

The Autonomous Language Learner

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*Do you think that there is such a thing as a 'Good language learner'?
To what extent do you think that it is possible for people to become
'better' language learners?*

1. Introduction

2. What Makes People Good Language Learners?

2.1. The Who: Aptitude & Personality

2.2. The What: Cognitive Style

2.3. The How: Learner Strategies

2.4. The Why: Learner Motivation

3. A Case Study: Learner Styles and Strategies

3.1. Explanation of Study

3.2. Results

3.3. Concluding Remarks

4. Fostering Learner Autonomy

4.1. Developing/Maintaining Learner Motivation

4.2. Strategy Awareness

4.3. Pedagogical Limitations

5. Conclusion

1. Introduction

The existence of a “good language learner” (GLL) is often accepted as axiomatic by researchers and teachers, yet the imprecise nature of the term *good* makes articulating what is meant by this notion difficult. Although *good* has been traditionally equated with a high learning rate by established aptitude tests (Carroll 1962, in Saville-Troike), more recent developments in the field of human intelligence suggest that humans possess other kinds of intelligences upon which the idea of *good* could be measured such as insight, creativity, and spontaneity (Sternburg 1985). Some GLL’s may in fact be fast learners, yet one can hardly call someone who learns slowly yet eventually achieves a high level of proficiency in their L2 a *bad* learner. Saville-Troike (2012: 87) juxtaposes these definitions through the terms “initial rate” and “ultimate achievement” when framing the ideas of success in language learning.

The question of what allows some learners to achieve higher levels of proficiency at faster rates than others has been the focus of much SLA research since Rubin (1975) first proposed a short list of GLL traits/strategies. The field quickly expanded to learner characteristics such as aptitude and personality (MacIntyre 1995, Horwitz 2001, Robinson 2005), cognitive styles (Willing 1994, Ehrman 2003, Nunan and Wong 2011), learning and communication strategies (O’Malley 1985, Oxford 1991, Dörnyei 2001), and affective factors such as attitude and motivation (Dörnyei 1994, 2001). Traditional aptitude constructs and testing also continued to evolve with the emergence of communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980), while developments in the cognitive sciences (Gardner 1983, Sternburg 1988, Goleman 1995) that challenged previously held concepts of intelligence further complicated the

relationship between intelligence and language learning.

This essay will address the question of what a GLL is and does by first reviewing the various learner traits, styles and strategies that have been linked to language learning success and then comparing them to the results of a style/strategy survey of adult Japanese learners of English. These two sections will argue that rather than a strictly defined mold of traits, style, and strategy, GLL's are autonomous learners who actively seek out and employ a variety of learning strategies that match their styles/characteristics. The final section will then discuss how pedagogy can help learners become better language learners through the fostering of this autonomy by attending to learner motivation levels and increasing learner awareness of the various learning strategies they can employ in their studies.

2. What Makes People Good Language Learners?

2.1. The Who: Aptitude & Personality

Personal traits and aptitude are generally understood to differ from styles and strategies in that they are relatively static, or semi-static, constructs and often remain outside of the control of the teacher and learner. I refer to these characteristics as *who* traits because they attempt to define who a learner is through his or her abilities, persuasions, and limitations. Traditional approaches to identifying the *who* characteristics of GLL's have centered around the measurement of language aptitude through tests such as the MLAT or PLAB (Carroll 1962, in Saville-Troike), though it has been argued that they could merely be reflecting the "...general intelligence or

academic ability of a student in any instructional setting” (Brown: 106). More recently, the idea of aptitude has evolved from a discrete skill set to a complex interaction of cognitive abilities and processes related to memory, planning, processing, noticing, and speed (Robinson: 51-52), and tests have been developed to measure these faculties. Aptitude appears to be a good indicator of learning efficiency, particularly during the initial learning period when taken at face value; however, many other individual characteristics can affect learner success.

