Encouraging Autonomy with an Online Language Support System

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Abstract

In this article, we describe the results of a small study into the implementation of a new institutional language support system in an academic English class at a Thai University. The system was designed to encourage out-of-class learning and to develop autonomous learning skills. As a pilot project, access to the program was offered to one group of students as part of their regular classroom course. We report the amount and type of student usage of the program and in particular the extent to which learners made use of those features of the program designed to encourage self-directed learning. It was found that fewer students used the program than had been expected and that those students who did use it, used it in limited ways. In this article, we describe these usage patterns and identify some possible reasons for them. The results may help others in implementing online language support.

Keywords: learner autonomy; online language support system; self-directed learning; CALL; blended learning

Background and rationale

The University where this study took place (King Mongkut's University of Technology in Bangkok) had identified several problems relating to the language proficiency of its students and graduates. In particular, the results of a recent survey study done at the University (Report on the Follow-up of the University Graduates, 2004) had shown that employers thought graduates from the University were not sufficiently proficient in English. This prompted the University to invest in improving the quality of its language teaching and also in exploring ways to prepare students for their language use and ongoing learning in the workplace. One of the measures taken was the establishment of an online language support system that could be used by students and teachers to access language learning materials and support from anywhere at any time. One of the major goals of the system was to encourage students to continue their language learning outside the classroom, and for the program to help them to develop their self-directed learning skills. This program, called 'My English', encourages and supports students in setting learning objectives, choosing appropriate materials to achieve their objectives, encourages reflection on their learning and evaluation of their performance. The program also provides a channel for the learners to seek help when they are learning by themselves.

This study attempted firstly to identify whether the provision of this type of support was successful in encouraging students to learn by themselves, and secondly to report students' perceptions of the program.

Literature review

As mentioned above, one of the main reasons for developing the online support system was a perceived need for the University to do more to help students develop their self-directed learning skills. The reasons for this were both practical and pedagogical. The numbers of students requiring language support at the University are very large, and the provision of self-study opportunities was hoped to alleviate some of the pressure on the language courses and their teachers. The pedagogical rationale was to better equip students to manage their learning, both with and without the help of a teacher, and to prepare them for life after graduation through the development of lifelong learning skills and learner autonomy (Dam, 1995; Littlewood, 1996; Breen & Mann, 1997).

One way to develop learner autonomy is to train students on how to use cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies so that they can manage their learning without the help of a teacher. Learner training can be done in class by providing explicit training to learners (Wenden, 1991). Learner training can also be done by providing an environment and resources for self-study so that learners can develop experience in working alone while being guided in their self-study. A common environment is the self-access centre where the learners have control over the decisions relating to their learning processes, such as the selection of resources, monitoring of progress, and (self-) evaluation. Self-access centres are now widely regarded as the most common way in which institutions implement the development of learner autonomy (Benson & Voller, 1997).

Many different types of self-access centres exist and many increasingly use technology to support the development of learner autonomy (Schwienhorst 2008; Ulitsky 2000; Vanijdee, 2003). There are several reasons for this. Firstly, CALL materials can be offered to learners independent of time and place, and in this way they allow learners to learn the language outside the classroom and without constant teacher direction. CALL materials also facilitate immediate feedback, thus further reducing reliance on the teacher. Because the computer can record and monitor learners' behaviour and progress, it can dynamically alter input, or make suggestions to the learners, based on their performance. The records can be made accessible to the student to encourage reflection on the learning process and help students make decisions about their learning progress and priorities for further study. The increased control that technology can give students can help students to feel more responsible for their learning, and can thus increase self-motivation (Ushioda, 1996). In other words, CALL has the potential to empower learners, i.e. to give them more control of their learning, and in doing so, to help the development of metacognitive skills and learner autonomy (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000).

