

Methods and materials for motivation and learner autonomy

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ABSTRACT

Motivation is the key to success in learning. First year students at Nanyang Business School, Singapore, started their English Proficiency course stigmatized as poor in language skills and demotivated in their study of English. The previous methods (grammar-based, teacher-centered, and with the emphasis on the final exam) and materials (standardized American textbooks written for ESL students) were revised to promote motivation and autonomy. The methodology was changed to utilize cooperative learning, learner choice, reflection and more active classroom and outside activities. Teaching materials were revised into a new textbook that used locally relevant texts and topics pertinent to Business and Accountancy students. Results of questionnaires from four cohorts of students showed positive responses to the changes. These questionnaires were also reflective exercises that folded into the theoretical concepts of increasing motivation. A noticeable disconnect between the goals of students (better writing and speaking skills) and a preferred strategy (reading) points toward a need to overtly teach learner strategies in order to make students feel successful and thus empower them. The ultimate goal is for students to take control of their own learning to become autonomous learners.

Introduction

A meta-analysis of motivation studies has pointed to motivation as the key to success in learning a foreign or second language (Gardner, 1990; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). First language acquisition seems easy and painless, but for many, the road to acquisition of the second language means hours spent in a classroom environment learning a complex topic; and that is seldom easy. Especially for those who are trying to master material not for its own sake, but as means to another end such as conducting business in a second language, English proficiency courses can seem a burden.

Teachers and students may find themselves locked in a duel, endlessly preparing for tests, stuck in outmoded paradigms of teacher/student roles and looking for relevance in materials not suited for achieving the expected outcomes. It is not that students want to be demotivated, but they may simply want to hurry the process so they can get on with what they perceive as important, not the study of language. In cases such as this, action research can be a partial solution. By cooperatively discovering the perceptions and feelings of both students and teachers and using acknowledged positive aspects to choose methods and materials, including assessment, the quest for motivation can be a rewarding

experience for all. Through a process of exploring ideas and then planning, collecting and analyzing data and reflecting on what that means for a group of students, teacher-researchers can intervene (Burns, 1999). But because each situation, each combination of time, place, students and teachers can vary, there are no 'right' answers to the question of how to motivate students. Perhaps the closest answer is to have teachers who are: open and flexible enough, armed with the tools they need to find out what their students need and want, and willing and able to embrace change.

Background

The English Proficiency (EP) course for first year Nanyang Business School (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) students is a course seen by most as a class for 'failures'. Students who do not do well in college entrance exams and who fail a Qualifying English Test are required to take EP for at least one semester. Those who cannot pass the course take a second semester. Because of administrative work, the first semester is 22 classroom hours, spread out over a 14 week semester; the second semester is 24 hours. The directive from the business school is to improve grammar and writing skills so as to meet the standards expected of NBS students. In the first semester, about half of the students are Singaporeans and the remainder are mostly Asian, usually of Chinese ancestry. In the second semester, the proportion of international students is much higher, over 70%.

Because the course is of such a short duration with heavy expectations, encouraging students to become autonomous, independent learners is crucial to the success of improvement beyond the EP classroom. Students need to be highly motivated, not only to come to class and engage with the material, but also to retain and apply the knowledge and skills acquired. Previously the course depended heavily on a punitive 'pass the exam' model as a primary motivating factor. Although Singaporean and other Asian students can be motivated this way, it was not a motivational tool that spelled success beyond the classroom.

In 2003 the course was redesigned and in July 2004 was further modified using more active methods and relevant materials specifically designed to engage students intellectually and emotionally. Feedback from students in the 2003 cohort was sought and used for modifications for the 2004 cohort.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part discusses motivation and its central role in pedagogy. Concepts about learner autonomy, learning strategies and the role of the teacher in motivation are also explored. The second part describes the previous and present methods and materials and the logic for the change. The third part is a discussion of the results of the student questionnaires, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Finally, limitations and implications for further action research are discussed.

Motivation

Motivating students is seen by teachers as one of the most serious sources of difficulty (Dornyei, 2001) in the classroom. Students' motivation depends on a variety of factors, among them how they perceive their own achievement (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Another factor relates to materials and what tasks they do in and out of the classroom. Other factors include: how autonomous students feel and how important it is to be autonomous; classroom methodology, especially fun and engaging methods; students' relationship to the classroom group as well as to the society at large; how they view their teacher and power relationships with the educational institution; and their own anxiety, especially in classroom activities such as speaking and test taking. Another factor is the culture the student brings to the classroom. In Jin and Cortazzi's (1998) analysis of the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) students from China, they show how the relationship of the teacher's culture to the students' culture can affect motivation.

Although motivation is a difficult construct to isolate from other factors, in a meta-analysis of 75 motivation studies, Masgoret and Gardner (2003, p. 205) concluded that "motivation is more highly related to second language achievement" than other factors. The more the student sees him or herself as doing well, the more he or she wants to do even better. Perceptions of failure demotivate. Tasks and materials are motivating factors for these demotivated students in order for them to see their progress (Cheah, 2003) and so presenting quality activities can "make an enormous difference in students' attitudes toward learning" (Dornyei, 2003, p. 14).

In the present situation at NBS, the students do not need basic ESL, but "in Singapore... there is a need to train students in the communicative system in the different disciplines they are studying" (Ho, 2003, p. 400). Business topics and genres are motivating factors for Business School students. However, Nunan (1997) points out that materials writing needs to be driven by theoretical considerations such as motivation and cultural appropriateness. Materials and methods choices should depend on the motivating value of the tasks chosen. Examples of this are: students creating materials for others to read, oral fluency tasks that are based on students' own interests not the teacher's, and comprehensible grammatical explanations in a communicative context that learners see as promoting their own autonomy (Brown, 2001).

Learner autonomy is a goal seen as linked to motivation (Garcia & Pintrich, 1996; Brown, 2001; Dornyei, 2001), to materials selection (Nunan, 1997; Tomlinson, 1998) and task motivation (Farrell & Lee, 2003). The goal of language teaching is to get students to become "legitimate *producers* of language within social groups both inside and outside the classroom" (Hall & Beggs, 1998, p. 37), which points to the primacy of autonomy. Autonomy was found to be "more closely related to motivational factors than to performance and... seem(s) to foster intrinsic goal orientation, task value, and self-efficacy, all of which are critical components of 'continuing motivation'" (Garcia & Pintrich, 1996 p. 477). However, there is a school of thought that argues that learner autonomy is a Western concept, not necessarily wanted or needed by Asian students (Pennycook,

1997; Sinclair, 1997). However, in the current context of Business students in Singapore, there seems to be no question that students must exercise learner autonomy, as defined in the broad sense of 'going it alone' in the academic and business world. Their world of 'business', a decidedly Western one, may be at odds at times with their world at 'home' in a culture that does not always value autonomy. But their motivation to join the 'autonomous-valuing' Western world of business almost always wins out, as success in academia and business demands autonomy.