Personality is another factor that has been hypothesized to play a role in learning success, though current research suggests that personality in and of itself is unlikely to determine the success of a particular learner (Brown: 178, Lightbown and Spada: 63). In a review of research, Ellis concludes that “...in oral communication, extraverts were found to be generally more fluent than introverts both in L1 and L2, but on other aspects of L2 proficiency there exists a weak relationship with extraversion” (2004: 541). Other personality dimensions such as self-esteem, empathy, creativity, risk-taking, etc. have been investigated (Erhman and Oxford 1990, in Brown), but the findings suggest that these traits affect learning styles more than determining learning success. Anxiety, or more precisely “state” anxiety (Horwitz 2001: 113), is one affective trait that appears to exert influence on language learning success (Oxford 1999), though the cause-effect nature of the relationship is still under debate (Sparks and Ganschow 1991, Macintyre 1995). The picture is even further clouded when one considers not only that “...many successful language learners also experience language anxiety” (Horwitz: 119) but also that a certain degree of anxiety may actually be beneficial (Macintyre: 92) rather than detrimental. As a whole, these psychological constructs can prove useful in assessing potential strengths and weaknesses of a learner, yet a lack of empirical

evidence tying any particular trait to GLL's implies that *who* traits alone are probably insufficient for making predictions concerning language learning success.

2.2. The What: Cognitive Style

This section will shift the focus from *who* the learner is to cognitive style, or *what* is going on inside of the learner's head. More specifically, what preferences and tendencies do GLL's display during the learning process and in what way do they process the information they are encountering?

The field dependant/ field independent (FD/FI) construct (Witkin 1977) was arguably the first such cognitive style to be linked to language learning success. One hypothesis argues that field independence, or the ability to cull information from the whole and apply one's own order to it, was correlated to language learning success (Chapelle and Roberts, 1986). Others have refuted this claim, arguing that field dependence possesses learning advantages in its own right, particularly in social contexts (Johnson, Prior, and Artuso, 2000). It could be that, as Brown (2007: 123) has suggested, both positions possess a certain degree of validity: learners with field independent styles can find ways to leverage their ability to successfully learn language, while field dependent learners could theoretically do the same with their social skills.

Ehrman and Leaver (2003: 396-402) utilize 10 subscales (including FD/FI) when diagnosing the cognitive style of test subjects, each describing a different aspect of a learner's cognitive processes. Some subscales such as the inductive/deductive scale focus primarily on the cognitive processing, while subscales such as the reflective/impulsive scales deal with the affective nature of an individual. An important

thing to note about the Ehrman and Leaver's style construct is that it was used primarily as a tool for diagnosing learner styles in order to offer learning recommendations to the teacher and learner and not to identify GLL's. The likely reason for this goes back to what was previously said about FI/FD in that both ends of a particular subscale may offer advantages to learners as long as that style is properly recognized and accommodated.

Ultimately, trying to tie a particular cognitive style to language learning success may be both unfeasible and unnecessary, especially when one considers the possibility that "...a predisposition may be deep-seated, but it does imply some capacity for flexibility, and scope for adaptation of particular styles to meet the demands of particular circumstances" (Dornyei and Skehan, in Brown: 120). What is going on in the heads of GLL's, then, may not be quite as important as how these learners find ways to adapt their learning to their *who* and *what* traits.

2.3. The How: Learner Strategies

Until now, this essay has focused on describing *who* and *what* a good language learner is- yet it would appear a learner can be described not only by who they are but also by *how* they go about their learning. Key differences in the way successful learners manage their learning and the strategies they employ have been suggested as key causes of the performance disparity between learners (Rubin 1975, Oxford 1990). Strategy has been divided into two main categories: learning strategies, or "...techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (Rubin: 43) and communicative

strategies, described by Dörnyei as “...verbal and nonverbal means of dealing with difficulties and breakdowns that occur in everyday communication” (1995: 55).

At a glance, it seems logical to assume that learners who effectively employ a variety of learning strategies would outperform those who do not, and certain research appears to support this position. Erhman and Oxford (1995) suggest a correlation between the use of cognitive strategies and language proficiency, while Taguchi (2002) observed that Japanese learners with higher L2 proficiency reported using a larger variety of learning strategies than lower level proficiency learners. However, research has not been able to point to any one particular learning strategy (or even a subcategory) and connect it with successful learning. It would appear that the learning process is too complicated and there are too many other factors at play to reduce the causes of successful learning down to a limited set of strategies.

Communication strategies, on the other hand, present another dilemma in that while they can serve to facilitate communication, they can also interfere with the development with other areas of linguistic competence (Skehan 1998: 84). If a learner is too adept at using communication strategies, it is entirely possible that their linguistic development could stagnate once communication goals are met. And yet, to categorically reject a connection between communication strategies and learning success may be premature given that:

“A great deal of language attainment takes place through taking an active part in actual communication, and CSs [communication strategies] help learners... (a) to obtain practice, and (b) to gain new information by testing what is permissible or appropriate.”

