

Work, rest and play ?  
Reappraising students in the context  
of their lifestyles

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## Reappraising students in the context of their lifestyles

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The learners spend an hour or so in the classroom, but before that they have been elsewhere, and after they will go to other places. There is no doubt that their activities elsewhere have an effect on what happens in the classroom. (van Lier, 2004 : 194)

### 1. Introduction

Informal discussions among English language teaching professionals in Japan, and no doubt elsewhere, frequently return to the problem of motivation, usually in terms of a perceived deficiency among many university students. Meanwhile, the students themselves, when asked to talk about the previous evening, weekend or even vacation, will often answer with reference to sleep or *baito* (part-time work)<sup>1)</sup>, giving the impression that those two activities are very much foremost in their lives outside the classroom. It would be easy to make a connection between the latter and the former, bemoaning the fact that students are too tired to engage energetically in the study of a subject that they have not chosen (usually compulsory for the first

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1) a transliteration *and* abbreviation, common in foreign vocabulary items incorporated into the Japanese language, of the German word for work, “*arbeit*”. Incidentally, a third activity has recently been added to those standard responses, that of “watching YouTube”.

two years of university) or that teachers' demands for positive or interesting answers to the same old questions are little more than a nuisance to be temporarily endured by the sleep-deprived or merely fatigued. However, is this interpretation of it being a causal relationship too simplistic? Can evidence be found that the students are indeed getting as little sleep and working as many hours as reported or imagined? This paper will attempt to answer these questions and hopefully provide some insight into students' daily activities, before and after the limited time spent in the classroom, and the influence they may have on what happens there.

## 2. Background – motivational studies

A vast amount of research is available on the topic of student motivation, works by Dörnyei alone, often in collaboration with similarly familiar names (e. g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), having several entries in the bibliographies of many publications, including the current (2015, 2016). It is notable how much has continued to be produced throughout the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, moreover, how much of it originates from or concerns itself with the Asian region in general and specifically the situation in Japan (e. g., Apple, Da Silva & Fellner, 2013, 2017; Kikuchi, 2015; Sampson, 2016). The 'motivational wasteland' of tertiary-level English education at universities here (Berwick & Ross, 1989: 207) has clearly proved sufficiently fertile ground for the academics investigating it, often concentrating upon the phenomenon of demotivation (Chambers, 1993) and its negative effect upon student performance (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009). Japan has been described as being at the forefront of such research because of the importance with which it is viewed by all involved (Ushioda, 2013) and Kikuchi provides an overview of the expansive range of studies undertaken thus far (2015). While some have examined the attitudes and identities of learners (and instructors), Cowie

& Sakui expressing regret “that there is often little room for the voices of the participants” (2012), others have looked at how the demotivated state might be either prevented or at least ameliorated via “remotivational strategies” (Carpenter et al., 2009). The choice of materials and pedagogical styles and their impact upon classroom motivation have been an additional focus (Ockert, 2011, 2014 ; Shimada, 2017).

However, although educators and researchers have been exhorted to familiarise themselves with the students they teach and survey as individuals (Ushioda, 2011 : 16-17), with lives outside of the severely limited context in which they have contact, there appears to be little or no evidence of such study being widely shared. The following sections describe the process and results of an initial attempt to make some contribution to our knowledge of certain aspects of student lifestyles outside the classroom which seem likely to have a bearing on their levels of engagement within it.

### **3. Surveying students’ daily schedules**

Sleep quality, duration, and consistency are associated with better academic performance in college students. (Okano et al., 2019)

Initial surveys were undertaken fairly near the onset of the project, after a suitable selection of classes had been allocated to the author from the start of the new academic year in April. Three first-year classes and three second-year classes could be expected to provide representative sets of data, with the overall numbers of male and female students (26 female and 21 male in the first year and 27 female and 28 male in the second) adding to the balance as well as could be hoped. All

groups were taking compulsory productive skills courses for non-English majors and were generally placed (mostly according to their TOEIC scores) at the top end of the respective departmental rankings for the language, which run into double figures for larger faculties. First-year classes were ranked first in the Economics and Business Administration faculties, and second in Sociology & Law combined. With second-year classes comprising the first and third levels in Business Administration and the fourth in Economics, there appeared to be ample opportunities for valid comparisons to be made across various divides.