Some recent reports describe CALL programs used for the development of learner autonomy. Toogood & Pemberton (2002) introduce the Virtual English Language Adviser software that was designed to help students develop a personalised learning plan and suggest appropriate materials and strategies. Gick (2002) describes a program of blended learning where traditional and online learning is combined for a grammar course

with the help of CALL, within a self-access centre. In this program, students make a personal working plan for grammar and use CALL materials produced in-house which they then discuss with a counsellor. Esteve, Arumi & Canada (2004) describe the promotion of autonomy through CALL, also in a blended-learning course. This course combines online materials and activities with classes, where a study plan is developed, monitored, and assessed. Learner training is offered both in-class and online. Reinders (2006), for example, describes an Electronic Learning Environment that functions as a shell. The shell provides access to language content and includes mechanisms to support self-directed learning, such as monitoring of student progress and intervention in the form of advice when students' learning goals and their learning behaviour (e.g. their materials selection) do not match. Studies into the effects of these tools and mechanisms on student learning (Reinders 2006, 2007) made several interesting findings. In general, both questionnaires and interviews showed that students were extremely satisfied with the program. Usage records showed that many students had accessed the resources and had done so frequently and over periods of many months. Many students reported using more resources and more often than they normally did or would have without the program; in this sense, the program's access features were a clear advantage. Staff too were satisfied in that they could look up students' progress and did not have to spend much time on administration; an advantage of the automatic storage and retrieval of learners' work. However, SQL queries (queries of information stored in the records of a SQL database) of 1,200 student database records collected over one year gave a somewhat less positive picture. Despite numerous automated suggestions, many students did not complete their initial needs analysis, and very few updated their learning plans as a result. Similarly, the suggestions made by the computer were seldom followed by students; when students had set their minds on learning with particular materials or in a particular way, it was difficult to encourage them to change.

The use of online materials and the use of blended learning as a complement to existing classes require certain skills on the part of the teacher (Reinders 2009) and also factors like departmental support, student perceptions of and experience with self-directed learning and a range of other factors are likely to have an effect on the success or otherwise of the implementation of this type of support. The study described here aimed to identify what these factors were in the implementation of an online language support system.

We now turn to a brief description of My English, the program used in this study. For a more complete description, we refer the reader to:

My English

My English is an online language support system. The program can be accessed online from both within and outside the university. It has a student, a teacher, and an administrator interface. The screenshot below shows the homepage of the student interface which has nine different learning and support modules. The modules can be accessed randomly but are numbered from top-left to bottom-right in an order corresponding to the different stages in the self-directed learning process. The first module is Your learning plan, where the students can write down their personal goals, the difficulties they have in meeting those goals, and the ideas they have to remedy them.

They can do a self-assessment by completing the online needs analysis. To help them get started, the program uses the results from the needs analysis to provide a list of priority skills and a list of recommended resources suitable for their level. The Find resources module acts as an online catalogue for language learning materials which includes online and print, commercial, and in-house produced materials. 'Recommended resources' are materials selected by teachers as being the best available for the relevant skills. Your learning record keeps a record of students' work, such as the materials they have used and the language skills these are intended for. Teachers can provide comments and feedback on the students' work. The Test yourself module provides eight online tests of general and academic English proficiency. It was included in part because Thai students expect to be tested and like to get regular feedback on their progress. The English for fun module gives information about activities and materials that are more entertainment-oriented. These could include movie screenings or computer games in English, for example. Your progress gives an overview of the students' learning progress, the number of tests they have completed, the number of times they have used the program, and for how long how. It is intended to give students a quick overview of their progress until that point. Getting help from a teacher allows the students to contact the teacher (either their language teacher, if they have one, or the staff at the self-access centre) by posting messages via chat, or, if the teacher is not available, via email. Students can also book an (online or face-to-face) advisory question using this module. The Activities module is a place where the SALC (the Self-Access Learning Center, the unit in charge of My English) can advertise online and face-to-face activities and news. The last module is Live chat which provides chatrooms for communication among the students and for use by teachers, for example, to organise a discussion group. Next, we will describe the context in which My English was used.

Figure 1: My English homepage
Context of the study

This study investigated the use of My English (described above) and was conducted in the context of an Academic English course (with a primary focus on writing) for postgraduate students from a range of faculties, taught by one of the authors. The class was made up of 31 adult learners ranging in age from 23 to 30 years. They met the teacher for 3 hours a week for 15 weeks. They were generally motivated to learn as seen from their attendance rate and their involvement while learning. During the course, the teacher attempted to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning and make decisions for themselves. They were taught how to apply different steps to writing reports and at the end of the semester had to submit a complete report in groups of three to four people. Students were able to choose a topic for themselves and were free to choose how to present it. They were encouraged to plan their learning and to self-correct their drafts.