Dörnyei 1995: 60

Given that all humans use communication strategies to some extent, what likely sets GLL's apart is their judicious use of such strategies to provide extra input opportunity without allowing it to become a crutch that stifles linguistic development.

Strategy variance appears to be important, but to attempt to reduce the relationship between strategy use and language success would be an oversimplification of the issue. Case in point: a GLL could be someone who utilizes only a few key but highly effective strategies that mesh extremely well with their personality and style. How a learner goes about learning should be viewed in light of who the learner is and what kind of learner they are in order to understand its importance in the learning process.

2.4. The Why: Learner Motivation

Of all the potential factors that can affect learner success, perhaps none are as important as the motivations a learner brings with him or her to the learning process. Gardner and Lambert (1972) first suggested the idea of integrative and instrumental motivation in an attempt to understand why people learn second/foreign languages and the possible connection it had with successful learning, though these concepts are now understood primarily as orientations of motivation rather than specific types of motivation (Dörnyei 2001).

The extent to which these factors can predict successful language learning is still unclear, though there is evidence to suggest that students with high degrees of intrinsic motivation tend to be more successful learners than those who are more

extrinsically motivated (Brown 2007: 173). Such learners are usually “...interested in excellence for its own sake, tend to initiate achievement activities, work with heightened intensity at these tasks, and persist in the face of failure” (Dörnyei 1994: 277). They are autonomous in the sense that they actively seek out learning opportunities, are willing to try new things, take responsibility for their learning rather than expect a teacher to show them how to learn. Nunan and Wong reach similar conclusions in their study, noting that “The more effective learners in this study were more active and more prepared to take control of their own learning” (2011: 154).

While these observations do appear valid, it should be pointed out that motivation is a fluid construct affected by a wide range of social and psychological factors (Dörnyei 1994: 274). GLL’s tend to be generally motivated, but motivation levels can change and fluctuate over time in often unpredictable ways, complicating the idea of equating motivation with a GLL.

How, then, does one untangle this massive web of *who*, *what*, *how* and *why* factors to gain a clear picture of what makes a GLL? Clearly, GLL’s are not confined to some pre-determined mold of aptitude, style, strategy use, and motivations, though all of these factors are important. What does appear to be vital is the degree to which a learner exhibits autonomy through an active management of their learning and pursuit of learning opportunity. Informed by this definition of learner success, the study presented in the next section will attempt to gain insight into the learner autonomy of a group of relatively high achieving Japanese adult learners by investigating their cognitive styles and strategy use.

