

## Exploration of the Effects of Sharing Critical Incidents on Tertiary Level EFL Learners' Learning and Self-Efficacy Beliefs

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Article information	
<b>Abstract</b>	Critical incidents, which may appear insignificant at first, could pave the way for effective learning in English language learning environments. This study aimed to explore the effects of sharing critical incidents on learning experiences and self-efficacy beliefs of EFL learners attending the preparatory year program at the tertiary level. The study adopted a phenomenological qualitative research method combined with the critical incident technique and included three groups of university students, totaling 15 students. Through structured meetings held for six weeks, participating students discussed the critical incidents in their classes during the week and shared their experiences and knowledge gained in the same learning environment. The students, who came together in regular intervals weekly, were interviewed to talk about the potential effects of this sharing process on their learning experiences. Data were collected through students' voice recordings saved each week and focus group interviews conducted by the researcher every three weeks. The students' discussions were shaped by prompts that

	aimed to elicit critical incidents from their perspectives. Data were analyzed using content analysis methods. The results of the study revealed the positive impacts of the critical incident sharing process. Specifically, such a process was found to increase students' awareness of their learning, enable learning from and with peers, and increase their self-efficacy. Students enrolled in English preparatory programs could benefit from critical incident sharing with the guidance of their instructors to benefit from these positive impacts. This study has shown that utilizing critical incidents offers opportunities to enhance learning and increase self-efficacy about learning English as a foreign language.
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## 1. Introduction

Literature has associated the process of learning English as a foreign language with several factors contributing to success or failure, some of which include beliefs (Dörnyei, 2001), learning styles (Castro & Peck, 2005), gender, motivation, personality (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991), affective factors (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), learning strategies (Oxford, 1992), perseverance (Oxford, 2016), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). According to constructivist approaches, there is no single external and true reality; rather, there exist multiple realities that are constructed, apprehended, and rendered equally valid (Kukla, 2000). Hence, reality is constructed within individuals' minds as well as interactions between individuals. Social constructivism posits that learning happens in social contexts with the exchange of cultural meanings, indicating that the knowledge constructed may change depending on the environment in which an individual learns (Abdal-

Haqq, 1998). Foreign language learning happens in a social context, and self-efficacy is affected by teachers and peers as well as physiological states and social interactions in learning environments. As such, seemingly ordinary classroom moments could turn into critical incidents and transform people's future actions in learning. This factor makes peers and teachers important components of critical incidents in learning environments. The critical incident technique was first introduced as a qualitative research method by Flanagan in 1954. The technique has been considered an effective and flexible research tool (Chell, 2004; Sharoff, 2008) which enables the collection of data from the respondents' perspectives through common and everyday events. This technique has been utilized in various fields including English language learning and teaching.

Studies have been conducted to explore how critical incident analysis can facilitate learning. For instance, Vachon and LeBlanc (2011) carried out a study using a critical incident analysis and reflective learning process with a group learning activity. In 12 meetings held over a 15-month period, they found that the process improved students' motivation to self-evaluate and increased their self-efficacy. In a study conducted by Preskill (1997), students were asked to reflect on their reactions to and learning from the course through a set of evaluative questions responded to weekly and found that the process increased students' understanding of key evaluation concepts. The study also found that students appreciated their own and others' learning styles. Indeed, critical incidents have significant effects on language learning when learners are aware of and reflect on them (Finch, 2010), and the critical incident method effectively links foreign language skills and intercultural competence (Engelking, 2018). In their study that investigated the dynamic state of EFL pre-service teachers' self-efficacy through critical incidents, Pandee et al. (2020) explored the participants' levels of teacher self-efficacy and found that their self-efficacy was influenced by behavioral, contextual, and personal factors. In addition, Ravikumar (2013) explored the self-efficacy beliefs of pre-service elementary teachers regarding science and science teaching, focusing on their K-12 science experiences and found that both positive

and negative critical incidents significantly influenced these teachers' self-efficacy beliefs.

In their study that investigated students' self-efficacy in peer interactions, Nyman et al. (2019) found that perceptions about their self-efficacy in peer interactions manifest themselves in reflecting on information relevant to judging personal abilities. As verbal encouragement provided by teachers and peers contributes to the increase in self-efficacy, critical incident sharing in which students share about the difficulties they experience and provide suggestions for improvements with peers may be a catalyst for increasing self-efficacy and enhancing their learning. However, it is worth noting that the literature includes no studies that have investigated the effects of a process in which students have critical incident sharing experiences in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) to explore learning experiences and self-efficacy beliefs in tandem. To fill such a gap, this study aimed to explore the effects of the critical incident sharing process of EFL learners attending the preparatory year program at the tertiary level on their learning experiences and self-efficacy beliefs. Although critical incidents have been investigated in the foreign language literature (Drood et al., 2022; Finch, 2010; Kairouz, 2012; Siegllová, 2022; Snow, 2015), how the technique may affect learning and specifically self-efficacy seem to be under-investigated in the field of learning English as a foreign language. The present study was an attempt to explore these effects from students' experiences.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Critical Incident Technique**

