

## **Using Progress-Tracker Applications for Peer-Supported Independent Language Learning and Development: A Collaborative Autoethnography**

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## Abstract

Progress-tracker mobile applications are being increasingly used by individuals and groups of peers for health, fitness, and other self-improvement purposes. These tools offer great potential for language learners, especially in social language learning settings where thriving learning communities are readily established. This paper shares the story of a team of researchers with diverse language learning needs and attitudes as they undertook a period of self-directed, application-supported language learning together, with the aim of gaining insights into the experience of utilizing these peer support progress-trackers in order to better seed and spread this practice in the social language learning space in their institution and beyond. Taking a collaborative autoethnographic approach, rich data was provided by reflective journaling and weekly sharing sessions, alongside information recorded by the applications themselves. The shared stories illustrate the value of learning communities to the participants and established that the progress-trackers helped even the reluctant learners in the group to sustain study habits as well as to engage in proactive behaviors which led towards increased authentic target language use. The team identified a number of valuable application features and developed a deeper understanding of ways to encourage peers in their learning journeys. Most importantly, the team learned how to select appropriate challenges to track which can become long-lasting habits, supporting language learning and development.

進捗管理モバイルアプリケーションは、健康、フィットネス、その他の自己啓発のために、個人またはピアグループによってますます使用されるようになってきており、特に活発な学習コミュニティが容易に確立できるソーシャル言語学習環境において大きな可能性を秘めている。この論文は、多様な言語学習ニーズや考え方を持つ研究者チームが、進捗管理アプリケーションを使った自己管理型の言語学習を共に行った際のストリーリーを紹介し、ピアサポート進捗管理アプリケーションを活用した経験についての洞察を深め、彼らの大学やその他のソーシャル言語学習空間においてこの実践を広めることを目的としている。本研究は、共同作業による自己エスノグラフィーのアプローチを採用し、参加研究者4人が進捗管理アプリケーションに記録した情報とともに、それに基づく各自の振り返りのジャーナリングと参加研究者による毎週の共有セッションによって豊富なデータが提供された。共有されたストーリーは、参加者にとっての学習コミュニティの価値を説明し、進歩の遅い学習者でもグループの中で学習習慣を維持し、本物の目標言語の使用を増やすことにつながる積極的な行動を取ることができることを立証した。研究チームは、多くの価値あるアプリケーションの機能を特定し、学習過程において仲間を励ます方法について理解を深めた。最も重要なことは、言語学習と発達を支える長期的な習慣となり得る、適切な課題を選択する方法を学んだことである。

*Keywords:* progress-tracking applications, peer support, independent language learning, learning communities, language learning habits

There has been a proliferation in recent years of mobile applications for adopting and maintaining target behaviors or habits, informed by research in the field of behavioral sciences which shows that tracking and rewarding behaviors can lead to successful habit formation, and that social support can enhance this process (Clear, 2018; Duhigg, 2022; Fogg, 2020; Wood, 2019). Such progress-tracking applications have been investigated in a range of settings, including business, healthcare, and fitness, showing clear benefits (Bozan & Gewals, 2018; Jackson & Bourne, 2020; Pfund et al., 2019; Rivera-Pelayo et al., 2017). Tracker applications have the potential to support independent language learners in establishing and maintaining the behaviors necessary for language learning and development to occur, but they do not appear to have been embraced so far in social language learning spaces.

In this paper, four colleagues with a background in self-access language learning share a project in which we set out to use two progress-tracker applications designed for use in peer groups to support our own language learning endeavors, initially for a period of four weeks. Taking a collaborative autoethnographic approach, the aim of the study was to gain insights into the experience in order to effectively seed and spread this practice in the social language learning space in our institution.

### **Habit-Building**

Clear (2018) defines a *habit* as “a routine or practice that is performed regularly—and, in many cases, automatically” (p. 6). Wood (2019) explains that when a behavior leads to an immediate reward (a dopamine release), the brain builds an association between the context and the reward response. The context, or cue, becomes a prompt for the behavior. Duhigg (2022) notes that “cues can be almost anything, from a visual trigger, such as a candy bar [...] to a certain place, a time of day, an emotion, a sequence of thoughts, or the company of particular people” (p. 25). The reward can be extrinsic or intrinsic, and the sense of satisfaction in completing the activity can be the reward. With enough repetition, the cue will continue to trigger behavior even if the rewards stop (Wood, 2019). Habits do not require willpower because the cue triggers the behavior automatically (Duhigg, 2022; Wood, 2019).

It is possible to deliberately form habits. A behavior can be turned into a habit by repeating it in the same way (Wood, 2019). There must be a cue, and an immediate reward, which creates a “habit loop” (Clear, 2018), in which craving the reward leads to noticing and

responding to the cue. Clear (2018) recommends measuring progress with a habit-tracker (application) as the feeling of satisfaction generated by the visual evidence of progress is itself a satisfying reward. Making target behaviors small and easily achievable facilitates habit formation; Clear (2018) recommends selecting activities which can be completed in two minutes, and Fogg (2020) just 30 seconds. It takes many repetitions for a habit to be established; Clear (2018) argues that it takes “hundred, if not thousands” of repetitions, while Wood (2019) suggests that a new eating habit takes 65 days and an exercise habit approximately 90 days to form. Forming new habits leads to change on an identity level. Clear (2018) argues: “Your habits are how you *embody* your identity... the more you repeat a behavior, the more you reinforce the identity associated with that behavior” (pp. 36–37).

Social forces influence habit formation and maintenance in several ways. Clear (2018) and Wood (2019) argue that people align themselves with group norms, so it is helpful to join a culture of people who exhibit the target behaviors when trying to establish a habit. Sharing progress with peers also helps to increase feelings of accountability, because people do not want to be seen as failing; “knowing that someone is watching can be a powerful motivator” (Clear, p. 210). Duhigg (2022) explains how seeing others succeed and receiving their support helps people form new habits: “Your odds of success go up dramatically when you commit to changing as part of a group. Belief is essential, and it grows out of a communal experience, even if that community is only as large as two people” (p. 93). Fogg (2020) discusses supportive comments which can help the habit-formation process, noting that feedback should always be positive and aim to alleviate doubt or uncertainty. He provides a number of techniques, such as celebrating a single success, applauding a positive trend, recognizing consistent effort, and (with less successful outcomes) noting that things could have been worse with the phrase “at least...” or recognizing what has been achieved despite difficulties.

