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Transitioning to university: Online video resources for language students

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Abstract

This chapter reports on the creation of ten online video resources for languages education aimed at current and incoming students who need more guidance on how to improve their skills in order to be successful university language learners. The videos feature footage from actual language classes and interviews with current students and staff, and focus on the main aspects of language learning: what students learn and how, how learning at university differs from high school, how to find language learning resources and so on. In this chapter, we describe the rationale for our project, the methodology we used to implement the creation of the videos, and the results of a large-scale survey conducted with language students in the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at The Australian National University before the release of the videos. Students' learning expectations, strategies and beliefs are discussed in line with the content of the videos. The project has strong pedagogical implications, particularly for first-year students, since it focuses on the use of video for effective instruction, teaching time management skills, setting realistic expectations for learning outcomes and teacher-centred vs. student-centred learning.

Keywords: video resources, transition, learning expectations, teaching strategies, first-year experience

1. Introduction

Current research indicates that students' expectations are a major factor in predicting academic performance in first-year university students (Baik et al., 2019; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2010; Willans & Seary, 2018). First-year students often struggle to keep up with the workload of learning a new language and to adapt themselves to the pace of learning required for university-level work. This is not a problem with the students themselves, but rather with the expectations around studying, and the *method* of studying which is needed for success in language classes. This phenomenon is prevalent across disciplines and is not just limited to languages. Nevertheless, the sustained engagement required for language learning means many students often encounter difficulty during their first year. Two consistent problems facing many students are the mechanics of how learning is performed at university and the expectations of what to learn, and how to learn new material. This problem is particularly acute in language learning, given students' (often) unrealistic expectations of language courses (Magnan et al., 2012).

This chapter reports on the creation of ten online video resources for languages education aimed at current and incoming students who need more guidance on how to improve their skills in order to be successful university language learners. We also report the results of a large-scale survey conducted with language students in the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at The Australian National University (ANU) before the release of the videos. Each video discusses a particular aspect of language learning (the first video acting as an introduction), with the aim of guiding students to further resources and information about how languages are taught, and learned, at the tertiary level.¹ The topics of these ten videos are:

1. Introduction: Learning a language at university
2. Language learning resources
3. Language levels and placement test
4. Learning autonomy

¹ The videos are available at slll.cass.anu.edu.au/students/language-videos.

5. Making mistakes and feedback
6. Setting realistic expectations in language learning
7. Teacher-centred vs. student-centred learning
8. Techniques for language learning
9. The Common European Framework of Reference of Languages
10. Tips from language students

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a rationale for the project and explains the reason for choosing videos as a format. Section 3 discusses the survey and methodology used for our study. Section 4 presents the videos arising from our project, how they address a specific issue in language learning, and the feedback received from our survey. Section 5 discusses our project's pedagogical implications and offers a brief conclusion.

2. Rationale for the project

Our project stems from our teaching experience and from current research indications that student expectations are a major factor in predicting academic performance among first-year Australian university students (Baik et al., 2019; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2010; Willans & Seary, 2018). Such a claim is validated worldwide and in a variety of fields of study. To name a recent study, Hassel and Ridout (2018), in a study based on data about university psychology programs in the United Kingdom, concluded that there is still a need for better communication of expectations in order for students to achieve success.

Transitioning from high school to university is a challenge regardless of the subject matter (and beyond academic issues). The literature has characterised student attrition and student pathways as a 'wicked problem', and one that is likely to require further intervention (Beer & Lawson, 2015). To be clear, this is not an issue with the calibre of students themselves, but rather with the expectations and the *method* of studying that is necessary to succeed in first-year subjects, in our case in language classes.

In order to provide better and research-informed support to our new students and to help our colleagues better deal with their students' expectations in class, we created several reasonably short videos about key aspects of language learning. While we teach European languages, the videos were designed to

be useful to colleagues teaching other languages and other subjects, who may choose to adapt the content or use some of the videos, depending on each situation.

