



## BELIEFS AND AUTONOMY: ENCOURAGING MORE RESPONSIBLE LEARNING

Malcolm Shane SIM\*

**Abstract:** This study examines the effects of integrating a structured and explicit focus on goal setting and active learning into an English language and study skills university preparation program. It discusses the findings from an investigation conducted by the researcher at the National Centre for English Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University, Australia on 84 young ESL students studying English before progressing into the Australian higher education system. The results indicate that the employed treatment program did have a measured positive effect on learner beliefs which appeared to indicate increased implementation of more efficient learning practices.

**Keywords:** beliefs, autonomy, anxiety, learning.

**Özet:** Bu çalışmanın amacı, etkin İngilizce öğrenimi ve çalışma becerileri alanlarında, hedef belirleme ve aktif öğrenmenin amaçlandığı bir kısmın üniversiteye hazırlık programına eklenmesinin etkilerini belirlemektir. Bu çalışma ile Avustralya’da Macquarie Üniversitesi, Ulusal İngilizce Öğretimi ve Araştırma Merkezinde (NCELTR) yapılan bir araştırmanın sonuçlarını tartışmak amaçlanmaktadır. Araştırma katılımcıları Avustralya’da yüksek öğretime başlamadan önce ikinci dil olarak İngilizce eğitimi alan 84 öğrencidir. Sonuçlar göstermektedir ki, uygulanan iyileştirme programı öğrencilerin inançları üzerinde, daha etkin öğrenme uygulamalarının artması ile açığa çıkan ve ölçümlenebilen olumlu bir etkiye sahip olmuştur.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** inançlar, özerklik, endişe, öğrenme

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*“It’s a long step from saying to doing.”*

Miguel de Cervantes

The challenges facing ESL students furthering their studies in foreign countries are considerable, and have been well documented (Acton, 2003; Nixon, 1996; Lucantonio, 1992; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Walmsley, 1992). Generally, these students have limited time in which to adjust to their new surroundings and for many it is their first time living away from their home, family, and friends. New systems, social norms and confusing anomalies surround them and all have to be processed and managed. In such a situation it is very important to identify any specifically targeted strategies that may assist these students and help them to cope. This is particularly important when the belief systems and learning styles of the students in question are considered.

In Australia the university system is one in which students are generally responsible for their own progress, so successful students tend to be fairly independent and diligent. Even when they experience difficulties with their studies, they realise that ultimately success is their

\* Macquarie University, Sydney. [msim@nceltr.mq.edu.au](mailto:msim@nceltr.mq.edu.au)

responsibility. However, many international students, when compared to local students, experience a wider variety and intensity of difficulties in this setting (Burke & Wyatt-Smith, 1996; Nixon, 1993; Luhr, 2001). The beliefs and experiences many of them have about education and learning are not always suited to their new circumstances. At the very least, a number of the students' ideas (and behaviours) may have to undergo some adjustment if they are to excel in their new environment.

Learner beliefs have long been a focus of attention by many researchers (Benson & Lor, 1999; Peacock, 1999; Matsumoto, 1996; Cotterall, 1995; Horwitz, 1988). This is partly because it is generally accepted that the beliefs of a particular learner will affect how they learn and as a result, how well they learn. If beliefs are identified that educators feel inhibit successful learning then many would benefit from strategies formulated to deal with and effectively manage them. Conversely, if positive beliefs are identified and reinforced then learners may also benefit. Information regarding student beliefs is therefore particularly valuable to all educators, especially in the area of language education. The development (and success) of programs of study better suited to particular groups of learners could well depend upon this knowledge.

However, while it is agreed that beliefs play a significant role in learner development, they do not always necessarily translate into action or observable behaviour on the part of their holder. For example, Sim (2004) found (through the use of a 75 item questionnaire) that despite the fact that learners expressed views that showed support for the making of mistakes in language learning, they also reported feelings that suggested that their classroom behaviour was not in accordance with these views. For example, the students' original (stated) belief that it was acceptable to make mistakes appeared to somewhat contradict the same learners' report that they would start to panic when they had to speak without preparation in their language classes. Despite their professed belief otherwise they appeared to possess anxiety levels that were adversely affecting their language learning performance and/or production. This further demonstrates the value of using an array of related and varied items in assessments and measures aimed at achieving a clearer picture of beliefs held by groups and individuals.

This uncertainty about the role of student beliefs does not leave English teachers in a very comfortable position and perhaps they often become confused as to what is the best approach they should take. However, there are definitely options available for the teacher prepared (and able) to implement new methods. One potential strategy could involve the teacher attempting to facilitate a reinforcement of positive student-held beliefs and the learning of new ones (that would assist in their learning) through the use of tasks aimed at their learning behaviour. Dörnyei (2005, p. 217) adds to this stating that "creating realistic learner beliefs is an important motivational strategy". However, how this is done is of critical importance. A teacher, whilst meaning well, could potentially decrease motivation and reinforce negative beliefs if inappropriate strategies are used. However, there still remains the possibility that through the use of a direct classroom intervention strategy that both learner beliefs and behaviour may be positively affected (as Dörnyei, 2005 suggests), with more effective learning practices and learning experiences the final result.

## **2. THE STUDY**

This study set out to investigate the integration of a structured and explicit focus on active learning and goal setting into an English language and study skills university preparation program at the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University, Sydney Australia. The aim of this effort was not only to affect the learners' beliefs but also their language learning behaviours in ways that would assist their learning. It was hoped that this program would ultimately encourage students to display more independent learning behaviours and take more responsibility for their learning as this had been identified as an area of major concern for many international students in recent years. In addition, there was a strong interest in any potential effect the program would have on the anxiety levels of students.

## **2.1. The SSEPP Course**

SSEPP is one of the many courses offered at NCELTR with a focus on preparing students for their future studies. Students enrolled in the SSEPP classes are preparing to enter university in Australia, and a large part of the ten-week course is concerned with imparting the skills needed to survive and succeed within the Australian higher education system. Each week, from Monday to Friday, SSEPP students attend a four-hour class every day, beginning at 1.00 pm and concluding at 5:15 pm, with a 15-minute break in the middle. Independent study skills development is a major aim of SSEPP and possible improvements are always being sought so as to give students the best possible chance of success at university in Australia. Teachers have suggested many times that perhaps the language learning beliefs and behaviours of many SSEPP students directly (and indirectly) affects their progress in learning the English skills they need.

