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Self-Directed Learning Modules for Independent Learning: IELTS Exam Preparation
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Self-Directed Learning Modules for Independent Learning: IELTS Exam Preparation

Brian R. Morrison, Kanda University of International Studies

Abstract

Learners studying for exams sometimes show a lack of awareness in their abilities as tested through the framework of that exam. Instead, such learners focus on the score obtained in exams, and exam preparation includes using textbooks, online materials and timed use of past papers. The purpose of exam-focused flexible self-directed learning modules (FSDLMs) at Kanda University of International Studies have been designed to address this by developing learners’ ability to identify their strengths and weaknesses, to make informed decisions about their own learning, and to improve their test-taking skills. Each FSDLM has at its core a diagnostic for learners to use for self-evaluation, often with guidance from a learning advisor. This process leads to the setting of clear goals and the development and implementation of an individual learning plan through a variety of dialogues. Learners have the potential to transfer this skill beyond examination preparation to other areas of learning. In other words, learners’ awareness of needs analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation is fostered with a view to developing their language learning ability within and beyond this module.

Keywords: self-directed learning, diagnostic assessment, goal setting, self-evaluation

Context

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) is a specialist language university in Japan with obligatory English language core curricula for all students across departments. The university has invested in a state-of-the-art self access centre (SAC) resourced with a vast array of English language materials, audio-visual hardware and currently employs eight full-time learning advisors. Many students at KUIS who visit the SAC seem keen to focus much of their self-directed English learning on studying towards exams such as TOEIC, TOEFL and IELTS. This is understandable given that exam scores are often viewed as proof of English language ability when English is required for employment or further studies. Regardless of the efficacy of these exams at evaluating communicative competence, the fact remains that students may have an exam score as a goal in order to gain employment or access undergraduate or postgraduate studies in English. Although the idea of deadlines and improving exam scores seems to motivate some students into long hours of study, learners seeking advice related to language learning for exams at KUIS often show a lack of focus in their studies. While no data is
available regarding the numbers of KUIS students who take external English exams nor what they do to prepare themselves for these exams, those who seek guidance from learning advisors almost always have limited their strategies to using Japanese-English or English-English exam self-study books and repeatedly taking practice tests. When asked why, the response is often that older students recommended these strategies. This therefore suggests such exam preparation practices are common at this institute. As a result the effort they apply is unlikely to address their specific needs or to efficiently focus on where they could make the greatest impact on their exam scores. In order to support students in achieving their exam-based goals, a flexible self-directed learning module (FSDLM) was developed by learning advisors at KUIS.

FSDLMs build on the current self-directed learning modules (modules) and adapt them to be exam relevant. To understand the place of FSDLMs in KUIS, it is important to understand the concept of these modules. The modules offered at KUIS (see for example Cooker, 2010; Mynard & Navarro, 2010; Noguchi & McCarthy, 2010) seek to raise learners’ awareness of their self-directed learning. These modules have been available for first and second year university students for several years, are voluntary, have a fixed start date, and hand-written submissions are expected weekly for 8 weeks. What is actually submitted depends on the particular module, see below for details. In acknowledgement of the extra time students dedicate to working on their module each week, the modules are graded and up to 10 points are added to their English class score.

**Modules**

First year students are offered the First Steps Module (FSM) and the Learning How to Learn Module (LHLM), while second year students are offered the Sophomore Module (SM). All modules are paper-based, written in English and module takers write and receive feedback in English. Although the FSM is a prerequisite to LHLM, a few students apply for SM without first having done either FSM or LHLM and are accepted with the acknowledgement that they will require extra support. The recently launched FSDLM is aimed at third and fourth year KUIS students and does not require any previous modules to have been taken.
The FSM is a learner training module and introduces concepts such as goal setting, time management, learning styles and resource selection one unit at a time (Noguchi & McCarthy, 2010). Each week learners use their own time to read through the unit, complete the activities, reflect upon them and write up their thoughts, findings and experiences in the module pack. This module culminates in the production of a bespoke syllabus, an individual learning plan (ILP), which consolidates the concepts from the previous units.

