
Starting self-starters: Strategies to support independent learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an action research (AR) project run as part of a professional development program at a university English language institution in Australia. This project was set in a Learning Centre located within the institution, where students are offered a range of resources and programs to support their independent language learning. Focusing on a program run for students with lower levels of English language proficiency, this project explored the role of strategies and activities to develop these students' independent learning skills, including their learner confidence. This paper not only suggests the importance of training our students to become independent learners, but also offers some practical insights into how this may be achieved. While there is a significant amount of research on independent learning in various ESL classroom contexts, there is a minimal amount of research on the role of Learning Centres and other initiatives to support independent learning outside the English language classroom.

INTRODUCTION

As educators, we recognise the importance of students possessing independent learning skills, including a confident attitude towards learning. It is advantageous for students to have the skills to not only be able to consolidate their classroom learning, but also take

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advantage of the many learning opportunities they have outside the classroom, and to continue learning after they have finished their current course of study. Encouraging students to utilise the language learning opportunities which exist outside the classroom is particularly relevant for ESL students as it has a direct impact on their level of English proficiency (Benson, 2016). However, although we recognise the benefit of independent learning skills, it can be challenging to determine how best to support our students in acquiring them.

This paper documents an AR project which set out to explore this very issue. The project was conducted within the Professional Development Program run at a university English language institution in Sydney, Australia. The institution is a direct pathway provider and there is an official agreement between the student, the institution and an Australian university that on successful completion of an Academic English course, some students progress to a university degree program directly, and others via a transitional diploma course. As the majority of our students intend to do further study at tertiary level on completion of their English course, the swift and thorough acquisition of language and independent learning skills is paramount to them. The development of independent learning skills is important not only to their language learning, but also to the success of their future academic careers.

On commencing their English studies at the institution, if a student's level of English does not yet meet the language requirements to begin an Academic English course, students are placed in a General English class which, on successful completion, will lead into an Academic English course.

This paper is focused on a program run in the institution's Learning Centre which provides a space where students can study, access supplementary learning resources and seek learning and technical support. The aim of the Learning Centre is not only to assist students with successfully completing their current Academic English course but also to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge for their future academic lives. As part of my position as Learning Support Officer in the Learning Centre, I run a program called General

English Supervised Study Sessions (GESSS) which is aligned with these aims, and this program was the focus of this AR project.

GESSS is a program which aims to support General English students with their homework, listening and speaking skills and to develop their independent learning skills. It is run in the Learning Centre for one hour every day from Monday to Thursday, either before or after class times depending on the class timetable. The program is additional to the students' set class times and although attendance is recorded, it does not affect the students' official attendance records that relate to compliance with the requirements of their student visas. As such, attendance and completion of the program is not compulsory, but highly recommended. There are three courses within the General English program. The level of General English 1 (GE1) is equivalent to an IELTS overall band score of 3; the levels of General English 2 (GE2) and General English 3 (GE3) are equivalent to an IELTS overall band score of 3.5 and each course consists of a five-week term. The GESSS program runs alongside these courses. Depending on their initial level of English, students begin in GE1, GE2 or GE3 and, therefore, students can attend the GESSS program for 5, 10 or 15 weeks. On completion of GE3 students begin the first level of Academic English.

In running this program, I have observed that the most capable students, both in terms of their class results and their attitudes towards study, possessed a strong ability to work independently, knew when to seek assistance and exuded the confidence that they were not only capable of learning, but also capable of managing the frustrations that learning can, and inevitably will, present. Conversely, students who did not possess these skills and attitudes struggled. My project was born from both my curiosity and frustration at this situation along with an interest in practical measures that could be taken in GESSS to support students in acquiring these skills and attitudes.

This project reflects a broader interest in how learning centres and university libraries can best support the needs of 21st century students. There is extensive research on how university libraries in Australia and America are re-envisioning both their role and their

resources to position themselves, theoretically and physically, at the centre of the university learning experience (Stoddart & Hendrix, 2016, p.3). The results of this research have been reflected in recent innovations and refurbishments of university libraries in Australia, to include technological infrastructure such as Wi-Fi, computers, recharge bays and specialised computer programs to meet students' technological needs (Bailin, 2011). Alongside these developments, recent research on libraries has also demonstrated a renewed interest in the library as "learning space" (Stoddart & Hendrix, 2016, p.3) and the way libraries can align their services and facilities to help students achieve their learning outcomes. However, while there is extensive research on the role libraries play in the university environment, which is relevant to learning centres at university English centres, there is limited research on the specific role of learning centres in the ESL context.

There is significant research investigating the value and efficacy of supporting learning outside the classroom and learner autonomy for ESL students. Much of this research is in response to the opportunities and challenges presented by technological advancements of the last twenty years (Reinders & White, 2016). For example, Trinder's (2017) research examines students' attitudes towards informal language opportunities afforded by a range of digital resources. Likewise, Lai, Yeung and Hu's research investigates the disparity between teachers' perceptions and university students' perceptions in relation to the role teachers can play in "promoting autonomous language learning with technology outside of the classroom" (Lai, Yeung, & Hu, 2016, p.703). Again, while this research provides relevant insights for learning centres at university English language institutions, it does not specifically address the role these centres can play in supporting students in acquiring independent learning skills.

As many English language schools, especially direct pathway providers, have learning centres or some form of learning area or support outside the classroom, whether that is through study spaces, additional supplementary resources or learning support staff, further research into how these facilities or services may best benefit

students is warranted. There is some recent research in this area. For example, Warnick (2016) presented at a national conference on initiatives taken to encourage independent learning by an independent learning centre and academic advisors at a direct pathways provider in Melbourne, which included supporting students in accessing support from staff and specific online sources. White and Reinders (2016), in their review of autonomy and technology, discuss an initiative by the University of Auckland which involved setting up a self-access centre where both domestic and international students could seek advice from language advisors and access an online program which supported students to “identify learning needs, prioritise goals, find appropriate materials, record their learning and reflect on their progress” (p.145). This paper intends to contribute to this emerging area of research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For the purposes of this paper, the terms ‘independent learning’ and ‘autonomous learning’ are used synonymously and I predominantly use the term independent learning. The synonymous use of these terms is common in the literature, where it is “not unusual for learner autonomy and learner independence to be used interchangeably, as synonyms, or near synonyms” (White, 2008, p.6).

Since the early 1970s, research on independent learning has featured strongly in the literature on ESL teaching and learning. However, understandings of independent learning have shifted considerably over the years. As Little (2007) points out, early ideas of learner autonomy in the 1980s were mainly understood in relation to adult learners, self-access materials and areas and “learners doing things on their own” (p.14). Then, in the 1990s, as the idea of learner autonomy or independent learning gained recognition in both language classrooms and in the ESL literature, this understanding shifted as “learner autonomy now seemed to be a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves” (Little, 2007, p.14). At this time, the concept of learner autonomy was dominated by the notion of the independent learner as an active participant in making decisions about their learning, including decisions regarding curriculum and learning outcomes (Little, 2007).

