

## LEARNER AUTONOMY AND THE EFFECTIVE USE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN L<sub>2</sub>

DR. STARS JASMINE

**Abstract:** Autonomy is the shifting of focus from teaching to learning when the students take stock of their own learning process and materials. Henri Holec(1981) in “Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning “defines ‘learner autonomy’ as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning”, noting that this ability “is not inborn but must be acquired either by ‘natural’ means or by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way”. To take charge of one’s learning is to take the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning. While taking an active approach of their own learning tasks, they are ready to take risks and construct their own learning. The learners’ use of the components of language learning strategies like the cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective strategies motivate them to be more proficient in the target language. This paper is an experiment in the classroom when the students took active roles of the language learning tasks with their peers, with the assistance of the teacher. The research helped to gather a variety of data, including learners’ language learning histories, a language beliefs questionnaire, a course evaluation questionnaire and finally the output of their language learning. All the data are qualitatively analysed with interesting findings. The learners displayed anxiety reduction, self-encouragement and self-evaluating of their own progress.

**Key Words:** Autonomy, cognitive, meta-cognitive, socio-affective strategies.

**Introduction:** The term ‘Autonomy’ in education is a buzz word in the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education all over the world. Education is changing fast and with the introduction of technology, education has changed the classroom, the materials and methods. Healey quotes McNair[1]who points out that ‘individuals enter higher education with very diverse levels of personal autonomy and many of the educational processes which they have experienced in the past have not encouraged it. He also goes on to say that if the same learning methods are followed in the higher education, there is a danger that individuals will become less autonomous. The goal of education is to make studentslifelong learners who in future will be able to acquire what they need on their own. There needs to be a paradigm shift from teaching to learning and the power of a teacher is transferred to the students. When students are exposed to a plethora of learning materials, it is time for the teacher-focussed transmission of information to the ‘student-centred learning’. The learner will be able find his or her own ways of learning. In the field of second language learning, L<sub>2</sub>, autonomy in learning the language seems to the most ambitious programme. The term ‘student autonomy’ is sometimes over emphasised or overused or sometimes misused. The other synonymous words used are flexible learning (Taylor 2000), experiential learning (Burnard 1999), self-directed learning, student- centred learning or independent learning. Some of the definitions given may solve the misunderstanding of the term ‘autonomy’.

**What is Autonomy:** According to Little [2]Learner Autonomy is the product of an interactive process in

which the teacher gradually enlarges the learners’ autonomy by gradually allowing them more control on the process and content of their learning. Littlewoods[3] defines an autonomous person as someone who“has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions”.According to Littlewoods[3] this ability depends on two factors: *ability* and *willingness*. Furthermore, both of these factors can be divided into two components. Littlewoodsstates that ‘ability’ consists of *knowledge* and *skills*, and ‘willingness’ consists of *motivation* and *confidence*.

According to Holec [4] the autonomous learner is able to determine goals, select appropriate tools and methods and follow and evaluate his/her own progress and that these skills are learnt gradually. Moreover, Holec [4] specified his definition by emphasizing that autonomy is indeed an ‘ability’, not ‘behaviour’. Holec [4]also mentions the difference between the concept of individualized teaching, which can be done in a strictly teacher orientated classroom as well, for example if the teacher creates individualized materials for all the learners, and autonomy which is moving away from the teacher orientated way of working.

The term ‘autonomy’ has come to be used in at least four ways: a) for situations in which learners study entirely on their own b) for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning c) for the exercise of learners’ responsibility for their own learning and d) for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning [5]

Psychologically, when learners are in charge of their own learning they will learn better because of the

cognitive, social and affective aspects involved in the learning process [6]. Autonomous learners are intrinsically motivated to take responsibility for their own learning and develop the skills for self-management. As a result, their learning is efficient and effective, which, in turn, nurtures their motivation

**Autonomous learning and Theories related to learner Autonomy:** This student- centered learning helps students to make a choice of what or how to study or why the topic may be interesting to them. As Lea et al [7] say, autonomous learning relies on active rather than passive learning with emphasis on learning with understanding. There is an increased sense of accountability and responsibility on the part of the student which increases the student- teacher relationship. We know from research on learning strategies that, in addition to generic metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies that learners follow, there are many individual ways of learning a language successfully and that different students will approach language learning differently. This study has some theoretical understandings and some of them identified are;