We opted for an audiovisual format for several reasons. This format is easier to access given the prevalence of audiovisual materials in language classes and the generalised use of the technology necessary to watch these videos (e.g. access to YouTube on a mobile phone or in the library) and may provide more direct engagement to our students and allow them to watch the videos when and as many times as they want. Being a combination of audio, images and text makes the messages conveyed accessible to students with a variety of learning preferences and needs. Having a set of videos would also facilitate further distribution across other areas in our school and beyond, which could potentially motivate other colleagues to create their own transition to university materials. Videos may also be easily distributed outside of ANU (e.g. to high schools) and via social media. In addition, we saw these videos as an opportunity to involve some of our students in an activity that would help others like them in the future.

3. Survey and methodology: Students' background and language learning

Overall, the survey was designed to facilitate better understanding of the expectations and understanding of the students before watching the videos. The survey was open for two months, from September to October 2019. It was administered via Qualtrics and took approximately five minutes to complete. It was emailed to all language students at the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics, with ethics approval from the human ethics team at ANU. We elicited 126 responses (21% response rate) across 14 questions, including both closed and open. The answers to the survey were used to design the videos, as we explain in the following section.

ANU is situated in Australia's capital, Canberra, and is part of the prestigious Group of Eight (Go8) universities—that is, the eight universities comprising Australia's leading research-intensive universities (Group of Eight, n.d.). Currently, 25 modern languages are taught at both undergraduate and graduate levels, to both *ab initio* students and those with advanced language skills. The student profile is made up of a diverse cohort, including students of different socioeconomic levels and backgrounds. Around one-third of ANU students come from Canberra, another third from the major Australian

cities (mainly Sydney, Melbourne and surrounding areas), and a third are international students (*ANU Reporter*, 2021). ANU has exchange agreements with many universities around the world, and all students are encouraged to spend part of their degree overseas. In addition to being a comprehensive university, there is a strong focus on public policy research intended for use by the Australian government. Students often enrol in one or more languages, often in combination with a degree in international relations, politics, human resource management or business (ANU, 2021).

The rationale for the project's outcomes—online delivery of short videos—was driven by several factors. Firstly, we aimed to create an accessible repository from which students could easily obtain information about language programs and which could be shared through various forums, including university websites and social media. Secondly, videos can be integrated into different platforms, including school websites and the learning management systems of individual courses. Thirdly, there is currently no resource that allows new students to view an actual language class at university level, and we were keen for the project to provide realistic footage of a university-level language course, as opposed to some other potentially artificial format. Fourthly, the resource could easily be adapted across various educational institutions. In short, the innovation of the project is to present the material to students in an interesting and engaging way on topics that have never been spelled out for them before. This will allow them to form a clearer and, more importantly, realistic picture of what university learning is like, what they need to do to prepare, and which expectations to arrive with before they enrol in a tertiary language course.

4. Our videos: Procedure and discussion

We filmed ten videos in total, including eight on specific topics, one serving as a general introduction and a final one featuring students providing advice to future students.

One of the issues we regularly encounter with university language students is *how to set realistic expectations*. This was one of the questions in our survey. As Figure 2.1 shows, a majority of the students (64%) reported that they expected to improve their language skills. A sizeable minority (30%) indicated that they wanted to learn to speak like a native speaker as much as possible. Only 16 per cent chose the option that mentioned obtaining a high mark. The last 2 per cent were not sure.

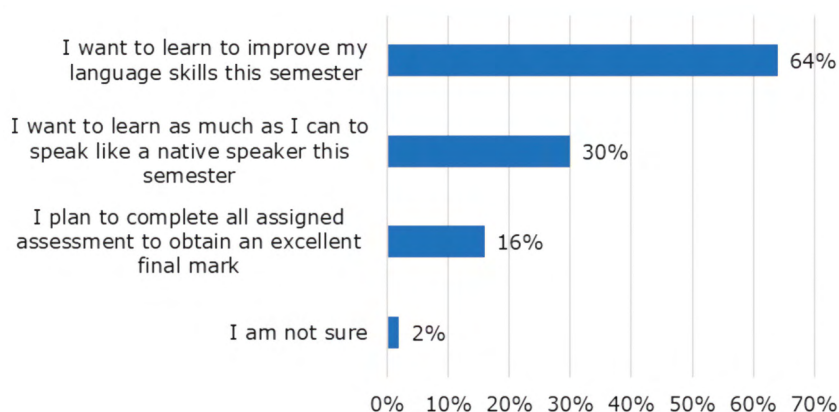


Figure 2.1 Which of the following possible expectations best captures your current expectations for your current semester as a language student?