The LHLM and SM are self-directed learning modules. The LHLM is essentially the application of the FSM and can only be taken in the second semester after completion of the FSM. LHLM learners design and implement an ILP. There are three one-to-one 30-minute advising sessions built into this module where the learner meets an advisor to discuss the ILP and its perceived effectiveness in English. The SM is almost the same as the LHLM but is linked to a specific class i.e. if SM is taken for an Advanced Writing class, the SM ILP must focus on writing. Unlike the FSM units, the input for LHLM and SM derives from whatever the learner has chosen to use for his or her learning. The learners submit their learning journal every week in English with a write-up of that week’s targets, what was actually done, an evaluation of the effectiveness of these and a plan for the following week. This reflection on learning and subsequent planning often seeks to consider the relative merits of resources and activities and may involve a modified target for the following week if there are perceived shortcomings of that week’s learning. For these modules, learning plans, learning logs and associated documentation, such as vocabulary journals and copies of articles, need to be submitted.

**Goal Setting**

McCarthy’s (forthcoming) case studies of three learners who followed these FSM and LHLM courses consecutively finds that goal setting is both instrumental in these learners’ self-directed learning and has a positive influence on other aspects of self-directed learning i.e. once goals have been selected, resources and learning activities can be selected which focus on the learning goals. She also raises the point that through learners setting their own goals, the professionals involved in supporting learners can offer guidance much more effectively when these goals are known. McCarthy therefore
concludes that goal-setting amongst learners should be prioritised by educators involved in fostering self-directed learning.

Morrison (forthcoming) proposes a model of how goal setting can be applied in self-directed learning by encouraging learners through a two-part wants, interests and needs (WIN) analysis with a diagnostic test carried out between both WIN analyses. The purpose is to arrive at individualised focused goals which combine learner choice with a greater self-knowledge of ability. Applying such a model to a standardized exam allows the learner to consider their performance within the constraints of the exam and has the potential to raise awareness of what exam boards actually test and value. Goal setting with a focused diagnostic is the key component of these exam FSDLMs and is guided through dialogue.

**Dialoguing**

Cotterall (1995) emphasises the centrality of dialogue in fostering autonomy but limits this discourse to spoken teacher-learner interaction. Mynard & Navarro (2010) further underline the importance of dialogue in self-directed learning from the perspectives of sociocultural and constructivist theories. However, they both broaden and categorise these interactions to include written dialogue, and the dialogues both within a learner and between learners (inner and peer dialogue).

In KUIS, learning support is offered by learning advisors (LAs) to all module participants in recognition that access to resources is not always enough for meaningful learning to occur (Benson, 2001). The most frequent support on modules is written feedback, which is given on a weekly basis and develops into a dialogue as the course progresses. Through the module, the learner and assigned LA respond to each other. The LA offers comments, including feedback on learners’ ideas, and always includes questions to encourage learners to clarify, to focus and to think more deeply about their learning (the inner dialogue). The learner in turn responds to the feedback and is invited to ask his or her own questions.

As mentioned above, LHLM and SM have advising sessions integrated into the course. These 30-minute sessions are an opportunity for a learner to talk through his or her learning and to raise any issues related to this. The LA actively listens and encourages
the learner. Through a range of advising skills such as guiding, questioning and attending (Kelly, 1996), the learning advisor supports the learner to make informed choices about his or her learning. Through this discussion, both participants develop a greater understanding of the learner’s actions (or inactions), the beliefs underlying these, and the outcomes of the actions. The LA listens to the learner’s perspectives, values these and rather than tell the learner what to do, asks the learner what he or she will do. If the learner requests ideas, then choices are offered but everything is in the hands of the learner thus giving learners ownership of their learning strategy. The sessions aim to finish with the learner proposing an action plan to continue with their learning; in other words, through the dialogue the learner has discussed various aspects of his or her learning and leaves with an idea of what he or she will do next.