- Theories of Motivation
- Socio-Constructivist Theory
- Self-efficiency theory
- Social cognitive theory

According to Harmer "Motivation is a kind of an internal drive which pushes an individual to do something in order to achieve something." [8] Quoting Douglas Brown [8], Harmer points out that a cognitive view of motivation includes factors such as the need for exploration, activity, stimulation, new knowledge and ego enhancement. It is a 'state of cognitive arousal' which provokes a 'decision to act' as a result of which there is 'sustained intellectual and physical effort', so that the person can achieve some previously set goal.

Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others and it can be enhanced when the learner has an opportunity to interact and to collaborate with others on instructional tasks. Learning settings that allow for social interactions, and that respect diversity, encourage flexible thinking and social competence. In interactive and collaborative instructional contexts, individuals have an opportunity for perspective talking and reflective thinking that may lead to higher levels of cognitive, social, and moral development, as well as self-esteem. The Self-efficacy theory emphasized instructional programs that help learners set their own goals, acquire learning strategies, and observe successful peer models to enhance self-efficacy beliefs and intrinsic motivation. The role of 'cognitions' and 'self' are accompanied by the importance given to the

social nature of motivation. This 'social-cognitive theory' can assist teachers in establishing a climate that promotes motivation and develops adaptive motivation theories. Learner- centered learning is connected with cognitive theory which emphasises the generation of ideas in the head and the social constructivist theory which emphasises activities that students complete together.

In fostering self-direction, the emphasis is on creating an environment in which learners become increasingly adept at learning from each other and at helping each other learn in problem-solving groups. The educator functions as a facilitator and provocateur rather than as an authority on subject matter. The facilitator encourages learners to create norms that accept order, justice, and civility in the classroom and respect and responsibility for helping each other learn; to welcome diversity; to foster peer collaboration; and to provide equal opportunity for participation. The facilitator models the critically reflective role expected of learners. Ideally, the facilitator works herself out of the job of authority figure to become a co-learner by progressively transferring her leadership to the group as it becomes more self-directive.

Kumaravadivelu [9] says that one of the goals of education has always been to create autonomous individuals who are willing and able to think independently and act responsibly. The key terms used are;

- 'self-instruction' which refers to situations in which learners are working without the direct control of the teacher;
- 'self-direction' refers to situations in which learners accept responsibility for all the decisions concerned with learning but not necessarily for the implementation of those decisions;
- 'self-access learning' refers to situations in which learners make use of self-access teaching material or instructional technology that is made available to them;
- 'individualized' instruction refers to situations in which the learning process is adapted, either by the teacher or by the learner, to suit the specific characteristics of an individual learner.

**Language learning strategies:** During the course of learning, the students make use of learning strategies. Rebecca Oxford [10] has offered a taxonomy which offers a comprehensive system of learning strategies. Her system consists of six strategy groups, three direct and three indirect. Direct strategies are those that directly involve the target language. Indirect strategies are those that support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language. The strategies suggested by Oxford are learner-centered, that is, they represent actions taken by learners to maximize their learning

potential. They have also provided us with useful insights into what learners need to know and can do to plan and regulate their learning. The following figure shows the micro strategies that are associated with the direct and indirect strategies.

**Direct Strategies:**

- i) Memory Strategies
  - A. Creating mental linkages
  - B. Applying images and sources
  - C. Reviewing well
  - D. Employing action
- ii) Cognitive Strategies
  - A. Practicing
  - B. Receiving and sending messages
  - C. Analysing and reasoning
  - D. Creating structure for input and output
- iii) Compensation
  - A. Guessing intelligently
  - B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing

**Indirect Strategies:**

- i) Metacognitive
  - A. Canter your learning strategies
  - B. Arranging and planning your learning
  - C. Evaluating your learning
- ii) Affective Strategies
  - A. Lowering your anxiety
  - B. Encouraging yourself
  - C. Taking your emotional temperature
- iii) Social Strategies
  - A. Asking questions
  - B. Cooperating with others
  - C. Empathizing with others