Source: Compiled by author.

We created a video to reflect some of these ideas, especially the problems related to setting expectations that are too high for the student's level. For instance, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) is a handy tool, since it helps us and our students to form an idea of the general goals of the levels so we can all work towards those goals and avoid unnecessary frustration. Another important issue has to do with the second-highest option in the survey. Setting realistic expectations also requires revisiting the goalposts. Let us exemplify this with a particular skill, pronunciation.

The literature on L2 (or L3, L4, etc.) pronunciation teaching and learning has now long highlighted the importance of incorporating explicit pronunciation teaching in our classes (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Levis, 2005). Popular pedagogical approaches, such as the communicative approach, focus on achieving communicability in the target language. While sound and well intentioned, the unintended consequence is that pronunciation has been relegated to class practice without any explicit goals or activities, even though oral tests figure prominently in language classes. The literature has also explained that, at least in part, this was a reaction to models that focused too much on pronunciation accuracy set against a native speaker model as the goal (Delicado Cantero et al., 2019; Levis, 2005; Steed & Delicado Cantero, 2018) These two extremes lead to less-than-ideal outcomes: not teaching a particularly necessary skill means that students may never know what the issues are and how to improve, and

this may lead to low comprehensibility; aiming for native pronunciation sets an impossible goal that can only lead to frustration (Levis, 2005). The literature advocates for an improvement in the comprehensibility (and intelligibility) of our students in the target language, which is to be achieved slowly throughout their several years of education, not just at once or occasionally at the beginning of a course (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Thus, a new student at university needs to be aware of what they can logically expect to achieve during the semester and how to improve to be more comprehensible, not more native-like, according to their level (Steed & Delicado Cantero, 2018).

The survey aimed to explore our students' expectations of both their role as learners and our role as teachers in the classroom, and we prepared a list of questions directly targeting this topic. Typical terms associated with learners were 'practice', 'active', 'study', 'grammar' and 'regular'. Typical terms associated with teachers were 'facilitate', 'learning', 'encourage', 'feedback' and 'mistake'. One of our videos was developed with some of these ideas in mind, and addressed the concept of *learner autonomy*, defined by Holec (1981, p. 3) as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' and included in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 141). Over the past decades, teaching methodologies have stressed the benefits of learners assuming responsibility for their learning (Benson & Voller, 1997; Little, 2020). Indeed, because of the limited number of hours students spend in classrooms, it is essential for learners to develop learning strategies and autonomous practice outside the classroom (Benson, 2011). A more resourceful student is, therefore, able to continue learning at their own pace, outside the classroom, and understands that they also play an active role and that the teacher is not the sole source of learning. Such students understand that they should not rely on the teacher for everything—for instance, constant corrective feedback and direction on what needs to be studied to achieve a high mark, and so on. Some simple examples include using additional free online activities to monitor their own progress, working in groups and engaging in peer review (Scharle & Szabó, 2000). This is also linked to *student-centred teaching* (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020; Jones, 2007; Wright, 2011), the focus of another one of our videos.

Another video explicitly addressed *techniques for language learning* and *language learning resources*. Both topics are dealt with here, since they inform each other. Given that the pedagogy of language learning and teaching at university is often different from what students are used to in high school,

the aim of creating these videos was to provide explicit guidelines for students on how best to improve their language learning, as well as where to look for up-to-date resources within and outside of the university. While techniques for language learning can vary across languages, our project identified some general approaches that students can use to improve their abilities, regardless of the language chosen, and which are informed by the literature. Tavoozy and Jelveh (2019), for example, point to the importance of factors such as responding to and repeating student answers, vocabulary checks, eliciting, modelling of target language and others.