Creating learner autonomy within the individual relies heavily on individual self-motivation. Bandura's (1977) notion of self-efficacy, a person's belief in their own capabilities, has been expanded greatly (Cotterall, 1999a, 1999b; Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003) to include learning strategies for self-motivation, such as "allowing students to create finished products that they can perform or display...and...taking stock from time to time of their general progress" (Dornyei, 2001, p. 136). Individual motivation has also been linked to the social context (Dornyei, 2001; Noels, 2003). Students learn better within a classroom setting that is intimately connected with their fellow students (Smith, 2001; 2003; Noels, 2003) and teacher. Collaboration (Adamson, 2004) and communicative language teaching have been shown to motivate students. Crandall (1999) has consistently maintained that cooperative learning reduces anxiety and increases self-confidence and motivation and has been compared unfavorably to competitive or individualistic structures of learning (Dornyei, 2001).

Both teachers and students have said that the teacher is the main focal point in the classroom for motivation or demotivation (Noels, Clement & Pelletier, 1999; Dornyei, 2001). Teachers, concluded Tomlinson & Masuhara (2004), set the classroom climate by promoting positive attitudes and the self-esteem of students and the emotional involvement of all parties in a shared endeavor. Teachers also enhance motivation by providing structural formats such as setting groups (Yang, 1998), carefully choosing content (Tomlinson, 1998; Brown, 2001; Ehrman, Leaver & Oxford, 2003) and by initiating, but not totally controlling, activities such as group discussions (Brown, 2001).

Teachers are also seen as vitally important in fostering self-direction and autonomy (Breen & Mann, 1997) and as needing to provide models and goals for students (Nunan, 1997). In a 1998 survey by Dornyei (2001), the single most negative influence that leads to student demotivation points to factors related to the teacher. The second most negative was reduced self-confidence related to a classroom event that was related to teachers' actions or inactions. Performance anxiety (Ehrman et al., 2003) has also been shown to be related to teachers and their effect on demotivation.

All of the above discussion topics are called into question by critical theories and the idea of cultural differences in the definition and need for learner autonomy, motivation and the role of the teacher (Sinclair, 1997). Cultural imperialism as a theoretical concept can be applied not only to administrative and policy decisions (Pennycook, 1997) but also to materials design and the structure of classroom time (Littejohn, 1998). Developing effective materials for different learners has been identified as a particularly useful line of research

(Tomlinson, 1998) and this must surely include different cultural orientations to learning (Nunan, 1997; Wachob, 2000, 2004a; Benson, Chik & Lim, 2003). An example of these cultural differences is the differing cultural contexts of motivation (Noels, Pelletier, Clement & Vallerand, 2000). For example, in Iyengar and Lepper's (1999) study, Anglo-American children were more motivated when they controlled choices, whereas Asian-American children were more motivated by allowing trusted authority figures or peers to make choices for them. However, viewing culture as monolithic and all-encompassing denies "the development of autonomy [that] forms part of the sociocultural process of second language learning for many Asian learners" (Benson et al., 2003, p. 24).

While a Western version of autonomy in the ESL classroom, learner-centered and based on the development of communicative skills (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998), may be applied to other culturally specific locations successfully (Ho & Crookdall, 1995; Gao, Li & Li, 2002), there remains the question of the motivation of a language teacher/materials developer in imposing autonomy on students, "Thus, while accepting the partiality of all autonomies, our goal as language educators becomes an attempt to teach language in a way that opens up cultural alternatives for our students, that allows them to become authors of at least part of their worlds" (Pennycook, 1997, p. 49).

In summary, students' language skills cannot be improved without engagement and motivation is seen as the critical element for success in improvement of students' engagement in the classroom and beyond. Students need to develop learner autonomy in order to succeed in the course, later classes and in future jobs. Self-motivation is individualistic but is fostered through mastering learning strategies, most specifically in a cooperative setting. Teachers' attitudes can enhance or inhibit autonomy and motivation. Finally, educators must not forget the culture of students nor ethical considerations of their profession to encourage and eventually allow students to take control of their own learning.

Materials and Methods

Materials selection cannot be divorced from the methods with which they are used. In this section, the previous materials (used before the changes brought about in the study) are described, and then the revised materials are presented with examples and explanations of the decisions about why they were chosen. The previous methodology of teaching and assessment is described and then the changes to the course, along with the justification for change, are explained.

Teaching materials for Asia

English language teaching materials, even for Asia, are still the domain of British and American publishers. Nunan (1997) identified this as a kind of cultural imperialism that persists, and so choosing a textbook for the appropriate level and target teaching goals is not easy. The textbook previously used (Wingerksy, Boerner, & Huguin-Balogh, 2003) was so big (472 pages) and heavy that many

students neglected to bring it to class. The content was aimed at an American immigrant population or the American 'underclass' that has failed to learn Standard English. Topics for writing relied on things such as Halloween, American football or other topics not relevant to Singaporean students. One example in an exercise on prepositional phrases included, "Seven inches of new snow fell on the ski run during the night" (Wingerksy et al., 2003, p. 64). Although students may know all the words in this sentence, this experience is alien to Southeast Asian students. Metric measurements are the norm and it never snows in Singapore; artificial snow is made indoors by an ice-making machine. The exercise contained similar references to American national parks, sports and quintessential American things such as "fortune cookies" (p. 46).

A new textbook was written by the author of this article for this specific group of business students. It was small (B5 size) and slender (110 pages) and the grammar was limited and targeted for the frequently misused items by Singaporean students. Asian names were often used and virtually all the text was adapted or specifically written for these Business and Accountancy students. Business topics such as business ethics, sales letters, and marketing exercises were used to give students more familiarity. For example, a passage on the delights of a seaside city, San Francisco, was changed to Singapore and familiar tourist attractions were mentioned. The writing genres common to business such as emails, letters, memos and reports were used as examples instead of traditional expository essays. The new textbook was user-friendly, locally situated and targeted business topics. This was done to enhance interest and thus be more motivating for the students.