Although there is the potential for learners to attend an advising session expecting a tutorial or language practice session, as Pemberton and Toogood (2001) discovered, this rarely happens at KUIS. Students at KUIS can reserve time with teachers in the SAC at the Practice Centre and the Writing Centre or meet them in a conversation area more or less anytime during the working week. As a result the vast majority of learners who attend advising sessions with LAs (either as part of a module or because they have made a reservation) do so to talk about their language learning or related areas such as motivation or confidence. It should be clarified that the Practice Centre, Writing Centre and conversation areas are used much more than the booked advising service but given that regular use one of these areas may become part of a learning plan that emerges from dialoguing, this is to be expected.

**Exam Flexible Self-directed Learning Modules**

Given the credit aspect of the modules, there is a requirement that all of these are relevant to specific English classes and of an appropriate length. The semester dates and human resources available further restrict the start and end dates. However, these restrictions have been lifted for the most recent modules, the FSDLMs, where grades are awarded by outside exam boards based on the outcomes of learning rather than the process and participation. These modules can therefore be more flexible and three versions have been developed, one for each of the following exams: IELTS, TOEIC and
TOEFL. In this article, IELTS will be focused on firstly for continuity and secondly because there are no IELTS classes at KUIS. As a result, self-directed learning becomes more necessary for those learners requiring an IELTS score.

**Flexibility**

The flexibility afforded by FSDLMs extend the philosophy behind autonomy development by offering further choice to learners. Learners can start a FSDLM anytime in a semester. In addition, the LA-learner dialogue is controlled by the learner i.e. the type of dialogue, medium of communication (email, learning log or advising session), frequency of communication, and next contact date are all set by the learner and can be modified as she or he sees fit (see Appendix A for details). Flexibility extends to the exam paper and diagnostic. Regardless of an LA’s perception of a learner’s needs, it is the learner who decides which diagnostic test to take and how to interpret the results.

Once a learner has decided to ask for guidance, chosen an FSDLM and the level of flexibility that suits him or her, he or she is encouraged to check the exam structure before deciding on a diagnostic test. The diagnostic tests consist of a sample exam and a diagnostic framework. To use the diagnostic test, first the learners select the part of the exam they would like to focus on and do this part under exam conditions. Learners then analyse their exam answers using the prompts in the corresponding diagnostic framework. In the case of IELTS, since there are four parts to the exam, reading, writing, speaking and listening, there are four different diagnostic frameworks. The diagnostic test can be considered the start of the learning cycle and can be revisited as required.

**Initial Advisor Contact**

Although all three FSDLMs are available for learners to work their way through without any support from an LA, they are offered an initial advising session to discuss the FSDLM. During the session, learners talk through their goals and perceived difficulties with the specific exam. This meeting allows for the learner, in dialogue with the learning advisor, to identify a suitable starting point for building on their existing knowledge. During piloting of the FSDLMs, the initial meeting was offered after the diagnostic but
some learners who met LAs had not attempted a diagnostic test and it became clear that these learners required more guidance regarding the selection and application of the diagnostic test. A meeting is now offered to anyone interested in FSDLMs before the diagnostic process to support this process.

**Apply a Diagnostic**

The core of these modules is the diagnostic test. Past exam papers form the basis of the diagnostic test but the analysis goes much deeper than merely looking at the score. After all, this is something that learners could do without help. Instead, these diagnostic activities encourage learners to first look much more closely at where they lost marks and why these were lost.

In IELTS, the receptive skills are easier for self-diagnosis than the productive skills because there is only one possible answer for each question. This allows for the score and therefore the grade to be calculated. Wrong answers can easily be identified and reasons for the errors attributed by the learner to whatever it was that created the misunderstanding and caused the wrong answer to be given.

The productive skills, by contrast, are graded according to the perceptions of examinees’ performance by trained examiners according to four main criteria for speaking and the same number of criteria for writing. The IELTS examining body do not disclose the grade band criteria even though the 4 areas graded are available. Without the grading bands it is impossible for a learner, peer or teacher to accurately grade a learner’s written or spoken performance. Nevertheless, by recording a speaking test or by keeping the written work after writing exam practice, the learner can self-diagnose or, if required, approach a teacher or peer for feedback using the four areas that are graded as a framework to consider where his or her strengths and weaknesses lie in within each category. The diagnostics frameworks follow the criteria for each paper (see Appendices B and C).