This study attempted to address this perception through the administration of an active learning component to selected SSEPP classes. It compared three classes that followed the standard SSEPP with three classes in which an additional explicit and structured focus on active learning behaviours and goal-setting was integrated into the program.

## **2.2. Instruments**

The integrated 'active learning' strand used in this study was based on research completed by Doye (1997). All three treatment classes made weekly use of three components (Appendix I), namely (1) Monday English Report (MER), (2) Midweek Goal Focus (MGF), and (3) Active Learner Chart (ALC).

### **2.2.1 Monday English Report (MER)**

The MER was very similar to Doye's (1997) English Report (ER). The intention of the MER was to encourage students to analyse and reflect upon their use of English outside of class time. If a student found this report difficult to fill out (due to lack of English usage in the identified areas) then perhaps they needed to work harder (on their English effort) outside of class. Students wrote down examples of English use in the areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Soon after teachers checked each individual report and provided brief written feedback. This also provided students with an extra channel of communication with the teacher whereby they could share ideas or ask further questions. The activity was facilitated by the fact that students were always

encouraged by their teacher to make suggestions and share any feelings they had about their language learning experience.

### **2.2.2 Midweek Goal Focus (MGF)**

The MGF aimed to encourage students to practice goal-setting for their language study. Each week students had to think of a major English goal for themselves and then to outline how they would actually achieve it. This activity included encouraging students to think about how achievable their goal really was and to list any extra strategies they could come up with to increase their goal's achievability. It was felt that if students could set reasonable goals and practice planning more effectively then their learning would benefit.

### **2.2.3 Active Learner Chart (ALC)**

The ALCs closely followed the concepts introduced by Doye (1997). However, there were several differences. Firstly, unlike Doye's study where the ALCs were used everyday, the ALCs in this study were used once a week and focused on the previous week's behaviour. This was done not only due to time constraints but also because of the results of earlier testing that showed students became disenchanted with the task when it was completed daily. Secondly, the response method used for the ALCs by Doye was by a simple checklist (YES or NO) for each item. This was felt to be inadequate as students could just tick everything and not really think about each of their answers. Therefore a different method was employed in this study, which encouraged students to think more about their responses and to provide a higher degree of information. The resultant ALCs consisted of items for which the student would indicate their level of achievement (from 1 = very low, to 4 = very high) for the week. For example, the items ranged from the simple "I took everything I needed to class" to the more difficult "I spoke only English in class" and "When my friends talk to me in my native language I reply in English". Like in Doye's study, the statements in the ALCs were changed over time to reflect increasingly higher level skills and strategies expected of the learners. A total of four different versions were used over the ten-week period. With each successive version the number of items increased in number and simpler items were systematically replaced with more challenging ones.

All three of the above active learning techniques sought to make it very clear to each individual that their success in English was their own responsibility. In other words their efforts, in class AND outside of class, would be instrumental in determining their future success, and one of the principal factors in success was their own level of commitment. All students in the treatment classes were given folders in which they kept all of their completed MERs, MGFs and ALCs. This meant that students were able to check their progress over the ten weeks, with the aim that this would increase the legitimacy and importance of the exercise in the eyes of each student. At the end of the ten weeks the folders were collected from the treatment classes for qualitative analysis.

### **2.2.4 Beliefs and Anxiety Measure (BAM)**

The outcomes of the study were measured in a variety of ways. General observations by teachers and feedback from students proved to be quite useful in fine-tuning the application of the instruments. Outcomes were also greatly determined by the Beliefs and Anxiety Measure (BAM),

a questionnaire which was completed twice by all ‘treatment’ and ‘control’ groups (at the beginning and end of the ten-week program). The BAM (see Appendix II) is based on selected items from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986), a Targeted Beliefs Set (TBS) used by Murphey (1996), and the brief Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scale by Leary (1983). Several other questionnaire items were added that more explicitly matched the overall aims of the study resulting in a total of 40 items. Participants in the study were required to answer each item using a five-point Likert scale from ‘Strongly Agree’ (1) through to ‘Strongly Disagree’ (5). Before completing this questionnaire it was made expressly clear to all students that their responses should be honest and reflect how they truly felt about each item. The final BAM questionnaire (administered at the end of the course), whilst otherwise identical to the first, was supplemented by two extra questions (Appendix III). The aim of this was to obtain supplemental data in addition to that already contained in the students’ folders.

### **2.3. Participants**

The investigation, conducted at the National Centre for English Teaching and Research (NCELTR) at Macquarie University, Australia, involved 84 international students, aged between 18-24 years, studying English before progressing into the Australian higher education system. The research group consisted of six SSEPP (Study Skills in English Preparation Program) classes at NCELTR, each containing fourteen students with an average age of twenty-three. Among the respondents, there were 75 Chinese, 6 South Korean, 2 Turkish, and 1 Japanese.

Three of the six classes were ‘control’ groups who completed the standard SSEPP course. These control groups were also given the opportunity to participate in follow-up classes which included the goal-setting and active learning focuses at the completion of the initial study. This was done in accordance with the strict ethical requirements for research employed by the university.

### **2.4. Procedure**

Students were recruited across the SSEPP course following the ethical guidelines set down by the university. All students participating in the research were given the opportunity to take part in a lottery for a shopping voucher at a local shopping centre. As a result, all students agreed to take part in the study and written permission was obtained from the treatment classes as the study’s design made complete anonymity difficult to achieve. After obtaining this permission, the BAM was given to all six classes (three treatment and three control) at the beginning and end of the ten-week course. This procedure followed that used by Murphey (1996) and sought to highlight/explain any changes that occurred as a result of the active learning program.

Each week students in the three ‘treatment’ groups filled out one (a) Monday English Report (MER), (b) Midweek Goal Focus (MGF), on Wednesday, and (c) Active Learner Chart (ALC), on Friday. As mentioned earlier the active learner charts changed (i.e. increased in complexity) every two weeks while both the MER and MGF remained unchanged. Usually the three activities were completed in minimal time at the start of each class. The MER and MGF both generally took about ten to fifteen minutes to complete and the ALC about ten minutes. Over the course this added up to around 3% of available class time and therefore did not unduly disadvantage the

treatment classes by using up excessive amounts of instruction time. Treatment classes received the same SSEPP program offered to the control classes.

When the MER, MGF, and ALC were completed the teacher would collect them and briefly go over them at the first opportunity (for eg. while students completed another task, such as writing, during the class). These would be returned to the students by the end of class, who would then place the checked activities into their personal folders. Teachers of these treatment classes were all informed in a training session as to how to deliver these active learning strategies in order for the whole process to be as consistent as possible between classes.