My English had been largely completed just before the start of the course (the modules 'activities' and 'live chat' described above were not fully functional yet) and was implemented for the first time with this group.

Research questions and methodology

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. 1) Do students use the online language support of My English, and if so, how often and for how long?
2. 2) What aspects of their self-directed learning do they use it for?
3. 3) What do students think of My English?

To answer these questions queries were written for the database of My English, which records all information about students' online activities. This information includes times of access, materials accessed, requests for help, and all other activities the students engage in. By using this source of data we were able to piece together a comprehensive picture of students' usage of the online language support and answer research questions 1 and 2.

To answer research question 3, we administered a short questionnaire (see appendix A) to the students after the course finished. Nineteen out of 31 students in the class, or 61%, answered the questionnaire. In addition to this, informal feedback about the program was obtained by the researcher-teacher during class time.

Procedures

All students in the class were introduced to My English in the first week of the course. They were shown the program and explained its purpose and a demonstration of how to use it. Students then individually explored the program in class and completed their online

needs analysis. Subsequent usage of the program was voluntary and in no way affected the students' course grades.

Students who decided to continue using the program received weekly feedback from the teacher, who used the system to respond to student queries online and to monitor their progress. Students were not given any specific instructions on what to work on (as the program was intended to support self-directed learning, and each learner could choose to practise the skills most relevant to them), or how to use the program. Students, therefore, had complete control over their learning with My English.

Results

Out of 31 students in the class, a total of 16, or 52%, continued to use the program after the introductory session. The table below shows the number of times these 16 students used My English and the total time they spent using it, over the 14 weeks of the course (13 weeks if we exclude the first-week introduction; the time taken for the introduction is not included in the figures below).

Table 1:
Student usage of My English

St	Total time in minutes	Nr of times
1	217	6
2	74	2
3	42	4
4	500	14
5	103	11
6	214	9
7	321	9
8	268	18
9	349	13
10	81	2
11	82	12
12	359	10
13	348	16
14	1289	38
15	858	12
16	1348	18
Average	403	12

The average number of times students used the program was 12 so approximately once per week, although there is a large variation with some students only accessing the program twice and others up to 38 times. The average amount of time spent using the

program was six and a half hours, but again with a large variation, from a low of 42 minutes to a high of 1289 (over 21 hours).

Table 2 shows which parts (modules) of My English students used. As mentioned above, the 'activities' and 'live chat' modules were not fully functional at the time of this project and were therefore excluded from the results below.

Table 2:
Modules used

St	Find Resources (mins)	Learning Record (mins)	Test (No. of tests completed)	Get Help From the Teacher (mins)
1	171	45	0	0
2	3	0	1 (10 mins)	0
3	26	0	0	0
4	306	5	8 (100 mins)	0
5	10	0	3 (42 mins)	0
6	113	0	3 (49 mins)	0
7	199	0	0	0
8	55	113	3 (43 mins)	0
9	253	0	3 (31 mins)	0
10	81	0	0	0
11	0	0	3 (19 mins)	0
12	203	36	0	0
13	194	5	8 (82 mins)	0
14	707	202	8 (222 mins)	66
15	362	35	3 (189 mins)	2
16	926	70	8 (276 mins)	20
Average [1]	226	32	66	6

The data above show that, as would be expected, the catalogue and the materials it contains are easily the most popular of the modules. The average amount of time students spent searching for or interacting with materials is nearly four hours on average. Perhaps more surprisingly, only half of the students record their progress. The language tests seemed to be more popular with students spending well over an hour on average and some students spending up to four and a half hours. Interestingly, students do not make much use of the help function of the program that allows them to contact their teacher.

To answer the third research question, a short questionnaire (see appendix A) was distributed to all students in the course (i.e. both those who did not make use of My English beyond the initial introduction and those who did), to investigate their perceptions of My English. Out of 31 students, 19 responded. Of these 14 were users of My English, and 5 were not.

The latter were asked why they had chosen not to use the program. Two students responded that they did not have enough time, and three said they did not know enough about it.

