

# Cultivating learner autonomy toward English writing

— A program based on Self-Determination Theory —

学習者の英作文への自律性を高める試み

— 自己決定理論を基盤として —

次世代教育学部教育経営学科

江原 智子

EBARA, Satoko

Department of Educational Administration

Faculty of Education for Future Generations

**キーワード：**基盤補完教育，英作文課題，自己決定理論

**Abstract：**近年，大学初年次生の英語学習における既存知識や目的は多様性を増し多くの教育機関で様々な学習の選択肢を提供する事例が増えている。大学における基盤教育としての性格を持つ英語学習は一般教養クラスや補習学習において，基本的な語彙や文法事項の見直しを中心とした学力の増強を中心に，後の学術分野・職業分野など専門的な英語学習への移行を目指す例が多く，同時に実践的なコミュニケーション力の獲得を期待される傾向がある。このような大学における学力基盤の見直しを中心とする授業では，学習者が自発的に言語材料を使用する機会を通し自律的な学習習慣の獲得へ効力感を得ることが初年次生の後の言語学習の実践と継続を促す鍵になると思われる。これを下支える自己決定理論（Deci & Ryan, 2002）の「3つの基本的な心理的ニーズ」を学習環境に提供する事を踏まえ，筆者は英語の補習学習クラスにおいて3つの英作文プロジェクトを導入した。学習経験の異なる学び手が，それぞれ限られた言語材料の中で自身の考えを表現する機会を通して，目標言語を介し伝達する事への価値観を得ることを期待した。これらの学習効果について，学生の作品や学内テストの結果，学期末アンケートの記述などを通して分析した。

**Keywords：**basic supplementary class, English writing, self-determination theory

## 1. Introduction

The type of common English classes (English as Liberal Arts) at universities are largely diverse in the first two years. Tajino and Suiko (2005) classified the definitions of the programs roughly in two by the purposes. One is “the destination of English learning” as a common subject of junior and senior secondly education, and the other is “the start of English learning” for professional education aiming for graduate and undergraduate level. Recently, the former is called EGP (English for General Purpose, which means general objective English). The latter is discussed as English for specialized use, called ESP (English for Special Purpose). Furthermore, ESP is

divided into EAP (English for Academic Purpose, at Universities and Graduate schools) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes, on business use) (Figure 1).

It is an urgent task to enable newly enrolled students to adjust to the learning specialized in academic skills at a university as promptly and smoothly as possible. The quality and the quantity of the English knowledge and skills of new university students have had are largely diverse because of the modern globalized enrollment of universities. Hence, it is the present conditions that many universities start to provide the students with the supplementary English learning classes.

Taken the limited weekly time frames and the commonly big class size at a university into

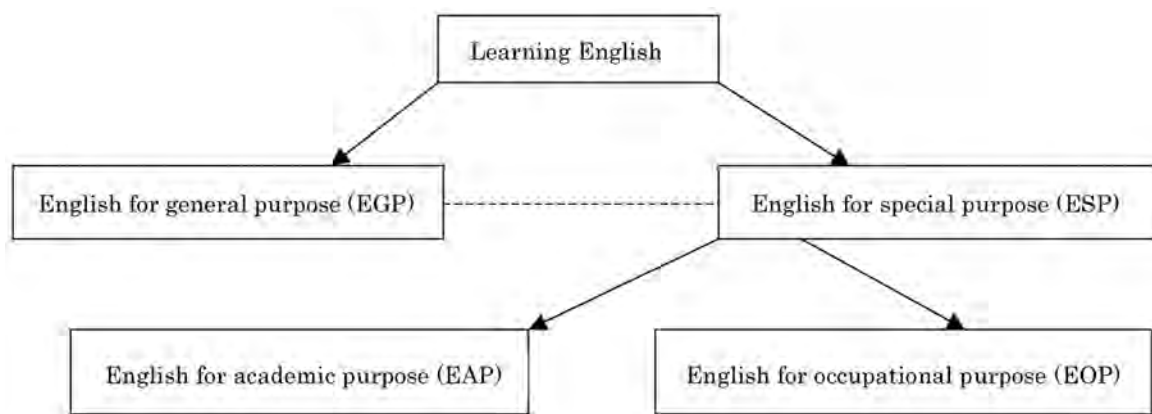


Figure 1 Classification of college English Education (cited and revised from Tajino, 2004: 17)

consideration, it seems obviously difficult for the instructors to take care of individual problems. On the other hand, considering of the demand from the globalized society, more and more universities are expected to cultivate young learners' communicative competence and usable skills of linguistic knowledge. It means that may not be mere purpose of general English supplementary lessons to cover just missing basic vocabulary and grammars.

