]School of Education, Waseda University
tsutsui@ic.hirokoku-u.ac.jp

Abstract
Due to the recent advances in information and communication technology, language learners have more chances to learn English by using computers or mobile phones. In such educational backgrounds, individual learners have to become more responsible for their own learning or academic self-management. In other words, learners have to monitor the process of their own learning and modify their attitudes and behaviors accordingly.

The purpose of this study is three-fold. Firstly, we create a wide variety of diagnostic tests that can assess knowledge and skills about English learning. By using CEFR-based statements, learners will be given individualized diagnostic feedback and short-term learning goals. The goals are numerically expressed and offer tangible assistance to learners. Secondly, we create a diagnostic test that assesses individual learner characteristics, such as the use of learner strategies, the degree of anxiety, and the range of interests or motivations. The results are given immediately after the assessment. Another noteworthy feature is these assessments are available to mobile phone users. And thirdly, we create a learning environment where students can enforce a wide variety of skills as well as learner strategies. We hope that the users can always be motivated to learn by a sense of accomplishment and that they can have more chances to train themselves to control their own learning and behaviors.

Keywords
Self-study, Individual differences, Moodle

Introduction
Due to the recent advances in information/ communication technology (ICT), more and more language learners have started to learn English by using computers and mobile phones. In fact, many language schools and colleges have been creating virtual self-access centers or e-learning environments. In such educational backgrounds, it may be unavoidable for individual learners to become more responsible for their own learning or academic self-management. In other words, learners have to monitor the process of their own learning and modify their attitudes and behaviors accordingly. Although this sort of educational approach may be pedagogically ideal and desirable, language teachers must be aware that not all students can be autonomous from the start. Many studies have so far found that basic-level learners are not self-regulated and need assistance for their independence.

The purpose of this study is three-fold. Firstly, we create a wide variety of diagnostic tests that can assess knowledge and skills about English learning. By using CEFR-based statements, learners will be given individualized diagnostic feedback and short-term learning goals. The goals are numerically expressed and offer tangible assistance to learners. This diagnostic test also serves as a placement test, and learners can start learning from the appropriate level of courses. Secondly, we design a diagnostic test that can assess individual learner characteristics. The diagnostic test deals with the use of learner strategies, the degree of anxiety, and the range of interests or motivations. One dynamic aspect of this system is that the results are given right after the assessment. Another noteworthy feature is these assessments are available to mobile phone users. And thirdly, we create an environment where students can enforce a wide variety of skills, reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. Of particular note is that system users can try out as many strategies as possible. We hope that the system users actively engage in their own learning and can have more chances to train themselves to control their attitudes and behaviors.

1. Skill-based counseling system

Tsutsui et al. (2007a) experimentally used CEF-R descriptors (Council of Europe, 2001) to assess Japanese learners' practical communication skills. They found CEF-R, which had been developed in the EU context, also applicable to Japanese students.

On the basis of CEF-R descriptors, we have started to create a skill-based counseling system that is programmed with PHP. Since many PHP scripts are widely available and easy to learn, many language teachers can make use of the scripts when they wish to collect, store and score learners data through the Internet. Students can also have accss access to this system by using mobile or smart phones.

Since this system targets low-performing students, we used A1, A2 and B1 descriptors. The system can estimate the user's tentative CEF-R level of each skill immediately after he or she has answered several questions. This assessment also plays a role of placement test so that the users can select activities that match their own levels.

Moreover, by showing descriptors that are one notch higher than their current levels, we can help students set realistic goals and figure out what to do next.

LMS such as Moodle allows us to easily build this kind of system, as shown in figure 1.