Cotterall (2000) also comments that in this period, independence “dealt principally with the theoretical background of learner autonomy, and the role played by learner variables such as attitude, beliefs, strategies, and roles” (p.109).

At the end of the twentieth century, independent learning was often understood in relation to the independent learner in the classroom, but more recent concepts of independent learning have shifted again to acknowledge the learning opportunities available in the world beyond the classroom (Benson, 2016). This shift is largely in response to the influence that globalisation and technology have had on the way we understand independent learning in the 21st century (Illés, 2012). In recognition of the ubiquity and accessibility of the internet, computers and mobile devices, and the increasing numbers of learners who are digitally literate, Benson (2013) has suggested that we need to reconsider what it now means to be an independent learner. Similarly, Lai *et al.* (2016) have argued that it should be a “core educational goal” to “support students to become autonomous learners who actively utilise technologies to construct personalized learning spaces and experiences” (pp.703-704).

It would appear that our understanding of independent learning is influenced by many factors, including the changing and diverse needs of the ESL students and the world which they inhabit. However, while there have been shifts in ideas about independent learning, and no doubt will continue to be, there are common themes, such as the focus on the individual, their capacity to learn independently and the idea of choice (White, 2008). Benson’s (2013) definition of independent learning as having “a capacity to control important aspects of one’s language” (p.839) is still useful, as long as we acknowledge that this broad definition encompasses diverse learners, learner needs and learning environments. The question for educators interested in supporting their students to become independent learners may first be to investigate what independent learning means in their unique learning environment.

It may also be of interest to educators to question the value of independent learning. In recent studies, the widespread assumption that independent learning will automatically lead to language

proficiency has been disputed (Illés, 2012). Both within the ESL context and educational psychology, there is strong argument that if independent learning is to be effective, appropriate independent learning skills need to be learned, and therefore taught. Thus, it may fall under the “remit” of teachers and educational institutions to support their students to be independent learners (Illés, 2012, p.508). White (2008) notes that for independent learning to be effective, the students need to possess not only the necessary motivation or “disposition” to learn, but also the “ability” (p.5). Therefore, if educators are interested in empowering their students to be independent learners, we need to consider our students’ attitudes towards independent learning, as well as their ability to set it up.

The question of what practical measures can be put into place to teach effective independent learners remains. In the ESL context, Illés (2012) argues that autonomy should be an “integral part of language learning and language use” (p.510) and that teachers can teach their students to be independent by activating their capacity for real-life problem solving. To do this, she suggests activities such as the teaching of literature, translation projects and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). In order to teach our students to be independent, White (2008) suggests that students need to be aware of their learning styles and “have the necessary procedural skills to set up optimal learning conditions” (p.13). There would appear to be a clear recognition in the literature that students may require practical input from their teachers and educational institutions on how to set up their own independent learning and there is a call for further research into how they may be able to provide such practical support.

Within the field of educational psychology, Ericsson’s concept of ‘deliberate practice’ (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993) may provide some insights into how to support our students to learn independently. Ericsson argues that there are certain conditions under which learning will thrive. The main conditions include: the role of the teacher to provide meaningful student feedback, the students’ motivation, willingness and ability to assert effortful practice, and the effective design of learning tasks which build on prior knowledge

(Ericsson *et al.*, 1993). For educators, Ericsson's research on the conditions which support effective learning may provide us with both a practical and theoretical framework to assist our students in developing their own independent learning skills.

Language learning resources have also featured strongly in the ESL literature on independent language learning. However, as Illés (2012) points out, since the advent of the internet, the challenges facing both teachers and students in regard to selecting resources have changed dramatically. She comments that since the onset of computer-assisted technology in the 21st century, "the lack of exposure to the target language has been replaced with the problem of plenty" (p.506). Internet based resources such as websites, mobile phone applications and social media provide today's learners with information about the English language and an abundance of resources to practise it. Illés goes on to emphasise that these days, the challenge for both students and teachers is "not how to find materials but how to make informed choices about those materials" (p.506). To respond to both the opportunities and challenges that learning English in the 21st century presents, we will need to consider how to best support students in making these informed choices. Lai *et al.* (2016) reaffirm this position, arguing that students not only appreciate, but also expect teacher involvement in supporting them to navigate technological resources for autonomous language learning.

The focus of the current project was on the practical measures that could be put into place to support independent learning skills, but it also focused on the role of learner confidence in developing these skills. Linguistic self-confidence, considered a significant factor in student motivation and increasing proficiency (Noels, Pon, & Clément, 1996), is described by Clément (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998) as including two main attributes: perceived competence and a lack of anxiety, and this confidence is in part a result of "a series of reasonably pleasant L2 experiences" (p.548). The implications for teachers who would like to foster their learners' confidence may be to create a learning atmosphere which will both encourage students to gain language competence and teach them to

manage anxiety. For Academic English students who are intending to study at a tertiary level, there may also be a need to consider not only their linguistic confidence, but also their overall confidence in their ability to learn and study at a tertiary level in an English-speaking country.

In terms of both linguistic confidence and learner confidence in general, Ericsson's concept of 'deliberate practice' may be illuminating (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993). Ericsson believes that deliberate practice rests on the central premise that given the right conditions, attitude and resources anyone is capable of improvement in their chosen area. Drawing on Ericsson's research, Mercer (2012) argues that the way we view intelligence affects our attitudes to learning. She comments that we can view intelligence in two ways, either as "predetermined and unchangeable, a fixed mindset" or as "something that can grow and develop, a growth mindset" (p.22). Arguing for the latter, Mercer relates these ideas to language learning, dismissing the notion that good language learners have a natural gift for languages, encouraging both learners and teachers to believe in everybody's potential to learn and develop their abilities. An adoption of this attitude along with the practical measures suggested by Ericsson, by both teachers and students, may have a profound impact on learner confidence.

Key ideas in the literature provided insights into the role I could play in setting up the GESSS program to support students in gaining learner confidence and independent learning skills. For example, the literature suggests we need to contextualise our definition of independent learning so that it is relevant to the learners' needs and learning environment. It further suggests that it is the role of educators to support students in becoming independent learners, and this support may need to consider the students' attitudes towards, as well as their ability, to set up independent learning.

METHODOLOGY

Action research (AR) was an effective methodology to explore how I could improve my students' independent learning skills, including their learner confidence. At the beginning of this project, I was unclear

about what was useful to my students, and what attitudes they held towards their independent learning, the Learning Centre and GESSS. My teaching instincts and casual observations led me to believe that there were positive aspects to GESSS, but also that there were areas that could be improved. As Burns (2010) comments, AR “involves taking a self-reflexive, critical and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching context” (p.2). It provides a framework for a teacher-researcher to investigate their teaching practice and to make changes which are based on data and empirical evidence derived from the classroom. AR provided a means to assess the GESSS program, especially regarding independent learning skills and learner confidence, which was evidence-based, critical and relied on the students’ voices and participation.

