

# **Perceived Learned Helplessness among International Students in an English Preparatory Programme in Singapore**

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the  
degree of Doctor of Education by Muhammad Isa bin Muhammad Hassan

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## Abstract

The number of international students enrolled in English-speaking universities is increasing rapidly. This trend is also common at my private college in Singapore, which offers tertiary programmes provided by universities from the United Kingdom and Australia. Students who do not satisfy the international English language testing system (IELTS) requirement must undertake a foundation English programme to prepare them for tertiary study. However, some of these students display negative attitudes towards studying and are reluctant to invest in activities deemed challenging and ‘difficult’. To overcome this issue, the school has introduced an e-learning component to the curriculum, while teachers have incorporated collaborative activities into classes to draw students’ attention. Despite these efforts, the problem is ongoing. Students continue to display signs of pessimism and are unwilling to actively participate in class. Can anything be done to improve this situation? Should money be invested into developing mobile applications to make learning a more accessible experience even when students are not in class? Could the curriculum be redesigned to allow a more holistic learning experience for all students? The solutions to this issue are endless; hence, schools cannot afford to risk a trial-and-error approach. Therefore, this study aims to find the possible causal factors of this negativity in international students currently enrolled in an English preparatory programme at a private higher education institute in Singapore. By discovering the possible causes, schools and teachers are better equipped to make informed decisions to help these students.

Keywords: learned helplessness, second language acquisition, English preparatory, international students, foreign students, second language, foreign language

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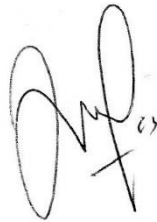
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## Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material that have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at this or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at this university or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis. I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a cross-like stroke at the bottom.

Date: 23/3/19

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Student mobility is quite common today. Since higher education has been made more accessible, learners all over the globe are moving across continents, oceans and lands to quench their thirst for higher learning. This education-led migration does not come without its issues. Individuals must contend with adapting to the unfamiliar cultures of the host countries and the languages used. Despite these hurdles, the popularity of international higher education continues to grow, even though this means learners may need to travel thousands of miles away from their homes to attain it.

One academic programme which some international students have to be enrolled in when they do not meet the English language requirements of their prospective overseas universities is the English preparatory programme. An issue that is a bane among many teachers in English preparatory programmes is the perceived lack of motivation displayed by some international students during lessons and the absence of positivity towards their own learning. In a study conducted by Okazaki (2011), the Japanese participants showed similar characteristics; they believed that no amount of effort could help them acquire English. Similarly, Hsu's (2011) research that explored the concept of helplessness among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Taiwan also showed a lack of student motivation to overcome difficulties in acquiring expected English proficiency. These students felt that any attempt to overcome this learning issue would lead to failure. The common characteristics displayed by participants of Okazaki's (2011) and Hsu's (2011) studies were a lack of willingness and confidence to solve their learning problem, and a sense of certain failure. They felt no compulsion to try to acquire English skills, despite being in an English preparatory programme, as they were convinced of failure.

This pessimism and negativity could be a phenomenon known as ‘learned helplessness’. Seligman (1972) explained that learned helplessness is the misconceived belief that one does not have the ability to alter or change one’s situation or environment. This “learned helplessness” phenomenon can be confirmed by a diagnostic tool that will be introduced later in the thesis.

According to my own experience, as an English teacher to international students, when schools or organisations are faced with the problem of pessimism, teachers are urged to conduct ‘creative’ and ‘fun’ lessons to pique students’ interests and motivate them to study harder. However, without comprehending the essence of this issue, it is not possible to overcome it. For instance, Seligman (1972), who first coined the term learned helplessness, mentioned that a common misconception people have about overcoming pessimism and negativity is to simply motivate oneself with positive words. Mere motivation does not work. The affected individual must first eradicate negative reactions towards failure before they can instil positive motivation in themselves (DeLaune, 1993).

Therefore, this research seeks to determine whether students in an English preparatory programme who display characteristics of lack of motivation could be suffering from helplessness. Further, it seeks to analyse the learning experiences of students who score differently on the chosen diagnostic tool and factors which could influence their engagement in the English preparatory programme. The Intellectual Achievement Responsibility (IAR) scale (Crandall, Katkovsky & Preston, 1962) was used as the diagnostic tool in this study. Participants were international students at an advanced level of an English preparatory programme at a local college in Singapore.

## **1.1 Growth of Higher Education and Private Higher Education Institutions**

Worldwide, there is currently exponential growth in the number of students seeking higher education (Ward, 2007). In 2007, there were about 47 million higher education

students from East Asia and the Pacific, an increase of about 33 million people from 14 million in 1991, while Central Asia witnessed a rise from 6 million to 20 million learners in the same period (UNESCO, 2013). Some students travel to Western countries such as the United States and Britain to receive their desired education. International students who hail from non-English-speaking countries are expected to converse well in the English language in their new learning environments. Those who do not meet English language requirements must enrol in English preparatory programmes in their new colleges or universities. In the past, universities were meant only for the rich and affluent (McCaffery, 2010). Today they are filled to the brim with students from diverse backgrounds and economic status. Why is this so?

One plausible reason could be the uncertainty of the world economy brought about by the continuous development of technology (Lee, 2012). This rapid development has created an urgent need for industries to be managed and maintained by a capable, reliable and sizeable workforce that can continuously adapt to technological advancements. Thus, universities and other higher education institutions must provide future workers with valid skills, knowledge and expertise (Lee, 2000). Further, potential employees also recognise the importance of attaining higher education to keep themselves relevant to the needs of the global economy. They turn to higher education institutions to meet this goal (McCaffery, 2010). The world can no longer depend on a minute group of 'elitists' to do this. Therefore, universities open their doors to the whole community, regardless of economic status, to ensure equal opportunity for all students, who can then contribute equally to their nations. However, one main issue that society must contend with is the limited number of public universities available to feed the scholarly demands of the masses (Levy, 2007).

To overcome this problem, many universities have been invited by several countries to build offshore campuses and supply academic programmes to local communities. Offshore



campuses are branches of universities located in a different country or continent which however remain under the jurisprudence of their home institutions (Miller-Idriss & Hanauer, 2011). This trend has become so popular among tertiary students (Harmon, 2005) that in 2011, there were approximately 183 offshore campuses worldwide (C-BERT, 2011).

However, not all universities find this an enticing and profitable venture, as it can be financially risky (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012) and requires heavy monetary and time investments (Smith, 2009). To remain competitive in the academic world, these universities prefer to export their programmes to overseas private tertiary institutions instead. This has exposed these universities to a wider group of consumers, including those from non-English-speaking backgrounds. In turn, this will increase enrolment rates for the foundation English programmes of these colleges and universities.

## **1.2 Private Institutions and International Students**

As mentioned previously, the surge in demand for higher education has forced many learners to seek scholarly opportunities from private institutions. This is prevalent in Singapore. The Singaporean government's 'world-class universities' policy, first implemented in 1998, encourages foreign universities to export their programmes to and establish offshore campuses in Singapore (Ng & Tan, 2010). Due to its comparatively affordable cost of living, Singapore seems to be preferred over its Western counterparts as a learning destination for many overseas students. Further, the country's cleanliness, economic stability and progressive education curricula (Ng, 2011) have regularly been cited by foreign learners as factors that entice them to continue their higher education in Singapore.

## **1.3 College and English Preparatory Programme**

This research was conducted at a private college. It has been in operation for about 60 years and delivers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes provided by universities from

other countries, such as Australia and England. Since English is the commonly used language for instruction and communication in most schools in Singapore, international students must prove they have met the English language requirements of those programmes. This can be in the form of a certified standardised IELTS test conducted by approved organisations such as the British Council. To qualify for direct entry to these tertiary courses, international students must obtain an IELTS grade of at least 6.0. Those who do not meet the language requirement must enrol in the English preparatory programme provided by the college before enrolling in their tertiary courses. The latter can only be attended by students once they have successfully completed the preparatory programme.

This English preparatory course consists of five levels: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. At each level, international students are taught the four components of the English language: reading, speaking, listening and reading. Students in this programme are expected to pass an examination which consists of all these components at each level before they can proceed to the next. Once students reach the advanced level and pass the examination, they are deemed to have successfully graduated from the English preparatory programme and are allowed to progress to their respective tertiary courses. Those who fail will have to re-sit the advanced level before being allowed to sit for another examination.

Although the whole preparatory programme takes about nine months to complete, students must first sit for an English language competency test to ascertain their level of proficiency. Those who are more competent will be at the upper levels, upper intermediate or advanced while the rest are likely to be at the lower levels. Participants in this study were at the advanced level and preparing to sit for their final examinations. Upon successful completion, they would proceed to their bachelor degree programmes.

I have been teaching for approximately 10 years. My first teaching role was when I had just graduated with a Bachelor of Communications; I started teaching at a primary school in Singapore. I was an English teacher and after 15 months, I decided that I needed to improve my teaching abilities. I completed a Master of Applied Linguistics in 2006 at the University of Sydney in Australia and graduated in the same year. I obtained my job as an English language teacher in Singapore in 2007 and have been doing this since. My students are mainly young adults from the age of 18–26 years; they hail from different parts of the world, mainly from the Asian region such as China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. Unfortunately, due to their inability to attain the desired English language grades for their undergraduate and postgraduate courses, they have to attend my college's English preparatory programme. The aim of this programme is to prepare international students for the rigorous use of English in their future studies.

Despite the technical and analytical knowledge I gained from the Applied Linguistics programme, I felt that my knowledge in encouraging and motivating students was lacking. I was given tools, such as tailoring classroom activities to meet the needs of my students and cultural communication in class, but the knowledge to overcome helplessness was missing. I was not even aware that such a learning issue existed! All I considered was creating an 'interesting' lesson to encourage students to gravitate towards me like bees to honey. I was wrong of course. No matter how 'interesting' or 'creative' my lessons were, there would always be some students switching off in class. It was a bane for me, especially during my early professional years when I was less experienced in teaching international students.

To exacerbate matters further, some of these students were contemplating or had already given up on their education and academic goals. Dropping out of school is the act of leaving school without the latter's authorisation and approval (Chinyoka, 2014). My students were dropping out of the academic programmes that they had earlier enrolled in. This was an

unfortunate trend. According to Gordon and Gordon (n.d.), about 30 per cent of high school students will leave school before graduating. The situation is worse for those who are not wealthy; they have a higher chance of dropping out (Chinyoka, 2014).

However, once I became aware of learned helplessness in one of my EdD modules, I began to slowly understand and found that the issue was a great deal deeper than I had previously thought and could not be overcome simply by 'creative' lessons. Therefore, with a better understanding of learned helplessness, armed with experience with international students and an unwavering passion to help them, I decided to embark on this journey to discover more and understand the perceptions and experiences of my international students who seem to lack motivation and could be suffering from learned helplessness. I have already experienced some of the positive effects of comprehending the learned helplessness phenomenon. My daily interactions with the students are more positive and interactive, and some students are displaying signs of improvement and willing to try tasks, even if they are difficult or challenging. This is steady progress, but it is not enough. I strongly believe that by successfully completing this research, I will further understand learned helplessness, fill the current knowledge gaps and help students achieve academic success. This study could possibly shed some light on this issue and help me better prepare myself as an educator to assist those who could be facing this learning problem.

## **1.4 Learned Helplessness**

It would be premature to conclude that these participants are indeed suffering from learned helplessness; however, there is a possibility that they could be. Therefore, it is valuable to first define learned helplessness. It was first described by Seligman and colleagues during a behavioural study on dogs (Overmier & Seligman, 1967). The experiments showed that when dogs who had been conditioned to be helpless were shocked periodically, they did not attempt to escape, even when they were able to do so (Atherton,

2013). Though such studies originated in behavioural research, the same theories are applied in education and learning (Atherton, 2013; Martinek & Griffith, 1994). According to Overmier and Seligman (1967), learned helplessness is the inability, due to a lack of self-belief, to alter one's negative conditions to more positive ones. This amplifies Seligman's (1972) opinion that learners who are helpless do not have the self-confidence or belief that they can achieve positive results in their studies. This aligns with the view of Dweck and Leggett (1988), who mentioned that those suffering from this unfortunate phenomenon strongly believe that their pursuit of academic success will almost certainly end in failure and they are powerless to prevent it. Hsu (2011) discussed the difficulties faced by English language teachers when they noticed their students' motivation to acquire the English language depleting due to learned helplessness. Despite the prevalence of learned helplessness among students today (McCarter, 2013), little research has been done to explore the link between learned helplessness and international students in an English preparatory programme (Hsu, 2011).

### **1.5 Statement of the Problem**

The problem, which entails negativity and pessimism at college, is that it prevents affected students from achieving their true personal, academic and professional potentials. This could also be true for those suffering from learned helplessness. Why is this so? The main reason is because it drains motivation from these individuals. Helpless individuals have an unfounded belief that, after experiencing setbacks and failures, they are defenceless against unfavourable outcomes and circumstances and any attempts to overcome these adversities will not be successful (Dweck, Chiu & Hong, 1995). Through regular informal conversations and discussions with some of my students, I found that they viewed acquiring the English language as very challenging. They opined that, due to past failures, they were

not good enough and did not have the ability to succeed in this area. They believed that they did not have control of the outcome of their language learning experience.

## **1.6 Justification for the Study**

As a teacher, I used to be perplexed, confused and at times lost by the negativity displayed by some of my students in class. I attributed this behaviour to simply a lack of interest in acquiring the English language. However, a brief introduction to the topic of learned helplessness one year into the Doctorate in Education programme at the University of Liverpool opened my eyes to other potential factors that could influence student behaviours and attitudes towards learning languages. With new-found knowledge of learned helplessness, I began to question if the phenomenon had also affected my students. In addition, I was frustrated by the inability of the school to develop fresh ideas on how teachers could help students and understand the true nature of this problem. The findings from this study will provide me with more knowledge and skills to construct improved lesson plans and activities that will cater to the needs of all students, not just those who are mastery-oriented. The findings will contribute towards scholarly discussions on how best to support students in English learning programmes. In the future, if I am in a professional position that allows me to implement new policies and curricula, this study will better equip me to make calculated changes.

This research could also benefit English language learners who seem to give up trying to acquire the language. They will be made aware of the learning issues they are experiencing and supported to devise new ways to overcome some of the problems they face as they acquire English. To overcome learning problems, students must first be aware of their issues and problems and possibly initiate changes to their negative thoughts before they can be helped (DeLaune, 1993). I often witness strategies designed by schools to help struggling students fail to eliminate this learning problem due to the students' lack of awareness that

they could be helpless! Seligman (1990) stated that for any cure of helplessness to be effective, affected individuals must first acknowledge and eradicate negative thoughts in their minds (as cited in DeLaune, 1993). How do we do this? How can we ‘make’ students realise that their reactions towards challenges are unhelpful? Through the data from this study, I hope to achieve this.

## **1.7 Study Aim**

The aim of this study is to explore the learning experiences of selected participants. This research could be a guide for schools, teachers, parents and even students affected by learning pessimism and negativity.

## **1.8 Specific Objectives**

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Use an IAR scale to identify students who are helpless and those who are mastery-oriented (non-helpless)
2. Determine students’ conceptions about their learning experiences in the English preparatory programme
3. Identify factors that could influence students’ engagement in the English preparatory programme.

## **1.9 Research Questions**

The research questions are:

1. Identify respondents who could possibly be helpless
2. What are the students’ opinion of the English preparatory programme?
3. What are the factors that could influence the students’ participation in the English

preparatory programme?

## **1.10 Thesis overview**

In this thesis overview we shall look at the content of each chapter available:

Firstly Chapter 1 concerns the background of this thesis. The growth of private colleges in Singapore due to the demands of the public, both local and foreign, and the purpose English preparatory programmes serving the latter. Further, I look at a learning issue which some of the students in the English preparatory have been facing and found out that its characteristics are very similar to the ones shown in learned helplessness. To be sure that students do suffer from learned helplessness, proper tools have to be utilised. I aim to find out more about these students' learning experiences and their opinions of the English preparatory programme. This is a motivation for me to better myself as an educator so that my students will get a more positive learning experience in the future.

In Chapter 2, I present the literature review. This review focuses on the components of learned helplessness and conditions which could induce this ailment. Some of these conditions are family influence, teachers and learning environment. Also, it covers the possible effects of learned helplessness and some ways which could be used to overcome it such as providing a proper support system and focusing on tasks among many others. Apart from that there is also a segment on theories which could be related to helplessness such as mindsets and attribution theory. Here, I also include tools which could be used to identify those who were helpless and those who were not. The Intellectual Achievement Responsibility (IAR) scale was chosen because of its effectiveness and success in previous studies by Diener and Dweck (1978), Hokoda and Fincham (1995) and many others.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology and methods used in this study. In Chapter 3 I discuss the use of constructivist paradigm in this study and also phenomenological research



approach to understand the participants' learning experiences through their lens. Lastly, the study design which consists of participants completing the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility and those with acceptable scores on a "first-come-first-served" basis were invited to an interview.

Chapter 4 consists of the analysis of the interviews. A thematic analysis was used to extract themes found from interviews with selected participants. The following themes were found: Motivation and Pressure, Reliance on Rote Learning, Understanding the Purpose of the English Preparatory Programme and Professional Backgrounds of Parents and Socio-economic Background.

In Chapter 5, I discuss in greater detail the themes found in Chapter 4. Factors which could influence the theme of Motivation and Pressure such as "losing face", competition to be better academically as well as the need to gain employment. For the theme of Reliance on Rote Learning, it has been found that participants who relied only on rote learning could face difficulties in adapting to new teaching methods and the requirement of comprehension in language acquisition. Understanding the Purpose of the English Preparatory Programme is the other theme. Anxiety towards failure due to lack of understanding of the goal of this programme plays a role in this theme. Students may not realise that by not trying for fear of failing and the possibility of bearing the financial repercussions they may gain a negative learning experience. Furthermore, a myopic view of focussing only on the end product of passing the programme and not about learning contributes to this theme. The other factor is the perception of being in control where learners misbelieve that they are in control by putting in "effort" even when this "effort" does not equate to positive results. The other theme is Socio-Economic Backgrounds of Parents. Financial prowess has been found to have some influence in the learning experience of respondents. Those in the higher economic background could afford proper education which emphasises on different learning techniques

which could benefit them. Finally, Professional Backgrounds of Parents. Parents who hold positions of leadership tend to instill leadership-like qualities to their children which could help them have a more positive attitude towards learning and grit to overcome difficulties.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the conclusions of this study, limitations of the findings and suggestions for further studies. I also delve on my own professional experiences with students who had shown signs of being helpless and my own activities which I incorporated in class to help promote a more positive and non-helpless learning experience. These activities were found to show a certain degree of success because some students were beginning to show signs of having a positive outlook on their own learning.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review consists of six parts:

1. attribution theory
2. components of learned helplessness
3. conditions that could induce learned helplessness
4. effects of learned helplessness
5. overcoming learned helplessness
6. tools to measure learned helplessness and mastery-oriented

Each part analyses studies that focus on the theme of each section and how they relate to this study of learned helplessness and international students in an English preparatory programme.

### 2.1 Attribution Theory

According to Fritz Heider (1958), attribution theory is concerned with what people attribute their failures and successes to. He mentioned that people tend to attribute them to internal and external factors. Weiner (1986) expanded on this theory by initiating the attributes to be divided into three dimensions: locus of causality, stability and controllability. He proposed the locus of causality to be either internal or external, stability to be whether the cause is stable or unstable and controllability is whether the cause is controllable or not (Weiner, 2006). Weiner (2006) further introduced four attributional factors: ability, effort, task difficulty and luck.

A study conducted by Photongsunan (2015) attempts to investigate the attributions of success of Thai university students in learning the English language based on their self-evaluations as English learners. It found that these respondents attribute their success to both external uncontrollable and internal controllable factors. The students strongly believe that

their teachers play a massive influence in their academic success while at the same time acknowledging that their own effort and strategies have a role to play, albeit not as significant as the former. This result shows a complexity in the perception learners have about their own success which highlights to me the possibility that contributing factors may not be in “black and white” as both could co-exist. However, how accurate could the evaluations of these students with regards to their success as English language learners be? There could be a possibility that their evaluations could be clouded by their own desire to create a more positive image of themselves as learners which will then result in the co-existence of both types of attributions.

One other study which probes into the area of attribution of English language learning success is one by Bouchap, Ahmadou and Abdelkader (2018). This study is similar to the one stated above whereby the researchers tried to discover the attributional factors for the respondents’ successful learning experience. The difference however is that the students who took part in this study mainly attributed their success to external factors: teacher influence and classroom experience. High level achievers in this study presumed that their effort, an internal factor, plays a big role in their success. This study considers the perceptions of respondents regarding the factors which have a positive impact in their learning. Bouchap, Ahmdaou and Abdelkader (2018) justified this method by implying that it is through the perceptions of learners that we get proper data to analyse as perceptions could influence their learning. Further, they interviewed the participants to have a better understanding of the data they got from questionnaires which respondents had to complete first. I do agree to a certain extent that triangulating data from both questionnaires and interviews could “fill” gaps that were present in the former. However, what do we constitute as successful learning? Is it a feel-good factor learners feel during the learning process or do we use examination results as

a benchmark? It would be better if there is another form of data used to reinforce and explain to readers the meaning of “success” in this study’s context.

My study is about understanding the learning experiences of the student in the English preparatory program. After using the IRA scale to identify helpless and mastery students, I wanted to explore whether these two groups had different learning experiences. The main focus was not about what the learners attribute their success or failures to. This could come later in the study, but for now my primary concern is as mentioned above. Hence, attribution theory is not the main theory to be used in my research.

This study examines both the negative and positive learning experiences of international students in an English preparatory programme in a private college in Singapore and identifies some of the possible causes of the former. There are numerous past studies pertaining to the topic of learned helplessness, but I have found very little on its impact on international students in foundation English programmes. This view was amplified by Hsu’s (2011) study, which will be explained in greater detail in this chapter, on learned helplessness and its effects on EFL students.

## **2.2 Components of Learned Helplessness**

### **2.2.1 Early experiments**

Seligman’s (1972) article could be one of the most paramount sources mentioned in this research study. It explains the theorisation of learned helplessness by Seligman and colleagues and how he first coined that term. Seligman and his team’s research sought to measure the reactions of animals facing events deemed uncontrollable. He placed a dog in a shuttle box and administered light shocks to it; the dog would then jump over the barrier. He did this several times. Each time, the dog became better at escaping. He then took another dog who had undergone inescapable shocks before and applied the same procedure. The second dog did not attempt to escape; it remained in a corner of the box, accepting its fate of

light shocks. Seligman (1972) called this acceptance learned helplessness. He further suggested that animals that are helpless are passive when facing challenges. They do not show signs of learning that effort is needed to escape their current trauma; they are more stressed when experiencing trauma that they cannot control.

Seligman (1972) further recommended that dogs affected by helplessness could be cured by force. To demonstrate this, he pulled them forcefully by the leash to help them escape the shocks. The dogs learnt that escape was possible. Apart from teaching the dogs to escape, he strongly suggested that prevention was better than cure. He based this opinion on the research he conducted with dogs who were trained to escape. They were not helpless and managed to escape while those who were not trained failed to find an escape route.

As mentioned earlier, findings in this study have paved the way for further studies on learned helplessness, not only on animals but also on human beings. For instance, studies conducted by Martinek (1996), DeLaune (1993), Verma and Gera (2014) and Ekechukwu and Isiguzo (2015) will be discussed in subsequent sections. Seligman's (1972) observation regarding the three deficits, motivational, cognitive and emotional, found in helpless individuals are still being studied today as studies conducted by Verma and Gera (2014) and Gacek, Smolen and Pilecka (2017) have shown. Understanding these deficits allowed me to better comprehend learned helplessness. I obtained a clearer view of the issues that some respondents experienced first-hand that could influence their engagement in the English preparatory programme.

### **2.2.2 Control and learned helplessness**

To further explain the concept and dynamics of learned helplessness, Martinek's (1996) article provides a simple yet elaborate explanation of this phenomenon. This article is seminal, as it provides a detailed model that elaborates on factors that potentially influence issues of helplessness in students. He used the proposed model to help readers understand

helplessness better. The model includes the following elements: need to control, mediators of control, teacher expectations and social context.

The model begins with ‘need to control’. Martinek (1996) proposed that everyone feels a need to control their own situation, but it is not always possible to control every aspect of one’s life. For example, the weather cannot be controlled. However, the ability to make decisions exemplifies the way humans exercise their need to control a situation. For instance, children are very enthusiastic about having this control. They hope that the decisions they make will please their figures of authority, such as parents and teachers (Pećnik & Starc, 2010). Due to this urge to control this stage in their lives, they might be full of optimism and enthusiasm, especially when they first get to school and have immediate and future goals to achieve. Unfortunately, at around the age of seven or eight years, some of these children could experience a decline in optimism. Ziglar (2002) asserted that this is the age at which learners begin to be more positive or negative in their outlook on life. Ziglar’s (2002) study looks at students in a learning environment who could possibly be influenced by their previous learning engagements and family backgrounds. This concept of “need to control” could possibly explain some of the learning experiences of my respondents. In the next few paragraphs we will observe how some groups could influence the learners.