Students who used My English were then asked to list the purposes for which they used the program:

- - practise English (e.g. listening, reading, grammar) (11)
- - test their English knowledge (3)
- - review the lessons (2)
- - practise English in order not to have to attend the class (2)
- - compensate for a missed class (1)
- - use English in everyday life (1)
- - practise English from websites (1)

Next, all students were asked to tick all the activities they engaged in to practise their English outside the context of the course. This was intended to identify to what extent students study independently and to determine if there was a difference between those who used My English and those who did not.

Table 3:
Out-of-class activities

Activity	Students using My English (N = 14)	Students not using My English (N = 5)
Reading news/information on the Internet.	85.71%	40.00%
Watch English movies with Thai subtitles and read along with the subtitles.	64.29%	60.00%
Review grammar from grammar books	64.29%	40.00%
Listen to English songs and try to understand their lyrics.	50.00%	60.00%
Watch English news (e.g. Channel 11 news).	42.86%	40.00%
Sing English songs and try to imitate the sound/accent.	35.71%	40.00%
Email/ write letters/ chat with friends in other countries.	35.71%	0.00%
Read English novels.	28.57%	0.00%
Watch English movies and try to guess from the story.	28.57%	60.00%
Read English newspapers.	28.57%	80.00%
Talk to foreigners.	21.43%	0.00%
Take English courses e.g. speaking in the workplace	21.43%	40.00%
Read English articles that are translated into Thai and compare the two versions.	14.29%	20.00%
Practise from English language teaching websites	7.14%	20.00%
Other, please specify	100%	60.00%

To answer research question 3, participants were asked what they liked about the program. They mentioned the following:

- - includes a wide range of different exercises (4)
- - allows students to practise English on their own (3)
- - allows further study (5)
- - it can be accessed all the time (2)
- - it helps to communicate with the teacher (1)
- - can be used to practise English during free time (1)
- - it can record learning progress (2)
- - it contains interesting websites (1)

The final question asked students for suggestions on how to improve My English. Those who used the program responded as follows:

- - the content should be more up-to-date and suitable for teenagers
- - there should be a greater variety of content
- - the program should contain new movies and songs
- - there should be somebody available so that the user can practise speaking with him/her
- - the tests should have more levels
- - the program should provide some kind of motivation after use
- - the tests should provide answer keys
- - more tests such as TOEIC or TOEFL should be added
- - answer keys to writing exercises should be provided

Suggestions from those who did not use the program were as follows:

- - students should be forced to use the program (2)
- - instructions on how to use the program should be provided (1)

Discussion

The first thing to point out is the relatively small number of students who used the program. Only just over half of all students enrolled in the class decided to make use of My English, even though it was freely accessible, encouraged by the teacher, and, one would hope, directly relevant to their course (there was no evidence in the questionnaire data to suggest otherwise). Another point is that of the 16 students who did elect to use the program, five only made use of it for a relatively short amount of time. In other words, only 11 out of 31 students used the program for a meaningful length of time during the course. It is important to identify why this is so. Responses to the questionnaire as well as informal feedback from students in class showed that students felt they did not know enough about the program, with some recommending that its use be made compulsory. This shows that the introductory session, even though it lasted the better part of an entire class and had students using (not just watching the teacher demonstrate) the program,

simply was not sufficient to encourage students to continue to use it. Perhaps more guidance in subsequent lessons, or recommended activities and structured activities would have been beneficial.

Another clue may come from the type of use the students made of the program. As shown in table 2, students, understandably, spent most of their time using online materials. They also spent considerable time completing the language tests. The education system in Thailand is very test-driven, and many students like to take regular tests to measure their progress. Much less time was spent by the students on recording their learning. Only eight out of the 16 students attempted to record their learning activities. Perhaps to the reader, this may not sound very surprising, however when one takes into account the introductory session, and the ongoing focus during the course on the development of learner autonomy, as well as the design features of the program that encouraged these postgraduate students to keep track of, and reflect on, their learning, the amount of time students spent on this part of the program, could be considered small. Part of the reason for this is that students do not have a great deal of experience in maintaining a record of their learning. Some of the comments that they recorded were very superficial. For example, when students completed their learning plan and their intentions for a future study they would write down 'practice', or when recording their language difficulties, they would write down 'English'.