Although unintentional study habits, including maladaptive habits, have been studied (Bailey & Onwuegbuzie, 2002; Sabbah, 2016), deliberate habit-building has not been a major focus in language learning research. However, there has been considerable exploration of behaviors associated with successful language learning, which learners may select as target habits. The things which good language learners do to learn a language are sometimes referred to broadly as *strategies* (Griffiths, 2008; Naiman et al., 1996). Griffiths (2008) notes that these strategies can be deployed automatically, i.e., they can become habitual. In the field of self-

access language learning, the tasks which learners choose for themselves are usually described as *learning activities*, rather than strategies (Lee, 1998; McLoughlin & Mynard, 2018). Researchers have explored how learners can continue pursuing these activities over time. McLoughlin and Mynard (2018) identified interest or enjoyment as one factor which helps learners continue activities, which may indicate habit-loop formation, with learners repeating the activity in anticipation of the reward of experiencing pleasure. Cheng and Lee (2018) noted that peer support helps learners persist in self-directed language learning and Kao (2013) found that when language learners support their peers, they demonstrate skills such as showing empathy, encouraging use of strategies and resources, sharing experiences, increasing confidence, and establishing friendship.

### **How the Project Started**

This project arose from activity taking place in Lounge MELT, the social language learning space at Gifu Shotoku Gakuen University, Japan. In September 2021, inspired by the Linguistic Risk-Taking Passport (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021; Lyon et al., 2019; MacDonald & Thompson, 2019), some students who use Lounge MELT began attempting challenges to stretch their linguistic comfort zones, such as “ask a question in class,” “read a graded reader,” or “make a social media post in English.” The students were excited about this process and expressed eagerness to maintain some of these behaviors long-term. This led to discussions about how to make long-term habits, and students shared the difficulties they had sustaining independent learning activities over time. To help students like this, Clair, the director of Lounge MELT, started to consider introducing smartphone progress-tracker applications, which could provide supportive features such as instantaneous visual rewards and reminder notifications, as well as allowing peer encouragement even when off campus. There were two indications that students would find these tools helpful. First, in April of 2021, student staff in Lounge MELT had switched from paper to smartphone applications to log their working hours. Second, around the same time, frequent users of the lounge had begun forming learning communities using the application Studyplus (Studyplus Inc., 2021), discovering the affordances of using a digital tool to track their study time and share study notes.

Before introducing progress tracker applications to students, Clair invited MELT learning advisors Kumiko and Alexandra and faculty member Jason to use trackers in this group project

to gain first-hand experience using these applications to support our own learning. We believed that this would ultimately help us spread the practice more successfully, as we would be able to tell students about our experiences and show them our progress. Our aims were (a) to develop an understanding of the process of adopting new habits for language learning growth; (b) to familiarize ourselves with the various features of the tracker applications; and (c) to gain credibility for this approach by “walking the walk” (i.e., using the applications ourselves, rather than just recommending that students try using them). In our belief that “walking the walk” would lead to greater uptake of habit tracking, we drew on Clair’s previous experience engaging in an action research project (Taylor, 2010) in which students dramatically increased their use of a vocabulary application when she, as class teacher, met the same weekly targets in the application (learning Japanese) which her class was aiming for (in English). Other language educators have taken a similar approach to influencing learners; Day and Bamford (2000) and Miller (2009) encourage teachers to read for pleasure in front of students and talk about their reading to turn students into readers, and Ellis (2006) interviewed teachers who share stories about their own learning strategies to help students understand how to learn, an approach also taken by Wyner (2014). Similarly, Maley (2022) “walks the walk” with environmental activism in his language classes, modeling the behaviors he hopes students will follow.

### **Project Outline**

We each selected three to four target behaviors to attempt to sustain (i.e., to turn into habits) for four weeks during July 2022 (see Table 1), one of which (“use a recently learned word or expression in real life”) we all shared as a group challenge. We selected this group challenge because it was already common behavior among successful Lounge MELT users and because it could be easily shared, irrespective of our target languages, while motivating us to use the language authentically rather than study it out of context. Our individual targets were chosen to meet our personal learning needs or wants.

To track our progress, we used the application Keystone (Jalabert, 2022) for the first and second week, then a different application, WithPeers (WithPeers Limited, 2020), for the third and fourth week. We switched to the WithPeers application because Keystone was still under development in July 2022, and some features were not fully functional at that time. However, Clair and Alexandra continued to use Keystone (alongside WithPeers) throughout the month due

to its superior features. All members made some use of Keystone (Jalabert, 2022–present) after the four-week project period ended, and Clair and Alexandra continue to use it to date, ten months from the start of the project.

**Table 1**

*Participants and Target Behaviors*

Name	Native language	Target language(s) and CEFR level	Target behaviors/habits	Schedule
Alexandra	English	Japanese (CEFR B1/2) Spanish (CEFR A1)	• Practice writing kanji for at least five minutes on an application for Japanese children	Daily
			• Practice flashcards for at least five minutes on Anki for kanji/vocabulary recognition	Daily
			• Complete at least one lesson on Duolingo or Anki for Japanese reading/grammar/vocabulary	Daily
			• Complete at least one Spanish lesson on Duolingo	Daily
			• Use a newly learned word or expression in real life (group challenge)	Weekdays
Kumiko	Japanese	English (CEFR C1)	• Watch <i>The Great British Bake Off</i> (Love Productions, 2010) for 15 minutes, learning new words and phrases	Daily
			• Listen to one episode of <i>The British English Podcast</i> (Baxter, 2020–present) with the transcript, studying the words on Quizlet	Weekdays
			• Read <i>The Vanderbeekers and the Hidden Garden</i> (Glaser, 2018)	Weekends
			• Use a newly learned word or expression in real life (group challenge)	Weekdays
Jason	English	Japanese (CEFR B1)	• Parse all Japanese email before resorting to translation software	Daily
			• Read one <i>NHK Easy</i> (News Web Easy, n.d.) news article	Daily
			• Use a newly learned word or expression (initially limited to one from the previous day's NHK story) in real life (group challenge)	Weekdays

Clair	English	Japanese (CEFR B1)	•Complete one set of five words in the vocabulary application iKnow (DMM, 2022)	Daily
			•Study at least five kanji in the application KanjiBox (duVerle, 2021)	Daily
			•Use a newly learned word or expression in real life (group challenge)	Weekdays

Note. CEFR=Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020)

### The Progress-Tracker Applications

Keystone and WithPeers are both free iOS applications available for iPhones and iPads. In Keystone, the user enters a target behavior (e.g., learn vocabulary items, do graded reading), sets any metrics to track (e.g., number of words or pages), and decides their schedule. The user then identifies a trigger or prompt for the behavior, sets up reminder notifications, and decides which friends to share progress with (see Figure 1). On completion of the activity each day, the user slides their finger to mark the activity “done” and sees animated celebration emoji. The user then advances a “level.” After each completion the user can record metrics and reflections in a private journal and make a post (including a photo) to their followers, who can respond to the comment with stickers and text comments, starting a conversation thread. In early versions of the application, users could only post after reaching a “milestone” by advancing five levels (Figure 2), a restriction which has since been lifted. There was also a “challenge” feature, now unavailable, in which a group of users compete to achieve a group goal (Figure 3). Keystone allows an unlimited number of daily targets.