‘Mediators of control’ comprises ‘behaviours of others’, ‘teacher expectations’ and ‘social contexts’ (Martinek, 1996). There are three parts to this element. The first part, ‘behaviours of others’, focuses on the interactions between parents and their children; the latter are curious and will be seeking answers from their parents. The answers provided by the parents are crucial to the psychological wellbeing of children because they could condition them to be helpless. In other words, if parents provide direct answers to children’s questions instead of explaining to them and encouraging them to think for themselves, they could take away their children’s willingness to put in their own effort to solve problems or

issues. This element is crucial in this research context since it involves international students who could face issues, both academic and non-academic, daily. Therefore, their reactions to these problems are crucial to their success at college (Zhang, 2016).

‘Teacher expectations’ is the next stage. Teachers are the next most important people to the students. In the ‘need to control’ stage, it is explained that learners at a young age have displayed the need to control their situation. To achieve this, they try to appease their teachers whom they view as crucial people in their lives. Thus, the teachers’ level of expectations of students is crucial to bring out the ‘mastery-orientedness’ in them. Research has shown that when teachers expect positive efforts from learners, they will most likely receive these results (Biber & Biber, 2014). Similarly, if something negative is expected, students will live up to this negative expectation (Martinek, 1996). Olvera (2015) suggested that in the area of English language acquisition, teachers’ perceptions of difficulties faced by learners could affect teacher attitudes and expectations. Hence, my research will contribute towards the discussion on teacher influence on language learning.

Finally, ‘social contexts’ examines how a learner’s social environment influences their learning experience, which could result in helplessness. For example, a child living in poverty may well assume that they can do little to change their life for the better since poverty surrounds them constantly. Teachers in this area could also be pessimistic about the chances of their students achieving something more positive in life. Hence, they may invest less effort in teaching. Further, teachers will also be affected by learned helplessness (Biber & Biber, 2014) when they assume that they can’t achieve their professional goals and believe there is no need to try to help the students. However, this should not happen since much can be done by teachers and schools to aid those affected by unfavourable social environments once they are aware of learned helplessness. For instance, teachers informed about the perils of helplessness could organise extracurricular academic programmes to bridge the gap



between those who endure economic challenges and those who do not. This paragraph illustrates the role social environment could play in the learning environment of respondents in my study. This is because my research tries to understand the learning experiences of my respondents.

One factor that must be considered is the learning environment of schools, which is likely to be either competitive or collaborative. It is unfortunate that a competitive environment still thrives in the current academic climate, in which students develop a sense of competition between each other when a collaborative one could have been proven more effective (Nordmore & Samara, 2009). A competitive classroom encourages students to compare themselves with their friends and this may lead to a misconception that their failures are permanent.

Martinek (1996) further emphasised that there are varying degrees or depths of learned helplessness. It can be explained in three ways: temporary and specific, permanent and specific, and pervasive and permanent. The final category is considered the most serious of the helpless condition, as the affected person view their helplessness as something that affects the specific issue and other parts of their life. These 'failures' are considered permanent.

Martinek (1996) recommended that teachers share different strategies to achieve goals and solve problems. Ultimately, it is more important for people to understand the issue of learned helplessness first before attempting to overcome it. DeLaune (1993) pointed out that despite schools and teachers trying to motivate affected students, they have so far fallen short in their efforts to remedy the situation.

One area that could be given greater focus, despite its presence within the realm of education, is the psychological aspect of learning. Based on DeLaune's (1993) observation, helpless students were found to be inattentive individuals who are always uninterested in

difficult tasks or challenges; they would rather give up than try. However, she stated that helpless individuals would have a degrading view of themselves and would be depressed due to their condition.

Learned helplessness is a phenomenon that is demonstrated, without realisation, for a prolonged period, usually by parents, teachers or life setbacks. These setbacks are viewed as a problem of gigantic proportion. This is so because the longer a person is helpless, the more their negative responses towards problems become a natural reaction, also known as explanatory style (Purandare, 2010). Seligman (1990) illustrated that there are three parts to this explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness and personalisation. Helpless people view their inability to solve challenges as something permanent (permanence) that will ultimately affect other areas of their life (pervasiveness) and is a result of their individual uncontrollable factors (personalisation) (Seligman, 1990). This explanation is potentially important to this study because it further elaborates on the characteristics of a helpless person.

The attribution theory as explained by Weiner (1986) describes the three basic dimensions used by individuals to comprehend events that happen to them or to others. The dimensions are locus of control, stability and controllability. This theory is used by people who try to explain certain situations, for instance one may attribute an event to a cause which does not change. This is a stable attribution, whereas causes that could be changed are known as unstable attribution. Another dimension is controllability, where a cause is viewed as uncontrollable such as moods or controllable such as skills. However, an area that requires greater attention for this study is the locus of control. This is because part of my research concerns the students' learning experience which could include their view on their own academic failures and success.

According to Eslami-Rasekh, Rezaei and Davoudi (2012), locus of control refers to the causes that individuals believe contribute to their failures and successes. There are

internal and external loci of control. Individuals with an internal locus of control believe that investing effort is important to gain success. Those who attribute their negative experiences to outside factors such as luck believe in an external locus of control (Adeyinka, Adedeji & Sam Olufemi, 2011). Based on these definitions, the locus of control theory is similar to the concept of mindsets (Dweck, 2015). Dweck (2015) opined that a growth mindset describes those who are willing to persevere and exert effort that could help them achieve their goals, while those with a fixed mindset do not believe this to be possible and perceive skills and knowledge as innate.

Fakeye (2011) examined the relationship between learners' locus of control and their achievement in the English language. Three hundred secondary school students from 10 schools in the Ibadan North (Nigeria) local government were randomly selected for this research. To collect data, an English language achievement test and the Locus of Control Scale were used. Fakeye (2011) found that there was an important link between the locus of control of learners and their achievement in English language acquisition. He illustrated that the way learners view their successes and failures could result in them achieving their English language goals.

This is in line with the findings of Eslami-Rasekh et al. (2012). They proposed that students be taught to take control of their own learning through strategies such as time planning and goal setting. These strategies encourage learners to view their achievements as effort, over which they have ownership. Fakeye's (2011) research allowed greater understanding of the issue of learned helplessness from a similar angle to mine in that it looks at how locus of control could be an influencing factor, whether internal or external factors such as parental pressure could affect the learning experiences of the students. However, Fakeye's (2011) study was quantitative and understandably sampled from many schools. Each school could have its own unique problems that could affect their students' learning

experiences differently. This limitation was not addressed in this study. This is in contrast with my study which focuses only on one college.

One article that could further elucidate this concept of locus of control and its possible connection to learned helplessness is by Aydogan (2016). Aydogan (2016) aimed to observe the effect of learned helplessness and locus of control on academic grades, including the English language, of 159 students in the Balkans. These students were tertiary level. The instruments used were the Academic Locus of Control Scale, the Learned Helplessness Scale and the Demographic Information Questionnaire. This study by Aydogan (2006) found out that students who do not believe in the importance of effort in their studies would probably experience negative results. They were usually susceptible to learned helplessness. Conversely, those who are more positive towards their own effort would most likely do better in their academic pursuits, including English. Further, the former group did not favour the English language and attribute any possible success to an external locus of control, such as luck. These findings are interesting and relevant to this research. They not only extend the findings of Fakeye (2016), they also enhance understanding of how the perceptions of learners in the English programme could affect their academic outcome.

### **2.2.3 Mindsets and learned helplessness**

One concept that could be closely intertwined with learned helplessness is mindsets, fixed and flexible. Dweck (2006) proposed that mindsets influence the way people react to themselves, others and situations. Based on Dweck's (2006) study, there are two types of mindsets: fixed and flexible. A person with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence and skills cannot be improved or enhanced; they are fixed. However, a person with a flexible or growth mindset strongly believes that with effort, intelligence and skills can be developed and improved (Dweck, 2015). Why is this concept related to learned helplessness? A person who is helpless, according to the original theory, does not believe that they have the necessary

attributes, skills or intelligence to change their conditions (Seligman, 1972). In other words, if a helpless person fails a mathematics test, they will assume that they do not have the intelligence to overcome this challenge, and that any attempts will only end in failure. The helpless learner deems this situation uncontrollable. A person with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence is stable and innate; nothing can be done to change this.

Ricci (2013) explained the science behind the concept of mindsets. Neuroplasticity describes the brain's ability to adapt and develop based on situations faced by the individual. Ricci (2013) provided an example of a person who had suffered a stroke. Their brain would almost immediately start to reconfigure and evolve to aid the patient to speak and move again, provided they put in the effort to regain what they have lost. In the education context, she cited the work of Dweck (2010), which shows improvements made by students introduced to the concept of the growth mindset. Ricci (2013) discovered that young learners at the kindergarten level have a growth mindset but may begin to lose confidence in themselves and adopt a fixed mindset a few years later. This clearly shows parents and teachers play a crucial role in the positive development of their children, a point echoed in studies related to helplessness (Walling & Martinek, 1995). The concept of mindsets is closely related to learned helplessness. A helpless person may have a fixed mindset. This article provided a platform from which to explore this topic further.

Mercer and Ryan (2010) sought to determine whether a language learner will find the process of acquiring the desired language easier or more difficult with the perception that acquiring language requires talent. Put simply, they wanted to explore the ease with which learners with fixed mindsets were able to acquire new languages. Mercer and Ryan's (2010) study involved participants from two countries in different parts of the world, Austria and Japan: five from the former and four from the latter. Both groups were EFL learners at the

university level and volunteered to participate. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data from the participants, which were recorded and later transcribed.

They found most participants did not exhibit either a fixed or flexible mindset; instead, they exhibited both. It was a case of the mindset to which the participants were more inclined. Interestingly, the learners held different mindsets for different components of the English language. For example, participants believed effort was needed for language learning, while innate ability (indicating a fixed mindset) was required for others.

Another piece of information gained from these data is the perception of fixed mindset individuals that the ease of acquiring language is due to talent; working hard was perceived as a sign of a lack of talent. The researchers recommended that teachers should provide feedback focusing on effort, refrain from organising competitive activities in class and discuss learning strategies to encourage a growth mindset to help students achieve their learning goals. Coincidentally, these strategies were also recommended to overcome helplessness (Ganz & Ganz, 2013).

Mercer and Ryan (2010) argued that further research is required in the area of language learning and mindsets to encourage learners to adopt a growth mindset. Despite the uncertainty over whether the mindset choice of participants hailing from different parts of the world was a conscious decision, it is interesting to note that both groups showed a clear distinction in some of their answers, which the researchers attributed to cultural differences. Although they further clarified that this was not a proven view and required greater research, adding culture to their study was important because culture does play an influential part in people's lives.

Helplessness is the belief that one is not in control of their situation (HaileMariam, 2001). A helpless student will feel that there is no need to put in any effort to overcome academic challenges since failure is perceived as inevitable (Verma & Gera, 2014). One of

the reasons is because of the helpless individual's assumption that intelligence is innate and hereditary; people are lucky enough to be 'born' clever or unlucky enough to be 'born' unintelligent (McLeod, 1992). Mindset is connected to helplessness because those with a fixed mindset believe that intelligence or talent is inherent and cannot be developed (Dweck, 2015).

However, there are others who hold the assumption that Dweck's (2015) mindset theory is oversimplified and impractical in authentic education environments such as schools and colleges. For instance, Sisk, Burgoyne, Sun, Butler and Macnamara (2018) conducted a study on the effectiveness of mindsets interventions such as organising programmes for students to boost their beliefs that talents and skills can possibly be developed. They found that there was very minimal impact on the achievements of the respondents and that the benefits of these interventions were exaggerated. Another study done by Mcnamara and Rupani (2017) echoes the findings of Sisk et al. (2018). They claimed that their results did not correlate with the claims made by growth mindset providers that the users would benefit from this program. These two studies have laid claim that the growth mindset theory does not reflect Dweck (2015) claims in her previous studies which claim that the introduction of growth mindset could develop skills and intelligence.

However, it is important to note that some issues could stem from the providers of the mindset theory themselves. Could the academic institutions which promote growth mindsets have missed out on certain aspects of the mindset theory? Such as providing students the time and space they need to develop their skill. Possibly. Furthermore, it is fair to note that assessing the credibility of the growth mindset based on the students' academic achievements could be oversimplifying the theory. Dweck (2015) did claim that the growth mindset could help in improving academic success, but she did not specify the period required to fully attain this benefit. She, however, did mention that time is an important necessity for growth mindset

to be applied (2010). Patience is key to ensure that growth mindset will have a positive effect on the students.

I shall discuss the effectiveness of the growth mindset in greater detail in Chapter 6 where I use the theory to help improve my students' learning experience.

## **2.3 Conditions That Could Induce Learned Helplessness**

### **2.3.1 Outlook and learned helplessness**

One study similar to this research thesis is that of Hsu (2011). Hsu (2011) aimed to explore 18 possibly helpless college students aged between 19 and 20 years, focusing on three factors: inability to acquire English, learners' outlook and motivation. Hsu (2011) used focus group discussions and discovered that an individual's outlook does influence their susceptibility to learned helplessness. This then affects the individual's motivation; learners who are unmotivated will find English a difficult language to acquire. This study is quite restrictive in its approach to gaining information about learned helplessness, as it focuses on learners' inability to acquire English, their outlook and motivations. It would have been better if the writer had been more open to other potential factors. Since the research environment is an Asian college, it would have been valuable for the writer to pose social conditions as another factor to be considered. Although Hsu's (2011) approach in obtaining data through focus group is effective, certain relevant questions pertaining to learning environment and experiences in English language learning were missing in this research. These questions are of importance to the current study because they question the influence of environment on learning and individuals' experiences in learning the English language at college. These probing questions could have added clarity and depth to the findings. Despite these issues, this study is still of significant value. It offers an insight into the setting of Hsu's study, which is similar to the one used in the current research: a college in which non-native English speakers are enrolled in an English programme.



### **2.3.2 Backgrounds and learned helplessness**

The next two articles discussed examine learners' backgrounds and how they could influence outlook on learning and the possibility of inculcating values within individuals. These backgrounds include communications with people close to the learners and the learners' living conditions and socio-economic backgrounds.

Walling and Martinek (1995) focused on a 13-year-old student who may have been helpless. They observed the individual through her interactions with family members, family circumstances, and rapport with teachers and school friends. They planned to design a programme for the individual based on the data gathered and had hoped that if successful, this programme could be recommended to schools to help create an environment that encourages all students to have a more positive attitude towards learning.

Although the researchers were not able to achieve the latter due to the severity and complexity of the participant's condition, they did provide some suggestions they believed could assist teachers to support students affected by helplessness. They recommended that future research should focus more on teachers and their responsibility to create an encouraging learning environment. This study is similar to the current research because the researchers wanted to determine how a person's surroundings and environments could influence their learning conditions. Data were used to construct an improved learning environment where students were encouraged to accept and learn from challenges and difficulties.

However, the settings of Walling and Martinek's (1995) study were vastly different from the current study. This thesis is focused on young adult international students in a higher education institution. An issue with Walling and Martinek's (1995) study is its aim to design a curriculum for the school based only on one case study. Redesigning a complex entity such as a curriculum based only on the data of one individual is risky. As pointed out by the

researchers, it was difficult to achieve the second aim because of the severity of the participant's perceived helplessness. It would have been better to obtain data from a group of students instead, as the information gained might have been more informed and reliable than that of a single individual (McLeod, 2008).

Mal, Jain and Yadav (1990) focused on prolonged deprivation and its consequences on learned helplessness. Their study involved 104 pupils, with an equal number of males and females, at Grade 10 in a rural high school in India. The Prolonged Deprivation Scale was used to measure deprivation in the form of poor housing conditions and environments, socio-economic backgrounds and past experiences. Two challenging tasks, a block design and an anagram, were used to detect learned helplessness among the participants. The findings indicate that deprivation does exacerbate the helpless condition.

Further, gender expectations in an area steeped in cultural expectations play a key role in inducing learned helplessness (Mal et al., 1990). This interesting study considers the gender factor and is similar to Akca's, (2011) study, in which societal expectation was a main theme. Deprivation and its influence on learned helplessness is a fascinating research concept, particularly in this research thesis. My study also focuses on students' past experiences; a poor learning environment, such as a "spoon-feeding" method where answers were provided readily instead of understanding methods, is one of many examples of deprivation of which researchers should be aware.

One concern about Mal et al.'s study is its relevance in today's context. There are very few comparable studies done today. Mal et al. conducted this study in 1990; were societal expectations in that setting the same as today's? Will deprivation still affect helplessness? This question could possibly be answered by the data gained in this thesis.

### **2.3.3 Societal expectations and learned helplessness**

Hsu's (2011) research lacked the social conditioning component. However, Akca's (2011) is steeped in societal norms and conditioning as practiced by the 708 student participants aged between 12 and 18 years in Aksaray, Turkey. Of this sample, 319 were sitting for their High Schools Placement Test while the remaining participants were waiting for their University Entrance Examination. Akca's (2011) study attempted to identify a connection between helplessness and assessment anxiety. Therefore, both the Learned Helplessness Scale and the Test Anxiety Scale were used. Akca (2011) discovered that the culture observed by some of the respondents, which causes anxiety and nervousness, plays an important role in students' lives and dictates their academic expectations and goals. It is quite surprising and unfortunate that the writer did not explore other factors such as characteristics and personalities (Hsu, 2011). Learners or individuals who become anxious easily when experiencing failure might find motivating and encouraging themselves to overcome this failure difficult, while conscientious learners have a strong belief in exerting effort to gain success and students who are extroverts are not affected by challenges (Hsu, 2011). In other words, Hsu (2011) explained that those who experienced anxiety due to failures could have difficulties in encouraging themselves to overcome these failures. On the other hand, conscientious learners would motivate themselves to put in the extra effort to overcome failures. Again, Akca's (2011) study shared a similar issue with Hsu's (2011): a lack in depth in understanding participants' answers. While Hsu's (2011) research had an absence of probing questions that could provide greater depth to initial participant responses, Akca (2011) did not conduct any interviews. Without these interview questions, some information may be misunderstood by the researchers, leading to data that are invalid and irrelevant to the study. Perhaps both researchers could have enriched their findings by opening their research to other components and factors, like those mentioned previously.

An important point which I would like to highlight is the insight this study provides me in relation to my own study. The social expectations on learners could have an influence on their outlook on the English preparatory programme.

LeUnes, Nation and Turley (1980) conducted research to determine the effects of learned helplessness on males and females. Twenty-four male and female psychology students at a university in Oklahoma participated in this study. Anagrams were used to induce learned helplessness in participants. This activity was also used by Mal et al. (1990) in their study, which was discussed previously. The results indicated that females are more susceptible to helplessness than their male counterparts are. Gender is the main theme in this study.

Previously mentioned studies have also included gender as a theme. For example, Mal et al. (1990) illustrated that females in India were more susceptible to helplessness than males were. One issue that requires highlighting in this study is the absence of interviews to obtain explanations from participants regarding their learning experiences. This method is not present in LeUnes et al.'s (1980) study. In my opinion this study could have been extended by adding these explanations to add more depth and clarity to the data.

Currently, there is very little research conducted in which the component of gender is highlighted at the university level. Sutantoputri and Watt (2013) attempted to identify the attributions (locus of control) of the different genders, religions and ethnic groups in some Indonesian universities. In terms of age group, this study may be closest to that of LeUnes et al. (1980). Further, the area of locus of control is related to learned helplessness, but the study is not about learned helplessness.

### **2.3.4 Family motivation and learned helplessness**

This thesis strives to learn more of the experiences of international students in an English language preparation programme. One study that bears a similar theme is that of Hokoda and Fincham (1995), which attempted to discover the relation between family motivation and helplessness. Twenty-one Grade 3 pupils around the age of eight years, together with their mothers, participated in this study. Using the IAR scale (Crandall, Katkovsky & Crandall, 1965) and a behavioural achievement task, participants were divided into two groups: helpless and mastery-oriented. These groups were given four tasks to complete; five minutes was allocated for each task. The tasks were a block design, anagrams (used in the third and fourth studies), gridlock and compound words. Mothers were allowed to assist their children by giving them the answers, showing them how to solve the puzzles, providing clues and encouragement or simply telling them to move on to the next easier question.

Hokoda and Fincham's (1995) findings show that families that provide motivations and who are more positive will encourage their children to be mastery-oriented. Conversely, those who have a negative approach to challenges will most likely induce helplessness in their children. Hokoda and Fincham's (1995) study was well constructed because it provided details of the tasks, something that is lacking in previous research articles. Without a proper understanding of the tasks, readers would be left wondering how they were relevant to this study. This study is relevant to my study because it shows the relevance and reliability of using the IAR scale in identifying helpless individuals and also informs me of the possible influence of family motivation on the students' inclination towards helplessness or otherwise.

### **2.3.5 Teachers, schools and learned helplessness**

McCarter (2013) stated that learned helplessness is a conditioned behaviour and affected individuals are taught to be helpless by influential groups of people such as parents

and teachers. One study conducted by Qutaiba (2011) involved teachers who were experiencing learned helplessness. More specifically, Qutaiba (2011) wanted to identify how the involvement in making decisions at schools and helplessness were related. The researcher speculated that teachers who manage special needs students daily may not enjoy much success, despite their efforts, and could even find themselves helpless in this situation. When they experience helplessness, teachers tend to show signs of pessimism towards their own teaching career by taking days off, asking for transfers and on certain occasions leaving the teaching profession (Qutaiba, 2011). Qutaiba (2011) said this could be due to the inability to participate in decision-making in the workplace. Decisions relating to school policies, curriculum setting, disciplinary matters and many other aspects not only have an impact on the lives of students, they also affect staff members. These teachers may feel helpless because they feel powerless to make positive changes in their professional environments.

Qutaiba's (2011) study involved 40 teachers, 12 males and 28 females, aged between 24–48 years. Two instruments were used in the research: the School-Involvement Scale Questionnaire and the Learned Helplessness Questionnaire. The first was used to find out more about the headmaster's behaviour regarding the involvement of the teaching staff at school while the latter was used to identify teachers affected by helplessness. The results of this research found that by allowing teachers to have a voice and be involved in decision-making at school, helplessness could be greatly minimised. This study also found that female teachers were more likely to be affected by helplessness than their male counterparts.

Despite this study's focus on teachers affected by helplessness, it is important to note that the same issue could affect their students (Kozol, 1991). The inability to have a voice in decision-making might affect their professional lives. Teachers will feel powerless in this situation and feel that they are not in control of their own decision-making. This may negatively affect how they teach their students. Parents, in this instance, should examine the

way they encourage or motivate their children when helping them to achieve their academic goals, as the act of encouragement of overzealous parents could result in stress and pressure on their children without them realising it (Agliata & Renk, 2009). Further, schools should be willing to share the syllabus and curriculum with students and obtain feedback. This will empower the students and encourage them to take charge of their own learning, something that is perceived to be impossible by individuals who perceive themselves as helpless (Verma & Gera, 2014).

Teachers and the school system play a role in the inducement of learned helplessness among students today. According to McCarter (2013), in the United States, a great deal of money has been invested in the development of students who are not fully prepared for education at the higher level. He claimed that these students are underprepared because they fail to realise the differences between high school and higher education. McCarter (2013) suspected that teachers and the school system are to blame for the increase in helpless students today. The author further claimed that to conform to the demands of the system, teachers tend to provide their students with answers and information on the important things that have to be learned for the examinations. This act of 'spoon feeding' has made teachers critical thinkers instead of their students. To illustrate this, the author provided the example of how high school students conducting research first find sources to support their hypothesis instead of seeking data from the study. Students are so afraid to learn for fear of making mistakes because they have been taught what to learn by their teachers.

McCarter's (2013) article indicates that teachers have an important role in ensuring their actions in class should not breed helplessness among learners, even if this means lower grades for the students. The school system must support this because the whole purpose of learning is discovering new things and developing new ideas, not simply regurgitating teachings. If students are not allowed to learn from their mistakes, how can learning occur?

Further, by spoon feeding students, teachers are indirectly making them helpless because they have taken away their learning process and encouraged them to invest minimal effort in their own academic success. Learned helplessness is a conditioned behaviour (McCarter, 2013). Affected people have been taught to be helpless for a long time and teachers must be aware that their actions could result in their students being helpless or mastery-oriented.

The two articles by Qutaiba (2011) and McCarter (2013) highlight the effect teachers have on their students. This is in line with my study which focuses on students in a college, which operates in a school-like environment. Data from them could elucidate reasons why some possibly helpless participants in my study behave negatively towards their own learning, in relation to the influence that they could have from their teachers.

Verma and Gera (2014) focused on adolescents and helplessness. They began by stating the characteristics and behaviour of helpless adolescents at school. These characteristics are disruptive, depressive and negative most of time. Verma and Gera (2014) also elaborated on the reactions of helpless individuals in class when facing challenges that are difficult and 'presumed' by those affected as impossible. These students assume that academic success is beyond them; no amount of effort could help and even if they are to do well, they would attribute this to luck and not their own efforts. Verma and Gera (2014) cited an example of research conducted by McLeod (1992) in which students in the West viewed mathematics as a difficult topic to pass and only 'naturally-talented' individuals born into a family skilled in that subject would do well. Ekechukwu and Isiguzo (2015) recommended that when facing this issue, it would be better for teachers to encourage students to focus more on their efforts than their 'natural' abilities.

Verma and Gera (2014) further explained the symptoms of a helpless adolescent and how they behave in class before listing ways to help affected students. Some of the suggestions by Verma and Gera (2014) include creating a learning environment in which



effort is key, emphasising the skills to improve oneself and providing ample time for students to master those skills. Verma and Gera's (2014) article is brief; however, its summary could help those interested in the topic of helplessness who do not have time to explore the literature in depth.

