

## **How can we (and our students) know we've made a difference? Evaluating and motivating high level academic learners**

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*The paper reports on an initiative to measure change in the confidence levels of pre-university entry learners in the Introductory Academic Program at the University of Western Australia Centre for English Language Teaching. These high level learners tend to be disparate in terms of cultural and professional background, academic and English language proficiency, discipline area and readiness for further study in Australia. Establishing a common goal and a shared motivation so that program content is seen as relevant can be problematic. Perceptions of progress may also not come as readily as they do with lower level learners. Therefore, we have devised a tool which measures confidence levels pre- and post-course in fundamental academic skills and knowledge. Learners and their teachers find that this tool helps in setting goals, motivating learning, and showing whether and where we have made a difference.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Lecturers of academic preparation courses face several challenges. These challenges include establishing common goals, ensuring program relevance and knowing that we have made a difference. Learners coming into our courses vary greatly in their abilities, backgrounds and interests. They can be quite disparate in terms of academic experience, linguistic ability, discipline area, professional background, cultural background and readiness for further study in Australia. They are also often at a level of English language development where they may not readily perceive change. However, as Harmer (1983, p.8) points out "just because advanced students have difficulty in perceiving progress and success they may well need the clarity that the setting of short-term goals, tasks, etc. can give them." In the Introductory Academic Program (IAP) at The University of Western Australia Centre for English Language Teaching, (UWA CELT) we have devised a tool to set these goals, motivate learning, and show change in student confidence.

### **CONTEXT**

Linguistic self-confidence is closely linked to motivation in second or subsequent language use, which in turn is linked to linguistic success (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). The tool that we have devised highlights areas of high and low confidence. Using this tool allows teachers and their learners to see in which areas expending their energy is likely to make the most difference. In the IAP at UWA CELT, we use a learner-centred approach which incorporates such things as needs analysis, self assessment, goal identification, objective setting, learner feedback and syllabus negotiation. The benefits of this approach have long been recognised (Brindley, 1989; Jordan, 1997; Nunan, 1985 and 1988; Richards, 1984).

We see this approach as most likely to create an optimal learning environment with a high level of student engagement and satisfaction that fosters effective, independent, articulate learners. Fostering such learners is the main aim of the Learning Language and Research Skills (LLRS) team at Student Services, who work with students enrolled in mainstream UWA courses, and is an aim shared by UWA CELT, which develops pre-university student

confidence and competence communicating in academic settings. This aim is also seen as congruent with the mission of the University of Western Australia, which is to demonstrate international excellence in all its endeavours. International excellence involves, amongst other things, attracting top quality students, and providing programs and services that ensure high levels of student engagement and satisfaction. The IAP, run for AusAID by UWA CELT in conjunction with LLRS, attracts top quality scholars from developing countries who have great academic potential but would otherwise lack the resources to study overseas.

The IAP is a 75-hour pre-university course conducted over five weeks with three broad objectives: to provide an awareness of Australian culture and UWA academic culture and expectations; to provide skills and strategies for meeting the demands of UWA studies and living in Australia; and to provide an introduction to UWA (and the broader community) and some of its facilities and services. There are eight skill areas that make up the program: study management, listening and note-taking, speaking, reading, writing, summarising and paraphrasing, cross cultural understanding, and information literacy. The extent to which these skill areas are emphasised is dependent on the results of the Academic Skills Confidence Indicator (ASCI), a simple needs analysis tool.

### ACADEMIC SKILLS CONFIDENCE INDICATOR

This tool, developed by the English Language Skills Adviser for LLRS, assesses student self-confidence in the major skill areas and the specific learning objectives of the IAP. It is not a 'test' of discrete skills, nor is it a comprehensive stand alone evaluation tool. Rather, it is one of a collection of formative and summative tools and methods that are used to inform the program.