Apart from a lack of experience, another reason may be that students do not like to formalise their out-of-class learning. Feedback from some of the students in class showed that they did not necessarily mind practising their English at home, but that recording or planning their learning would make the activity too much like schoolwork. Perhaps it is a bit surprising then, that they still spent considerable time completing the online language tests.

To some extent, this is also reflected in the results showing the activities students engaged in outside the classroom. Predictably, activities such as watching movies and listening to music score high. It is interesting that some of the more taxing activities, such as e-mailing and writing in English and talking to foreigners, were done more by the students who chose to use My English, than by the students who did not. Perhaps there is a difference in terms of the motivation of these two groups, which would be worth exploring in a future study.

When asked to give their feedback on the program, students asked for more tests and an opportunity to get speaking practice. Interestingly, two of the students who had not used My English during the semester, suggested that the program should be made compulsory.

A surprising result was the small amount of contact the students made through the program with the teacher. It had been thought that the students would take advantage of the opportunity to communicate with their teacher and get regular feedback on their learning. However, very little use was made of this feature. It could be, that the students were able to ask their questions during class time, however, especially seeing as the class only met once per week they did not make use of the program to extend their learning opportunities outside the classroom in this way.

What the results above have shown, is that the use of this type of program depends on several factors. One of these is the perceptions of the students, not only of the program itself but also the role of this type of program in their learning. Some students indicated

that they did not wish to take their learning outside the classroom like their learning inside it. Also, the results from the questionnaire showed that students predominantly engage in 'lighter' activities outside the school, such as watching movies and listening to music. These are, of course, worthwhile activities, and certainly should be encouraged. The question is to what extent these types of activities offer genuine learning opportunities, and perhaps more pressingly, how teachers and institutions, as well as their support mechanisms such as online programs like My English, can ensure that such activities move beyond entertainment and towards language learning. A significant amount of preparation and training may be necessary for the students not to see a clear division between their learning inside and outside the institution. At this point, with this particular group of learners, it seems as if most still see language learning as something that predominantly takes place inside the classroom, not as something that is an integrated part of their own lives.

Conclusion

It has to be pointed out that there are several limitations to this study. First of all, the total number of users was rather small. Second, the number of respondents to the questionnaire was also rather small especially with only five of the students responding who had not used My English during the semester. A second limitation is that the study did not aim to record what other activities students engaged in outside the classroom. Although the questionnaire asked students to list these, they may have engaged in other work besides My English and the activities mentioned in the questionnaire. This may have been the reason why not all of them chose to use My English, and it is also possible that some of them displayed a greater degree of self-direction in other ways. However, this seems unlikely based on the teacher's experience with this group and previous groups. Nonetheless, it is a possibility, and future studies should probably aim to control for this variable.

Conacher and Kelly-Holmes (2007) identify flexibility, diversity, accessibility, and equality as the key features of 'new learning environments'. My English makes available learning opportunities to all students, and in this way, it improves accessibility. It also allows the teacher to expand classroom learning to the students' lives and enables more flexible ways of teaching and learning. Because of its focus on individual learning, the program also caters to diversity, and with its potential to encourage self-directed learning, it can play a role in increasing students' ability for lifelong learning, and thus, equality. What the program does not do, however, is make all of this sufficiently clear to the students. Students may need more encouragement and perhaps initially even be required to use the program. Besides, they would benefit from more extensive training, not only in the technical but also in the pedagogical aspects of using the program for self-directed learning. Even though the program was intended to be used as a self-directed learning opportunity, the students would have benefited from more explicit instructions and perhaps initially a greater integration of the program into the classroom. In the future perhaps My English can be built into the curriculum in the first few weeks of the course, with required and regular contributions from the students and feedback from the teacher,

after which the use of the program could be made voluntary. The results from this small study are somewhat similar to those obtained in previous studies by Reinders (2006, 2007), who found that students who accessed an online self-access system did not make use of its features that encouraged the development of learner autonomy. In that study, the author argued for more training, and for making the aims and rationale of the program more explicit to the students. One major difference, however, between that study and the program is described, and this study is that My English is intended for use as an extension to the classroom, and as such, more integrated than programs such as that developed by Reinders, Toogood & Pemberton, and others described above, which are used by students independently.