Tripp (1993) has pointed out that critical incidents are not merely dramatic life-turning moments; they are rather moments that upon analysis gain new meaning that is transformative in some way. He adds that people create critical incidents from moments that often seem very ordinary. The critical incident technique (CIT) has been utilized in education research. For instance, Houston and Bettencourt (1999) investigated specific course-related behaviors by college

professors perceived as fair and unfair by students using CIT, and Voss et al. (2010) used CIT to categorize positive and negative student-professor encounters in higher education. Moreover, Tran et al.(2019) explored the effects of critical incident task instruction on intercultural competence among non-majored undergraduates. The intervention involving critical incident tasks indicated a significant and strong effect. In addition, Geng and Yu (2022) investigated doctoral students' emotions and emotion-regulation strategies in academic writing situations using CIT and semi-structured interviews. The study demonstrated the role of feedback as a critical incident triggering doctoral students' academic emotion.

Foreign language learning classrooms involve many instances involving ordinary moments to be created as critical incidents by learners. These incidents could pave the way for better learning, hamper the learning process, increase or decrease motivation, or have positive or negative effects on self-efficacy beliefs, which are all considered to be factors contributing to success or failure in the foreign language learning process. Drood et al. (2023) explored effective language classrooms using a critical incident technique, while Horgan (2017) used critical incident analysis to analyze foreign language students' self-reflection skills and found a perceived increase in students' self-reflection skills. Kairouz (2012) used CIT to improve learners' performance in English listening and speaking classes and found that the students' performance improved. Besides this, using critical incidents, Liao (2023) investigated developing symbolic competence for intercultural learning among EFL learners and reported the potential benefits of critical incident in the development of symbolic competence.

## **2.2 Self-Efficacy**

In Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1986), self-efficacy is defined as individuals' beliefs in their capabilities to perform a task and is considered to be a principal variable in predicting learners' performance. As such, learners' performance can be predicted by their beliefs better than their real ability

(Bandura, 1997). The self-efficacy theory proposed by Bandura (2012) has been shown to have an impact on learners' academic achievement. Language learning performance has also been reported to be associated with self-efficacy beliefs (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Ispinar Akcayoglu & Ozer, 2021). For instance, academic achievement and self-efficacy were found to be directly associated (Özer & İspınar Akçayoğlu, 2021); writing self-efficacy was reported to be negatively associated with anxiety (Aytaç-Demirçivi, 2020); proficiency in listening in English was found to be higher in self-efficacious students (Canaran et al., 2020); and self-efficacy was associated with success in EMI (English medium instruction) besides preparatory performance and L2 ability (Thompson et al., 2021). According to Bandura (1997), there are four factors that affect the development of self-efficacy beliefs. The first factor is mastery experience, which means a successful performance accomplished by an individual has a vital role in the development of self-efficacy beliefs. The second factor is vicarious experience, which means observing peers or friends perform a task successfully can help individuals develop positive beliefs about their own capability to do the same. The third factor is social persuasion referring to the fact that self-efficacy is affected by encouragement and positive feedback received from mentors, supervisors, advisors, etc. who are valued for their expertise. The last factor is physiological states that, together with emotional states, affect self-efficacy. For instance, learners with low anxiety during a task performance may strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs. Bandura (2006) asserts that self-efficacy is associated with motivation, indicating that when individuals are highly motivated, they tend to see difficulties surmountable. Huang (2023) reported that peer support positively predicted self-efficacy as well as enjoyment. Furthermore, in her study that examined peer tutoring in learning English as a foreign language, Aydinoglu (2016) found the benefits of peer tutoring which enabled students to witness their improvement in learning English. Peer collaboration is reported to be useful (Ratner et al., 2002) and enables students to experience higher self-efficacy for learning (Schunk, 1995). Considering the mastery and vicarious experiences as well as the role of social persuasion and encouragement from important people such as peers and teachers, whether

critical incident sharing could contribute to this process seems to be a topic worth exploring.

### **2.3 Critical Incident Technique (CIT) and Self-Efficacy Among EFL Learners**

As Bandura (1997) has mentioned, self-efficacy depends on specific situations under the influence of several factors. Becoming aware of these factors through sharing critical incidents in these environments could offer valuable benefits. Studies in the field of teaching and learning English as a foreign language indicate the utilization of critical incidents to investigate self-efficacy beliefs (Meijer et al., 2011; Smolleck & Mongan, 2011). Everyday events bring the opportunity to explore critical incidents and their effects on various factors (Tripp, 1993). Critical incidents could have positive or negative effects on learners' self-efficacy. Ravikumar (2013) used critical incidents as an analytical tool to explore factors affecting pre-service teachers' self-efficacy. Nylén and Isomöttönen (2017) found that critical incident reporting induced reflection on learning as well as having positive effects on students' awareness of their professional knowledge. Similarly, Atikah and Astuti (2020) discovered that critical incident technique helped learners improve writing in content, organization, language use, vocabulary, and mechanic aspects. These positive effects and improvements are considered to lead to an increase in learners' self-efficacy beliefs.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Study Design**

The present study adopted a phenomenological qualitative research method combined with CIT. Qualitative designs enable the researcher to make an in-depth exploration of the participants' perspectives through semi-structured interviews, self-administered questionnaires, or structured interviews (Bryman, 2006). This study utilized a descriptive phenomenology, which focused on the participants' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. Phenomenological design is a powerful tool that deepens a researcher's understanding of human experience and

behavior (Moustakas, 1994). Such an approach was utilized because of the very nature of critical incidents and the essence of those experiences from the participants' perspective.