In AR, the teacher-researcher explores an ‘issue’ or ‘situation’ (Burns, 2010) that has arisen in their classroom or learning environment. In this project, the issues discussed above led to the design of a central research question: ‘What activities and strategies can be set up to teach independent learning and learner confidence in GESSS?’ ‘Strategies’ refers to a range of structures and devices used in the GESSS program to support students to learn independently, for example the signposting of daily learning goals, signage on resources and how to access them, worksheets for students to record their learning activities and the structure of the sessions.

However, it should be noted that this question was somewhat problematic. Firstly, it assumes that independent learning and learner confidence can be taught, which is a contentious issue. However, as both concepts arguably play an important role in the success of our students, an investigation into how educators can best support our students in acquiring them is worthwhile. Secondly, the research question assumes that independent learning and learner confidence are two separate concepts, and that the AR project would investigate them equally. As the project unfolded, I reflected on the relationship between the two concepts and concluded that, in the context of this project, learner confidence is an attitude which complements, and perhaps is even integral to, independent learning and is not in fact a

separate concept. Consequently, I recognised that independent learning became the primary focus of this project, and learner confidence became a secondary, but intricately connected, interest. It should also be noted that this research question focused on the practical means (i.e., the activities and strategies) to develop independent learning skills as well as a confident attitude towards learning.

The AR process involves cycles of research that may include four phases: planning, action, observation and reflection, with the 'action' aspect manifesting itself in the interventions put in place by the teacher to explore their question. However, as Burns (2010) notes, the nature of the AR process does not always neatly follow in this succinct order. While there were significant changes and interventions throughout the course of the current project, these changes were often incremental, evolutionary rather than revolutionary, and in response to the cyclical, iterative nature of AR.

This project consisted of two cycles of research, the duration of the first cycle corresponding with one five-week term, and the duration of the second cycle corresponding with three five-week terms. Student permission was sought at the beginning of each cycle, with most students agreeing to participate. Students were predominantly from mainland China but there were also students from Saudi Arabia, Korea and Japan, and most students were between the ages of 18-24. A limited number of students had completed tertiary studies in their countries, but most had only completed secondary studies. Almost all students had the intention of studying at an Australian university on completion of their Academic English Program.

At the completion of this project, as part of the reflection stage of Cycle Two, data were collated and interpreted in response to the central research question; what activities and strategies could be set up to teach independent learning and learner confidence. Common themes emerging from the data relating to independent learning, the strategies in place to support independent learning, the use of activities and resources and learner confidence were then analysed.

This analysis will be considered in the Discussion section of this paper.

Data collection

AR involves the systematic collection of data (the 'observation' stage). In this project, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected in both cycles. This data included two peer observations by other teachers, one during Cycle One and one during Cycle Two, both of which were followed by discussions which were recorded and transcribed. The purpose of these teacher peer observations was to gain objective and constructive feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the GESSS program, especially in relation to the activities and strategies in place to support the students in developing independent study skills.

Data also included a student survey which focused on students' attitudes towards independent language learning and GESSS. The GE Learning Survey comprised five statements that students could respond to on a five-point Likert scale. It was given to all students at the beginning of each term of GESSS and an identical GE Exit Learning Survey was given to exiting GE3 students in each term of Cycle Two (see Appendix A). Two additional statements were added to the GE Exit Learning Survey in Term Three of Cycle Two (see Appendix B).

To further gauge student attitudes, three focus groups were conducted with exiting GE3 students in each term of Cycle Two. In all three focus groups students were asked similar questions to those in the Student Learning Surveys. In the Term Three focus group, the two additional questions added to the exit survey (see Appendix B) were asked. There were four students in the first focus group, five in the second focus group and ten in the third focus group. Group discussions were recorded and transcribed before analysis. Lastly, throughout this project, I kept a teaching journal to record my own observations on students' behaviour and the elements of the program which were successful and those which were problematic. Alongside this journal, photos were also taken of student activities, signage and the organisation of the learning space to provide a visual record of

the changes to the physical space including the signage and the resources students utilised in the Learning Centre. The journal and photos were beneficial when reflecting on the project, and planning for future cycles. At the end of Cycle Two, survey results were collated (see Appendix C).

ACTION RESEARCH CYCLES

Table 1 outlines the two cycles, their phases and key features.

TABLE 1
Summary of action research cycles

Cycle	Phase	Key features
Cycle One	Exploration Observation Reflection Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher peer observation
Cycle Two	Action Observation Planning Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher peer observation • Minor changes to the GESSS Program (minor intervention) • Major changes to the GESSS Program (major intervention) • Collation of results from GE3 exit group survey and focus groups • Interpretation of data

Cycle One: Initial exploration (observation, reflection & planning)

The first five-week cycle of this project was essentially an exploratory cycle dedicated to evaluating the current GESSS program and the strategies and activities which were set up to support the students' acquisition of independent learning skills. At this initial stage, there was no change or intervention but rather a focus on assessing the strengths and weaknesses in the program to plan accordingly for the next cycle. In this first cycle (one term of GESSS) there were 15 participants in the project: two students in GE1, eight students in GE2 and five students in GE3.

As this was an exploratory cycle, I followed the strategies and structures to support independent learning and the program which had been established in previous terms before the commencement of the project. The following describes the way the study sessions were structured.

As part of the GESSS program, every Thursday was dedicated to developing students' independent learning skills. These Thursdays were referred to as 'Your choice' Thursdays. On the first Thursday, I wrote up the skills/areas on the whiteboard (Listening, Reading, Grammar, Vocabulary and Writing) and asked students to choose an area they wanted to focus on improving this term. Students wrote their names under the skill/area they wanted to improve. In the Learning Centre, resources are divided into levels, and within those levels, they are divided into skills/areas. After students had identified the skill/area they wanted to improve, I took each group and introduced them to the relevant resources. For example, students who wanted to improve their reading were shown the GE Level reading resources and encouraged to borrow one of those resources. Alongside the resources in the Learning Centre, I also suggested links to English language websites and mobile applications. I provided advice on what resources would be appropriate for the students' particular level and interest. There were also posters for recommended resources, including resources in the Learning Centre and online. Students were encouraged to find their own resources and activities but most students chose the recommended resources. Students filled in a 'Your choice' Thursday worksheet to document their choices.

On the following Thursdays dedicated to independent learning, I put the skills/areas up on the whiteboard and the posters of recommended resources. Students, for the most part, came in on Thursdays and practised their activity. However, at times, students decided to change their area or skill, or did not want to do the activity because they had homework to finish. There was also a problem with attendance. Throughout this first cycle, I reflected on my own observations, and the literature I had begun reviewing on key ideas in independent learning and learner confidence to plan for further

cycles. The teacher peer observation undertaken was also significant in this reflection and planning stage, and is described below.