Although this may be an introductory piece, it could have been improved with more detail. Verma and Gera (2014) could have added examples to their suggestions to overcome helplessness. For example, when suggesting that teachers create a learning environment that encourages students to continuously learn, even during mistakes, they could have recommended how this be done. What activities should be used in class? These are some of the questions this article leaves the reader asking. Verma and Gera's (2014) article is intended to be brief, but without examples it is difficult for teachers who are still new to helplessness to envision solutions. Further, in the recommendation that teachers should encourage students to aim for 'realistic' goals, the term 'realistic' is not defined. Ostensibly in education, it is beneficial to encourage students to achieve their goals and dreams, no matter how big or 'unrealistic' they may be. In the view of this researcher, only encouraging goals that are 'realistic' could induce helplessness, as it does not allow students to make mistakes, learn from them and be comfortable with goals that are easy for the students to achieve.

These articles allow me to have a better view of how learning environments such as schools and universities could influence students' engagement in class, which is one objective of my thesis.

## **2.4 Effects of Learned Helplessness**

There are several known effects of learned helplessness on students. However, Yaman, Esen and Derkus (2011) explored the detrimental effect of this phenomenon on the development of language learning. Their research considered other factors such as age, sex

and financial, family and academic backgrounds. Around 296 English language students from Grades 9–11 in three different types of school, Anatolian, state and private, participated in this study. Each school had two groups of students representing them. Participants were asked to complete the Learned Helplessness Scale, which consisted of 30 questions describing both positive and negative situations, to identify helpless individuals and their level of helplessness. The scale was compared to the factors mentioned earlier and the students' academic results to identify any correlations.

Results indicated that the more helpless a participant perceived themselves to be, the poorer their academic achievement was. An interesting point noted by the researchers was that those from higher socio-economic backgrounds were more helpless than the other students. However, the researchers were trying to observe the influence of variables such as gender, financial backgrounds and parents' academic achievements on helplessness and the participants. Although these factors are relevant, since parents, teachers and unfavourable situations such as tragedies could induce helplessness, the time taken to investigate these demographics would surely be longer than three months, as acknowledged by the researchers.

As such, data gained from this study were rather summarised and too brief. Given the time taken to conduct this study was just a few months, the researchers could have improved the specificity of the findings if they had focused only on one or two demographics. Further, Yaman et al. (2011) admitted that the research's main hypothesis was to explore the connection between learned helplessness and students' academic achievements. Nonetheless, the point they discovered regarding financial standing and a student's helplessness was interesting and could be considered in my current study.

Donnell (2009) attempted to explore any potential correlation between learned helplessness and the act of dropping out of schools. He cited two government studies relating to this situation; each study generated different findings. The first, by Davis and Elias (2003),

stated that the main reasons for ending a programme prematurely were ill-suited academic courses (29 per cent), financial issues (18 per cent) and personal issues (14 per cent). The second study, by Simm, Page and Miller (2007), identified quality of teaching (32 per cent), general reasons (28 per cent) and time management issues (20 per cent) as the main causes. However, little consideration had been given to psychological influences.

This article aimed to do just that. As mentioned earlier by DeLaune (1993), who examined pessimistic explanatory style (PES), Donnell (2009) also added the optimistic explanatory style, which consists of the opposite components of the former. These components are external, unstable and specific. The writer explained that those with PES would find a new or different environment, like college or university, a daunting and difficult place to adapt to. Due to their negative explanatory style, they believe that any unfavourable result is permanent, will adversely affect a major part of their lives and is because of their own doing: these students would experience stress and learn to be helpless.

Donnell (2009) selected 18 higher education students who had to complete the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ), which consisted of 12 scenarios, six good and six bad, to identify helpless and non-helpless individuals. Following this, four additional questions, relating to a person's control or lack of, were asked to confirm the accuracy of the data gained from the ASQ. Based on the data gained, the writer discovered that students felt helpless when faced with stress brought on by situations over which they had little control, such as tests and examinations. He further illustrated that a pessimistic learner might also attach a negative belief to these uncontrollable events, which could prevent them from acquiring new knowledge.

Simply put, this is the issue. It is inevitable that some amount of stress is experienced by learners because learning involves pushing one's limits when understanding a new

concept. Unfortunately, since learners are unable to handle and control this stress, they soon grow to believe they will forever be unable to overcome this hurdle, rendering them helpless.

Donnell (2009) further mentioned that leaving academic programmes prematurely could be the result of perceived helplessness. Despite the inclusion of four open-ended questions to further understand the experiences of the participants with learned helplessness, the absence of probing questions prevented readers from fully understanding students' thoughts concerning this phenomenon. This thesis could help readers comprehend the issues and experiences that helpless and mastery-oriented learners endure.

Another interesting article of relevance to the current study was written by Firmin et al. (2004). The researchers explored the concept of helplessness in test taking and the chances of students being helpless during a test due to the construction of the test paper itself. Two groups of university students participated in this study. The first was a child development class while the latter was a general psychology class. The first group undertook the research edition of the Shipley cognitive scales (Shipley, Martin & Gruber, 1997) to assess the knowledge garnered through education and their ability to gain information by logic.

This test consisted of 88 questions, comprising three sections: vocabulary, patterns and abstraction. Participants were asked to complete the questions within 25 minutes and scores were generated. Researchers also searched for questions that students committed most mistakes on and those that students answered correctly. The questions with mistakes were considered difficult, while the remaining ones were deemed easy. Two tests were constructed. Test A consisted of difficult questions first and easy questions last, while Test B was constructed with easy questions first, followed by difficult ones. The second batch of students was asked to participate in the second part of the study. They were randomly divided into two groups. Group 1 was asked to do Test A while Group 2 had to complete Test B.

Researchers found that those who took Test A experienced helplessness due to frustration and inability to answer the difficult questions. Thus, they failed to answer the easier ones. Students in Group 2 fared better in their test. This clearly shows that during a test, it is possible to induce helplessness in students taking tests that are not constructed properly: easy questions first before gradually increasing in difficulty. For a teacher, this is crucial information because the results of students depend partly on the way the questions are placed.

This study would have been more helpful for this current study had it been more focused on language learning. Further, the questions were based on the four components: reading, writing, speaking and listening. This could be a platform for new research in the future to determine whether components in an English language test would work the same way. Another limitation in Shipley et al. (1997) was the lack of distinction between helpless and non-helpless participants. Could non-helpless participants have provided a different set of data? Possibly.

The current thesis research began with the identification of helpless and mastery-oriented students to obtain data that were more reliable. Nevertheless, this research and its data have helped this researcher view the problems experienced by helpless participants in greater depth and construct interview questions in a way that does not induce helplessness. As this study has clearly shown, failed attempts to answer difficult questions will have a detrimental effect on the students' performance in the remaining easy ones.

## **2.5 Overcoming Learned Helplessness**

### **2.5.1 Psycho-education programme**

Ulusoy and Duy's (2013) research relates to the use of a psycho-education programme to overcome learned helplessness. A psycho-education programme uses cognitive behaviour therapy to develop the skills of students and help them overcome irrational beliefs

that could result in learned helplessness (Ulusoy & Duy, 2013). Approximately 142 students in a primary school participated in this research and the Irrational Beliefs Scale for Adolescents and children's ASQ were used. Once data from these scales were gathered, only individuals with high mean scores for both scales were invited for an interview. The researchers wanted to determine whether the psycho-education programme was useful in overcoming helplessness.

Unfortunately, based on the results of the interview, this programme was not considered a complete success. This study supports the importance of this thesis in discovering more regarding this phenomenon first before appropriate programmes or solutions can be constructed to overcome learned helplessness. It is difficult for anyone to find a solution to an issue without first identifying its causes.

### **2.5.2 Feedback, communication and support system**

Greer and Wethered's (1984) investigation on burnout among special education teachers who feel helpless provides a deeper view on the problems they face and the possible ways to help these teachers. The researchers discussed the three deficits experienced by helpless individuals: motivational, cognitive and emotional. Through their findings, they opined that these teachers had adopted a pessimistic explanatory style that made them believe that their problems were permanent, pervasive and personal. Similar to the research conducted by Qutaiba (2011), burnouts are a natural occurrence among special needs educators. Greer and Wethered (1984) reasoned that this could be due to a lack of improvements made by their students, despite teachers' efforts and a perceived lack of control over their professional lives.

Greer and Wethered (1984) further explored the possible causes of perceived helplessness among these educators. They divided these into three specific environments: the classroom, school and community. For the classroom, students' progress meant a great deal

to them. Hence, due to the students' special needs, progress was difficult to achieve, and teachers viewed this as a factor that could not be controlled. This was further exacerbated by other 'uncontrollable' influences such as overwhelming workloads and a lack of administrative support. They also cited the poor behaviour of these students in classrooms as a factor that could not be controlled by the affected teachers. At school, helpless teachers experienced a perceived decrease in control over their own promotions, job stability and school expectations. Conversely, the community continuously expects positive results and improvements to be achieved by special needs students, despite the salaries of these teachers not reflecting fairly the pressure and challenging work they face.

When interviewed, nearly half of the teachers claimed that they would not be in this profession if they could turn back time. The writers proposed that potential special needs teachers be given an honest view of the expectations they would face in this career, both the highs and the lows. They further argued that school administrators continuously consider the heavy workload undertaken by teachers and maintain open communication with them to help prevent a descent into helplessness.

Another solution recommended by Greer and Wethered (1984) was to show evidence of teacher input and control in the developments of their students. Administrators and principals were encouraged to provide teachers with written documents to show progress achieved and provide recognition for hard work (Greer & Wethered, 1984). Teachers should be permitted involvement in making decisions concerning the school's syllabi and curricula to encourage them to take ownership and responsibility for their own teaching (Greer & Wethered, 1984). Finally, Greer and Wethered (1984) recommended that teachers be provided with a proper support system to help them cope with challenges and failures inside and outside the classroom environment. It is rather unfortunate that teachers usually work

alone in their classrooms and in silos. This limits their interactions with other teachers who could offer mutual support.

This article tackled the two deficits of helplessness: motivation and emotion, which could be factors that could influence my respondents' in the English preparatory programme. When a person is helpless, they tend to attribute it to their 'inability' to control their circumstances. They feel unable to overcome their failures and are regularly depressed by this (DeLaune, 1993). The writers offered commendable solutions to overcome these deficits, but learned helplessness causes three deficits, not two. What about cognitive deficit, in which sufferers expect failure? Further, the solutions provided were not tested or researched to assess their credibility. Overcoming learned helplessness may be possible with the solutions provided, but nothing can be certain unless it has been rigorously researched.

On a more positive note, despite being a study that concerned only teachers, its content regarding the perceived lack of control (which was its main theme and a factor that plays a part in helplessness), is still valid to this thesis.

Teachers play a vital role in the academic success of students (Yates, 2009). Apart from imparting knowledge and facilitating students' learning, their outlook also affects their students' progress. Moghari, Lavasani, Bagherian and Afshari (2011) asserted that there is a connection between students' perceptions of their teacher's academic optimism and students' achievement in English language acquisition. They suggested that academic optimism is the positive outlook that encourages teachers to be optimistic. In return, this positivity influences students to be positive towards their own learning. This, according to Moghari et al. (2011), could be due to students who continually observe their teachers and hold them in high regard (Ziniel, n.d.).

This study's participants were 741 students at the high school level who had completed the English Language Self-Efficacy and the Perception of Teacher Academic



Optimism Questionnaires. The findings indicate that students' perceptions of teachers' academic optimism towards them could lead the former investing greater effort in their studies. This is because students perceive that there is an expectation by their teachers for them to achieve more in their studies. Students perceive this as their teachers believing that they could achieve more than their own academic goals. Hence, while communicating and interacting with students in class to facilitate their learning, teachers' comments and feedback are positively accepted by the students.

These findings align with those of Olvera (2015), who discovered a correlation between teachers' perceptions of their students and students' results. In other words, if a teacher displays a positive outlook towards their student's academic potential and provides positive feedback, the students could also produce a positive attitude towards their own studies. The studies by Moghari et al. (2011) and Olvera (2015) have some common elements to my own study due to the former's focus on the subject English and also both are related to the factors which could affect learners in class.

Parents and teachers can influence the lives of learners (McCarter, 2013). Unlike the article by Moghari et al. (2011), which focuses on teachers, Orkin, May and Wolf (2017) examined the role of parents. Their research highlights the importance of feedback and comments by parents to learners. Orkin et al. (2017) specifically sought to find whether poor support by parents while assisting their children during homework could exacerbate students' helpless behaviour.

This study involved 36 parent-child partnerships. The children were asked to do language, reading and motivational skill assessments while their parents were requested to complete several questionnaires. There were three questionnaires using the Likert scale for the parents. The first measured parent practices, the second examined parenting style, and the last measured children's helpless behaviours. A research assistant was assigned to each child

to administer four tests and questionnaires. The first was the Gray oral reading test. The second was the clinical evaluation of language fundamentals, followed by the Behaviour Rating Inventory of Executive Function Parent form. Finally, a modified version of the Reading Motivation Questionnaire was conducted.

The results uncovered several insights. First, parents who micromanaged their children's homework through intrusion resulted in the latter displaying helpless behaviour. These intrusions came in the form of interruptions, always correcting their children while the latter were trying to solve academic problems. Next, students who showed signs of helplessness in this study by Orkin et al. (2017) were not affected by their low reading and linguistic abilities, but their perception of poor abilities. This perception is because parents who prevent their children from trying by instructing them what to do unknowingly undermine their confidence and promote self-doubt.

Greer and Wethered's (1984) article shows the importance of feedback and support in overcoming helplessness. Recent studies by Moghari et al. (2011) and Orkin et al. (2017) add further weight to this assertion by suggesting that constructive comments and support from teachers and parents could result in a more positive student attitude towards challenges. These articles by Moghari et al. (2011) and Orkin et al. (2017) allow me to have better insight on the possible factors which could influence the students' participation in the English preparatory programme and their conceptions regarding it.

### **2.5.3 Focus on solutions**

Diener and Dweck (1978) were precise and relevant in their attempt to explore the characteristics of helpless and mastery-oriented people who faced difficult tasks. They explored the problem before seeking solutions for learned helplessness. There were two studies conducted in Diener and Dweck's (1978) research. The first examined students' reactions to the difficult tasks, while the second focused more on the words used by students

when facing these tasks. Both studies consisted of two groups of Grade 5 pupils: 68 for the first study and 60 for the second. Participants completed the IAR scale to discern the helpless from the mastery-oriented. For the first study, participants were questioned on their opinions of those tasks and to what they attributed their problems. For the second, students were required to verbalise their thoughts when attempting to solve the tasks.

The results of these studies were analysed and the researchers discovered that helpless students in both studies tended to focus on the causes of their failures and blamed them on uncontrollable factors such as luck and lack of ability. Conversely, their mastery-oriented counterparts analysed their problems and developed different strategies to overcome them. This research focused on the reactions of both helpless and non-helpless participants when facing problems. However, the suggestions made by the researchers to help children overcome helplessness based on the data attained are helpful to this thesis. Perhaps the researchers could expand a little on their solutions and provide possible teaching methods to overcome helplessness. This study by Diener and Dweck (1978) used the IAR scale which is the same instrument I used for my thesis. It allows me to see the possible value of using this scale to discern potential helpless respondents of my thesis from the mastery-oriented ones.

Diener and Dweck (1978) recommended the use of focusing on solutions instead of problems when dealing with academic challenges. This recommendation was echoed by Falout (2012) in his study of Japanese students learning the English language. Falout's (2012) study involved 157 university students. A questionnaire was used to identify how participants lost, recaptured and maintained their motivation when learning the English language at university. He compared the different coping processes of those with a positive outlook on themselves learning English and those with a negative outlook. Based on this research, Falout (2012) recommended that solutions in the form of methods or strategies, not answers, be

demonstrated to learners. This way, when learners encounter issues in the future, they will review various ways to solve those problems before deciding on the most suitable.

Interestingly Falout's (2012) study was skewed towards how learners lost, recaptured and maintained their motivation when learning English. It was not aimed to find solutions to learned helplessness. However, during the process of his research, Falout (2012) realised that those who displayed traits of helplessness were most likely not to be able to regain their motivation when they encountered difficulties. He further discovered that those who successfully recaptured and maintained their motivation had a more positive outlook on themselves as learners; their past learning experiences taught them to exert effort when facing difficulties and not surrender when challenges occur.

Finally, Falout (2012) suggested that teachers should verbalise the different methods used to solve problems, as it encourages learners to connect those strategies to positive learning outcomes. This method is similar to the one recommended by Diener and Dweck (1978). Both articles by Diener and Dweck (1978) and Falout (2012) show that despite the gap between both studies, similarities could be found in the solution to possibly overcoming helplessness.

#### **2.5.4 Stress management, task focus and academic intervention**

Ganz and Ganz's (2013) article provides potential solutions for teachers to help their students overcome learned helplessness. They sought to discover the influence of stress and test anxiety on learned helplessness. A questionnaire and three assessment instruments were used in this research to measure an individual's coping ability, stress level and test anxiety. The results of this study attest to the data of earlier research (Dweck & Wortman, 1982, as cited in Ganz & Ganz, 2013), which shows that students who have high anxiety could be affected by learned helplessness. Ganz and Ganz formulated four ways that schools could support students to overcome perceived helplessness:

1. introduce programmes to help students manage stress
2. improve students' learning environment
3. educate students to focus on tasks
4. encourage the intervention of school staff.

Despite providing explanations that are clear and concise for each solution, there is an issue that should not be overlooked. These solutions are based on one cause of learned helplessness: anxiety. The other possible causes of this learning issue are not acknowledged. Surely other causes could contribute to learned helplessness? This thesis will provide more comprehensive data that will aid in finding potential solutions to helplessness.

### **2.5.5 Journals and self-evaluation**

Coley and Hoffman (1990) examined the issue of learned helplessness from a more focused angle: 'at-risk' Grade 6 readers. Six students were chosen for this study based on their poor performance in reading and continuous attendance for remedial classes for at least two years. They had experienced failure and were thought to have a very poor opinion of themselves as learners. The researchers decided to measure the effectiveness of a programme they had designed to overcome this problem.

This programme consisted of three segments: question response cues, journals and self-evaluation. Coley and Hoffman (1990) strongly believed that question response cues would be beneficial for students to improve their asking and response skills. Images were used to hone the individuals' comprehension abilities by teaching them the meaning and significance of the images in relation to the comprehension questions. Another segment or solution of this programme was the writing of journals. The journal was divided into two columns: left and right. In the left column, comments made by fellow peers and keywords used during lessons were noted, while the other column was used by participants to pen their thoughts and reflections. Teachers also used the right column to provide feedback and

comments. This solution, according to the researcher, would encourage students to be more aware of their understanding and analyse their peers' strategies to answer the comprehension questions. Further, they were given greater responsibility for their learning and the adoption of a positive attitude towards their own ability to overcome their learning issues.

The final segment was self-evaluation. Participants were asked to assess their own learning experiences by answering three questions:

1. 'What kind of thinker were you this week?' (to be answered on a 1–5 scale, 1 for poor and 5 for excellent)
2. 'What was the best thing you did this week?'
3. 'What do you hope to do next week?'

The researchers found an improvement in the participants' progress towards reading. Their results suggested that they were more positive than they had been a few months ago. Although this programme was a success, the method used to select participants is a potential limitation. The researchers chose students they thought would have poor opinions of themselves due to repeated academic failures. Although it is true that people who feel helpless are pessimistic towards their own learning (Diener & Dweck, 1978), this might not be enough to label a person helpless. The researchers should use scales such as the IAR, which have been used by others and proven to be reliable, to identify helpless individuals instead.

Coley and Hoffman (1990) suggested that self-evaluation could alleviate helplessness by encouraging learners to take control of their own learning by analysing their own academic problems and trying to find possible solutions. Goodall and Johnston-Wilder (2015) further enhanced this idea by introducing the concept of 'resilience', investing effort despite many challenges to learning. Goodall and Johnston-Wilder (2015) acknowledged that some parents have issues with mathematics. They called this 'mathematics anxiety', in which

individuals who fear mathematics refuse to overcome their fear and instead run from it.

Therefore, they suggested that mathematical resilience, in this instance for parents, could help those affected by mathematics anxiety.

Goodall and Johnston-Wilder (2015) used a case study to understand the helplessness experienced by both mother and daughter, the introduction of mathematical resilience to this mother–daughter issue and the result of this introduction. This study began with how the mother, Heather, was first conditioned to feel helpless due to her inability to overcome her fear of mathematics at a young age. Later, when her daughter Rose experienced issues with mathematics, Heather volunteered to help her daughter but was told by Rose’s teachers to avoid this, as she could further exacerbate matters. Reluctantly, she agreed and by Grade 6, Rose was deemed to be at a low level compared to her classmates. It did not help that Rose became emotionally affected because her teachers gave negative comments about her poor mathematics grades by implying that she was not investing enough effort. Both Heather and Rose were rendered helpless.

Fortunately, Heather became familiar with Johnston-Wilder, who was in the education industry, and decided to seek her help in tutoring Rose. Heather had anticipated a response of disdain and mockery, but it was completely positive instead. She listened intently and talked calmly to Heather and reassured her with sound advice. In addition to providing lessons for Rose, Johnston-Wilder recommended that both mother and daughter self-evaluate their situation. Heather continued to self-evaluate her learning problems and tried to find solutions for them. Both mother and daughter are coping with their learning issues well and are more confident in overcoming them. This form of resilience, refusing to surrender, seeking help and self-evaluating, shows that this method could help overcome helplessness.

Coley and Hoffman (1990) and Goodall and Johnston-Wilder (2015) provided possible methods to overcome the issue of learned helplessness. Although the former’s form

of self-evaluation consisted of written journals and the latter did not, both have been shown to have the potential to overcome learned helplessness. These potential solutions could highlight to me the possible methods used in my participants' classes which could affect their statuses whether helpless or otherwise.

### **2.5.6 Learned hopefulness**

Zimmerman (1990) proposed that helplessness is overcome by adopting the opposite outlook: learned hopefulness. Learned hopefulness is the process of acquiring and using skills to solve problems to gain the self-belief through psychological empowerment (Wehmeyer, 1999). These crucial skills, which are meant to empower those who feel helpless to take control of their lives by reducing stress and solving problems, can be gained through experience and observing others (Bandura, 1982). The researcher deliberated that these skills could be attained professionally by attending formal classes and workshops.

Another way these skills can be developed is through voluntary or charitable activities that aim to help the less fortunate. This is considered a more natural setting than the former (Rappaport, 1987). One main advantage that the natural environment provides to individuals is that it encourages a form of social support and alleviates feelings of loneliness (Kieffer, 1984). A helpless person suffers an emotional deficit that causes them to feel sad and depressed. However, with proper support in a natural setting (like the one mentioned previously), the person knows they are not alone and help is readily available. Further, rendering help to others provides individuals with a sense of control, which is something that helpless individuals assume they do not possess.

Zimmerman's (1990) study sought to explore the effectiveness of learned hopefulness in combating against helplessness. Two groups of participants were used for Zimmerman's (1990) study. One consisted of university students between the ages of 16 and 39 years, while the other comprised non-university community residents between 18 and 74 years. They were



requested to complete questionnaires related to three variables: participation, psychological empowerment and alienation. Data from this study showed that participating in community development helped improve the psychological empowerment of individuals. However, this was limited only to organisations that encouraged members to be involved in decision-making and empowered members to fill positions that demanded responsibility. Further, results also showed that for empowerment to be achieved, voluntary organisations must encourage members to be involved in collaborative activities using specific skills, such as problem-solving.

This study indicates that solutions to helplessness can be achieved when the researcher understands the predicament of a helpless individual. Zimmerman (1990) mentioned multiple times in his study that the empowerment of individuals is important. This is true because a helpless person feels that they are powerless when they are in ‘uncontrollable’ situations.

Section 2.4 focuses on possible ways to overcome helplessness. The articles presented in this section allow me to have an overview on these potential solutions and to have a more informed idea on the solutions which could be presented in Chapter 6 of this thesis. Similarities between some of these studies to mine can be observed. For instance, Greer and Wethered (1984), Moghari et al. (2011), Orkin et al. (2017) and Goodall and Johnston-Wilder (2015) focus on the potential factors which could affect my respondents’ learning in the English preparatory programme whereas Zimmerman’s (1990) study deals with students who are in an institution of higher education which is the same as mine. Despite the age of some of these studies which could be 30 years old, their credibility in the current context is never in doubt. Various articles or studies which produced similar results despite their “age gap”. For instance, Diener and Dweck’s (1978) study and Falout’s (2012) both recommend focus on learning strategies rather than providing answers to learners. Also, articles by Coley and

Hoffman (1990) and Goodall and Johnston-Wilder (2015) both recommend self-evaluation of learners to overcome helplessness.

## **2.6 Tools to Measure Learned Helplessness and Mastery-Orientedness**

How can helplessness be identified in students? What method or scale is reliable enough to do this?

A common problem which teachers face is the pessimism and negativity displayed by some students facing tasks deemed a little challenging (Yates, 2009). They display characteristics of helpless people by giving up easily, refusing to answer questions and constantly providing excuses to avoid completing assignments. Yates (2009) lamented the lack of research studies on the perceptions of teachers towards learners affected by learned helplessness or a reliable way to identify helpless students in class. She explained that these are legitimate comments, especially for some mathematics teachers who could face the arduous task of teaching a subject that is potentially viewed by some students as one of the driest subjects. To exacerbate this unfortunate situation further, there is a misconception among helpless learners that competency in mathematics is mainly due to heredity and not effort (McLeod, 1992). The helpless students in McLeod's (1992) study further assumed that all mathematical questions must be answered and solved within a short time (McLeod, 1992). These reasons prompt students to dislike this subject and perform poorly in it.

