

## Using Reflective Logs to Track Independent Work

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes a small Action Research project which looked at the use of reflective statements, submitted online through Google Forms, to track independent reading and listening work done for homework in three introductory English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. After accessing the materials (such as graded readers and news articles), students were provided with example narrative frames and asked to submit responses to what they had read (e.g. “After reading this, I realised...”, “This lecture made me want to...”, “My favourite quote was ... because ....”). Analysis of submissions showed that requiring these reflective statements did not deter students from choosing to do additional reading/listening work, but that only a third of statements were of a quality which allowed confidence that students had in fact accessed the materials. Some suggestions are made for how the process can be improved in the future.

### INTRODUCTION

This article describes a small Action Research project which looked at the use of reflective statements, submitted online through Google Forms, to track independent reading and listening homework. This article follows the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) model of action research, summarized by Kuit, Reay and Freeman (2001) as “the repeated application of plan, act, observe and reflect”. First some background is given in the next section, then the remainder of the article follows one Action Research cycle across an academic year: *planning* and *action* occurred in Spring 2016, then *observation* and *reflection* on the outcome in early 2017.

### BACKGROUND

Students doing the tasks described in this article are first-year undergraduates in three intact twice-weekly introductory EAP class groups, who learn some of the skills targeted (note taking, citing sources, summarising, outlining, presenting, and discussing) using a series of note-taking projects as a scaffold. To focus attention on the skills, the materials used start easy: graded readers, SRA (Science Research Associate) cards, and simplified online news; then becoming more difficult (un-simplified online news, subtitled online lectures). The aim is to give them a start on the path to being able to eventually handle difficult, unsupported materials (live lectures, research articles) in a Content and Language Integrated Learning

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(CLIL) or study abroad context in the future. An explanation of each activity is given below and in the appendices.

However, not all students will need these EAP skills. For some, this is the last language class they will ever take, so another objective is to give them practice using resources they could draw on later (as self-directed learners) and making autonomous decisions about which activities suit them best. As such, after each material type (e.g. readers, online news) has been used in the EAP skills scaffolding project, it is “unlocked” for independent work, and offered alongside other options such as quick-writes, timed readings, self-access centre visits, event attendance reports, and vocabulary work. A minimum number of each is required to ensure students are familiar with the choices available, but then 20% of course credit is assigned to motivate *additional* independent work beyond that minimum in any combination of options. This is weighted so that 1% takes around 30-45 minutes of work, with a maximum 5% for each option to encourage variety. However, while quick-writes or a vocabulary notebook can be submitted as part of a learning portfolio, a decision was needed on what students should submit after watching a lecture or reading a news article. The decision that was taken is described in the next section.

## **PLAN: A SYSTEM FOR TRACKING INDEPENDENT WORK**

Students need to submit *something* to receive credit for work done, but if too much is required they will do the bare minimum and no more. As such, asking them to repeat the full EAP skills scaffolding project (a typed outline with APA references, a summary, and discussion questions) for additional work would have been unwise. Students were asked to take rough handwritten notes to support a brief presentation/discussion in class, but these were often unreadable. Self-report alone (“Yes, I read five news articles”) seemed unlikely to be reliable, while more rigorous checks (e.g. online quiz systems for graded readers) were not available for all material types used.

The plan eventually decided on was to ask students to write a short reflective comment, based on a set of example narrative frames such as “After watching this lecture, I want to ...” or “My favourite quote was ... because ...” (see Appendix 1 for more), to be submitted online through Google Forms with information on what was read or watched. Google Forms can output data to a spreadsheet, which can be manually sorted and checked. However, the author adapted a previously described tool (Prentice, 2015) to help automatically monitor progress. Instructions were given in class on how to use the materials (where this differed from the EAP skill scaffolding project), and how to submit a learning log (see Appendix 1).

Perhaps unwisely, this idea was not taken from the literature on language learning - it was based on the author’s experience as a M.Ed. student being asked to reflect on readings in online course discussion groups. As such, this project aimed at finding out (after a year of use) if the system was working, and if adapting it had been an appropriate choice.