Cycle One: Teacher peer observation

As previously mentioned, as part of my data collection, I organised two teacher peer observations and did the first of these in the first cycle. The first teacher peer observation was done by a teacher who was experienced in teaching GE and who had also undertaken an AR project in the past. The teacher peer observation took place on the third Thursday of the cycle and the observing teacher was briefed on the project focus before being invited to watch a session. Afterwards we discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the activities and strategies to set up independent learning. The discussion was recorded and transcribed.

In the discussion following my teacher peer observation, my colleague showed surprise that the students were working independently and were clear about what they had to achieve in the session. She commented that the students displayed a mature approach to their learning. We discussed how the students had the opportunity to trouble-shoot practical problems such as setting up accounts and dealing with lost passwords. We reflected that the students who were attending were following the strategies and structures in place to guide them through the study session and had established a good study routine. They were working independently, but knew they could ask for assistance if required. However, we also discussed whether the students were developing a sense of ownership and confidence about choosing resources and setting their own learning goals. We reflected on attendance issues. We questioned if they recognised the importance of independent learning and study skills and if the students made the connection between developing these skills and their ability to manage and succeed in their future academic lives. These questions also prompted me to explore more deeply the conditions in which people most effectively learn. In this discussion I was encouraged to investigate educational psychology and Ericsson's concept of 'deliberate practice' (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993). The questions and considerations raised in this

discussion would be the catalyst for some of the changes made to the GESSS program in Cycle Two.

At the end of this first exploratory cycle, using the initial data collected from the peer observation and my teacher's journal and photos I reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of current strategies in place to encourage independent learning and learner confidence in the GESSS program. The main strength of the program appeared to be the effectiveness of daily structures and strategies to support independent learning, for example the signposting of daily learning goals on the whiteboard. Students also seemed to benefit from the physical space of the Learning Centre including the signage indicating how to access resources and the assistance provided by Learning Centre staff. While this was encouraging, I speculated on the importance of this set-up, perhaps especially for low-level learners, and concluded that the structures and strategies in place (for example, the signage, the signposting of daily goals, the instructions given), could be further clarified and improved to assist students in accessing their resources and managing their independent learning activities. Also, I concluded I could review and update the recommended online resources.

A weakness of the program seemed to be the lack of explicit teaching about the value of independent learning. I speculated that students needed to make the connection between developing their independent study skills and becoming more capable, efficient and confident learners.

These reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the program informed the planning of Cycle Two.

Cycle Two: Planning, Action, Observation, Reflection

Cycle Two consisted of three terms of GESSS and interwoven phases of planning, action and observation along with a considerable period of reflection. This lengthy cycle demonstrates the iterative nature of AR, where phases often occur concurrently. The changes or interventions made in this cycle were a result on reflections made at the end of Cycle One, and ongoing reflections made throughout Cycle Two.

In this second cycle there were 17 participants in the first term (two in GE1, five in GE2 and ten in GE3), 14 participants in the second term (one in GE1, seven students in GE2 and six students in GE3) and in the last term there were 14 participants (four students in GE1 and 10 students in GE3).

Term One: Action, Observation, Planning

At the beginning of the first term of this cycle, the Learning Centre began to run a 45-minute workshop on study skills, language acquisition and independent learning for all new students at all levels. I was involved in the development of this workshop, together with colleagues from the Learning Centre. As discussed, at the end of Cycle One, while recognising that the strategies and activities and resources in the program seemed to be supporting students to study independently, I questioned whether the students were making a connection between these activities and learning to be independent. As the aim of this workshop was to explicitly teach independent learning skills and to demonstrate the value in learning independently, I speculated that it may be one way to address the concerns that had risen at the end of Cycle One.

I adapted and taught the workshop to meet the specific needs of the GESSS cohort. This adaptation included modifying the language in the workshop to be suitable for lower level learners, and the practical exercises in the workshop were modified to lead into the set-up and to explain the purposes of 'Your choice' Thursdays.

The workshop was run on the first Thursday of the first term of GESSS. The workshop was based on a PowerPoint presentation which was highly visual and utilised practical exercises to guide students through concepts of time management, choosing good resources to study and where to seek assistance if they were struggling. The workshop ended with the students following the same structure of the study session as in Cycle One, where they identified a skill/area they wanted to improve this term and then filled in the 'Your choice' Thursday worksheet. However, due to time constraints, students did not choose an activity to practise their area/skill until the following Thursday.

On subsequent Thursdays, students were shown slides from the workshop to remind them of what they did in these Thursday workshops as well as why they were doing it. Also, in this cycle, I experimented with the physical space of GESSS by moving the desks into five bays with each bay dedicated to a skill/area. After noting at the end of Cycle One the importance of the physical space and signage, I ensured each bay had clear visual signage and relevant resources. I updated the recommended resources to include a listening website aimed at lower levels and encouraged students to also use this website at home.

It should be noted here that the introductory workshop was repeated in subsequent terms and has since become an integral part of the GESSS program.

In this first term of Cycle Two, the second teacher peer observation was also conducted. Again, the purpose of the teacher peer observation and following discussion was to gather objective feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the activities and strategies in place to support the students with their independent learning skills. The second peer observation is described below.

Cycle Two: Teacher peer observation

The second of my teacher peer observations was carried out on the third Thursday of this cycle by a teacher who was experienced in teaching GE. In the subsequent discussion, we talked about whether the activities should be more prescriptive, of which I could see the benefit. We also discussed the challenge of trying to monitor and give feedback to a group of students when everyone was doing different activities, yet we recognised the benefit of students being able to choose their own activities. We also talked about how it was useful for students to use their activities to extend what they were learning in class. One key comment made in the discussion was that it may be more useful for students to practise their chosen skill every day, and that especially for lower levels it may be 'more progressive and more consistent' for them. This observation, which resonated with Ericsson's concept of deliberate practice (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993), prompted a significant change in the GESSS program.

Term Two: Action, Observation

As a result of the discussion with my colleague, a change was made. The following term, instead of students taking one full hour on Thursdays to focus on their own skill/area of their choice, they spent the first twenty minutes of GESSS doing their skill and chosen activity and then they were given time to complete and check their homework.

In response to the literature and data I had collected so far, I attempted to provide more specific and targeted feedback and guidance to students. When selecting activities and resources to practice their chosen skill, students were encouraged to make a connection between their activity and their coursework or an area of their own personal interest and knowledge. For example, if a student chose to practice their writing, I asked them what topics they had been studying in class that week and suggested they write about this topic. Similarly, for students studying grammar, I suggested they do extended practice of the key grammar points learnt in class and for students studying listening I directed them to a sequence of audio files which were appropriate in level and similar in content/theme to those encountered in their coursework. The idea behind these choices was to help students consolidate and extend their learning and to provide guidance on activities and resources, without being overly prescriptive or teacher-centred.