Previous traditional teaching methods

The previous methods were heavily dependent on a grammar intensive course that used a heavily weighted traditional final exam for assessment. The course (2002 and before) consisted of a series of grammar exercises of the 'fill in the blank' and 'rewrite the sentence' model. Writing was done to a traditional formula of topic sentence, body and conclusion. The basic genre taught was the essay with variations on organization such as classification, comparison and contrast, process, argumentation and so forth. A series of in-class writing assignments and a mark for the portfolios comprised the 30% continuous assessment mark. The final exam was a two-and-one-half-hour formal exam worth 70% of the final grade. It consisted of grammar questions, a summary and an essay. In the classroom, students sat in traditional desks in rows or in a U-shaped formation centered on the teacher. Activities were centered on teacher-directed whole-class activities such as correcting grammar exercises. Communicative language teaching was downplayed in favor of knowledge transfer. (See Table 1 for assessment criteria.)

These methods were based on a Confucian Heritage Cultural (CHC) orientation to classroom concepts. In CHC, the teacher is of paramount importance in the classroom. As there is only one right answer, the idea is to guess the answer the teacher expects. The exam is paramount, a concept inherited from the Imperial Exam system of China. Concepts of saving face and group

Table 1

Assessment criteria

Academic Year	Continuous Assessment: Writing	Continuous Assessment: Speaking	Continuous Assessment: Subtotal	Final Exam
2002/3	Assessment Task #1 10% Assessment Task #2 10% Portfolio 10%		30%	70%
2003/4	Assessment Task #1 10% Assessment Task #2 10% Portfolio 5%	Speaking Participation 5% Speaking Assessment 10%	40%	60%
2004/5	Portfolio 30% Writing Task (in-class) 10%	Speaking and Class Participation 20% Speaking Assessment 10%	70%	30%

cohesion mean students hesitate to volunteer any answers for fear of being wrong and they often look to the group to validate any response. Finally, the concept of effort having more importance than ability means that students feel demoralized and demotivated by failure. Failure means that they have 'not tried hard enough' and they have failed their parents, fellow students, teachers and themselves (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Wachob, 2000, 2004a).

Changed teaching methods tied to motivation

The changed methodology was based on what makes students learn—motivation (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). Affective engagement was seen as essential; students need to like the class environment, their fellow students, the teacher and the materials. Understanding and catering to different learning styles was accomplished by providing different kinds of activities for different kinds of learners. Learners' needs were addressed whenever possible as the learner was seen as the central point of the classroom, not the teacher. Extra time and effort were allotted to activities that students said they needed more time for or more work on such as particular grammar points. As the course was too short to teach and practice everything the students needed to master, motivation for autonomous learning was promoted. Students were encouraged to use learning strategies practiced in class with other activities outside that would promote language learning and skills enhancement.

Readings and speaking activities for writing prompts were used as a way of integrating activities and arousing interest in students. Activities that were physically active, that required students to stand, move their seats, desk or change groups were organized in order to keep students motivated and interacting with fellow students. By using small groups (3-5), each student had more chances to

speak in a safe environment. Requiring students to discuss in small groups meant that they also needed to practice listening and negotiating skills and take responsibility for outcomes.

Grammar exercises as cooperative learning

An example of this new methodology was the traditional grammar exercise as group work. The material chosen was not a traditional 'fill-in-the-blank' kind but 'find and correct the errors' type, similar to the assignments they were expected to produce for their portfolio (see the following section on portfolios). The exercise was handed to students as they arrived in class or assigned from the textbook. Students worked alone on the assignment for a short period of time, then got into their assigned groups to discuss. This discussion centered on the answers to the exercise. Some students corrected errors that were not errors, other students overlooked errors. The group was given the task to complete the exercise to the best of their combined ability. Disagreements were frequent and students were encouraged to 'argue' for their position by referring to the grammar examples in the textbook or other handouts. Students who were more knowledgeable about grammar or who understood the concepts better took the role of 'teacher', explaining the rules or ideas to the other students who did not yet understand. 'Teacher' students consolidated their knowledge; 'learner' students could ask 'stupid' questions without losing face. When each group felt they had completed the exercise as best they could, the answer sheet was provided, one for each group. This way, students were forced to continue to communicate and negotiate with their group. At the end of the exercise, each group was encouraged to tally up the correct and incorrect answers for a self-assessment of understanding and ability to use the grammar points raised. No formal assessment was done. Then each group reported on the grammar points they missed or found difficult. This was followed by a whole class discussion on these difficult points. The answers that were 'correct' were not discussed. This was an opportunity to clarify variations in answers due to context, connotation, British/American spelling and grammar usage or individual preferences for different usages, for example in article use. Grammar exercises are generally seen as a solitary activity, but this method turned the activity into a lively, interactive one. Frequent heated discussions led to bonding with classmates, increased listening skills and honing of argumentation and persuasion skills, things very important to business students. It was also a good method of teaching grammar (see research findings below).

Teamwork

Team activities, or cooperative learning, were the main method of organization for the course. Teams were formed at the beginning of the semester and most activities were done within these teams. Teachers were responsible for making sure teams were diverse and that all members contributed. A reading and class discussion about how and why teams are used in the business world (Wachob, 2004b) was a foundation for working in teams. One team activity that required a long-term commitment was a marketing activity that lasted

approximately seven weeks. Students started with a reading about marketing, then discussed why they chose a particular product, in this particular case, shampoo. They then did a homework project of finding various brands in the market. The next class was devoted to designing their own products which they subsequently presented orally to their 'project manager' (teacher) and the other teams. Then students constructed and carried out a simple market survey to see what their intended audience thought of the product. They wrote to the project manager via a short report explaining the results of the survey and how they planned to revise their product. The entire project wrapped up with a radio or TV advertisement for the new product. Some activities were done in class, others as homework; most were done in teams, some done alone. The continual interaction means that students learned how to depend on their teammates, make communal decisions and claim ownership of the success or failure of their teams' production. The topic was geared towards business, but did not require extensive technical knowledge. By using cooperative learning, students were able to connect with fellow students, utilize various learning strategies, motivate each other and learn better.

Reflective activities

Another change in methodology was extensive use of reflective questions and activities that allowed students opportunities for individual review of work, such as portfolios. Reflection as a learning strategy was built into the course. For example, reflective questions were common after many activities such as the grammar exercise type described above. After students did the exercise and checked their answers, they were asked to reflect on what they understood or did not, and what they found easy or difficult. This was used as a prompt for group and whole class review. Pre- and post- course questionnaires also asked students to report on their ideas of what was important, easy and difficult, what plans they had and later, whether they carried through with their plans. These questionnaires (see discussions below of the research findings) were meant as a learning strategy of reflective practice in order to promote self-efficacy and learner autonomy. Teachers were responsible for handing out and collecting the questionnaires and urged students to complete them, pointing out the importance to the students for reflection and for research purposes, so that teachers could revise the course to better suit future students.