Yates (2009) proposed that there should be an efficient way for teachers to identify helplessness and those affected by it because through this identification, the issue can be resolved in its early stages. She decided to test the reliability of the Student Behaviour Checklist (SBC), designed by Fincham, Hokoda and Sanders (1989), because it has been used in the identification of helpless learners by teachers. She also tested whether this checklist could be shortened.

Approximately 293 students, from Grade 3–Year 7 who had to take mathematics as a core subject and 58 of their mathematics teachers in South Australia participated in this study. A year later, the teachers were contacted and requested to complete the SBC based on the students they taught who had been part of the study. The checklist consisted of 24 items and teachers had to choose from a scale of 1 (not true) to 5 (very true) the description that best fit their students' mathematics performances. Results from Yates's (2009) study showed that the SBC could potentially be shortened from 24 items to 10. The researcher further suggested that this checklist in its original form (24 items) could be ideal to identify helpless and mastery-oriented students.

Yates (2009) recommended that teachers be positive and educate their students to learn from failures. Further, anxiety-inducing activities such as mathematics competitions should not be encouraged in class, as they do not support positive learning because they focus on competitiveness between individuals. The main theme of Yates's (2009) study was to investigate the effectiveness of the SBC in identifying people who are suffering from learned helplessness. The researcher opted to view this from the teachers' perspective, which is useful in the education sector. Teachers should know how to administer reliable tools, not only the SBC, to recognise students suffering from self-perceived helplessness. This will possibly help them take the necessary steps to support students and prevent them from being helplessness.

Despite its effectiveness in identifying helplessness, one shortcoming of the SBC which in my opinion prevents me from using this tool for my thesis; is that the user has to be a teacher, trainer or someone who is able to observe students. Hence, this tool would not be ideal for my study since teachers are not involved in this study.

Another article that emphasised tools to identify helplessness was mentioned by Sorrenti et al. (2014). She and her colleagues wanted to determine whether it would be

possible to construct a questionnaire that could be used by the students themselves. This self-administered questionnaire, according to the researchers, could eliminate any discriminatory factors that could influence the true measurement of helplessness. Since many questionnaires and scales used today are administered by teachers, Sorrenti et al. (2014) believed that a self-administered instrument could help students recognise their helplessness and develop measures to address this weakness and become more mastery-oriented.

Fifty male and 54 female students from an Italian middle school participated in this study; 8.7 per cent were from a higher economic status while 55.8 per cent and 35.6 per cent were from middle- and lower-income groups. They adopted the SBC, translated it to Italian and amended the questions to be student-oriented, since the original form was meant for teachers. There were 24 questions altogether, 12 learned helplessness and 12 mastery-orientedness, and students had to answer these on a Likert scale: 1 (not true)–5 (absolutely true). They called this modified scale the ‘Learned Helplessness Questionnaire’ (LHQ) (Sorrenti et al., 2014).

The researchers found that they could reduce the number of questions from 24 to 13, with six being the helpless items and seven mastery-oriented. They further mentioned that data from this study showed that the new LHQ, consisting of 13 items was reliable enough for students to self-administer. They reiterated the importance of using this scale to eradicate any form of bias, which may result in a misdiagnosis of a students’ helplessness.

One concern regarding this study, also acknowledged by the researchers, is the reliability of the data of this scale if measured only by students’ answers. They recommended that future results garnered from this tool be compared to those of the SBC, which are based on teachers’ answers, to improve validity and reliability. Sorrenti et al. (2014) also suggested that future research be conducted in different parts of Italy, the LHQ be tweaked for use at

school orientations to help teachers identify students who feel helpless and are at risk of helplessness, and to analyse helplessness during adolescence.

The LHQ was developed by Sorrenti et al. (2014) to counter the issue of biasness which teachers might have on their students. Despite its success in successfully identifying helpless individuals, this instrument could pose a potential issue for me if I were to use it for my study. This issue is the reliability of the questions developed by Sorrenti et al. (2014) themselves because they adapted the SBC and modified the questions. This might work to suit their needs and environment but could be different for me. Therefore, the LHQ was not the tool for me.

Finally, Mannarini (2008) studied the validity of the IAR scale, which has been translated to Italian using the many-faceted Raasch model (MFRM). The MFRM examines various factors, such as a respondent's capabilities, education and social background, which could affect the IAR measurement. A total of 485 Italian students volunteered to complete the IAR scale and their results were analysed using the MFRM approach. Results indicated that the IAR scale is valid and free of prejudices of sex, grades and kinds of schools attended.

This study shed further light on the validity of the IAR scale, which was be used in this thesis. Further, it reinforces that the IAR is suitable for analysis of the attribution of successes and failure, and the locus of control of the respondents. The locus of control, which examines whether a respondent believes that outcomes or results are based on internal or external factors (Eslami-Rasekh, Rezaei & Davoudi, 2012), is closely related to the theory of learned helplessness. The former looks at internal and external factors that influence an outcome, whereas the latter relates to the misconceived belief that outcomes are difficult to alter (Seligman, 1972).

For this thesis research, the IAR scale (Crandall et al., 1962) was used to differentiate helpless participants from mastery-oriented students. The IAR scale comprises 34 questions

with two answers each: positive and negative. This scale examines the phenomena to which participants attribute or accredit their successes or downfalls (Hokoda & Fincham, 1995). A helpless person attributes their conditions, good or bad, to bad luck or unchangeable situations, while a non-helpless individual believes effort is the key to success (Diener & Dweck, 1978).

The IAR scale was selected for this research for its effectiveness and simplicity. Unlike the SBC, it does not need another person's perspective about a target audience: the IAR gets straight to the respondents' answers. This reduces bias (Sorrenti et al., 2014). The LHQ on the other hand is the modified version of the SBC. Changes have been made to suit the needs of the researchers, Sorrenti et al. (2014). This might not be suitable to my research needs and to further adjust it could affect its effectiveness. Furthermore, I would like to reiterate that this IAR scale targets the locus of control of the participants. This means, focusing on their perceptions on events, positive and negative, and whether they attribute them to their internal or external locus of control. Therefore, the IAR is the right instrument for my study.

My participants are international students acquiring the English language. Hence, it is appropriate to use a tool that is simple to explain and use. Furthermore, the vocabulary used in the IAR scale is used regularly in Singapore. Words such as "school", "puzzle" and "teacher" are not uncommon in their everyday usage among residents in this country. Due to this familiarity, participants will find the IAR scale more user-friendly. Prior to completing the IAR scale, participants were instructed how to complete the scale, which required them to read and understand the questions, analyse the two options provided for each question and select the one they deemed most appropriate. This would have been a difficult task if the instrument used consisted of difficult questions and complex words. This is important

because a difficult tool could jeopardise the answers provided by the participants, as they could provide unreliable data due to misunderstanding the questions.

Despite its ease of use, this scale does not compromise on effectiveness and reliability in identifying helpless individuals and their opposite counterparts. Research by Hokoda and Fincham (1995) on the family's role in the cultivation of helpless or mastery-oriented traits among children successfully used the IAR scale to differentiate between the two groups of children. Diener and Dweck (1978) indicated that helpless individuals perform poorly once they experience failure, while mastery-oriented students persevere to perform better. They also used the IAR scale to identify helpless and mastery-oriented participants.

A common limitation of these studies is the absence in knowledge regarding helpless international students studying in a country in which English is the lingua franca. How will studying in a country that teaches only in English affect these students? Will students be affected when acquiring a foreign language from non-native speaking teachers? What is the role of the culture in education and acquiring a different language? Does a foreign environment with similar but not identical customs and beliefs hinder or promote the learning process of helpless students? These are just some questions that require answers. However, all these questions have one common theme: acquiring the English language in a foreign land. This study specifically focuses on international students acquiring English in Singapore.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods**

This chapter contains six sections that outline data collection methods and tools. The first two sections concern the theoretical perspective and the research approach of this thesis. The following three parts focus on the study context, its design and the participants. The final section represents the data collection tools: the IAR scale and an interview.

### **3.1 Theoretical Perspectives**

Constructivism is a theory whereby various occurrences or phenomenon constructed by human beings and the effects these have on the masses (Salkind, 2005). It also provides an interpretation on how individuals gain knowledge (University of Sydney, 2016). A constructivist view postulates that knowledge and information could be made or constructed based on an individual's experiences and interactions with their surroundings (Murphy, 1997). It is also understood that constructivism focuses on factors such as culture, history and language use that could influence an individual's experience since experience and understanding are constructed by these three factors (Willig, 2010). This study aimed to explore whether participants showing signs of learned helplessness, such as negativity and pessimism, could be helpless. If this is the case, what factors could have influenced this helplessness in the first place? However, if this is not the case, what could have made them display such similar traits of helplessness?

As mentioned by Creswell (2003), constructivists study the opinions of participants regarding the topic that is being studied. Why is this of importance to this study? Through data provided by both negative- and positive-oriented students, a firsthand view of those who could or could not be affected by learned helplessness can be obtained. Comparisons can be made and differences between both groups of people will provide insight into the issue of helplessness. Learned helplessness is a conditioned response (DeLaune, 1993). Therefore,



those affected by it are individuals who are likely to have suffered unfortunate experiences in conditions that would induce helplessness in them at a very young age or have been influenced by the behaviours of parents and teachers (Walling & Martinek, 1995). Constructivism could possibly aid in the exploration of these experiences from the participants' perspective.

Further, this thesis aims to learn more about the environments of participants in the past and present. What kind of environments are these? The focus is on learning environments, which include cultural and societal aspects, since constructivism suggests that environment shapes and constructs people (Flick, 2002). However, social constructivism is more suitable to be used for my study. Although constructivism provides data through information provided by my respondents, social constructivism presents a more complete view. This is because it takes into account the interactions individuals have with their environments and also knowledge they make from these communications through their own unique experiences in the past (Shah, 2019). This will deepen my comprehension on the environmental influences that may have led participants to be helpless or otherwise.

### **3.2 Research Approach**

I have chosen a phenomenological approach for the simple reason that it allows greater comprehension of the learning issue, based on the knowledge and the understanding of participants (Creswell, 2007). According to the definition of phenomenology, this methodology seeks to understand the experiences of a group of people experiencing a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007) through the lenses of the individuals themselves (Howitt, 2010). In other words, phenomenology allows examination of a phenomenon from the viewpoints of participants, who come from different parts of the world (Willig, 2010). This is crucial since I seek to explore the experiences of these students in the English preparatory programme.

This study aims to discover how these students began being helpless cultivating their helplessness seeds and how has it affected them as foreign students in a foundation English programme. Phenomenology encourages me to do this from direct participant data. I am able to have a better comprehension of learned helplessness through the lives and learning experiences of participants (Salkind, 2005). Through this direct approach, external factors such as second-hand opinion, which may lead to bias, will be eradicated. Hence, the data and information gathered in this study will be more authentic.

### **3.3 Study Design**

There are two parts to this study context. First, students had to complete the IAR scale (Crandall et al., 1962) because this scale can be used to identify students affected by helplessness. Once helpless individuals were identified, individual interview sessions with the participants took place. The reason for the latter was to gain information regarding the learning experiences of helpless participants and compare them to experiences of their non-helpless counterparts.

The class of students participating in this research completed the IAR scale. This was done in a classroom at the college, an environment that was comfortable and familiar to them. Once the scale had been completed, students were allowed to leave the classroom if they chose to. The scores from this scale were then tabulated. Students were not informed of their scores. Only the first five students who had scores of 7 and below and the first five students with scores of 8 and above were invited for the interview. A sample size of 10 was used for the in-depth interviews that followed this stage of the research, however this size later reduced to 8 because 2 respondents decided to drop out of this study. Despite this decrease, the quality of data gathered was not jeopardised because probing questions used in the interviews could create a data saturation which would then affect the validity of my research (Amerson, 2011).

Further, my study was interested in comprehending a possible phenomenon of helplessness that could be the result of social interactions of the interviewees (Dworkin, 2012). Those selected for the interview were given five days to read the research participant information sheet and consider whether they would like to continue participating in this research. Once the selected individuals had consented, they were requested to attend the in-depth interview five days later.

The would-be interviewed students were asked about their desired interview location. This is because I wanted the students to be as comfortable as possible when they provided answers for my interview questions. A classroom environment, like the one that students were accustomed to, was chosen by them for the interviews. Why would they collectively select a classroom? The classroom setting, I believe, made the students feel like they were attending a normal class, which would encourage them to feel at ease with their answers. Since the 'losing face' culture is still observed by my Asian students (Tan & Yates, 2011), conducting these individual interviews in the presence of mastery-oriented classmates would embarrass some participants. Once embarrassed, their answers might not have been as authentic as possible. Therefore, students who were being interviewed were interviewed in private.

Each interviewee was seated in front of the interviewer and a voice recorder was placed on a nearby table to record the interviews. The use of this recording tool will be discussed in the next few sections.

Initially, I wanted to select participants through the process of observation. This method was used to successfully identify helpless participants in earlier research studies conducted by Hsu (2011) and LeUnes et al. (1980). Observing students in class is an effective method because it allows close observation of students' reactions when facing challenging tasks and assignments. What kind of reactions was I supposed to search for? Some classic

tell-tale signs that indicate helplessness are regularly skipping classes, not willingly participating in class activities such as reading aloud, refraining from tasks considered difficult, and depression (DeLaune, 1993).

However, after much deliberation I decided to refrain from using this method. As mentioned previously, this research must be reliable but using my own students could result in an unfair and biased outcome. Bias is an unfair and prejudiced view regarding a certain issue or topic. In the context of research, it is the introduction of factors that could influence the results (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). My students were mainly from Asian countries and the strict observation of culture and tradition could still be felt even when they are away from their home countries. For instance, most Asian students view their teachers and people of authority who could influence their academic results with great respect (Goyette & Xie, 1999), while their parents believe in maintaining a positive relationship with their children's schools, including not questioning teachers' decisions and teachings (Kim, 2007).

With this in mind, I questioned the wisdom of using my own students as participants in the study. Although they were comfortable discussing their own opinions with me in class freely and without fear, would they do the same in my research? How confident could I be that data and answers provided were true? They could, out of respect towards me as their teacher due to cultural observances, provide answers that they thought would please me (Ziniel, n.d.). This would be detrimental to my goal of generating true and authentic data.

I therefore conducted my research at a different college using learners I had not met before. This college was very similar to mine in terms of its English preparatory programme and students were mainly from the same countries as those from my college. I contacted the upper management of the school regarding my intention of conducting my study at their college. They felt that the study could help not only their own students, but also others who could be suffering from helplessness.

### 3.4 Participants/Sample

This research was conducted at a private college in Singapore. This college has provided undergraduate and postgraduates for nearly three decades and there is an equal mixture of local and international students. The international students comprise mainly Chinese, Vietnamese and Malaysian students; however, there are also learners from other parts of Asia such as Laos, Thailand and Indonesia.

Participants were aged between 18 and 32 years and were at the advanced level. The total number of students who completed the IAR scale was 18, and 5 were helpless while the remaining were mastery oriented. However, only 10 were selected for the interview based on a first come first served basis whereby the first 5 students with a mastery oriented score of 8 and above were chosen and the first 5 with a helpless score of 7 and below were selected. Based on the scores collected, the mastery oriented group consisted of 4 female students, a Chinese, a Vietnamese, a South Korean, and an Indonesian, and a male Laotian (see Table. 1). The learned helplessness group comprised of 3 Chinese students, 1 female and 2 males, 1 male Vietnamese and 1 male Malaysian (see Table. 1). However, 2 students, 1 female Chinese and 1 male Vietnamese, from the helpless group decided to forego the interviews and only 3 agreed to take part in the interview (see Table. 1).

**Table 1.**

**The students who completed the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility (IAR) scale and chosen to move on to the interviewing stage. The ones in bold belong to the mastery oriented group while those underlined are in the helpless group.**

<b>MALE</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>IAR Scores</b>	<b>FEMALE</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>IAR Scores</b>
<u>Chinese (HCM1)</u>	23	-6	<u>Chinese* (HCF)</u>	-	2

<u>Chinese (HCM2)</u>	32	4	<b>Chinese (MOCF)</b>	22	20
<b>Laotian (MOLM)</b>	26	14	<b>Vietnamese (MOVF)</b>	26	22
<u>Malaysian (HMM)</u>	20	4	<b>South Korean (MOSKF)</b>	22	22
<u>Vietnamese* (HVM)</u>	-	2	<b>Indonesian (MOIF)</b>	23	22

**Note\*** These students dropped out of the study after completing their IAR scale and chose not to participate in the interview. Students refused to divulge their ages.

The participants had shown understanding and competency in English, although had not yet fully acquired it. All the respondents were international students. These students were briefed on the objectives of the study and provided with the research participant information documents. I informed them several times that they had the right to not participate in my research and, at any time of the study, had the right to withdraw without any negative repercussions. These students were then given about 15 minutes to read the documents and digest the information provided during the briefing. They were encouraged to ask questions and voice any immediate concerns. The whole briefing took about 45 minutes. The students were told that they had five days to make a decision on their participation. My contact details, telephone number and email address, were provided and students were told that they had the right to contact me for more details on the study at any time during the five-day consideration period.

The IAR scale was used to differentiate helpless participants from others. All 18 completed the IAR scale. The IAR scale cut-off scores are 7 and below for helpless individuals and 8 and above for non-helpless students.

One issue concerning the process of selecting interviewees based on their IAR scores could be the possible perception I had towards them. As mentioned earlier, the IAR is used to identify helpless and mastery oriented individuals. With the knowledge that I had regarding the potential interviewees and their IAR scores, I could possibly extract answers from the interviews to match the results of their IAR scores so as to meet the desired outcome. To counter this issue, my questions were open-ended ones and followed by probing questions. So how could these open-ended questions help make this interview data to be reliable? Cresswell (2008) explained that this type of question could improve the validity of data gained as it does not put a constraint to the content of the answers provided. This could then produce answers which are unexpected and unanticipated by the interviewer (Lupton, 2015), minimising the possibility of bias and misperception.

### **3.5 Data Collection Tools**

Despite my application being approved, observation was still not feasible. This was mostly due to constraints set by the upper management of that college who acted as gatekeepers. Saunders (2006) explained that gatekeepers are those who have total access to the organisation and complete control. I was explicitly told that I was not allowed to sit in classes during lessons and was given a maximum of two weeks to collect my data. The upper management feared that my presence in class while observing participants could distract the students and hinder their academic progress. Despite my explaining the advantages of observation, allowing the researcher to study an event naturally without being too conspicuous (Salkind, 2005), they remained steadfast in their decision. Therefore, I was left with only two data collection tools: the IAR scale and individual interviews.

### 3.5.1 Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Scale

A class of 18 international students at the advanced level of the English preparatory programme were invited to take part in my research; all of them volunteered to participate. I used the IAR (see appendix A), which consists of 34 forced-choice questions and one positive and negative answer for every question, to identify those suffering from learned helplessness (Crandall et al., as cited in Diener & Dweck, 1978). This scale was used by Diener and Dweck (1978), Ulusoy and Duy (2013) and Overton and Meehan (1982) with much success. Although the IAR scale was used for studies with a large pool of participants, such as Diener and Dweck's (1978) study on words used after failures (which had 70 participants) and Overton and Meehan's (1982) research on gender and helplessness (which consisted of 60 individuals), Martinek (1996) did a case study on helplessness based on the experience of only one individual. He used the IAR scale to confirm that she was indeed helpless. Therefore, there was no issue that this scale could only be used for a sizeable number of students. As shown in the studies above, this scale is flexible enough to be used for any sample size.

To calculate the scores for the IAR scale, each positive answer is a +1 while a negative one is -1. These scores were added; a total score of 7 and lower denotes helplessness and an 8 and above is mastery-oriented (Crandall et al., 1965). For example:

1. If a teacher passes you to the next grade, it is because:
  - a. She liked you.
  - b. You did good work.
2. When you do well on a school test, it is because:
  - a. You work hard.
  - b. The test is very easy.
3. When your work is very hard to understand, it is because:



- a. The teacher isn't giving you enough help.
- b. You aren't listening to what she says.

If a student chooses 'b' for all three questions above, since 'b' in Question 1 is positive, they score +1. The second answer is a negative (-1) and the third is a positive (+1). Therefore, the total score is  $+1 - 1 + 1 = 1$ . Respondents with a cut off score of 7 and below are considered to have the helpless scores while those with 8 and above have the mastery oriented scores. Positive options focus more on an individual's effort, while negative answers focus more on external factors such as other people's behaviour and luck. This is in line with the concept of learned helplessness, whereby helpless individuals feel that no amount of effort can help them overcome challenges or failures (Diener & Dweck, 1978).

### **3.6 Interview**

Interviewing is considered one of the most popular tools of data collection in educational research. Its flexibility endears many researchers to it (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009). The questions, developed by the interviewer, could help the researcher comprehend the perceptions and feelings of the respondents regarding the topic of the study (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009). I chose to conduct a semi-structured interview because I wanted to learn from participants' own experiences in being helpless and compare their experiences to those who were not.

This semi-structured interview is different from its structured counterpart. The latter does not encourage interviewees to 'stray' from the questions asked by the interviewer, whereas the former allows and encourages them to speak freely as much as they want (McLeod, 2014). According to Howitt (2013), allowing respondents the freedom to speak as much as they desire results in the extraction of a great deal of useful data and information.

One disadvantage, which I had anticipated prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews, was my unfamiliarity with the organisation at which I conducted my interviews.

Familiarity with the organisation would allow greater understanding of respondents' answers, which could be related and influenced by their current learning environment and its cultures (Willig, 2010). To overcome this disadvantage, I spent considerable time poring over the organisation's websites and printed materials to further assimilate with the organisation.

I also built a rapport with the interviewees during the interview by being friendly towards them so that they would not feel scared or intimidated, helping to ensure data accuracy and validity (Wilson & MacLean, 2009). Another strategy I implemented while conducting the interview was to summarise the answers provided by my respondents. By doing this, I was able to maintain respondents' interest throughout the interview and confirm that I fully understood the answers given (Willig, 2010).

Although individual semi-structured interviews are a time-consuming data collection tool (Howitt, 2013), I do not believe the focus group alternative would have been better. It is true that focus groups require only a short time (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009) and respondents in a group interview would debate, argue and study the answers provided by their group members, saving the researcher valuable analysis time (Willig, 2010). Apart from that, interviews done in a group allow participants to be as comfortable as possible (Willig, 2010). This also allows them to feel like they are participating in a normal classroom activity. However, there could be a possibility of 'groupthink', in which respondents tend to have the same or similar views as their friends (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009). The risk of diluting the data was too great. Hence, I made the crucial decision of using a semi-structured interview.

### **3.7 Interview Questions**

Learned helplessness is a conditioned behaviour that is usually brought about by the possible influences of parents and teachers (McCarter, 2013). To fully understand the phenomenon of learned helplessness, the interview questions must be related to both groups

of people. I had to know what respondents, both helpless and non-helpless, experienced in terms of academic matters when they were taught in their home countries and their families. The interview questions (see Appendix B) are based on exploring the learning experiences, past and present, of the students and their family backgrounds, including their opinions on academic excellence. They are in a sequence whereby the first question could provide a better view of the type of education they got in their home countries which could possibly affect the way they learn in the English preparatory programme. The second question is an overview of the learning habits on the interviewees and expectations of teachers and parents. It provides a better understanding to answers provided in question 1 since Ladd (2012) explains that students in a higher economic background could do better at school than their lower economic counterparts. Question three concerns interviewees' reactions towards learning issues which could be used to delve deeper into answers provided in the second question. Question 4 is about expectations of interviewees on the English preparatory programme while the last question is an overview with answers which could be crosschecked with data provided in previous questions. These questions have been used because of the themes related to the IAR scale which can be found in Table 2.

The first question asks about the family background of the respondent, with probing questions focused on their socio-economic background and cultural observances in terms of education. The first reason this question was asked is because of the correlation between socio-economic background and academic grades. Studies have repeatedly shown that those in higher-income groups tend to perform better at school than those in the lower income (Ladd, 2012). It would be valuable to explore the influence of a family's socio-economic background on participants' outlooks on learning and any potential relation to helplessness.

Culture plays an integral role in the lives of international students (Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005) and the lives of their parents, especially Asian parents who strongly believe that

education opens multiple employment opportunities that lead to comfortable lives (Chao & Tseng, 2002). Further, gender roles, a component of culture, were also queried to measure any correlation to helplessness, as in the studies mentioned by Akca (2011) and Yaman et al. (2011). Hence, the factor of culture was also added into one of the probing questions.

The next question examines the learning habits of respondents during their childhoods in their home countries. The first probing question explores the learning styles of the students: surface or deep learning. Martinek (1996) claimed that teachers who were given less control in their profession tend to view their position negatively. Faced with a near impossible task of achieving goals set by the school, the teacher is left with no option but to engage in poor teaching techniques. In English language acquisition, memorisation is considered by many Chinese teachers who teach English as an effective method (Yang & Dai, 2011). However, Krashen (2011) maintained that although there are some benefits to rote memorisation in language acquisition, understanding remains the key method to acquire the English language. Therefore, this probing question could shed some light on whether choosing one over the other or competency in both surface and deep learning would help language acquirers achieve their language goals.