As pointed out by Aveyard and Neale (2009), the CIT is a flexible method for the collection of data because it can be adapted according to the needs of the study as well as the participants. Mertens (2013) considers subjectivity as the common focus of different phenomenological approaches. CIT allows for the exploration of subjectivity because, as stated by Douglas et al. (2009), participants can freely describe their experiences and feelings as they perceive them, which provides more meaningful data. The phenomenology in this study was students' differing perceptions and experiences in their English language learning journeys. The study benefited from the strengths of these methods to make an in-depth exploration of the issues under investigation.

### **3.2 Setting and Participants**

This study was conducted at a School of Foreign Languages of a state university located in southern Türkiye. Schools of Foreign Languages in Türkiye provides students with intensive foreign language education for a year. The School of Foreign Languages where the present study was conducted grouped students into three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced (English major). The majority of the students (72% when the study was conducted) start at the beginner level and become pre-intermediate and intermediate in the second semester of the academic year. The participants of this study were selected by means of purposive sampling among the same group of learners (pre-intermediate) because they were exposed to the same instructional content. Other groups were instructed on different content through different materials, which could have affected the study results. Attending classes regularly at the School of Foreign Languages, being in the pre-intermediate group, and agreeing to participate in the study were the inclusion criteria. The participants of this study were three groups of students, with five students in each group, totaling 15. While 11 students attended the School of Foreign Languages for the first time, four students were repeat students.



The relatively small sample size (n=15) in this study could be considered a limitation that may introduce bias and decreased diversity of perspectives. However, working with a small group in a qualitative study is believed to allow for a deep, nuanced exploration of individual incidents, which facilitates a rich understanding of a complex phenomenon like learning a foreign language. To make an in-depth exploration of the processes introduced with the critical incident sharing and to better elicit its effects on students' learning and self-efficacy through each individual's voices, the study utilized a relatively smaller sample size that is considered to reflect the opinions of a larger population. Besides, commitment to such a process for a long period of over six weeks required regular participation. The study participants were exposed to 22 hours of English per week and instructed in grammar, listening and speaking, and reading and writing courses.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

In this study, through critical incident sharing sessions, the participants constructed ongoing teaching and learning conversations within and beyond their education settings through the critical incident questionnaire (CIQ) developed by Brookfield (2017), enabling reflective introspection to pinpoint instances when their comprehension of instructional material peaked and when confusion emerged. The sessions were voice recorded. Any information that remained unclear was also discussed with an opportunity to elucidate and enhance understanding collaboratively.

The students were first given information about critical incidents. As reported by Atikah and Astudi (2020), a critical incident is a subjective interpretation of the significance of a particular event. In this study, participating students were asked to reflect on their everyday foreign language learning experiences and specifically focus on the prompts provided by the researcher through the following questions that guided their conversations: "At what moment in the classes this week did you feel like you most understood the instructional

content?,” “ At what moment in the classes this week did you feel most confused about the instructional content?,” “Was there information presented in this week’s class that is still unclear to you? If so, please describe and share your knowledge to make it clear?,” “Are there additional materials that help you understand this week’s content better?,” and “Do you think you will learn the topics instructed despite the current challenges you face?” The participating students came together twice a week to have conversations using these questions, which aimed to elicit their learning experiences that directed their learning as critical incidents. The participants recorded their voices and shared them with the researcher for analysis purposes.

After three weeks, the researcher met the participants to conduct focus group interviews to elicit their experiences about the implementation of CIT and its potential effects on them. At the end of the sixth week, the researcher met the participants again. During focus group interviews, the students were asked to describe their critical incident sharing experiences as well as its specific effects, if any, on their learning and self-efficacy. Focus group interviews were voice-recorded.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

Data obtained from weekly critical incident sharing sessions and focus group interviews were transcribed for analysis purposes. Fifteen students were coded by indicating the groups (G1, G2, and G3) and the number of students in each group (from 1 to 5).