## **ACT: WHAT DID STUDENTS ACTUALLY DO FOR HOMEWORK?**

A detailed description of how all the tasks (*Book, News, Lecture, and SRA*) were introduced in class or completed for homework is outside the scope of this report. However, relevant worksheets are available online and archived in Appendices 3-6, with a summary in Appendix 2 containing links and suggested reading for those who want to learn more about each. Appendix 1 archives the worksheet describing how to submit the reflective logs

themselves, including the narrative frames mentioned in “Plan” above. Note that the worksheets sometimes refer to reflections as “responses”, to tie in with the summary-response paragraph genre covered in the writing part of the course. In order to offer the most useful materials to readers, note that all worksheets in the appendices are updated versions with improvements made following this round of Action Research, not versions used during the data collection described below. One major change is that to increase the relevance of the example reflections, the teacher-written examples have been replaced with edited versions of student-written examples.

## **OBSERVE: WHAT WAS SUBMITTED IN THE REFLECTIVE LOGS?**

This section looks at which tasks were chosen, and what kind of responses were made. All data are from the Fall term 2016, but Spring data showed similar patterns.

### **Uptake: Popularity of each Material Type**

Figure 1 below shows the popularity of each report type. News was most popular, SRA and Lecture were around one quarter of reports each, but only 4 % of reports were based on graded readers.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Proportion of Reflection Logs from each of the Four Task Types (n=316 reports total)**

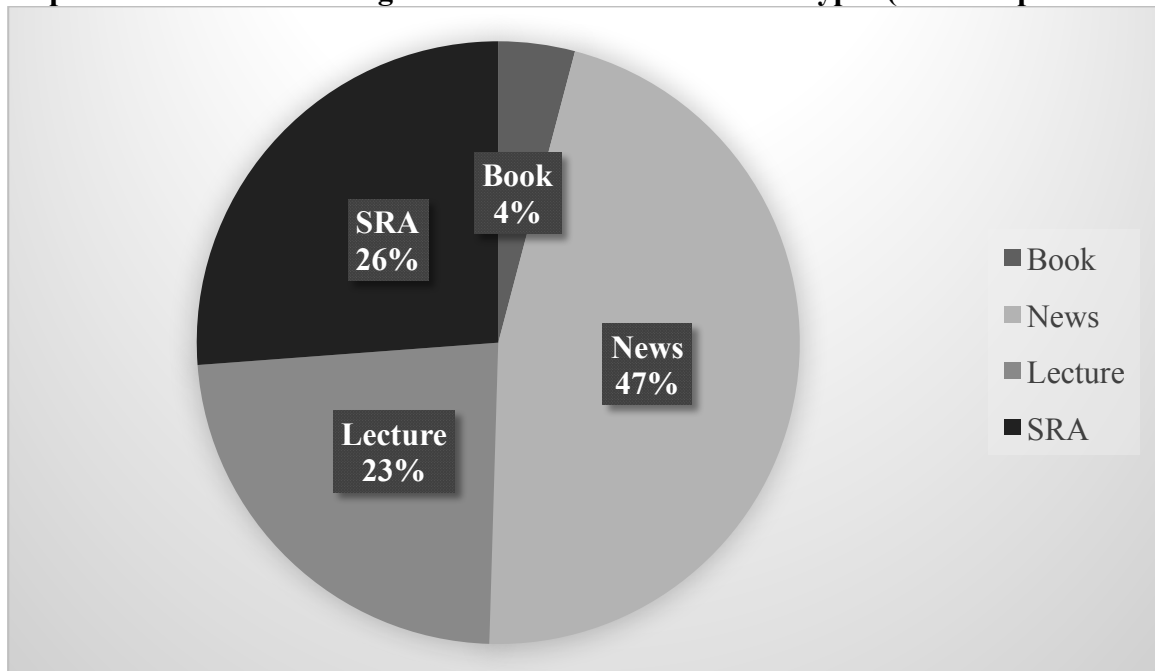
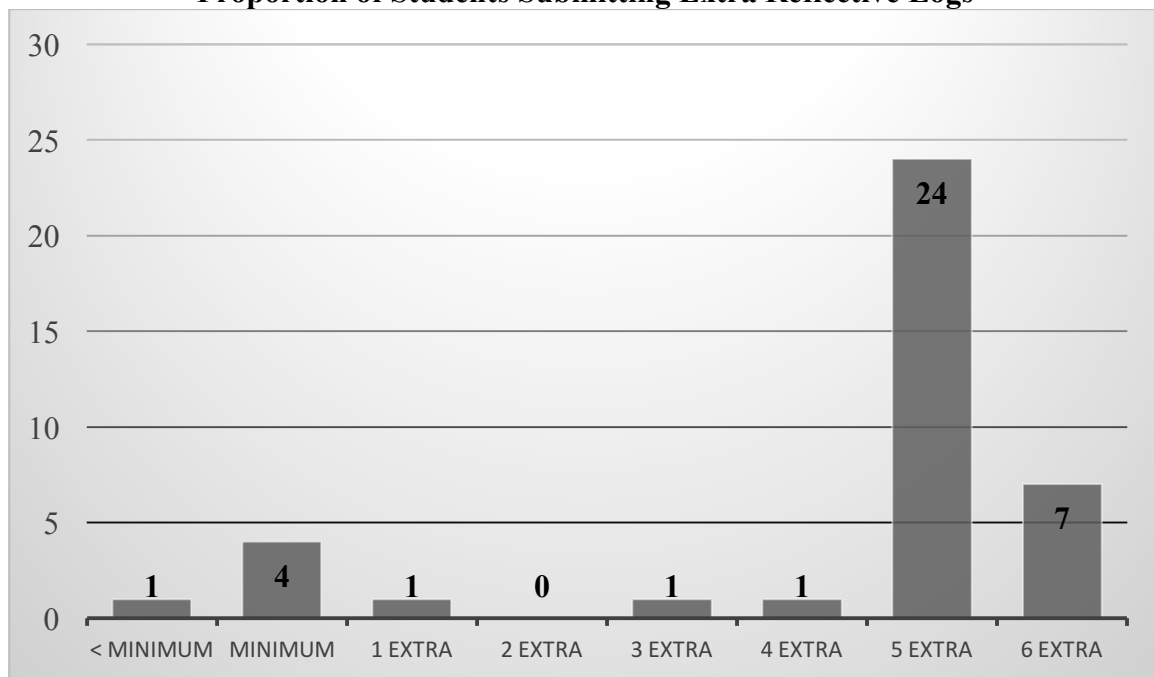