Term Three: Reflection

In the last term of this cycle, there were no further changes made to the program as I focused on consolidating and assessing the changes I had made and collating and interpreting results. This process was aided by reviewing and reflecting on my teacher's journal and the numerous photographs taken throughout the previous terms. Again, the teacher's journal and photos aided in my reflection on my observations and the changes to the physical space of the Learning Centre.

At the beginning and end of each term in Cycle Two, students were surveyed and at the end of each term I held a focus group of exiting GE3 students and recorded the conversation. It should be

noted that in the last term of the cycle I added two statements to the exiting survey to gauge more accurately students' attitudes toward their skill acquisition and independent learning skills. The two additional statements were 'I improved in the skill I choose to practise this term' and 'I know how to continue to improve this skill'. The results of these surveys and focus groups are described below.

FINDINGS

Student attitudes

The first part of this section reports on the findings from the exiting GE3 student surveys, including responses to the two additional statements added to the exit survey in Term Three, Cycle Two. The second part of this section reports on the findings from the three exiting GE3 focus groups.

Exiting GE3 student surveys

In the reflection phase of Cycle Two, the surveys were collated. I divided the surveys into two groups; students who had finished GE3 after at least two terms of GESSS and students who had finished GE3 after only one term of GESSS. Therefore, participants who had not finished GE3 were not included in the survey results, nor were students who had not completed both the initial and exit surveys. Consequently, there were thirteen responses from the group who had completed two cycles of GESSS (Group One) and seven from the group who had completed one cycle (Group Two). Two additional questions added to the survey in the reflection phase of Cycle Two and there were ten responses to this.

TABLE 2
Survey responses from students who attended two or more terms of
GESSS (Group One)

<i>Initial Survey</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I like learning English	9	4			
I study outside of the classroom	5	4	3	1	
If I have problems with my study, I find resources or ask for help	7	4	2		
I am confident I can learn English	5	7	1		
I am confident I can use the Learning Centre	1	5	1	2	4

<i>Exit Survey</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I like learning English	9	4			
I study outside of the classroom	5	4	3	1	
If I have problems with my study, I find resources or ask for help	6	7			
I am confident I can learn English	6	7			
I am confident I can use the Learning Centre	6	7			

TABLE 3
Survey responses from students who attended one term of GESSS
(Group Two)

<i>Initial Survey</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I like learning English		4	2	1	
I study outside of the classroom		4	2	1	
If I have problems with my study, I find resources or ask for help	1	4	2		
I am confident I can learn English	1	5	1		
I am confident I can use the Learning Centre	1	3	2	1	

<i>Exit Survey</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I like learning English	3	4			
I study outside of the classroom	2	3	2		
If I have problems with my study, I find resources or ask for help	4	2	1		
I am confident I can learn English	3	3	1		
I am confident I can use the Learning Centre	3	4			

TABLE 4
Student responses to additional statements added to exit survey in
Term Three, Cycle Two

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I improved in the skill I chose to practise this term	4	6			
I know how to improve this skill	3	7			

In response to the first two statements on the survey, 'I like learning English' and 'I study outside of the classroom', there was no change in attitude in Group One: in both the initial and exiting surveys all participants indicated that they either agreed or strongly agreed. In Group Two there was an improvement in attitudes after one term. In response to the third statement 'If I have problems with my study, I find resources or ask for help' both groups showed a positive change in attitude and confidence and a similar pattern occurred in response to the statement 'I am confident I can learn English'. Interestingly, there was a strong change in attitudes in response to the statement 'I am confident I can use the Learning Centre' in the exit surveys with participants in both groups indicating that they either 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed'.

As mentioned in the Method section, in the reflection phase of my project I wanted to gauge accurately students' attitudes toward their skill acquisition and independent learning skills and to achieve this I added two more statements to the exit survey, as explained above. Participants indicated either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' to both statements. These responses suggest that students not only felt they had improved in their skill, but also, and perhaps more importantly in terms of their independent learning, they felt they knew how to continue to improve their skill.

Exiting GE3 focus groups

At the end of each term in Cycle Two, I conducted, recorded and later transcribed a focus group with the exiting GE3 class. These discussions were all approximately ten minutes in duration. The students at this stage had completed their General English course and were about to commence their first level of Academic English. All students had completed at least four weeks of GESSS. In these focus groups, I asked students to elaborate on the questions asked in the student surveys.

After the last cycle of my project, I re-read all three discussions to ascertain common attitudes and to gain insights into students' attitudes towards the GESSS program and their attitudes towards independent learning. Although many of the same questions were asked in each focus group, in the last focus group students were also asked how they felt towards the skill they had chosen. These questions were added as a response to my more direct focus and interest in how students felt about their 20-minute practice. In all discussions, there were students who were regular attendees, partial attendees and reluctant attendees to GESSS.

In the first series of questions, students were asked if they liked learning English, what they liked about it and why they were learning. Most of the students who participated in the focus groups even those who were reluctant attendees to GESSS, commented enthusiastically that they enjoyed learning English, and many of them expressed a particular interest and enjoyment in a particular skill, especially speaking, listening and writing. Perhaps not surprisingly given that the institution is a pathway provider to tertiary education, most of the students in the focus group indicated that they were learning English for study and "to get a good job". However, many students talked about the importance of English as an international language and said they wanted to learn English for travel and "the general life". One student commented that he liked English culture and that "speak English is very cool".

When I asked the students about studying outside of the classroom, responses were more varied. In retrospect, it may have been useful to clarify if students saw GESSS as 'outside' of the

classroom. Some students commented that they liked studying in GESSS because they “get help with the homework and their skills”. One student commented that he liked that in GESSS “you can tell me a website that is useful for my English”. However, many students told me that they did not attend GESSS because they were “tired”, indeed, being tired was the most common answer for students who were not regular attendees to GESSS. Interestingly, one student told me that she studied at home and did not want to come to GESSS because she liked to study alone at home.

Responses were quite similar across all three discussions groups in regard to what students do if they are having difficulty with their language learning. While most students indicated that they would ask their teacher or ask at GESSS, they also indicated that they would also ask their classmates, their friends, or “check on my phone”.

While there was some hesitation, most students were confident they would continue to improve their English, although one student commented that they thought their English would improve “slowly”. When I asked students if they were confident that they knew how to use the Learning Centre, they expressed greater confidence. One student replied “I can ask teacher and I can practise listening on the computer” while another student said he could “read a book, ask questions”.

In the last focus group, I asked how students felt about their daily 20-minute practice. Nearly all students felt they had improved in the skill they had chosen this cycle and they would continue with their 20-minute practice. One student commented: “Yeah, everyday writing something is good for my write”. Another student commented that she would prefer to practise for 30 minutes, but others commented that 20 minutes was “enough”.

Summary of findings

Overall, from the Exiting GE3 focus groups and the GE3 student survey results we can see that after at least one term of GESSS, there was a slight improvement in the number of students who engaged in independent learning or ‘studied outside of the classroom’. There was also a small improvement in the number of

students who indicated they were aware of how to seek resources and assistance to support their learning. There were more noticeable improvements in relation to the students' confidence in their ability to learn and to use the Learning Centre for their own study. Students also indicated that they felt they had improved the skill they had chosen to practice in GESSS and that they knew how to continue improving in this skill.