**Figure 1***Creating a Habit on Keystone*

**CREATE A HABIT**

**Base Details** ?

Base Details: Greet people in Japanese

Description: + Description

Color: + Color

**Tracking**

- tracking number of people... ×

+ Add a metric to track

**Schedule**

On what days do you want to do your habit?

M T W T F S S

Everyday Weekdays Weekends

**Trigger** ?

I will do it after Arriving at work ×

**Reminders**

- 10:00 ×

+ Add a reminder

**CREATE A HABIT**

**Share progress with**

Who will be allowed to see your progress?

Friends Everyone in your friends list

Private Only selected friends - or no one

Friends not on the app? Invite from contacts

**Create Habit**

**Figure 2***Milestone Posts and Comments on Keystone*

The screenshot shows a feed of posts and comments. At the top, a post from 'kumikothom' shows they hit level 10 for 'Watch British Bake Off'. Below it, a post from 'LEVEL 10' shows they completed a game. A comment from 'xana' discusses a language-related challenge. Other users like 'clairt' and 'xana' also comment on the posts.

**kumikothom hit level 10 on:**  
**Watch British Bake Off**  
8 months ago

**LEVEL 10** Do one IKnow game  
**70** M T W T F S S

Woo hoo! Nothing exciting today tho. Nozomashii (desirable) - something I understand but don't use. And 南東 which I don't use as I can't do directions in any language :-)

1 like · 3 comments

clairt · 8 months ago  
Soggy bottom is a great expression. It's a must-use!!!!!!

xana · 8 months ago  
Soggy bottom! But "spot on" is super useful!

xana · 5 months ago  
Lol! M [REDACTED] is always baffled by my complete cluelessness as to which way is north. I listened to a podcast about a tribe that ordered everything by direction. So they didn't say it's on my right, they'd say it's to my south, or whatever. I thought that goodness I wasn't born into that society because I'd be the village idiot.

**Figure 3***Completed Keystone Challenge*

The screenshot shows a summary of a challenge that has ended. It displays the goal (80% completion), participants (4), and completion rates for each participant. The challenge summary includes a message of congratulations for reaching the goal.

**Use a recently learned word / expression**

**Time left** ended   **Goal** 80% completion   **Participants** 4

Linked with: Use a recently learned word / expression

**0 / 4 have completed today**   **Avg. Completion**

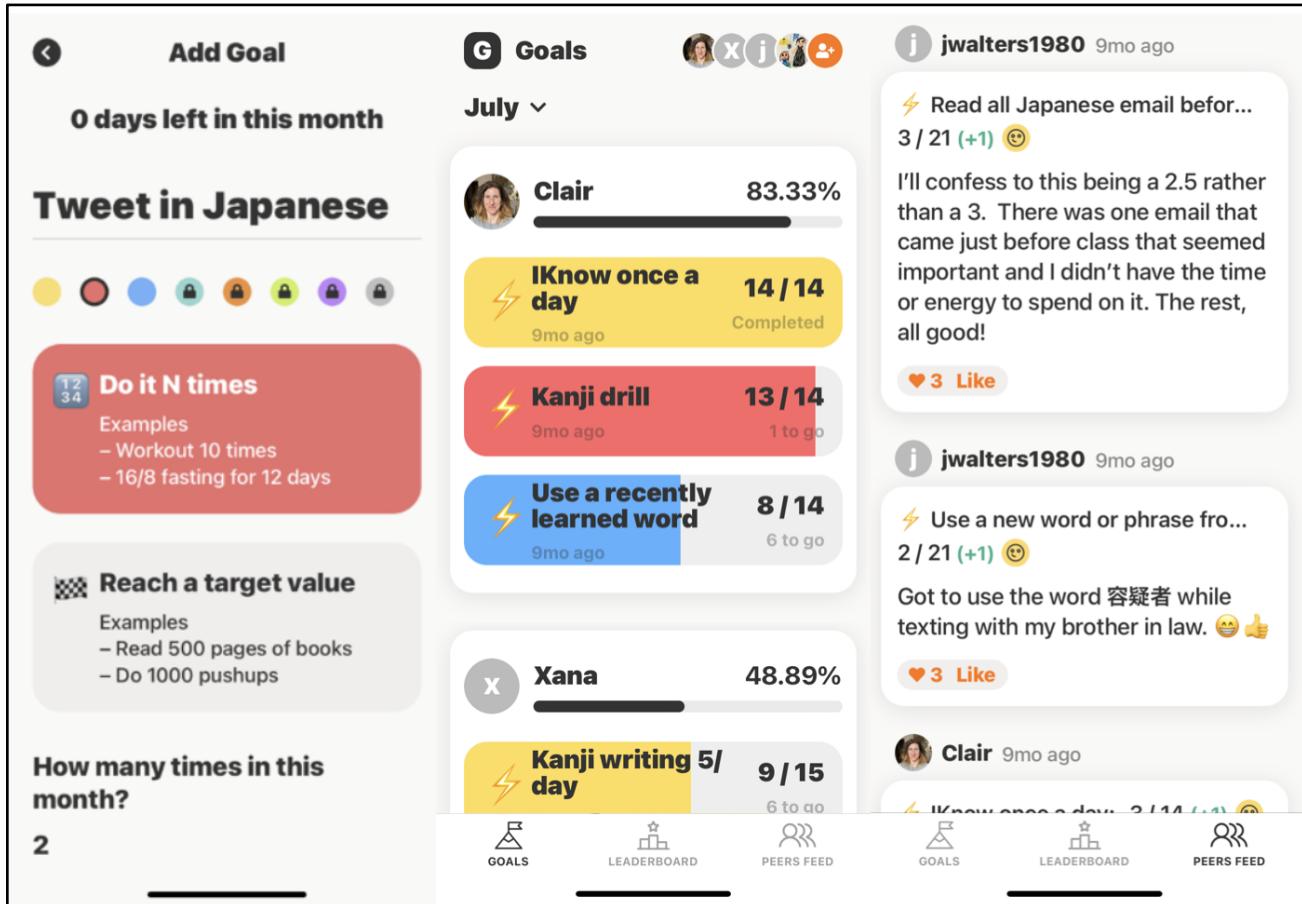
Participant	Completion %
All	69%
clairt	81%
kumikothom	76%

**Challenge has ended!**  
Group avg. : 69% · Individual avg. : 81%

You reached the goal, congratulations!

Share your result

In WithPeers, users can add a maximum of three goals, setting a target value for the calendar month (e.g., N times, words, or pages). The user then selects “commit” and a bar appears. The user checks in, enters the appropriate number (e.g., one time, five words), and adds a photo and/or comment post. Their followers (peers) can see the post and choose to “like” the post but cannot respond. As the user moves towards their monthly target, the bar fills with color (see Figure 4). Peers in the group appear on a leaderboard in order of achievement. Each month begins afresh and there is no way to accumulate levels or progress once the calendar month is over. [This video](#) (Taylor et al., 2022) demonstrates the features of both WithPeers and Keystone, including animations which cannot be shown in screenshots.