Fully aware of the danger of using valuable class contact time for the purpose of private research, this main survey was designed to serve as an adjunct to textbook content being covered at around the same time. With the two year-groups using different levels of the English Firsthand series (Helgesen et al., 2018), Firsthand Access and Firsthand One, the syllabuses conveniently converged on the topic of “Daily Activities”, in Unit 4, “When do you get up?” (p. 36-43) and Unit 3 “When do you start?” (p. 28-35) respectively. Setting the survey (see Appendix A), with its simple request for times and activities through each day of the week, as homework meant that in addition to providing information for the research, it would also be a resource for students themselves in class, having precise data at hand to use in answering questions such as those in the ‘Pair Work’ sections in the middle of each unit.

A second survey was again initiated via materials content, this time with a single second-year class of 24 members and focussed solely on “Students Working Part Time”, a chapter title in the discussion textbook (Bossauer, 2018) being used in the elective course entitled “Communication in English”, open to students from all faculties, though in this instance including just one English major. After utilising

some questions in the classwork exercises, students were encouraged to create more of their own on the topic for homework, which could then be assessed, edited and combined into a single page survey form in pairs or groups to ask others. Concluding a project covering nearly three full ninety-minute weekly sessions, plus homework, in the middle of the second term, the results were presented by each group in the form of ten students' answers to the ten original questions, with some interpretation or comment required (see Appendix B).

### 3.1 Sleep

With simple indications of times to rise and retire at either end of the day, the following results were obtained regarding averages among both year groups and extrapolated to give what could be considered an average length of sleep for each night. Some extremes were reported, with certain students already getting up as others went to bed and, partly due to such outliers, second-year students were found to start the day at a wider range of times (between 90 and 180 minutes later than the latest first years, although also quite often an hour later than the earliest). However, the most unexpected result was how unsurprising most of the sleeping patterns that emerged were (see Figure 1 below), with schedules that could be deemed rather sensible for people of their age.

With attendance at first period classes required from 8:30 am, the consistent timing among first years of getting up on school days at 7:00 or 7:30 after an average of seven hours sleep (plus or minus thirty minutes later in the week) seems commendable, and the tardier emergence from their slumbers by second years (by between 30 to 120 minutes), but still crucially after seven or more hours sleep, probably reflects a timetable more likely to start from the second period at 10:15 (moving out of the family home to nearer the university, or simply becoming more

efficient – or less diligent – in their morning routines could be other factors). It cannot be overstated how unanticipated these findings were, considering the tired, sleepy teenager so often imagined or actually witnessed later in the day, only revealing themselves after laborious if simple calculations. Even at the weekend, students do not appear to be staying in bed all day, only up to a couple of hours longer, some reasons for which will be revealed later, in 3. 2.

Average	Students	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
time to get up	1st year	7:00 (F/M)	7:00 (F/M)	7:00 (F/M)	7:30 (F/M)	7:30 (F/M)	8:30 (F/M)	8:30 (F/M)
	2nd year	F 7:00 M 8:30	F 8:00 M 9:00	F 8:00 M 9:00	F 8:00 M 7:30	F 8:00 M 8:30	F 9:00 M 9:30	F 10:00 M 9:30
time to go to bed	1st year	0:00 (F/M)	0:00 (F/M)	F 0:00 M 0:30	F 0:00 M 0:30	F 0:00 M 1:00	F 0:00 M 1:00	F 23:30 M 0:30
	2nd year	0:30 (F/M)	F 0:30 M 2:30	0:30 (F/M)	F 0:30 M 1:00	F 1:00 M 2:00	1:00 (F/M)	F 0:00 M 1:00
hours of sleep	1st year	7 (F/M)	7 (F/M)	F 7.5 M 7	F 7.5 M 7	F 8.5 M 7.5	F 8.5 M 7.5	F 7.5 M 6.5
	2nd year	F 7.5 M 8.5	F 7.5 M 6.5	F 7.5 M 7	7.5 (F/M)	F 8 M 7.5	F 9 M 8.5	F 7 M 7.5

Fig. 1 Survey of student daily activities 1 : sleep

102 students : 47 first-year (26 F, 21 M), 55 second-year (27 F, 28 M)

(F = female, M = male, figures rounded to nearest 30 minutes)

In terms of classes attended from Monday to Friday<sup>2)</sup>, the answers were as might be expected from the schedules that the author has occasionally observed when shown by students, although it should be noted that as instructors we generally seem to be as unaware of their weekly academic timetables as they are of ours (though those can be viewed on the university portal). One possible failing in the

2) a maximum of two ninety-minute sessions before and three after a forty-five minute lunch break, with fifteen minute breaks to allow movement between lessons.

design of the survey was that no distinction was requested between free periods and non-attended classes, although one would imagine respondents would have been less inclined to indicate the latter in writing, however private the information would be kept. Differences between the number of lessons reported by gender were slightly surprising, although this could be affected by the balance of male and female students within each class surveyed, and also the choices they have made regarding participation in optional extra classes, with stereotypically more studious young women making greater use of such opportunities than their apparently less academically motivated male counterparts.