This paper aims to report the results of exploratory experiments and the investigation at a university supplementary class. The activities are planned for having struggling learners equip with a feeling of development by promoting their acquiring of various expressions, with a desire of English communication, and enable them sustain their language learning after the course. The post-survey and proficiency tests presented may be the evidence of the learners' change quantitatively and qualitatively. At the end, the trials suggest some pedagogical implications. The author, as a teacher as well as a researcher, aimed to connect basic grammar knowledge to the practical application through creative writing tasks.

## 2. The purpose

Even supplementary English lessons can be more creative enough to encourage the learners to use the language as a communication tool. A complimentary second language (L2) lessons are

often characterized by emphasizing on reviewing of basic vocabulary and grammars. Needless to say, basic knowledge of a language should not be ignored. There is a significant amount of knowledge to build up a solid foundation of acquiring a foreign language not only for understanding the structures, but also for the use of it. However, teachers and instructors often worry too much and prevent their struggling students from assigning rather challenging tasks. The author believes in that such striving students desire to try developmental tasks, desiring their real feeling of capability of a language use.

Therefore, the author introduced practical writing programs to utilize what they learned as basic grammar or vocabulary with good examples. The examples are often found in authentic materials such as English songs and poetry, which are impressive enough to engage students with various learning backgrounds. The program emphasizes English compositions including three main projects. In a long run, this program aims to raise learners' awareness to be self-driven learners for their future sustainable learning.

## 3. Theoretical background

The author planned the class contents based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Three psychological desires: autonomy, competence, and relatedness are pedagogical suggestions which come from the theory. Deci & Ryan (2002) assert

that learners can raise intrinsic motivation under the environment where these three desires are assured at the same time. They define the three basic psychological desires as follows:

“Autonomy” means whether a learner has the feeling of self-determination toward the actions of their own. If the learner is autonomous, which means he takes actions in line with his own interests and sense of values, and his actions can become the synonymous as his own self-expressions. But it does not necessarily mean the learner is dependent when he acts along with someone’s instructions in SDT. If he accepts the ordered action with his own will, his autonomy is secured by having the responsibility and right to choose the options for his own learning.

The desire of “Competency” is a feeling of confidence and efficacy to accomplish his own objects. Appropriate challenges in learning satisfy learners’ desires of competency, while the desire makes the learners more sustainable on learning because of the accompanying desire to develop further ability and technical growth. It is necessary for instructors to provide learners with the opportunities to trust in and express their own abilities in multiple ways.

A desire of “Relatedness” includes the sense of solidarity with the feeling of good relationships with those around the learner in a society. The significant point is learners’ feeling of being accepted and secured through positive collaboration with other members in a community, not expecting to be superior to others by gaining a profit. If the learners find the meaning of his existence in the relations with others, they would be able to contribute in class more actively and develop their own learning even better.

Based on the three basic psychological desire of SDT, the author decided to include following tasks stated below:

1. An English song and poem were introduced in class every week. Utilizing the expressions in the works, students borrow some usable sentences and grammatical points to express their own ideas which may enable students to realize the effect of learning language materials and their

own competence.

2. Along with the seasonal event, the project of writing Christmas message was taken in. Each student took charge of one of the classmates secretly and prepared a present and message. Through repetitive one month observation and revision of the message, the author expected her students to take responsible for building a good relationship with each other.
3. A creative short writing script was assigned at the end of the term. That was aiming to raise learner autonomy as well as the feeling of competency of using English. The English poems were expected to express their own ideas freely with reference to the poems and songs introduced in class until then.

There are many empirical studies in light of SDT (e.g., among Tanaka, Hiromori, 2007, Tanaka, 2010, Iwanaka, 2010). This study may be new by researching the development of the English writing along with the psychological aspects.