Also important in formative needs analysis and program design are incoming student academic transcripts and English language scores, ongoing student performance in assessment tasks and assignments, ongoing student feedback on the program, and findings in the literature on international students in tertiary institutions. Key in summative evaluation are student satisfaction ratings in the Student Perceptions of Teaching survey administered centrally at UWA), their responses to the IAP qualitative course evaluation form, and their end-of-program results and UWA mainstream performance.

The ASCI is administered pre- and post-course and asks students to rate their confidence levels against four specific learning objectives in each of the eight general skills areas covered in the IAP using a simple three-point rating scale of 'not confident', 'fairly confident' and 'very confident'. See Figure 1 below for a selection from the ASCI form used in the IAP. A complete copy of the ASCI form can be found in the Appendix.

A Study management	a Understand and conform to what is expected of me as a learner at UWA <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident
	b Think critically, ask critical questions and accept academic criticism <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident
	c Effectively manage my time <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident
	d Set and achieve goals <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident

Figure 1 Sample of first major skill area in ASCI

Each point on the rating scale is accorded a different score - one for 'not confident', two for 'fairly confident' and three for 'very confident' - and a percentage rating is calculated based on these scores. This means that if the IAP students were to rate themselves as 'very confident'

in all learning objectives, their score would be 96 (eight skill areas x four objectives x three points) and their confidence rating would be 100%. If they were, on the other hand, to rate themselves as 'not confident' in all objectives, their score would be 32 (eight areas x four objectives x one point), and their confidence rating would be 33%. If they were to rate themselves as 'fairly confident' in everything, their score would be 64 (eight skill areas x four objectives x two points) making for a confidence rating of 67%. A class or individual student rating below 67% in a general skill area or in a specific learning objective would be seen as being likely to require considerable attention.

Although such ratings are admittedly approximate, and although rating scales other than the one described above may be preferable with different groups, the ASCI used in the IAP nevertheless allows teachers and students to quickly gauge general levels of confidence amongst individuals and the group as a whole. It also assists greatly in setting goals and motivating student learning, and informing program development and evaluation. ASCI findings for the pre-Semester One IAP program in 2006 are described below.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The ASCI was completed by a group of eleven students attending the IAP prior to Semester One, 2006. At the beginning of the program, students' overall confidence levels were just below 66%; by the end of the program, overall confidence was quite high, having risen 18% to 84%. While this was a positive outcome for both students and teachers and helped to show us and the students that we had made a difference, the ASCI also had many other benefits. Below, we discuss these benefits. First we consider overall trends in the pre- and post-confidence levels of this group by skill area. Then we examine trends in confidence levels for specific course objectives.

- **Overall confidence ratings**

Pre-course confidence ratings indicated that students were least confident in the areas of academic writing (55%), followed by listening and note-taking (63%), speaking (64%), summarising and paraphrasing (64%). On the other hand, students were fairly confident in terms of cross cultural understanding (67%), and good levels of confidence were expressed in terms of information literacy (73%), study management (74%) and reading (75%). See Figure 2 below.

