

## **Exploring Learner Beliefs in Self-Regulated Learning: A Case Investigation of an English Self-Study**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated how learner beliefs relating to self-regulated learning were characterized and whether these beliefs changed over time during English self-study. Self-regulated learning functions effectively when supported by motivational beliefs, and many studies have confirmed its role in classroom settings; however, self-study which is detached from teachers and grades has not been examined. Two university students (Kei and Takushi) participated in the research and were willing to learn extra English through self-study. Using online material, they began to learn English independently. Over seven months, they set and reflected on learning goals. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, and excerpts regarding the participants' beliefs were extracted and categorized using qualitative thematic analysis. Five learner belief elements seemed to explain attitudes towards self-regulated learning during self-study. Kei displayed strong learner beliefs regarding the value of learning, the self, and learning management, which appeared to be the core ideas underpinning his self-regulated learning. Takushi also had a strong belief in language learning and its value, but sometimes these interfaced negatively, leading him to experience difficulty in conducting self-study based only on his own motivation.

**Keywords:** self-regulated learning, English self-study, learner beliefs, case study

## **Introduction**

In an English as a foreign language (EFL) environment such as Japan, studies have acknowledged that the amount of time spent learning English in school is inadequate for reaching ultimate second language (L2) proficiency (Hiromori, 2015). Most EFL learners who wish to improve their English language skills tend to study independently, outside the classroom. In such situations, they are required to study the L2 in a self-regulatory manner. Increasing research into the effect of self-regulated learning (SRL) on L2 learning has recognized that SRL predicts language proficiency (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006; Seker, 2016; Teng & Huang, 2019) and that SRL instruction has a significant influence on language skills (Lam, 2014; Little, 2009); however, few studies have addressed the learning environment outside the classroom. Besides, SRL has sub-components that move the learning cycle forward, including learner's fundamental motivational beliefs (Zimmerman, 2000). Learner beliefs can be a strong motivator in self-study where learners need to learn English voluntarily, but previous studies have exclusively examined self-efficacy beliefs in the process of SRL, not focusing on other types of learner beliefs. If a focus on SRL skills for self-study can meet the demands of L2 acquisition, a comprehensive understanding of learner beliefs can play its role in proceeding SRL. To investigate this topic, the present study explored learners' beliefs about SRL and reported on two Japanese EFL learners' cases, tracing their English self-study attitudes outside the classroom over seven months.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Cycle of Self-Regulated Learning**

The concept of SRL has become embedded in the field of learner psychology relating to second language acquisition (SLA) because SRL is considered to be a comprehensive model focusing on the

interrelationship between motivation and learning strategy (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). SRL is defined as “the ways that learners systematically activate and sustain their cognitions, motivations, behaviors, and affects, toward the attainment of their goals” (Schunk & Greene, 2018, p. 1). Zimmerman (2000) proposed three phases of SRL: forethought, performance or volitional control, and self-reflection, which include sub-components, as shown in Figure 1. The forethought phase involves learners in setting goals and planning their learning strategically, including considering self-motivational beliefs, such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations. The performance or volitional control phase consists in controlling and managing learning with focused attention and self-observation. In the self-reflection phase, learners identify and evaluate the causes of good work (Zimmerman, 2000). It is generally understood that, the more self-regulatory learners become, the more they achieve in school (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990). In an EFL context, researchers have acknowledged that SRL skills correlate with and influence L2 proficiency (Fukuda, 2018; Teng & Huang, 2019; Seker, 2016).

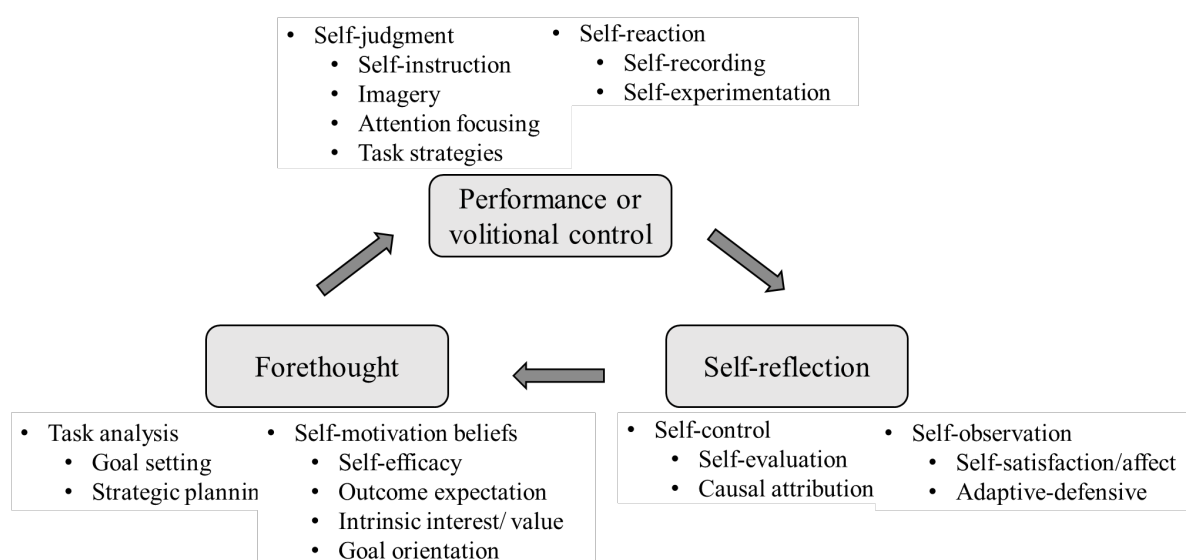


Figure 1. The cyclical model of self-regulated learning (based on Zimmerman, 2000).