Figure 2 shows how nearly all students met or exceeded requirements across the three class groups. Depending on the group, the minimum expectation was 0, 5 or 6 logged reflections, so “5 extra” here respectively means 5, 10 or 11 total. As can be seen, most students chose to submit five reflections - exactly enough to get the maximum participation points - with seven exceeding that and only one submitting under the minimum.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Proportion of Students Submitting Extra Reflective Logs**



### Example Quotes

One high-quality and one low-quality example of submitted reflective statements are given below for each material type. Around one third of responses were of similarly high quality, one third were of similarly low quality, and one third fell between or were hard to code due to language errors.

#### **News**

- + *After reading this article, I want to open a café in my hometown to promote special products such as strawberry, so I really want to go to the engawa cafes and get some ideas*
- *I agree with this author*

#### **Lecture**

- + *I learned that sustainability is important, because resources are limited, and I would like to work for solving environmental problems in the future*
- *This is very interesting idea*

#### **Book**

- + *Main character Matty can grant his dream that is farmer. After I read this book, I thought that I want to do my favorite thing for my job too.*
- *I learn about never give up*

#### **SRA**

- + *After reading this, I want to eat from each food group, for example vegetable, fruit, meat, bean, grain, and dairy because eating these group provide my body valuable vitamins and minerals.*

- *I can know about distinguish the place*

## REFLECTION AND PLANS FOR NEXT YEAR

No research questions were fixed in advance other than “Is this working?”, but reflection did become focused on four main questions during analysis. Here are those reflections, along with plans being made for the 2017 cycle.