3. A Case Study: Learner Styles and Strategies

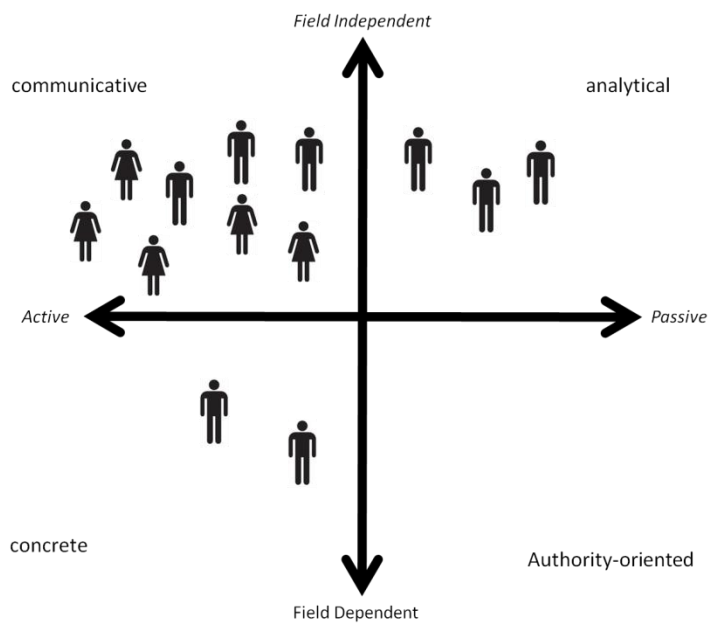
3.1. Explanation of Study

The aim of this study was to find concrete evidence to support the position that learner autonomy, more than any other factor, plays the most important role in determining who is a GLL. As the purpose of this study was to gain insight into learner autonomy by assessing learner styles and strategies, I will avoid making correlations between a particular cognitive style or strategy and GLL's. Participants were selected according to the following criteria: a) he or she has achieved a minimum of Eiken Level 2 and b) has demonstrated moderate to high level communicative ability either during or outside class. The reasoning behind using both a subjective and objective component in the selection process was to produce a balanced appraisal of student ability without putting too much weight into either test results or my own personal opinion. The instrument of data collection was a self-reporting survey adopted from the Willing survey (1994) and the Oxford SILL (1990). The survey itself contains a style and strategy section, and was administered primarily in English with occasional clarifications provided in Japanese. General results from the survey are listed in Figures 3.2.1 (style) and 3.2.2 (strategies), while the survey questions and a detailed breakdown of participant answers can be found in the attached appendices.

3.2. Results

Cognitive Style

Figure 3.2.1 Learner Cognitive Style Distribution



Adapted from Nunan and Wong (2011: 153)

The first part of the survey focuses on cognitive style, the questions adapted from the Willing (1987) survey and results interpreted in a manner similar to Nunan and Wong (2011). Both Nunan and Wong and Willing report a correlation between effective learners and the communicative group (Group C), and the results of the style section (see figure 3.2.1) would appear to mirror their findings. Perhaps the most telling finding, however, is the 70% differential between those who reported on the active end of the continuum (~85%) and those who reported on the passive end (~15%). While learner style varies to a certain degree, activeness, or autonomy, appears to play a prominent role in the majority of participants' styles, especially when considering that no participant identified with the authority oriented group (Group D).

Such straightforward interpretations of the data should be met with a certain amount of caution, though, considering that the Willing survey was never intended to be

used as an instrument for measuring FI/FD and the degree to which the original four categories actually represent the ends of the passive/active FD/FI continuums Nunan and Wong claim are difficult to empirically demonstrate. Another possible issue lies in the Willing survey's assumption of mutual exclusivity between groups on the questionnaire, which forces participants to choose from four somewhat overlapping labels. Many of the participants of the survey were initially puzzled that they could choose only one category while disregarding other areas that also applied to them. Given the test again with slightly different wording, it is entirely conceivable that many of the participants would have identified with a different group and thus cast doubt on the definitiveness of the results.

Strategies

Figure 3.2.2 Learner Strategy Distribution

	Overall	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Meta-cognitive	Affective	Social
This study	3.47	3.07	3.56	3.73	3.74	3.01	3.67
Taguchi (2002)	3.26	2.72	3.56	3.41	3.41	2.70	3.76

The second part of the survey, adapted from the SILL, attempts to measure the degree of learner strategy use within 6 subcategories defined by Oxford (1990): memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective, and social (see figure 3.2.2). The overall results were surprisingly high, especially when compared against the results of Taguchi's (2002) study of high proficiency Japanese learners living in Australia. While this could be a byproduct of the participants taking the survey in their L2, the variety

reported by the participants suggests that their high English proficiency levels are, in fact, no accident. Ehrman and Oxford describe users of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies as "...a confident, positive, highly motivated lot" who tend to be "internally motivated, self-confident and emotionally energized" (1995: 377), a description that in my opinion would apply to most of the study participants. The fact that these learners are living in Japan and often not in daily contact with native speakers almost necessitates a high level of meta-cognitive strategy use, as they will have to be far more active in managing their studies in order to build and maintain linguistic competence. High SILL scores, particularly in the cognitive and meta-cognitive domains, and the fact that the participants are voluntarily supplementing their lack of communicative opportunity with English conversation classes, both paint a picture of highly autonomous learners.

One surprising find was the relatively high amount of compensation strategy use reported by the participants, which runs contrary to Taguchi's findings that higher level proficiency learners tended to use compensatory strategies at lower frequencies than lower proficiency learners. A closer look at the individual question scores from the strategy section, however, reveals a significant discrepancy between the scores of what Taguchi (2002: 27) refers to as "positive" and "negative" compensatory strategies. The average score for strategies that have been argued to negatively affect L2 acquisition such as using gestures and making up new words was 3.31, but scores for positive strategies such as using another word that means the same thing and making prudent guesses had an average of 3.94. In other words, these participants appear to be using the kind of strategies that not only enable communication but also do not hinder their L2 development.