It was hypothesised that the application of these reports (MER & MGF) and the ALCs would produce an increase in the awareness among learners of the expectations and responsibilities placed upon them in their new environment. Through this process, it was anticipated that learners would acquire improved self-confidence and more autonomous learning strategies and behaviours, which in turn would empower them to assume greater levels of responsibility for their individual progress in developing both their English language and university study skills.

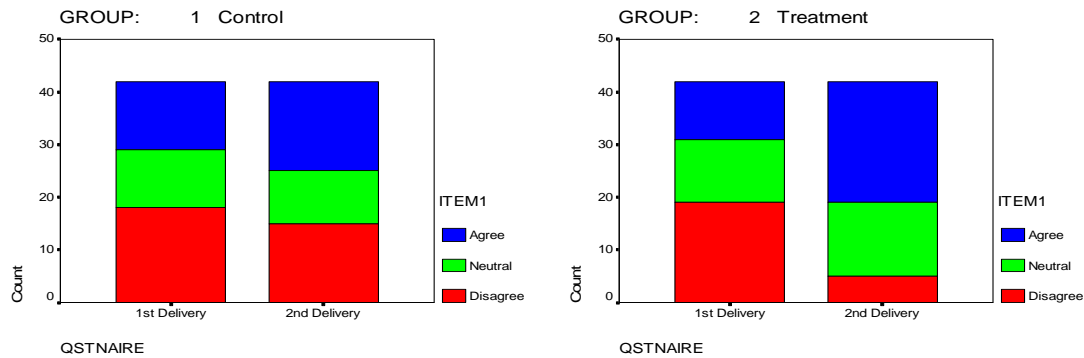
At the completion of the ten-week treatment period a final administration of the BAM to all classes took place and this included the two supplementary open-ended questions. The responses to this final questionnaire were then compared to the initial questionnaire (administered in the first week) using the SPSS statistical program. This was done in order to see if there were any differences between the treatment and control classes. In effect, if differences were discovered, they would provide possible evidence of the effect of the additional treatment program on the treatment classes, versus the control classes.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION FOR INDIVIDUAL ITEMS**

The results obtained from the analysis of the first and second delivery of the BAM appeared to indicate that the treatment program did indeed have an effect on the treatment classes. Out of the forty items contained in the BAM, seven were of particular individual interest and they displayed significant differences between the treatment and control classes. Using SPSS a series of graphs were constructed displaying the response variations from the first delivery of the BAM along with the second. These graphs displayed a compressed version of the five possible responses to each item on the BAM (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree). This meant that the resultant graphs displayed the changes not in five responses but three (Disagree, Neutral, Agree). This was done to better highlight the changes and make the graphs more readable. The results for the selected seven items, which compare the control group (on the left) with the treatment group (on the right), are as follows:

## BAM Item 1

p value = .146

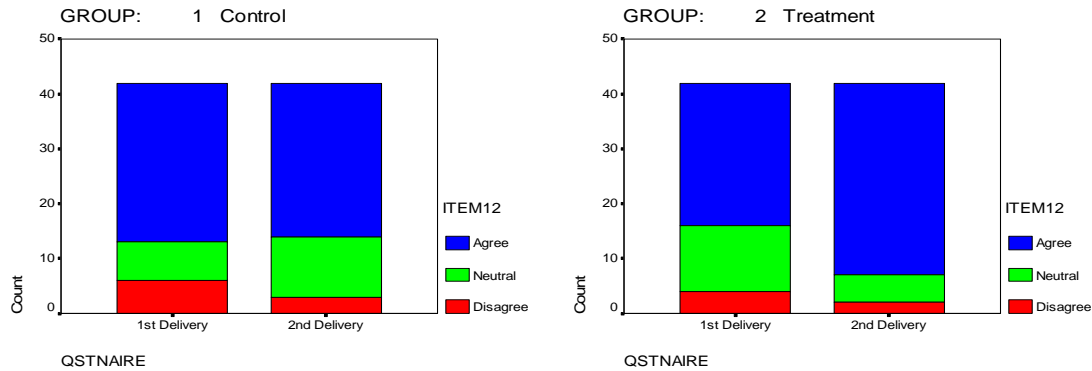


**I must speak English in grammatically complete sentences to be understood.**

This item displayed a big shift in agreement (from the 1<sup>st</sup> Delivery to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Delivery) for the treatment group (T-group) at +29%, versus the control group (C-group) with only +9% in comparison. Perhaps the T-group realised through their extended effort/attempts that their grammar needed more work. However, this cannot be claimed with much certainty because the p-value for this item was very high (.146). In statistics the p-value is like a *measurement of chance* and the higher the p-value the higher the results are due to chance, and not due to the treatment. Only if the p-value is small enough (usually less than .05) can the idea that the difference could have happened by chance be rejected. In the case of the first item above it can be seen that the p-value of .146 means that chance alone would produce such a result 14.6 times in every 100 studies. Therefore, no definitive conclusions can be drawn.

**BAM Item 12**

p value = .136

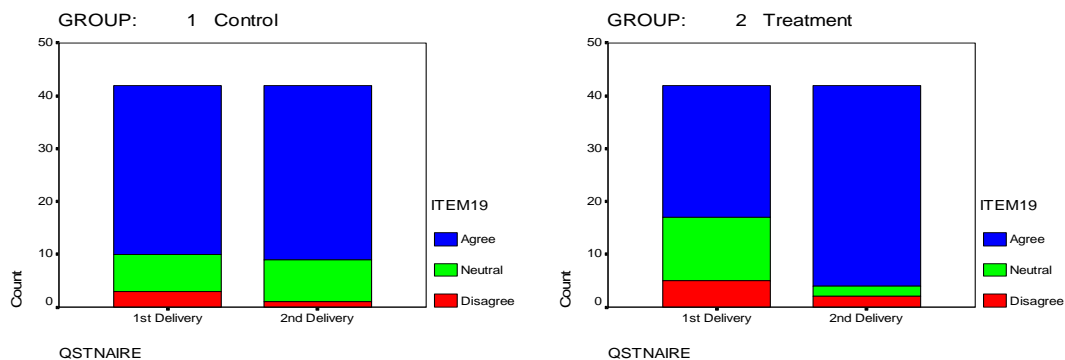


**No matter how many English classes I go to, I still have to use English a lot after school if I want to really learn it.**

This item displayed a reduction in agreement by the C-group (-3%) versus a rise in agreement by the T-group (22%). Perhaps the treatment could have been responsible and the T-group realised the extra effort needed to learn effectively. However, once again the p-value was very high at .136 rendering this result as inconclusive.