What all these studies have in common is that they seem to point to a need for students to recognise the importance of bridging the classroom with their own lives. By connecting the formal learning that takes place in the classroom, with the informal learning that can take place anywhere, students may come to see the University learning experience as not confined to the campus, but rather as an ongoing pursuit that extends beyond the here and now at the university and into the future (Allford & Pachler, 2007). This may sound like a lofty goal, but it is only until students are ready to assume responsibility for their learning that they will be able to benefit from this type of program. It is the institution's, and the teacher's role to provide this rationale to the students, and to ensure that they are ready to assume it. In the case of My English, future courses will need to dedicate more time to emphasize how the program may benefit students' learning. In a way, then, developing My English was perhaps the easy part. Getting the teachers and the learners to take advantage of it may prove an exciting challenge for the years to come.

Note

1. The number of minutes of average use of the program in Ttable 1 is greater than the addition of the average minutes of use of the different modules in table 2 because table 1 includes general browsing of the program where students read instructions or explore the program without using any of the actual modules.

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Appendix A - Questionnaire

(This questionnaire was administered in Thai but has been translated into English for this article).

When you were taking LNG 600, I introduced My English, the online language support program. This questionnaire asks your opinion about the program. The first part of the questionnaire is for those who used the program. If you did not use the program, please go to the second part of the questionnaire.

PART I Students who used My English

1.What do you normally do when you want to practise English in addition to studying in class (you can choose more than one answer).

_____ watch English news (e.g. Channel 11 news).
_____ watch English movies and try to guess from the story.
_____ watch English movies with Thai subtitles and read along the subtitles.
_____ listen to English songs and try to understand the lyrics.
_____ sing English songs and try to imitate the sound/accent.
_____ read English newspapers.
_____ read news/information in the Internet.
_____ read English articles which are translated into Thai and compare the two versions.
_____ read English novels.
_____ talk to foreigners.
_____ email/write letters/chat with friends in the other countries.
_____ review grammar from grammar books.
_____ practise from English language teaching websites.
_____ take English courses, e.g. speaking in the workplace.
_____ other, please specify...

2. When you used My English, how did you choose what materials to work with?

_____ 1. I first chose from the language skills which I wanted to practise (e.g. listening, reading, writing). Then I chose from the suggestion provided by the program, e.g. Top five materials or Recommended materials.

_____ 2. I chose by typing 'key word' based on the skill in order to find the materials I wanted to work with.

_____ 3. I did not think of any language skill but I chose from the Top five materials. Other, please specify..

3. For what purposes did you use My English?

....

4. When using My English, did you use the learning record?

_____ yes _____ no because...

5. Do you think there is enough content in My English?

_____ yes _____ no because...

6. Do you think the content in My English is useful for English language practice ?

_____ yes _____ no because...

7. Overall, what do you think about My English? Please specify what you like or dislike about the program. ....

....

8. How could we improve the program?

....
....
....

PART II Students who did not use My English

1. What was your main purpose for taking LNG 600?

_____1. to pass the English requirements of the university.
_____2. to develop academic English proficiency.
_____3. to be able to write my thesis in English
_____4. other...

2. How often do you practise English outside the University?

_____ almost never _____ sometimes _____ often

1. What do you normally do when you want to practise English in addition to studying in class (you can choose more than one answer).
_____ watch English news (e.g. Channel 11 news).
_____ watch English movies and try to guess from the story.
_____ watch English movies with Thai subtitles and read along the subtitles.
_____ listen to English songs and try to understand the lyrics.
_____ sing English songs and try to imitate the sound/accent.
_____ read English newspapers.

_____ read news/information in the Internet.
_____ read English articles which are translated into Thai and compare the two
versions.
_____ read English novels.
_____ talk to foreigners.
_____ email/write letters/chat with friends in the other countries.
_____ review grammar from grammar books.
_____ practise from English language teaching websites.
_____ take English courses, e.g. speaking in the workplace.
_____ other, please specify...

4. Do you think online programs such as My English can help you to learn outside class?
How?

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....

5.Overall, what do you think about My English? Please specify what you like or dislike
about the program.

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6.Why did you not use My English?

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7. How could we better motivate students to use My English?

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Thank you for your cooperation