### **Question 1: “Did the reflective statements show students were actually doing the work?”**

Yes and no. The “high quality” responses (see *Example Quotes* above) gave the author reasonable confidence that those students had made at least some effort to engage with the materials. However, only a third of comments reached this standard: the reason for this was perhaps lack of monitoring. Every two weeks during term, individual reflection counts were checked to make sure no-one was falling behind, but little attention was paid to reflection content. That was in retrospect an oversight, as was failure to Observe and Reflect at the end of Spring semester rather than waiting until the end of the academic year. These oversights were likely due to over-reliance on the automatic submission tracking system (Prentice, 2015) mentioned above. Next year, there will be a full review of the first submissions, followed by random checks throughout term, and a 100-character minimum length requirement (enforced using Google Forms’ data validation feature). Good and bad example responses collected have also been used to improve the instructions (Appendix 1). Another option would be to ask for summaries (“The speaker said ...”) rather than, or in addition to, reflections (“...and this made me think/want to”). Ability to summarise is a course goal, already practiced and taught in class, and it may offer a more accurate picture of whether students have actually engaged with the materials. Then again, summaries can be difficult, and requiring them could have an impact on uptake, the topic of the next section.

### **Question 2: “Did requiring a reflective statement deter students from doing extra work?”**

No. Most students chose to submit the maximum number of extra logs. This is comparable in uptake to non-reflective options such as timed readings (which only required a title, time, and test score). As mentioned in Question 1, the author is considering a switch in 2017 to requesting summaries, or summary-responses instead. However, the extra effort required could reduce uptake: the second Action Research cycle would aim to check this has not happened.

### **Question 3: “What materials did students choose?”**

As Figure 1 shows, *Lecture*, *SRA*, and *News* were all popular, but only 4% of reports were *Book*, probably because graded readers (other than at very low levels) can take longer to finish than other options. Next year it will be made clear that any 30 minute chunk of reading can be reflected on, even if the whole text is not completed.

## Question 4: “What else could we do next year?”

Firstly, song lyrics were added as an experimental option in mid-December. While this was too late to be sensibly included in this article, 20 lyric logs were submitted by five students - many with good quality reflections - and so this will become a main option. Secondly, a search of the literature was a reminder that students can be asked to reflect on the learning experience itself. Fujita and Ogane (2011) note that this can help “students become aware of how to learn and lead to teacher and learner autonomy” (p. 537). As such, additional learning-focused frames (e.g. “I had problems understanding this - my weak point was ... so I will ...”) have been added (see Appendix 1) and will be encouraged next year.

## CONCLUSION

To briefly sum up, requiring students to write short reflections was partially successful as a method of tracking whether or not independent reading and listening had been done, and did not reduce uptake of reading and listening tasks as a choice for independent work. However, clear instructions and closer monitoring are necessary to make sure reflections are of sufficiently high quality to allow confidence that the students are engaging with materials.

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## **Appendix 1: General Instructions**

Online version: <http://www.alba-english.com/Projects%20-%20log%20input.html>

### **1) Choose the thing you want to read/listen to**

- Another book
- Another news article
- Another TED lecture
- An SRA card
- An English song (download the lyrics)

### **2) Read/Listen to it.**

### **3) Take a note of the title**

### **4) Take basic handwritten notes**

- Follow the instructions for note taking, but this is NOT an official graded outline:
  - Do not type and print an outline
  - Do not write a summary
  - Do not prepare questions.
  - Do not write an APA reference

### **5) Think of a short "response". Tell me what you thought. Some examples:**

- Something you liked/disliked
  - My favourite bit was when ...
  - My favourite quote was "...", because ...
  - I liked/disliked it when...
- Something you thought/realised
  - It made me think...
  - It reminded me of...
  - I realised that...
- Something you decided
  - After reading this, I want to...
  - Watching this made me want to...
  - This made me realise that I should...
- Something you agree/disagree with
  - I don't agree with the author/speaker because...
  - I agree with the author/speaker because...
- Something you learned
  - This article/video taught me that...
  - Before I read this, I didn't know that...
  - I learned that...
- Something about your learning experience
  - This material was too easy/difficult/long/short, so next time I will ....
  - The words I learned weren't very useful for my major/life, so next time I will ...

- My time management was bad for this homework, so next time I will...
- I had problems understanding this - my weak point was ... so next time I will...