## **Learner Beliefs**

Learner beliefs were traditionally regarded as an accompanying element that supported rational argument, and were understood as stable innate individual traits (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015); thus, many researchers attempted to classify different types of beliefs. One of the most widely used questionnaires, for example, was the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1988), which assesses five elements of learner beliefs: the difficulty of language learning, L2 aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning strategies, and motivations and expectation. Early quantitative studies prioritized the investigation of the types of learner beliefs and their links with other factors using self-report questionnaires (e.g., Mori, 1999; Wenden, 1999).

Many studies have discussed learner beliefs, because of the ambiguity of their conceptualization; however, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) summarized the characteristics of learner beliefs as (1) referring to the nature of language and language learning and (2) emphasizing their social and cultural nature. Williams, Mercer, and Ryan (2015) widely generalized that beliefs represent “an acceptance or conviction that something is true” (p. 63). The current study regarded learner beliefs as referring, not only to the nature of language and language learning, but to any social and cultural factors underpinning the learning context—English language self-study.

## **Learner Beliefs in Self-Regulated Learning**

Learner beliefs are especially concerned with the forethought phase of SRL, in that learners set goals, decide which learning strategy to use, and plan how to proceed based on their beliefs about L2 learning. Of the beliefs concerning the SRL process, self-efficacy is one of the most potent factors for enhancing the process (Mills, 2014). Cho and Kim (2019) confirmed that self-efficacy beliefs significantly related to self-regulatory skills for 173 Korean EFL learners, and the strength of self-efficacy beliefs and learners' SRL strategies differed significantly, depending on learners' English

proficiency. Even for English as a second language (ESL) children, the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and SRL was found (Wang & Pape, 2005). Using a mixed-method case study involving questionnaires and interviews, Wang and Pape (2005) discovered that proficient English-speaking children tended to feel more efficacious, reporting wider and more numerous SRL strategies than less-proficient children.

Expanding self-efficacy beliefs, Zheng, Lian, Yang, and Tsai (2016) focused on conceptions (i.e., beliefs) about language learning and online self-regulation. By distributing two questionnaires about learner beliefs and SRL to 401 Chinese EFL learners, they demonstrated that two beliefs, understanding/seeing in a new way and memorizing, significantly predicted learners' self-regulated attitudes, while conceptions emphasizing success in examinations related negatively to online self-regulation. These quantitative studies provided us with clear-cut evidence of the relationship between learner beliefs and SRL, suggesting that learner beliefs about their confidence, outcome expectations (e.g., Scholer, Miele, Murayama, & Fujita, 2018; Zheng et al., 2016) and cognitive/metacognitive strategies (e.g., Cho & Kim, 2019; Law, Chan, & Sachs, 2008) have a positive relationship with SRL; however, such studies have hardly addressed the SRL cycle, despite the interaction between the three phases of SRL.

### **Qualitative Focus on Learner Beliefs and Self-Regulated Learning**

The turning point for addressing learner beliefs came in the year 2000. Kalaja and Barcelos (2003) criticized the quantitative approach, which assumed that beliefs are stable and fixed mental representations, claiming that they are dynamic and situated (Barcelos, 2003, 2015). Ellis (2008) supported this argument, indicating that a qualitative method would be more suitable than a quantitative one for capturing trends in beliefs because beliefs can affect both the process and product of language learning. It is now generally understood that learner beliefs are complicated and formed

by interconnections between personalities, social contexts, and learning experiences.

Navarro and Thornton's case study (2011) revealed the interfaces between beliefs and self-directed learning<sup>1</sup> actions. Eighteen Japanese EFL learners participated in the course. The variety of instruments, such as self-reports, the guidance of self-directed language learning, advising sessions, and reflective journals, were combined. During the English course integrated with a self-directed language learning module, learner beliefs changed over time and that the interconnectedness of beliefs and self-directed actions played an important role in shaping further belief development. On the other hand, Kaypak & Ortactepe (2014), though not focusing on SRL, examined changes in beliefs about English learning through overseas exchange programs. They conducted mixed-methods research with surveys and journals, concluding that there was no change in beliefs before and after five months of studying abroad.

Whereas it is recognized that learner beliefs are formulated through the learning experience and social life (Aro, 2012), there seems no unified view, with some studies finding learner beliefs to be mutable and developing, and others finding no change. Further, although there have been studies focusing on learner beliefs related to SRL, less research has addressed them in the L2 self-study environment with a qualitative approach.