Patton (2015) posits that no single method or technique is recommended for the analysis of qualitative data. However, several essential steps were utilized during analysis in this study, which included organizing data, conducting initial analysis, coding and categorizing the themes, representing the data in figures, tables, and forming and interpreting the data, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2016). An analysis process based on this framework was adopted to analyze the

data, specifically, reading and taking notes, coding and categorizing the emergent codes, combining them into themes, interpreting them, and finally reporting the interpretations. Data obtained from critical incident sessions were subjected to frequency analysis of the items cited. The data obtained from the focus group interviews were coded by two coders separately, and the nine-page interview transcriptions were reviewed for each rendition together. Inter-coder reliability was calculated utilizing the formula by Miles and Huberman (1994), with reliability equaling to the number of agreements/(total number of agreements + number of disagreements), which was 87.38%. With an agreement rate of 87.38%, the level of consistency between coders indicated a good degree of agreement.

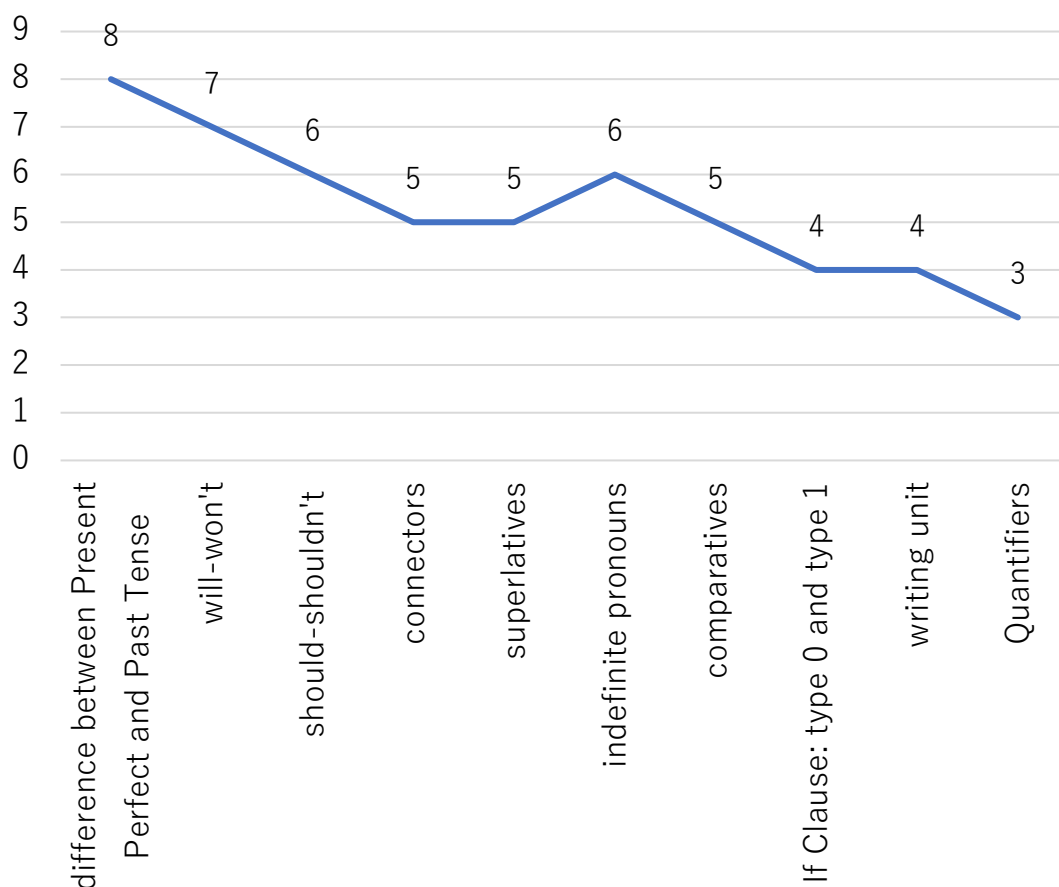
### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Before the study was conducted, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the university where the study was conducted (dated 30.11.2022 and numbered 10/10). The participants were given information about the purpose of the study, and they were informed that participation was on a voluntary basis. They were also assured that the voice recordings would be used only for analysis purposes within the scope of the research and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative effects on them.