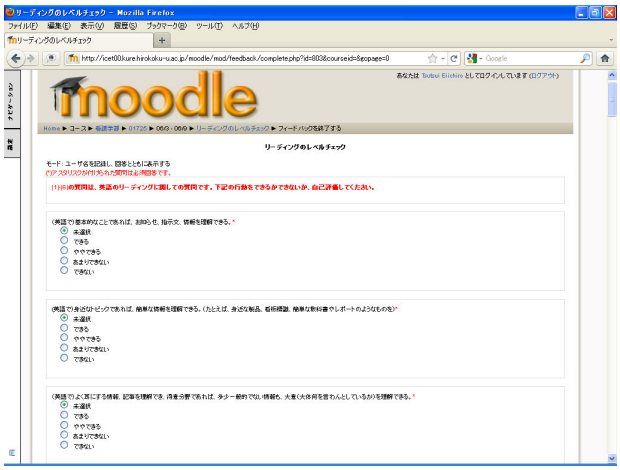

Figure 1: CEF-R based assessment

2. Strategy-based counseling system

Tsutsui et al. (2006) has created an online assessment system for Japanese basic and intermediate learners of English. In this system, the system users can obtain instamtaneous feedback immdiately after having answered 51 questionnaire items. The feedback is tailored to suit individual learners' characteristics, needs and preferences. They used such learner characteristics as learning strategies (Oxford, 1989), anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), learner preference (Ely,1986) and motivational orientations (Noels et al., 2000). 18 types of diagnostic feedback are available in this system; (1) nine kinds of strategy use, (2) four types of anxiety and discomfort, and (3) five kinds of motivation.

The nine strategy components are (1) social strategies, (2) practical writing strategies, (3) anxiety management strategies, (4) contextualized vocabulary learning strategies, (5) rational planning strategies, (6)grammar learning strategies, (7) decontexualized memory strategies (associating), (8) efficiency-oriented strategies to keep a good balance between accuracy and fluency, and (9) self-training strategies.

The anxiety and discomfort section deals with (1) class avoidance, (2) speech anxiety, (3) in-class anxiety, and (4) procrastinations.

The motivation components include (1) instrumental motivation, (2) introjected regulation, (3) identified regulation, (4) intrinsic motivation triggered by intellectual appetite (5) intrinsic motivation triggered by a sense of accomplishment, (6) motivation triggered by cultural stimulations.

All the component scores are indicated by standardized factor scores.

On the basis of several experiments and factor analyses, Tsutsui et al. (2006) managed to reduce a list of questionnaire items for perceived individual differences. Initially, the total number of items was more than 100. After their careful item selections, they experienced nearly a one-half reduction of the items. They have also demonstrated that computer use in EFL teaching can provide language teachers with sufficient educational data such as learners' test responses or survey responses. Using Moodle or other online data collection methods, Tsutsui et al (2009) were able to obtain nearly 3,000 Japanese learners of English. This enabled them to program the automatic counseling system for individual differences. The questionnaires are given online and each learner receives instantaneous online feedback as to how to overcome their specific learning difficulties.

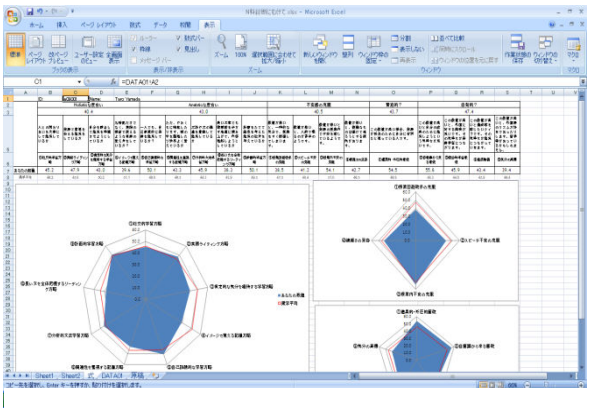

Figure 2: Diagnostic Sheet

Figure 2 illustrates a tailor-made advice sheet for his or her optimal learning model with a suitable list of courses he or she should be taking to accommodate their learning preferences.

Tsutsui et al.(2010) also examined how the system users felt about their individualized feedback. The users were asked to evaluate whether or not they find the system reliable, useful and persuasive. The system was conducted among 103 university students right after they had received a diagnostic feedback of our online assessment system. As a result, our system obtained favorable views from a large majority of university students (95%).

3. Building learning environments

From the results of the counseling systems, learners find out about their own learner characteristics and needs. Most of the learners are likely to feel they need to work on their own weaknesses. The system provides some activities that help students train themselves to study independently.

In Table 1, we describe what kind of activities the system users can do. Since this is our on-going project, we plan to increase the variety of activities.

Table 1: Activities available in our system

<Listening>
・Dictations
・Clause tests (using pop music)
・Multiple tests for Listening comprehension

＜Reading＞
・Rapid reading
・Extensive reading
・Multiple tests for reading Comprehension

<Writing>
・Clause tests (Sentence completion tasks)
・Free compositions (with time constraint)

<Speaking>
・Chorus reading
・Shadowing

<Vocabulary Learning>
・Parts of speech
・Vocabulary levels (on the basis of JACET 8000)

According to their levels, Japanese translations, and hints and tips are available.