### **Self-Regulated Learning during Self-Study**

Many studies have focused on the role of SRL in classroom activities; some of them have dealt with independent learning contexts, such as distance learning and computer-assisted language learning. For example, the relationship between self-instruction and SRL capacity in online courses (Bown, 2009), the effect of homework on achievements and performance in the classroom (Kominato, 2016), and the outcomes of study preparation for biology examinations (Sebesta & Speth, 2017) have been examined. Because of the overlapping roles of researchers and teachers/instructors,

most of the studies have recognized self-study conditions in classroom environments. Little research has explored English learning outside the classroom that is unrelated to class credits, assignments, teachers and instructors, and course grades; however, in circumstances where autonomous English learning, within and beyond the educational classroom, is encouraged in EFL countries, a focus on SRL skills to support self-study is vital for the effective acquisition of L2 (Hiromori, 2015). The current study defined self-study as a situation in which students learn English independently, regardless of their university courses, and focused on the relationship between SRL and learner beliefs in such a situation.

### **Problems and Research Questions**

Learner beliefs, including self-efficacy, seem crucial for supporting the SRL cycle and its functioning, and SRL appears to be the core of L2 learning in self-study conditions. Even though learner beliefs and SRL are inseparably linked in various contexts, such as in classrooms, distance courses, skill-specific instruction, it has not elucidated how they relate in English self-study conditions. Additionally, more attention needs to be paid to investigating learner beliefs descriptively and dynamically because learner beliefs can be mutable and interrelated within the SRL cycle. The current study aimed to qualitatively explore the learner beliefs that Japanese EFL learners held about self-regulated language learning, how their beliefs related to SRL, and how these beliefs changed during English language self-study.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The researcher visited compulsory English classes at a private university in Japan and recruited participants by announcing that the research sought students who wanted to improve their English

skills. The participants voluntarily joined the study, not knowing that the research dealt with the concept of SRL. This research was a part of a dissertation project: nine people participated in the research, and the two of them, both of whom were male university students, are the focus of the current paper in that they reported and showed contrasted learner beliefs throughout the study.

Kei<sup>2</sup> was 21 years old and majoring in business and marketing. He had been studying English for nine years but had never studied abroad. At the beginning of the research, he declared that his latest TOEIC score was 685. He joined the research in September 2018, and completed it in the middle of June 2019, after participating for eight and a half months.

Takushi was 18 years old and majoring in intercultural communication. He had been learning English for seven years, including overseas study in Australia for three weeks. He had Eiken Grade 2 at the beginning of the research, and his latest TOEIC score was 805. He began participating in September 2018 and finished in the middle of April 2019. His participation in the study was for about seven months.

Both participants had final examinations at their university at the end of January, and each of them traveled abroad during the fall holiday: Kei went to Bali and Takushi to the United States. After finishing the fall semester, Kei started full-time job hunting, which continued until early June; Takushi belonged to a volunteer club, so he undertook voluntary activities in Cambodia during the spring vacation.

## **Materials**

The current research provided English language self-study conditions that had no relationship to university courses. To this end, online English material and learning logs were used.

**Online material for learning English.** The English online material, whose program was originally provided by the participants' university and free for the students and staff, was used in the



present study for English self-study. Considering the accessibility of the learning materials by all the participants, the establishment of suitable self-study conditions, and the convenience of the learning record, this online learning material was judged to be the most appropriate. It included four dimensions of English skills: vocabulary, grammar, reading, and listening, targeting TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS, and general English learning. The participants could choose any content that interested them, accessing the material from any device, anywhere, and at any time.

**Learning logs.** Learning logs were distributed to the participants to record what they learned on certain days and the extent to which they were motivated and felt a sense of achievement. They wrote down how long they studied for and what they learned, then scored their levels of motivation and sense of accomplishment for that day. The learning log was mainly used to help them reflect upon their English learning, making the interviews more fruitful and facilitating the participants' retrospection.

## **Procedure and Analysis**

**Semi-structured interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were adopted to focus on the SRL attitudes, reveal the interconnectedness of the learning environment with self-study, and enhance the learners' disclosure of their learning and self-reflection. Although the current research expected the cyclical activities to follow the previously mentioned three phases of SRL theory, the interviews only provided an opportunity to investigate the two stages of forethought and self-reflection, due to the research design. Because the learners were supposed to learn English by themselves in the performance or volitional control phase, it was not monitored but occasionally reported in the interview retrospectively. A number of standardized questions were prepared, corresponding with the theoretical SRL framework (Zimmerman, 2000), as shown in Table 1, but the interviews were not limited to them.

**Procedure.** The interview sessions were conducted 13 times, biweekly. The interviews were arranged according to the participants’ schedules and held in a private room at the university. Participants dropped in on their way to classes or clubs. To focus on the cyclical events of SRL, the interview sessions repeatedly required the learners to set goals and reflect on their SRL, to provide opportunities for forethought and self-reflection.

Table 1

*Examples of the Prepared Questions for Each Phase*

Forethought phase	Self-reflection phase
Q: Why did you set this goal?	Q: What were the good/bad points during this period?
Q: Do you expect that you will work well?	Q: Why did you (not) study well?
Q: How much are you motivated now?	Q: What was your motivation like?
	Q: To what extent did you feel a sense of accomplishment?