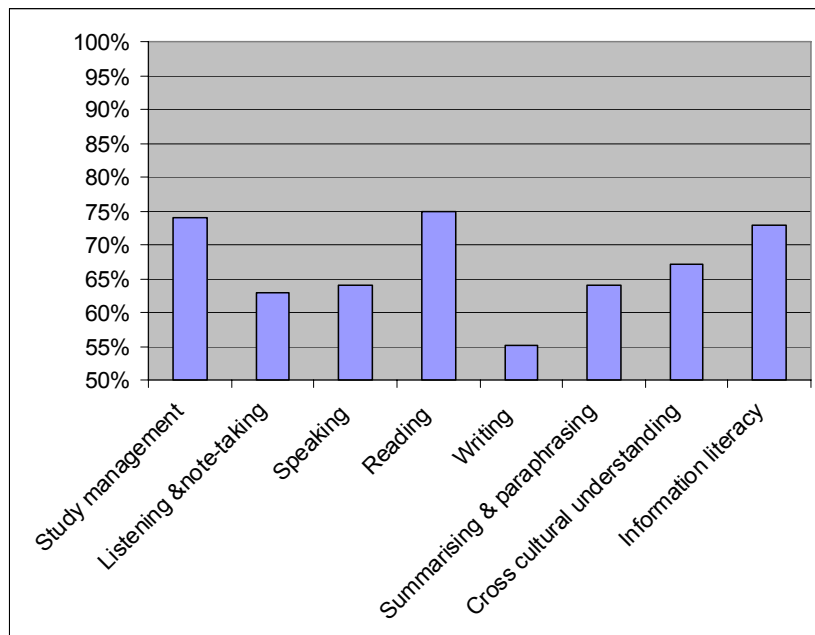


Figure 2 Pre-course confidence ratings by general skill area

These pre-course ratings might suggest that a heavy emphasis on academic writing be placed on the course, and, indeed, approximately 25% of course time was devoted to writing. When writing was combined with listening and note-taking, speaking, and summarising and paraphrasing sessions, the percentage of class time was 55%, with the other 45% of class time being spent on cross cultural understanding, information literacy, study management and reading. This meant that the skill areas in which students felt the least confident received the most emphasis in the course.

At the end of the five-week program, student confidence levels were again rated. Students did not have access to their earlier ratings of skill areas, as we did not want them to be influenced by these. Findings were that reasonably high levels of confidence (of 80% or above) had been achieved in all skill areas. Figure 3 below depicts these ratings.

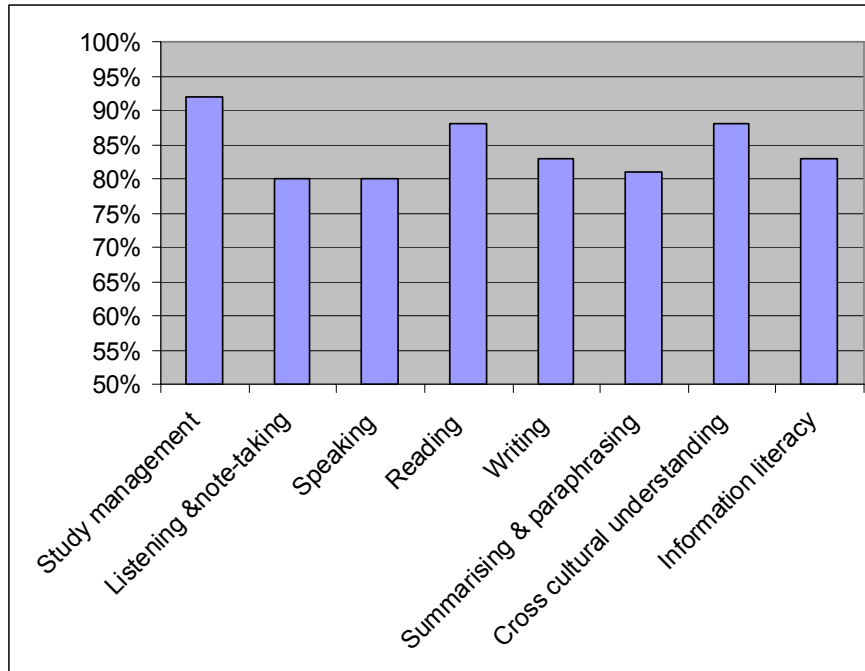


Figure 3 Post-course confidence ratings by general skill area

By using the ASCI we were able to see that the IAP made a substantial difference in the confidence levels of students in the areas targeted by the program. In fact, academic writing, which was the area that previously received the lowest confidence rating, showed the greatest increase of 28% to 83%. This seems to justify the time spent and to indicate that students felt well prepared for the academic assessment tasks they would be facing in their mainstream degree courses. For listening and note-taking and speaking, student confidence rose to 80%; for summarising and paraphrasing it increased to 81%.