Another form of individual reflection was the use of portfolios. Portfolios were used by Yang (2003) as a way for each student to reflect and map their progress throughout the course. Eight portfolio assignments were required and the completed portfolio, handed in at the end of the course, accounted for 30% of the final grade. The portfolio was not only judged by the quality of work, but also by completeness, timeliness and attention to rewriting or correcting work. Therefore, low level students could attain a higher mark for their portfolio for their progress in the course and not simply on their final achievement level. Portfolio assignments emphasized personal events, opinions or ideas in order to give students more choice. Motivation was the goal of this methodology. In-class peer reviews of portfolio assignments were used to help students get feedback

from peers in a safe environment and to promote self-confidence. Students were instructed to give honest but encouraging comments to fellow students, building rapport and practicing 'teacher' and 'student' roles as they did for the grammar exercises.

Continuous assessment was emphasized in order to encourage students to persist and set goals for improvement. The final exam was deemphasized by making it only 30% of the total mark in an attempt to make use of the backwash effect. As the goal of the course was to encourage students to improve their communication skills, a punitive method of assessment was seen as unnecessary, in fact, demotivating. Students needed to feel empowered by their experience in the course. By promoting choice, self-confidence and autonomy, it was hoped that students were able to access different models of learning.

The research findings

The research for this project was carried out over a two-year span from August 2003 to April 2005. Most of the changes described above were made starting with the July 2004 academic year. Each semester, all students taking the course were given a pre-course questionnaire during the first or second week of class, and a post-course questionnaire at the end. The students were divided into four cohorts, 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, and 2.2. Cohorts 1.2 and 2.2 failed the course during the first semester and so were repeating the course. These groups of students were substantially different from the average students in cohorts 1.1 and 2.1. See Table 2 for the date of each questionnaire and the number of respondents.

The questions asked in the questionnaires were of two types. The first type was a reflective type of question designed to make students think about their own plans, hopes and evaluations of strengths and weaknesses. The second type of question was evaluative of the course, the students' progress and for the cohorts 2.1 and 2.2, an evaluation of the new course book and the new grammar codes and self-analysis system respectively. The questions varied over time, so the tabulated results do not reflect a consistency in questions. (See Appendix A for questionnaires.)

The questionnaires were handed out and collected by tutors during a regular class period. In order to complete Questionnaire 2, the first questionnaire was

Table 2
Cohorts

Cohort	Date	Number
1.1 Questionnaire 1	Aug 2003	171
1.1 Questionnaire 2	Oct 2003	162
1.2 Questionnaire 1	Jan 2004	26
1.2 Questionnaire 2	Mar 2004	23
2.1 Questionnaire 1	Aug 2004	188
2.1 Questionnaire 2	Oct 2004	164
2.2 Questionnaire 1	Jan 2005	53
2.2 Questionnaire 2	Mar 2005	50

returned to them (hence the requirement for the name), so the students could refer to their pre-course questionnaire. Questions 1 and 3 for Cohort 1.1 and Questions 1 and 2 for cohort 2.1 referred to the original questionnaire about what they hoped to gain from the class and learning strategies. Questionnaires for Cohorts 1.2 and 2.2 were different as these students were ones who had failed the course. The questions were meant to be reflective types of questions in order for students to benchmark themselves at the beginning of the semester. Note that Question 4 (Cohorts 1.2 and 2.2 Questionnaire 1) has the first goal as 'Pass the course' already filled in. This is to acknowledge that virtually all of the students wanted to attain this goal as a primary objective. Not only did it mean that they did not have to repeat the course again, but it would be a validation that they had reached an important goal set by the university–English Proficiency.

Questionnaires 2 for Cohorts 2.1 and 2.2 had an additional page to evaluate a new textbook (Cohort 2.1) and a new grammar code and self-analysis profile (Cohort 2.2) (see Appendix B) instituted for that semester. The questions gave the students something to reflect on as well as giving the teacher/researcher valuable feedback on the new methods and materials.

Goals and Strategies

For Cohorts 1.1 and 2.1, two important questions, both for personal reflective purposes and for the purpose of this on-going action research project, were numbers 2 and 3 of questionnaire 1. "What do you hope to gain from this class?" and "What learning strategies do you plan to use?" (See Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6 for results.)

In Tables 3 and 4 it can be seen that the students of both cohorts hoped to improve writing and speaking. Also note the importance students placed on communication in general and a gain in confidence. Cohort 2.1 introduced a new category of speaking skills, presentation skills. Also notable is the number of students who said they wanted to read better, only 3 in each cohort. However, by looking at the learning strategies chosen to improve these skills, we see that Cohort 1.1 planned to read (50.2%) as the most important learning strategy. Only 21% said they would write, but 56.6% hoped to improve their writing. There is a similar disparity with wanting to speak better (47.4%) and actually

Table 3

Cohort 1.1 Questionnaire No. 1: What do you hope to gain from this class?

Number	Gain	Number of students	Percentage
1	Improve writing	98	56.6%
2	Improve speaking	82	47.4%
3	Improve communication	75	43.3%
4	Gain confidence	21	12.1%
5	Make more friends	7	4%
6	Gain knowledge or ideas	7	4%
7	Pass exam	5	2.9%
8	Read better	3	2.1%

Table 4

Cohort 2.1 Questionnaire No. 1: What do you hope to gain from this class?

Number	Gain	Number of students	Percentage
1	Improve writing	94	50%
2	Improve speaking	65	34.5%
3	Gain proficiency	58	30.9%
4	Improve communication	38	20.2%
5	Gain confidence	32	17%
6	Develop presentation skills	30	16%
7	Improve grammar	28	14.9%
8	Gain knowledge or ideas	10	5.3%
9	Increase vocabulary	9	4.8%
10	Make more friends	7	3.7%
14	Read better	3	1.9%

Table 5

Cohort 1.1 Questionnaire One: What learning strategies do you plan to use?

Number	Strategy	Number of students	Percentage
1	Read	86	50.2%
2	Speak more	45	26.3%
3	Write	36	21%
4	Listen	31	18.1%
5	Do the assignments	30	17.5%
6	Work in groups	24	14%
7	Practice	18	10.5%

Table 6

Cohort 2.1 Questionnaire One: What learning strategies do you plan to use?