The video on *techniques for language learning* focused on general resources, such as flashcards, word lists and language diaries, encouraging students to use words in context. It also recommends students watch content on YouTube and Netflix, make use of mobile learning technologies, and watch the same clip several times to transcribe the video. For some languages, resources such as ‘news in slow Italian’ or clips of slowed-down speech are readily available online. Other tips encouraged students to make use of podcasts or language exchange partners, or to copy down certain expressions with which they were unfamiliar. In terms of language learning resources, we insisted on the range of resources available in most university libraries—DVDs, grammars, subject guides for specific languages and so on—in addition to online resources and social media. Another resource pointed to community groups that meet up for language exchange, many of which can be easily found online.

In our survey we asked students to order these resources from those used most frequently to least, using 9-point Likert scale. The results can be categorised according to this usage frequency, and are reported in Table 2.1.

While students clearly make liberal use of the course textbook and a range of online media, the results point to a lack of uptake for TV and movies, library resources and podcasts. The results point to the importance of reiterating that there are a range of resources available to students that they are often unaware of. When mobile adaptive platforms are introduced into language classes, students respond positively. In a recent study, De Toni et al. (2020, p. 274) found that students considered their platform ‘extremely useful’, but that ‘the lack of tools to meet this request [the use of technologies within and outside the classroom] is problematic’. In a section entitled ‘Evaluating Language Learning Resources and Assessing Students’ Use of Them’, Chun et al. (2016, p. 74) point to the importance of ensuring that the effective outcomes of digital tools ‘are based at least in part on students’ effective

use of the digital tool being investigated'. For most of the resources listed above, students are clearly aware of the presence of a range of media that can assist with their language learning. Languages also entail particular strategies for successful acquisition, given the general acknowledgment that learning strategies differ among different fields of study (Simsek & Balaban, 2010). In any case, the implication from the results presented here is the need to highlight for students the range of resources available to them. Students can receive direct benefits by adopting a range of different inputs for successful language learning.

Table 2.1 Students' reported frequency use of most used resources to least used resources

Resource	Mean	Standard deviation
Resources most used		
The course textbook	2.48	2.17
Online videos (YouTube etc.)	3.72	1.91
Your own word list / word diary / grammar list	3.78	2.24
Resources used intermittently		
TV and movies	4.2	1.89
Apps on mobile phones	4.52	2.02
Study groups	5.82	2.01
Resources least used		
Podcasts	5.85	2.4
Resources at ANU libraries or other libraries	6.96	1.88
Transcribing short videos (from YouTube etc.)	7.67	1.71

Source: Compiled by author.

The results from the survey (Figure 2.2) indicated that almost half the students (47%) had never heard of the CEFR, whereas an additional 19 per cent had heard about it but did not know what their level was. In comparison, 9 per cent of the students responded that they were not very familiar with the framework but knew what their level was, and 25 per cent reported being familiar with the framework and knowing their level. This pattern is aligned with another study in Australia in which half the students polled indicated not being familiar with the CEFR (Normand-Marconnet & Lo Bianco, 2015).

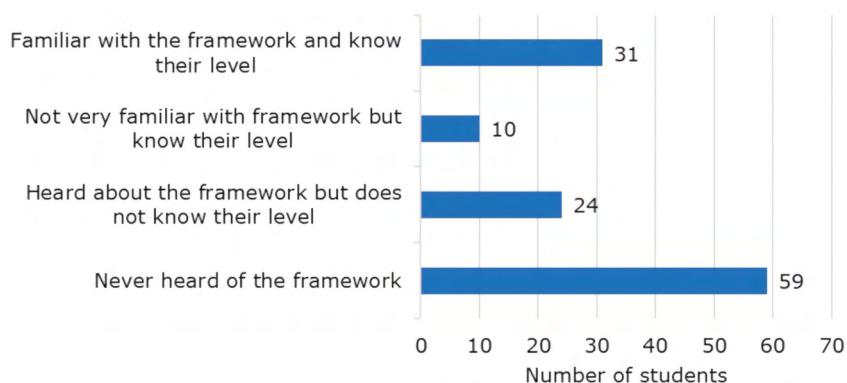


Figure 2.2 Students' familiarity with the CEFR

Source: Compiled by author.