### ***What is a good response?***

- A good response is
  - AT LEAST 100 characters
  - Shows you understood and thought about what you read/heard:
  - Here are some examples:
    - *I learned about the structure of aurora from this book - it was great because before I didn't know how they happened. I was glad to learn this, and increase my knowledge*
    - *Before I read this SRA card, I knew that there are some kinds of galaxy, but I learned about the different types. I want to know more because I belong to an astronomy club.*
    - *After reading this article, I want to open a café in my hometown to promote special products such as strawberries, so I really want to go to engawa cafes and get ideas*
    - *I learned that sustainability is important, because resources are limited, and I would like to work to solve environmental problems in the future.*
    - *The main character could get his dream to be a farmer. Reading this book made me want to do my favourite thing for my job too.*
    - *After reading this article, I realised I should eat more fruit and vegetables, because they provide my body valuable vitamins and minerals.*
- A bad reflection
  - *Is less than 100 characters*
  - *Gives a summary (what it said), not a reflection (what you THOUGHT)*
  - *Could be about any topic*
  - *Here are some examples. Why is each bad?*
    - *This was an interesting idea, and I agree with this author*
    - *I learned about types of galaxies*
    - *This article said that they sell typical products from around Japan.*
    - *I liked this article.*

### ***How to talk about what you did***

- For lectures
  - Use "speaker" for someone you heard.
  - Use "lecture" or "talk" for the thing.
  - Use "watch" or "see" as verbs (After watching this / After I saw this lecture, I ...)
- For readings
  - Use "author" for someone you read.
  - Use "book" or "article" for the thing.
  - Use "read" as he verb (After reading this / After I read this article, I ...)

### ***6) Submit it online***

- Use this link: <see <http://alba-english.org> for this semester's live link, but please do not submit actual reports!>
- Scroll down to "Learning Log" section. Type in:



- What you did (book/news/lecture/SRA/Song)
- The title
- Your response (from step 5)

**7) In class**

- Present from your notes (2-5 mins)
- In class, I will check you made an effort.
  - Bring your notes
  - You need enough notes to give *at least* a 2 minute presentation

**Assessment**

- At the end of semester, I will check you submitted the minimum number of logs
  - Check your syllabus for your minimum (6 or 0)
  - Less than minimum = lose participation points
- Participation points available for reports over the minimum
  - One bonus point for each extra log done
  - You can do ANY of the log activities (book, news, etc.) for a bonus
  - Maximum bonus is 5 points for logs

## Appendix 2: Overview of Tasks

Note that News, Lecture, and Book are done first as part of an outlining project, so the instructions in the “Related worksheet” for those tasks will need adapted before they can be used for a standalone activity.

### News

**Who:** All students. Simplified news available for all levels in online list.

**What:** Read a news article related to interest/major. See link in Appendix 3 for list of graded sources

**Related worksheet:** <http://www.alba-english.com/Projects%20-%20outline%20a%20news%20article.html>

**Archived worksheet:** See Appendix 3

**Suggested reading:** See Prentice (2013) for an overview of introducing students to news.

### Lecture

**Who:** Intermediate and above. For lower level students, wiser to keep this as a supported in-class activity.

**What:** Watch a TED lecture

**Related worksheet:** <http://www.alba-english.com/Projects%20-%20outline%20a%20lecture.html>

**Archived worksheet:** See Appendix 4

**Suggested reading:** See Takaesu (2013) on using TED lectures as extensive listening material

### Book

**Who:** All students.

**What:** Read a graded reader (or part of one). Some advanced students choose to read an unsimplified book chapter (e.g. Harry Potter).

**Related worksheet:** <http://www.alba-english.com/Projects%20-%20outline%20an%20easy%20book.html>

**Archived worksheet:** See Appendix 5

**Suggested reading:** See Day and Bamford (2002) for practical guidelines, Nakanishi (2015) for a meta-analysis of the extensive reading literature, and see Uden, Schmitt, and Schmitt (2014) for case studies following the transition from graded to ungraded reading.

### SRA

**Who:** Elementary and lower-intermediate level. Ideal for STEM majors.

**What:** Read an SRA card (laminated cards with simple science texts on one side, and a quiz on the other). Take notes, and then use those notes to take the quiz.