Once the learner has a clear idea of his or her strengths and weaknesses, the diagnostic framework encourages the learners to consider their priorities for improvement. The LA is available to contact for guidance through the different parts of the exam paper the learner took. The framework encourages a cost-benefit analysis of the results i.e.
where each learner believes the greatest improvement could be made in the shortest time. This analysis can be extended by dialoguing and further learner-lead analysis. For example, a learner who decides grammatical accuracy is a priority should then identify which areas of grammar he or she produces inaccurately in their IELTS exam writing and again prioritise those according to time cost versus exam benefit. This allows the learner to prioritise and establish personalized exam-specific aims and objectives which are likely to move away from unfocused exam-grade goals back to language goals. For example, instead of a learning goal which is to get 5.5 in IELTS, a learner may choose to focus on improving the coherence of written work by focusing on integrating signposting language (in order to get 5.5 at IELTS). The latter goal, if based on informed principled decisions the diagnostic test aims to develop, will be more achievable than the former. Once the learner has selected one or more specific areas and chosen at least one as a learning aim, he or she can consider how to go about progressing towards the learning goal(s) in a way which suits him or her best.

**Second Advisor Contact**

If learners return to discuss the results of the diagnostic test, during this second session, learners talk through their analysis of the diagnostic test and discuss what they want to prioritise and why as detailed in the previous section. Learners are encouraged in the diagnostic framework to consider where they believe they can make the greatest difference in the shortest time. The learners have shown themselves to be very astute at this and can provide clear rationale for their choices. The session then moves on to discuss resources and activities with a view to talking through a learning plan. If the learner chooses a specific area to focus on but has difficulties thinking of resources and activities, the LA talks about two or three resources and activities that other learners have tried to stimulate other ideas and offer choices. These face-to-face advising sessions are digitally recorded for the learner’s reference.
Design a Learning Plan

The learning plan is based around a study-use-review-evaluate (SURE) model, which is used in the FSM, LHLM and SM. A brief overview is that Study relates to learning vocabulary, grammar or phonology to improve a specific skill, Use is the use of what was studied within the skill, Review is to review what was studied and Evaluate relates to both checking language progress and checking that the learning resources and activities are effective. The SURE model is not designed to be a linear process but rather to encourage learners to categorise and consider the balance of their learning.

For FSDLMS, some of these stages may be adapted or dropped depending on individual needs. For example, learners who want to increase part 1 of their IELTS listening score may not be using their time effectively if they study vocabulary, grammar or phonology. Instead, they are likely to benefit by focusing on fluency in listening and note taking by listening to spoken language which includes typical section 1 listening answers such as dates, times, addresses and phone numbers, and writing these down. This could be termed Prepare. Use in an exam context relates to doing a specific section of an exam paper to apply what was done to Study/Prepare. Therefore in the example above, Use would be taking section 1 of an IELTS exam listening paper. Review becomes redundant because nothing has been studied in order to be reviewed but evaluation involves checking which parts of that section of the test continue to cause problems, if any, and considering the effectiveness of the activities and resources used. This creates a feedback loop based on SURE (in this case modified to prepare-use-evaluate), which allows the learner to prepare again or move on to the next priority, be that another section of the listening or an alternative diagnostic test.

As well as a modified SURE model, the learning plan is dependent on relevant resources and activities which are fit for the purpose of meeting the focused, prioritised goals. Learners have to evaluate these but they also may need help identifying possible resources and activities. Any material aiming at a holistic approach to a specific exam is likely to contain information irrelevant to individual learners. It is therefore important that learners can identify resources and activities that are likely to be effective and consider the SURE balance is a topic for dialogue, be that inner dialogue, peer dialogue or advisor dialogue.
Implement

Once individual learning plans have been established, learners implement these and modify them as needed without further recourse to an advisor. Further meetings are available at anytime with an LA to discuss any aspect of language learning or the FSDLM. To date, learners who contact their LA again to discuss their learning, report that they have accomplished one or more of their learning aims and would like another advising session to discuss another learning plan. This has means the learner has achieved the required score in that section of the past paper and is moving on to another section or another part of the exam and another cycle of diagnosis, planning and implementation. However, as the academic year has progressed some learners are contacting their advisor not to discuss learning but rather to report delightedly they have achieved or surpassed their target exam score and that their focused learning has been successful.