3.3 Concluding Remarks

The results of this study indicate that the majority of the study participants lean toward a communicative style and employ a versified range of learning strategies in their studies. This would suggest a substantial amount of autonomy on the part of the participants, but the scope of the study and this essay are too limited to draw definite conclusions. A survey with more detailed learner profiles (personality, etc.) and in depth interviews about study habits and motivations could have yielded more reliable and enlightening results, but practical constraints of this essay made effectively implementing these elements difficult.

Despite these limitations, the survey still highlights the importance autonomy plays in successful language learning and points to one possible way to address the issue of helping people become better language learners. The following section will propose two ways in which teachers can help foster learner autonomy as well as some of the limitations of such instruction.

4. Fostering Learner Autonomy

If learner success hinges upon the development of learner autonomy, then it follows that dedicating instruction time to strengthening this autonomy can help any learner become a *better* language learner. Such instruction would focus on two key areas: the promotion of learner motivation and strategy awareness. If a learner is lacking

in either of these areas, it is very possible that they will struggle to succeed regardless of whatever natural talents or circumstantial advantages they may possess.

4.1. Developing/Maintaining Learner Motivation

A crucial step in developing learner autonomy concerns the development and maintenance of learner motivation, as “...motivational variables have been found to affect second language achievement... by influencing the extent to which individuals take advantage of opportunities to develop language proficiency” (Gardner and Lysynchuk, 1990: 256). This is obviously easier said than done, as learners will inherently bring different motivations and attitudes to the learning process.

Dornyei’s process-oriented approach to motivation details four key areas teachers where teachers can have a positive impact on student motivation: 1) creating basic motivational conditions, 2) generating initial motivation, 3) maintaining motivation, and 4) encouraging positive self-evaluation (2001: 29). I have found that any single strategy to improve motivation can potentially have a positive impact across many or all of these motivational stages. For example, having learners conduct in-class interviews with one another to learn about why others are learning English can help maintain motivation levels of learners, generate motivation in learners who are orientated differently, and allow learners the opportunity to evaluate their goals in respect to those of others. I can then take the information the learners provide and adjust lesson content to target specific learner motivations and interests to help ensure that learner motivation levels remain high.

4.2. Strategy Awareness

The next area of instruction pertains to raising learner awareness of the learning strategies they can employ to maximize their learning efficiency. By addressing the “...gap between what learners can do and what learners will do...” (McDonough: 4), teachers can help learners better understand the language learning process and take full advantage of their strengths while addressing their weaknesses. For example, after concluding this essay’s study I identified two specific learning strategies that appeared fairly under-utilized by the study participants- flashcard use (1.69) and writing a language diary (1.62)- and made a point to discuss the two in class. It turned out that the low use of flash cards stemmed primarily from the students’ outdated perceptions of what a flashcard can be. After introducing the students to more modern, high tech, flashcard software that could be used on their computers and smart-phones the students appeared much more enthusiastic about incorporating flash card use into their learning. I also made a point of emphasizing the fact that a language learning diary need not be a dedicated diary specifically to language learning; social networks and message boards can also function in such a fashion as long as one is making a point to think regularly about his or her learning process.

Another point worth remembering is what McDonough refers to as the “double-edged relation between teaching people to learn and learner autonomy” (12). By equipping learners with better tools, we make the learning process smoother and more rewarding, which in turn should have a positive effect on the attitude and motivation of the learner. As a learner becomes more empowered and confident, they

begin to assert their own autonomy in the learning process, engage in more meaningful and bottom up learning, and more or less exhibit the qualities associated with GLL's.

4.3. Pedagogical Limitations

On the flip-side, we as teachers also need to be conscious of the limitations of this type of instruction in order to make the best use of it. First, we should always bear in mind the limited control we as teachers have over the learning process and what students will take away from a language lesson (Breen 2001). I sometimes find that students have “missed” the point of my regular language lessons, so it stands to reason strategy instruction would follow the same pattern. But even assuming the students are keyed in on the main point, doubt still remains as to whether or not a top-down approach is the best way to improve learner strategy use (Nunan and Wong: 155). Depending on both the socio-cultural context, some students may respond favorably to being instructed on how to learn while others may hesitate to adjust their learning habits to fit with “foreign” concepts of learning (McDonough: 4).