Number	Strategy	Number of students	Percentage
1	Speaking	126	67%
2	Taking notes	48	25.5%
3	Reading	47	25%
4	Writing	40	21.3%
5	Word lists/vocabulary	23	12.2%
6	Practicing	21	11.2%
7	Interacting classmates	19	10.1%

planning to speak (26.3%). Cohort 2.1, on the other hand, planned to speak as their preferred learning strategy. This is more in line with their goals of improving speaking (34.5%) and developing presentation skills (16%). Also, the number of students who chose reading as a strategy decreased considerably (25%). However, there is still a gap between the goal of improved writing (50%) with a strategy choice of writing (21.3%).

Cooperative Learning

As the course used cooperative learning extensively, it was important that students learned how to work in groups and leverage on the various strengths of the members of their team. The question, "How important are your fellow students in helping you?" was meant as a prompt for reflective thought about how they would improve their language skills by interacting with their fellow students. See Tables 7 and 8.

The question was worded slightly differently. For Cohort 1.1, it was an open question, but Cohort 2.1 was provided with a five point scale. However, there does seem to be a shift in the perception of the students about the importance of interaction. In Cohort 1.1, among the students who indicated fellow students were not at all important, were these two observations. "Frankly, I do not think they can help me much, as I think learning English is a rather individual task." Another student wrote, "English is all about reading and practice."

Table 7

Cohort 1.1 Questionnaire 1: How important are your fellow students?

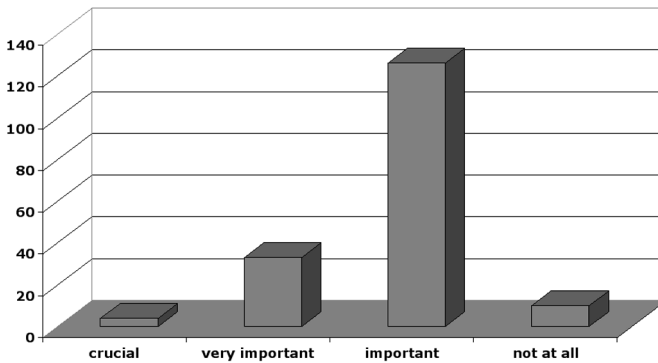
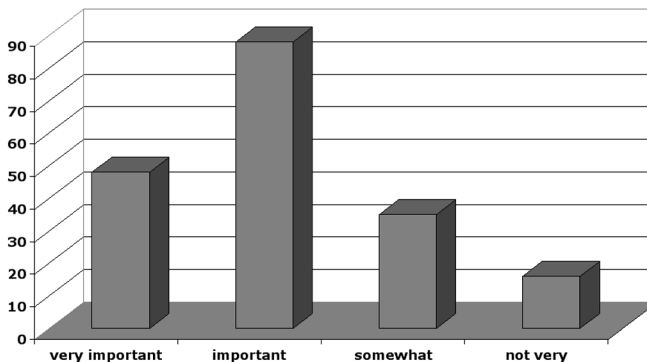


Table 8

Cohort 2.1 Questionnaire 1: How important are your fellow students?



Evaluation of activities

The post-course questionnaire for all four cohorts asked the question, "What was the most useful part of the course?" By answering this question, students reflected on what they had learned, skills they had acquired or gained proficiency in and how class activities contributed to this. As can be seen in Tables 9, 10, 11 and 12, the portfolio and in-class discussions were consistently judged important by all cohorts. This corresponds to their hopes for gaining improvement in their writing and speaking, as can be seen from the first questionnaire. A significant shift took place as grammar exercises gained in usefulness to become the most useful activity for Cohort 2.2. The methodology of grammar exercises as described above was gradually introduced starting with Cohort 1.2 and only realized fully with Cohort 2.1.

Table 9

Cohort 1.1 Questionnaire 2: What was the most useful part of the course?

Number	Activity	Number of students	Percentage
1	Portfolio	58	36%
2	In-class discussions	50	30.9%
3	Debate	34	21%
4	Grammar exercises	31	19.1%
5	Speaking/presentations	16	9.9%
6	Peer review	13	8%
7	Writing	7	4.3%

Table 10

Cohort 1.2 Questionnaire 2: What was the most useful part of the course?

Number	Activity	Number of students	Percentage
1	In-class discussion	10	43.5%
2	Portfolio	7	30.4%
3	Grammar Exercises	6	26%
4	Writing	2	8.7%
5	Debate	1	4.3%

Table 11

Cohort 2.1 Questionnaire 1: What was the most useful part of the course?

Number	Activity	Number of students	Percentage
1	Portfolio	72	43.6%
2	Grammar exercises	49	29.7%
3	In-class discussions	39	23.6%
4	Debate	22	13.3%
5	Peer review	16	9.9%
6	Writing	6	3.6%
7	Presentations	2	1.2%

Table 12

Cohort 2.2 Questionnaire 2: What was the most useful part of the course?

Number	Activity	Number of students	Percentage
1	Grammar exercises	19	38.9%
2	Portfolio	18	36.7%
3	In-class discussions	11	22.4
4	Peer review	5	10%
5	Debate	3	6%
6	Marketing exercise	2	4%
7	Presentations	2	4%

Motivation and self-efficacy

The importance of motivation for second language achievement has been shown. The question, "How important do you think motivation is for learning a subject" was asked of Cohort 1.1 and 2.1 as a way to reflect on this crucial element. Understanding the connection is a first step in self-efficacy. As can be seen in Tables 13 and 14, students recognized that motivation is important, but in general did not embrace it as crucial. However, some students gave the question some thought and wrote insightful answers. "Students are like wheelbarrows. They only go as far as you push them. However, if you motivate/inspire them, they go on forever." "If there is no motivation, there is no attention." "It will keep you on the right path." "Without motivation, a student can pass. With motivation, a student can score." "No motivation means bye-bye."

Another question was asked of Cohort 1.2 and 2.2 on their final questionnaire. These students had struggled for two semesters to improve their language skills and were anxious at this point as they handed in their portfolios and prepared for their final exam only weeks away. The question, "What has been your greatest success?" was meant as a reflective question to motivate and encourage students to take heart. (See Tables 15 and 16 for their responses.)

Table 13

Cohort 1.1 Questionnaire 2: How important do you think motivation is for learning a subject?