DISCUSSION

The central question of this project sought to investigate what activities and strategies could be set up in GESSS to foster independent learning and learner confidence. In the reflection phase, I analysed the collected data from both my own and peer observations, student surveys and focus groups to ascertain common themes across the data and to speculate on what insights I had regarding the central question. I also sought to position and further understand these ideas in relation to literature on independent learning, learner confidence and deliberate practice.

Based on this analysis, I would suggest there are five main areas which need to be discussed: a concept of independent learning which is relevant to the learning needs of this particular cohort; the importance of clear strategies and structures to support their independent learning; the role of educators to support students in navigating the activities and resources available; and the impact educators may have on students' learner confidence. It is also important to acknowledge the obstacles which may prevent these students from developing their independent learning skills.

Independent learning

Independent learning is the focus of much research and debate within the world of ESL and in the broader context of educational psychology. While ideas about independent learning have shifted over the years, common themes such as the focus of the individual, control, choice and capacity for independence persist. While for the students who were the focus of this project these themes are still relevant, there are some other issues which need to be considered. The many students studying Academic English in direct pathway

programs may have limited control or choice in relation to their language learning. For these students, the focal point of their learning is the classroom, and their learning activities and outcomes are often determined by the curriculum. Yet, their present and future academic success largely depends on their ability to consolidate and extend their learning independently. Therefore, the notion of independence is problematic.

For students studying in Academic English programs, Illés's (2012) concept of independent learners as having the "capacity to become competent speakers of the target language who are able to exploit the linguistic and other resources at their disposal effectively and creatively" (p.509) may prove more relevant, especially if we consider the wealth of resources they have access to in the classroom, the Learning Centre and online. We also need to acknowledge the fact that these students need to be competent writers, readers and listeners. On reflection, I would surmise that students studying Academic English Programs need to have the skills and confidence to set up independent learning strategies which enable them to consolidate and extend the classroom learning, take advantage of learning opportunities outside of the classroom and manage the challenges, large and small, that studying will present.

This paper argues that there is value in students developing independent learning skills including learner confidence. It also reaffirms the position that the development of independent learning skills may fall under the remit of educational institutions. This is a position which has been argued for by many theorists within ESL and educational psychology. Lai *et al.* (2016) argue that students benefit from teachers' instruction and recommendation on how to use technological resources for independent learning. On reflection at the end of this project, I would argue that programs such as GESSS run in Learning Centres are in a unique position to support such instruction and provide recommended resources, and to act as an intermediary space for students between the classroom and the world beyond.

Strategies

In regard to strategies, I reflected that if students had clear strategies and structures to follow in GESSS this would not only assist them in using the Learning Centre for their study, but it would also assist them in developing learner confidence, good study habits and study routines for their future academic lives. From my own observations recorded in my teacher's journal, and from the observations made in the teacher peer observation, the strategies which students appeared to find useful included the clear signposting of manageable daily learning goals (e.g., the completion of a 20-minute practice of their chosen skill), clear signage suggesting recommended resources, support in accessing answer keys and information on how to access learner support. It also included practical support in setting up computer accounts and assisting students in accessing online resources and mobile phone applications. The focus in this project on these strategies was largely in response to the recognition among theorists that students require both a favourable disposition and practical information to set up successful independent learning.

The data from this project would suggest that students benefitted from the strategies and structures in place in GESSS. In the discussion following my first teacher peer observation, there were positive comments from my colleague in regards to the students' good routines and their ability to access materials and resources independently. There was also recognition that GESSS 'was not class' and students were managing their learning independently. Feedback from student surveys and focus groups also demonstrated that students were generally confident in their ability to improve their English and to use the Learning Centre. These outcomes may suggest that students were acquiring the "procedural skills" that White (2008) suggests are important to set up "optimal learning conditions" (p.13).

Interestingly, Benson (2016) comments that for many ESL students, it is often small incidences, such as not knowing how to access information, which can be detrimental to a student's confidence and engagement with learning English. The results from this project may suggest that Learning Centres, and learning support

programs such as GESSS, can play a beneficial role in training students to manage such incidences.

Activities and resources

During this project, it was interesting to note that in all three of the GE3 exiting focus groups, students commented that when they are having difficulty with their language learning, they asked their teacher, asked at the Learning Centre or “check on my phone”. For these students, their mobile devices and the internet are part of their daily lives and a main source of information, including information on their language learning. As Benson (2013) comments with regards to digital literates, autonomous language learning “is more likely to be self-initiated and carried out without the intervention, or even knowledge, of language teachers” (p.840). I would not suggest that students finding information about English online is hugely problematic, but I would suggest that students both want and benefit from being recommended online resources and learning strategies to help them navigate online information. Several students commented that they liked coming to GESSS because they could find out about websites or mobile applications they could use to learn English.

Throughout this project, I observed that most students appreciated guidance and recommendations when choosing both an area/skill to improve, and the activities and resources to improve it. In GESSS, guidance and feedback was provided in various ways. Information from class teachers through feedback forms, emails or informal conversation often provided me and the student information on weak areas which should be targeted in GESSS. When it came to choosing an activity/resource to practise this skill/area, I noted that students usually selected one of the recommended resources, even though they were given the option to choose an activity or resource they had found themselves.

During this project, it also became evident that some students benefitted from using resources which helped them to consolidate and extend their class work. For example, one student had chosen Grammar for the skill/area they wanted to improve in GESSS. They had learnt past simple in class that week so as an activity in GESSS

they decided to review past simple forms using a mobile grammar application. Similarly, students who wanted to practise their writing often chose to write about topics covered in a recent class, for example, daily routines or travel. This allowed students not only to extend and consolidate their classroom work, but also to personalise the language. Students also appreciated being directed to resources which were appropriate to their English level. This, perhaps, is particularly useful for lower level students who may find many resources and materials overwhelming. For example, students who had chosen to improve their reading were shown reading resources which were appropriate to their level both in the Learning Centre and online. In addition to this, they were taught strategies to assess if a book was too difficult (or too easy) for them. The effectiveness of these strategies also reaffirms Ericsson *et al.*'s (1993) idea that activities and resources which learners engage with should "take into consideration the pre-existing knowledge of the students" (p.367) and that it is the role of the teacher to provide guidance on how "to organize the sequence of *appropriate* [my italics] training tasks" (p.367).

In terms of providing guidance on choosing resources, whether by a class teacher or learning support staff, it would appear that the guidance does not need to be extensive but it does need to be targeted to that particular learner. Targeted feedback may include not only the areas/skills the student needs to improve, but also information on where to find and how to assess appropriate resources to make real improvement. As Trinder (2017) points out in her study of university students learning English, many students wanted their teachers to recommend online resources to assist with their studies, and "thus validate materials for out of class use" (p.9). Providing recommendations on resources and meaningful feedback to students are two ways we can train and support our students to become confident independent learners.