After receiving an explanation of the research objective and participation conditions, they described their English learning backgrounds and tried to set initial learning goals in the first interviews. During the intervals between the interviews, the participants studied English independently, using the online material, and completed their learning logs. After 11 SRL sessions, the learners had final interviews that enabled them to reflect on all the sessions (see Figure 2). Longitudinal research had the advantage of describing unique learners’ characteristics as they relate to learner beliefs and SRL, and this approach allowed us to capture changes in beliefs during the research. This research attempted to establish a quasi-self-study condition and keep contact with learners to obtain data by repeating interviews and self-study period.

Theoretical concepts of beliefs and SRL had been concealed from the participants, whereas, information about them was implicitly elicited by the interviews. No instructions or advice were given to participants for setting goals or reflecting on their behaviors and motivations; therefore, the

ways in which they worked on their English learning varied. Even if they asked the researcher for advice or suggestions, they did not receive any; rather, they had to address the issues by themselves. The researcher restricted herself to listening attentively to the learners' talk, holding all the sessions as openly and freely as possible, and trying to pose the prepared questions gently in the course of natural conversation; thus, the participants could disclose anything about their daily lives, their moods, and their feelings and thoughts.

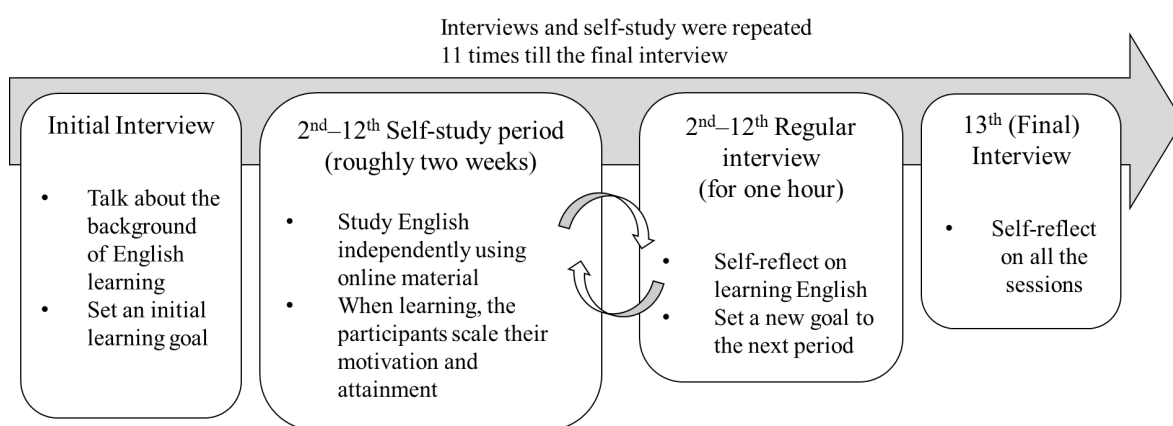


Figure 2. The research procedure.

**Analysis.** Thematic analysis (Tsuchiya, 2016) was applied to the interview data. All the interviews were transcribed and, thereafter, the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly. The transcribed data was then segmented, with one paragraph of conversation regarded as a single unit of coding. The units of coding were then categorized and labeled with thematic codes. The research aimed to focus, not only on beliefs about linguistic features, but any contextual beliefs; every mention of beliefs was extracted according to the definition of Williams, Mercer, and Ryan (2015). This work was done in a timely and repeated manner to ensure the reliability and validity of the data (Meriam, 1997).

The relationship between learner beliefs and SRL involved determining whether the beliefs

were reflected during the forethought and/or self-reflection phases of the study. Learner beliefs that were extracted by the thematic analysis, if different perspectives on the same beliefs were displayed in earlier or later interviews, were judged to have “changed.”

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The Relationship between Learner Beliefs and Self-Regulated Learning**

The inductive thematic approach involved extracting five categories from the interview data: (1) motivational beliefs about the L2 (antecedents of participants’ motivation to learn English before their self-study began); (2) learner beliefs about language learning; (3) learner beliefs about the value of examinations; (4) learner beliefs about the self; and (5) learner beliefs about learning management (participants’ management of such aspects as time, the environment, and how to maintain their motivation to keep learning).

### **Kei’s Case**

**Motivational beliefs about L2.** Kei fundamentally thought that language learning would expand the world he could access. He also had a strong intrinsic interest in English, stating: “English is very cool, and the best way to improve my speaking skills is to communicate with native English speakers”<sup>3</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> interview). He greatly admired native speakers of English and cared about acquiring conversational skills. Another of his motives for studying English came from his interest in MBA programs abroad. After joining a company, he hoped to take advantage of the company’s MBA program in the United States. He wanted to learn English to make his dreams of studying for an MBA come true.

**Learner beliefs about language learning.** Compared to Takushi, Kei thought more systematically about English learning, emphasizing two characteristic strategies for acquiring English

in light of his learning experience: continuity and skill integration. First, he understood that to acquire the L2, it was necessary to keep practicing regularly. Here are two extracts regarding his beliefs about effective ways of mastering English:

(Extract 1) Let's say that you practice listening for two hours just one day during a week, or that you do it for 15 to 30 minutes every day for 2 hours per week in total. I think the latter is much better (Self-reflection, SR hereafter, 4<sup>th</sup> interview).

(Extract 2) Vocabulary is limited, but listening and reading are infinite. I need to gain experience of reading and listening, so I can never have too much practice (SR, 8<sup>th</sup> interview).