**Present Study:** In view of the powerful influence of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies on the motivation to learn, an experiment was conducted in the first year undergraduate class of the technical students. Looking at the scores in their school leaving examination, one may be misled to say the students show high motivation. An informal talk with the students revealed that their motivation has been very low. Moreover the class was very large which hindered teacher's assistance for students with personal or academic problems. The experiment was conducted to investigate;

- Whether the students were intrinsically motivated

- Whether they possessed self-efficiency and self-determination to achieve the goal
- Whether cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies were in use while language learning

**Methodology:** An undergraduate engineering class was selected to experiment with cultivating learner autonomy in the students. The sample to be used are the first year undergraduate engineering students belonging to the department of Agriculture containing 13 students, Geo Informatics 16 students and Mechanical 26 totalling 55. These students were grouped based on their choice as two and three which came around 23 groups. The activities were chosen consciously in order to fit in the syllabus of the curriculum. The purpose of the study was to help learners enhance the language skills autonomously, apply learning strategies like cognitive and metacognitive and social strategies and improve their higher order skills which are essential for the students' career and life.

The research was conducted in five steps; i) administering a pre-questionnaire ii) learners were introduced to the learning materials iii) learners worked with the materials and created the tasks iv) learners presented the learning in class v) evaluation by self, peers and teacher.

A pre-questionnaire was given to the students to find out the learners about learner autonomy. The responses of the students were evaluated. Items 1.1 to 1.9 were on language acquisition. It was found that 95% of students had understood the language learning goals, 2.1 to 2.6 were about the use of L1 in acquiring L2 and 77% of the students said that they could use the strategy. 2.6 to 2.18 were on using language learning strategies and 73% of the learners were aware of the learning strategies but had not used them. About the language learning styles, 69.5% students wished to be autonomous learners, 18% said that pair work and group works develop interest among students in learning through autonomy. Since the experiment requires pair/group work, the students were asked to give their opinion on pair and group work. A small percentage of students, 12.5% still depended on the teacher centred conventional classroom.

Table 1: Analysis of the Pre-questionnaire on learner autonomy.

Class: BE			Total number of students: 55 Date:			
Items	No. of learners who agree (average)	Percentage	No. of learners who disagree (average)	Percentage	No. of learners who are not sure (average)	Percentage
1.1 to 1.9	52	95%	0	0	3	5%
2.1 to 2.5	42	77%	10	18%	3	5%

2.6 to 2.18	40	73%	8	14.5%	7	12.5%
3.1 to 3.13	38	69.5%	10	18%	7	12.5%
Total	172		28		20	

After the analysis of the questionnaire, the researcher moved into the task of developing activities and exercises based on the students' interest which was found from the questionnaire. The activities were designed based on the learner autonomy for language skills which also involves the use of cognition and strategies throughout the activity.

**Autonomous language learning materials:** Kumaravadivelu [9] introduces the interrelated GAME plan for introducing autonomous learning materials.

G- Goals, general as well as specific goals

A -Activities, the type of activities to realise the goal

M-Materials, selection of appropriate materials

E- Evaluation, method of assessing desired language outcome

Six self-directed learner activity materials were designed based on the goals of learning and learner autonomy respectively. These activities were i) Working with movies ii) Dealing with short story, iii) Conducting Survey iv) Reading and preparing newspaper articles v) Preparing Job application and conducting mock interview and vi) Games –all of which focus on the autonomous language learning skills. A two week time period was given to all groups to identify and select their material. During the course of the preparation, they had informal chats and discussions with the facilitator. The students had to complete the following logs and charts while doing the activities. i) Learner Log ii) Think-Pair-Share Chart iii) K-W-L chart and K-W-L-E Chart and iv) How Do I Learn questionnaire.

**Table 2: Learner Log**

Language: Level:

Type of Activity	Date	I completed this task	I needed assistance to complete task	I still need to work on this task	What I would do differently next time to improve

**Table 3: Think-Pair -Share Chart**

My Name: Partner's Name: Date:

Question or Issue to Discuss	My Opinions	My Partner's Opinions	Points to Report or Share with Larger Audience
<i>Short story</i>			
<i>Selection of Topic</i>	<i>Existing Story</i>	<i>Create a story</i>	<i>Created story</i>

**Table:4K-W-L chart**

Language Learner's Name:Date:

What I know	What I want to know	What I have learned

**Table:5K-W-L-E chart**

Language Learner's Name: Date:

What I Know	What I want to know	What I have learned	Evidence that shows How I have learned it

'K' stands for 'Know' that means "What do I already know about this topic?"