The second and third probing questions deal with whether the influences of teachers and parents affect whether participants experience helplessness. Teachers and parents, since they have the most contact time with the students, will undoubtedly play a prominent role in the latter's attitude towards failure and challenges in their academic life, in this case, in English language acquisition.

The third question relates to participants' immediate reactions when faced with academic problems at school, specifically in the English preparatory programme. All three probing questions aim to extract data from students to identify learned helplessness. The first probing question examines the dependency of respondents on their two closest groups of

people, teachers and friends, when experiencing academic difficulties away from home. The third question seeks to reconfirm the answers provided in the first probing question. A helpless student has a negative outlook on their academic progress and always expects failure (Martinek, 1996). Some may assume that by asking for help, a student is not helpless. However, this is not true because a helpless person could immediately ask for help once they are about to face a known challenge. Their (helpless students) idea of help is to receive answers to the challenging questions. This is similar to McCarter's (2013) study, in which high school students were found to be trained to be helpless by their teachers when the latter spoon-fed students with answers instead of providing strategies to overcome academic issues. This is also where the second probing questions comes into place: the preference of answers over concept understanding or vice versa.

The fourth question seeks to obtain students' opinions regarding their English preparatory course. Data generated from this question is crucial to the development of my research. This is because participants from both groups, helpless and mastery-oriented, would show a certain preference for the type of programme they preferred. By knowing this predilection, I will further understand the likes and dislikes of both groups. The preferences could be unique to each group, which will further shed light to this issue. The contents of the programme's curriculum, modes of assessment, teaching methodologies and personalities will inform me of the scholastic strengths and weaknesses of both helpless and non-helpless respondents.

The final question dealt with the interviewees' opinion about acquiring English. Did they have the inclination to acquire it? Were they forced to undertake this course since it was part of the programme route, they had to tread due to their inability to meet the language requirement? Would a reason to acquire the English language help a student possess the drive and motivation to invest effort to learn English? Would students simply accept the situation

they are in since they have no control and no ownership of their academic aims be automatically deprived of drive once they experience challenges in this programme?

According to Qutaiba (2011), when teachers are not permitted control in their teaching and policies, they suffer from learned helplessness. This could possibly be the case for the respondents who were helpless when they were not given a choice pertaining the English preparatory course.

### **3.8 Data gathering**

Two tools were used to record data from the interview: a recorder and note taking. The former was used to allow me to better analyse my data because I was able to rewind and forward the recording while the latter helped me to jot the facial expressions and body language of respondents during the interviews. These non-verbal reactions would help me have a better understanding of the emotions of the students during the interviews. An audio recorder was used to record the interviews. Consent for this method of recording was provided by participants. I strongly believe that audio recording is useful when findings must be analysed. I could rewind and forward the recording to my liking (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009). Despite some views that using a recorder during an interview could evoke a sense of uneasiness (Willig, 2010) and inhibition in answering questions (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009), my participants were asked about this arrangement and they gave their approval willingly. During the interview, I put the audio recorder on the table between the interviewee and myself. The former was informed of their right to not be recorded at any time during the interview and any part of the interview recorded prior could be erased if requested. Respondents had the right to change any information they provided if they felt that the original answers given were insufficient, incorrect or not a proper reflection of their thoughts. The close proximity of the recorder also meant that the interviewee could

physically reach out and stop the recording if they wished. Finally, I could easily observe whether the recorder was recording the session.

Learned helplessness is not just about verbal responses, but also physical communication (DeLaune, 1993). Thus, I also documented participants' physical reactions, facial expressions and body language during the interview. Their reactions while answering the questions gave the answers greater depth and richness. Note taking can be somewhat distracting to interviewees (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009); therefore, I kept this to a minimum so that focus of the interviewees would remain on the answers they provided. Points that were important and interesting were noted simply and in a summarised manner so that I did not lose focus while interviewing participants.

A phenomenological approach was used to help understand the learning issue of respondents better. These respondents were international students who were enrolled in an English preparatory programme because their English language requirement were not met. Interviews allowed me to comprehend experiences by interviewees better from their own perspectives.

### **3.9 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview data. Howitt (2010) stated that it is the most convenient method for new researchers to study the data efficiently and effectively. However, I chose thematic analysis because it allowed me to discover themes within the data. These analysed themes aid me in making sense of the objectives of my study (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), since I would like to know more about my respondents' experiences in the English preparatory programme and factors that could influence their engagement.

The recorded interviews were listened to repeatedly, to ensure a better and clearer understanding of the contents. Some answers lacked clarity or I feared that I might misunderstand them. I sought to clarify those answers immediately with participants by

telephone or email. Once this was done, I began to transcribe the data from recording to text (Creswell, 2008). Eight participants participated in the interview. This number of respondents meant that the data involved were quite vast. Therefore, the transcribed data were grouped according to the interview questions, not only by interviewees. A pen and paper worked best for me, despite the existence of programmes such as NViVo and Hyper RESEARCH (Creswell, 2008). The reason is because these applications require considerable time and effort to explore all their functions. My data was transcribed manually as it offers a higher level of accuracy (Lapadat, 2000).

After transcribing my data, I used inductive coding for my study. This is because unlike deductive coding, I did not want to have any assumptions of possible themes which could be extracted from the data. By having an unbiased approach themes from my study could be more reliable. Although some may argue that using deductive coding is simpler and encourage accepted generalisations, this was not the direction I would want my research to steer towards. I would like my study to be as authentic as possible without my assumptions being an influence.

I began coding the text in every line or every two to three lines depending on the validity of the contents (Howitt, 2010). For instance, information provided by interviewees such as “...study hard because it is your job.”, “I must work hard and be good in my studies” and “If I can’t get my degree I am so stupid” shows pressure to achieve expectations while “Parents encourage me by saying I could do better”, “My parents will help me by reassuring me” and “I will pray for you” demonstrate encouragement through reassurances. Once this was complete, I evaluated all codes and began deleting those that were not relevant to my study. The remaining codes were grouped according to themes that were consistent with the discussion topic of learned helplessness (Creswell, 2008). For example, pressure to achieve expectations and encouragement through assurances have been grouped to the theme of



motivation and pressure. This is in line with the topic learned helplessness as mentioned by Donnell (2009), Akca (2011) and Salomons et al. (2012). I accompanied each theme with a short write-up and quotations from the recorded interview. This will enhance the authenticity of my thesis (Creswell, 2008).

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Presentation

This chapter will discuss the findings of the research. As noted above, the study was divided into two phases. Phase one involved using the IAR scale to establish whether the participants were helpless based on their scores. A class of 18 international students in an English preparatory programme was invited to participate in this research. All 18 international students volunteered to participate and completed the IAR scale. Phase two was the interview stage to explore experiences of students who were mastery-oriented and those who were helpless, as indicated by their IAR scores. Based on a first-come–first-served basis, 10 students (five mastery-oriented and five helpless) were invited for the interview. However, two students decided to pull themselves out of the interview, leaving the helpless group to three students. The findings of this phase are supported by quotations from the interviews.

### 4.1 Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Scale

There are 34 items in the IAR questionnaire and they are divided into several categories, as shown in Table.2. These categories are significant because they could help answer one of the objectives of this study, which is the factors that could affect the students' engagement in the English preparatory programme. By tying the IAR scores of some participants to their interview answers, we will further elucidate factors that could influence students' commitment to the preparatory programme.

Table 2

*Questions in the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Scale Divided into 10 Categories*

Categories	Question number
Teachers' influences (TI)	1, 13, 16, 22, 33 & 34
Parents' influences (PI)	5, 18, 26 & 31

Scholarly accomplishment (SA)	2, 6, 19 & 23
Memorisation (M)	4, 17, 29 & 15
Problems and solutions (PS)	9, 14, 28 & 30
Opinions (O)	8, 10, 21 & 24
Games (G)	7 & 20
Explanation and demonstration (ED)	27 & 32
Comprehension (C)	3 & 12
Goals (G)	11 & 25

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Table 3 further illustrates the scores each chosen mastery-oriented and helpless participant achieved for the 10 categories. These categories can be observed in Table 2.

Table 3

*Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Scale Total and Subcategory Scores*

Participant code	TI	PI	SA	M	PS	O	G	ED	C	G	IAR Score
MOCF	4	2	2	4	2	4	2	2	-2	0	20
MOVF	4	4	2	4	2	2	0	2	0	2	22
MOIF	4	4	4	0	-2	4	2	2	2	2	22
MOSKF	4	4	4	2	4	4	0	-2	0	2	22
MOLM	2	4	2	2	-4	2	0	2	2	2	14
HCM1	2	-4	2	4	-4	-4	-2	0	0	0	-6
HCM2	2	2	2	2	-4	0	2	0	-2	0	4
HMM	2	-2	2	4	-2	0	-2	-2	2	2	4
HCF	6	2	-2	2	-2	0	0	-2	0	-2	2

HVM	0	0	2	4	-4	0	0	0	0	0	2
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To calculate the IAR score for each participant, all scores for every category are added. For example, MOCF:  $4 + 2 + 2 + 4 + 2 + 4 + 2 + 2 + (-2) + 0 = 20$ . Based on the scores collected above, the mastery-oriented group consisted of four female students (MOCF, MOVF, MOIF, MOSKF) and one male respondent (MOLM). Their scores were 20, 22, 22, 22 and 14 respectively. Conversely, the learned helplessness group comprised four males (HCM1, HCM2, HMM, HVM) and one female (HCF) (see Table. 3). Their scores were -6, 4, 4, 2 and 2 respectively. Table 3 addresses one of this study's objectives regarding the identification of mastery-oriented and helpless students. When comparing the sub-scores between the helpless and mastery-oriented group, we can observe that the former, except for memorisation, will always be lower than the latter. For instance, the total teachers' influence (TI) score for the mastery-oriented group was 18 when added, whereas the helpless group scored only 12.

## 4.2 Interview

Only 10 students were selected for the interview session but two students from the helpless group, who initially agreed to participate, decided not to proceed to the interview phase. This reduced number should not be an issue, as other studies related to learned helplessness have used a smaller sample with positive results. For instance, the study on the mindset of EFL learners by Mercer and Ryan (2010) used 9 students, while Coley and Hoffman's (1990) research on overcoming helplessness among examined six 'at-risk' students.

## 4.3 Themes

The themes discovered were:

1. motivation and pressure
2. rote learning
3. understanding the purpose of the English preparatory programme
4. professional backgrounds of parents and socio-economic background.

#### **4.3.1 Motivation and pressure**

Motivation and pressure was one theme that emerged from the analysis of the interview data. Motivation is the ‘push’ someone makes or an influence to which they react to move towards a certain goal (Bunch, 2010). There are two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. According to Pintrich (2003), intrinsic motivation is the appetite to experience an ambition or aim being achieved because the individual derives much pleasure in doing so and has the perception that he/she has much control of the situation. Conversely, extrinsic motivation refers to an action that occurs due to an external or outside factor (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

I will highlight factors that influence both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for helpless versus mastery-oriented students in this study. Intrinsic factors include the desire to graduate with their respective degrees. Extrinsic factors were identified as influences from parents, teachers and society.

##### ***4.3.1.1 Positive and negative extrinsic motivation***

###### *Helpless group*

*In China, always leaders will be males. (HCM1)*

*Degree is an essential thing I must get. I want my parents to be proud of me. (HCM1)*

*Sometimes when I get low marks they [my parents] will scold and shout at me. I feel sad [when that happens]. Sometimes they reward me to ‘encourage’ me. They never tell me ‘you must pass’. Always essential cannot fail [It is important not to fail]. (HCM1)*

*Also, should study hard because it is your job. (HCM2)*

###### *Mastery-oriented group*

*Parents encourage me. You can do better next time. I felt more relaxed and no pressure. (MOCF)*

*'It is okay I understand you' ... I didn't want to disappoint my parents, but they were very supportive. (MOLM)*

Based on the quotations above, research participants from both the helpless and mastery-oriented groups are more inclined towards extrinsic motivation or the lack of. For instance, when asked about the influence of parents and teachers, both helpless and mastery-oriented groups relayed thoughtful opinions. For instance, HCM1 stated that a poor examination result would often result in him being scolded and shouted at by his parents, while MOCF's parents comforted her when she did not do as well as she should in her studies. This shows that parents play the role of extrinsic motivation when pressurising, in the case of the helpless group, or encouraging, in the case of the mastery-oriented group, the students.

Again, by examining the excerpts above, both groups cite parental influence to be their desired source of motivation. For example, HCM1 wanted to make his parents, proud by earning a degree, which is an extrinsic motivation. There is also a mention of societal pressure. HCM1 first mentioned that in China, due to expectations from society, males are expected to be leaders (MacLeod, 2013). This aligns with a newspaper article regarding the current issue that female leaders or politicians face with regard to great difficulty in becoming political leaders in China (Sun, 2017). Culturally, males are supposed to lead, which adds more pressure on these students.

HCM1 further claimed that he wanted his parents to be proud of his academic achievements. At times, he would be reprimanded for his seemingly poor academic scores, a common practice among Chinese parents (Gao, 2016). Alternatively, HCM2 opined that his parents drilled into him the belief that his 'job' is just to study hard; failing to do so could bring shame to his parents and family (Zhang & Carrasquillo, 1995).

In the same vein, external motivation plays a role in the lives of the mastery-oriented group. The difference is this external role is positive compared to motivation in the helpless group. In the above excerpts, only positive words and terms were used by the parents of mastery-oriented participants. Terms such as ‘can do better’, ‘don’t worry’, and ‘I understand you’ and words such as ‘encourage’ and ‘supportive’ were used. This shows that their parents display motivation and encouragement. It is very much in line with the findings of Martinek (1996), which stated that students’ environments are shaped by both parents and teachers, whether at home or at school. This influence can induce helplessness in them. MOLM, for example, has shown that through his parents’ incessant support of his academic journey, he is reluctant to disappoint them. Parental motivation, whether negative or positive, influences the participants, as claimed by Martinek (1996).

This is also consistent with the findings of Walling and Martinek (1995) and Berti, Mameli, Speltini and Molinari (2016), who suggested that parents play an important role in the positive or negative development of their children. The following sections contain other excerpts that illuminate this theme: motivation and pressure.

#### ***4.3.1.2 Pressure on helpless group***

*A few years ago, I didn’t want to go abroad ... A normal life is enough. Peace and normal life. I told my father I wanted to go abroad and do my masters. My father was very happy. (HCM1)*

In the extract above, HCM1 mentioned his change in opinion about his outlook on life. Despite his desire to lead a ‘peaceful and normal’ life, his father’s desire (an earlier quotation indicated his need for his parents to be proud of him) far outweighed his own personal dream. This clearly shows the control his parents, especially his father, have over him. He wanted to make his father happy and proud, so he relented and decided to study overseas. This aligns with his previous answer in which he mentioned that having a degree is important for him because he wants his parents to be proud of him. This indicates external

motivation is present and has led to pressure. According to Agliata and Renk (2009), a worrying trend of parents pressuring students could place much unneeded stress on the latter. Stress then could lead to helplessness (Salomons et al., 2012):

*Some teachers told me, with my qualities and physical attributes, I should be useful in the future. Otherwise it's a waste ... sometimes when I got tired, but I still had to work hard. Sometimes I am a little contrast in my mind. I think I want to have a good rest, but my future is very important and focus on my studies. I fell in love with a girl. I didn't know how to solve this 'problem'. I felt pressure ... I was very confused at that time ... It was a hard time, a really hard time. (HCM2)*

HCM2 was also pressured by his high school teachers in China to achieve his 'full' academic potential otherwise it would be deemed a 'waste'. Emotions were cast aside, as this was thought to have a detrimental effect on his scholarly aims. He mentioned the confusion and the difficulty he faced trying to reconcile his feelings towards a girl and his focus on his studies. Studying hard, after being reminded by his parents and teachers multiple times, was a job for him, a responsibility that he had to carry.

To further elucidate that positive motivation was absent, HCM2 emphasised the words 'pressure' and 'confused' to illustrate the stress he was under to live up to the expectations of his teachers. HCM2 stated that it was a really difficult time for him, managing the stress he was under due to his teachers' expectations. He scored only a 2 for his sub-score TI, indicating the negative impact of teachers' expectations on him. This is consistent with the findings of Martinek (1996) that suggest that teachers could promote helplessness in their students. This is supported by Goyette and Xie (1999), who discovered the respect and awe students in Asia have towards their teachers. These students do not want to disappoint their teachers:

*In China, teachers always give answers. Reputation between schools is important ... so every teacher ... competition between schools and classes always compare [with one another]. Teachers always push you. Parents also. (HCM1)*



Based on this excerpt, the constant competition and relentless race towards the top of the league table among public schools in China have caused school administrators, teachers and parents to push their students to study as hard as possible. By constantly pushing the students to achieve academic success for the sake of the schools' reputations, teachers tend to encourage their students to memorise or use rote learning. Although this may be 'successful' in the short term, in the long run, students may well experience difficulties in adapting to change academically. In other words, when only exposed to rote learning, individuals will find other forms of learning, such as deep learning, difficult to follow. Once this occurs, students could gradually become helpless as they find their rote learning not gaining them the results they require. Heikkilä, Lonka, Niemivirta and Nieminenn (2011) found that respondents who were trained to rote learn were also found to be helpless when in a learning environment that required them to think and make meaning of what they had learned:

*If your child gets high school [only] something is wrong with your child maybe. Actually, my mother and father don't care about my results ... my mother and father don't care they just, whatever. (HMM)*

HMM admitted that despite his parents' strong opinions about the importance of higher education, his parents did not provide him with any motivation. Instead, they chose to leave HMM to his own devices. The term 'whatever' was used by HMM to describe his parents' views. Despite being given little motivation, his parents expected him to achieve an education beyond high school.

#### **4.3.1.3 Motivation for non-helpless group**

*My parents will help me and say, 'You don't worry about this you can do better'. (MOVF)*

*They will just say that I did not do much work. You have to put effort and work hard. (MOSKF)*

At the opposite end of the scale, non-helpless participants did not experience much pressure from either their parents or teachers. Instead, they were given motivation. Extrinsic

motivation provided by the parents of MOVF and MOSKF indicates its importance in helping the students gain a positive outlook on their learning experience. Although the participants were intrinsically motivated by the belief that education was needed for a better future, they did not indicate that they were ever pressured by anyone to achieve good grades. In fact, all students indicated that advice and words of encouragement were usually given to them by their parents when they became worried about their studies. Some of the encouraging phrases mentioned were: 'It is okay I understand you', 'I will pray for you', 'You don't worry you do better', 'You can do better next time' and 'Maybe you should put in much work'.

Despite the drive created by intrinsic motivation, how the students positively react to adversity with the support of extrinsic motivation is important (Hsu, 2011). Hence, proper motivation from parents is important for individuals to repel helplessness.

*My mother is not a university graduate. She didn't go to the university, but she is still doing very well. (MOCF)*

*My parents like me to find my dream. Not just study. Find what you like to do. They are very motivating. (MOSKF)*

Some of the non-helpless individuals also discussed the support they received from their parents is in the form of actions. For instance, MOCF was allowed to explore an unconventional route by pursuing her interest in ballet instead of a more conventional pathway straight to the university, while MOSKF's parents encouraged her to chase her dreams and not focus only on her studies. Their parents also played an essential role as role models. MOCF claimed that despite not being a university graduate, her mother is currently doing well professionally as a manager. As mentioned earlier, an environment shaped by parents and teachers is instrumental in the cultivation of helplessness (Martinek, 1996). Therefore, the positivity displayed by parents of both MOCF and MOSKF has protected their children from learned helplessness.

*My father has many titles. So, it makes me want to do better, equal or above my father. (MOIF)*

*My parents are very nice. They often motivate me. (MOIF)*

MOIF viewed her father as an inspiration although he has never pressured her to be like him or achieve more than he has. The quotations provided by the non-helpless respondents are also peppered with positive words such as ‘encourage’, ‘help’, ‘motivating’ and ‘very nice and supporting’. None of these terms can be found in the quotations of their helpless counterparts.

There is a difference between the way the helpless interviewees and non-helpless individuals were ‘encouraged’. The former are often pressured academically while the latter are motivated and advised instead. However, we can also see that in the case of HMM, he mentioned that his parents showed little care about his academic progress. Hence, applying very minimal pressure on him which seems to be different from the rest his helpless counterparts.

Based on the data above, it is possible that the absence of proper motivation plays an important part in cultivating helpless characteristics in students. It could be one factor that influences their engagement in the English preparatory programme.

#### **4.3.2 Rote learning**

Rote learning involves memorising information and remembering knowledge to be regurgitated later when required (Mayer, 2002). Learners using rote usually implement a repetitive action to help them remember what they are learning (Lim, Tang & Kor, 2012). Rote learning is usually done void of any context. Studies by Heikkilä et al. (2011) and Elkadri (2016) indicate that helpless students tend to resort mainly to rote when learning.

There are some advocates of rote learning who testify to its usefulness. They claim that understanding a concept requires an individual to memorise it first. without memorising the concept, it is difficult for students to gain knowledge (Klemm, 2007). However, what

happens to students who are only taught to remember and not think critically about what they have memorised? Gu and Johnson (1996) viewed rote learning as ineffective and futile. Teaching students to memorise only could lead them to helplessness when placed in an environment such as the English preparatory programme, which requires them to exercise comprehension. Section 4.2.3.1 presents some excerpts that highlight examples of learning through rote and understanding.

#### ***4.3.2.1 Memorising and understanding***

##### *Helpless group*

*Writing not good. I do nothing. I don't know how to improve. I don't do anything because I don't know how to improve it ... I try memorising. (HCM1)*

*I just try to remember hard ... Teachers are always showing us the ways, but my writing is still low [poor]. (HCM1)*

##### *Mastery-oriented group*

*Studied through understanding. (MOCF)*

*I prefer understanding because, for example, one question has different answers. (MOCF)*

*I prefer understanding because if understand everything you can apply [the knowledge]. (MOVF)*

These quotations show the different experiences of both the helpless students and the mastery-oriented individuals. HCM1 (of the helpless group) demonstrated learned helplessness when facing issues with his writing skills. He admitted that despite his teachers' efforts to show him ways to improve, he still failed. He decided not to try anymore. This clearly shows the detrimental effects of learning through rote only. Conversely, the mastery-oriented group displayed understanding when learning. Analysing the excerpts above, MOCF and MOVF claimed that through understanding, one can apply concepts to different contexts. For example, MOCF said that there could be the possibility of multiple answers to a single

question. Students in the helpless group mentioned ‘memorisation’ and ‘remember’ when studying in the English preparatory programme, but showed little improvement.

#### **4.3.2.2 Memorisation and the helpless group**

*Both memorisation and understanding [I was taught during my younger years] ... Linguistics [acquiring language] more on memorisation. (HCM1)*

*Both memorisation and understanding are important ... But I think memory can judge a person clever or not. My memory is not very good. I failed my college because my memory is not very good ... When I was younger I memorised a lot. I wish I was taught to understand more. Because memorise made me unhappy. If we were taught to understand life would have been easier. (HCM2)*

*Because younger cannot think a lot so you just memorise it is better ... Now, prefer understanding. (HMM)*

HCM1 mentioned that acquiring the English language is reliant on memorisation, while HCM2 associated the ability to memorise well to one’s intelligence. He said that the reason he fared poorly in college was because of his inability to memorise. Students in the helpless group were earlier taught mainly to memorise when learning. This caused issues when they were required to adopt other methods of learning. This difficulty to adapt to a change in learning strategy could lead them be helpless. We can observe that rote learning plays such a dominant role in their country’s learning culture that it affects their emotional health. One helpless participant, HCM2, had an unhappy learning experience when he was in his home country because of the need for him to memorise. Although only recently believing that understanding is better, HMM during the earlier stages of his life convinced himself that memorisation was simply the best form of learning when he was younger. These statements attest to the belief of numerous Chinese teachers who teach English that rote is important and should be used exclusively (Yang & Dai, 2011). This will then become an issue for these students:

*Problems about grammar is rigid. (HCM2)*

*Maybe they [the teachers] are more advanced ... Their performance [teaching methods] seems a little easier for themselves and not the students. (HCM2)*

*Quite difficult ... The standard is quite high ... The teachers using the skills for academic and more thinking. A new way. (HMM)*

The inability of these helpless respondents to adopt a different strategy to learning is because of the insistence of their teachers during their formative years to use memorisation to learn and acquire English. This causes the students in the helpless group to put little effort into their learning, as they do not think that much can be done to improve their academic situation (Elkadri, 2016).

Although they claimed that they were also exposed to deep learning, it is evident that much emphasis is placed on rote. HCM1 claimed that linguistics or acquiring a language was about memorising only. Alternatively, HCM2 felt that the English programme was challenging because of the rigid grammatical rules; he felt unable to adapt to the teachers' new teaching methods, which he found difficult to follow. The same sentiment was shared by HMM when he said the programme was challenging and the teachers had a 'new' method of teaching that he did not find helpful. These statements indicate that the students felt helpless, as they thought they could not change their dire state. As mentioned by Lieder, Goodman and Huys (2013), helpless individuals perceive that they do not have the capabilities to change their situation.

