| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Combating Negative Thinking Among EFL College Students

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| ABSTRACT

Results of surveys with a sample of EFL college students and instructors showed that many Saudi students have a negative image of themselves as foreign language learners and translation students. They think courses are difficult and are always afraid of failing. If they fail an exam or a course, they blame it on the instructor, on their bad luck, or on the exams that do not match their proficiency level. Some are not willing to try. They hate college and studying. If they have a test, an oral presentation, or a writing assignment, they are under stress. They cram and lose sleep. They are always worried about the kind of ideas their instructor has about them. They feel helpless and view themselves as a victim. Based on findings of the surveys, this study proposes a model for helping students overcome negative thinking, develop positive thinking, positive attitudes, positive affirmations, emotional resilience, for becoming happy and relaxed learners, for overcoming stress and anxiety, and making more improvements and accomplishments. The model consists of strategies for identifying negative thoughts and their causes, creating flexible and supportive learning environments, developing students' pragmatic skills, providing psychological help, applying coping mechanisms, offering adaptation programs, workshops for positive thinking training, and who can provide support. Examples of students' negative thinking, strategies and guidelines for overcoming it are given in detail.

| KEYWORDS

Negative thinking, negative attitudes, linguistic skills, adaptation strategies, pragmatic skills, self-esteem, coping mechanisms, self-referent thoughts, self-talk, anxiety

1. Introduction

Negative thinking refers to a pattern of thought characterized by focusing on the worst possible scenarios, anticipating failures, and ruminating on mistakes, often leading to negative emotions and reduced well-being. Negative thoughts are perceptions about oneself, other people, or the world in general. They are cognitive components of anxiety, loneliness, hostility, worry and overthinking, negative expectations, and feeling threatened and uncomfortable in social interactions. They include thoughts of helplessness, hopelessness, and low self-esteem. They are characterized by negative perceptions, expectations, attributions, unpleasant emotions and unfavourable behavioral, physiological, and health consequences (Hawkley, 2013).

Moreover, negative thinking[1] is often conversational and situational. As a conversation, it is what we mentally say to ourselves, i.e. self-talk, but it can also impact the way we express ourselves to others. It can disrupt the way we anticipate situations, the way we view and experience them at the present moment and the way we interpret them in the future.

Negative thinkers[2] have automatic, quick and subconscious negative thoughts that trigger self-criticism, unpleasant feelings, and never feeling good enough as in saying *"I'm not good enough"*, *"I'm a failure"* or *"I will never pass this course"*. They spend a lot of

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[1] https://melliobrien.com/the-four-keys-to-overcoming-negative-thinking-for-good/

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automatic_negative_thoughts

time ruminating on negative thoughts or past mistakes, hindering their ability to move forward. They tend to overgeneralize the shortcomings and potential problems in a situation rather than focusing on the positive aspects or potential solutions. They tend to blow up the consequences of negative events, leading to a belief that the worst possible consequences are almost certain to take place. They draw broad, far-reaching conclusions based on a single negative experience or a limited amount of information. They base their judgments and beliefs on emotions rather than objective facts. If a negative emotion is felt, it is interpreted as evidence of something negative being true.

Due to the impact of negative thinking on students' academic achievement, low self-esteem, social isolation, and increased anxiety and depressions, a plethora of studies in the literature investigated issues related to negative thinking especially in educational settings. The first group of studies focused on the problem of negative thinking among many foreign language learners in numerous countries. For example, in the United States, Goodhart (1986) found that negative self-referent statements influenced undergraduate students' motivation and performance. In Turkey, negative attitudes from classmates, teacher-related factors, test anxiety, and failure experiences demotivated Turkish EFL university students to learn English (Han, Takkaç-Tulgar, & Aybirdi, 2019). In the UK, British high school students' anxiety was linked to lower motivation and negative attitudes toward language learning. Lower motivation affected the students' foreign language enjoyment and anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2018). Khajavy, Makiabadi, & Navokhi (2019) detected that low self-efficacy, lack of optimism, and reduced resilience negatively impacted motivation and achievement among Iranian EFL learners who exhibited low psychological capital, i.e., low self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience. In Poland, predictability and monotony in lessons led to disengagement and boredom in language instruction among English majors (Kruk, Pawlak, & Zawodniak, 2021). In Ukraine, foreign students had difficulty comprehending Ukrainian as a foreign language. Lack of progress, and cultural differences led to frustration and anxiety due to emotional factors in learning. Foreign students learning Ukrainian experienced frustration and anxiety due to comprehension difficulties and cultural differences (Tsurkan et al., 2020). In China, international students experience anxiety in Chinese language learning which negatively affected their motivation and achievement, with integrativeness playing a role in learning success (Wang & Du, 2020). Emotional reasoning, overgeneralization and catastrophizing (focusing on negative outcomes ruminating in their minds) contributed to negative thought patterns (Friedman, 2023). Perfectionism and interpersonal sensitivity in social interactions and opinions of others led to repetitive negative thinking and reduced self-compassion (Neshat, Farah Bijari, & Dehshiri, 2024).