**BAM Item 19**

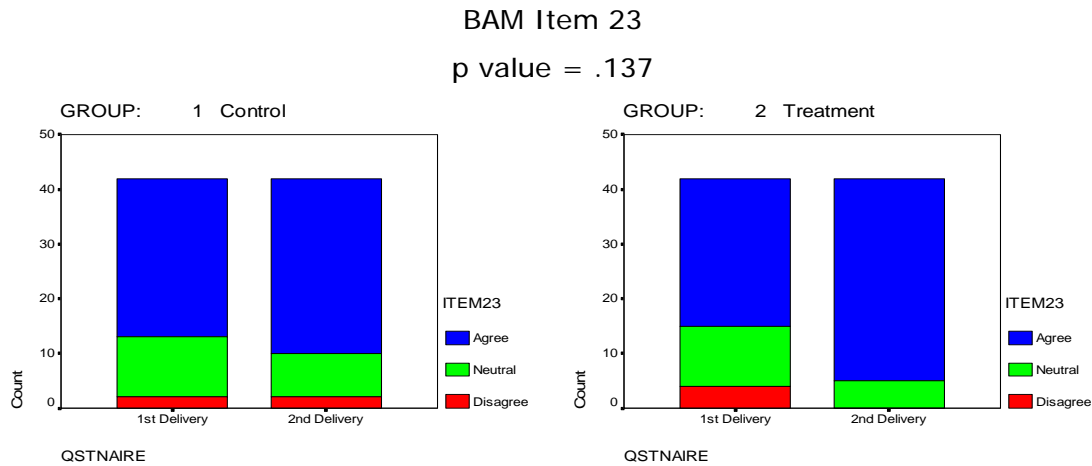
p value = .072



**Learning English can involve trying new ideas and never giving up**

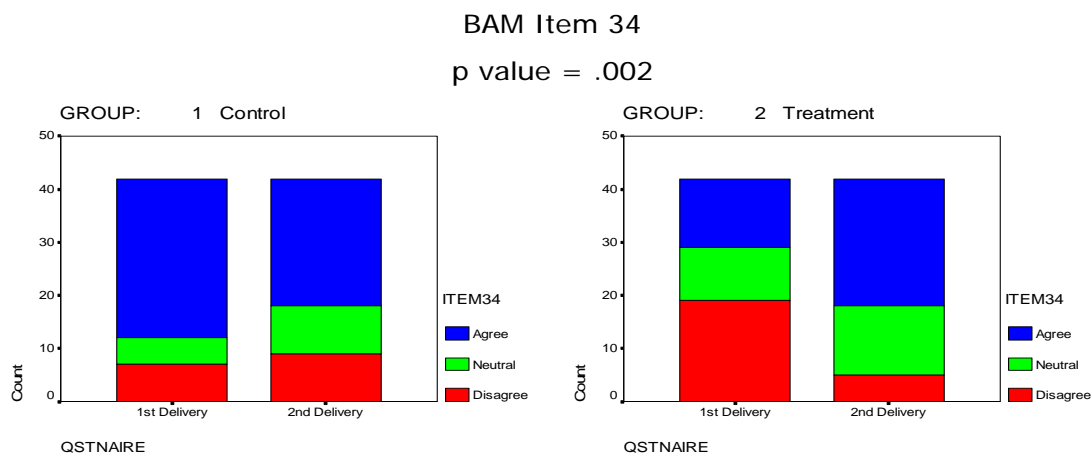


The results for this item showed that the C-group remained largely unchanged while the T-group registered a large increase in agreement (+31%). The treatment may have been responsible for this but the p-value of .072 was still just outside the generally accepted minimum of .05.



**If I try to speak English outside the classroom I will improve much faster.**

This item was particularly interesting because both the T-group and the C-group had nearly identical results for the first delivery of the questionnaire, similar to Item 1. However, the second delivery displayed a sharp rise in agreement for the T-group (+24%) and a smaller rise for the C-group (+8%). Also the T-group completely lost their initial disagreement for this item while the C-group maintained theirs. The p-value was quite high once again, however, and this prevents any strong claim that the treatment was responsible.

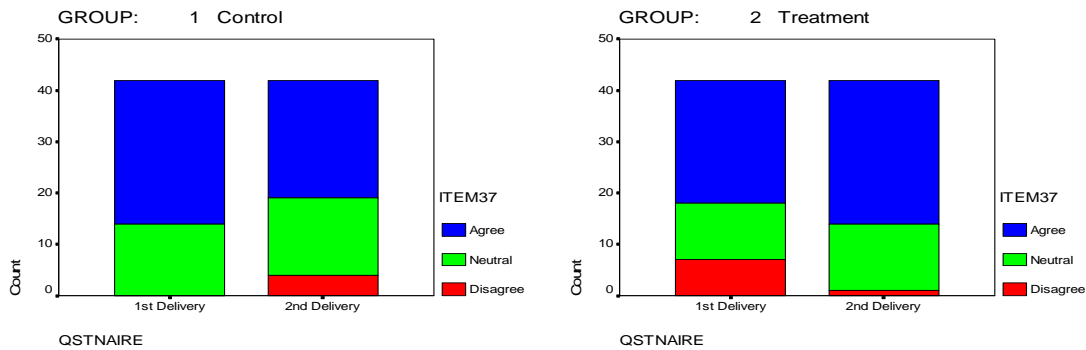


**Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.**

Despite vastly different responses in the first delivery of the BAM, both the T-group and C-group displayed quite similar responses for the second delivery. The T-group increased their agreement (+26%) and lost a very large amount of disagreement. The C-group, however, lost agreement (-14%) and even slightly increased their level of disagreement. This item displayed a very low p-value of .002 which meant that it was now possible to say that the treatment *may* have been responsible for the observed changes in the T-group. In other words, chance alone would produce such a result only twice in every thousand studies. This result could have been due to the intensive and repetitive approach of the treatment.