**Figure 4***Goal Creation and Tracking on WithPeers*

### Methodological Approach

This project is a collaborative autoethnography (CAE). This project—in which we each worked solo on our separate target behaviors, but also provided peer encouragement through the tracker applications and shared the common experience of using those applications to support learning—lent itself ideally to the practice of alternating between solo and community reflection which characterizes and enriches CAE (Chang et al., 2013).

Ethnography can “straddle the lines of scholarship and praxis applications” (Hernandez et al., 2022, p. 9). From the outset, this project had a practical aim: to help our students who struggle to start and sustain behaviors which advance their foreign language development. Transformation was an intended outcome of this endeavor. We aimed to adopt new language

learning habits, to become more successful foreign language users, changing ourselves so that we could become better role models and change agents in our social language learning space and our institution as a whole. Hernandez et al. (2022) define transformation as “substantial and potentially sustainable change in knowledge, insights, and/or behaviors that can take place in individuals, communities, and organizations through the process of ethnographic enquiry” (p. 2).

We collected data from multiple sources to record our learning journeys. The progress trackers applications were one source of data, providing details of the number of times we completed our target activities and also providing a record of our posts and comment threads. To “make the inner workings of [our] minds visible” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 22), we wrote journal entries and held weekly meetings in which we discussed our experiences.

We each wrote six journal entries in total, using written prompts to stimulate reflection. We uploaded these texts to a shared Google Drive folder so that we could read each other’s reflections. First, we completed our first journal entry in June 2022, prior to starting the project, in which we reflected on our learning history, target behavior choices, and aspirations for the project. We then wrote a journal entry at the end of each week of the one-month project period in July 2022. Finally, we each wrote another journal entry in December 2022, seven months after the project began, reflecting on our trajectory over this period, exploring how we managed to sustain the habits and how we have developed our understanding of target behavior choices.

We held weekly meetings during the month of July 2022, always preceded by reading each other’s journal entries. In these meetings we discussed our challenges honestly and openly, making ourselves vulnerable in a way that encouraged deep sharing (Ellis, 2004; Yazan, 2020). The structure of the meetings evolved over the course of the month. During the first meeting, we experimented with the application, trying to fully understand the detailed functions. In subsequent meetings, more time was used for oral retellings of the reflections we had shared in writing, allowing the high-quality listening provided by our team members to draw out and clarify our thoughts, a practice Mann (2002) calls “talking into understanding.” In later meetings, we began to identify areas in which we needed to read more research to deepen our understanding and created a working document to plan how to introduce progress-tracker applications to students, informed by our discoveries. All meetings concluded with the team deciding the prompts for the following reflection journal entry. The meetings were recorded and

played back to produce meeting notes which summarized the content, with the most salient parts transcribed in full.

Our approach to reviewing the scholarly literature in the field of habit-formation and behavior change was unconventional, and we do not “hide the messiness” (Ellis, 2004, p. 252) of our study. Rather than reading extensively before selecting our target behaviors and starting the habit-tracking process, we made the decision to embark on this endeavor with a very basic knowledge of the field and explore the literature as our journey unfolded. We anticipated that if we set about this endeavor closely following the recommendations of behavioral researchers, we would have a friction-free experience which might be less useful for learning about the kind of pitfalls and challenges our students might experience when they attempt to use the applications without the benefit of this knowledge. Through experiencing some difficulty, discussion, reflection, and dialogical interaction with the scholarly literature, a deep understanding was gained, allowing us to identify ways to guide students towards a smoother journey.

As is typical of CAE, our data collection-analysis-interpretation process was “iterative rather than linear” (Chang et al., 2013, pp. 100–101). Meaning-making was ongoing throughout the journal writing, reading, reviewing, and discussions, and culminated in the analytic process of story-writing (Chang et al., 2013; Ellis, 2004). Presentation of findings in autoethnographic projects can take “a variety of forms—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, [...] and prose” (Ellis, 2004, p. 38). In this paper, we decided to present our findings as four separate stories. We made this choice in order to illustrate our different learning trajectories and to preserve the multivocality of our diverse group. The stories were written through a process of revisiting the data collected by the applications, the reflections, meeting notes, additional email meetings, and the working document, selecting the most significant details to highlight key learnings. The story writing entailed a long process of discussion, drafting and redrafting, reading each other’s stories, suggesting, and editing to identify the most important findings and communicate them evocatively.

## Findings

### Alexandra’s Story

*Living in Japan for over two decades, learning Japanese has always been a struggle for me. My inattentive type ADD and aphantasia (inability to visualize images in my mind) make it*

*particularly challenging for me to learn kanji. I have repeatedly given up studying after a week or two, feeling like an utter failure, resulting in uneven Japanese skills which are ill-suited to most standard language learning programs. Still, I aspire to become a functional, literate adult.*

*I had never participated in an online or app-based learning group as a student before, nor had I ever successfully used any digital learning method. In fact, it had been over 30 years since I last experienced any external feedback on my language learning. Although I had low expectations of myself and felt trepidation due to my long-term negative relationship with Japanese learning, I was interested in trying new technology and discovering ways to support our students in their language learning.*

*Initially, my three Keystone tasks were a minimum of five minutes daily of kanji writing, kanji recognition, and Japanese reading/grammar/vocabulary. I added a fourth target of Spanish on Duolingo to compare the enjoyable experience of learning a relatively easy new language with my fraught relationship with Japanese.*

*I found the Keystone app visually appealing and easy to use. It was satisfying to swipe away habits as I completed them. I could time and stack habits to fit my study into my morning routine. Talking it through in our second meeting, it became clear that although I wasn't learning to love kanji, I was studying every day, just like I do the dishes, because it was a task that had to be done. For the first time in decades, I was overcoming negative self-talk and repeated failure and maintaining a regular study routine, achieving a 100% completion rate for all the targets in the first two weeks. Spanish was enjoyable and Japanese learning had become a daily chore rather than an existential crisis.*

*Our group challenge, to use a new word or phrase in daily conversation, was the most difficult task for me to complete as it depended on manufacturing conversations in Japanese. Thanks to my teenage daughters' patience with my sudden random attempts to discuss things like the immortal soul in Japanese, I managed to complete this task on 9 out of 10 days. Although the task was difficult, bonding over our group's efforts to use obscure phrases and vocabulary was sometimes the highlight of my day. For example, Clair commented, "My word yesterday was 乗馬警官 [kibakeikan]" and I just had to know how she worked "mounted police" into casual conversation.*