As his remarks showed, Kei purposefully paid attention to learning English continuously; because he thought that the amount of practice would influence the proficiency the later achieved, he emphasized the frequency as well as the duration of practice. In addition, he held the belief that language skills cannot be separated, but must be acquired reciprocally; for example, he perceived that vocabulary was integral to writing and reading. He stated this with regard to ways of mastering vocabulary:

(Extract 3) I don't enjoy studying using only vocabulary books: I hate them. I prefer using texts that contain integrated passages and vocabulary because I can learn the vocabulary through reading (1<sup>st</sup> interview).

(Extract 4) Vocabulary can't be acquired without writing. I write messily on the back of used paper and, when it is full, I throw it away. Practice itself is important, so I don't care how neatly I write (SR, 3<sup>rd</sup> interview).

Vocabulary books are commonly used by students in Japan who are taking entrance examinations for universities. Most of them comprise English words and their equivalents in Japanese, with notes about pronunciation and intonation, and sometimes examples of word usages. Kei, however, declined to use such materials, preferring to choose his own material (mainly reading

texts with the necessary words integrated into them). It can be said that a strong belief appeared in his preference for these kinds of texts. Kei mainly practiced reading and listening sections in the research, using vocabulary and grammar sections supplementarily.

**Learner beliefs about the value of examinations.** In an EFL country such as Japan, the main objectives for studying English independently are connected to examinations. Kei expressed the value of English as it relates to assessment:

(Extract 5) I trust the value of the nationwide mock exams more than the ranking of tests within schools. Anyone can get high enough scores on school tests if they prepare, so students with high GPAs [grade point averages] are not always smart. School tests are rather meaningless (forethought, F hereafter, 5<sup>th</sup> interview).

(Extract 6) Taking TOEIC only in order to get a good grade is a waste of energy ... English is meaningless unless you acquire it properly; thus, it shouldn't be achieved with a short-term purpose (SR, 4<sup>th</sup> interview) ... I think that preparing for TOEIC to get good grades for job hunting doesn't make sense (F, 12<sup>th</sup> interview).

(Extract 7) Taking TOEIC is for estimating how proficient I become. It is just one step toward ultimately talking confidently with foreigners and traveling abroad (Kei, 13<sup>th</sup> interview).

Kei regarded taking the examination as one way to confirm the development of his language skills. His long-term goal was to converse with foreigners and travel abroad fluently. Taking tests served to check how his English ability developed. Evidently, he did not see it as beneficial to take an examination simply to achieve a high score, as shown in Extract 7, because (in his words) learners tend to spend less time studying English when they set such short-term goals. He believed that English cannot be acquired easily, since he talked about the necessity of continuous learning, emphasizing that English takes a long time to acquire and good grades are a by-product of mastering English.

**Learner beliefs about the self.** Kei was particular about what he was to be. He mentioned that his motivation was not only to learn English but to frame his life policy. When he came to the interview session after a demotivated period, the researcher asked why he was able to learn English according to his predetermined goals, despite the lack of motivation, and he answered:

(Extract 8) Those who are all talk and no action annoy me. I really hate liars and can't understand those who don't do what they say they will do. People who don't keep their word are the worst in the world. If you cannot do what you plan, it is only demotivation ... so I keep my word. (SR, 7<sup>th</sup> interview) ... Don't you think that people who don't keep their words for goals are uncool? I don't like all-talk-but-no-action people (SR, 10<sup>th</sup> interview).

This utterance encapsulated Kei's stand toward English self-study throughout the sessions. He was consistently true to his word, and this was evident in the forethought phase; that is, when he set his own goals to learn English through self-study, he tried to set achievable and realistic goals, because he did not want to lie to the researcher or to himself. If he failed to achieve his goals, he would have had to admit to being "all-talk-but-no-action," and he loathed such an attitude. It was clear that his beliefs spurred his learning into real action.

**Learner beliefs about learning management.** Goal-setting and controlling the learning circumstances were included in this category. Kei's policy for setting goals was to engage in English learning as often as possible:

(Extract 9) When I'm free, I often drop in to the café and do something, such as preparing for job hunting or term papers. I buy a beverage, of course, so it would be a waste of money if I didn't do anything there. That's how I make myself work. This is my habit, and I integrate English study into this habit (SR, 9<sup>th</sup> interview).

(Extract 10) I don't want to set goals that overwhelm me, but too easy goals are useless. I set a proper schedule that suits me (SR, 6<sup>th</sup> interview).

(Extract 11) Goals need to be clear and easy to understand. Setting goals involves revising them periodically ... Setting a vague goal such as “become better” makes no sense, because it is important to understand what I need to do. Once I confirm a small step, I can go on to the next goal (F, 10<sup>th</sup> interview).

Kei was very conscious of making English a habitual part of his life, because of his belief that English cannot be acquired in a short time (see Extracts 1 & 9). As one of his strategies for making himself study English, he mentioned going to a café. When he entered a café, he had to buy a drink to stay there; hence, he took advantage of this opportunity to do his schoolwork or prepare for job hunting. This habit made him finish his work, even when he was reluctant to do so; because if he did not do anything except fiddle with a smartphone, he would have wasted the money for a cup of coffee.