Bearing the proviso above in mind, whether the answers given represent their actual timetables or those they chose to keep to, between 11 and 23 second-year students reported having no morning classes on four days (compared to just ten or fewer first-year students on three days), with a disproportionate number of males (16 out of 19 on Fridays, for example).

Figures were lower overall and more evenly balanced between the genders regarding free afternoons. Two lessons in the morning and two in the afternoon were most commonly reported among first years (three and five days a week respectively), whereas more second years seemed to be attending one morning and two afternoon classes throughout. It should be remembered that the numbers obtained were collated as totals for the two times of day, so the students who attended a certain number of classes in the morning were not necessarily the same as those who attended in the afternoon, nor from day to day, a data processing choice made to extrapolate general patterns and avoid an unwieldy overload of individual information. Although the correlation between students' academic timetables and their daily sleeping habits might have warranted further examination, restrictions of



time and space prohibit such detail here.

Gathered from the same survey, information regarding hours spent neither in lessons or sleeping (or perhaps in some cases, both simultaneously), particularly those working part-time, will be presented alongside that gleaned from a second source in the following section.

### 3.2 Part-time work

The survey described above also asked respondents to give some indication of their non-curricular activities, principally in the evenings and at weekends. This varied widely in detail, with it being understandably difficult to give precise timings for possibly intermittent or simultaneous actions, although a diary entry approach at the end of each day was encouraged. While interesting information was supplied by those who admitted watching baseball for three hours, six days a week (and “praying that Tigers will win tomorrow, too” on the one day with no game), spending an hour “looking at the stars” on Saturday night and ninety minutes just taking a bath, or five hours at driving school on consecutive weekday evenings, a decision was made to concentrate upon part-time work for the purposes of this particular study. It had become apparent that club and circle membership would be worthy of its own, separate investigation in a forthcoming project, although some numbers will be included later in samples of the busiest schedules reported. The basic statistics here could be compared to and combined with information received from the smaller but more detailed student-led survey undertaken by second years, as described earlier.

Once all the replies from the daily activities survey had been processed, some expectations were once again confounded. While it had been thought that many

more second- than first-year students would be engaged in part-time work, the overall figures were almost identical, at one third of the total male sample and around forty percent of the female. Predicting a certain period of post-university entrance acclimatisation to what would be new surroundings for many and a new lifestyle for all implied the likelihood of a delayed start to any extra-curricular activities (as indeed is the case for many clubs or circles), but perhaps the timing of the survey in June meant that such re-orientation had already taken place and students, whether by choice or necessity, were finding ways of supporting themselves and their habits financially in a way that had been prohibited before graduation from high school. This was confirmed in the second-year student survey, where most answered that they had started working from June or soon after during their first summer at university.

The differences in the schedules those in part-time employment committed to were less that older students necessarily worked longer shifts than their younger counterparts (although this was the case for some individuals) but more that they worked on more days over a larger range of times through the day. From the larger survey it became apparent that the first-year students worked an average two or three days a week for about five hours per day (the full range of one or two hours to nine or ten indicating that the girls worked over an hour longer per day than the boys), while for second years, the daily average was the same at five hours (though some worked up to eleven or twelve hours, and there was a smaller gap between the sexes), but, significantly, for three or four days a week, figures that were confirmed in the second, single-class study. In the latter, this was interpreted by the student interviewers as indicating how “people want free time half of a week” (sic), without raising any concerns regarding the equal division of their time between the classroom and the workplace. They also found that at least a fifth of

the class (in which all but one had jobs, a much higher proportion than in the main survey) reported monthly totals of eighty hours, representing consistent labour in the upper echelons of the average number of hours and days worked. Figure 2 below shows some examples of the busiest weekly schedules among both first- and second-year students.