*Unfortunately, due to travel and illness, I was not able to participate fully in the following two weeks using the WithPeers app and my overall completion rate for my Japanese*

*targets was just 49%. Although I enjoyed the freedom to post whenever we wanted, I missed the ability to respond to posts, creating back-and-forth discussions. Additionally, in With Peers, being faced with the total number of times I would need to complete the tasks that month felt more daunting than seeing my daily Keystone to-do list.*

*After summer vacation, I returned to Keystone. It has been ten months since we started this project and I am still studying Japanese and Spanish daily. Some of my study materials have changed, but my motivation level has not. I am using the same kanji writing app and have 200 completions (78%), but I am now using Wanikani for kanji recognition and vocabulary thanks to hearing about Jason's experience in one of our weekly meetings. I have 166 completions (99%). I also read aloud daily from a book of science facts for children (なぜ? どうして? 3年生) with 146 completions (86%).*

*Participating in this project has shown me the importance of "walking the walk." I had recommended daily reading aloud to my students for decades but had never tried it myself. It is, in fact, effective, improving my grammar, vocabulary, kanji, and fluency. Spanish continues to be my most enjoyable task with 293 completions (96%).*

*Using Keystone has helped me build a daily study routine and gain confidence in my language-learning abilities. Participating in this project has completely rewired my brain. For over 20 years, I despised studying kanji and found any excuse to avoid it. Yet, the other day, I woke up at 4:00 am with a driving need to review the kanji I would be doing on Wanikani that day. I couldn't fall back to sleep until I looked them over.*

*Initially, joining the group for this project helped motivate me and keep me accountable. I learned additional vocabulary and practical tips from other members, but more importantly, the comments and discussions made me feel like I wasn't struggling alone. Positive feedback from group members such as Clair commenting, "Gosh, level 20 is awesome!!" helped me feel pride in my progress, even on hard days. After experiencing the change in myself as tiny habits have grown and transformed me into a dedicated language learner, I am now starting to use Keystone with students and look forward to seeing how it works for them.*

### **Kumiko's Story**

*As a wife of a Canadian and a mother of two daughters we are raising bilingually, my long-term objective is to be able to have more complex conversations in English. I have been highly motivated to improve my English, but I was always making excuses for not having enough*

time and had had no active language learning habits for some years, though I use English in my daily life. For the first four weeks of this research project, I set three targets—1) study with the podcast for 15 minutes on weekdays, 2) watch the BBC program *British Bake Off* for 15 minutes every day, 3) read an English book on weekends—in addition to the group challenge which was to use a newly learned word in real life.

I was able to study with the podcast for 20 out of 20 days. I watched the program, however, for only 18 out of 28 days (a 64% completion rate) as I realized that adding this activity was too ambitious. I managed to do the weekend reading on 7 out of 8 days (a completion rate of 88%). For the group challenge, I used a recently learned word/phrase 17 out of 20 days (a completion rate of 85%; though the app displayed this as 76%).

At first, I completed my targets mainly because of feeling pressure, knowing my group members were watching my progress. But after a week, I did them because I felt the joy of learning English again and was proud of using my time well. I started to feel reluctant to track my progress, finding even just swiping the phone screen each time a little bit 単調で面倒 [tanchou de mendou, monotonous and tedious], and streaks and the progress chart did not give me any 達成感 [tasseeikan, sense of accomplishment]. In the third meeting, I asked, “When do you realize something has become a habit?” I felt I did not need to track any more.

While the *WithPeers* app had limited interactivity, the *Keystone* app had a feature which allowed me to interact with the peer group by adding comments to the posts I or the peer group had made. This was only available when you reach a milestone, and I know some people might think it is an odd restriction, but to me, the fact that I could not write or get a comment each time made the milestones feel special and stimulating. Encouraging positive comments from the peer group became like 自分の努力に対するご褒美 [jibun no doryoku ni tai suru gohoubi, a welcoming reward for my efforts], and it became enjoyable sharing my learning progress. I also wanted to encourage and support my peer group in their continued efforts with the same positive comments, and this exchange comments feature helped me feel part of a learning community.

Ten months have passed, and I have continued to use the podcast and view the program. I finished the book and have started another one. But I do not do these things on a daily basis, as I do not want to turn my English study into a daily ‘chore.’ I do not need tracker apps to continue my English learning.

*I realized that apps can help me make habits if I choose the right target and the right amount of activity, which I can combine with my daily routine. Thus, I decided to study one lesson a day of beginner-level Spanish on Duolingo, an application which has progress-tracking features, using Keystone as extra habit-building support for the first 20 days. I have continued now for 163 days.*

### **Jason's Story**

*Before COVID, prioritizing Japanese study had been a challenge. However, during the pandemic, daily reviews using a subscription-based, timed-repetition kanji study application I truly enjoyed helped me to pass the N3 proficiency test, and I was making progress toward N2. When my weekly work commute increased by 12 hours in 2022, Japanese study unfortunately became my first sacrifice. This project, I felt, might help me to establish a new study routine.*

*I set three reasonable targets to kickstart my habit-tracking journey. First, I aimed to read and comprehend Japanese work emails without relying on translation tools. Second, I committed to reading a nightly article from Japan's NHK News Easy website. Finally, I joined the group in using one new word or phrase daily—adding the challenge of selecting my target language from the previous night's reading.*

*During the first two weeks, I consistently completed the reading task, but encountered issues with the other targets. Deciphering Japanese emails proved impossible on days when no emails arrived, and incorporating language from news articles into casual interactions was difficult due to limited opportunities.*

*My Keystone interactions were comparatively infrequent—and at times I struggled to make them feel personal rather than obligatory. I found it difficult to wear both participant and researcher hats while feeling sincere in my participation—was I leaving comments and taking screenshots because I felt it was truly helpful to the others, or was I simply trying to generate useful data for the project? Using these features never became habitual, but knowing my progress was visible to others was enough to keep me coming back. At our first in-person meeting following week one, I had a breakthrough when the others told me they felt energized by my comments—as simple as they were, I had not expected that they would impact anyone. This feedback motivated me to interact more frequently with their posts. Our second group meeting helped me to take this engagement further—I mentioned that my tracking applications were located deep in a subfolder on my phone, and my peers suggested increasing their visibility by*

*placing them on my home screen, which helped me engage more frequently with the social features of the comparatively feature-light WithPeers app in the second half of the project. Though I never developed the same enthusiasm as my teammates, these key moments were invaluable in helping increase my engagement.*

*In my first two weeks with Keynote, I completed my news reading every night but was only successful in achieving the other two 71% of the time. When we switched to WithPeers in week three, I continued to struggle with these more situational habits that were sometimes impossible to complete. While changing my email-reading habit mid-stream would have presented difficulty, I adapted my third habit by choosing “any new word or phrase” for conversation (rather than pulling language from my NHK article) to better match my team members’ approach to the group challenge.*