**BAM Item 37**

p value = .042

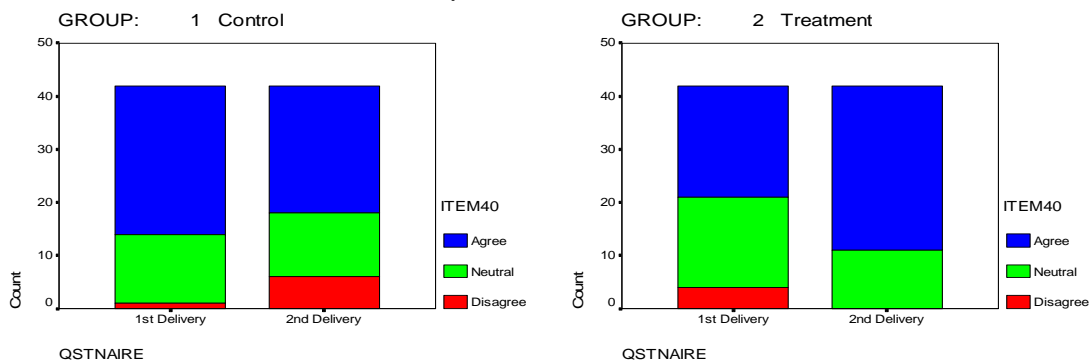


**Learning a language requires a constant effort and a lot of positive thinking.**

This item, with a relatively high statistically significant p-value of .042, appeared to indicate the C-group moving away from agreement (-12%) and towards disagreement (+9%). The T-group, however, moved towards agreement (+9%) and away from disagreement (-14%). While both groups maintained majority agreement, the observed changes were significant and it is possible that the treatment was responsible for the changes in the T-group.

**BAM Item 40**

p value = .004



**I am ultimately responsible for my progress learning English.**

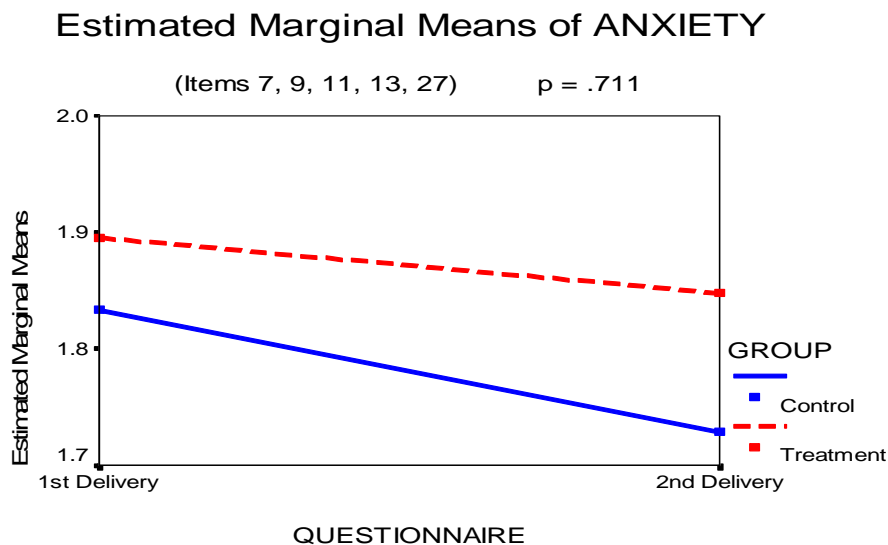
The final individual item displayed a very statistically significant p-value of .004, and appeared to show the C-group losing agreement (-9%) and gaining disagreement (+12%). The T-group

once again reacted very differently losing all their disagreement (-9% → 0%) and increasing their agreement (+23%). The treatment may have been responsible for this result, increasing the T-group members' realisation that they were responsible for their language learning. Despite these encouraging individual item results that appeared to indicate that the treatment had had at least some effect on the T-group when compared to the C-group, further analysis was needed.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION FOR GROUPED ITEMS

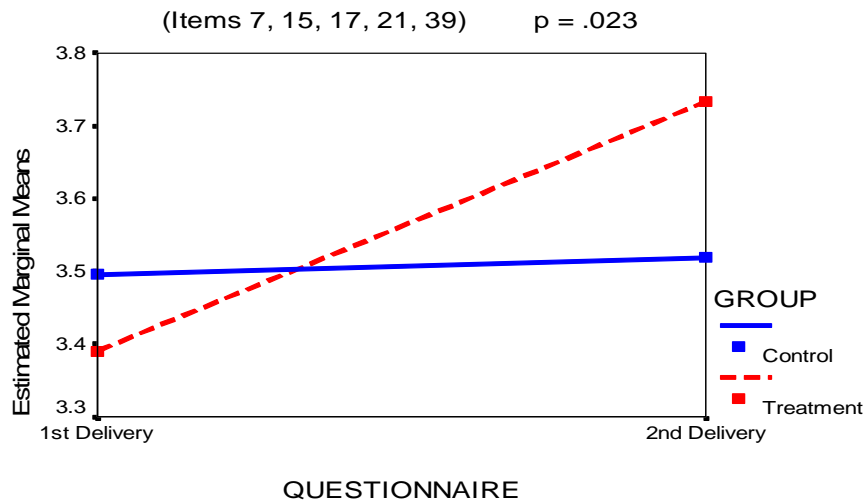
The need for further analyses resulted in the grouping of particular individual items contained in the BAM to form three distinct sets: Anxiety (BAM Items 7, 9, 11, 13, 27), Confidence (BAM Items 7, 15, 17, 21, 39), and Autonomy (BAM Items 6, 12, 19, 21, 23, 37, 40).

Grouping the items not only had the advantage of allowing the formation of the three distinct sets (seen above) but provided statistical advantages as well. By adding items such as these together (or averaging them), the random variation associated with and unique to each item, is averaged out. As a result, the overall error is reduced and the resulting scale is much more reliable than any single item (Taylor, 2005). These grouped items resulted in a clearer, and statistically superior, overall picture of the effects of the treatment in the study.



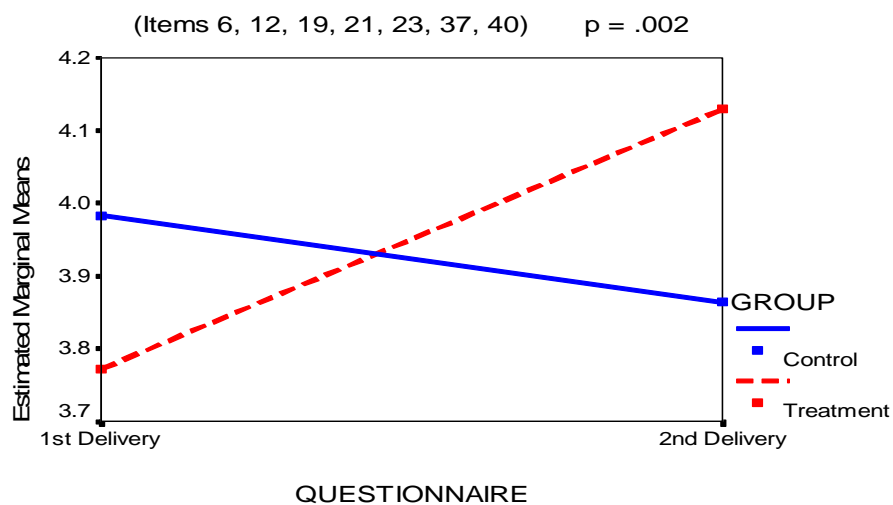
The first grouping of ANXIETY (above) showed that anxiety did not appear to be affected or influenced by the treatment. Even though both groups decreased slightly in anxiety from the first delivery to the second delivery of the BAM, the  $p$ -value of .711 was very high and rendered the results inconclusive. Anxiety does not appear to have been directly affected, positively or negatively, by the treatment and/or the measure (BAM) was not an accurate measure for this grouping.