'W' stands for 'Will' which insists on "What do I think I will learn about this topic?" and "What do I want to

know about this topic?" 'L' stands for 'Learned' means that "What have I learned about this topic?" 'E' stands for 'Evidence' which means "How can I show what I have learned about this topic?"

Through "How do I Learn?", students tried to identify what they had learnt through all these fields

like i) Organizing work space (ii) Learning vocabulary (iii) Acquiring grammar structure iv) Improving pronunciation v) Developing Listening vi) Reading for understanding vii) Editing and proof reading the learners' own writing viii) Communicating in the target language ix) Recognizing the unique circumstances of language learning. The students were asked to rate this learning in a four point scale; frequently -4, sometimes 3, seldom-2 and never-1.

This was also used as the post questionnaire. Majority students used the language learning strategies consciously. This was evident from the number of students who selected 'frequently' and 'sometimes'. Around 63% of the students used the learning strategies frequently and 21% used them sometimes. Only a small percentage of students 10% and 6% either seldom or never used the strategies.

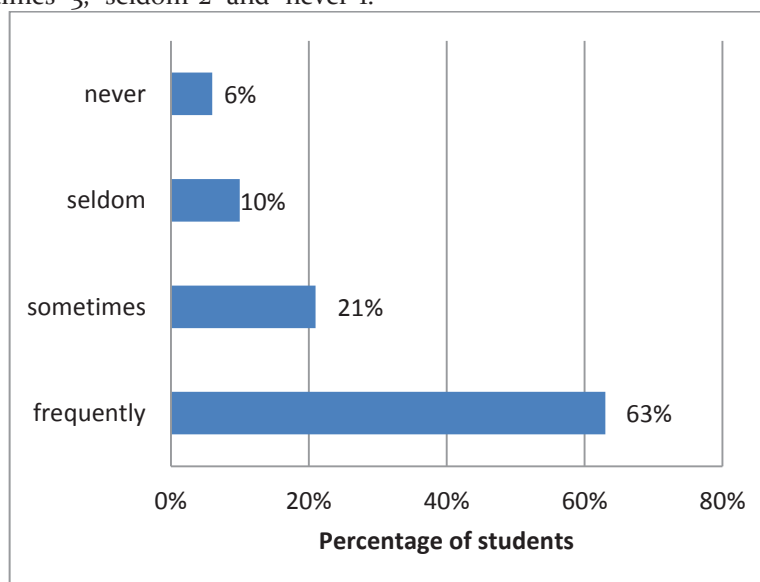


Figure 1: Language learning Strategies in "How do I learn?"

**The language learning Process and Assessment:** This whole process of learning was adapted from Nunan's [11] procedure for moving learners along the continuum from dependence to autonomy which consists of the following steps.

1. Awareness: Raising learners' awareness of the pedagogical goals of the materials used. Learners identified the strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identified their own preferred learning styles/strategies. They shared their experience of learning with their group mates or went to them for assistance.
2. Involvement: Learners were involved in selecting their own goals from a list of alternatives given. Learners made choices among a range of options. The choice of the materials was based on the group members' interests.
3. Intervention: Learners took part in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the programme. Time was spent with the facilitator to discuss on the materials, the tasks that had to be designed and that led to the learners adapting some of the tasks.
4. Creation: Learners created their own goals and objectives. Learners created their own tasks. The learners made presentations in the class which formed the basis for the assessment process.

5. Transcendence: Learners went beyond the classroom and made links between what they learnt in class and the outside world. The groups that conducted surveys on social issues did not stop with class presentations but went beyond to include outside people to make documentaries. Learners become teachers and researchers.