*I found that I much preferred WithPeers’ more minimalist interface, and enjoyed steady progress with all of my chosen habits. I managed 86% completion for my Japanese email, was able to use a new word in conversation 90% of the time, and completed 71% of my nightly news readings—sometimes even going on to read one or two more articles just for fun!*

*When the project ended, I replaced my selected habits with activities I had always enjoyed—such as re-subscribing to my favorite timed-repetition kanji software, reading Harry Potter in Japanese, and having more proactive text chats with my Japanese in-laws. I briefly tracked my activity using the applications, though I soon left them behind. Although they did help me to re-establish a study routine, the project’s most unexpected and enduring benefit for me was the experience of weekly journaling and group sharing. Reflections and discussions sparked feelings of connection and support that never seemed quite authentic while using the apps, and reinforced my understanding of the value of reflective practice and of sharing the journey with others. While I may not be the target market for these apps, I understand how they could be valuable virtual spaces for many, including the students I teach.*

### **Clair’s Story**

*My free time is really precious, and I resent spending any of it learning Japanese. I made myself study to pass the N2 proficiency test, but after that I stopped trying and slid backwards. In this project I wanted to turn that around. I set myself three targets. I decided that every morning, after looking at my Facebook feed, I would complete one set of five words in the vocabulary app iKnow, which I had used with success in the past. At night, in bed, I would study five kanji in*

*KanjiBox. The last target was the shared challenge, which was to use a newly-learned word in real life.*

*In retrospect, that challenge was not well chosen. In a normal day I only encounter a few minutes of transactional Japanese, but I suddenly found myself having to start conversations and manipulate those conversations so that I could use an obscure word like “牧場 [bokujou, ranch].” I struggled. Nevertheless, with the peer accountability and support, I did it. I went out and spoke to people, even though I usually avoid speaking Japanese whenever possible. It was hard, but I managed all ten weekdays in the first two weeks. I also completed the iKnow activity every day and studied five or more kanji on 13 of the 14 days during this period. On one day, I managed as many as 15 kanji.*

*This was all thanks to the encouragement and inspiration provided by Xana, Kumiko, and Jason. I’m often critical when I speak to myself in my head, so it was nice to have people show an interest (asking how I’d used a word in conversation, for example) and say kind things (such as: “You deserve to be on weekend mode!”). When I posted about a “weird vocabulary hole” I had, Xana replied “I’m with you in that hole!” Other people admitting their struggles helped me judge myself less harshly.*

*I loved seeing what other people were doing in Keystone posts. I got vivid mental images of Kumiko watching *Bake Off* and learning about “soggy bottoms” and apologizing to her husband for “talking his ear off.” I could see Alexandra telling her cat in Japanese that there was plenty (豊かな [yutakana]) of food to eat, and I saw Jason reading his NHK news stories. It made me feel less alone. Some people go to a coffee shop to study near other people. I felt the app helped me do something similar, seeing the others in my mind, working on their language skills, as if they were in the next room.*

*We switched to WithPeers because we wanted to post more frequently, but I immediately realized that this app did not work for me. Our reflections and discussions showed that everyone was frustrated by the app’s limitations. The biggest problem was that we could not reply to posts. Also, entering a number when a target was achieved was less satisfying than swiping. I missed Keystone’s animations. I missed seeing the words “Perfect Day” (which Keystone displays when all your habits are done) and the Lou Reed lyric that automatically plays in my mind when I see those words. I missed seeing my level go up, showing the total number of times my target has been achieved. I missed choosing emoji to send, proudly looking at my bank of earned emoji, like*

*treasures. So, I went back to Keystone and attempted to track my progress in both apps in weeks three and four, recording 14 out of 14 successful days using iKnow, 13 out of 14 studying kanji, and 8 out of 10 for the group challenge.*

*The four-week project finished, but I'm still using Keystone ten months on. The app has developed, and we can post every time we complete a target. I have now reached level 224 for my vocabulary activity, a completion rate of 77%, and level 173 for kanji, a completion rate of 59%. I modified the final target, making it easier to achieve. Instead of trying to use a new word in real life, I decided just to greet people in Japanese, which still forces me to interact, because it often leads to a conversation. My completion rate is 75%, and my best streak is 11. I feel better about myself as a Japanese learner and user.*

*Even as we planned how best to introduce habit trackers in MELT, I could not resist introducing Keystone to a few students, alongside a similar app for Android users. It is exciting to see students experiencing success and it makes me smile when they comment on my progress. The connection is so powerful and intimate, and I am confident this will take off in MELT when we promote it widely.*

## Discussion

### Habit Building

Our habit-building experiences illustrate well-established findings in the field of behavioral science. Reluctant learners Alexandra and Clair were both able to establish durable learning habits by committing to small target behaviors taking five minutes or less (Clear, 2018; Fogg, 2020), and Kumiko reduced her ambitious targets to make a more sustainable learning system. Jason and Clair both found setting small target habits (study five words, read one short news story) often led to doing more, indicating that these targets functioned as “gateway habits” (Clear, 2018, p. 163) which affect how the subsequent chunk of time is spent. The importance of cues for triggering behavior was also evident. In putting the applications on his home screen, Jason experienced the significant impact of managing his environment so that the visual cue triggered the new habit of using the applications (Clear, 2018; Duhigg, 2022). Wood’s (2019) claim that we “grow to love the things that we repeatedly do” (pp. 204–205) is supported by the reduction in the negativity towards Japanese study which Clair and Alexandra experienced over the months of repeated learning activity.

Our struggles with the group challenge showed that “using a new word or expression in real life” was not an optimally-designed target behavior, particularly for intermediate learners. This target relies on the availability of others to interact with, and on the conversation serendipitously moving in a direction which allows the natural use of the vocabulary item. This means there is no “stable cue” (Wood, 2019, p. 132) to trigger the habit. For intermediate learners, newly-learned vocabulary does not feature in everyday, transactional encounters, and achieving the target behavior requires not only a willingness to initiate interactions but sufficient language proficiency to sustain them, and to steer conversations towards topics which may present opportunities to use the selected words. In this group, only Kumiko had a proficiency level appropriate for this challenge, as Figure 5 demonstrates. Fogg’s (2020) recommendation to “imagine yourself doing the behavior on your hardest day of the week” (p. 62) helped Clair formulate a more achievable target to build up from (“to greet someone in Japanese”).

However, the group challenge was effective in encouraging all of us to engage in proactive, social behaviors leading towards increased authentic target language use, and helped expand our comfort zones, leading to feelings of bravery, elation, fun, and group bonding. Notably, the peer progress-tracker applications supported some level of success in sustaining this habit, despite the difficult level. This indicates that such applications can be valuable for students who wish to pursue behaviors in which they use the target language, taking linguistic risks.