### Estimated Marginal Means of CONFIDENCE



The second grouping of CONFIDENCE (above) showed that confidence did appear to be affected in a positive manner by the treatment. Despite the T-group beginning the treatment period (first delivery of the BAM) with less confidence than the C-group, the T-group significantly increased their level by the second delivery. This was in contrast to the C-group which remained largely unchanged. The p-value for this grouping was also very low at .023 and added statistical significance to the result. It appears that the treatment may have increased the confidence of the T-group. This is interesting as the previous grouping's results for ANXIETY were inconclusive yet this grouping appeared to show that CONFIDENCE had been positively affected. This raises questions about the relationship between confidence and anxiety; and may require further investigation.

### Estimated Marginal Means of AUTONOMY



The final grouping of AUTONOMY (above) appeared to indicate that autonomous beliefs (and possibly behaviour) were positively affected by the treatment. While the C-group showed a slight decrease the T-group displayed a significant increase. The low p-value of .002 further validated the possibility that the treatment may have been responsible for the observed changes in the responses from the T-group. This was a very encouraging result that appears to provide evidence of the overall effectiveness of the treatment employed throughout the study.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION FOR QUALITATIVE ITEMS

As mentioned earlier the final BAM also included the addition of two final questions (Appendix III). The responses to these final two questions revealed some interesting results that appeared to further complement the quantitative findings of the study.

**Table 1: Responses to final BAM questionnaire – Question 1.**

<b>“If you had to choose one thing that would improve your English, what would it be?”</b>	
Control Group	Treatment Group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find foreign or local friends</li> <li>• Watch more TV</li> <li>• Work on grammar</li> <li>• Get a part-time English speaking job</li> <li>• Practise writing</li> <li>• Practise conversation</li> <li>• Improve pronunciation</li> <li>• Speaking English everyday</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find foreign/local friends or girlfriend</li> <li>• Speaking English as much as possible</li> <li>• Watch more TV and movies</li> <li>• Go out, get work, and mix more</li> <li>• Work on grammar</li> <li>• Practise writing much more</li> <li>• Practise conversation</li> <li>• Improve pronunciation</li> </ul>

The responses from both the treatment and control groups to this first question (*If you had to choose one thing that would improve your English, what would it be?*) were quite similar. The above selections are a collation of all of the various answers appearing on the final BAM and represent the most common responses. It appeared that many members of both groups felt that they needed to make more English-speaking friends and expose themselves to English more often in their daily lives.

**Table 2: Responses to final BAM questionnaire – Question 2.**

<b>“What is a good English language learner?”</b>	
Control Group	Treatment Group

<p><b>Someone who:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studies hard (extremely popular response)</li> <li>• Works hard</li> <li>• Practises everyday</li> <li>• Believes mistakes are OK</li> <li>• Studies vocabulary</li> <li>• Is brave and active</li> <li>• Never gives up</li> <li>• Asks for help</li> <li>• Listens to L1 speakers</li> <li>• Is more confident</li> <li>• Good at everything</li> </ul>	<p><b>Someone who:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studies hard and practises skills</li> <li>• Is interested in English</li> <li>• Tries not to use Chinese</li> <li>• Does hard work in and outside of class</li> <li>• Tries to speak only English</li> <li>• Speaks as much English as possible with all kinds of people</li> <li>• Initiates conversations with others</li> <li>• Is always thinking positively/Doesn't just rely on the teacher</li> <li>• Reviews their progress</li> <li>• Listens/Reads/Writes; mixes knowledge, ideas of how to learn, and knows their importance. Doesn't just watch one or two points</li> <li>• Makes a constant effort/Tries English in their life</li> <li>• Utilises every possible chance/Does best to correct themselves</li> <li>• Learns from mistakes</li> <li>• Listens to negative advice</li> <li>• Works out own way to do things</li> </ul>
---	--

The comparative responses to the second question (*What is a good English language learner?*) displayed significant differences between the control and treatment groups. It appears that the treatment group's responses were of a greater variety and possess a much higher level of sophistication and detail compared to that displayed by the C-group. The C-group responses appear to focus on innate ability and character and the non-specific idea of 'working hard'. Conversely, the T-group focuses on individual effort and more specific language-learning strategies and study skills. This encouraging result was somewhat unexpected and it appears that when the above responses are analysed the differences in detail are quite apparent and somewhat striking.

The table appeared to indicate that perhaps the treatment could have been responsible for the T-group members possessing such an in-depth range of ideas, beliefs and strategies (which tended to centre on the topic of autonomous learning) that could enable them to ultimately improve their own English language learning. Perhaps the treatment improved not only the methods but also the goal-setting and self-reflection strategies of the T-group members.

## 6. OVERAL FINDINGS

The results of this study have produced a number of interesting and important findings regarding the application of the aforementioned treatment that can be summarised as follows:

1. The treatment appeared to bring students' attention to their areas of weakness.

2. The treatment did not appear to reduce the levels of fear and anxiety experienced by the T-group. Their levels either remained relatively stable or, in some instances, actually increased. One potential reason posited for this could have been the added pressure of feeling greater responsibility/need to take action.
3. The treatment did not adversely affect confidence and appeared to give the T-Group increased confidence in their English skills and abilities.
4. The treatment also appeared to significantly increase the strength and levels of autonomous beliefs (and potentially behaviour) among members of the treatment group.

## **7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The limitations of the study were quite numerous and a great deal was learned from their identification.