Learner Uptake and Patterns of Use

In the academic year 2009-2010, before the FSDLM modules were developed, the two LAs who deal with IELTS FSDLM support had three booked advising sessions between them. Two of these were with one learner focusing on IELTS, the other was with a learner focusing on TOEIC. Since the launch of the FSDLMs, the same LAs have had a combined thirty-eight booked advising sessions. The vast majority, thirty-three, have been to discuss preparing for IELTS and have involved the steps outlined in this paper, three have been to talk about other exams and two have been to discuss matters related to general English and affective strategies.

In terms of learner numbers, eleven learners booked advising sessions for FSDLM IELTS in the 2010-2011 academic year. Of these, three of the advisees only had 1 session, perhaps because of the proximity of their sessions to the long summer or spring breaks. Four of the learners had two sessions, i.e. the diagnostic and a learning plan session. Two learners took four sessions and one, the postgraduate applicant discussed below, came for seven sessions. Of these three learners who came for more than two session, there was no indication that they came for to practice their English or for tutorial advice. Instead, they clearly came back because they had achieved what they had set as their target in the
previous session and wanted to talk through their next target and how they would go about reaching it. All of these learners met their IELTS goals and one booked an extra session to discuss developing her listening skills for academic lectures as she had identified this as a weakness though her use of a listening diagnostic for IELTS.

The data for the IELTS FSDLM shows that there is a clear preference (80%) for advising sessions in the second semester. This is to be expected given that the exam scores are required for the following academic year. What was unexpected was that all but one of the learners were first or second year students aiming for one-year study abroad programmes to complement their undergraduate degrees in Japan. As such, their target score was generally IELTS 5.5 although some required 6.0. The only exception was a learner who had graduated and was auditing translation classes at KUIS. She first booked an advising session a week before her IELTS exam and scored 6.0. She needed 6.5 to get onto a pre-sessional course or 7.0 for direct acceptance. She obtained 7.0 and is now considering which of her three postgraduate offers to take.

The uptake for the first year of IELTS FSDLM was relatively low but there are two factors that are likely to have influenced this. The first is that TOEIC appears to be a much more dominant academic exam on campus and in Japan in general. The second is that the learners who wanted guidance were not the group the FSDLM was either designed for or offered to. It seems likely that promotion to second year students, i.e. students who may be applying for study abroad programmes would generate greater uptake.

**Planned Research**

The FSDLMs were designed to meet KUIS student demand for support with TOEIC, TOEFL and IELTS. After a full year of these modules being offered, the data relating to these is restricted to brief notes on the contact LAs have had with the learners. Research is currently being planned to gather data on the experiences of both LAs and learners with all three FSDLMs to develop an understanding of whether the experiences reflect the planned experience or whether some modifications are required. An additional project is to set up a system to gather data on the exam scores of learners to check whether they actually rise. The anecdotal evidence is that they do but it is possible that
the LAs only hear about the success stories therefore more systematic data collection is required before any claims can be made regarding the efficacy of the FSDLM system.

The brief data analysis conducted for this paper is also planned for the other FSDLMs in order to profile the learners who seek support and the mode of interaction they prefer. This will come closer to the learner-led and learner-informed materials and syllabus development direction that LAs have been working to implement in recent years.

**Summary**

Flexible self-directed learning modules add an extra dimension of choice to self-directed learning both from the perspective of pacing and the type and frequency of support offered. The extra analysis provided by a diagnostic and the focused, prioritised goal setting that emerge undoubtedly stimulate inner dialogue and raise awareness of targeted learning. From this stage, the design and implementation of a self-directed learning plan comes from the learner with support when requested. This cycle passes ownership of learning back to the learner without pushing the learners into unsupported autonomy if they choose to ask for guidance. Contact with LAs is available in a variety of ways whether for reassurance, guidance or to celebrate success.