In Saudi Arabia, a survey with a sample of EFL college students and instructors at King Saud University and students' comments on social media showed that many students have a negative image of themselves as foreign language learners. They feel incompetent, think that courses are difficult and they are always afraid of failing. If they fail an exam or a course, they blame it on exams that do not match their proficiency level, on the instructor whom they think want fail them, or on their bad luck. Some are frustrated and are not willing to try. They hate college and hate studying for exams and courses. If they have a test, an oral presentation, or a writing assignment, they are under stress. They cram and lose sleep. They are always worried about the kind of ideas their instructors might have about them. They feel helpless and that they are a victim. Examples of students' negative thinking expressed on social media are: *The Problems of Translation course requires endless studying; Finally I am done with the Problems of Translation course and I feel a mountain of worries has been lifted off my chest.; God damn such an awful course, I was thinking about it and about how to study it even before the ceremony; I just want to pass, I do not want to learn; every time I have a nightmare while I am sleeping, I realize that the course grades are out in Edugate; I have the option to either to commit suicide or study; Miss X is very nice, but her course is awful. I pray to God to help me out; I have nothing in my life except exams: an exam today and an exam tomorrow; come get your grades; this last one would make my adrenaline have a party in my body; I have not started studying yet, do not make me feel guilty; the Problems of Translation course is a never-ending course; I've been studying since morning and have only covered 25% of the material; I feel an unimaginable state of depression and feel sleepy whenever I open the handout (to study) for this course; I have to write a term paper and it should be #1. Do you know anybody who writes papers? I do not need to learn. I just need to get a good grade because I have the Security and Political Translation course tests; after I am done with the Legal and Problems of Translation courses, I hope I never see this mess again for the rest of my life; do you know anybody who translates legal texts?* (Al-Jarf, 2022c; Al-Jarf, 2022d; Al-Jarf, 2021f; Al-Jarf, 2009b) (See Appendix 1).

These repetitive negative thinking statements reveal several underlying academic, pragmatic, psychological, adaptation, coping and social problems that the students face in their courses as: (i) frustration over the heavy workload and the amount of studying required, leading to exhaustion, burnout, and stress. (ii) focusing solely on passing rather than understanding the material, indicating a lack of intrinsic motivation and negative attitudes toward learning. (iii) anxiety and fear of failure and extreme worry about their performance on exams and in the courses as a whole. (iv), and deep emotional distress, including feelings of hopelessness and depression which require serious attention. (v) lack of engagement and interest through describing their course as "hateful" and "never-ending," showing lack of interest and disconnection between the curriculum and their engagement. (vi) External pressure to produce high-quality work, such as term papers, and obtaining high grades without necessarily learning the material. (vii) Seeking external help such as looking for others to write papers or translate legal texts for

them, indicating a struggle with course content and possibly ethical concerns. (viii) While some students appreciate their instructor, they still find the course overwhelming, suggesting a need for improved teaching strategies or curriculum adjustments. Additionally, these concerns highlight the need for mental health support, curriculum reform, and student engagement strategies to create a more positive learning environment.