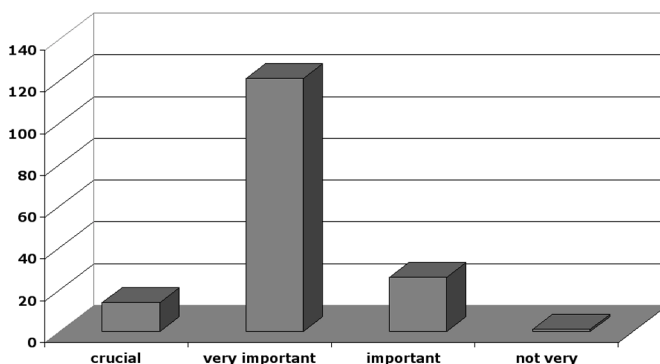
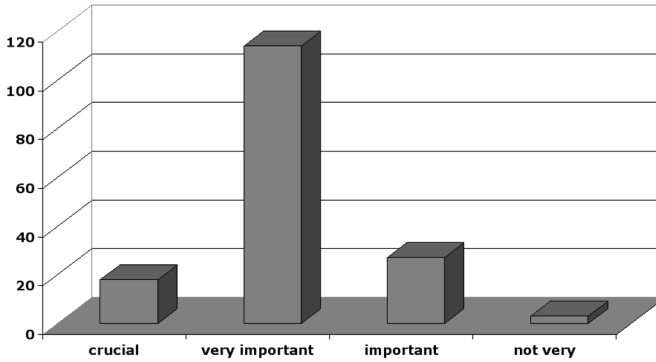


Table 14

Cohort 2.1 Questionnaire 2: How important do you think motivation is for learning a subject?

**Table 15**

Cohort 1.2 Questionnaire 2: What has been your greatest success?

Number	Success	Number of students	Percentage
1	Speak naturally in public	6	30%
2	Improve writing skills	3	15%
3	Make fewer grammar errors	2	10%
4	Gain confidence in speaking	2	10%
5	Completed the portfolio	1	5%
6	Organized time well	1	5%
7	How to get up from failure	1	5%
8	Better grades on portfolio	1	5%
9	Communicate better	1	5%
10	Came to tutorials	1	5%

Table 16

Cohort 2.2 Questionnaire 2: What has been your greatest success?

Number	Success	Number of students	Percentage
1	Improve grammar	11	22%
2	Reduction of errors	7	14%
3	Writing improvements	6	12%
4	Speaking	5	10%
5	Speaking with confidence	4	8%
6	More brave to give opinion	1	2%
7	Clearer writing	1	2%
8	Finished assignments	1	2%
9	Learned from the teacher	1	2%
10	Able to continue studying	1	2%
11	Grab people's attention	1	2%
12	Don't know, never had any success in English	1	2%

Table 17

Cohort 2.2 Questionnaire 2 (Key: 1 = agree 5 = disagree)

Statement 3: I learned a lot by thinking about the various kinds of errors I made.	1	2	3	4	5
Number of students	11	22	13	3	1
Percentage	22%	44%	26%	6%	2%
<hr/>					
Statement 4: I have taken control of my learning.	1	2	3	4	5
Number of students	7	27	12	4	0
Percentage	14%	54%	24%	8%	0%

Cohort 1.2 said their greatest success was in speaking naturally (30%) and greater confidence (10%). Improvement in writing skills (15%) and fewer grammar errors (10%) indicated success in writing. This corresponds with their goals of improving speaking and writing. On the other hand, Cohort 2.2 said they improved grammar (22%) and reduced errors (14%), many more than who said they had success in writing (12%) or speaking (10%) and speaking with confidence (8%). For this cohort, there was a different emphasis in homework assignments on the correction of grammar errors in portfolio assignments based on the new grammar codes and self-analysis profile form (see Appendix B). Although in-class activities were very similar to those in the first semester, these students in Cohort 2.2 had failed the course, and so the need for improvement was crucial. This improvement was seen to be mostly in the realm of writing, needed for portfolio assignments (30% of marks for the course) and the final exam (30% for the course). See Table 12 for this cohort's 'most useful' activity, grammar exercises (38.9%) and the portfolio (36.7%).

Cohort 2.2 in Questionnaire 2 answered questions related to the new grammar codes and self-analysis form. (See Table 17.) Sixty-six percent said they had learned a lot (1 or 2 on a 5-point scale). Sixty-eight percent said they had taken control of learning (1 or 2 on a 5-point scale). This semester's emphasis on finding errors and taking control of learning is reflected here as well as in the answer to the greatest success question.

Discussion

Action research seeks to answer questions or solve problems that occur in the classroom. It is carried out with particular groups of students in a particular time and place. Answers may or may not help the students, who are quite likely to go on to study in a different class or school elsewhere, or finish their studies. The answers obtained from one group of students may not fit another group, even within the same institution, as circumstances change. Even as this researcher learned about these four cohorts and the methods and materials chosen to

enhance their motivation, it does not necessarily follow that the next cohorts will have the same problems and the same needs.

The questionnaires reflected the changing nature of the course and students. The findings showed a disconnection between goals and the strategies chosen to achieve those goals. The strategy choice of students also changed between the cohorts. The perception of the importance of fellow students had implications for the CL model used in the course. Reflecting as seen in the perceived importance of the portfolios as well as the CL type grammar exercises was an important factor in the success felt by students. Finally, self-confidence and autonomy as shown by the last cohort sampled was enhanced.

Goals and strategies disconnected

The gap between what students wanted to accomplish and how they planned to do it is most noticeable in Cohort 1.1. Although students said they wanted to improve their writing, speaking and communication skills, they chose the strategy of reading to accomplish these goals. The next group, Cohort 2.1, had very similar goals, but they selected speaking over reading as a way to accomplish these goals. Improving writing, the top goal for both groups, was not connected to the learning strategy of writing more. This perhaps reflects a methodology of education grounded in traditional CHC models of reading for knowledge. The students had accepted the notion that if they simply read more, they could accomplish their goals of writing and speaking better even without writing and speaking.

This dissonance between goals and strategy choice presents a challenge to the teacher who wishes to implement a methodology different from previous ones. However, Cohort 2.1, one year later, had shifted their strategies significantly. There is still a disconnection, but it is not so severe. The strategies are more active and product-oriented, speaking as opposed to reading as the first choice. But Cohort 2.1 also included 'taking notes' rather than 'listening', a more active way of participating in lectures. This shift in learning strategies augurs well for students who will be participating in new forms of teaching methodologies in coursework in the future. This shift in learning strategies might be a reflection of the push for educational reform in Singapore schools that has been a major thrust in the twenty-first century. It might also be the result of the timing of the questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed and collected after the class had started, about the second or third week of the course. The students had time to look at the new textbook and read over the new course requirements. These course requirements, (See Table 1) emphasized writing, speaking and class participation as important components of the continuous assessment. The textbook activities were built around working in groups and teams. Thus, students were able to see that the strategies to be used in the class emphasized speaking and writing. This undoubtedly also contributed to their choice of strategies.