### **7.1 Pre and Post Linking of Subjects**

This was found to be a major limitation that prevented the study from achieving a higher degree of statistical significance. Because individual responses were unable to be compared (first delivery against second delivery) due to ethical and privacy concerns, the results observed in the study were in effect very conservative, because if the responses of subjects can be linked the statistical power of the data is increased considerably. However, this study was only able to compare the results for each group (Treatment and Control). In any future follow-up study this will need to be addressed so that individual responses (pre and post) will be able to be linked and analysed.

### **7.2 Sex of Subjects**

Another limitation highlighted by this initial research project was the need to be able to identify the sex of individual subjects and to build this variable into the study. This will be done in any future studies.

### **7.3 Small Sample Size**

The sample sizes involved in this project were seen as quite modest (although still statistically significant) at 42 Control and 42 Treatment. In future research the numbers of subjects employed will be a major consideration.

### **7.4 Time Stresses/Classroom Realities**

During the course of the study teachers reported that they found it hard to always complete the three weekly treatments and to provide additional feedback to students. This was to be expected for such an intensive ten-week program such as SSEPP. However, the study did indicate that the level (and quality) of teacher feedback was a contributing factor to the overall effectiveness of the treatments. The checking by the teacher appeared to give students greater confidence in the whole process and teachers reported that they seemed to enjoy the fact that the teacher was taking notice



of what they were writing down. This also allowed the teacher to keep an eye on the progress of each student and to develop an even deeper understanding of each individual.

### **7.5 BAM Review**

Due to the questions raised by the apparent conflict between the measures of confidence and anxiety the BAM in its current form may require a review of individual items to make it a more reliable and valid measure of the three major constructs (Anxiety, Confidence, Autonomy) investigated in the study.

### **7.6 Treatment Needs to be Made Part of whole SSEPPP Program**

This final limitation was also deemed an important consideration. Better results could have been seen if all of the classes in SSEPP had undergone the treatment and there were no control classes. This could possibly have led to the creation of a “group culture” among all SSEPP students. This would have eliminated the pressure on T-group members to put aside newly acquired language learning strategies arising out of the treatments due to peer pressure from C-group members before classes, during break times, and after classes. However, this would of course have made it difficult to measure/compare actual results.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The study showed that beliefs can be affected in a positive way by teachers through the use of an integrated, structured and explicit focus on active learning and goal setting. This focus appeared to encourage more active, responsible and autonomous learning behaviours which were evidenced in the changing beliefs of participants. However, the focus employed in this study did not appear to significantly affect the anxiety levels of participants in the treatment group. Other methods may need to be employed to address this or, alternatively, the current methods in this study need to be modified in an attempt to help control learner anxiety levels; especially if this anxiety moves into the range of debilitating anxiety which directly (or indirectly) affects performance in the second language (English).

This study also provided much-needed experience into the implementation of a classroom treatment program which is expected to be repeated and refined in the near future. This research, however, is not expected to be the only method used in response to the language learner beliefs and anxiety issues which were observed in this study. Instead, it is expected that anxiety (in the context of the language classroom) will need to be addressed using various other methods and strategies that have a proven track record. Therefore, in conclusion, further research is needed to fully explore not only the role of anxiety in the classroom (and beyond) but also how best to manage anxiety to provide the best learning conditions. The role of beliefs and autonomous learning will most likely play a major role in this endeavour as both clearly have significant roles in the learning process and resultant performance outcomes.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Carol Floyd, of NCELTR, and Dr. Peter Roger of the Department of Linguistics for their input. Many thanks also to Dr. Alan Taylor of the Department of Psychology, Macquarie University for his invaluable statistical advice.

## REFERENCES

- Acton, L. (2003). In best practice: Rhetoric or reality? *Proceedings of the 16<sup>th</sup> English Australia Educational Conference*, Melbourne.
- Benson, P. & Lor, W. (1999). Metacognitive knowledge and beliefs in language learning. *System*, 27(4), 459-472.
- Burke, E. & Wyatt-Smith, C. (1996). Academic and non-academic difficulties: Perceptions of graduate non-english speaking background students. *TESL-EJ*, 2(1), A-1. Retrieved September 10, 2005, from <http://tesl-ej.org/ej05/a1.html>.
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Readiness for autonomy: Investigating learner beliefs. *System*, 23(2), 195-205.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Doye, C. (1997). It made me think...About making assumptions. *Modern English Teacher*, 6(1), 43-47.
- Ferris, D. & Tagg, T. (1996). Academic listening / Speaking tasks for ESL students: Problems, suggestions, and implications. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(2), 297-320.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B. & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *The Modern Language Journal*, 72(3), 283-294.
- Leary, M. R. (1983). *Understanding social anxiety: Social, personality, and clinical perspectives*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage.
- Lucantonio, D. (1992). The cross-cultural business of self-directed learning. *EA Journal*, 10(2), 45-50.
- Luhr, S. (2001). New perspectives on old problems: Re-examining the needs and problems of high school preparation students. *Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> EA Educational Conference*, Sydney.
- Matsumoto, K. (1996). Helping L2 learners reflect on classroom learning. *ELT Journal*, 50(2), 143-149.

Murphey, T. (1996). Changing language learning beliefs: “Appreciating” mistakes. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 6, 77-84.

Nixon, U. (1993). Coping in Australia: Problems faced by overseas students. *Prospect*, 8(3), 42-51.

Nixon, U. (1996). Adjusting to Australia: Insights from student journals in a TESOL program. *Prospect*, 11(3), 29-44.

Peacock, M. (1999). Beliefs about language learning and their relationship to proficiency. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 9(2), 247-265.

Sim, M. S. (2004). *Have no fear: An investigation into the possible existence and prevalence of cultural traits and beliefs across nationalities for ESL students*. Unpublished masters dissertation, Macquarie University, Sydney.

Taylor, A. (2005, November 25). *SPSS Analysis of Data*. (Interview). Macquarie University, Sydney.

Walmsley, E. (1992). Cross-cultural awareness: A two-way street. *EA Journal*, 10(2), 51-55.