#### ***4.3.2.3 Understanding and the non-helpless group***

The mastery-oriented individuals had a better experience in adapting to changes in their learning strategy. They were flexible learners who were able to use different strategies for diverse learning environments:

*I prefer understanding because if I understand things as well I can remember. (MOSKF)*

*The teachers told me to understand and not memorise ... I prefer to understand. (MOLM)*

Although MOSKF and MOLM did not explicitly state that they were taught both ways, the word ‘preference’ was used to indicate that they were exposed to rote learning in the past and did not like the idea of memorisation only. MOSKF and MOLM (of the mastery-oriented group) acknowledged the preference of adopting comprehension and understanding when learning. However, for HCM1, there is an over-reliance on rote learning and a hesitance to adapt to changes in teaching strategies in their current academic environment.

*For English, both memorisation and understanding. (MOIF)*

*Lower [Primary level] remember [memorising] is more important but higher education understanding is more important. (MOVF)*

MOIF mentioned that the acquisition of English was optimised by applying both deep and surface learning, advice given to her by her teacher in her home country. Despite her weakness in grammar, she was receptive of her current teachers’ teaching methods. MOSKF also stated that if she could understand, she could also remember. MOVF concluded that learning through understanding is needed for higher education, including the acquisition of a new language, despite being taught to memorise as well:

*Not easy [the English preparatory programme]. I can do it! (MOCF)*

*I think I quite understand well when the teachers explain. (MOLM)*

MOCF was confident in doing well in the English programme, even though she found it challenging. She reasoned that this was due to her preference for deep learning.

Additionally, their language (English) teachers in their home countries encouraged them to apply the deep learning approach more instead of rote learning. MOLM mentioned that he was able to cope with a change in teaching methods. Earlier excerpts indicate that his teachers encouraged him to understand more and not memorise only. By exposing students to deep learning and not just rote learning, teachers arm their students with the abilities to cope with different ways of teaching. Students will feel in control of their own learning and invest effort into overcoming their difficulties; these are traits of mastery-oriented individuals (Ganz & Ganz, 2013).

The English preparatory programme in which the participants are enrolled consists of four components: reading, writing, listening and presenting skills. These skills require students to understand rather than simply memorise. For instance, in the reading component, students are expected to read page-long passages and answer 10 questions pertaining to those passages. To do well in this component, one must understand the passages before attempting to answer the questions. However, the helpless participants seem to turn to memorisation only when trying to learn English in the preparatory programme. This misconception is echoed by McCarter (2013), who mentioned that the United States invests vast sums of money to help students to unlearn rote learning and relearn the way they learn.

#### **4.3.3 Understanding the purpose of the English preparatory programme**

One of the main aims of an English preparatory programme is to provide extra teaching to potential students who do not meet the language requirement as set by their respective institutions (Özkanal & Hakan, 2010). However, some programmes still fail to appeal to some students due to the programmes' perceived impracticality (Falout, Elwood & Hood, 2009). As a result, some students fail to fully comprehend the purpose of the English preparatory programme. These extracts demonstrate respondents' views on this theme:

##### **4.3.3.1 Helpless group**

*English is very important. Although I don't do any homework, but better than before.  
(HCM1)*

##### **4.3.3.2 Mastery-oriented group**

*It is very important because if I want to work in Singapore I have to speak English ...  
Yes, jobs. (MOCF)*

*If I do business in another country, it is important. Someone who can speak English in  
my country will get a good job. (MOLM)*

It must be noted that these students were enrolled in an English preparatory programme when this interview was conducted. According to the data collected, it can be



observed that the mastery-oriented group's opinion for enrolling in this programme was different to HCM1. While the latter accept that this preparatory programme could aid them in acquiring English to gain a professional advantage in the future, the former did not share the same view. The resistance to completing his homework could be a sign that he did not view this programme as seriously as he should. According to Donnell (2009), students affected by learned helplessness display acts of defiance and demonstrate poor discipline. One way for them to do this is to not to complete their homework.

*My aim is to pass degree. My aim is not to develop my writing. (HCM1)*

*Very necessary ... A kind of ability. (HCM2)*

HCM1 and HCM2 did not perceive the real value of their English preparatory programme. HCM2 mentioned that acquiring the language is just like acquiring a tool or any other ability, while HCM1 admitted that he did not put any effort in this programme and just wanted to scrape through to his degree programme, which is his main aim for studying overseas (Singapore). This is because as English preparatory programme students, they must pass this course first before they can transition to their respective diploma or degree courses. When these students just view the preparatory programme as a 'stepping stone' to achieve their degree, like HCM1, they may put in minimal effort. HCM1's goal is simply to graduate. He did not understand the process or effort to achieve that dream. When facing issues in achieving that dream, HCM1 showed signs of helplessness (as evidenced in previous quotations). He refused to invest much effort, which based on studies by Verma & Gera (2014) and Dweck (2015), indicates helplessness. If students understood the importance of the English preparatory programme, they could value the process of graduating from it and continue to try when facing failure.

*So, if you want a good job, international companies, you have a good English...I'm more confident. (MOVF)*

*First reason is international language connected globally to other people and the other is business proposal. If not good I'll try a different system... (MOIF)*

*English language is important if you want to communicate with people from other country...very pressuring (HMM)*

The mastery-oriented group provided compelling reasons to acquire the language; these reasons reached beyond academic motivations. Four of them cited the need for English for future professional goals such as presenting business proposals, interacting well with potential employers and fellow colleagues and working in multinational companies. Their answers show that there is a need for them to use the English language beyond the English preparation course. Their professional goals and dreams could depend on their success in acquiring this target language. Hence, the positive comments and reactions in trying to acquire it. They view this foundation programme as an opportunity to achieve this.

Having mentioned this, it is interesting to note that despite being in the helpless group HMM seems to “agree” with those in the mastery-oriented group. He is of the opinion that English should be better if one wants to communicate with people from different countries. However, it is important to note that he could just be giving a reason why he thinks English is important. He may not necessarily subscribe to that belief mainly due to his sentiment towards it when he said that was pressurising to do so.

#### **4.3.4 Professional Backgrounds of Parents and Socio-economic Background**

According to extensive studies, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to perform better academically than their counterparts from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Ladd, 2012). Studies done by Marnot (2004), Memon, Joubish & Khurram (2010) and Kalil (2005) indicate the influence of parents’ professional backgrounds on their children’s education. By analysing quotations regarding family backgrounds from both the helpless and mastery-oriented participants, we can observe a trend that aligns with these studies. Students in the lower socio-economic group could be pressured more by their parents to achieve more academically, since money is invested into their studies. We can observe

from the earlier finding that a lack of motivation and greater pressure could lead these students to helplessness.

#### **4.3.4.1 Helpless group**

*Can earn a lot [father was a lorry driver]. (HCM2)*

*My parents are both tailors, make shirts. (HMM)*

#### **4.3.4.2 Mastery-oriented group**

*Parents are running their own business. (MOVF)*

*A team leader [father]. (MOSKF)*

*He [father] was a scholar when he was 30 and went to London to complete his studies. (MOIF)*

Occupational status is divided into two elements: high ranking and low ranking (Marnot, 2004). High-ranking occupations are those that require greater responsibility in controlling the work environment, more professional challenges and higher skill sets. Low-ranking jobs require less responsibility, can be more dangerous and lower paid (Usaini & Abubakar, 2015). Of the eight students who participated in the interview, all five parents in the mastery-oriented group fell into the high-ranking category. The three parents in the helpless group were in the low-ranking category.

The above quotations display information regarding the professional backgrounds of two of the parents in the helpless group: tailors and a lorry driver. These jobs may not require them to work with others for a long period and highly likely do not require extensive responsibility in the working environment. This is an important point because when there are fewer opportunities for parents to exert responsibility at work and provide leadership and guidance to colleagues, the chances of them displaying these qualities at home could be minimised as well (Memon, Joubish & Khurram, 2010). This is unlike the parents of the mastery-oriented group, such as MOSKF's parent who is a team leader, a role that requires constant interaction with colleagues and responsibility for subordinates. These parents have a

higher chance of providing emotional and mental support to their children (Usaini & Abubakar, 2015).

One other point to note is the socio-economic background of MOIF, whose father was a scholar and was sent overseas at the age of 30 to complete his higher education. This is significant because based on the father's past academic achievements, he is able to instill proper academic values in his child to help her be more positive and excel in her studies. This is supported by research conducted by Kean (2005) and Hill et al. (2004) that shows that parental education status influences children's scholarly accomplishments.

#### **4.3.4.3 Helpless group**

*My father is a businessman ... I live with my grandparents and my uncles and aunties. (HCM1)*

*I paid a lot of money. If I can't get my degree I am so stupid. (HCM1)*

#### **4.3.4.4 Mastery-oriented group**

*My mother is a manager. My father is also a manager. (MOCF)*

*My father is working for an insurance company [a director]. My mother is a government employee, a teacher. (MOIF)*

*My father works as a managing director. (MOLM)*

As mentioned previously, the parents (father, mother or both) of students in the mastery-oriented group hold positions of a higher status, mainly positions of leadership that require great responsibility. Some of the job titles mentioned were managers, team leaders, directors and managing directors. These positions are very different to those mentioned in the helpless group. The former, given the financial prowess attached to these positions, are able to provide the necessary tools and skills to cultivate their children into better learners (Azhar et al., 2013). The latter may struggle to provide this learning environment.

Interestingly, these data have also shown that HCM1's father is a business owner, a position of authority and leadership, just like the parents of the mastery-oriented students. Why is this participant helpless if his father has responsibility for subordinates and most

likely has a certain degree of leadership qualities? In this instance, socio-economic background could be a factor. This helpless student, HCM1, whose father is a business owner, mentioned during the interview that his family is currently living with his grandparents and uncles and aunts. He was the only person in this study to declare this and the only one to show concern for money when he said that he must pass his English exam and get his degree or he would consider himself stupid for wasting so much of his father's hard-earned money.

*Can earn a lot [father was a lorry driver] but must work hard. Sometimes three to four days [straight] or even half a month. (HCM2)*

*I remember they [parents] used to say 'We are not rich but if you want to go to school, to further your education, we have money'. (HCM2)*

Additionally, HCM2 claimed that his father quit his previous job as a teacher to be a lorry driver to earn more income, even though he had to work for long periods to earn more than what he was earning previously. He said his parents earned money for education and nothing else. These long periods of work could mean less interaction and academic supervision time with his child, which could affect the student's attitude towards positive learning (Qaiser et al., 2013). Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) opined that parents who are more involved in their children's academic progress will find that they have a higher chance of experiencing success.

Further, the reminder from HCM2's father regarding the lack of funding for anything else but education could also lead to extra pressure on HCM2 to perform academically. This pressure could be counterproductive for him (Amorim & Lam, 2013).

*Parents want me to get a better (higher salary) job than them. (HMM)*

HMM also stated that his parents would love for him to achieve academic excellence and secure a better-paying job than their position as tailors. Based on these revelations, I suspect that HCM1, HCM2 and HMM could be in the middle or lower socio-economic background and finance is a considerable factor for them.

However, finance did not seem to be a pressing concern for individuals in the mastery-oriented group. The professional positions held by their parents indicates that they are financially stable and in the higher-income group.

*My major was ballet, so I didn't go to [a traditional] high school and university.  
(MOCF)*

MOCF, for example, went to a ballet school to pursue her interests. Ballet schools are quite expensive to attend and yet her parents still sent her there to further her studies in the arts programme. This clearly shows the financial strength of MOCF's parents, who are willing to invest considerably in her education and interest. With these investments, students could gain more experiences and knowledge that could benefit them in their pursuit of their own academic goals (Ahmar & Anwar, 2013).

Four themes were found in this study: motivation and pressure, rote learning, understanding the purpose of the English preparatory programme and professional backgrounds of parents and socio-economic background. There is much difference between the helpless group and their mastery-oriented counterparts. It can be observed that although extrinsic motivation was important for both groups of respondents, the helpless ones received the negative aspect of motivation with parents and teachers demanding a lot from them. On the other hand, the extrinsic motivation for the mastery-oriented group shows much motivation from parents and teachers that they were seen as inspirations.

Next, rote learning was considered to be the only learning strategy for the helpless respondents during their earlier years that it was difficult for them to adopt a new strategy in learning. This caused much pressure and stress to them when they realised that their strategy was not working well. However, the mastery-oriented group were taught both memorisation and understanding skills. This allows them to use both strategies in class, enabling them to have a better learning experience.

Thirdly, the helpless group viewed the English preparatory programme as just a stepping stone for them to move on to the next stage of their academic life. This is a contrast to the view of the mastery-oriented group who viewed this programme as an opportunity to further improve themselves and achieve their professional goals in the future. Lastly, it was found that the parents of the helpless interviewees held low ranking jobs which require little need of responsibility. In contrast, parents of the mastery-oriented interviewees held professional positions which require them to exercise a lot of responsibilities. This probably led to a higher pay which allows them to invest in their children's interest and future with not much pressure.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This research aims to identify using the IAR scale international students in an English preparatory programme who could be affected by learned helplessness and discover the learning experiences of selected students based on the results of this scale. The research questions focus on the identification of helpless and non-helpless students, their opinions and conceptions of the English preparatory programme in which they are enrolled and the factors that could influence their engagement in this programme.

This chapter focuses on the themes extracted from data gathered in this study: motivation and pressure, rote learning, opinions on the English preparatory programme, socio-economic backgrounds and professional backgrounds of parents.

### **5.1 Motivation and Pressure**

The first theme to emerge from the data is motivation and pressure. It is obvious that based on the IAR scale questions pertaining to attributes in answering questions and solving puzzles affect both helpless and non-helpless participants most. Questions such as the reason one completes a puzzle quickly and why mathematical questions seem easy or difficult provoked the highest negative scores.

This is interesting, as I had anticipated that only questions that concern parents and teachers would evoke such a negative response since these are the two entities that could induce helplessness in both children and students easily (Martinek, 1996). However, the data indicate that answering correctly also has an influence on these individuals. In fact, this had the largest influence of all IAR questions. One reason that solving and answering questions could affect these individuals to such an extent is the pressure brought about by parents and teachers. The cultural need to meet the expectations of their parents by attaining the highest



possible marks and scores could lead these individuals, especially the helpless students, to have a very critical view on their abilities to answer questions.

Amorim and Lam's (2013) study, on self-esteem and anxiety among Asian and European students, presents a similar point: fear of failing to meet the academic expectations of parents will burden students. This is similar to the research of Akca (2011), which found that cultural awareness causes anxiety that has a negative effect on respondents' academic results. Some interview excerpts from the helpless group clearly show the demands of both parents and teachers in wanting their wards to attain excellent results. For example, HCM1 mentioned that attaining a degree is mandatory while HCM2 stated that his parents urged him to give his best in his academic pursuits since it is his 'job'. What sort of cultural influences could lead to this need?

### **5.1.1 Losing face**

First, let us focus on the culture of 'losing face'. 'Face' is a term that concerns pride and status. It is known to be one of the most important traits to manage when dealing with people daily (Zhang, Tian & Grigoriou, 2010). To 'lose face' brings shame, not only to the individual involved, but also to his or her family members and teachers. The latter are mentioned here because of the status teachers have within the community; they are usually viewed as people who should always be respected and admired (Zhang & Carrasquillo, 1995).

Education is regarded as a beacon of hope and pride for some Asian parents. HMM, a helpless respondent, believed that if he could only attain a high school diploma, he was a failure in not wanting to achieve more academically. Furthering one's studies overseas is an accomplishment that could be shared by the whole family (Sharma, 2013), including the teachers for having 'contributed' to the success of students. It is a celebration that the parents of the student like to share with everyone related to them. Hence, failing to study overseas

will bring shame to parents. Parents, not wanting to ‘lose face’, are quite strict with the results of their students. Poor academic results are greatly frowned upon and students will be reprimanded. In the case of helpless student HCM1, his parents raised their voices at him for attaining low grades even though he did not fail. Another helpless respondent, HCM2, was afraid that his feelings towards a girl would result in him getting poor results and feared consulting his parents regarding this matter.

It is worse for the students if they fail to return home from their overseas studies with the degree they and their parents had hoped for. Their parents view this as a form of ‘losing face’ since all family members and friends know of their children’s pursuits abroad. They expect their children to return home with a degree and nothing less. HCM1 explicitly claimed that he must not fail in getting his degree otherwise his parents will lose face when he returns home in the future. What would happen to them if they have problems at school and feel unable to pass their exams? The thought of not attaining academic excellence and being the cause of their parents ‘losing face’ will likely be so burdensome that they may just give up and feel helpless. To amplify this point, a Chinese student in a study by Wachob (2000) claimed that giving up trying to achieve academic goals is better than ‘failing’, as the latter will cause a loss of face. Some other non-Asian communities also display observances of the ‘face’ culture as well. For instance, Akca (2011) found that due to the strict observances of culture and expectations to live up to societal norms, students in several communities in Turkey suffered greatly from anxiety, which ultimately led them to become helpless.

Conversely, the non-helpless respondents in this research displayed very little or no pressure from their parents although they are Asians themselves. For instance, MOCF mentioned that she felt no pressure from her parents when she did not do well at school. Instead, she was given motivation and felt relaxed knowing that her parents were supportive and not pressuring her. Similarly, MOIF and MOLM claimed that they did not experience

any pressure from their parents to do well but were motivated and supported instead. In fact, even when MOLM failed, his parents encouraged him to try again and not give up. There was no indication from the interview data that the non-helpless students felt anxious about failing due to the culture of 'losing face'.

### **5.1.2 Competition**

Another reason for this intense pressure from parents and teachers is the competitive culture present (Amorim & Lam, 2013). As mentioned previously, education, among some Asian parents, is viewed as an important factor in their children's life. Therefore, competition to be the best academically between parents, students and even teachers can be observed within this society. This competition among their peers has exerted pressure on the students. The reason parents continue to push their children to achieve better grades at school is so that they can enter schools, colleges or universities of higher repute, which could lead to a higher social status in the future (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

Unfortunately, this pressure to be the 'best' academically or be number one in school has resulted in some negative repercussions. One such consequence is the increase in cheating cases, whereby students have been caught trying to cheat during the exams (Jacobs, 2010). Alternatively, some students adopt an uncritical form of learning such as rote or memorisation. The latter will be discussed in detail in Section 5.2.

Teachers are also not spared from this pressure, as they are expected to produce a high number of passes with excellent grades. To cope with this, some have turned to passive teaching techniques such as 'spoon feeding' the students and drilling them on strategies that are expected to be used to answer questions during time-pressured exams (Lee, 2011).

Teachers, as admitted by both helpless respondents HCM1 and HMM, preferred to provide them with answers instead of explaining. Although results in the short term may seem to be

excellent, they fail to prevent the impending challenges that students will face later at the university level, especially overseas, where little or no ‘spoon feeding’ is allowed.

According to HCM1, this competition is because of the need for schools to be at the top of the league table and be one of the best in the country. Despite the lack of evidence that being higher on the league table means producing students with better academic results (Tierney, 2013), some schools persist in competing with other schools. Ultimately, the victims of this culture are the students. Not only may they buckle under the constant pressure to meet the expectations of parents and teachers (Lin & Qinghai, 1995), they will also contend with the inability to cope with learning challenges independently when they are overseas (Li & Campbell, 2006). The burden to keep up with this will be ingrained in these students and it will be difficult for them to escape this pressure, even when they are away from their parents and teachers. Once this happens, they may experience helplessness, as they will be lost not knowing what to do once they fail to achieve the goals set by their parents.

Alternatively, non-helpless respondents replied that they were not provided with much drilling or memorising. They were advised by their teachers to understand and comprehend concepts when studying. For instance, MOCF believed that understanding allows one to produce answers easily, while both MOVF and MOSKF thought understanding encouraged them to be versatile learners. It is obvious that this group of respondents were not taught in a competitive learning environment in which the shortest route, drilling, to academic success was sought. Unlike their helpless counterparts, their method of learning might seem arduous, as it requires time.

### **5.1.3 Jobs**

Another factor that has driven these parents to pressure their children to achieve a university degree is the need for jobs (McCaffery, 2010). Tertiary education, such as a bachelor’s degree, is expensive and costs are expected to soar in the future (Schoen, 2015).

Despite increments in university fees, parents are willing to invest that amount of money to ensure that their children will get the ‘best’ education possible. To make things worse, higher education overseas is obviously many times more expensive and some parents will not think twice about funding their children. Those who cannot afford this will resort to borrowing money from relatives and friends, while others have been known to sell their homes (Sharma, 2013). The stakes are high for these families who have sacrificed a lot to ensure that their children achieve their scholarly dreams overseas. Therefore, failure is not an option.

The constant reprimands from parents if their children do not perform as well as they have hoped (Lin & Chen, 1995) act as pressure on the students. This pressure will further intensify when they travel overseas because things are more complicated, as they must live up to the expectations of their parents. Students are aware of the sacrifices and monetary investments their parents have made, and this will put that extra pressure on them. The students know that they cannot fail, and they must return to their hometowns with their degrees.

Parents are so willing to go to these extents because of the belief that their children will obtain a better job, which will secure their future financially (Zou, Anderson & Tsey, 2013). Although this perception has merit, in today’s circumstances there is no guarantee that having a degree, locally or overseas, will lead to a better-paying job and ultimately a better future. In fact, in today’s volatile economic state, the number of graduates securing jobs that do not require the expertise of a graduate is high due to their inability to get ‘proper’ jobs (Ng, 2015). This state of underemployment experienced by many graduates in China is also due to the monumental number of graduates available today and the lack of suitable jobs available (Sharma, 2013). This further prompts parents to push their children to obtain their degrees and even study overseas because of their perception that without a basic bachelor’s degree, the situation will become even more dire in the future.

Further, the obsession with achieving high marks by scoring as many correct answers as possible is also due to a misconceived belief that this will definitely lead to a better future. For example, helpless respondent HCM2's disregard of his feelings towards a girl for fear this relationship could potentially jeopardise his academic progress clearly epitomises this point. He believed that having relationships while in school could have an adverse effect on his studies (Lin & Chen, 1995).

Conversely, the parents of the non-helpless group did not exhibit such pressure, but instead helped their children with motivation and advice. Although all these students are Asians, and MOCF is Chinese, their parents were not strict adherents to the 'losing face' culture. In fact, MOCF's parents encouraged her to delve further and immerse herself in her passion for ballet dancing by enrolling her in a private ballet school. This is quite unique because a private ballet school is not a conventional public education institution. Few parents allow their children to forego their basic high school education to pursue their interests (Zuo, 2017). By doing this, her parents have demonstrated to MOCF that they would not want to apply too much pressure on her by enforcing the cultural observances of the society on her interest and goals. When this extreme pressure was not applied on MOCF, she felt empowered, not helpless, knowing that she will always have her parents' support.

Another example is MOSKF's parents, who encouraged her to pursue her own interests and not just focus on academic matters. One common trait that parents of this non-helpless group possess is that they continuously motivate their children, even when they experience challenges at school. Not one parent reprimanded their child in this group. They also encouraged their children to analyse their learning methods to help improve their grades. MOSKF's parents told her that to perform better at school, she must put in more effort. This type of encouragement is effective in preventing helplessness and helping those affected by it.

Diener and Dweck (1978) also found that support from parents was vital in aiding children to overcome academic issues. Words of encouragement are constantly used to motivate their children when they experience academic failures. Research by Hokoda and Fincham (1995) showed that when parents reassure their children and encourage them when they are facing challenges, they tend to be more positive in their approach to the problems. For instance, MOIF's parents use religious expressions to support her when she is disheartened by academic challenges.

## **5.2 Rote Learning**

Another theme present in my data is the reliance on rote learning. Rote learning is the memorisation of ideas and concepts. It involves a great deal of repetition by the learner and its main purpose is for easy recollection when there is such a need (Mayer, 2002). According to Samuelowicz (1987), many students from Asia, mainly Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, tend to rote learn rather than adopt deep learning. Though this could be the reason the helpless respondents struggle to adapt to a different learning environment that encourages deep learning and communication skills, it does not explain the difficulties they experience in adopting a new type of learning. I am inclined to believe that this concept of rote learning has been ingrained in them as the most suitable and effective learning strategy since their early years in their hometowns (Lin & Chen, 1995).

Why does rote learning have such an influence on learning culture? As mentioned previously, two helpless respondents, HCM1 and HCM2, were from China. It is well established that China has a test-centric learning environment. Based on a *Wall Street Journal* article, the education curricula in China is adept in producing learners who are proficient at sitting for standardised tests (Xueqin, 2010). If the students are capable in doing well in these tests, why do helpless respondents have trouble coping with the current curriculum? The reason is simply because these standardised tests require extensive memorisation (rote) and a

great deal of hard work (practice) (Blanchard, 2010). Students are expected to memorise to pass their tests. This breeds the belief that poor memorisers are not intelligent or clever. Thus, those who do not memorise well will not do well in these tests.

One of the characteristics of a helpless person is the belief that one cannot attain academic success because they were ‘born stupid’ (Verma & Gera, 2013). Based on a study conducted by Jones et al. (1993), pessimistic individuals mostly favour rote learning. Therefore, not only did the tests that the helpless respondents were exposed to during their early years influenced them to be helpless, these students were further pushed to the depths of helplessness because they falsely believed that rote learning is the most suitable way to learn. HCM1 and HMM made comments that validate this point. The former was convinced that acquiring English requires only memorisation, while the latter cited age as a factor that prevents learners from using methods other than rote.