#### 4. Research questions

This practice aims to raise learners’ awareness of English communicative skills through writing tasks at a supplementary class. That intends to lead them to be autonomous language learners with their satisfaction of three psychological desires. The effect was investigated mainly with the works of three tasks assigned in class, two course questionnaires, and the results of two proficiency tests. The participants were assigned reflective portfolios. After the course, a post-program interview was implemented to some of the learners. The research questions are stated as below.

1. Do diverse level English learners develop their language proficiency under the environment based on SDT: three psychological desires?
2. For what type of learners do creative English writing projects work effectively?

5. The participants

The experiment was conducted in the fall semester, from September 26, 2011 to January 30, 2012 at a private four-year university in west Japan. The participants were thirty-seven first graders who chose to register the extracurricular English class at the university. The class was selective program with no credit, and the final score did not influence their GPA. For estimating their original English proficiency level, the author utilized annual in-school proficiency tests which was made of 50 selective Eiken STEP third level to pre-second level questions. The score range was from one hundred to eighteen out of one hundred as perfect points by the class takers in the class. The official material book of the class was grammar focused, but the author treated it as merely a reference book, to examine the example sentence patterns of English structures. Teachers’ original worksheets and PowerPoint presentation were mainly used in class. The exercise questions in the worksheets were assigned as homework along with review quizzes at every following class. The unacceptable score takers of the quizzes were also assigned to take follow-up quizzes outside classroom. The time often became as opportunities to ask questions individually and to increase the time of supplementary learning only in case of being asked for taking the time from the learners’ side. The textbooks were to be marked by the students themselves and submitted at the end of the term. In addition, the efforts were included in the last evaluation.

As for the authentic materials of English songs and poems, they were carefully chosen to introduce target grammar points. In particular, as to the English poems, the author cited simple ones to understand from ESSC (Extremely Short Story Competition) program by “Japan English Society in Asia”. ESSC is the online project of 50 words or less English writing sent by the participants of English learners in China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. The excellent works are awarded with book certificates and introduced on the web. The author chose the works including the grammar target for each class

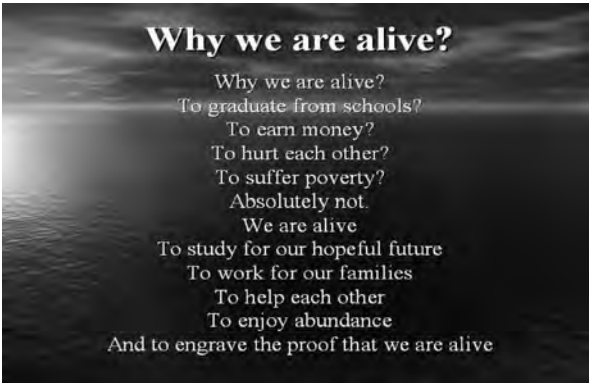
from the awarded works of ESSC. The correction by a teacher is not permitted to the original works. The format is free, and strictly speaking, the works are not always perfect poem styles. These make the works familiar enough for struggling English learners to feel secure to read and write English compositions with the feeling of “I also could write something by myself.” Thus, the author judged the works of ESSC as most appropriate supplementary sample materials for the class target (Table 1).

Table 1 The basic flow of the class

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Review quiz</li><li>● Pronunciation (using phonetic symbols)</li><li>● A song (check the pronunciation and grammatical points)</li><li>● Explicit introduction of the target grammar points</li><li>● Practice questions</li><li>● ESSC work (examine a work on the grammatical matter)</li><li>● English composition and questions (quiz and project preparation)</li><li>● Reflection on a Portfolio sheet</li></ul>
--

6. 1 Project 1: Message tree

The first picture below (Picture 1) shows an awarded ESSC work sample by a high school student. The target grammar is ‘to-infinitive’. Students fill in the latter part of the sample sentence with their original ideas, and put each sentence on a piece of leaf shape paper. Putting all together on a tree shape backing paper, two message trees were made and put on a wall for the playroom of children on the school festival day (Picture 2).



Picture 1 Junko Tomae, Soka high school, ESSC (Extremely Short Story Competition) the fourth competition in 2009, awarded in senior high school section



Picture 2 The message tree

## 6.2 Project 2: Secret Santa: project messages

The next project procedure was announced to the class-takers as stated below (Picture 3). It took about one month until they complete the messages and exchange presents and the cards so that they fulfill all the assigned conditions in the message. It included the time for revising (Table 2). Compared to the message tree, this project required more efforts, responsibility, and communicative points of view. On the other hand, exchanging Christmas presents thrilled almost all learners to prepare for it. Eventually, the learners grappled with the writing project more seriously and positively.