**Related worksheet:** None (SRA is done first outside the assessed outlining project, so has an actual worksheet)

**Actual worksheet:** <http://www.alba-english.com/Study%20Skills%20-%20do%20an%20SRA%20card.html>

**Archived worksheet:** See Appendix 6

**Suggested reading:** The publisher’s website has a select research bibliography (“The research for SRA,” 2000, December). For a short, readable overview and critique, try Watters (2015, March 19).

## Appendix 3: Instructions for News

### Aim

For this report, we will read an easy news article. We will practice:

- Finding a good article
- Reading news
- Taking notes
- Presenting and discussing
- Typed RR only, not learning log: Summarising, APA citation, formatting written work, and writing good discussion questions

### Instructions

Most students say they take 50-60 minutes to do this report.

#### 1) Find a good news website in English

- Visit the list of English news sources: <http://www.alba-english.com/Resources%20-%20websites%20for%20English%20news%20articles.html>
- Choose a site.
- Choose an interesting section on the site
  - Front page is often boring: Technology/Society has more interesting stories
  - Maybe choose something interesting for your major
    - e.g. DSESI majors - look in "Environment"
    - e.g. Economics majors - look in "Business"
- Choose an article.
  - "Simplified" category can only be used by some groups. Check the syllabus!
  - Internet news (e.g. Yahoo) is often shorter and easier
  - News indexes (Google, Reuters): good for finding a topic but can be difficult
- Read critically
  - Some newspapers are tightly controlled by different governments or groups.
  - See the worksheet "Invention: Avoid bad sources": <http://alba-english.org/Invention%20-%20avoid%20bad%20sources.html>
  - Try to read more than one source/side before you believe anything you read.

#### 2) Find a good article

A good article is something INTERESTING your partner MIGHT NOT KNOW

- not "Tokyo Sky Tree Opens" (everyone knows the story already)
- not "Daisuke Matsui transfers to Slavia Sofia" (not everyone likes football)

#### 3) Doing an RR outline? Follow the general instructions:

- Instructions are here: <http://alba-english.org/Projects%20-%20outline.html>
- APA style for your *References* section is here: <http://alba-english.com/Invention%20-%20use%20APA%20format%20for%20reference%20lists.html#Newspaper>
- APA style for your *Summary* is here: <http://alba-english.org/Invention%20-%20use%20APA%20format%20in%20the%20text.html>

### Finished your RR outline? Remember!

- You can get up to 5 participation points for extra reading and listening.
- Check your syllabus for details
- You do not need to write a full RR outline to get participation points.
- Just log input instead.

## Appendix 4: Instructions for Lecture

### Aim

In this report, we will practice listening to a short interesting online lecture

- Finding a good lecture
- Preparing to listen
- Knowing what to listen for
- Taking notes
- Presenting
- Discussing
- Typed RR only, not learning log:
  - Summarising
  - APA citation
  - Formatting written work
  - Writing good discussion questions

### Instructions

Most students say they take 50-60 minutes to do this report.

#### 1) Visit the TED website <https://www.ted.com/talks>

- Select the option for a short talk (no more than 12 mins)
- Select a topic (e.g. Technology, Education)
- Look for an interesting title
- Watch 20 seconds. If they speak too fast or have a difficult accent, choose again.

#### 2) When you have chosen a talk

- Watch at least one minute with no help.
- Then, if you need them, watch it with English subtitles
- Then, if you REALLY need them, try the Japanese subtitles.
- Finally, go back and try to watch it one more time with no help

#### 3) Doing an RR outline? Follow the general instructions:

- Instructions are here: <http://alba-english.org/Projects%20-%20outline.html>
- APA style for your *References* section is here: [http://alba-english.org/Invention%20-%20use%20APA%20format%20in%20reference%20lists.html#Online Video](http://alba-english.org/Invention%20-%20use%20APA%20format%20in%20reference%20lists.html#Online%20Video)
- APA style for your *Summary* is here: <http://alba-english.org/Invention%20-%20use%20APA%20format%20in%20the%20text.html>

#### Finished your RR outline? Remember!

- You can get up to 5 participation points for extra reading and listening.
- Check your syllabus for details
- You do not need to write a full RR outline to get participation points.
- Just log input instead.