While this was positive in showing our program made a difference in the areas most needed, it is also interesting to note that in the other areas of the program in which students had already felt fairly confident to begin with there were significant increases in confidence levels. Confidence levels rose to 88% in cross cultural understanding, 83% in information literacy, 92% in study management, and 88% in reading. The high rating in student management in particular was seen to auger well for the success of these students in their mainstream programs.

Overall, using the ASCI allowed us to identify and focus on initial weaknesses as these were perceived by the group; the general post-course findings helped us to see that we made a difference in these areas and in other areas important to student success in mainstream tertiary courses. Our program was therefore seen as more relevant by the students, as leading to better outcomes, and as more satisfying. Group cohesion was greater as students perceived that they had shared needs and were working towards common learning goals.

- **Confidence ratings in specific learning objectives**

Determining the priority of course objectives was not, however, just based on the broad understanding of student confidence in general skill areas described above. We also undertook an in-depth analysis of the specific learning objectives within the skill areas. Doing this allowed us to identify the learning objectives in which students were least confident and to emphasise these during classes. Figure 4 below shows the learning objectives in which students initially expressed the lowest confidence (below 67%) and indicates the gains they had made (the code at the left corresponds to the code on the ASCI – see Appendix). As can be seen, student confidence levels improved in these objectives.

Code	Specific learning objectives	Pre-course	Post-course
A.b	Think critically and ask critical questions	61%	76%
B.a	Write abbreviated notes	61%	88%
B.d	Cope with accents and social contexts	55%	70%
C.a	Give presentations and speeches	58%	82%
D.d	Critically analyse texts	64%	76%
E.a	Organise essays and research papers	55%	85%
E.b	Use techniques for cohesion and flow	52%	82%
E.c	Evaluate, edit and revise writing	61%	85%
E.d	Use analysis, argument and evidence	52%	79%
F.a	Know when to quote and when to paraphrase	58%	79%
F.b	Rephrase sentences effectively	52%	85%
G.b	Understand UWA academic culture	61%	85%
G.d	Understand Aussie lingo	48%	70%
H.b	Access library databases and online information	58%	85%
H.d	Use EndNote for referencing	61%	64%

*Figure 4 Pre- and post-course confidence levels for specific learning objectives*

Two themes stand out. The first relates to students' confidence in areas crucial to writing tasks, such as the ability to think and to argue critically and analytically (A.b, D.d, E.d and F.a), to conduct research and use sources effectively without plagiarising (B.a, F.b, H.b and H.d, and to construct well-organised, cohesive pieces of writing (E.a, E.b, and E.c). These are all critical to academic success, and yet pre-course students' confidence on all of these was relatively low, but showed significant improvement by the end of the course.

The second theme relates to students' confidence against criteria important to speaking and listening tasks and to negotiating meaning orally, and would thus be likely to affect not only academic success but also social adjustment. Student confidence against criteria important to speaking and listening tasks and to understanding the local university culture had also improved (B.d., C.a, G.b and G.d).

Significant also for their social and academic adjustment were the extremely high confidence ratings in meeting learner expectations and understanding Australian culture (both 97%, up from 73% and 76% respectively), understanding the adjustment process and managing time effectively (both 88%, up from 67% and 73%), and setting and achieving goals (85%, up from 79%).

These findings accord with the literature that highlights the difficulties that many international students face when studying in Australia, including issues relating to inadequate productive (writing and speaking) skills, listening and note-taking skills, and paraphrasing and summarising skills, with much recent attention being paid to the problems of plagiarism amongst international students (Alam, 2004; Introna, Hayes, Blair & Wood, 2003; Marshall & Garry, 2005). According to this literature, moreover, international students seem to struggle with acculturation to their new academic environment, including, very often, to expectations related to critical, analytical thinking and learning (Ballard & Clancy, 1984; Ramburuth, 1999).

Using the ASCI, therefore, may not have shown us much that is new, but it has shown us that our program was highly relevant to the needs of our particular learners, and allowed us to modify our program to benefit their learning. Just as importantly, it has allowed our learners to see that what they were learning was relevant and to have input into the program, increasing their motivation for learning.