### **5.2.1 Reliance on Rote Learning**

Interview excerpts in Chapter 4 show the acceptance of and reliance on rote learning to acquire the English language among helpless respondents. For example, HCM1 was convinced that for language acquisition, memorisation is key to success. Alternatively, HCM2 believed that the ability to memorise can be used as a yardstick to gauge a person’s intelligence. HMM was certain that the young can only learn through memorisation and not understanding. Hence, the former is a more effective learning method than the latter. Due to these beliefs, there is an over-reliance on rote learning or memorisation to achieve academic goals (Lin & Chen, 1995), including learning English.

Although they may have achieved some amount of success using this method in their home countries, they have found that this method alone is not enough for them to do well in the current English preparatory programme. They realise that they must apply critical thinking skills and deep learning to acquire the English language. HCM1 lamented that he



could not achieve his desired results when adopting his current teachers' recommended methods, while HMM thought that the teaching styles of his teachers were more challenging because of the need to think more. HCM2 wished that he had been taught to understand more when he was in his home country because he experienced difficulty adapting to a new style of learning that did not require memorisation. This clearly shows that rote learning has been ingrained in them for so long that they have found it really challenging to adapt to a different way of learning.

The present English preparatory programme in which they are enrolled has been designed to encourage participants to think, understand and use the target language often to further facilitate the learning process. Some class activities are group discussion and presentations. As mentioned previously, the helpless students were hardly exposed to these activities when they were in their home countries. Hence, they now experienced difficulties keeping up with lessons and struggled to acquire the target language. HCM1 admitted that his writing skills were poor but chooses not to do anything to improve himself because he does not know how to do so. Apart from showing that this individual cannot cope with the change in teaching style, this admission also demonstrates a helplessness characteristic: the perceived belief that one is powerless to change their own environment (HaileMariam, 2001). HCM2 claimed that the teaching methods are more 'advanced', but some students are still agonising over these new techniques that they have simply not adapted to.

### **5.2.2 Language acquisition**

How will over-dependence on rote learning affect an individual's will to acquire English in an English preparatory programme? When an individual has been taught to believe that only a certain method of learning is 'effective' in acquiring the English language, they will find the transition to other types of learning difficult or even impossible. According to Krashen (1982), depending only on rote learning bears little fruit when acquiring the English

language. In other words, students tend to acquire the target language better through comprehension and understanding instead of simply memorisation or rote.

As mentioned previously, the current preparatory programme demands learners exhibit signs of comprehension, but the helpless respondents were not able to do this due to their over-dependence on rote learning. They are ill equipped to change how they acquire English. They cannot adapt to new learning environments because of the simple fact that they were not exposed to alternatives or their previous learning environments emphasised rote only. Helpless respondents HCM1, HCM2 and HMM found the current English programme difficult to cope with due to new teaching methods that require comprehension rather than memorisation.

The other side of the scale tells a different story. The non-helpless respondents were also exposed to rote learning but were able to adapt to different learning styles and environments. The reason for this is possibly because their former teachers in their respective home countries taught using both rote and understanding. MOVF, MOIF and MOLM claimed that they were taught using both methods, but that the latter was emphasised. MOCF and MOSKF showed that they had a slight exposure to rote when they made the assertion that their preference was more on acumen than memorisation. When students are taught in more than one way, they can choose the type of learning method that works well for them and their environment. A helpless person becomes helpless because they no longer feel in control of their situation or environment (Greer & Wethered, 1984). Conversely, a non-helpless or mastery-oriented person has the ability to adapt and readapt to new situations, granting them greater control of their environment.

This is supported by the multiple comments made by these individuals. For example, MOIF claimed that she was taught both ways, understanding and rote, when acquiring the

target language, English. These individuals are not helpless because they are empowered by their former teachers to acquire English wherever they may be (Zimmerman, 1990).

### **5.3 Understanding the Purpose of the English Preparatory Programme**

The English language is a common language around the world today (Seidlhofer, 2005). Being the lingua franca of most of the global population has made it an important language to use. However, it is not necessarily acquired by many students today (Sawir, 2005). Since international students from some countries do not use the target language extensively in their home countries, they are required to prove that they have mastered the ability to use English at the university level. One common way to measure this, as mentioned in Chapter 1, is the IELTS examination. Students must meet the necessary standard before they are admitted to their respective tertiary programmes. For example, the University of New South Wales (American Psychological Association, 2016) requires its international students to have at least a 6.0 grade, while it is a 7.5 for those intending to enrol at the University of Cambridge (University of Cambridge, n.d.).

The situation is the same for Singapore. All higher education institutes with English as the medium of instruction should provide an English preparation programme for international students who do not meet the required English target grades. Private institutions that provide tertiary programmes from English-speaking overseas universities will have to adhere to the language requirement of the parent universities. Therefore, these foundation English courses must first be approved by the parent universities exporting the tertiary programmes before they are allowed to be part of the curriculum of the local institutions.

Although these foundation courses may vary from one local institution to another, the goal is still the same: to prepare international students for rigorous English language use in their future tertiary programmes. For instance, one local institution may have a foundation programme consisting of five levels of competency, which can span 12 months, while

another with a four-level competency may only take 10 months to complete. The content may be different as well, as some organisations prefer to focus on the writing component while others favour the speaking elements. Nevertheless, if parent universities agree with the local institutions regarding the validity of the latter's foundation English courses, they will continue to remain in the curriculum.

### **5.3.1 Anxiety towards failure**

What happens when an international student fails to successfully complete one of the levels? They are required to resit that level until a more successful outcome is generated. This can cause much anxiety and distress for some international students. This is due to a few factors; the most prominent on that list is finance. As previously stated, sending a student overseas to attend a tertiary programme is quite costly. Parents must consider not only the school fees, but also accommodation costs and other expenses of their children. An extra few months, due to failure, could easily set the parents back by a few thousand dollars. For instance, helpless respondent HCM2 claimed that his parents confessed to him their financial constraints but that they would be willing to work as much as possible for his education. This created stress for HCM2, as he longed for a more 'simple' life, a claim also made by HCM1.

Anxiety is known to be a detrimental factor in the pursuit of positive thinking. How would helpless individuals react when facing difficulties in overcoming their challenges? They will mistakenly believe that they do not have the natural talent or intelligence to achieve success and feel unable to overcome those challenges. Finally, they may become depressed (Seligman, 1972). In fact, Akca (2011) found that anxiety is a contributing factor of learned helplessness. Interestingly, MOLM, despite being in the non-helpless group, expressed a certain degree of anxiety when facing failure or getting undesirable test results due to his unwillingness to disappoint his parents. However, his ability to cope with this anxiety is through his parents' complete support and motivation.

### **5.3.2 The right effort**

A considerable problem is that helpless students' aim is too myopic for them to focus on the right kind of effort because they just want to pass the English preparatory programme. The helpless respondents in this study misunderstand the whole purpose of attending the English preparatory course. They focus too much on the end goal to realise the importance of the process of acquiring the English language, which is investing in the right kind of effort. For instance, when asked about his next course of action when facing academic problems, HCM1, a helpless respondent, professed that he would ask for the teacher's help only when the questions are connected to the examination. Otherwise, he did not plan to act. HCM1 mentioned that the reason he was in Singapore was to get his tertiary education and attain his degree, not to acquire the English language. He simply wanted to pass the preparatory course and progress to his degree, regardless of whether he is competent to handle English at the tertiary level. His effort was very much limited to just rote and enquiring only on exam-related questions. This has proven to be unfruitful because he confessed that he still had issues with his writing despite seeking help from his teachers. Another example is HCM2's admission that he used memorisation a great deal, which shows he puts in effort, but not enough understanding, which is the right kind of effort needed.

This brings us back to an earlier chapter on mindsets. Mercer and Ryan (2010) claimed that effort to achieve a goal is an important step that many individuals tend to forsake due to the exaggerated emphasis on results. Those with a flexible mindset are usually mastery-oriented people who believe in putting in a great deal of effort in mastering and improving their skills to achieve a goal instead of simply reaching the goal itself (Dweck, 2015). The helpless students in this research displayed a fixed mindset because they aim only to scrape through the foundation English course for the sole purpose of beginning their degree. HCM1 was particularly guilty of this type of behaviour. He said that he did not even

try to improve his writing skills because he did not know how and he refrained from asking questions pertaining to his homework if he thought that it would not be assessed.

I would like to emphasise that although effort is paramount, it is essential that the right kind of effort is invested to acquire the English language. HCM2 mentioned that he worked hard but his focus was exclusively on rote, not the right type of effort. The helpless interviewees did not exert the right effort to acquire English. Instead, they depended only on sheer memorisation.

For example, they preferred to be provided with answers than to be taught ways to solve academic problems. They memorised these answers, hoping to pass the preparatory exam. This is due to the way they were taught during early in their lives. HCM1 explained that the competitive nature of schools in his home country has led to teachers readily providing answers to students. This value has unfortunately been inculcated in the beliefs of HMM because he advocated for the provision of answers before any other methods of support. HCM2 echoed this sentiment when he said that he will not attempt to achieve a particular skill or interest if he is not good at it. Rather, he would give up instead. These statements by the helpless respondents show how highly prized results are compared to the correct efforts and methods, resulting in a detrimental mindset.

The non-helpless respondents provided a contrasting opinion about the role of the English preparatory course. For them, it is an opportunity to acquire the English language to achieve important things in life that will occur in the future, not the immediate future but beyond that. This programme is not viewed as a 'passport' to move on to their respective tertiary courses, but as an opportunity to learn English. Four out of five of these students believed that the acquisition of the English would put them in good stead for their future careers when they work in companies and conduct business deals around the world. Although MOSKF did not mention such an initiative, she was highly interested in the English

preparatory programme because of her passion to acquire this language. The non-helpless individuals understood that the true value of this foundation English course surpasses mere academic needs. Thus, they invest greater effort into it.

For example, MOCF often tried multiple times using different strategies to overcome her academic problems. MOCM stated that this way will help him to achieve his academic goals, while MOIF understood that takes time and a variety of learning methods for her to acquire English. This realisation of the importance of acquiring the target language, not simply passing the preparatory programme, has protected these students from helplessness. Their focus is more on the process of acquisition, not just the end goal.

### **5.3.3 Control of learning environment**

To further illuminate this point, we must observe the concept of perceived or realistic control that both groups of respondents have experienced throughout this English preparatory course. While the helpless group, due to a lack of exposure to the proper effort needed, did not believe that they were in control of their own learning, the non-helpless group showed otherwise. For instance, HCM2 was exasperated that he had to continue memorising even when he was too tired and in need of a rest. This condition was worsened by the tremendous pressure he was under from his parents and teachers to ‘work hard’ to attain academic excellence. He believed he had no other choice or way to achieve this goal than memorisation. The perception that he was in control of his own learning environment by investing ‘effort’ led him to believe that he was doing the right thing. However, he was mistaken. When facing a different curriculum that demands a different set of learning skills (i.e., comprehension), he felt lost and had difficulty adapting to new teaching methods. This could possibly be that he was not in control of his own learning from the outset.

This epitomises the belief that helpless people do not know that they are in control of their own lives, and to create a better situation they must make the conscious choice to do so

(HaileMariam, 2001). Parents and teachers hold the key to battling helplessness and negative thinking (Walling & Martinek, 1995). Despite Zimmerman's (1990) finding that a perceived belief that one is in control of their environment could help a helpless person be less helpless, this study has indicated that this may not apply to the context of language acquisition.

Perceiving a certain method, rote learning, as successful when it is not working as well may ultimately lead the learner to be helpless, thinking that 'hard work' and 'effort' does not help. This may result in lowered motivation, which is one of the three deficits experienced by helpless people (Seligman, 1972).

In terms of anxiety's contribution to the helpless state of some of my respondents and their perception of the English preparatory programme, the helpless students in this study viewed the preparatory course as a stepping stone to their tertiary programmes.

Unfortunately, they soon realised that their learning strategy of rote did not serve them in this context since there was a need for them to understand and comprehend. Despite putting in much effort, they still experienced issues throughout the programme, leading them to believe that they were not in control of their own learning environment.

## **5.4 Socio-Economic Background**

How does a family's income influence the academic results of children? According to Ladd (2012), there is a correlation between a family's socio-economic background and the results children achieve at school. She found that children from families with higher income tend to perform better academically compared to children from families whose income is lower. This is interesting because when analysing the backgrounds of my respondents, I found that the professional positions of parents of those in the non-helpless group seemed to attract higher pay than the positions of parents of their helpless counterparts. Some positions mentioned were directors, managers and team leaders. The earning power of these parents



allowed their children to venture into avenues of their own interest, even though they were unconventional and cost more money.

For example, MOCF stated that she did not tread the tried and tested route of attending high school and college in China; she attended a professional ballet school instead. To be a student of such an institution means expensive school fees. Despite this, she was able to attend this school easily.

The professions of the parents of the helpless group were different. HCM2's and HMM's parents worked as a lorry driver and tailor respectively. HCM1's father was a businessman. One claim from which one could deduce the financial status of HCM1's family is the current situation of his family; they have to share their family home with the grandparents and his uncle's family. Although the focus of this study is not the academic grades of respondents, we can clearly observe that the non-helpless group seems to be from a slightly higher socio-economic background than the helpless group. This seems to be in line with Ladd's (2012) study in terms of the connection between better grades and higher salaries.

What is the correlation between one's earning ability and low marks or grades at school? Orr (2003) stated that those in the lower-income group will have difficulties in providing their children with the best in learning resources, such as laptops and books. Further, today, it is fair to conclude that information can be disseminated in an instant. This is made possible with the use of the internet. Hence, infrastructure, or the lack of it, becomes a problem. Although the internet may seem an omnipresent entity in our lives, about 60 per cent of the world's population is still without internet access (Internet Live Stats, n.d.). Without proper access to the internet, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds could be at a disadvantage. The proliferation of online learning platforms such as Udemy and EdX has made this situation worse. How is this possible? Initially designed to help

individuals gain knowledge and acquire skills at the learner's own convenience (Magee, 2015), online learning can leave those without internet access behind in terms of information and education.

What about the helpless respondents in this study? Again, I would like to reiterate that the focus is not academic results but students' outlook in acquiring English as an international student in an English preparatory programme. The respondents do have access to the internet in their home countries so that is not a concern. However, there could have been issues pertaining to the availability of a learning environment that eases the process of acquiring the English language.

At times during the interview, helpless respondents cited examples of when it was difficult for them to adapt to the demands of the English preparatory programme, which demanded a different learning strategy than the one to which they were accustomed. This difficulty is due to the normalised practice of rote they were exposed to when they were trying to acquire the target language. Conventional learning institutions back in their home countries, with credible yet differently trained teachers, lean towards traditional learning methods that will ultimately affect learners, especially the young ones, in a negative way.

Ingersoll (1999) highlighted that children from poor families in schools in poorer areas are usually be taught by teachers who are less qualified than those in affluent neighbourhoods. When comparing teaching methods of the former teachers of non-helpless and helpless respondents, it is quite clear that according to the advice given, the teachers of the non-helpless group were more qualified and well trained in English language acquisition. This is because they exposed their students to different ways of teaching, not simply rote. The ability to attend schools with better-trained teachers indicates that an individual's socio-economic background plays an important role in conditioning learners not to be helpless. For example, all the helpless respondents expressed great difficulty in trying to adapt to a

different teaching and learning method, one that is not only about memorisation and rote, but also comprehension and understanding.

However, there is no guarantee that by being in a more affluent environment can make an individual less helpless or more mastery-oriented, just as being rich does not guarantee academic success. However, there is a correlation between wealth and better grades at school (Ladd, 2012). Therefore, based on the data in this study, there is also a correlation between economic success and a learner's state of being helpless.

Another factor that is important to highlight is that financial pressure to achieve excellence is not an issue to those from affluent families. This point was mentioned in the early part of this chapter when the lack of pressure on non-helpless students was discussed. The only pressure that these non-helpless students have is the pressure they lightly apply on themselves to remain positive in the face of academic adversities during the English preparatory programme. They know that they are under no financial duress; hence, they are not bound to time limit to complete their foundation course. This is unlike the helpless respondents, who knew that failure to complete a level of the English preparatory programme would result in them resitting that level, which means more money will have to be spent.

The non-helpless respondents understood the process of acquiring the English language and that performing well in the programme required patience and time. Therefore, they do not apply too much pressure on themselves by setting a time limit to complete this foundation programme. For example, MOIF confessed that she failed her IELTS examination thrice, yet she was not perturbed and decided to continue with the English preparation programme despite the challenges. Sitting for an IELTS examination is not cheap and there is no guarantee that one can pass on the first attempt, just as MOIF did not. However, money was not an issue for her, so she could attempt the test multiple times. Unfortunately, the same

cannot be said about those in the helpless group. HCM2 disclosed that his elder sister, despite performing well at school, had to discontinue her studies to work.

## **5.5 Professional Backgrounds of Parents**

Further analysis of the backgrounds of the respondents, both helpless and otherwise, led me to realise that parents of the latter group hold positions of leadership or authority, unlike the parents of the helpless group. Occupations such as managing director, manager, team leader, business owner and educator were stated for the parents of the non-helpless respondents, while blue-collar positions such as tailor and lorry driver were the occupations of parents of two of the three helpless individuals. It has been established earlier that the earning power of parents does have an impact on learners' approaches to problems, but what about the actual nature of the jobs that require a certain level of authority? Based on these data, there seems to be an association between the professional positions of the parents and the attitude displayed by their children.

It is known that learned helplessness or helplessness is a conditioned behaviour (Diener & Dweck, 1978). Hence, if a behaviour, characteristic or person can be conditioned, would it be possible that the nature of the parents' job could influence the way these students react to challenges and failure? Non-helpless respondents explained that their parents motivated them when they complained about difficulties with their academic work. Instead of ridiculing or apprehending them for failing to meet some of their goals, parents of the non-helpless group offered words of encouragement instead.

For example, MOCF's parents explained that there is no easy route to success and that goals can be achieved through persistence and perseverance. This was also the advice given by MOSKF's parents when she did not perform well in her exams. Another example is that the parents of MOVF continuously reassured her that she was capable enough to overcome any challenges and attributed her 'failures' to other possible contributing factors. Thus,

MOVF is dissuaded from blaming herself and encouraged to analyse the ‘failure’ at a higher level. This is, of course, the opposite to the thoughts of a helpless individual who attributes their ‘failures’ to their own stupidity or lack of intelligence (McLeod, 1992). Again, this characteristic is related to a person with a fixed mindset who vehemently believes that intelligence is innate (Dweck, 2015).

Motivation has already been discussed, but in this instance, the focus is on the characteristic and nature of a profession that demands great leadership and support. This research supports the view that parents’ influence on a learner can very much be affected by the former’s profession.

A successful leader encourages and motivates subordinates. Through these motivations and support, leaders are able to drive their associates to achieve their goals (Vojta, n.d.). Is this not what those parents of non-helpless participants have been doing? They have been trying to help their children to achieve their academic goals by not putting them down but through positive actions and words instead. Interestingly however, HCM1’s father was a businessman. His motivational characteristics should match parents in the non-helpless group, but this was shown to be untrue. As explained earlier, the less-than-desirable economic background could have a negative impact in the behaviour of HCM1’s father.

To sum up, this chapter discusses the themes found in this study. It further discusses how the helpless and non-helpless groups are experiencing them and how they could possibly affect their learning experience in the English preparatory programme. Now that the themes have been found, what can be done to possibly help those who could be helpless based on the themes provided? We shall discuss this in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Thus far we have answered the first research question and found that there were helpless respondents in this study. We have also had answers to the remaining two questions: the students' opinions about the English preparatory programme and factors that could affect their engagement in it. In this chapter, we shall have a summary of the findings found in chapter 5 and then based on these findings we shall analyse the possible solutions which could help prevent and possibly overcome learned helplessness. Finally, I will analyse this thesis and look at how this study can be applied to my profession and be further improved.

One aim of this thesis was to explore whether some international students in an English preparatory programme who show signs of negativity and passiveness in class were experiencing learned helplessness. I chose to use the IAR scale to identify helpless respondents and those who were not. Apart from IAR's reliability in identifying those who are suffering from learned helplessness, its user-friendliness for respondents is another compelling reason this scale has been widely used in many studies (Hokoda & Fincham, 1995). Respondents were international students at the advanced level of the English language preparatory programme, still acquiring the target language. Only the first 10 with the desired IAR scores (7 or below for helpless and 8 or above for non-helpless) were selected to proceed to the next stage of this study: the interview.

The other aim was to understand the learning experiences of these participants. These students were interviewed individually and data from this interview were used for this study. The interview questions focused on the interviewees' family backgrounds, learning experiences (past and present), and opinions about the English preparatory programme and acquiring the English language. Unfortunately, of the 10 who were chosen, two decided not to continue with this study. Those who opted out of this research were from the helpless

group. Despite this loss, the number of interviewees was adequate to conduct the interviews successfully. As mentioned before, there were successful studies related to helplessness done earlier by Mercer and Ryan (2010), which had 9 interviewees, and Hoffman's (1996) which had 6 individuals.

## **6.1 Main Points**

Of the themes identified two specifically concern the area of acquiring the English language. One is about motivation and pressure while the other two relate to social status.

### **6.1.1 Motivation and pressure**

The first theme is 'motivation and pressure'. Helpless respondents in my study were most affected by the intense pressure to achieve academic excellence exerted by their parents and teachers. The culture of 'losing face' has been cited as one of the factors to push respondents to achieve great results.

One point is the issue of jobs. Expectations of parents of the helpless group are high in terms of the purpose of education. They expect the returns from the financial investment they have made in their children's education in the form of a secure, professional future. Parents want their children to excel in their academic pursuits so that they can be assured of a steady job in the future. Due to this, helpless students always feel pressure and stress, brought upon by the need to do well in their studies, a sentiment constantly echoed by their parents and teachers.

### **6.1.2 Over-reliance on rote learning**

Another finding is the over-reliance on rote learning. The difference between the helpless group and the non-helpless one is that the latter was not only exposed to rote learning, but also encouraged by their home country teachers to think critically and to acquire English through understanding. When faced with a different learning environment, those

equipped with different learning techniques were not helpless when they had to deal with new learning and teaching methods. A non-helpless individual feels in control of their circumstances and has the abilities to overcome challenges and issues. Conversely, a helpless person suffers a deficit in motivation because they lack the belief that they are capable of overcoming problems. The helpless interviewees in my study were so consumed with the belief in the reliability of rote learning that they experienced difficulties adapting to a different learning method. This misplaced trust in rote learning could be due to the conditioning by their former teachers.

### **6.1.3 Understanding the purpose of the English preparatory programme**

Another point is respondents' understanding regarding the purpose of the English preparatory programme. The helpless interviewees in my study viewed this foundation English course as a stepping stone to reach their tertiary programmes. Without passing this foundation programme, they could not proceed. Hence, passing it became their main priority.

However, this programme was designed to help students acquire the English language well enough for them to be prepared for their respective tertiary courses, not just for these students to scrape through. That is why there is an element of understanding involved and not just rote learning, which the helpless respondents were used to. When faced with the realisation that even extensive effort (albeit effort through rote) did not help them overcome their academic problems, they had the perception that their learning environment was beyond their control. This led to anxiety when they realised that their plan of scraping through the programme could be jeopardised.

Conversely, the non-helpless respondents did not have such a view about the English preparatory programme. Their main aim was to acquire the English language because of other reasons such as doing business globally and working in countries where English is the medium of instruction and not merely an academic language. Apart from having the



necessary skills (rote and comprehension), their understanding of the role of this foundation English programme put them in good stead to overcome any challenges that came their way. They were able to apply the right kind of effort to overcome the problems and not just remain focused on the amount of effort needed.

#### **6.1.4 Socio-economic background**

Based on the data gathered, parents of the non-helpless respondents held jobs that commanded a higher pay compared to the parents of their helpless counterparts. This correlates with a study conducted by Ladd (2012), which found that those in higher-income groups usually perform better academically than those from lower-income backgrounds. Why is this so?

Helpless respondents in this study showed great difficulty in adapting to a different learning strategy as required by the English preparatory programme because they were taught to use rote only by their teachers in their home countries. This is in contrast with the experience and reaction of their non-helpless course mates who adopted strategies that were in tune with the needs of this programme. For instance, using understanding and comprehension and not just rote. Former teachers of the non-helpless respondents could have encouraged them to use more understanding and not just depend on rote. This could be because that these teachers were trained well in English language acquisition and this can only occur in affluent schools in their home countries (Thorniley, 2010). Affluent schools are more expensive than normal schools, which means the fees are affordable only to those in the higher-income group (Lau, 2015).

Another point is that non-helpless individuals in this study displayed less stress compared to their helpless friends. The former knew that patience and perseverance were important ingredients in success in this preparatory course. Hence, they did not stress themselves over the ‘desired’ period needed to complete the programme. The same,

unfortunately, cannot be said about the helpless individuals because failure to complete the programme in the stipulated period meant extra money was required. This created stress in the helpless individuals, as their aim from the very beginning was to just scrape through the preparatory programme, regardless of whether they were competent users of the target language.

### **6.1.5 Professional backgrounds of parents**

There is a difference between the professional backgrounds of parents of the helpless and non-helpless respondents. The parents of the latter were in positions of leadership and great responsibility, such as directors, managers and team leaders. This contrasts to the parents of the helpless respondents; two out of three pairs of parents did not hold positions of authority. As mentioned multiple times in this thesis, individuals are affected by their surroundings and parents play an important role in this. Based on the results, parents of the non-helpless respondents were clearly more positive and optimistic in their approach towards their children's challenges and failures. Despite having covered motivation in Section 6.1.1, I would like to emphasise that this point is focused on the characteristic of the professions of the respondents' parents. These professions require the workers to motivate their colleagues positively for them to achieve their organisational goals. This is in line with the way these parents shaped the mindsets and beliefs of their non-helpless children in achieving their academic goals.