## General tips for listening to lectures

### *Before you listen*

- Review what you already know about the topic before you start (from memory, or notes)
- Quickly Google the topic in Japanese and get an idea of the main issues
- Guess what you are going to hear

### *When you listen*

- Listen more than once.
- In TED, use the live transcript to skip back and forward
- If the lecture is live (e.g. the GLS lecture later this term), record it on your phone.

### *What to listen for*

- You do not usually quote lectures, so you do not need to copy every word.
- Instead, use lectures to FIND and ORGANISE ideas. Listen for:
  - Important terms you need to know
  - Important Authors / Books / Articles you should read next
  - Important links between things.
  - Important agreements/disagreements
  - Which ideas are old, and which are new
  - The lecturer's attitude to a topic (You can disagree, but don't ignore)

### *Other practice sources for free lectures*

Visit: <http://www.alba-english.com/Resources%20-%20websites%20for%20listening.html>

### *Tips for taking notes on lectures*

- Lectures are too fast and too hard to take 100% English notes
  - Copy only short quotes in English.
  - Take most notes as summary (paraphrase) in Japanese
  - For your RR outline, type up your notes IN ENGLISH
  - For learning log, handwritten Japanese/English notes are ok, but you will present IN ENGLISH, so take a note of any vocabulary you will need
- Lectures are fast - use short-cuts when writing common words. For example
  - "Is" =
  - "is not" ≠
  - "Number" #
  - "And" +

## Appendix 5: Instructions for Book

### Aim

For this report, we will read an easy book. We will practice:

- Choosing a graded reader
- Reading for meaning without using a dictionary
- Taking notes
- Presenting
- Discussing what you have read
- Typed RR only, not learning log:
  - Summarising
  - APA citation
  - Formatting written work
  - Writing good discussion questions

### Instructions

#### 1) *Get a book*

- Non-fiction is best for RR outlines. Fiction is OK for learning logs.
- You can borrow books from the library (1F, far right wall).
- You can read books in the self-access centre, but you cannot borrow them.
- If you are not on campus, try ER Central: <http://www.er-central.com/>

#### 2) *Choose a book.*

- Read the first page.
- It should be easy
  - you should know 98% of the words without a dictionary
  - if you don't, go down a level

#### 3) *Doing an RR outline? Follow the general instructions:*

- Instructions are here: <http://alba-english.org/Projects%20-%20outline.html>
- APA style for your *References* section is here: <http://alba-english.org/Invention%20-%20use%20APA%20format%20in%20reference%20lists.html#Graded Readers>
- APA style for your *Summary* is here: <http://alba-english.org/Invention%20-%20use%20APA%20format%20in%20the%20text.html>

#### *Finished your RR outline? Remember!*

- You can get up to 5 participation points for extra reading and listening.
- Check your syllabus for details
- You do not need to write a full RR outline to get participation points.
- Just log input instead.

## Appendix 6: Instructions for SRA

### What is “SRA”?

SRA are A4 folded cards in four boxes in the self-access centre.

Each card has:

- an easy reading about Science (General, Life Science, Earth Science, or Physics)
- a quiz

### Aim

This activity will practice:

- Useful specialist vocabulary for your major
- Understanding and answering questions
- Reading and understanding easy technical texts
- Taking notes
- Presenting
- Discussing what you have read

### Instructions

- 1) Go to the self-access centre.
- 2) Find the colourful boxes on the left as you enter
- 3) Choose a box (Science, Life Science, Earth Science, Physics).
- 4) Choose a card. Take a note of the box and title: e.g. "*Life Science Box - 5B-Plant Cells*"
- 5) Read it and take rough notes in English (handwriting OK)
- 6) Close the card
- 7) Try the quiz from your notes
- 8) Mark your quiz (answer card is in the box)
- 9) Add any useful vocab to your list for that week
- 10) In class, you will use your notes to give a short presentation
  - Tell your partner quickly what you learned
  - Answer any questions they have
  - Have a short discussion
- 11) In class, I will also check
  - you took notes - I should see notes (map or outline), not just a copy of the card
  - you did the quiz - I should see 1-10, answers, and a score

### Remember!

- You can get up to 5 bonus points for extra reading and listening.
- Check your syllabus for details
- You do not need to write a full RR outline to get participation points.
- Just log input instead