Yet, the implications of this disconnection between goals and strategies are something that must be addressed if students are to feel as though they have succeeded in meeting their own goals for the course. Motivation and self-efficacy (see below) can suffer if students cannot feel in control of their own learning. Although the course was very short (22 hours of classroom time), it appears that

at least some time is needed to be spent making sure students understand how activities help them learn, in other words, teaching learning strategies. The new textbook included numerous examples of reflective thinking, self-assessment including evaluation checklists for both speaking and writing, and peer reviewing. At the very least, students needed direction from the teacher, as one who sets the classroom agenda and climate, in the goals of various activities, how they benefit students and justifications for teaching methodology. Although Singaporean students are more and more used to CL and other modern teaching methodologies, many of the international students have not yet had extensive experience with new methods. Thus, it is left to the teacher of each class to make sure that students are oriented and prepared to take full advantage of these new methodologies.

Cooperative Learning

Another factor that students did not seem to fully appreciate was the crucial place of their fellow students. Cooperative learning relies heavily on each member of the group to contribute. Not contributing to group discussions robs students of the opportunity to speak, to organize their thoughts, to formulate their opinions and to practice the crucial skill of argumentation. Listening to other students, negotiating, sharing feelings and bonding as a team leads students to greater motivation and ability to continue learning outside the classroom. Although students recognized that fellow students were important, they did not seem to fully realize how vital to success they were. Again, teachers need to provide the framework and justification for class activities by being explicit in directions to students about how and why activities are done.

Reflection

Reflective activities, such as completion of portfolios by rewriting all assignments until the student was satisfied, and the group work done in the 'find and correct the errors' exercises, were important for success. The portfolios were seen as the most useful activity for Cohorts 1.1 and 2.1 and a close second for Cohorts 1.2 and 2.2. The portfolio, even while accounting for only 5% of the course grade, was judged the most useful activity by Cohort 1.1 and second by Cohort 1.2. Thus, the percentage of the assessment given was raised to 30% for Cohorts 2.1 and 2.2 in order to motivate students to pay greater attention to this activity. The portfolio continued to be judged the most useful for Cohort 2.1 and a close second for Cohort 2.2.

Grammar exercises, judged by many to be most useful by those in Cohorts 1.1 and 1.2, were emphasized and expanded for Cohorts 2.1 and 2.2. It was as a result of these questionnaires and classroom observations in how students used the interactive nature of the grammar exercises that led to the change in the course emphasis, including assessment. The grammar exercise type of 'find and correct the errors' done as group work was heavily emphasized in the new course textbook. As well, the speaking and class participation of the grade was raised from 5% to 20% in order to emphasize the importance of in-class discussions

and group work. Many in Cohorts 2.1 and 2.2 responded by judging these two activities as most useful. Reflective practice in both completion of portfolios and the grammar exercises can be seen in the response for Cohort 2.2 in their final questionnaire (see Table 17). The statement "I learned a lot by thinking about the various kinds of errors I made" shows that students took reflective practice seriously. Although it may be argued that this is a 'cart leading the horse' scenario, Cohort 2.2 judged grammar improvement and reduction in errors as their greatest successes. Thus, the feelings of accomplishment and success were real to these students. The motivation created by these feelings of success should carry over to their future course work as well as to their working life.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the entire course does not relate to improvement in grammar, or better writing and speaking, but in improvements in self-confidence. These students came into the class stigmatized as poor in English and forced to attend an extra class beyond their full course load. Feelings of low self-confidence, demotivation and resentment were palpable. Success is hard to measure in this case, and especially for those in Cohorts 1.2 and 2.2, as these students failed in the first semester and were forced to repeat the course. But for Cohort 1.2 (see Table 15), the students said that speaking in public (first) and confidence in speaking (fourth) were their greatest successes. Cohort 2.2 (see Table 16) had more success with grammar, but still, success in speaking (fourth) and speaking with confidence (fifth) were important successes for some. Perhaps the most telling response from any student group was that from Cohort 2.2 in response to the second questionnaire (see Table 17). The number of students who said they 'had taken control of my learning' showed that this cohort, at least, was leaving the course on a positive note. Even though they may not have improved as much as they, the teachers or the university wanted or expected, they left with feelings of empowerment. These feelings of self-confidence are perhaps more powerful in engendering autonomy than any other skill or knowledge practiced in the classroom

Limitations and Further Research

On-going action research has built-in limitations related to time, place and particular individuals. In this case, the questionnaires which were developed as a guide to reflective practice doubled as data for research purposes, so perhaps they were not as well suited for research purposes as if they had been especially designed and controlled for one specific purpose only. For example, the questionnaires were not anonymous, and so honesty in answers might be suspect. Teachers who view the answers and also grade students are often given the answers students feel teachers want to read. Despite this, at least one student in Cohort 2.2 took the opportunity to give a rather obviously honest answer in response to the greatest success by answering, "Don't know. Never had any success in English." Perhaps we as teachers and researchers are too quick to impute motivations to students and do not give them the chance "to become authors of at least part of their world" (Pennycook, 1997, p. 49).

One area of research that appears to be of some value in helping students

realize success is fitting goals and strategy choices. It appears that with this group of English Proficiency learners, more overt learning strategy training would be beneficial. It might also help students feel in control and more motivated if they themselves were given time to identify realistic goals and help devise strategies to reach them. Collection of data and then intervention might reveal successful methods of helping students reach autonomy.

Action research has many limitations, but that is not to say that educators should give up on research in a changing educational environment. In fact, it is just the opposite. Educators must remain active and involved with classroom practices in order to better meet the needs of students. Pedagogy training for tertiary teachers is often neglected but sorely needed in fast changing educational environments like Singapore. Flexibility, nimbleness and an open mind lead to better ways of teaching. Motivation for students more often comes from the teacher and what s/he does and says in the classroom. That often entails choosing and using materials suited for the particular students. This research project taught the author much about her students and how to motivate them. They in turn gave her the motivation to keep exploring ways to be a better educator.

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Appendix A: Cohort 1.1 Questionnaire No. 1*Questionnaire on Motivation and Learning Strategies*

Name _____ Tutorial Number _____

1. Why are you taking this class?
2. What do you hope to gain from this class?
3. What learning strategies do you plan to use?
4. Why?
5. How important are your fellow students in helping you? How will they do that?
6. Is there anything you think your tutor or course coordinator should know about you?

Please use the back if necessary. Thanks for your cooperation and help!

Cohort 1.1 Questionnaire No. 2*Follow up Questionnaire on Motivation and Learning Strategies*

Name _____ Tutorial Number _____

At the beginning of the course, you answered a questionnaire about your motivations for taking this course and the learning strategies you planned to use. Now, please think about how successful you were.