**Figure 5***Keystone Thread Discussing the Group Challenge*

**kumikothom** hit level 10 on: Use a recently learned word / expression 6 months ago

**LEVEL 10** Use a recently learn... 6

M T W T F S S

"digress"

In conversations with my mum, we often digress and don't get to the main topic, and then my husband loses patience.

I was able to use this word today when talking to Naoki in MELT (natural, not manipulated!)

1

3 likes • 12 comments

Like Comment

**clairt** • 6 months ago

Lol!!! Oh, to get to a point where I could naturally drop a newish word into a conversation without forcing it in!!! That is master level!!!!

## Using the Tracker Applications

The diversity in our experiences shows how different learners can have very different experiences with the same tool, depending on preferences, needs, feelings about the target language, stage of their learning journey, time constraints, and other personal factors. Gender differences (Nyikos, 2008) may also be one factor relevant to the different level of engagement with the social interaction in Keystone experienced by Jason. Our experiences demonstrate Fogg's (2020) claim that individuals respond to different rewards. The screen-based Keystone animations served as a powerful reward for Clair and Alexandra, but were less effective for

Jason, who values face-to-face human contact, and Kumiko, who finds intrinsic enjoyment in the learning activities themselves.

Using a different application for weeks three and four helped us establish which application features are most valuable for peer-supported independent learning. We found the ability to respond to comments and interact was essential. We also valued having the option to post frequently. There were three other features which we identified as important: a simple, satisfying way to mark activities done, the ability to see continuous progress, and a daily task list.

### **Peer Support**

The power of the peer group to support change and sustain target behaviors was evident. Being part of the group reduced feelings of isolation, and, as Clair explained in her story, the shared posts even generated the sense of adult parallel play which people experience when they engage in study or work activities in social spaces such as coffee shops (Weiner, 2022). We would not have had such transformative experiences had we embarked on this progress-tracking endeavor alone.

This project provided rich information about the ways in which peers can support others. Encouragement, through stickers and celebratory comments, was helpful, and we enjoyed discussing our study methods and the language points we were studying, providing a window into our language-learning processes. Admitting struggles and commiserating were among the most powerful support techniques used in the group. Overall, the peer support via the application and the weekly meetings displayed the features of positive communication: Greeting (to create human contact), asking questions, complimenting, disclosing (to deepen relationships), encouraging, and listening (Mirivel, 2019, p. 53). There were abundant examples of Fogg's (2020) supportive techniques (discussed above) in the Keystone comment threads.

### **Limitations of the Project**

This was our first attempt at a CAE project, and it presented some challenges. Jason's story highlighted how difficult it can be to switch between so many hats; the learner, the peer supporter, the researcher, and the faculty member or learning advisor who is planning how best to support students in adopting new behaviors to support their learning.

Moreover, we realize that our commitment to this project as researchers added an extra layer of pressure to maintain use of the application and sustain our target habits which students

using the applications will not benefit from, as well as other support from the reflection processes of journaling and weekly meetings which clearly contributed to our outcomes. It is difficult to gauge the extent of these effects, and we recognize that each language learner will have a multitude of factors influencing their journey.

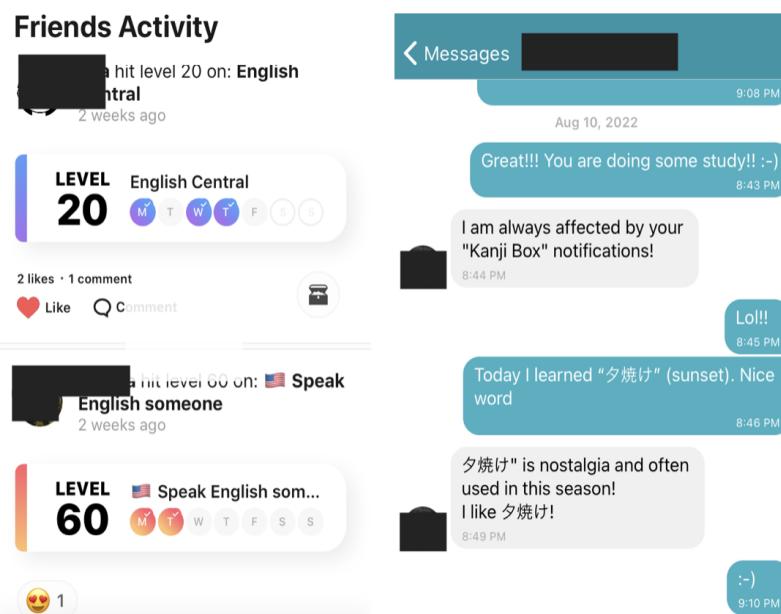
### Applications of the Findings

Acknowledging these limitations, the project has already helped us start to introduce progress-tracker applications to students. Clair and Alexandra have made fledgling attempts to share Keystone and HabitShare (2022), a similar application for Android devices, inviting students into their communities. Some students have already built up a significant habit streak, and students have, without explicit training, displayed similar tendencies towards positive communication in their comments (Figure 6), following the existing community practices.

Most importantly, the project helped identify potential pitfalls for language learners. These include selecting targets which are situation-dependent (and cannot be built into a daily routine), those which take up too much time, or are simply too difficult. Using these findings, we have produced a leaflet, with practical suggestions (such as putting the application on the smartphone home screen) which may help students have a smoother experience (see Appendix).

**Figure 6**

*Screenshots of Student Activity on Keystone (Left) and HabitShare (Right)*



## Conclusions

This project has had considerable transformative power, helping the team build and sustain new habits for language learning and development, while gaining valuable insights about the process of doing this in a peer group. We identified key interface options that enable this practice, including the option to post each time an activity is completed, to respond to posts in a comment thread, to mark activities as completed in a satisfying way, to view progress over time, and to see a daily task list. We also developed a better understanding of designing target habits, and the importance of selecting target behaviors which are simple, have a stable cue (which the learner can be sure to encounter), and take little time. We developed an awareness of the kinds of interactions in the application that can help peer learners: in particular, sharing (examples of the language being learned, successes, strategies, and difficulties) and providing positive responses in words and emoji (showing interest, celebrating successes, offering sympathy and positively reframing difficulties).

The CAE process was an enriching and revealing process, connecting colleagues who had not previously known each other and making us more aware of the diversity of our experiences of foreign language use and learning. Alm and Ohashi (2020) found that their CAE endeavor exploring informal learning brought them closer to students and their students' experiences. Similarly, reflecting on and sharing our learning experiences in this project has led to a deeper awareness and appreciation of the rich inner experiences of our students as they make their own language learning journeys.

With our personal experience of using the applications, we can introduce these tools to learners in our social language learning space with a sense of self-congruence; we are “walking the walk.” We hope that the pamphlet we have designed will help this practice flourish in our social language learning space, with learner communities forming so that more students can benefit from the affordances offered by progress-tracker applications.