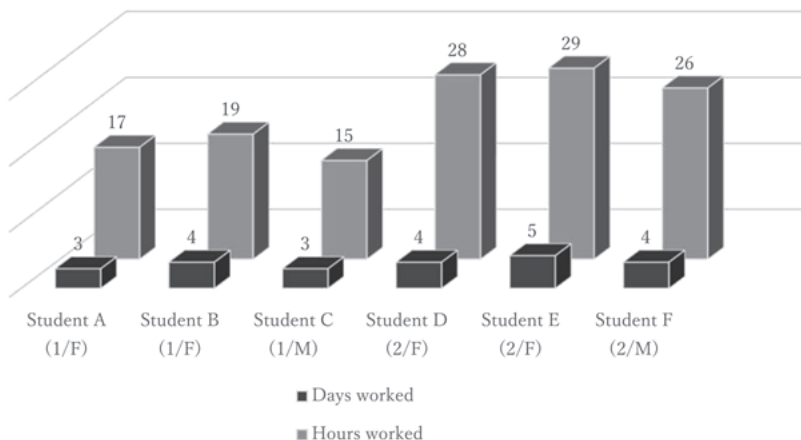


Fig. 2 Working schedules of busiest students  
(1 or 2 = 1st or 2nd year, F or M = female or male)

In addition to the near doubling of hours worked by these admittedly extreme examples among second-year students, one individual (Student F) reported joining her club for seven hours on each of two further days, making a total of forty hours a week spent on the two main student non-curricular activities, raising the question of what time was left to lead a normal daily life, let alone study! Perhaps reflecting changes to their university timetable in the sophomore year, it was interesting to find that on every weekday afternoon (and even some mornings) there were several second-year students working, though far fewer than in the evenings, with shifts

at any time during the weekend remaining unsurprisingly the most common. Conversely, no first-year students worked during the day from Monday to Friday, or indeed at any hour on the former, presumably due to the busy start to the week from first thing in the morning for many. Commenting on the results of her survey of nearly three hundred first- and second-year students, Lee-Cumin surmised that

...many might have already prioritised their non-academic lives over their academic ones, such as being absent from classes due to club activities and/or working in a part-time job. (2005 : 149)

Her study also reveals how little has changed in over decade in terms of the type of work most popular, namely that in the service sector (2005 : 161) which was again found to be the case here, with food (restaurants, bars and *izakaya*<sup>3)</sup>) and retail (supermarkets, secondhand book and used clothes stores) most often cited. A few were working in hotels in a variety of posts, from reception to events assistance, so still service-oriented, or tutoring in cram schools, with both mentioned in discussions about fields of employment considered potentially more lucrative than most.

To end on a positive note (following Kikuchi's maxim that "using quotations, readers can understand what cannot be conveyed by numbers", 2015 : 72), in one group of ten students, eight felt that their jobs enabled them to learn and improve communication skills, the remaining pair citing the benefits of being active and having to concentrate on a single task (Appendix B). Another group was

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3) A restaurant-bar hybrid ubiquitous throughout Japan, not dissimilar to the British so-called gastropub, although more down-to-earth than that term might hope to imply. Students often find and use the English translation of "tavern", conjuring a rather different image again, even if the "taverna" of southern Europe are indeed closer equivalents.

unanimous in declaring that “a part-time job is an effective way to achieve a good personal relationship” and should be done by everyone during their years at university. It would be hoped that such motivation might be transferred as applicable to their studies, too, or at least encouraged in that direction by those of us acting as their guides.

#### 4. Conclusions

I...hope that, in order to assist language learning, teachers will now see their students as agents in complex systems and learn more about how they interact with the various factors they face in their lives outside their classrooms. (Kikuchi, 2015 : 104)

Warnings of the need to provide students with support to avoid tiredness having “a lasting negative impact on their overall learning trajectory” (Dörnyei, Henry & Muir, 2016 : 133) should be considered before teachers react to any individual losing the struggle to stay awake with either excessive anger or passive acceptance (McVeigh goes as far as proposing that “not a few students – perhaps exhausted from part-time jobs...go to class *in order* to sleep”, 2002 : 189). In spite of its limited scope, this study failed to include any account of sleep in the classroom (often observed in larger groups, particularly at the back of bigger lecture rooms, neither of which the current author has much recent experience of) and hence provide a more comprehensive view of overall habits. Although such behaviour would seem rather hard to note or quantify, one American survey ranked foreign languages as equal second in a table showing the extent to which different subjects were affected, with three-quarters of students admitting to the misdemeanour (Kaplan, 2017).