Learner confidence

As previously acknowledged in this paper, as this project progressed, I considered the relationship between independent learning and learner confidence and would suggest that learner confidence is a

characteristic of a successful independent learner. Mercer's (2012) concept of a growth mindset and Ericsson's concept of deliberate practice (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993) previously discussed in the literature review are both based on the belief that intelligence is not innate and I would argue that students possessing this belief are more likely to possess a confident attitude towards their learning. However, whether these beliefs can be taught is debatable. I would suggest that as educators we may need to not only hold these beliefs ourselves, but also signpost them to our students. I would also suggest that by undertaking practical measures such as setting up clear learning strategies and structures providing strategic feedback and providing guidance relating to resources, educators may demystify the learning experience. This may potentially have a positive impact on our students' confidence. A learning environment with these characteristics may also create an ideal location whereby students may experience "a series of reasonably pleasant L2 experiences" (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998, p.548), which can lay the foundations for future linguistic self-confidence. This view can be supported by both the GE3 student survey results and the GE3 exiting focus group discussions which showed that students reported feeling more confident in their ability to improve their English and use the Learning Centre after completing one or more terms of GESSS. It is also suggested by the response from most of the students indicating they felt confident they knew how to improve their chosen skill.

Obstacles to independent learning

It is also important to note the limitations of the success of the GESSS program. Throughout this project, there were varying levels of attendance for the GESSS. In Term Two, 23% of GE students attended between 75%-100% of GESSS, while in Term Four 87% of GE students attended 75%-100% of GESSS. While student motivation is obviously a factor in attendance to GESSS and independent learning in general, the data from this project suggest there may be other issues to consider.

In the exiting GE3 focus groups, several students commented that the reason they had not attended GESSS was because they

were “tired”. Student fatigue is an issue which may be worthy of consideration by educators, researchers and institutions, perhaps especially for international students who are commonly undertaking extensive, and intensive, English language courses before starting their tertiary education. Interestingly, Ericsson *et al.* (1993) acknowledge the detrimental impact fatigue can have on a student’s ability to learn and suggest that students must limit practice to an amount from which they can recover on a daily or weekly basis. On reflection, I recognise that for many students the extra time commitment to attending a program such as GESSS may feel overwhelming. However, I also recognise that programs such as GESSS may help students to manage their learning and time management.

It is important to note that for some students, group study sessions in a Learning Centre may not suit their style of learning. In one of the exiting GE3 focus groups, one student, who was an engaged and motivated learner, commented that she did not attend GESSS because she preferred to study in her home and “alone”. As a sidenote, student attendance to GESSS was also affected by students needing to prioritise looking for accommodation or attending to health issues or pressing family matters.

There were various limitations to this project. Firstly, GESSS was only one of many factors which influenced the participants’ attitudes to learning, developing independent learning skills and their overall learner confidence. Also, there is the recognition that this was a localised study of a small group of participants over a relatively short period of time. There is also the consideration of the language level of the students: the implications of this study may not be relevant to students with a different level of English. Still, I would argue that the focus on strategies and activities to support independent learning including learner confidence may be relevant to other levels and disciplines. It is also important to note that the English language level of this cohort of students, and my inability to converse in any of the students’ first language, was an obvious limitation to eliciting full, complex and nuanced student responses.

Future research directions

As AR methodology lends itself to exploring the teacher's unique context and practices, it was an insightful means of investigating the GESSS program run in the Learning Centre. It allowed me to explore what strategies and activities could be set up to develop the independent learning skills of my particular cohort of learners in my teaching context. The methodology allowed me to explore key current ideas on independent learning, and relate them to my own teaching practice in practical and meaningful ways. This project has also sparked further questions: how could the program be further improved? What impact do programs such as GESSS have on learners' future academic lives and successes? Can the program be adapted to meet the needs of students of different levels of English or 'at risk' students? More broadly, this project highlights the need for further investigation in the ways that Learning Centres can practically support students in achieving learning outcomes and goals. As AR enables a rich dialogue between theory and practice, it would appear to be an effective methodology for potential further investigations.

CONCLUSION

In summation, this paper details a research effort which sought to develop independent learning including learner confidence in English language students in university pathway programs. It focused on an AR project based on a program (GESSS) run for General English students in the Learning Centre of a university English language institution. This paper reaffirms Illés's position that "autonomous learners have to be trained" (2012, p.506) and considers the practical set up of strategies, structures and activities to 'train' our learners. It also suggests the benefits of learning support programs such as GESSS and Learning Centres to develop students to be effective and confident independent learners. While this project focused on low-level learners, I would suggest that the ideas presented would be relevant to other levels. Additionally, while this project was run in a Learning Centre, the insights presented in this paper may be relevant to any educational professional interested in empowering their

students through the acquisition of sound independent learning skills. Furthermore, AR may be an appropriate methodology for future research on the role of independent learning and, more generally, on the role of Learning Centres and learning support to assist our students.

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APPENDIX A: GE SURVEY

GE LEARNING SURVEY

We want to know how you feel about your learning. Please answer the questions honestly.

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____



Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I like learning English					
I study outside of the classroom					
If I have problems with my study, I find resources or ask for help					
I am confident I can learn English					
I am confident I can use the Learning Centre					

Do you have any comments?

**APPENDIX B: GE SURVEY WITH ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS
ADDED IN TERM THREE, CYCLE TWO**

GE LEARNING SURVEY

We want to know how you feel about your learning. Please answer the questions honestly.

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____



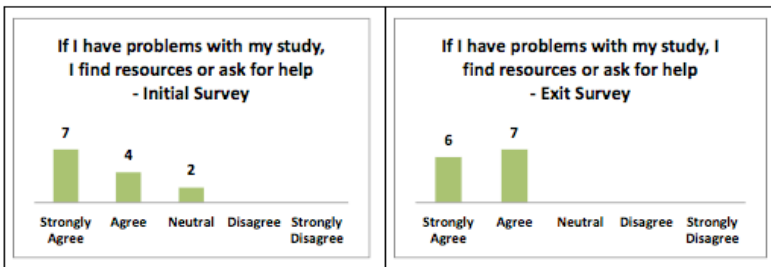
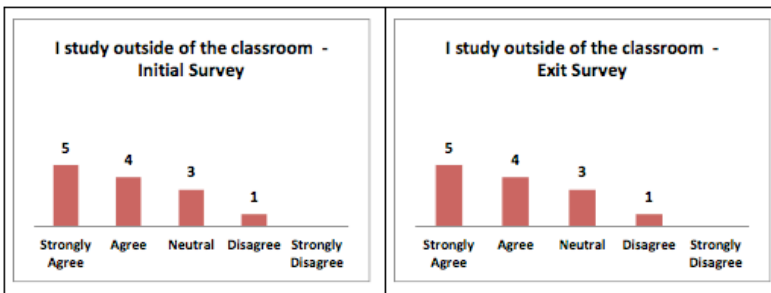
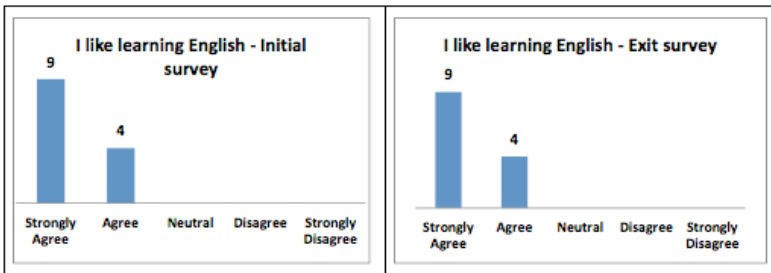
Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I like learning English					
I study outside of the classroom					
If I have problems with my study, I find resources or ask for help					
I am confident I can learn English					
I am confident I can use the Learning Centre					
I improved in the skill I choose to practise this term					
I know how to continue to improve this skill					