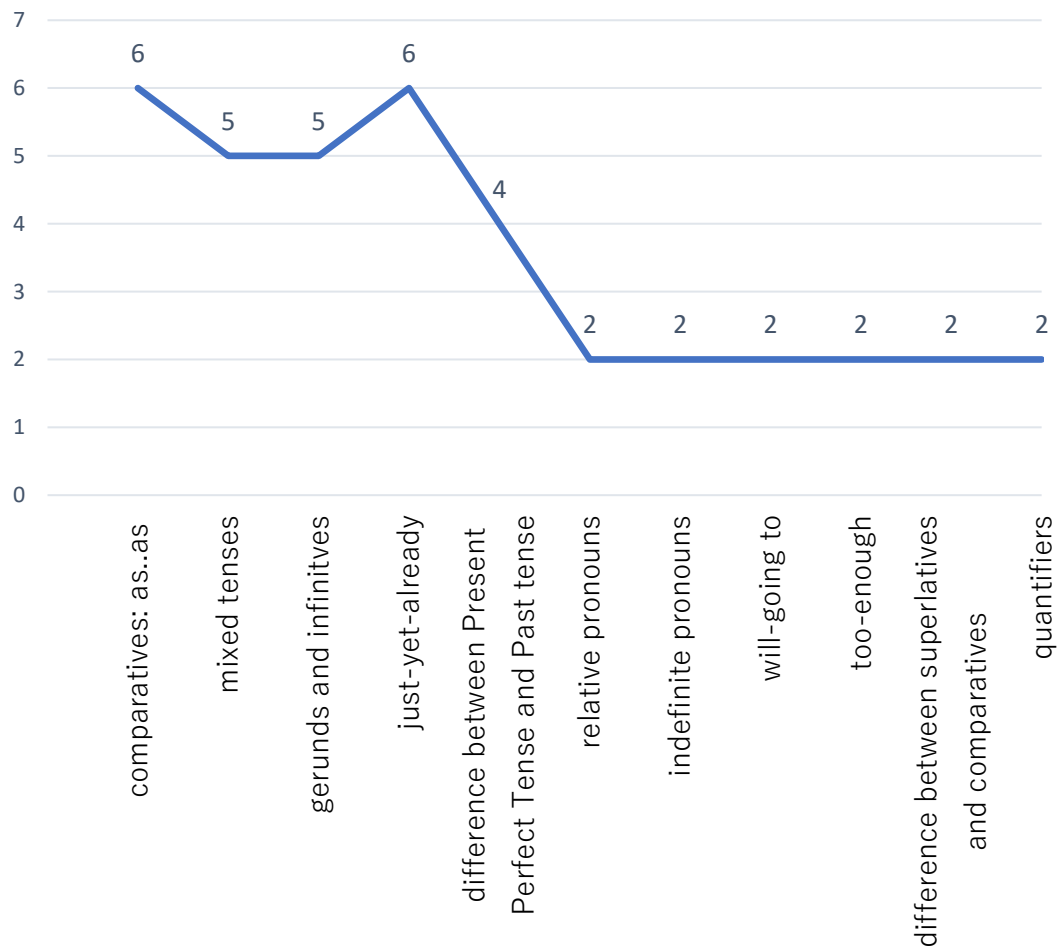
## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Findings from Weekly Critical Incident Sharing Sessions**

The first three questions in the critical incident questionnaire (CIQ) aimed to determine the instructional content that the students considered to understand very well, the content they felt most confused about, and the information that was still unclear to them, as shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1***Most Understandable Instructional Content to Students*

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the content that was considered to be understood very well by most of the students was the difference between the present perfect tense and the simple past tense, which was cited by eight students. Other topics included will-won't (f=7), should-shouldn't (f=6), indefinite pronouns (f=6), connectors (f=5), comparatives (f=5), if clauses types 0 and 1 (f=4), writing unit (f=4), and quantifiers (f=3), respectively.

**Figure 2***Most Confusing Instructional Content to Students*

The students discussed at what moment in the classes they felt most confused about the instructional content. Their responses are demonstrated in Figure 2.

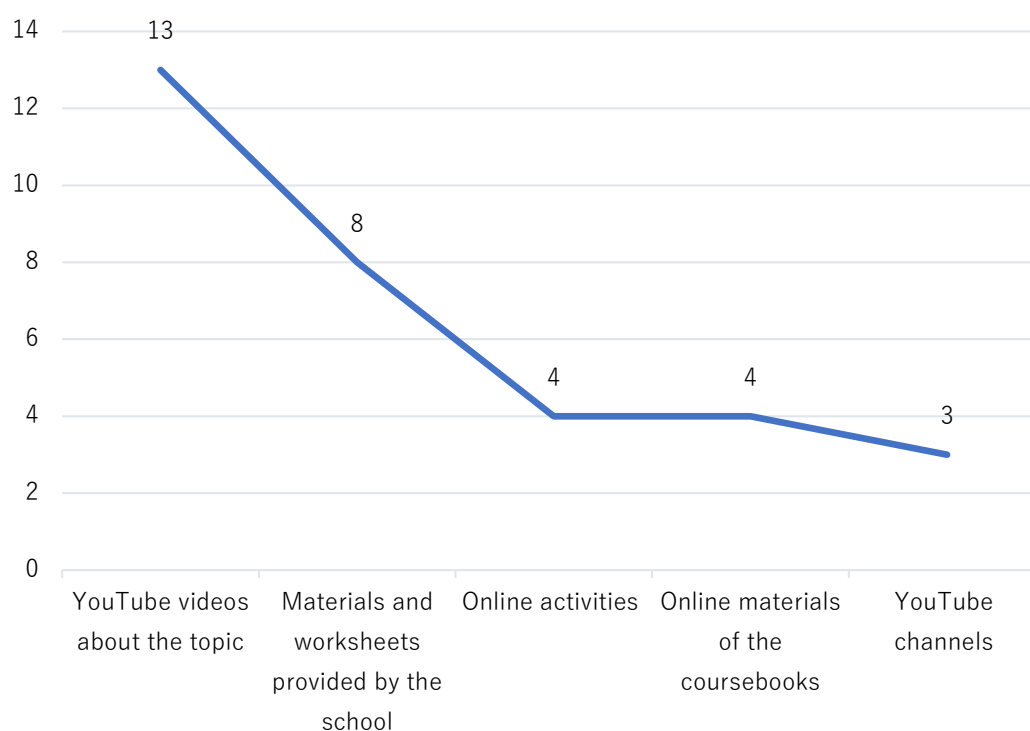
As shown in Figure 2, although comparatives were among the most understandable topics, comparative sentences containing “as...as” were the top-cited item as the most confusing instructional content (f=6). The use of just-yet and already was another more frequently cited topic. Other topics included mixed tenses (f=5), gerunds and infinitives (f=5), the difference between the present perfect tense and the past tense (f=4), relative pronouns (f=2), will-going to (f=2), too-enough (f=2), the difference between superlatives and comparatives (f=2), and quantifiers (f=2).