## 6.3 Project 3: Free short English Compositions.

The final project seemed the most difficult for the class-takers. Compared to project one and two, this piece of work was assigned with more freedom provided with expectations of the learners' initiatives to be put into place. The work was not limited in a lot of conditions except for limiting the story within

Table 2 Christmas message first revised version

▷	You are very serious. You never miss the class and always study eagerly. I would like you to study more. So, I'll give you "...". Please keep it up!
▷	I think your charming point is your laugh lines! You know that very well. I wanna see your smile more. : )
▷	You are my longing senior friend "senpai". You are very kind, and you give attention to everyone. Congratulations! You've succeeded in getting a job in this tight time. I think your employer noticed your seriousness! Please wash your car and round out your university life with it. I wish you have a bright and successful X'mas and a Happy New Year!
▷	You will challenge everything toward your own dream from now on. I'd like to support you and your dream.
▷	You often work part-time after school. I respect you because you look busy everyday. Therefore, I will give you energies.
▷	Merry X'mas!! You are a challenger. You are always fighting with many balls. But you don't have enough money now. So you had better save it until the end of the year. I'll give you this present.
▷	Hey, what's up? How was this year? You are always cool. That's superfly! I hope you keep your coolness and have a very good year in 2012. Happy Merry X'mas : ) By the way, I will give you sooo cool present. I miss you so much. Thank you for your reading)
▷	You are always smiling. Your smile will make everyone around you smile. You will have a more smiling face if you wear this "... with a pleasant character.
▷	You are always kind to everybody with smile. Please continue it. I hear that you are kind to everybody, and I will give you "...".
▷	Dear ..., you are very cool and polite. Fight!! "..." is the present for you.
▷	You are interesting, and that's your good point! You make me Happy. Let's enjoy a day off together as You Don' eat too much. Merry Christmas!!
▷	You are cute, and I am always healed by watching you. I want you to stay being as you are. I love you.
▷	You are always cheerful and positive! You make me cheerful. I want you to keep your smile. So I'll give you "..." as a present.
▷	Your good points are your studiousness and seriousness. This light will be so helpful that your eyes will not be worsen, and you can study more.
▷	Your smile makes me happy. Because your face is so cute, and I love you so much. Merry Christmas.
▷	The more you speak in English, the easier it will be for you. I think your soccer skills have become better and better. You always give us energies. You will be able to use this item very well. This is the present for you.



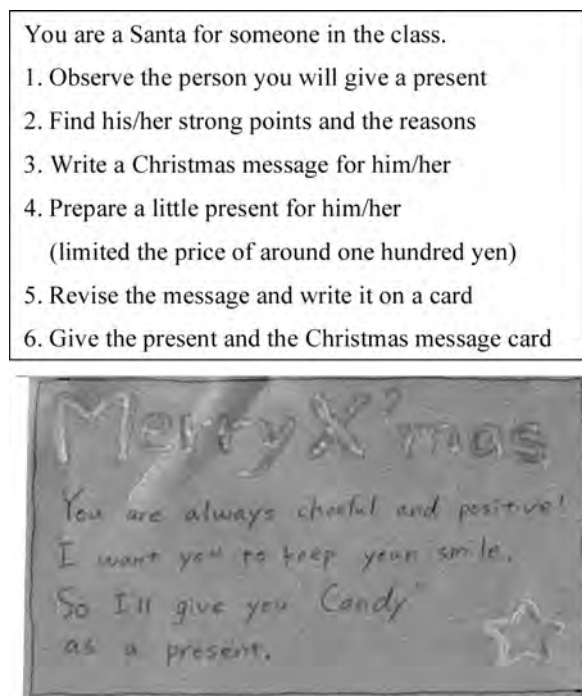
fifty words like ESSC compositions. About one month was provided to the students for preparing and revising their works. Unfortunately, only eighteen out of thirty-seven students submitted their final drafts at the end of the term. The project participants were not merely the ones with high English skills and knowledge. The examples (Picture 4) were made by a student who was in C (the lower score achievers) group at the first English proficiency test. She visited the teacher's office several times before completing it.