Implementing learner autonomy in a classroom is a challenging process. It is a gradual and guided introduction of autonomy over pedagogic choices related to the aims, outcomes, tasks, and materials of learning and teaching. The process is completed in three stages. i) The initial stage of autonomy, when the students are made aware of the teacher's choice of goals, tasks, and materials, ii) the intermediary stage, when the learners are allowed to choose from a range of options given by the teacher, iii) the advanced stage, the learner works with the determination of achieving the goals, tasks, and materials. At the end of the two week period, the groups were made to present their tasks in the class. According to Boud [12] all assessments including self-assessment comprises of two main elements - making decisions about the standards of performance expected and then making judgments about the quality of the performance in relation to these standards. When self-assessment was introduced, students were asked to assess their performance in



relation to the standards. Manichander [13] quotes Andrade & Du definition, "Self-assessment is a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on and evaluate the quality of their work and their learning, judge the degree to which they reflect explicitly stated goals or criteria, identify strengths and weaknesses in their work, and revise accordingly". "Peer assessment requires students to provide either feedback or grades (or both) to their peers on a product or a performance, based on the criteria of excellence for that product or event which students may have been involved in determining" [14]

Peer and self-assessment give some control and responsibility to the learners, an increased sense of autonomy in the learner as noted by Lea et al definition of student-centered learning. To what extent might this framework guide the way learner autonomy is promoted in the area of assessment is shown when the following assessment process of Brown et al [15] was adapted. The learning materials being a part of the curriculum, the assessment grades were made part of the formative assessment.

**Table 6: Assessment process and student-centered learning:**

Involving students at the stage when the task is set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choosing the assessment task</li> <li>• Setting the task</li> <li>• Discussion of assessment criteria</li> <li>• Setting the assessment criteria</li> </ul>
Involving the students after the task is completed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making self-assessment comments</li> <li>• Peer assessment feedback comments</li> <li>• Suggesting self- assessment grades</li> <li>• Assigning self-assessment grades</li> <li>• Assigning peer assessment grades</li> </ul>

[15]

All self-learning materials were evaluated based on an evaluation sheet. The outcome skills were assessed and grades were given by an outside evaluator, the teacher, the peer group and the self-evaluated

response of the portfolios was taken for the evaluation of the results considering it as the evidence of the self-reflection by the students.

**Table 7 :Sample of Evaluation Sheet for Short Story**

Student Activity	What to do	Skills Required	Outcome/Skills acquired/grades
Story Selection/ Read	Select a short story of your own interest (preferably from English Literature or Science fiction/Detective/Adventure stories).	Choice of the story selection/ Reading	Reading
Poster Making	Create an advertisement and posters of your own to support your drama.	Creativity	Creative thinking
Enacting the Scene	Enact the drama depending on your creative skill (you can alter the story a little to suit your context and message you are trying to convey) with properties (props), music, Costume and so on.	Creativity, Speaking, Acting, Listening.	Speaking and Listening
Script Writing	Submit the drama (with dialogues) which you are enacting.	Formal/Informal Writing Skill, Creativity, grammar, Vocabulary.	Writing/ Grammar/ choice of words

Kumaravadivelu [9] divides the field of autonomy into two approaches; narrow and broad. By 'narrow' he means approaches that focus on the pedagogical side of autonomy, as in approaches that focus on helping learners to learn, for instance through different learning strategies. With 'broad' approaches he

means that considering autonomy, it should liberate and empower people. The above learning processes not only enhanced language learning but also empowered them to acquire skills of creativity, problem solving and critical thinking. Even though the students' attitudes did not change immediately,

the result was astonishing. Having had a say in planning the activities, led to active involvement during lessons.

**Benefits of promoting learner autonomy in classroom:** As advocated by learning to learn approach of the scholars like Little (1990) and Wenden (1991), autonomy in learning helped learners to

- develop a capacity for critical thinking, decision making, and independent action;
- discover their learning potential of gathering knowledge and using it;
- take responsibility for their learning and for using appropriate strategies to achieve their goals
- understand their strengths and weaknesses and how to overcome failures and fears;
- develop self-control and self-discipline, which lead to self-esteem and self-confidence;
- overcome dependence on teacher led instructions, instead moved beyond to take individual efforts;
- realise that autonomy is a 'complex process of interacting with one's self, the teacher, the task, and the educational environment'.