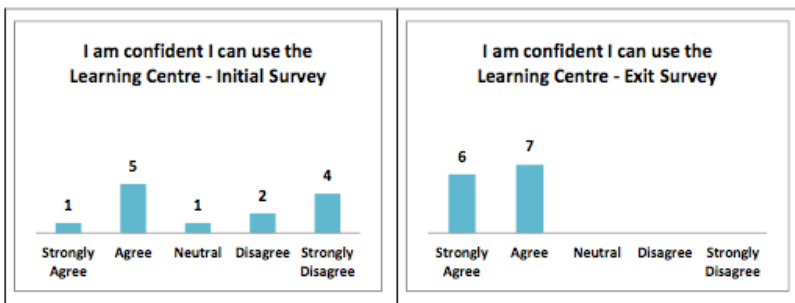
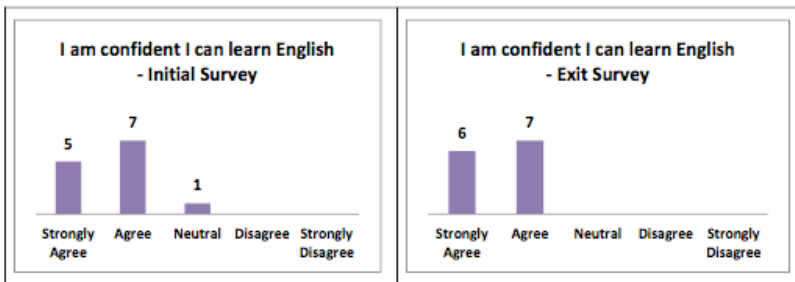
Do you have any comments?

APPENDIX C: SURVEY RESPONSES

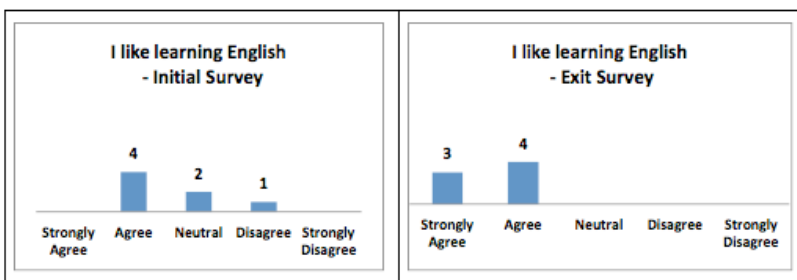
The following charts show the initial and exit responses from the GE3 students. The student responses are divided into two categories: students who had completed two or more terms of GESSS and students who completed one term of GESSS.

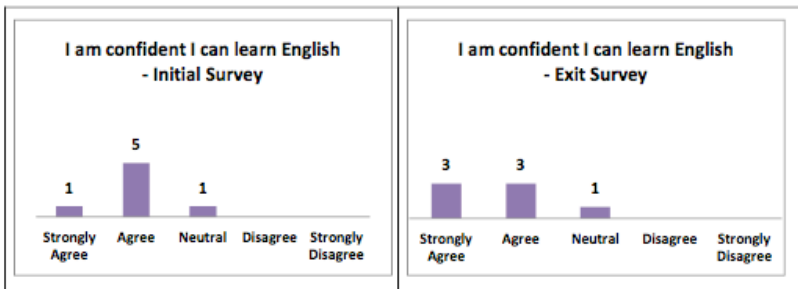
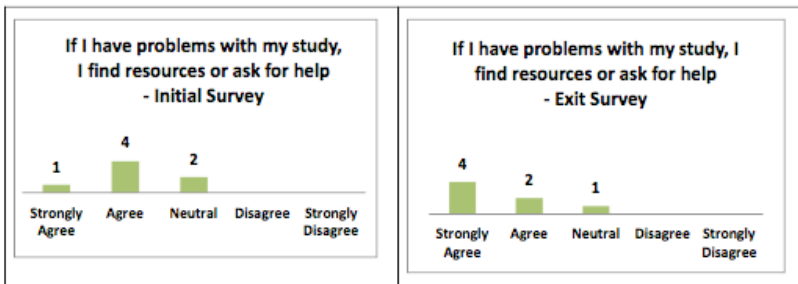
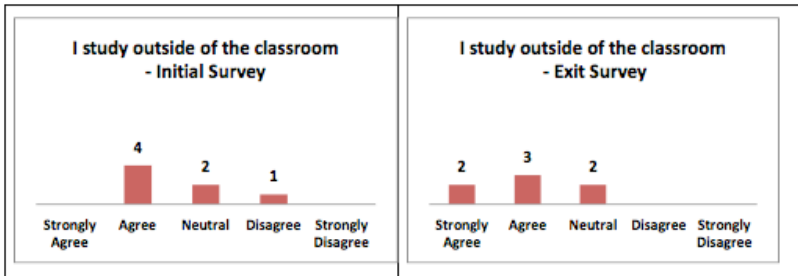
Students who attended two or more terms of GESSS

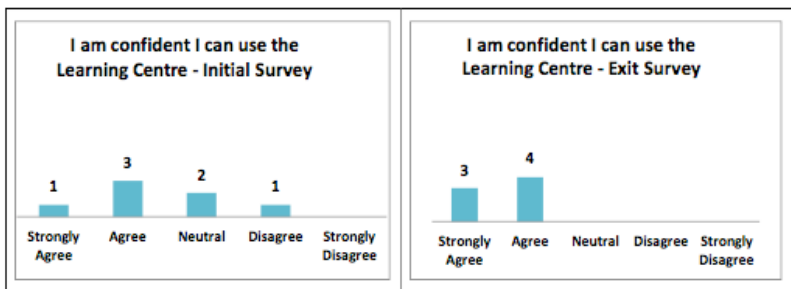




Students who attended one term of GESSS







Student responses to additional Term Three, Cycle Two statements