## 7. Analyses of the practice

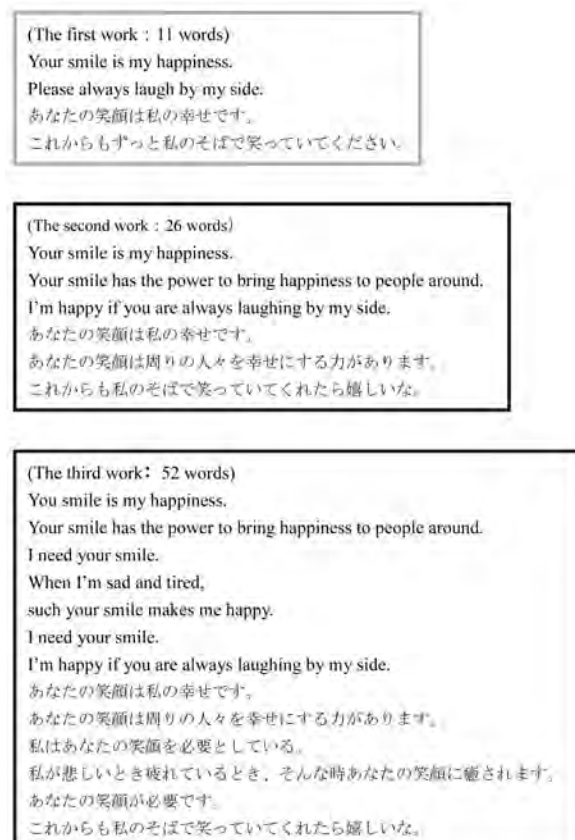
The effect of the projects in the course was first examined by the in-school English proficiency test. They took exactly same questions before and after the course. There was roughly one year between them. The score results were divided in three proficiency levels by the score range: high (70-100), intermediate (40-69), and low (10-39). From

these results, the research question 1: "Do diverse level language learners develop their English proficiency under the environment based on SDT: three psychological desires?" may have the answer. It seems positive to some extent.

Looking at the results (Figure 2), the average of 5 points went up. About a half of the intermediate level students got into the higher score range level, while the percentage of low level students seemed to stay almost the same. These may be the response to research question 2: "For what type of learners do creative English writing projects work." That may imply a challenging task like writing project takes effects especially on intermediate or higher level students. The negative descriptions were stated mainly by the lower ones in the questionnaire (Table 3). They are not always reluctant to take a challenge like the sample writer of final project. The results seem, however, they need more support in terms of both basic language items and learning strategies.



Picture 3 Secret Santa procedure and a Christmas card



Picture 4 Original short writing: three revised versions

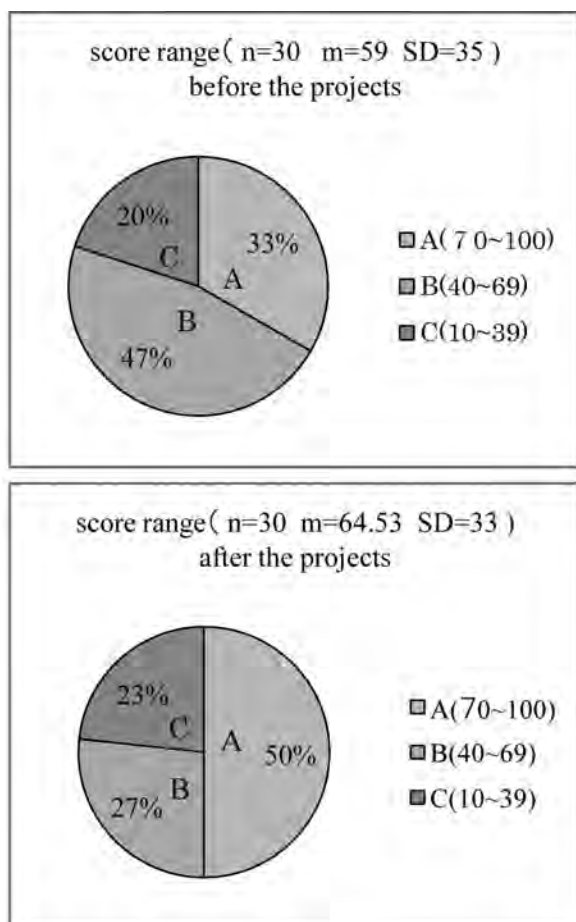


Figure 2 the change of average test scores

## 8. Conclusion

It must be hard for all instructors to define the appropriate targets for the mixed level class. It is essential that all learners utilize their knowledge, and realize their own achievements of language learning. Not ignoring the importance of basic skills, it seems necessary for introducing the learners suitably challenging and practical tasks underlying an empirical theory and examination. Once learners acquire the feeling of self-efficacy, they may be able to continue to take challenges on learning autonomously even after the general language learning course.