Based on findings of the surveys, this study proposes a model for helping EFL and translation students in Saudi Arabia overcome their negative thinking, develop positive thinking, positive attitudes, positive affirmations, emotional resilience, become happy and relaxed learners, overcome stress and anxiety, and make more improvements and accomplishments. The model consists of strategies for identifying negative thoughts and their causes, creating a flexible and supportive learning environment, developing students' pragmatic skills, providing psychological help, applying coping mechanisms, offering adaptation programs and workshops for positive thinking training, who can provide support and how coping and adaptation strategies can be accomplished.

2. Proposed Model for Addressing Negative Thinking
Based on findings and recommendations of prior studies and the author's experience and research with her students, the following sections present some strategies that will help EFL and translation college students in Saudi Arabia overcome negative thinking (Al-Jarf, 2024a; Al-Jarf, 2020b; Al-Jarf, 2018; Al-Jarf, 2014.; Al-Jarf, 2010).

2.1 *Identifying Negative Thoughts and Their Sources*
First, the students should identify their fears, apprehensions. This can be done through conducting regular check-ins, surveys, and academic advising sessions to identify challenges that the students face and provide personalized support. The students can keep a journal, i.e., writing thoughts to help process emotions and track progress. Adaptation and coping strategies depend on the students' specific problems and worries. The causes of negative thinking among college students majoring in EFL and translation can be classified into the following: (i) Language anxiety resulting from feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of learning a foreign language, leading to self-doubt and frustration. EFL students often experience anxiety due to unfamiliar grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. (ii) Challenges and difficulties in translating different genres as legal, literal, medical and others which create stress, especially when dealing with cultural and structural differences. (iii) Negative language transfer. (iv) Academic pressure resulting from high expectations and rigorous coursework which can contribute to stress and negative thinking. (v) Lack of confidence and feeling insecure about their language proficiency and translation skills, leading to avoidance behaviors and self-criticism. (vi) Social factors as peer pressure, fear of making mistakes in front of others, and lack of support which can reinforce negative thoughts. EFL students may feel isolated or judged for their language proficiency level and translation ability. (vii) Low confidence levels EFL students may hesitate due to fear of making mistakes. Low confidence in communication. (viii) High cognitive load resulting from the variety of advanced courses they are taking which included processing meaning, grammar, specialized technical terms, and transferring meaning to the target language simultaneously, increasing mental strain and others (Al-Jarf, 2022c; Al-Jarf, 2022d).

Understanding the causes of negative thinking can help educators and students and develop strategies to overcome negativity and foster a more positive learning environment.

2.2 *Creating a Flexible and Supportive Learning Environment*
Self-efficacy[3] reflects a person's confidence in his/her ability to take control over his/her own behavior, motivation, and social surroundings. To strengthen the students' self-efficacy and motivation, and help them build confidence in their abilities, course instructors should help the students set achievable goals, break learning objectives down into small, manageable tasks, provide positive reinforcement, emotional regulation, and foster a supportive learning environment (Shamionov, Grigoryeva, & Grigoryev, 2014; Noble & McGrath, 2008).

Working on manageable tasks allows the students to experience success and boost motivation. Instructors can adjust teaching methods to accommodate diverse learning styles, reduce stress and improve engagement. The students should be allowed to make choices in their learning process to enhance their motivation and have autonomy in selecting topics or learning methods that foster their engagement (Csizér & Illés (2020). Collaborative activities with classmates, and mentorship through group projects, enhance engagement. Students should feel valued and heard to foster a sense of belonging and motivation, improve self-esteem and to make students feel comfortable practicing without fear of judgment (Asakereh & Yousofi, 2018; Zhang, 2022; Alrashidi & Alshammari, 2024; Gerasimova, Gerasymova, & Dmytryuk, 2021; Al-Jarf, 2021a; Al-Jarf, 2017; Al-Jarf, 2009a).