**Appendix I:**

<b>Monday English Report</b>
Week: _____ Name: _____ Class: _____ Teacher: _____
<b>Please write down some things you did this past weekend involving:</b>
<b>SPEAKING!</b>
_____
_____
_____
_____
<b>LISTENING!</b>
_____
_____
_____
<b>READING!</b>
_____
_____
_____
<b>WRITING!</b>

**Midweek Goal Focus**

Week: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Outline your MAJOR ENGLISH GOAL for this week:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Do you think this MAJOR ENGLISH GOAL is achievable? Why or Why Not?  
What are you planning to do to make it more achievable?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Is there anything you could get your teacher or others to do to help you achieve your goal?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**ALC #1** Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Date/Week: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

**For each item indicate your level of achievement for the week:**

<b>(1)</b> <b>Very Low</b>	<b>(2)</b> <b>Low</b>	<b>(3)</b> <b>High</b>	<b>(4)</b> <b>Very High</b>
-------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------	--------------------------------

1. I told my teacher that they were really intelligent ( )
2. I went to class ( )
3. I didn't go to sleep in class ( )
4. I took everything I needed to class ( )
5. I completed all my homework ( )
6. I tried not to speak my native language ( )
7. I tried to speak English as much as possible ( )
8. I listened closely to the teacher when they were speaking ( )
9. I listened to my other classmates when they were speaking ( )
10. I wrote new words down in my vocabulary book ( )
11. I followed the instructions given by the teacher ( )
12. I asked the teacher to explain things I didn't understand ( )
13. I answered a question in English most days ( )
14. I kept my phone off while I was in class ( )
15. I was polite and/or friendly to EVERYONE in my class ( )
16. I thought about the reasons why I need English in my life ( )

Your ideas for other target behaviours:

(What else do you think you need to focus on to help your English study?)

---

---

---

---

---

---

**ALC #4** Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Date/Week: \_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_

**For each item indicate your level of achievement for the week:**

**(1)**                      **(2)**                      **(3)**                      **(4)**  
**Very Low**              **Low**                      **High**                      **Very High**

1. I told my teacher that they were very professional and pragmatic ( )
2. I went to class on time and came back on time after the break ( )
3. I took everything I needed to class including all my materials ( )
4. I completed all my homework to the best of my ability (ie. not rushed!) ( )
5. I stopped myself from speaking my native language all day (ie. self-policing) ( )
6. I spoke in English all the time ( )
7. I listened closely to the teacher and stopped what I was doing when my teacher spoke ( )
8. I wrote all new words down in my vocabulary book/list AND tried to use them in my conversations ( )
9. I followed the instructions given by the teacher and questioned anything that was not clear ( )
10. I asked the teacher to explain things I didn't understand and things which were interesting ( )
11. I told my friends to speak English to me and not my native language ( )
12. I tried to revise every class each night and thought about my progress ( )
13. I only spoke English outside of the classroom ( )
14. I had a successful **English Only Day (EOD)** this week ( )
15. I listened actively and critically to my classmates while they were speaking English and I commented (in English) on what they had to say ( )
16. I read the interesting parts of a newspaper/magazine and I watched the TV last night ( )
17. I asked and answered a lot of questions in class ( )
18. I didn't speak my native language ( )
19. I spoke only English in class ( )
20. I spent some time going over my latest English vocabulary every night ( )
21. When my friends spoke to me in my native language I replied in English ( )
22. I expressed and listened to many views, opinions and ideas and enjoyed it ( )
23. I thought about **my weak points** and what **new things I could do** to improve my English ( )

Your ideas for other target behaviours: (What else do you need to do to improve your English level?)

**Appendix II:**

<b>SSEPP Questionnaire</b>						
Please remember that this survey is <i>anonymous</i> . Answer <i>honestly</i> expressing your true feelings about each statement.						
<b>For each item, indicate your response from the following five options:</b>						
<b>1 = Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>2= Disagree</b>	<b>3= Neutral</b>	<b>4 = Agree</b>	<b>5 = Strongly Agree</b>		
<b>Item</b>		<b>Circle your response:</b>				
1	I must speak English in grammatically complete sentences to be understood.	1	2	3	4	5
2	Native speakers of English speak English correctly.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I must not make mistakes when I speak English.	1	2	3	4	5
4	To improve my English I must speak with native speakers of English.	1	2	3	4	5
5	One of the most important jobs of a teacher is to correct your English.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I should make opportunities to use and practice my English.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I don't feel confident when I speak English.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I can do and achieve anything if I really want to.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I am afraid of making mistakes in English.	1	2	3	4	5
10	Speaking English with others from my language group can really improve my English.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I feel foolish when I speak incorrectly in English.	1	2	3	4	5
12	No matter how many English classes I go to, I still have to use English a lot after school if I want to really learn it.	1	2	3	4	5
13	If I make mistakes in English my fellow students will lose respect for me.	1	2	3	4	5
14	My success in English depends largely on how good my teacher is.	1	2	3	4	5
15	The language I am trying to learn is: (1) a very difficult language, (2) a difficult language, (3) a language of medium difficulty, (4) an easy language, (5) a very easy language.	1	2	3	4	5
16	If I have many opportunities to use English I will eventually speak it very well.	1	2	3	4	5
17	I believe I will eventually (one day) learn to speak English very well.	1	2	3	4	5
18	It is important to speak a foreign language with a good accent.	1	2	3	4	5
19	Learning English can involve trying new ideas and never giving up.	1	2	3	4	5
20	You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.	1	2	3	4	5

21	If I heard someone speaking the language I am trying to learn, I would try to speak to them so that I could practice using the language.	1	2	3	4	5
22	It's OK to guess if you don't know (or forget) a word in English.	1	2	3	4	5
23	If I try to speak English outside the classroom I will improve much faster.	1	2	3	4	5
24	I have foreign language aptitude (i.e. the skills needed to learn a L2).	1	2	3	4	5
25	Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary.	1	2	3	4	5
26	It is important to practice English a lot every day.	1	2	3	4	5
27	I feel self-conscious (nervous/shy) speaking English in front of other people.	1	2	3	4	5
28	If you are allowed to make mistakes at the start, it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	1	2	3	4	5
29	My level of success depends on me and my effort NOT just the skills of my teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
30	It is more important to read and write English than it is to speak and understand it.	1	2	3	4	5
31	Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	1	2	3	4	5
32	To learn faster you should practice English every chance you get.	1	2	3	4	5
33	If I speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	1	2	3	4	5
34	Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	1	2	3	4	5
35	Learning English is mostly a matter of translating it.	1	2	3	4	5
36	It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	1	2	3	4	5
37	Learning a language requires a constant effort and a lot of positive thinking.	1	2	3	4	5
38	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	1	2	3	4	5
39	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	1	2	3	4	5
40	I am ultimately responsible for my progress learning English.	1	2	3	5	5
<b>Thank you &amp; good luck with your studies!!!</b>						



### **Appendix III:**

**2. Please answer the following questions in your own words:**

**A. If you had to choose one thing that would improve your English, what would it be?**

---

---

---

---

---

**B. What is a good learner of English?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---