A follow-up survey question further revealed that most of the students who reported knowing their CEFR level were at the upper-intermediate level (B2) or higher. In addition, although the majority of students not knowing their level were first- and second-year students, a surprising number of more advanced students did not seem to be familiar with their levels despite having studied in ANU language courses for several semesters (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Students' reported familiarity with their CEFR level

Year	Don't know	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2	Total
1st	34	0	1	1	5	4	0	45
2nd	27	0	1	4	3	6	0	41
3rd	10	0	1	2	6	2	2	23
4th	6	0	1	2	4	2	0	15
5th	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
Total	78	0	4	9	18	15	2	126

Source: Compiled by author.

Taken together, these results point to the need to familiarise students with the CEFR, which motivated us to prepare a video on that topic. In Video 4, we drew students' attention to the fact that the framework is used all over Europe and in many parts of the world by learners, teachers, universities and employers and that understanding your language level will help you to achieve your goals, whether it's studying at the ANU, going on exchange overseas or looking for a job. We then presented a very brief overview of the

six main levels of language mastery (A1 to C2) before providing examples of how the CEFR describes what language learners are able to do in reading, listening, speaking and writing. In line with the importance of developing learners' autonomy, the video emphasises that linguists and language testers estimate that each level is reached after a certain amount of guided learning hours. These hours vary across languages but, on average, learners of European languages need: 160–200 hours of study to reach A2, 350–400 hours to reach B1 and 560–650 hours to reach B2 (Knight, 2018). Clearly stating how long it approximately takes to move from one level to the next is important, because it emphasises the importance of self-directed study. At ANU, for instance, European language courses have three to four contact hours per week over the course of a 12-week semester. Yet, the courses themselves have a set total student learning time of 130 hours, and students are therefore responsible for 82 to 94 hours of independent research, reading and writing. Managing students' expectations of their proficiency is, consequently, another aspect that we deemed worthy of consideration. In Video 6, we emphasised that learning a foreign language involves a lot of continuous practice, and recommended that to make the most of their language learning experience and to be successful in the class, students are expected not only to attend classes but also: 1) come to class prepared (i.e. having done any preparatory work assigned by their instructor), 2) participate actively in the classroom activities and 3) consolidate new learning by doing homework activities.

Making errors in a foreign language is part of the learning process and reflects the interlanguage of the learners—that is, their developing system (Selinker, 1972). Accordingly, the field of second language acquisition has long been interested in the role and effectiveness of corrective feedback when it is presented orally in the classroom (Lyster et al., 2013) or in written form (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Yet, learners do not always notice feedback. In the survey we distributed to ANU students, we asked what they associated feedback with. Responses revealed that students mostly associated feedback with their teacher, and with corrections on both their speaking and writing. A large group of students also related feedback to assessments (also, exams, quizzes, marks, grades and assignments). At the same time, several students also mentioned peer feedback and classroom discussion. Figure 2.3 summarises in a word cloud the most common words taken from the students' answers.

‘these cognitive processes may contribute to restructuring and consolidation of the provider’s L2 knowledge’ (Sato, 2017, p. 26). Accordingly, in our video, we told students to remember that they can also provide feedback to others when they work in groups; feedback does not only come from the instructor—classmates can also help each other.

As mentioned earlier, developing good learning strategies is a crucial aspect of second language acquisition. Researchers emphasise that students who have developed learning-how-to-learn skills are not only able to use these strategies effectively in class, but also ‘will be more adequately equipped to continue with language learning outside of the classroom’ (Wong & Nunan, 2011, p. 144). These students can serve as great examples to other language learners. In fact, as Chamot (2001, p. 25) wrote, ‘[i]t may be possible to teach less successful language learners to use the strategies that characterize their more successful peers, thus helping students who are experiencing difficulty in learning a second language become better language learners’. Our last video aimed at increasing learners’ motivation and development of learning strategies by hearing from *successful language peers*. Seven students representing French, Italian and Spanish volunteered to share their best language tips on video. The list below summarises their main tips:

- Integrate as many outside resources as you can into your life because it will make it so much easier to practise every day (e.g. podcasts, reading, songs, movies, YouTube tutorials in the target language). For some of these resources, it is possible to adjust the speed of speech delivery.
- Write down words you do not know on flashcards and practise before going to bed.
- Seek opportunities outside the classroom (e.g. language clubs, conversation tables).
- Be unafraid of making mistakes, ‘you could be wrong or you could be right, but it’s learning at the end of the day’.
- Go on exchange to immerse yourself in the culture and keep learning new things. Make friends with native speakers instead of staying in your ‘comfort zone and hanging out with people who already speak English’.
- Practise your pronunciation imitating native speakers on TV while paying attention to how you shape your mouth (i.e. look at yourself in the mirror) or try using automatic speech recognition (e.g. Siri, Google’s assistant, Alexa) in your target language and see if you are successful.