To keep learning English, he tried to be conscious of the content of his goals (see Extracts 10 and 11). There were three points, according to Kei, that made goals more effective: they should be specific, clear, and comprehensible. He often dialoged with himself, guessed that challenging goals might be the most appropriate for him, and then set goals with appropriate content, time, and measures. Because he believed that too easy or too difficult goals were meaningless, he was prudent in setting a new goal in each session.

**Change in learner beliefs.** In terms of the five categories of learner beliefs, Kei consistently adhered to what he talked about in the 13 interviews. After the final session, he successfully obtained a job with the possibility of studying for an MBA abroad. He remarked, “Three years before, I thought the guy who got a high TOEIC score was cool, but not anymore. Many of my friends failed in job hunting, even with high scores” (13<sup>th</sup> interview). Although his view of examinations might have changed throughout his university life, his beliefs did not change with regard to self-study.



## **Takushi's Case**

**Motivational beliefs about L2.** Takushi thought of English as a tool for having conversations with foreign friends and teachers. He reported his desire to speak English fluently, but he was struggling with it, and he could not figure out the cause:

(Extract 12) I don't know why, but I can get a high enough score on the listening test, so I'm worried about the future when I might not be able to do it suddenly. I can understand English, but I can't converse well ... I have no idea why speaking and listening skills are so disconnected" (1<sup>st</sup> interview).

One of his interesting motives for trying self-study was because, in addition to acquiring English skills, he wanted to participate in the research. He was interested in pursuing a doctoral course, so he wanted to become familiar with research.

**Learner beliefs about language learning.** Takushi showed his unique opinion of how to acquire necessary words, stating that learning vocabulary is unnecessary. He said that if he came across unfamiliar words while learning, he would ignore them and focus on understanding the main ideas:

(Extract 13) I think that remembering vocabulary is unnecessary for reading English passages because I don't get bad results when I don't study vocabulary ... You can answer questions as long as you can understand sentences, despite ignoring unknown words (SR, 6<sup>th</sup> interview).

Nor did he think that practicing ways of answering and the correct spelling was necessary for him in language learning. For example, he mentioned that translation and revision technology has developed in recent years, implying that people no longer have to remember the spelling of words:

(Extract 14) Practicing spelling is what high school students do, so I don't need it. Also, most writing must be done with laptops, so MS Word revises the spellings (F, 7<sup>th</sup> interview).

(Extract 15) My vocabulary skill won't decrease, and my reading skill will be maintained, as

long as I practice listening. My grammar skill is ... I think it will be okay with my spirit (F, 10<sup>th</sup> interview).

Based on his belief that he did not need to learn English systematically, he concluded that the necessary skills (i.e., reading, vocabulary, and grammar), except for listening, could be disregarded (Extract 15). Although he first learned vocabulary in this research due to its easiness, he eventually only completed listening tasks in the online material for the purpose of learning vocabulary.

**Learner beliefs about the value of examinations.** Takushi placed far more emphasis on taking examinations and achieving good results than Kei. The extracts below represent how he had studied for English examinations throughout his life. Characteristically, he understood examinations to be the equivalent of a *game* (Extract 16), with regard to the type of questions; for example, TOEIC uses multiple-choice answers for all 200 items. Takushi reported that he could choose options with a 25% probability of success, even if he answered unfamiliar questions; therefore, rather than studying to master English, he practiced narrowing down the four choices to just two, becoming more familiar with the format of the test than developing a specific skill (Extract 17).

(Extract 16) All the TOEIC questions have a choice of four answers, so it is easy to get points (1<sup>st</sup> interview) ... I trained only on the strategic aspects of the TOEIC test. Anyway, my score will depend on whether my answers, based on the odds, are right or wrong (F, 12<sup>th</sup> interview).

(Extract 17) I feel that I can achieve an advantageous score for job hunting, even with overnight cramming. The job I'm interested in requires a TOEIC score of at least 860, so I will study for it someday, but I don't have to start it right now (SR, 4<sup>th</sup> interview).

(Extract 18) I want to use English well, because I want to be recognized as being intelligent. I don't know how to acquire English, but when I get a high score on TOEIC, I feel that I rank more highly as a human being (SR, 11<sup>th</sup> interview).

English examinations were likened to a game by Takushi, who believed that there was a knack

to passing English examinations. At the same time, he explained that his pleasure came, not from obtaining a high score and developing English proficiency, but from beating the people around him in terms of the examination scores (Extract 18); hence, his motivation declined during the self-study, which required beliefs about learning management.

**Learner beliefs about the self.** One of the most remarkable differences between the two learners was what they thought about themselves in relation to their learning of English. While Kei recounted firm beliefs about himself, Takushi did not mention himself at all. He described his environment, the influence of his friends, and the phenomenon of his language learning, but he did not clearly state his own beliefs.