The next two questions aimed to find out the topics that were still unclear to the participants and what they could do to learn them better. The findings showed that participating students were still confused about gerunds and infinitives, mixed tenses, -ed and -ing adjectives, and Type 1 and Type 2 conditionals, respectively. The students reported that they felt like memorization was the only way to learn gerunds and infinitives, and not being able to see the logic behind them made them confused.

The students discussed what they could do to learn these topics better. Figure 3 demonstrates their responses.

**Figure 3**

Things Used for Instructional Content Confusing to Students



As demonstrated in Figure 3, watching YouTube videos about the topic was the most frequently cited solution by the students. Other solutions included extra materials and worksheets provided by the school, online activities, online materials of the course books, and YouTube channels they followed regularly. During the critical incident sharing sessions, some of the students had recommendations for

their friends to help them to better understand what had confused them. Some excerpts are as follows:

*G1-S1: “You should focus on A1 and A2 level materials on the Internet; others might seem complicated. For instance, you can watch A2-level movies adjusted for learning. I am doing so, and it works.”*

*G2-S4: “You should use dictionaries that provide the use of words in sentences. In this way, you can be sure when you are using them in sentences.”*

*G1-S2: “As our teacher said the other day, we should not worry about making mistakes and do our best to produce something even if it does not seem to be good enough. These confusing topics will be clearer soon.”*

*G1-S1: “Choose a film you like and know well. Watch it in English without subtitles. Improve your listening, not reading.”*

*G3-S1: “I have just learned that vocabulary knowledge becomes more permanent when the words are learned in context.”*

Some excerpts indicating the participants’ self-efficacy beliefs were selected from the voice recordings of the critical incident sharing experiences. The majority of the participating students (n=11) reportedly believed that they could learn the topics despite the difficulties they faced; excerpts indicating their views included the following:

*G1-S4: “The topics I found difficult a few weeks ago seem to be so easy to me now, so I believe that these topics will be easier for me after some time.”*

*G3-S1: “I’ll check the materials provided in the Google Classroom and then watch the channels you suggested. I’ll also check the worksheet you shared in our critical incident group. I believe I can learn.”*

*G3-S4: The extra material our teacher brought today seems to be helpful. It made things clearer for me. I believe I will learn when I review it once more.*

On the other hand, some of the students did not seem to be as positive, as indicated in the excerpts below:

*G2-S3: “I do not think there is time to learn it. We have an exam next week and the topic is still complicated to me.”*

*G2-S5: “There is nothing to learn about gerunds and infinitives; we have to memorize them. I am struggling to find some kind of formula to make my learning easier, but I cannot. Memorization is the only solution, which makes me demotivated.”*

*G1-S3: “I must be honest that I do not study hard enough, so I think I have more difficulties than you do.”*

## **4.2 Findings from focus group interviews**

The data obtained from the focus group interviews were subjected to qualitative data analysis. The participating students were first met for focus group interviews when they completed the critical incident sharing in the third week.



Table 1 demonstrates the themes formed based on the findings from the third-week focus group interviews, which consist of two themes and seven codes.

**Table 1**

*Findings from the Third-Week Focus Group Interviews*

Themes	Codes	f
Learning experiences	increased awareness	7
	learning from and with peers	7
	revision and enhanced learning	3
	reflection	2
	challenges and difficulties	2
Self-efficacy	increased self-efficacy by learning from and with peers	3
	increased self-efficacy due to increased awareness	3

Data obtained from the third-week focus group interviews revealed the following codes under the theme of learning experiences: increased awareness (f=7), learning from and with peers (f= 7), revision and enhanced learning (f=3), reflection (f= 2), and challenges and difficulties (f=2). Under the self-efficacy theme, increased self-efficacy by learning from and with peers (f=3) and increased self-efficacy due to increased awareness (f=3) indicated positive effects of the critical incident sharing practice on self-efficacy. Increased awareness and learning from and with peers were found to be top-cited codes. The students mentioned increased awareness as noted below:

*G3-S3: “The questions, which I had never thought about until I saw them here, make me think about the parts I understand and the parts I find confusing. It makes me think about it consciously. I need to think about the topics and match them with their names, which increases my awareness.”*

*G1-S3: “Questions help you think and recall about the process .”*

*G2-S4: "When I come home, I sit at my desk to study and sometimes do not know what to study or where to start. If that day we have these critical incident sharing sessions, I say, okay, I should start with the topics that confused me."*

Learning from and with peers revealed the interaction with participating individuals as they indicated a kind of group dynamics they developed for learning, which was noted by students as follows:

*G1-S4: "We learn by teaching each other. Teaching it to a friend helps you not to forget the topic."*

*G2-S2: "In this group, my friends suggested to download dictionary applications having so many different meanings and forms of the words. I realized I was limiting myself to one exact meaning provided in Translate. Sometimes it suggests something so weird. In dictionaries or the websites my friends suggested, you see words in sentences."*

The group dynamics formed were also reflected in one student's comment as follows:

*G3-S1: "During presentation weeks, I record my voice and send it to my friends to receive feedback, to see how I perform."*

Finally, reflections on the process of students' self-efficacy were revealed in one student's views as shown below:

*G2-S4: "Previously, when I did not understand a topic, I used to think that it was my problem only. However, during these sessions,*

*when I hear that my friends also did not understand, I feel like it is a general problem and feel better.”*

The students were met for focus-group interviews when the critical incident sharing process ended after six weeks. Table 2 demonstrates findings from the second focus group interviews, which consist of two themes and ten codes.

**Table 2**

*Findings from the Second Focus Group Interviews*

Themes	Codes	f
Learning experiences	learning from and with peers	12
	enhanced learning	10
	increased awareness	7
	challenges and difficulties	7
	developing group dynamics	2
Self-efficacy	improvement in self-efficacy	11
	increased self-efficacy due to Increased awareness	6
	increased self-efficacy by learning from and with peers	6
	discovering self-learning through technology	2

Students’ responses to the interview questions revealed the codes as learning from and with peers (f=12), enhanced learning (f=10), increased awareness (f=7), challenges and difficulties (f=7) (both program and the critical incident sharing process), and developing group dynamics (f=2) under the learning experience theme. Thirteen out of 15 students reported the positive impact of the critical incident (f=13), and the codes under the self-efficacy theme included improvement in self-efficacy (f=11), increased self-efficacy by learning from and with peers (f=6), increased self-efficacy due to increased awareness (f=6), and discovering self-learning through technology (f=2) under the self-efficacy theme.

The students were found to have noticed a great deal of improvement in their knowledge since they started school as they noted the effective learning experiences, as can be seen in the following excerpts:

*G1-S1: "I feel like I am two different people when I compare myself in September and January. I used to start all sentences with I am. I can produce more and more now. I try new structures and then share them in my critical incident group."*

*G1-S5 "We came together and shared so many things about our learning process. For instance, Ece (S4) helps us a lot. Sometimes, learning from a friend is more effective. We even came together online to study together. My questions are limitless when I ask to my friends. Although our teachers help us, after some time you feel like you are asking too many questions."*

Another student shared a similar sentiment:

*G3-S4: "We ask questions to our friends more freely. Sometimes we feel shy to ask our teacher in front of other students. We attach too much importance to our friends' thoughts, which is not good. However, in this small group, we could ask questions to each other freely and teach and learn from each other. It certainly affects our learning positively."*

Similar views were indicated as follows:

*G1-S3: "It has positive effects. I am not sure if the same dynamics could be achieved with other people. People need to understand and want to benefit from the process equally; something we could achieve in the critical incident group. We learned a lot from each*

*other. For instance, we had another WhatsApp group. We got prepared for the exams as a group separately from other people in the classroom.”*

Finally, the participants mentioned the difficulties of both the English language and the preparatory year program on their learning experiences and self-efficacy, saying, for instance,

*G3-S1: “Difficulty of the topic is an important factor. Some topics become more complicated as you go deeper. We think we understand, but we see that we cannot do the exercises.”*

*G2-S5: “Exceptions are so annoying. They never end and if memorization is needed, I cannot accept it and I do not feel like I am learning effectively.”*

*G1-S4: “I feel like I have learned very well and feel self-efficacious until I need to perform in the exam. Things get just the opposite if I feel I do not understand the questions well or I receive scores lower than I expect.”*