The learners using the information now available on learning strategies and learning materials can monitor their learning process and maximize their learning potential. Teachers and peers can help the learners to identify their abilities, strengths and weaknesses as language learners. Learners can achieve this by filling in the learner logs and strategy inventories which would help them to consciously develop or use the learning strategies. The students then by evaluating their language performance can see how well they have achieved their learning objective(s). This can be achieved by monitoring language learning progress through journal or portfolio writings, sharing their learning in class with the peers in addition to taking regular class tests. The library resources and the electronic media such as the Internet can assist learners in this process of autonomous learning.

#### 1.0 Aims:

- 1.1 I want to improve my listening
- 1.2 I want to improve my speaking skills
- 1.3 I want to be able to read well and read fast
- 1.4 I want to be able to write well
- 1.5 I want to improve my critical thinking
- 1.6 I want to improve my grammar
- 1.7 I want to increase my vocabulary
- 1.8 I want to learn to pronounce words correctly
- 1.9 I want to be able to participate in class discussions

#### 2.0 Strategies:

- 2.1 I know how to read well in my first language
- 2.2 I know how to write well in my first language
- 2.3 I use my first language knowledge to learn the second
- 2.4 I compare the grammar rules of the languages I know
- 2.5 I use what I already know to learn something new

The students seek their teachers' intervention to get adequate feedback on areas of difficulty and to solve problems. This can be done through dialogues and conversations in and outside the class. Working in small groups provides opportunities to collaborate and work with other learners to share ideas and information on a specific project they are working on. The group can share the responsibilities of collecting materials from reference books, internet and personal survey that will enable them to communicate with competent speakers of the language. Collectively, these activities can contribute to at least two beneficial results. Learners gain a sense of responsibility for aiding their own learning and that of their peers. They also develop a degree of sensitivity and understanding toward other learners who may be more or less proficient than they are.

The activities that the learners are involved in are aimed at making the learners aware of learning strategies and at training them to use those strategies effectively. Wenden [16] considers the learners to be "successful" or "experts" or "intelligent": "They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous." It can also be claimed that it is an ideal system which had allowed the learner to take as much responsibility for his or her own learning as he or she wishes to, and which had made provisions for lifelong learning.

**Pre-questionnaire** taken from Kumaravadivelu.B(2001)

Name: Class: Date:

Note: This is not a test. This is a survey to seek your opinion about yourself. This survey will help me understand what you expect to learn in this class, and what you normally like to do in order to learn. Please read the following statements carefully and circle **1 if you agree, 2 if you disagree, or 3 if you are not sure:**

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|---|---|---|
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2.6	When I read, I focus on pictures, subtitles, and key words	1	2	3
2.7	I think about grammar rules when I speak and write	1	2	3
2.8	I associate new information with images and pictures	1	2	3
2.9	I monitor and judge my progress in language learning	1	2	3
2.10	When I read, I use a dictionary to understand new words	1	2	3
2.11	I think about strategies that will help me learn better	1	2	3
2.12	I identify the problems that slow down my progress	1	2	3
2.13	I use the library, the Internet, and other sources to learn	1	2	3
2.14	I seek out conversation partners to improve my skills	1	2	3
2.15	I do not like to make mistakes when I speak or write	1	2	3
2.16	When I read, I try to guess the meaning of new words	1	2	3
2.17	I like to find out grammar rules myself	1	2	3
2.18	I don't think I can evaluate my own learning	1	2	3
<b>3.0 Styles:</b>				
3.1	I like working with a partner in class	1	2	3
3.2	I participate actively in whole-class discussions	1	2	3
3.3	I like to work on topics and themes that I select	1	2	3
3.4	I learn best when my teachers explain grammar rules	1	2	3
3.5	I think I do better when I work alone	1	2	3
3.6	I like to learn from my teachers, not from my classmates	1	2	3
3.7	I hesitate to participate because I fear I'll make mistakes	1	2	3
3.8	I share with my class interesting readings from the Internet	1	2	3
3.9	I think working in a small group is a waste of time	1	2	3
3.10	I feel frustrated when I work with classmates	1	2	3
3.11	I participate actively in a small group	1	2	3
3.12	I read newspapers daily to increase my vocabulary	1	2	3
3.13	I don't like telling my teachers what to do in class	1	2	3

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Dr. Stars Jasmine, Department of English, Anna University, India