Teachers should also acknowledge that while motivation can be improved on in most cases, “realistically, it is highly unlikely that everybody can be motivated to learn everything and even generally motivated students are not equally keen on all subject matter” (Dörnyei 2001: 25). Certain social and institutional realities all but guarantee that teachers will come across learners for whom even the best efforts toward fostering motivation will yield sparse immediate results, if any at all. This is not to suggest that throwing in the towel is acceptable when it comes to unmotivated learners, but that we

run the risk of further alienating such students when we approach them with too lofty of expectations regarding their motivation levels.

5. Conclusion

In summation, factors such as who the learner is, what kind of learner they are, how they go about their learning, and why they are learning a foreign language all play a role in determining whether or not that individual is seen as a GLL, but none of them should be viewed the sole determining cause of learning success. Given the complexity of the language learning process and the limitations that exists within any type of language instruction, the degree to which the learner is willing to take an active role in his or her learning instead of passively waiting to be spoon-fed language becomes all the more important. Whether “good” is seen in terms of efficiency or achievement is inconsequential, as both of these notions are contextually dependent and often say just as much about the observer as the linguistic ability of the learner. An autonomous learner is more likely to be successful in his or her unique context regardless of how “success” is defined, and any time we manage to increase this autonomy in our students we help make them better language learners.

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Appendix 1: Style and Strategy Survey

(Adapted from Willing 1994 and Oxford 1990)

Part 1

Write the letter of the box that most applies to you.

1. I like to study grammar 2. At home, I like to learn by studying books 3. I like the tutor to let me find my own mistakes 4. I like to work on problems independently	A
1. I like to learn the foreign language by talking in pairs 2. In class I like to learn by playing games 3. I like to do practical tasks in the language classroom	B
1. I like to learn the foreign language by talking to native speakers 2. I like to learn by watching TV in the foreign language 3. In class, I like to learn by conversations 4. I like to learn small aspects of vocabulary and grammar then look for opportunities to try them out	C
1. I like the tutor to explain everything. 2. I like to have a textbook to follow. 3. I like to study grammar with the tutor.	D

Part 2

Write a number next to each statement based on how each describes you.

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Usually not true of me
3. Somewhat true of me
4. Usually true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

Section A

1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help remember the word.

4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.
7. I physically act out new English words.
8. I review English lessons often.
9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign.

Section B

10. I say or write new English words several times.
11. I try to talk like native English speakers.
12. I practice the sounds of English.
13. I use the English words I know in different ways.
14. I start conversations in English.
15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.
16. I read for pleasure in English.
17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.
18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.
19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.
20. I try to find patterns in English.
21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.
22. I try not to translate word-for-word.
23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.

Section C

24. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.
25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English.
27. I read English without looking up every new word.
28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.

29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

Section D

- 30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.
- 31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.
- 32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
- 33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.
- 34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.
- 35. I look for people I can talk to in English.
- 36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.
- 37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.
- 38. I think about my progress in learning English.

Section E

- 39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.
- 40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.
- 41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
- 42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.
- 43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.
- 44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.

Section F

- 45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.
- 46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.
- 47. I practice English with other students.
- 48. I ask for help from English speakers.
- 49. I ask questions in English.
- 50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.

Appendix 2: Survey Results By Question

	#	Average		#	Average
Memory 3.07	1	3.15	Metacognitive 3.74	30	4.08
	2	4.31		31	3.92
	3	3.85		32	4.23
	4	3.54		33	3.85
	5	2.54		34	3.15
	6	1.69		35	3.54
	7	2.31		36	3.38
	8	3.15		37	3.77
	9	3.08		38	3.77
Cognitive 3.56	10	4.31	Affective 3.01	39	3.85
	11	4.46		40	4.15
	12	4.00		41	3.15
	13	3.08		42	2.92
	14	3.46		43	1.62
	15	3.62		44	2.38
	16	2.62	Social 3.67	45	4.31
	17	3.46		46	3.92
	18	3.77		47	2.23
	19	3.31		48	3.62
	20	3.38		49	3.77
	21	3.23		50	4.15
	22	3.85			
	23	3.31			
Compensation 3.73	24	4.00			
	25	3.92			
	26	2.69			
	27	3.77			
	28	3.62			
	29	4.38			