4. Monitoring and evaluating system users

It is of high importance for language teachers to encourage and motivate students. ICTs (i.e., Moodle) allow teachers to easily and carefully monitor individual learners' performances. Access logs (figure 3) are one of the observable indices for learners' participations.

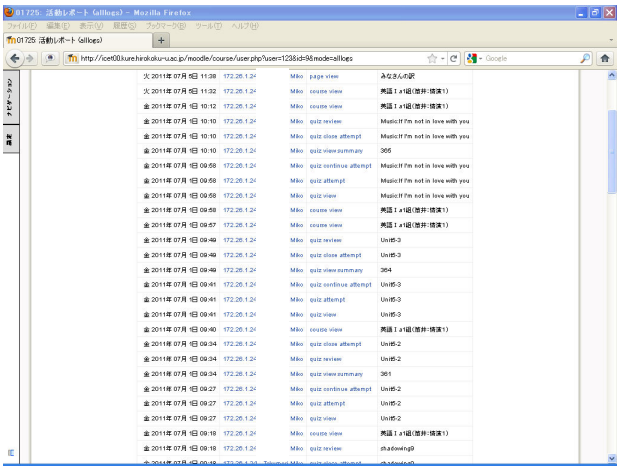

Figure 3: Miko's access logs

We can also take into account how many words learners have written/read and how many tasks they have completed.

By using journals and other self-reflection, tools we can not only monitor but also measure learners' achievement (see Tsutsui et al., 2009 for more details).

<Self-reflections>
- Journals
- Self-reflection tools

<Participations>
- Access logs
- Individual learners' progress reports

5. Conclusion

This study describes an ongoing project that aims to give feedback on learner needs and create learning environments that are closely related to the needs. Through diagnostic feedback, which raises consciousness of learners and motivates them to learn more, we can integrate some counseling systems and learning environments.

ICTs are beneficial in that automatic assessment and instantaneous feedback are conducted relatively easily. Nonetheless, humane approaches are also necessary. By closely observing learners' achievement, we should encourage learners to learn to control their own learning and behaviors.

References

Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

North B. & Schneider G. (1998). Scaling descriptors for language proficiency scales. *Language Testing*, 15(2), 217-263.

Deci, E.L.(1980). *The psychology of self-determination*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath.

Ely, C.M. (1986). An analysis of discomfort, risk-taking, sociability, and motivation in the L2 classroom. *Language Learning*. 36, 1-25.

Gardner, R.C., & Lambert, W.E. (1972) *Attitudes and motivation : Second language learning*. Newbury House.

Horwitz, E.K., Horwitz, M.B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety, *The Modern Language Journal*, 70, 125-132.

Noels, K.A., Pelletier, L.G., Clément, R., & Vallerand, R. J. (2000). Why Are You Learning a Second Language? Motivational Orientations and Self-Determination Theory. *Language Learning*, 50, 57-85, 2000

Oxford, R.L. (1989). Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Pub.

Tsutsui,E., Ueda, N.,& Nakano, M. (2006) A multi-dimensional approach to analyzing individual differences of Japanese language learners of English, *Proceedings of the 10th Conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics,* 257-264

Tsutsui, E., Kondo Y., & Nakano, M. (2007a). Developing CEFR-based Can-do Descriptors to Assess Practical Communication Skills of Japanese Learners of English. *Proceedings of the 12th Conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 186-189.

Tsutsui, E., Owada, K., Kondo, Y., Ano, K.,Ueda, N. and Nakano, M. (2007b). "Why do we Need to Teach Communication Strategies to Japanese EFL Learners?", *Proceedings of 12th Conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics,* 192-195, 2007.

Tsutsui, E., Owada, K., Kondo, Y., and Nakano, M. (2008) "A Proposal for a New-dimensional Online Feedback System: Focusing on Individual Learner Differences", *Association of Pacific Rim Universities 9th Distance Learning and the Internet Conference 2008,* 107-110.

Tsutsui, E., Owada, K., Ueda, N., and Nakano, M. (2009) "Supporting and Assessing L2 Learners' Self-regulated Learning", *Proceedings of the 14th Conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics,* 479-482.

Tsutsui, E., Ueda, N., Owada, K., and Nakano, M. (2010) "Survey Results on Japanese EFL Learners' Independent Learning", *Proceedings of the 15th Conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics,* 434-435.