The number of students involved was also small, particularly in the second, single class project. However, Ockert suggests the fact that most Japanese university students studying English are obliged to do so rather than majoring in the subject could mean the results of even small-scale surveys may be applicable to a much wider student population (2014 : 27). The information gathered on daily routines and part-time work also represents no more than a snapshot of a particular period in the students' lives, especially surveying the former over the duration of a mere seven days. How long participants could be reasonably asked to regularly note such private details is open to debate, as would be the reliability of reporting over an extended passage of time, but as with much research, larger and perhaps longer could be better overall in terms of gaining the fullest possible range of responses. Additionally, while some observations have been presented, more could have been made of any longitudinal changes, particularly the transition from both first to second term and year (Kikuchi, 2015).

Partially in the light of these deficiencies, two further studies on related matters are proposed for the coming years. Firstly, potentially complementing a previous survey of former students about their use of English *after* graduation (Paterson, 2016), an investigation of what, if any, contact current *undergraduates* have with the English language outside the classroom, particularly informal and online (Sokkett, 2014). If there is none, how might it be encouraged? If it is taking place, are the circumstances and content transferable to the campus? Secondly, a focus on the other key extra-curricular pursuit for many students, having already made an appearance in the weekly schedule reports here; that of club activities. What can the frequently whole-hearted commitment to such time-consuming and often demanding action teach us about motivation and maintaining enthusiasm long-term?

We have seen that certain individuals work what might be considered rather excessively but also, by way of contrast, that the majority *are* getting sufficient rest at the end of the day, however it has been filled. While students alone must take responsibility for the choice to spend more hours at a part-time job than asleep overnight, some consideration for their situations could help diminish feelings of frustration among both learners and teachers, consequently lessening the chances of negative outcomes in the classroom.

To the extent that we as teachers invoke and orient to student's transportable identities in the classroom and engage with them as 'people' rather than simply 'language learners'...the more likely that students will feel involved and motivated to communicate and thus to engage themselves in the process of learning and using the language. Ushioda (2011: 17)

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### Appendix A

#### DAILY ACTIVITY DIARY

Time	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
got up	8:15	:	:	:	:	10:00	:
morning 8:30-12:30	class (3) (= hours)					part-time job (11:00~ 6.5)	
afternoon 12:30-17:30	class (1.5) chat with friends (2) library (0.5)						
evening 17:30-	club (2.5) game (1) TV (1.5) online (1)					shopping (1) eating out (2) online (3.5)	
went to bed	0:30	:	:	:	:	2:00	:

Form (with example answers) given to students for Daily Activities Survey

**Appendix B**

**“Students working part-time” survey results**

Questions	Answers	Comments
1 Where do you work at part-time job ?	restaurant : 5    used clothes shop : 1 supermarket : 4    dispatch : 1	Many people are customer service jobs. Restaurant and supermarket are popular.
2 What work do you do at the part-time job ?	cashier : 4    set up : 2    cook : 3 carry foods : 2    shelf stocking : 1	The service industry is main occupation.
3 How many times a week do you work ?	4 : 4, 3 : 2, 2 : 2, 5 : 1 (time : people)	I think that most people want free time half of a week.
4 How long do you continue it ?	1 year and a half : 2, 1 year : 4, half year : 2, 10 months : 1, 2 years : 1, 2 years : 1, 1 month : 1	There are both person who work long time and short time.
5 What do you use the money you earned ?	travel : 3    hobby : 2 to play with friends : 2    to live : 1 clothes : 1    eating : 1	Almost all people use their money what they like.
6 Are you satisfied with your hourly wage ?	Yes : 6    No : 3    So so : 1	I worried about everyone's hourly wage.
7 Is it near from your house ?	Yes : 8    No : 2	People tend to choose work place which near from their house.
8 Which age group is most populated in your part-time job ?	university students : 6 twenties : 2 middle age : 3	I think that there are many same generations.
9 What are you learning the most at part-time job ?	communication skill : 8    active : 1 concentrate on one thing : 1	Almost all people learn communication skills at work.
10 What part-time job do you want to try ?	office work : 3    hotel : 1    gas stand : 1 teach : 1    amusement park : 1    café : 1 food and drink : 1    detective : 1	Opinions are divided ! There is the interesting opinion.

**Sample survey result sheet** (spellings corrected, grammar verbatim)



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