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[3] https://www.apa.org/pi/aids/resources/education/self-efficacy

Instructors should use engaging teaching methods as interactive tools, games, and multimedia resources encourage language exchanges, discussion groups, peer collaboration, integrating participation goals, online collaborative activities, collaborative translation training using online discussion forums, interactive translation practice on X (formerly Twitter) to create a sense of belonging and make learning more enjoyable and less intimidating. To engage students, the instructor can assign tasks that require searching for linguistic and translation key terms and concepts, summarizing a research paper, online debates, problem-solving questions, project-based assignments, attending a thesis defense, inviting guest speakers, linguistic analyses of family speech and videos, interpreting contests, collecting and analyzing translation errors, translating Wikipedia articles, dynamic online speaking activities, student-created podcasts and digital stories, and integrating technology such as Padlet and Slido (Al-Jarf, 2024b; Al-Jarf, 2022e; Al-Jarf, 2021d; Al-Jarf, 2020c; Al-Jarf, 2017; Al-Jarf, 2009a Al-Jarf, 2022a; Al-Jarf, 2021c).

Providing language support such as out-of-class extension activities, using technology and AI, using internet websites, text-to-speech software to promote decoding skills, pronunciation accuracy and independent interpreting practice, YouTube videos for self-regulated pronunciation practice, mobile audiobooks for listening comprehension practice, MP4 lessons to develop listening and speaking skills, finding a native-speaking partner, collaborative mobile ebook reading, reading simplified novels, street and bus signs, blogging about current global events, writing a daily journal and using a discussion forum to help enhance the students' proficiency level in EFL (Al-Jarf, 2022; Al-Jarf, 2022e; Al-Jarf, 2022f; Al-Jarf, 2022g; Al-Jarf, 2022h; Al-Jarf, 2021e; Al-Jarf, 2021a; Al-Jarf, 2012).

Teaching students that language learning process and translation practice are a journey, and mistakes are part of the process of learning. The instructor reminds the students that language proficiency and translation skills improve with practice.

Teacher support, emotional support, encouragement, reducing test anxiety and on-going constructive feedback, rather than focusing on mistakes, help the students develop a growth mindset, boost their self-efficacy, and help them overcome demotivation in EFL learning and translation practice (Alrashidi & Alshammari, 2024; Han, Takkaç-Tulgar, & Aybirdi, 2019).

2.3 Developing Students' Pragmatic Skills
Pragmatic skills include time management and pragmatic skills such as goal setting (what, why, when, where), analyzing current use of time, preparing a to-do list; classifying activities according to importance and urgency, spending more time on projects and tasks that are important and valuable, choosing what to do now, what to do later, what not to do at all, and what to stop doing; planning, developing presentation and note-taking skills, developing study and test-taking skills, maintaining an organized work environment and organizing tasks effectively prevent feeling overwhelmed.

2.4 Providing Psychological Help
Language and translation college instructors should encourage the students to talk about their academic problems; diagnose their problems and difficulties, provide moral support, create a question-answer forum or a social media class page, use learning guides, assure the students that it is o.k. to make mistakes and that it is not the end of the world to fail, teach students to substitute negative words and phrases with positive ones, read simplified self-help books, read student success stories, watch motivational videos for success in life, and keep a progress diary to monitor their own progress (Al-Jarf, 2024a; Al-Jarf, 2020b; Al-Jarf, 2018; Al-Jarf, 2014.; Al-Jarf, 2010) (See Appendix 2).

2.5 Applying Coping Mechanisms
Coping mechanisms include avoiding negative self-referent statements, i.e., thoughts or expressions in which individuals describe themselves in a negative way, reinforcing harmful self-perceptions. These statements often contribute to anxiety, low self-esteem, and self-doubt. They are typically deeply rooted in past negative experiences, fear of failure, or self-criticism. Examples of negative self-referent statements include: "*I'm a failure*"; "*I always mess things up*"; "*I'm not smart enough to do this*"; and "*No one likes me.*" Such negative statements shape how students perceive their abilities and interactions with their instructors and classmates, often becoming self-fulfilling prophecies that lead to actual failures, avoidance behaviors, or social withdrawal. Over time, they can contribute to repetitive negative thinking, depression, and poor mental health. For these reasons, instructors should reinforce the students' belief in their abilities (Khajavy, Makiabadi, & Navokhi, 2019). Self-reflection exercises can be integrated into coursework to help the students recognize their strengths and improve their confidence (Asakereh & Yousofi, 2018). Mindfulness techniques such as meditation or journaling can improve emotional regulation, reduce stress and improve focus. The students need to practice mindfulness to become more aware of their thoughts and emotions without being overwhelmed by them. Mentorship programs, and resilience training are helpful as well (Merino, Jooste, & Vermeulen, 2019).