The three psychological desires in SDT must be significant suggestion to prevent underachievers from the depression in their learning. That may provide all type of learners with some confidence and security in class. As long as they continue to stay in class and continue to try to catch up the high-achievers, they may have chance to be into the autonomous stage of learning in the future to satisfy their desire of three psychological needs even better by themselves.

Table 3 Descriptions from the post-program questionnaire

### Q. Do you feel English learning worth doing now? Why do you think so?

Positive opinions	Negative opinions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I could learn the basic matters well, and they were practical, too.</li> <li>I have begun to understand them little by little.</li> <li>I think I have been able to develop my English.</li> <li>Though I thought that it was difficult, I am glad to become able to understand it gradually.</li> <li>It seemed slightly difficult and regretted a little I took this class first, but I understood it a little from the basic items.</li> <li>I want to continue doing my best more and even more.</li> <li>Though it was difficult, I did it and it was fun.</li> <li>English is important and I want to learn even more voluntarily from now on.</li> <li>I was able to reconfirm the sentence structures that I had completely forgotten.</li> <li>The projects were fun.</li> <li>It was good to come to understand English more than before. I was able to take the classes with a certain target or theme every time.</li> <li>I improved my English more than before, and I changed my ideas about studying English.</li> <li>I came to know the parts to review. I knew what unit I need to work on.</li> <li>It was good I could increase that time to be closer to English.</li> <li>I have begun to know my strength and the parts I need more efforts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A quiz result was always bad. Then I found some reflection points that I did not review well enough to carry out the tasks.</li> <li>Though I do not understand the value of quizzes, it might be important...?</li> <li>When I cannot do it well, it is hard. I feel depressed.</li> <li>I reconfirmed the difficulty of English. I still do not understand it very well.</li> <li>English compositions are too difficult. I don't think It is necessary.</li> <li>I am not confident. I wanted to give it up on the way.</li> <li>I did not understand it too much, and I did not feel like working on it.</li> <li>I gave it up and always just fell in sleep. I'm sorry.</li> </ul>

## Bibliography

- A Japan English Society in Asia, [www.jafae.org/essc/index.html](http://www.jafae.org/essc/index.html).
- Bandura, A., (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.
- Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (2002). *Handbook of Self-Determination research*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester.
- Deci, E. L., Jang, H., Reeve, J., Ryan, R. M., In Schunk, D. H., & Zimmerman, B. J. (Eds.). (2008). *Understanding and promoting Autonomous Self-Regulation: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective*. Chapter 9, Motivation and self-regulated learning: Theory, Research, and Applications. : Routledge.
- Hiromori, Y., Tanaka, H., (2007). "An inspection of the intervention of the educational practice to raise an incentive of the departure from of the English learner and the effect" *JALT Journal*, 29, pp.59-80.
- Iwanaka, T., (2010). "Contributing to the improvement of learning will. classroom activity considering three psychological desires of Self-determination Theory", presented at the fall conference of JACET Chugoku Shikoku block.
- Reeve, J., Ryan, R., Deci, E. L., & Jang, H. (2008). Understanding and promoting autonomous self-regulation: A self-determination theory perspective. In D. H. Schunk, & B. J. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Motivation and self-regulated learning. Theory, Research, and Applications* (pp. 223-244). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Sakai, S., (2011). *Rimediaru to mukiau* [facing to remedial education], *Eigo kyoiku* [English Education], 59, (12), pp.10-12.
- Takefutata, Y., Suiko, M., (2005). *Korekara no daigaku eigo kyoiku* [English education at a university from now on]. Tokyo: Iwanamishoten.
- Tanaka, H. (2010). "a study to raise intrinsic motivation by an English class" *JACET Journal*, 50, pp.63-80.