## Acknowledgments

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## Appendix

### Leaflet (English and Japanese versions)

**TIPS**

- \* Put the app on your home screen.
- \* Make 1-3 daily habits.
- \* Chose fast, easy habits.  
(Think: Can I do this even on a really busy day?)
- \* If you have successful learning habits already—keep going! Don't stop. Add a tiny extra habit after you finish doing the learning habits you usually do. Or make a small improvement to one of your current learning habits.
- \* Set a time of day.  
(eg. "while I get dressed", "on the bus/train", "after I brush my teeth")
- \* Swipe immediately when you do your habit and say, "Yay! / Good job! / I did it!"
- \* Follow some friends
- \* Share your progress!

- \* Support your friends with emoji and nice comments

**WATCH THE VIDEOS**

Keystone

HabitShare

"A slight change in your daily habits can guide your life to a very different destination"  
—James Clear

**POWER HABITS!**

Your habits make you what you are. If you run every day, you are a runner. If you dance every day, you are a dancer. And if you use English every day, you are an English user, an English speaker.

Start some habits and become the English speaker you want to be!

Research shows that when you track your habits, you succeed. We recommend these habit tracking apps:

Keystone  
iPhone

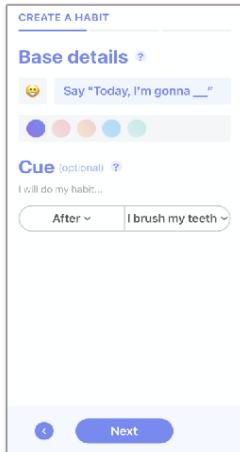
HabitShare  
iPhone/Android

Many MELT students use these apps to develop their English.

Join us!

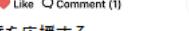
### EXAMPLE

- In the morning, after I brush my teeth, I will say one thing I plan to do that day in English, e.g. "Today, I'm gonna go to the gym."



### EASY STARTER HABITS

- After breakfast, I will read aloud in English for 1 minute (textbook, website, literally anything!)
- While I get dressed in the morning, I will listen to songs in English
- On the train/bus I will review five TOEIC words
- In the car, I will sing along with an English song
- While waiting for the bus/train, I will do some Quizlet/the British Council Grammar App
- When I arrive at school, I will say "Hello" to someone in MELT
- On the way to class, I will greet someone in the elevator in English
- I will eat my lunch in MELT
- I will ask a classmate/senpai how their study is going
- At the end of class, I will thank the teacher
- Before I leave the campus, I will do some EnglishCentral
- When I get home, I will say one sentence to my pet or an object I like (a trophy, a model, a soft toy, etc.) in English.
- After dinner, I will review one page of the previous day's class
- After I finish my homework, I will post a tweet in English
- When I use social media, I will like a tweet/post written in English
- In the shower, I will practice one minimal pair (e.g. rice/ice, fur/far, very/berry).
- While I take a bath, I will watch one Cake app video
- Before I brush my teeth, I will practice one minimal pair (e.g. walk/work, run/ran, math/mass, ear/year) with Siri/dictation
- At night, after I brush my teeth, I will say one thing I did that day, e.g. "Today, I talked to my friend."
- In bed, I will read a page of a graded reader

コツ	ビデオを見て	強力習慣!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* アプリをホーム画面に置く</li> <li>* 毎日の習慣を1~3つ作る</li> <li>* 早くして簡単な習慣を選ぶんで (「本当に忙しい日にもできるな?」 と考える)</li> <li>* もしあなたがすでに成功した学習習慣を持っているなら、そのまま続ける!いつもやっていた学習習慣をやり終えたら、さらに小さな習慣を追加する。あるいは、現在の学習習慣の1つを少し改善する。</li> <li>* 時間帯を設定する (例「着替えながら」「バスや電車に乗るとき」「歯磨きした後」)</li> <li>* 習慣を実行したらすぐにスワイプして、「やったー!」／「よくやったー!」／「やったー!」と言う</li> <li>* 友達を何人かフォローする</li> <li>* 進捗状況を共有する!</li> </ul> <p></p> <p>* 友達を応援する </p>	<p><b>ビデオを見て</b></p> <p> Keystone</p> <p> HabitShare</p> <p>「日々の習慣のわずかな変更が、人生をまったくちがう目的地へと導きかねない。」 —ジェームズ・クリアー式</p> <p></p>	<p><b>強力習慣!</b></p> <p>あなたの習慣が、あなたを作っている。毎日走っていれば、あなたはランナーです。もしあなたが毎日ダンスをするならば、あなたはダンサーです。そして、もしあなたが毎日英語を使うなら、あなたは英語の使い手、英語の話し手なのです。</p> <p>何か習慣を始めて、あなたがなりたい英語スピーカーになりましょう！</p> <p>研究によると、習慣を記録すると、成功するそうです。おすすめの習慣追跡アプリをご紹介します：</p> <p> Keystone iPhone</p> <p> HabitShare iPhone/Android</p> <p>多くのMELT生がこれらのアプリを使って、英語力を伸ばしています。 ぜひご参加ください！</p>

## 簡単なスタート一習慣

例

- 朝、歯を磨いた後、その日にする予定のことを一つ、英語で言う。例えば: "Today, I'm gonna go to the gym"
- 朝食後、1分間英語の音読をします(教科書、ウェブサイト、文字通り何でもOK!)
- 朝、服を着ている間に、英語で歌を聴く
- 電車・バスの中で、5つのTOEIC単語を復習する
- 車の中で、英語の歌に合わせて歌う
- バス・電車の待ち時間に、Quizlet/the British Council Grammar Appをやる
- 登校したら、MELTの誰かに「Hello!」と声をかける
- 教室に向かう途中、エレベーターの中で、英語で挨拶をする
- MELTでお弁当を食べる
- クラスメイトや先輩に学習の様子を聞いてみる
- 授業の終わりに、先生にお札を言う
- キャンパスを出る前に、EnglishCentralをやる
- 帰宅後、ペットや好きな物(トロフィー、模型、ぬいぐるみなど)に対して、英語で1文言ってみる
- 夕食後、前日の授業の1ページを復習する
- 宿題を終えたら、英語でツイートする
- ソーシャルメディアを利用するときは、英語で書かれたつぶやき・投稿に「いいね！」をする
- シャワーの中で、1つの音の最小限のペア練習をする(例: rice/ice, fur/far, very/berry)
- お風呂に入りながら、Cake Appのビデオを1本見る
- 歯を磨く前に、Siri/ディクテーションで最小限のペア(例: walk/work, run/ran, math/mass, ear/year)を1つ練習しておく
- 夜、歯を磨いた後、その日にしたことをひとつだけ言う。例えば、「今日、友だちと話したよ」
- ベッドで、グレーデッドリーダーを1ページ読む