2.6 Offering Adaptation Programs

To reduce stress, enhance social belonging, and improve academic performance among the students, universities can implement step-by-step adaptation programs that guide the students through the following adaptation stages: (i) Pre-arrival orientation consisting of informational materials, online sessions, and mentorship programs before the students' arrive on campus to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. (ii) Organizing welcome events, student networking activities and peer mentoring to help students build connections and feel included. (iii) Offering study skills workshops, time management training, and tutoring services to help students adapt to university-level coursework. (iv) Providing counselling services, stress management workshops, coping strategies and resilience training to help the students cope with academic pressures and enhance their ability to handle challenges. (v) Conducting regular check-ins, surveys, and academic advising sessions to identify the challenges that the students face and provide personalized support. Fostering positive learner emotions enhance self-esteem. (Zhang, 2022; Tarasova et al., 2017; Shapovalova et al., 2019). Additionally, use of relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises and physical activity reduces anxiety, releases endorphins, boosts mood mindfulness, and manages stress.

2.7 Offering Positive Thinking Training Workshops

To help the students overcome anxiety, develop autonomous learning, focus on their strengths rather than weaknesses, and to build resilience and motivation, the college can conduct positive thinking workshops to help reduce students' anxiety and improve motivation. These workshops teach the students how to eliminate negative thoughts and focus on constructive self-talk, and build self-compassion (Yuniarti, Anggawijayanto, & Rinaldi, 2025; Macaskill & Denovan, 2013). Cognitive Behavioral Techniques - CBT-based exercises alleviate insomnia, anxiety, and everyday stress caused by negative thinking. CBT develops strategies that replace negative thought patterns with more realistic and positive ones, help the students identify and challenge negative thought patterns and improve mental resilience (Blair, 2009). The students should say positive things to themselves, should avoid people who complain, should be around people with positive thinking, and be around classmates and people who are enthusiastic. The students need to have a real desire, strong willpower and determination to succeed. We learn if we are willing to learn and if we put our mind into it. When the student has a positive attitude towards a course, he/she will understand it better. Students are not alike. What happened to some students may not necessarily happen to every student. The students should try to get rid of their negative attitudes towards their courses, teachers, classmates, and university. Instead of looking at their courses as a burden, they should approach the task with enthusiasm, avoid distractors while studying, visualize success, reward themselves, take a break every 90 minutes while studying, and get enough sleep. These approaches can help the students develop confidence and resilience in language learning.

2.8 Who Can Provide Support

To reduce stress, provide reassurance and strengthens adaptation, the students can seek help when needed. They can talk to family members, trusted friends, mentors, academic advisors, counsellors, therapists, peer groups, or online communities to get valuable support and guidance in addressing negative thinking patterns. Family and Friends provide emotional support. Mentors, academic advisors and other experienced individuals can provide guidance and help with goal setting and decision-making. Professional psychological support can help address stress, anxiety, and negative thinking. Group activities, mentorship programs, and student organizations will help the students feel connected and supported. Online learning communities allow participating students to exchange experiences and advice. The students can access counselling centers and receive professional support when needed. Connecting with peer groups as classmates or student organizations helps them create a sense of belonging (Serebryakova et al., 2017; Biserova & Shagivaleeva, 2019; Al-Jarf, 2022c; Al-Jarf, 2022d; Al-Jarf, 2021f; Al-Jarf, 2020b; Al-Jarf, 2006; Al-Jarf, 2005).

2.9 How Coping and Adaptation Strategies Can Be Accomplished

Coping and adaptation strategies can be accomplished through individual or group activities such as online and face-to-face workshops, training programs, online learning communities on social media and teacher-student and student-student communication through SMS messages, a Chatbox, social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), blogs, and online discussion forums and other forms of technology(Al-Jarf, 2021; Al-Jarf, 2021b; Al-Jarf, 2020a; Al-Jarf, 2022b; Al-Jarf, 2006; Al-jarf, 2005).