1. Did you gain what you hoped from the class?
2. What are your expectations of success in the course (be realistic!)?
3. Did you follow through with your strategies?
4. Were the class materials and style of teaching what you expected?
5. Why or why not (in answer to #4)?
6. What was the **most** useful part of this course? (For example: peer review of writing, grammar exercises, debate, portfolio, in-class discussions etc.)
7. Why?
8. How important do you think motivation is for learning a subject?

Please use the back if necessary! Thanks for your cooperation!!

Cohort 1.2 Questionnaire No. 1*Questionnaire on Motivation and Learning Goals*

Name _____ Tutorial Number _____

At the beginning of the course last semester, you answered a questionnaire about your motivations for taking this course and the learning strategies you planned to use. Now that you are more familiar with the course and its aims, please think about how you can be successful this semester.

1. Identify your strong points. These could be skills in speaking, reading, writing or organizing. Or they could be your motivation level, ability to organize your time well or some other soft skill.
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
2. Identify your weak points. These should be the ones you can change, not the ones you cannot.
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
3. What plans do you have to work on one or more of your weak points? Give a short plan below for 1, 2 or 3 above.
4. What goals would you like to achieve at the end of this course? Please be specific.
 1. Pass the course
 2. _____
 3. _____

Please use the back if necessary! Thanks for your cooperation!!

Cohort 1.2 Questionnaire No. 2*Follow up Questionnaire on Plans and Goals*

Name _____ Tutorial Number _____

At the beginning of the course, you answered a questionnaire about your plans and goals for this course and the learning strategies you planned to use. Now, please think about how successful you were.

1. At the beginning of the semester, you identified your strong points. Have you used them as leverage to help you achieve your goals in this course? Why or why not?

2. You identified your weak points. Have you specifically worked on improving these? How?
3. What was the most useful part of this course? (For example: peer review of writing, grammar exercises, debate, portfolio, in-class discussions, the marketing exercise etc.)
4. Why?
5. What has been your greatest success? Why?
6. If you could change anything about this course, what would you change and how?

Please use the back if necessary! Thanks for your cooperation!!

Cohort 2.1 Questionnaire No. 1

Questionnaire on Motivation and Learning Strategies

Name _____ Tutorial Number _____

1. Why are you taking this class?
 - a. Failed the QET
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
2. What do you hope to gain from this class?
3. What learning strategies do you plan to use? (for example: memorizing word lists, speaking with classmates, writing notes etc.)
4. How do you think these strategies will help you?
5. How important are your fellow students in helping you?

Very important				not at all
1	2	3	4	5
6. How might they help you?

Please use the back if necessary. Thanks for your cooperation and help!

Cohort 2.1 Questionnaire No. 2

Follow up Questionnaire on Motivation and Learning Strategies

Name _____ Tutorial Number _____

At the beginning of the course, you answered a questionnaire about your motivations for taking this course and the learning strategies you planned to use. Now, please think about how successful you were.

1. Did you gain what you hoped from the class?
2. Did you follow through with your strategies?
3. Were the class materials and style of teaching what you expected? Why or why not?
4. What was the **most** useful part of this course? (For example: peer review of writing, grammar exercises, debate, portfolio, in-class discussions etc.)
5. Why?
6. How important do you think motivation is for learning a subject?
7. In the context of learning in this course, what is the relationship of speaking to writing?

Please turn this paper over for more important questions!

Evaluation of the textbook Persuasive Writing and Speaking

This semester we have a new textbook for BK101 written especially for this course. It has never been used before, so, as first time users, please give us your honest feedback.

- Key: 5 agree strongly
 4 agree somewhat
 3 neutral
 2 disagree somewhat
 1 disagree strongly

1. I enjoyed the activities in *Persuasive Writing and Speaking*.

5 4 3 2 1

Why?

2. It has helped prepare me for my other courses at NTU.

5 4 3 2 1

3. Compared to other course books, *Persuasive Writing and Speaking* is more user friendly (in terms of size, readability, appropriate examples etc.).

5 4 3 2 1

4. Using *Persuasive Writing and Speaking* has made me more interested in the topic of business communications.

5 4 3 2 1

5. Which kind of activity did you *enjoy* most? (Ex.: group discussions, 'find and correct the errors', portfolio assignments, 'game' activities, peer editing..)
6. What would you change about the book? (More or less of something, additional topics or activities, organization of material, leave out something?)

Thanks for your valuable ideas and comments! The best is yet to come!

Cohort 2.2 Questionnaire No. 1

Questionnaire on Motivation and Learning Goals

Name _____ Tutorial Number _____

At the beginning of the course last semester, you answered a questionnaire about your motivations for taking this course and the learning strategies you planned to use. Now that you are more familiar with the course and its aims, please think about how you can be successful this semester.

1. Identify your strong points. These could be skills in speaking, reading, writing or organizing. Or they could be your motivation level, ability to organize your time well or some other soft skill.
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____

2. Identify your weak points. These should be the ones you can change, not the ones you cannot.
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____

3. What plans do you have to work on one or more of your weak points? Give a short plan below for 1, 2 or 3 above. What can your teacher do to help you?

Plan: _____

How tutor can help: _____

4. What goals would you like to achieve at the end of this course? Please be specific.
1. Pass the course
 2. _____
 3. _____

Please use the back if necessary! Thanks for your cooperation!!

Cohort 2.2 Questionnaire No. 2

Follow up Questionnaire on Plans and Goals

Name _____ Tutorial Number _____

At the beginning of the course, you answered a questionnaire about your plans and goals for this course and the learning strategies you planned to use. Now, please think about how successful you were.

1. At the beginning of the semester, you identified your strong points. Have you used them as leverage to help you achieve your goals in this course? Why or why not?
2. You identified your weak points. Have you specifically worked on improving these? How?
3. What was the **most** useful part of this course? (For example: peer review of writing, grammar exercises, debate, portfolio, in-class discussions, the marketing exercise etc.)
4. Why?
5. What has been your greatest success? Why?
6. If you could change anything about this course, what would you change and how?

This semester a new system of grammar codes and self-analysis was started. Please help us evaluate the effectiveness of this system.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Key: 1 = agree 5 = disagree

1. The Grammar Codes were easy to understand.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

2. I kept my Self-Analysis Profile Form up-to-date.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

If not, why?

3. I learned a lot by thinking about the various kinds of errors I made.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

4. I have taken control of my learning.

1	2	3	4	5
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How?

5. The on-line submission was easy and convenient.

1	2	3	4	5
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If not, why? What problems did you have? (Please be specific.)