Although this article focuses on IELTS, the principles are relevant to any type of exam where sample exam papers and marking schemes are available. The approach, stages and cycles described can be adapted for use with a class of students, applied to a distance learning exam preparation course, or kept as an optional module delivered through a self-access centre to individual learners who request it.

**Notes on the contributor**

Brian R. Morrison took a CTEFLA course in 1994 in order to see more of the world. He soon realized he was in his element and has taught and learnt in a variety of countries from Macedonia to Equatorial Guinea. Now in Japan, he does his best as a learning advisor at Kanda University of International Studies to guide learners to achieve their goals.
References


Morrison, B.R. (forthcoming) The bespoke syllabus, objective setting and WIN analyses. *Independence, 52*.


Appendix A

Flexible structure

Structure of this module

This module has a flexible structure. You decide when you start, how many weeks you continue for and how you communicate with your Learning Advisor. This structure can also change if you want it to.

To give us an idea of how you would like to structure the module, answer the questions below. Remember, you can always modify your answers later on.

1. When would you like to start the module? __________
2. How many weeks would you like to work on this module? ________
3. How would you like to communicate with your advisor?
   - [ ] Face-to-face
   - [ ] Using a learning diary
   - [ ] By email
4. How often would you like to speak / write to your advisor?
   - [ ] Weekly
   - [ ] Every 2 weeks
   - [ ] Other

The first meeting with your learning advisor will help you think about what you need to study and how you can create an individual learning plan to meet your needs. You can also confirm with your advisor how you would like to structure this flexible module.
Appendix B

Listening diagnostic

Do the listening part of Test 1. Fill in the chart below with your scores in each section. Use the conversion table (p. 7) to help you work out your IELTS score.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Section 1</th>
<th>Section 2</th>
<th>Section 3</th>
<th>Section 4</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>IELTS Score</th>
<th>IELTS Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compare your score with your target score. Do you need to focus on improving your listening score?

Answer the questions below. 

Yes  
No    

Take the next section of the diagnostic for the areas you want to focus on.

Compare your answers with the answer key and the tapescript of the listening test and try to answer the questions below.

1. Which section would be easiest to improve your score on? Why?

2. There are many reasons why test-takers get questions wrong. Circle/underline those which may apply to you:

   • Misunderstanding the question
• Misunderstanding the listening text
• Not knowing the vocabulary
• Can’t understand the pronunciation of the words
• Being “tricked” by hearing the wrong answer in the text
• Something else? _____________________________

3. Which mistakes would be the easiest for you to fix?

Now you’ve analysed your performance, what are your listening priorities? Which area(s) from question 2 will you focus on? Write the most important first.
Appendix C

Speaking diagnostic

Using an IELTS speaking pack (find it on top of the IELTS shelf), do a speaking practice exam in the practice centre or with a learning advisor. While you are doing it, record yourself. (You can borrow an IC recorder or MD recorder from the SALC counter.)

Listen to your performance; give yourself a score for each section and fill in the chart below. The IELTS score for speaking is graded according to 4 separate criteria (see the IELTS study skills workbook for details)
1 = poor 2 = not too bad  3 = good enough  4 = good  5 = no problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fluency and coherence</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Which section was the most difficult? 1  2  3

2. What areas do you think you need to work on?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fluency and Coherence:</th>
<th>Vocabulary:</th>
<th>Grammar:</th>
<th>Pronunciation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Thinking of ideas</td>
<td>o Using more academic vocabulary</td>
<td>o Becoming more accurate</td>
<td>o Pronouncing individual sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Organizing your ideas</td>
<td>o Using more idioms, phrasal verbs</td>
<td>o Using complex grammar</td>
<td>o Pronouncing words in sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Speaking fluently</td>
<td>o Using a range of vocabulary (synonyms)</td>
<td></td>
<td>o Stress and weak forms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Something else? | | |

3. Now, rank the areas that you want to focus on in order of importance.