**Learner beliefs about learning management.** Kei managed his environment to keep learning English, but Takushi's behavior depended on examinations. Takushi confided, in the final session, that he no longer wished to study English, as described in Extract 19. Given this change in his viewpoint, he could not imagine what he would be doing seven months later and could formulate suitable goals. He preferred extrinsic to intrinsic rewards, which gave him a much stronger sense of studying English to prepare for examinations; for example, he claimed that the researcher should have set conditions, with those who achieved the highest scores on the TOEIC exam at the end of the research obtaining a greater reward for beating others. This was his motivation for conducting English self-study: not to acquire English, but to beat his fellow students. For Takushi, English seemed to be a tool for gaining supremacy over others, as well as for communicating with them:

(Extract 19) I had no idea of the necessary amount of English to study because I had no concrete goals ... I couldn't imagine the future or set goals, even for seven months ahead. I couldn't estimate my progress, so I didn't try to set any objectives (13<sup>th</sup> interview).

(Extract 20) If you had given me a goal such as "Improve your TOEIC score by 50 points", I could have decided on my goals and been motivated. To make efforts to accomplish what

others dictate is good for me. Someday, when I become a member of society, I will have to work on this kind of self-study. So far, I have forced myself to study by applying for certification exams because it is an easier way for me to compete with others. (13<sup>th</sup> interview)

He used his train commute to study vocabulary and listening because he could use his smartphone to pass the time; however, this was not new learning for him, which made him more reluctant to practice English self-study.

**Change in learner beliefs.** Throughout the research, Takushi's beliefs about language learning strategies seemed to change. He gradually realized the importance of an awareness of grammar:

(Extract 21) Learning English is about getting good grades in junior or high school, but since entering university, I have realized that English is a communication tool for conversations with foreign friends and teachers. I regret my study focus—concentrating on grammar ... I'm especially bad at speaking and listening. My grammar knowledge is sufficient, but I think it is unnecessary to study abroad (1<sup>st</sup> interview).

Takushi originally wished to study abroad and wanted to take advantage of voluntary activities to visit foreign countries. Considering the environment around him, in which he was majoring in intercultural communication alongside many students from overseas, he noticed that English was a communication tool for conversing with these international students. At the same time, he realized and regretted that he devoted too much time and energy to acquiring English grammar, reporting that his priority, when learning English, was to develop listening and speaking skills for fluent communication.

However, after going abroad as a volunteer, his learner beliefs changed dramatically. He realized that grammar is the basis for constructing sentences and having conversations with his friends:

(Extract 22) Most of my friends told me that my study style, focusing only on grammar and test

scores, was a waste, and I thought that myself, but I noticed the usefulness of grammar a bit in Cambodia. I thought that grammatical skill wasn't needed in a conversation, but now I think it is important (SR, 12<sup>th</sup> interview).

Takushi had a conversation with some local friends in Cambodia, during which they told him that they spoke fluently, but that their grammar was weak; therefore, they respected his grammatical ability, since he could make a conversation fruitful. This experience led Takushi to notice the importance of a grammatical basis for communicating in English. The change came about, not because of the self-study, but due to his volunteer experience, which did not seem to relate to self-study.

**Summary.** Both learners joined the current study with reasonable motivation; however, they ran their self-study in a very different way with the same material and context. Kei tried self-study because he originally had a positive and intrinsic interest in using English and especially wanted to become a fluent English speaker. After starting self-study, he had cared about the number and quality of his goals, frequently evaluating whether he would achieve them or be overwhelmed. Obviously, his attitude to goal-setting and motivating himself was supported by his beliefs. His goals guided his mastering of English, which he believed to be a process of creating small steps that helped him to achieve his ends more easily. He mentioned that goals needed to be clear and easy to understand, reflected on how he could achieve his aims, and revised goals that were not difficult enough. This is the very process that many self-regulated learners have traced (Zimmerman, 2002). This belief in learning management seemed to be promoted by his belief in the value of examinations, which he perceived a means to assess his L2 development, and by his beliefs about himself. Kei believed strongly in his motto: "If you give your word, you must keep it," which enabled him to foresee what he could do and reflect on how he behaved. Eventually, these consistent and firm beliefs played a role in his SRL of English by self-study.

Takushi was first motivated to speak English because English appeared to be a necessary tool for communication with people around the world. Once he joined the study, he experienced difficulty in setting learning goals because his motivation for self-study depended on getting better scores than the people around him, and he could not achieve such an aim in an individual learning situation. He could have set examination-oriented goals to advance his self-study, but he did not do so. It caused him to feel that there was no benefit to taking tests in the period of the research. His beliefs in the value of learning English seemed to have a negative impact on his goal-setting. Additionally, he did not have strong beliefs about himself, in contrast to Kei. These elements might have affected the forethought phase of SRL: his self-reflection was not likely to lead to goal-setting in the forethought phase. He believed that goals should be set by others, such as the requirement to take a class or achieve a good grade, and such extrinsic goals motivated him. He thought himself capable of studying English without setting goals; hence, it can be concluded that he was not self- but other-regulated.