While some might assume that since only two themes, 'understanding the purpose of the English preparatory programme' and 'over-reliance on rote learning', involve attaining the target language, the rest of the themes may not be valid. However, this argument is weak because the essence of this thesis topic not only focuses on the aspect of language learning, but also on being an international student in a foundation English course. Therefore, respondents' family backgrounds (socio-economic backgrounds, social status) and

motivational needs play important roles in this study. They are strongly aligned with the goal of my research study, which seeks to identify the reasons why some of these international students are negative towards their own learning and pessimistic about their chances to achieve academic success. Qualities which could indicate helplessness.

These findings, in my opinion, will play a crucial role in the area of English language learning among international students, especially those in English preparatory programmes in higher education. The five points above present areas that schools, teachers, parents and students have to consider ensuring that positivity breeds in the learning environment. The findings are holistic, for they do not only examine issues faced by learners, but also those faced by parents and schools. These findings can be treated by all parties, schools, teachers, parents and students, as gaps that require solutions and consideration. This can help prevent international students in the English preparatory programme from suffering from learned helplessness, and those who are currently affected from helplessness will be able to overcome this problem.

## **6.2 Possible Solutions**

Below are some ways that, based on the five points stated, can be used to help prevent learned helplessness and assist in overcoming it.

### **6.2.1 Motivation and pressure**

Parents and teachers play a crucial role in the development of positive attitudes and behaviours in their children. This thesis has discussed how intense pressure and a lack of proper motivation from both groups of people (teachers and parents) could have a detrimental effect on students. Based on this, both parents and teachers can analyse how they have educated and motivated their children. For example, verbal advice, although important, should be constructed well and in a positive manner that focuses more on effort and less on results. I would like to recommend that school administrators be given the opportunity to

know more about learned helplessness and how it could be affecting their students.

Surprisingly, despite learned helplessness being an issue in academic institutions today (Barnard, 2018), not much progress has been made to successfully overcome it (Graham, 2015). College workshops for parents and teachers can be organised focusing on the negative undertones of poorly constructed feedback given to students.

This may be challenging for some teachers and parents, not due to the complexity of learned helplessness, but because of habits. Habits are quite difficult to break, especially those which have been cultivated for years (Dean, 2013). The longer a person has adopted a habit, the more challenging it becomes for him/her to stop it. However, should this be a reason for schools or parents to stop trying? I do not think so. Researchers and academicians who are well versed in the area of learned helplessness could work together with schools and higher institutions of education to conduct these workshops (MacMahon, Nugent & Carroll, 2017). In these workshops, participants will be introduced to the concept of helplessness and how it could occur. Further, they could be shown various successful methods and ways to help them deal with this learning issue.

One other point is schools acting on the obsession to climb league tables at the detriment of a positive learning experience for their students. McCarter's (2013) research regarding helpless university students attributed their condition to how they were taught during their high school years. This occurred due to the desire of their schools to generate students with the highest scores possible; hence, they were provided answers and rendered too much help by the teachers which could prevent them from thinking for themselves.

Why the fixation towards league tables? One reason is applications, specifically applications from overseas students (Catcheside, 2012). This is due to the immense financial gains which come with these applications (Cook & Zhuang, 2019). Although it would be very difficult to forego standings in league tables completely, it would be good that there is more

information on how these league tables work and their importance to would-be students and the public in general. Currently, many potential students are unaware of the significance of these tables and how universities are ranked (Sharp, 2018). Having proper information provided could help educate individuals better regarding this issue and place less stress on teachers to possibly produce students with excellent grades. To achieve this, head of departments could explain these topics on the first day of school or on orientation days when going through the English preparatory programme's curriculum, syllabus, goals and expectations.

### **6.2.2 Over-reliance on rote learning**

Based on Seligman's (1972) theory of learned helplessness, a helpless individual will have a misconceived belief that he/she has lost control of his/her situation and would give up before even trying. With much dependence on rote learning, students who are helpless will have their situation exacerbated because they realise that this learning strategy does not work all the time. Some of these international students come from educational backgrounds that focuses mainly on rote learning. However, they may one day be in a position that requires comprehension instead of memorised information. It would be best to introduce comprehension as well. The helpless respondents in this study agreed that comprehension would be better for them, but still found it difficult to adapt to it. Therefore, it would possibly be beneficial for teachers to explore the idea of incorporating understanding and comprehension in their lessons.

However, this does not mean that rote learning has to be shelved; it can still be used.. Believing that you are in control of your own learning environment and having a wider repertoire of learning methods could help overcome helplessness (Dweck, Chiu & Hong, 1995). Societal norms may be an issue for some teachers in institutions that adhere strictly to certain observances that champion rote learning. In this instance, it would be best for such

institutions to analyse their curriculum so that rote and other forms of learning can coexist within the learning environment.

Experts in the area of English language teaching could be engaged to spearhead this initiative and help teachers to re-learn what they were taught before. Currently in New South Wales, Australia, teachers are required to meet a target of 100 hours of professional development every five years of their service (NESA, 2019). This equates to 20 hours per year, approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes every month. Is this enough to help teachers to re-learn what they were taught before? I would like to recommend that schools provide professional development courses or programmes every fortnight. By increasing the frequency of these courses, teachers could familiarise themselves better with new teaching methods or issues pertaining to English language teaching. These professional development courses could be held at the teachers' school or universities to provide convenience for them. Administrators, principals and even senior teachers will conduct weekly meeting sessions to evaluate areas which teachers can improve in (Prytz, 2019). These sessions will look at teachers' opinions regarding their professional development sessions and how they could use them to further improve their teaching. This, in my opinion, is a good policy academic institutions can adopt. Understanding the purpose of the English preparatory programme

### **6.2.3 Understanding the purpose of the English preparatory programme**

The helpless respondents in this study viewed the English preparatory programme as a stepping stone for them to move on to their respective tertiary courses. Their main goal was to attain their tertiary qualifications regardless of whether they were able to communicate in English. However, issues such as anxiety can be a hindrance to this goal, as failure to successfully complete this course within the stipulated time will incur financial losses because the failed level must be retaken. There is a chance of this happening because helpless interviewees in this study failed to realise that acquiring English takes time and the right kind

of effort. Their aim is often just to scrape through this programme. They then assumed that controlling their learning environment was beyond them, causing them to be helpless.

For this issue, schools will have to change these students' perceptions of the English preparatory programme. It is not just a stepping stone, but a useful course designed to help them navigate their future tertiary programmes that will use the English language as the medium of instruction. For this to be done, schools must create initiatives such as extracurricular activities, organising volunteer work and organise academic projects that will help illuminate that acquiring the target language is important. To further expand this idea, I would like to explain that these activities can be project-based assignments. This means, students will be provided with comments and grades by their teachers.

So, what kind of projects will these assignments entail? The students who participated in my study would be enrolled in a business course after successful completion of the English preparatory programme. It would be ideal if these projects revolve around business-related tasks, such as conducting surveys (which require communication skills) and writing reports based on the data gathered. Helpless students tended to view this programme just as a stepping stone for them to move on to their respective degree programmes. Therefore, these students will have an idea about how important the English preparatory programme is to them in the future. The participants must know that this preparatory course is not simply a stepping stone, but a crucial period for them to prepare themselves linguistically.

Furthermore, this is also an opportunity for students to realise the relevance of the mindset theory as proposed by Dweck (2015) in relation to their own learning. Dweck (2015) proposes that by adopting a growth mindset, individuals will understand that one can learn a new skill and improve oneself if he/she is willing to put in effort and have patience.

#### **6.2.4 Socio-economic backgrounds**

Data in this study indicate that helpless interviewees come from lower socio-economic backgrounds while those in the higher-income group were not affected by learned helplessness. This is in line with a research study by Ladd (2012), which highlighted that richer students tend to perform better at school than do their less wealthy friends. The correlation between the study conducted by Ladd and this thesis research shows the impact of sufficient financial support. Some might argue that schools and teachers can do little to improve the economic backgrounds of students, but there are other ways that can bridge the gap between the rich and less wealthy students.

For instance, schools can build better libraries that feed the linguistic needs of their students. This was highlighted by Krashen (2014), who recommended the building of libraries in poverty-driven communities to improve literacy rates. The same can be done in all higher education institutions; attainable libraries can be built and used to attract all students, especially international ones. Here, students will find the resources, equipment and scholarly assistance that they might have missed in their home countries, which will aid them in their pursuit of academic goals.

This alone may not be enough to attract students to visit the library. What can be done is for teachers to organise daily events which could attract students to visit the library. For instance, these events can be related to language learning such as short workshops for better writing skills or effective communication skills. There could also be events which will require interested participants to volunteer at nursing homes or the orphanage, events which require students to use the English language in an authentic environment. Teachers could also organise exhibitions at libraries. These are events which students in the lower socio-economic may find difficult to be a part of. They should be exposed to these activities at the library, so that they could experience things which they would normally not be able to attend.



### **6.2.5 Professional backgrounds of parents**

Parents play a crucial role in the development of their children in the way the latter react to problems, issues and failures (Walling & Martinek, 1995). The final point of this study pushes this statement further by stating that the professional backgrounds of parents also has an influence on children. With this in mind, how can institutions of higher education help? Currently, the support system provided for international students is effective but rather limited. Why is this so? Help and support provided by academic counsellors at these institutions is only available during office hours, not during the weekends. Even when the counsellors are available, students must make appointments, which can be demotivating for those who need immediate academic help and advice. Therefore, teachers become the focal point of contact and support for these students. Classroom activities and the way teachers communicate in class has to be positive and encourage positivity among students.

Furthermore, in the earlier chapter we have seen how the professional backgrounds of parents could have an impact, positively or negatively, in the way they communicate with their children at home. They may not realise that the words they use to their children could affect their children's attitude towards learning. One event which I think should be implemented regularly is to have parent-teacher discussions or meetings. This could be done monthly and not only at the end of every term. During these meetings, not only could teachers have discussions on ways to improve learning at home but especially on areas of effective communication.

One initiative which could be presented during these meetings involves the use of video recordings. This is inspired by an advertisement whereby children are asked what would happen if they failed to achieve good grades for the exams, they answered truthfully but they didn't realise that they were being recorded and their interviews were being watched by their parents (Milo Singapore, 2016). Their parents were taken aback by the stress and

agony they unintentionally put their children through at the prospect of possibly failing their exams. Parents watching their children answer questions without them around would provide the parents with a better understanding as to what their children are going through. Teachers could simply ask the children on their opinions on how their parents interact with them, they would probably be provided with honest answers. These recordings will be shown to their parents so that they will see how their own children actually feel when faced with such language. Teachers could provide advice and motivation to parents themselves to help the latter better provide positive feedback and encouragement to their children.

This solution may seem to skew towards young students: what about young adult international students like those in my study? According to Seligman's (1972) theory on helplessness, an affected individual will assume that he/she does not have the ability to overcome problems and issues. This is due to conditioning. Seligman (1990) recommended that affected individuals should first recognise that they could be helpless before engaging in any possible solutions. But how can this be achieved? A student who is helpless does not believe that he/she is in control of his/her own learning (Dweck, Chiu & Hong, 1995).

Therefore, I would like to recommend teachers implement a combination of strategies engaged by Goodall and Johnston-Wilder (2015) and Falout (2012) in overcoming learned helplessness. I have been administering this solution for the past two years and have noticed students becoming more positive towards their own learning. Negative statements from the students have greatly reduced and they are more willing to try than to give up. What does this combination consist of? To convince students that they could take charge of their own learning, I encourage them to evaluate their own learning. Students are requested to write short notes on problems they are facing in class and their own possible solutions (Goodall & Johnston-Wilder, 2015). I then, on another day, have a one-on-one session with these students and analyse what has been written on these notes. During these sessions, I do

not provide them with solutions but instead discuss the content of these notes by looking at possible ways and means to solve the problems (Falout, 2012).

As I have mentioned, this method encourages students to believe that they can offer the potential solutions themselves and teachers are just facilitators in this whole process. By doing this, there is a possibility that affected students could realise that they were helpless, and they are able to overcome this issue independently.

### **6.3 Improvements and Further Research**

This study could be improved further by increasing the sample size. For this study, there were eight participants: five non-helpless and three helpless. In a further study, it would be possible to interview more people and generate data that could possibly be more comprehensive. For example, having a sample size of about 40 respondents to interview could provide the researcher with more information to study and produce different findings which may enhance current ones. It could also highlight issues and raise concerns regarding data which have been produced in this study. The location for future research need not be focused only on one college. Multiple colleges which provide similar English preparatory programmes could be used as well. The difference in curriculum, teacher expectations and learning environments could provide potential researchers with a more thorough understanding of learned helplessness and other issues which may have not been covered in this study. This may further improve the research area of the topic of learned helplessness.

Another way to improve this study is to implement another method to identify helpless individuals or participants. For instance, in some research studies, such as Walling and Martinek's (1995), the observation method was used instead of scales such as the IAR scale or the learned helplessness scale. Using these two methods, we can further confirm the claim that an individual is helpless or otherwise. This is because exact results from different scales could enhance the credibility of this study. Further, through triangulation we could

validate that data gathered from either of these scales are true. This could then show that those with grades which are found to be helpless and mastery oriented are reliable and suitable to be used.

One more way to improve this research study is by improving its ethical aspect. Although much care had been taken to protect the confidentiality of the respondents it would be good to reassure them that their confidentiality was kept safe. I realised that there could be a possibility that some of the interviewees might forget that the information provided by them was confidential. Or that I would disclose their identities to their teachers. This could affect the results of my study. Therefore, I would like to suggest that before the interview starts, the interviewer could reassure the participants that their answers would be kept confidential and at further reassurances could be made at the end of it. Further, inform interviewees that even after their interviews has ended, they could still change their answers by contacting the researchers via email or phone. They may even choose not to have their interview answers be used in the research. This message should be conveyed to interviewees so as they will be reassured and information provided could be authentic and useful to future studies.

Finally, researchers interested in furthering this study could analyse the solutions mentioned and conduct research in their own settings and help their students who are affected by learned helplessness. Potential researchers might consider doing experimental research using a new batch of helpless international students in a foundation English or English preparatory programme. Their outlook throughout the programme could be monitored and by the end of the course, it could be evaluated whether these students are still helpless.

However, since the focus is the development of students, potential researchers should be prepared to invest time and resources in monitoring their progress throughout the English preparatory programme. Further, would any higher education institutions allow a stranger, the researcher, to spend prolonged time in the classroom with the students? Will the presence of

the researcher, an outsider, affect the progress of the students and their outlook and perceptions about being in the preparatory programme?

### **6.3.1 Conclusion**

In conclusion, I have found that learned helplessness, has affected some of my respondents which could mean that other English language learners could be experiencing the same problem. I have also found that the theory of mindsets by Dweck (2015), which indicates that an individual with a fixed mindset believes that talents and intelligence cannot be developed but are innate traits instead, could be related to learned helplessness. Helpless individuals think that their inability to master a skill is permanent and innate as well, hence the reluctance to try to overcome their situations. I would like to propose that these two theories come together and be used as an explanation to teachers, educators and parents to help them comprehend learned helplessness a little better.

Conducting this research has not only allowed me to delve deeper into this issue of learned helplessness, but more specifically into the issue of helplessness among international students in an English preparatory programme. The data gathered have given me a stable platform from which I am able to explore different ways to help my students who experience helplessness and aid those who are not by providing them with learning strategies that could help them.

Two years ago, I was teaching English to refugees at a community college in Sydney. Unfortunately, some of them were showing characteristics of learned helplessness. They complained that acquiring a new language, English, was difficult for them and that they would never be able to do it. They did not show much initiative and effort in class and would constantly blame their inability to keep up with the rest of the students on their lack of innate abilities to do so. This closely resembles Seligman's (1972) theory of helplessness.

However, I was very positive in class and with the help of an interpreter would regularly engage in discussions on their learning issues and ways to further help themselves to achieve their academic goals. I provided lessons and activities which encouraged them to think about their positive environment. Every single time a student verbalised a negative or pessimistic comment such as “I can’t do this”, I would smile and say “Yes, we can. Let’s do it again”. I encouraged students to be involved in weekly feedback sessions with me. Students were asked, what issues they had for the week, and what possible solutions could be introduced to overcome them. These sessions were organised in a dialogue-like manner whereby students got involved in not only answering questions by me but also asking me questions as well (Ahea, 2016).

Students were initially hesitant to provide opinions of their own. But, after seeing how enthusiastic and earnest I was in wanting to help them out they began providing me with possible solutions such as reading more simple articles before going to bed to improve their vocabulary and engaging in simple conversations with staff members at the library, supermarkets and clinic to improve their confidence. I observed that as the students got more comfortable during these feedback sessions, they started to ask me questions about my own opinion regarding their solutions. They enquired about the reliability of their solutions from my perspective as a teacher. This outcome is in-line with a study conducted by Dweck (2010), which was mentioned earlier, that by providing effective feedback to students they will be empowered and have a more positive outlook on their own learning since they have begun to realise that they could be in control of their own learning.

This went on for a couple of months until they had to sit for their exams. A colleague of mine who conducted those exams informed me that she was surprised at how confident my students were. Needless to say, they did well. Honestly, if I were not as informed as I am now

regarding learned helplessness my teaching approach would have been different and results could have been less desirable.

Currently, I am the director of studies of my college's English programme and am helping my college with its orientation programme. I have informed my director regarding the issue of helplessness among international students and I intend to incorporate the IAR scale during their first day of registration. This way we could analyse the scores of these students and look out for those who could be helpless. I have also conducted a mini workshop for some of my colleagues on characteristics of helpless individuals and better ways to communicate and interact with students in class, ways which would encourage positivity and motivation. So far feedback from my colleagues have been positive as students are slowly showing a more positive outlook on their studies and more willingness to take charge of their own learning.

One activity which stands out for me, and I champion greatly, is that of field trips or excursions. While some may view field trips to be activities which simply promote fun while learning, I would like to add a bit more to this belief. In my opinion, a properly planned field trip or excursion not only enhances the learning experiences of students which focuses on the content of the subject. It also encourages students to be more confident in handling the subject matter. When I help plan and organise field trips with my teachers, I ensure that they concern the possibility of students using the English language freely on their own in the future.

A favourite excursion of mine which motivates students to take charge of their own learning and demonstrates to them that they could do this independently is retail excursion. This activity allows students to be in an authentic environment conversing with the sales representatives through questions about products and services they are interested in. Helpless individuals tend not to overcome their problems due to the misconceived belief that they are

powerless to do so (Dweck, 2010). A retail excursion demonstrates to students that they can do something practical at their own time to improve their English language competency. The introduction of this excursion has produced a lot of positive feedback from students and willingness to overcome their challenge in acquiring the English language. This activity is in line with the narrative propagated by Seligman (1990) that helplessness could be overcome when individuals are willing to take control of their own education.

The main aim right now is not about pushing students to get better grades in their English preparatory programme, although that would be ideal, but for them to show initiative, motivation, willingness and desire to improve themselves, whether they are in class or otherwise.

With this proposed initiative, although it would be impossible for teachers like myself to have total influence over students, since parents and schools are strong influencers as well, this does not mean that teachers cannot make a conscientious effort to help our students. We may be bound by the school's curriculum but the activities and the way we interact with our students should veer towards positivity. Our influence today could have an impact on their tomorrow.



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## **Appendix A: Individual Achievement Responsibility (IAR) scale**

- 1) If a teacher passes you to the next grade, it is because
  - a) she liked you.
  - b) you did good work.
- 2) When you do well on a school test, it is because
  - a) you work hard.
  - b) the test is very easy.
- 3) When your work is very hard to understand, it is because
  - a) the teacher isn't giving you enough help.
  - b) you aren't listening to what she says.
- 4) When you can't remember much of a story you read, it is because
  - a) the story isn't any good.
  - b) the story isn't about something you like.
- 5) If your mother says you are doing well in school, it is because
  - a) your school work is good.
  - b) your mother is feeling well.
- 6) If you do better than usual in something at school, it is because
  - a) you work harder.
  - b) someone helps you.
- 7) When you lose at a game of cards and checkers, it is because
  - a) the other player is good at the game.
  - b) you don't play well.
- 8) Suppose a person doesn't think you do good work.
  - a) You can make him change his mind if you try to.

- b) Some people will think you don't do good work no matter what you do.
- 9) If you finish a puzzle real fast, it is because
- a) the puzzle isn't very hard.
  - b) you work carefully on the puzzle.
- 10) If someone tells you that you are dumb, it is because
- a) he is mad at you.
  - b) what you did really wasn't very bright.
- 11) If you want to become a teacher, scientist, or doctor and didn't make it, it would be because
- a) you didn't work hard enough.
  - b) other people should have helped you more.
- 12) If something is easy to learn at school, it is because
- a) you pay attention.
  - b) the teacher gives you lots of help.
- 13) If teacher says to you, "Your work is fine", it is because
- a) teachers usually say that to encourage pupils.
  - b) you did a good job.
- 14) When arithmetic or number problems are hard to work at school, it is because
- a) you don't do enough work on the problems.
  - b) the problems are too hard.
- 15) If you forget something the teacher says in class, it is because
- a) the teacher doesn't say it very well.
  - b) you don't try very hard to remember.

- 16) If you weren't sure about the answer to a question that your teacher asked you, but your answer turned out to be right, it would happen because
- a) the teacher wasn't as particular as usual.
  - b) you gave the best answer you could think of.
- 17) If you remember most of a story you read, it is because
- a) the story is about something you like.
  - b) the story is good.
- 18) If your mother says you're acting silly,
- a) it is because of something you did.
  - b) it is because she is not feeling good.
- 19) When you do not do well on a school test, it is because
- a) the test is very hard.
  - b) you don't do your work.
- 20) When you win at a game of cards or checkers, it is because
- a) you play real well.
  - b) the other person doesn't play well.
- 21) If people think you do good work, it is because
- a) they like you.
  - b) you do things well.
- 22) If the teacher didn't pass you to the next grade, it would happen because
- a) she had it in for you.
  - b) your school work wasn't good enough.
- 23) If you don't do as well as usual in something at school, it would happen because
- a) you don't do your work.
  - b) someone bothers you.

- 24) If a boy or girl says that you do good work, it is because
- a) you do things well.
  - b) they like you.
- 25) If you became a famous, teacher, scientist or doctor, it would happen because
- a) other people helped you when you needed it.
  - b) you worked very hard.
- 26) If your mother says you're not doing well in your school work, it is because
- a) your school work isn't good.
  - b) your mother isn't feeling well.
- 27) If you are showing a friend how to play a game and he has trouble with it, that would happen because
- a) he wasn't able to understand how to play.
  - b) you couldn't explain it well.
- 28) When arithmetic or number problems are easy to work at school, it is because
- a) the problems are easy.
  - b) you work hard on the problems.
- 29) When you remember something the teacher says in class, it is because
- a) you try hard to remember.
  - b) the teacher says it well.
- 30) If you can't work a puzzle, is because
- a) you are not good at working puzzles.
  - b) the instructions weren't written clearly enough.
- 31) If your mother tells you that you are bright and clever
- a) it is because she is feeling good.
  - b) it is because of something you did.

- 32) If you are explaining how to play a game to a friend and he learns quickly, it would happen because
- a) you explained it well.
  - b) he was able to understand it.
- 33) If you're not sure about the answer to a question your teacher asks you and the answer you give turns out to be wrong, it would happen because
- a) he teacher was more particular than usual.
  - b) you answered too quickly.
- 34) If a teacher says to you, "Try to do better," it is because
- a) she wants you to try harder.
  - b) your work isn't as good as usual.

## **Appendix B: Interview Guide**

### **Family background of interviewees**

- Socio economic backgrounds
  - Cultural observances towards education
- 1) Could you tell me more about your family?
- Are your family members working? (socioeconomic background)
  - What is their opinion about education? (culture)
  - Do both males and females have equal opportunities at school?

### **Learning habits of interviewees in their home countries**

- Learning styles (surface or deep learning)
  - Influence of teachers on students' learning
  - Influence of parents on students' learning
- 2) How were you taught when you were younger?
- Through understanding or memorising?
    - Do you have any preference?
      - Why? Why not?
  - What are your teachers'/parents' (figures of authority) outlook on education?
    - Are paper qualifications important?
      - Why? Why not?
  - How would they react (physical and verbal) when you have academic problems (fail or poor results)
    - Any motivations?
      - Why? Why not?

### **Interviewees' reactions towards academic issues**

- Dependency towards teachers or friends
- 3) What do you do when you have problems (academic) at school?
  - Would you ask for assistance from teachers or friends?
    - Why? Why not?
  - Do you prefer to be shown the answers or the concept?
    - Why? Why not?
  - Would you try to solve them on your own?
    - Why? Why not?

### **Interviewees' opinions on English preparatory programme**

- Assessment style of programme
- Teachers' methodologies and teaching styles
- 4) What is your opinion of the English preparatory programme?
  - curriculum/exams
    - Are they easy or difficult?
      - Why? Why not?
  - teachers
  - methodologies
    - Are they motivating?
      - What are their reactions when you don't understand what is being taught?

### **Interviewees' view on acquiring the English language**

5) What is your opinion of learning a foreign language (English)?

- Is it important?

- Why? Why not?