By discussing confidence levels with the learners, we were able to negotiate individual and group learning goals. Measuring student confidence against skill areas and learning objectives made it easier to establish shared goals with the group, motivate students, and teach the program in ways relevant to their needs.

## **FUTURE**

It will be interesting in the future to see how the confidence ratings of other groups compare to those of the first semester 2006 group in the IAP. Equally interesting will be to follow up on possible correlations between the self-confidence ratings and academic success, including the longevity or otherwise of boosted confidence in the objectives of the IAP. Preliminary figures seem to support this correlation with students scoring high on the ASCI also achieving high levels of academic success.

A final area of interest is to explore other possible applications of the ASCI. For example, it could be tailored to groups in general English by modifying the skill areas and learning objectives on the ASCI form. The tool also seems to allow for the possibility of extension activities, such as the writing of data commentaries of class data by groups practicing for the IELTS test. Because the tool allows the teacher to identify levels of confidence against specific learning objectives, it could also be used in encouraging peer interaction, by having students survey one another on student confidence (a great ice-breaker). Results could be then compiled by students who would create their own charts using Excel or Word, assisting their development in information technology. ASCI could also assist with peer learning by pairing students with high and low confidence learners for certain activities.

Whilst these areas of research and application are all ones that may be fruitful to explore, we are heartened by the fact that the ASCI has proven to be a useful tool in measuring confidence, establishing shared goals, motivating students, informing program development and assisting evaluation for the disparate, high level learners in the IAP at UWA CELT. We hope that it may also be of use to others in the field.

**APPENDIX**

**Academic Skills Confidence Indicator**

*I can...*

A	Study management	<p>a Understand and conform to what is expected of me as a learner at UWA  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>b Think critically, ask critical questions and accept academic criticism  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>c Effectively manage my time  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>d Set and achieve goals  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p>
B	Listening and note-taking	<p>a Write notes using abbreviations and layout  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>b Recognise how lecture content is organised  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>c Take notes during lectures  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>d Cope with listening to a variety of accents and listen in social contexts  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p>
C	Speaking in academic situations	<p>a Give effective formal presentations and/or impromptu speeches  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>b Use aids in my formal presentations (pointers, laptop, video projector, etc)  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>c Lead and contribute to group discussions, as in seminars and tutorials  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>d Speak with supervisors and lecturers  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p>
D	Academic reading skills	<p>a Read effectively, including identifying ideas relevant to writing tasks  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>b Read quickly and efficiently  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>c Take effective notes based on my reading  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>d Critically analyse the texts I read  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p>

<p>E Academic writing skills</p>	<p>a Organise ideas effectively in long texts, including essays and research papers  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>b Use techniques for cohesion and flow in sentences and paragraphs  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>c Evaluate, edit and revise my writing  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>d Use analysis, argument and evidence in ways expected of me at UWA  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p>
<p>F Summarising and paraphrasing</p>	<p>a Know when and how to quote and when to paraphrase  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>b Rephrase sentences effectively in my own words (paraphrase)  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>c Understand and select the main ideas of longer texts, including chapters and articles  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>d Summarise and condense ideas from long texts, e.g. articles and chapters  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p>
<p>G Understanding cross cultural differences</p>	<p>a Understand cultural differences between my home country and Australia  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>b Understand academic culture and acceptable modes of behaviour at UWA  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>c Understand the process of adjustment I will go through in Australia and at UWA  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>d Understand the way Australians speak (Aussie lingo)  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p>
<p>H Information literacy</p>	<p>a Proficiently use basic computing skills, including word processing, web searching and email  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>b Access information at UWA, including in the library resources and via online databases  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>c Use Powerpoint and Excel effectively  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p> <p>d Use EndNote for referencing and writing bibliographies  <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Not confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fairly confident      <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Very confident</p>

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