3. Conclusion

The author tried the techniques described herein with her students over several semesters. She conducted follow-up studies and surveys with the students at the end of the semester. Results of the training showed that those strategies had positive effects on students' self-image, attitudes, motivation, self-confidence, skill improvement, enjoyment, and lower anxiety. They proved to be effective in overcoming negative thinking and adopting positive thinking and positive attitudes towards their courses, assignments and exams.

Finally, other problems as learned helplessness, procrastination, career goals, specific academic problems, and application of the Pygmalion and Golem effects in higher education in Saudi Arabia, especially in foreign language learning environments, are still open for further investigation by researchers in the future.

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Appendix 1: Examples of Students' Negative Thinking from Social Media

Appendix 2: Images of Positive Thinking Readings

https://selfgrowth.com/successskills_articles.html

ARKANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY   Giving   Library   Athletics   News   Calendar   Pack Portal   A-Z Index   Search A-State

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CONTACT STUDENT SUPPORT
SERVICES

Student Support Services

Phone: 870-972-2320
Fax: 870-972-3060

Postal Address:
PO Box 1390
State University, AR 72467

STUDY SKILLS LINKS

The following links are provided as a resource for our students and are not affiliated with our program.

WRITING PAPERS

- **Writing Strategies:** https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/2/65/
- **Starting Your Research Paper:** http://libguides.astate.edu/c.php?g=14501&p=78095
- **Citations and References:** http://libguides.astate.edu/citations/builders
- **Library Databases:** http://libguides.astate.edu/az.php
- **Search the A-State Library Collections :** http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/search/advanced?sid=8e41e5d1-5307-453e-9cd3-eb5486198a22%40sessionmgr110&vid=0&hid=114
- **Reference Materials from Arkansas State University Library:** http://www.astate.edu/library
- **APA Writing Style:** http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/
- **English Composition:** http://libguides.astate.edu/composition

NOTE-TAKING STRATEGIES

- **Useful Abbreviations and Symbols:** http://www.english-zone.com/study/symbols.html
- **Cornell Method of Note-Taking:** http://www.dartmouth.edu/%7Eacskills/docs/cornell_note_taking.doc

https://www.astate.edu/college/university-college/student-support-services/study-skills/index.dot

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106 N Caraway Road
Office Suite 301
Jonesboro, AR 72401

STUDY SKILLS METHODS

- **Study basics:** http://www.studygs.net/
- **Improve your study skills:** http://academic.cuesta.edu/acasupp/AS/601.HTM
- **Student Study Tips:** http://www.collegegrant.net/college-student-study-tips/

TEST-TAKING SKILLS

- **Ten Tips for Test-Taking:** http://www.studygs.net/tsttak1.htm
- **Test-Taking Checklist:** http://www.d.umn.edu/kmc/student/loon/acad/strat/testcheck.html

TEST ANXIETY

- **Overcoming Test Anxiety:** http://www.studygs.net/tstprp8.htm
- **Do I have Test Anxiety?:** http://www.how-to-study.com/study-skills-articles/test-anxiety.asp

TIME MANAGEMENT

- **Time Management Strategies:** http://www.studygs.net/timman.htm
- **Developing a Interactive Daily Schedule:** http://www.studygs.net/schedule/index.htm
- **Prioritize your goals and objectives:** http://www.studygs.net/schedule/goals.htm
- **Problem Solving and Decision Making:** http://www.studygs.net/problem/exception.htm

STRESS MANAGEMENT

- **What is stress and how can it be managed?:** http://www.mindtools.com/smpage.html
- **Ten to Managing Stress:** http://stress.about.com/od/studentstress/tp/school_stress.htm

A-STATE TUTORING AND SERVICES

- **Learning Support Center:** http://www.astate.edu/college/university-college/learning-commons/lsc/
- **Writing Center:** http://www.astate.edu/college/humanities-and-social-sciences/departments/english-and-philosophy/writing-guide/writing-lab/ **OR** http://libguides.astate.edu/composition/writingcenter

https://www.astate.edu/college/university-college/student-support-services/study-skills/index.dot