### **General Discussion**

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between learner beliefs and self-regulated language learning by analyzing two case studies. The results showed contrasting learner beliefs regarding L2 self-study and illuminated five categories of beliefs: motivation, language learning, the value of examinations, self-beliefs, and learning management. Learner beliefs and SRL clearly related to each other, regardless of the characteristics involved, which was consistent with previous studies hypothesizing that learner beliefs are indispensable in launching the SRL cycle (Navarro & Thornton, 2011; Zheng et al., 2016). Holding strong beliefs about the self can play an important role in SRL, but only Kei displayed such beliefs in the research. Being conscious of the self is a core idea underpinning SRL because every phase of SRL requires learners to focus on themselves in order to

ascertain whether their goals are suitable, both personally and situationally, and whether their learning performance is effective for attaining their goals (Zimmerman, 2002). Kei's habit of continually evaluating himself and his learning process strongly related to the concept of the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009). Kei considered both an "ideal" and "ought-to" L2 self, in that he wanted to speak English like a native English speaker (ideal L2 self) and, once he had decided this, he thought that he should achieve it (ought-to self). Yashima, Nishida, and Mizumoto (2017) confirmed that both kinds of L2 selves can predict intended effort, and ideal L2 selves are influenced by beliefs about the communication orientation in L2 learning. This study showed that beliefs about the self may work as precursors for setting goals and be linked with the whole SRL cycle, as well as with making an effort to develop L2 learning habits.

With respect to learner beliefs about the value of examinations, both the two learners gave weight to them; however, what was obviously different between them was that Kei regarded them as a barometer of his development of English proficiency, while Takushi regarded them as a game enabling him to dominate others. This seems partially correspond to the results of Zheng et al. (2016), which suggested that an examination-oriented belief had a negative correlation to SRL. In an environment where initiative plays an important role in self-study, such as in this particular research context, judging the value of learning is crucial rather than being examination-oriented or not. In other words, understanding "why I am doing it" can enhance SRL for self-study, which is independent of teachers, grades, and course assignments in school. Takushi did not find such meaning in self-study because his powerful motivation depended on competition with other learners.

In terms of changes in learner beliefs, the present study found that there were hardly any changes in beliefs before and after the self-study sessions. Only Takushi showed the transformation of his grammatical orientation; however, this seemed to be greatly influenced by his experience of going to Cambodia as a volunteer. This result seemed to support the idea that a person's beliefs

cannot be transformed easily, as Kaypak & Ortactepe's (2014) study illustrated with regard to unchanged beliefs even pre- and post-study abroad periods. Navarro & Thornton's (2011) study identified a significant development of learner beliefs, asserting that both beliefs and self-directed language learning can be mutable through interaction with instructors. Similarly, Barcelos (2015) pointed out that beliefs are not stable, but dynamic and influential, and are formed by learners' experiences. It might, therefore, be worth lengthening the research period to trace changes in learner beliefs about SRL.

Last, SRL could be based on individual learners' intentions. As previous studies have mentioned, the cycle and strategy of SRL are teachable, and learners can acquire SRL skills through explicit instruction about their mechanisms (Lam, 2014; Little, 2009). The current study did not provide any direction or advice about SRL to the learners; nevertheless, Kei was encouraged to learn English autonomously by monitoring his goals and level of attainment. Takushi paid little attention to himself in the first interview, being far more conscious of other factors, such as the online material and the personalities of his teachers and friends; however, he gradually began to consider why he did not have goals. This indicated that less self-regulated learners might benefit from an opportunity to look at themselves objectively through self-study. Another possibility is that the participants took the opportunity to learn SRL activity implicitly through the influence of biweekly interviews, during which they could engage in reflecting on their self-study and setting goals for the forthcoming session. The researcher always invited the learners to sit comfortably and chat, which should have created plenty of opportunities for them to reflect on themselves. These calm situations could have contributed to the participants reporting that they did not notice the SRL cycle or understand the concept until the end of the research. SRL may thus be acquirable by learners without them necessarily being taught it, providing that they are fully aware of their learning attitudes, set goals, and reflecting on them.



## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the current research confirmed that learner beliefs were certainly embedded in SRL during English self-study. Learner beliefs about the value of language learning, the self, and learning management were seen as parts of the SRL cycle, with learners foreseeing the self-study by setting goals and motivating themselves. Although most studies have concerned SRL in classrooms, this research used a self-study setting, which did not relate to teachers, academic classes, or grade point averages (GPAs). It could be claimed that only part of the pure SRL situation requiring learners to learn the L2 in a self-regulatory manner was observed; however, there are two other limitations in this study. First, the research could only speculate on the relationship between beliefs and SRL, and the process behind changes in learner beliefs was not identified. More longitudinal research (over a year or a much more extended period) should be conducted to focus on the accumulation of beliefs about language learning. Learners' backgrounds should be examined more closely to address the influence of beliefs on other dynamic and complicated processes of L2 learning. Second, self-selection bias may have existed in that the decision to participate in the research was left entirely up to the participants, representing that the participants might show only a unique case out of the population. However, because the study was designed to pursue the attitude in long-term English learning, it was reasonable that learners who were willing to learn English joined the research. The present research emphasized examining learner beliefs, so the complete SRL cycle was not highlighted. By triangulating a quantitative and qualitative approach, future research could accurately describe the SRL cycle, clarifying transformations in perspectives about SRL from pre- to post-English self-study.

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### Notes

1. Self-directed learning is a similar concept to SRL, in that both include goal-directed and self-organized learning, but self-directed learning is broader than SRL and features the learning environment, whereas SRL features learner characteristics (Loyens, Magda, & Rikers, 2008).
2. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.
3. The interviews were conducted in Japanese. The transcriptions were translated into English and proofread by a native English speaker.

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