5. Pedagogical implications and conclusion

In this chapter, we suggested that videos could serve as a useful means to aid students during their transition to university. The video format also means that the resources can be shared easily across multiple platforms. We were careful to ensure that the videos we made remained short and to share them widely across university and professional associations, such as the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU) and Australian Federation of Modern Languages Teachers Association. Given the range of issues and expectations that can affect students in language classes during their first year of study (but also later years), we designed our project to address several different aspects of teaching and learning. The survey we conducted allowed us to refine these topics. Following this methodology meant that we were able to target specific areas of concern expressed by students themselves, and which they found particularly difficult.

The implications arising from this project follow several directions, given the range of topics addressed by the videos. These concern the importance of ensuring language standards are met through the CEFR, the necessity of communicating to students the availability of language learning resources, language learning techniques, and other issues. Future research will be able to replicate the methodology adopted here, and individual institutions will also be able to create similar resources for their own particular circumstances and cohorts of students. The pedagogical implications also mean that there is one central resource that students from multiple languages can access for study advice and techniques to improve. Previously, resources of this nature have often been found in disparate locations, as part of general study skills websites or elicited directly from language teachers themselves. This project aimed to remedy this situation by providing a central repository for language learning resources for students in the modern university.

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Appendix

Below we present the questions asked in the feedback survey used for our project.

1. Year at ANU:

- a. 1st
- b. 2nd
- c. 3rd
- d. 4th
- e. 5th
- f. 6th

2. Gender:

- a. male
- b. female
- c. prefer not to say

3. Age:

4. Language(s) studied at the ANU (multiple options):

- a. Spanish
- b. French
- c. Italian
- d. German
- e. Russian
- f. Portuguese
- g. Arabic
- h. Chinese
- i. Japanese
- j. Other [dropdown]

5. Did you study a foreign language in Year 11 and/or Year 12?

- a. Yes
- b. No

6. How familiar are you with the European Framework of Reference for Languages? [pick one]

- a. I've never heard about it.
- b. I've heard about it but I don't know what my level is.
- c. I'm not very familiar with it but I know what my level is.
- d. I'm familiar with it and I know what my level is.

For c and d: What is your level:

7. In the language classroom, what activities do you associate with feedback?

8. What are your expectations after one semester of language learning? Which one of the following possible expectations best captures your current expectations for your current semester as a language student?

- a. I want to learn as much as I can to speak like a native speaker this semester.
- b. I want to learn to improve my language skills this semester.
- c. I plan to complete all the assigned assessment to obtain an excellent final mark.
- d. I am not sure.

9. In your opinion, what is the role of a language teacher in the classroom?

10. In your opinion, what are the three most important responsibilities of a language student in order to learn the target language?

- a.
- b.
- c.

11. Order the following resources to study languages from the one you use most frequently (1) to the one you use the least (9):

- a. The course textbook
- b. Online videos (YouTube etc.)
- c. Resources at ANU libraries or other libraries
- d. Apps on mobile phones
- e. Study groups
- f. TV and movies
- g. Podcasts

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- h. Create your own word list / word diary
 - i. Transcribing short videos (from YouTube etc.)
12. When you receive written feedback on a test or essay, do you usually:
- a. just look at the final mark
 - b. read the written comments
 - c. think about the comments and how you can improve
 - d. ask the teacher about the feedback
 - e. look up the grammar point in a textbook to see how to use it properly
13. At the start of the semester, I think about the learning outcomes for the course:
- a. always
 - b. sometimes
 - c. I look at them, but don't know what they are / mean
 - d. never

You're done! Thanks for participating in this survey.

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