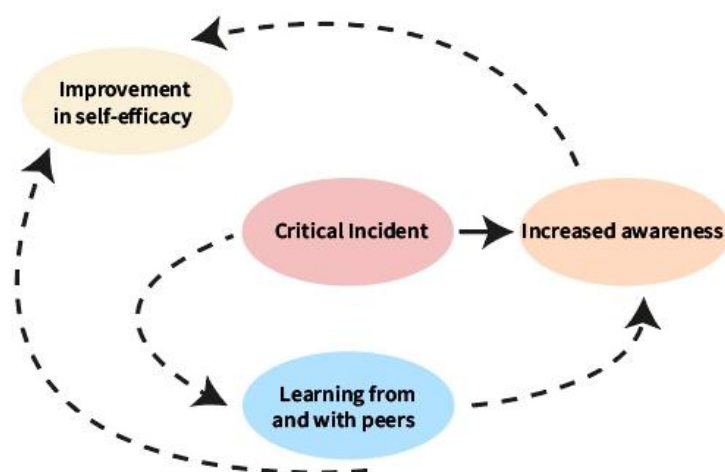
Similar to the learning experience theme, participating students mentioned the effects of learning from and with each other and increased awareness as factors contributing to their self-efficacy beliefs, as one participant described:

*G3-S3: “I felt like I am fully aware of the process while I am discussing topics with friends. My confidence in achieving increases. I trust myself more when I teach or learn from a group friend.”*

Figure 4 displays an overall analysis of the effects of the critical sharing process on learning and self-efficacy with the affecting factors emerging from the data collection tools.

**Figure 4**

*Effects of the Critical Incident Sharing Process on Learning and Self-Efficacy*



The data obtained in this study revealed the positive effects of the critical sharing experience on students' learning and self-efficacy. Increased awareness and learning from and with peers were indicated as the most important factors that contributed to this effect.

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the effects of the critical incident sharing process of EFL learners attending the preparatory year program at the tertiary level on their learning experiences and self-efficacy beliefs, and the findings demonstrated reciprocal relationships between critical incident sharing experience, learning from and with peers, increased awareness, and improvement in self-efficacy.

During their weekly critical incident sharing sessions, the students talked about the grammar topics they thought they understood very well or found confusing. Larsen-Freeman (2003) examined the challenges of grammar from the

perspectives of linguistic form, semantic interpretation, and pragmatics and reported that a grammar feature can be easy with respect to one aspect, yet it can be difficult with respect to another. Those topics perceived as challenging by students shared some topics parallel to the studies conducted by Shiu (2011) on ELF learners' perception of grammar difficulty, Scheffler (2011) on grammatical difficulty from English language teachers' perspectives, and Dehghani et al. (2016) on difficult English grammar features as perceived by undergraduate EFL learners. Differences between English and the participants' native language are considered to be one of the reasons why they find these topics challenging. In the present study, talking about these topics by referring to their names and sharing what to do to learn them better seemed to contribute to the participants' learning and self-efficacy. Learners' self-efficacy beliefs are affected by their own mastery experiences or their peers' successful performances. The critical incident sharing process contributed to these learning experiences through specific examples they shared and implemented.

Participating students shared the things they did to learn topics better (watching YouTube videos about a specific topic as the top-cited solution) during the critical incident sharing sessions. The findings clearly demonstrated the utilization of videos in enhancing learning. The students were found to enhance their learning using these videos for self-study, which is in line with research findings indicating that videos could help students receive better scores, achieve long-term success in learning, and prepare themselves for some social situations in English-speaking countries (Ahmad et al., 2020) and that students had positive attitudes toward using visual media for enhancing their learning (Sakkir et al., 2020). The Internet offers access to millions of sources online for learning English as a foreign language. Research indicates that high-performing students frequently access information and communication technologies (Hromalik & Koszalka, 2018). During the critical incident sharing sessions, participating students seemed to help each other make their learning more effective through concrete suggestions that worked for them, which is generally believed to enhance

their learning and have positive effects on their self-efficacy. Students realized that they experienced similar challenges and became aware of sources available to them through the lived experiences of their peers. This process was triggered by the critical incident sharing sessions and enhanced students' learning and increased their self-efficacy.

Focus-group interviews revealed the effects of critical incidents on students' learning and awareness. The critical incident sharing process was found to be associated with increased awareness. In their study that investigated the critical incident open-ended tasks, Tran et al. (2020) concluded that critical incident was a promising method to assist educators in developing students' awareness of intercultural communication. These results align with previous research conducted by Finch (2010), who noted that critical incidents may include delayed reactions to lesson content or flashes of awareness as a consequence of triggered learning. Enhanced learning was among the top-cited codes in this study. The most significant factor that contributed to learning was learning from and with peers. Talking about their learning, hearing similar challenges, and trying each other's suggestions seemed to help students in this process.

The students, who reportedly developed group dynamics in the process, were found to benefit from an interactive workshop environment in which they reflected on their learning experiences and contributed to their self-efficacy. Finch (2010) also reported that the sensitivity to initial conditions, critical incidents in this study, in terms of learning enables learners to reflect on their learning over a period and notice these incidents for triggering or realizing subsequent learning. Associating critical incidents with the complexity theory, he further commended that insignificant initial events could determine how global structures (e.g. learning) emerge over the long term. It seems that becoming aware of their learning and enhancing it with friends triggered participating students' subsequent learning, which was enabled through critical incident sharing.



The finding on the role of peers also echoes the social constructivist theory, which posits that knowledge is constructed through dialogue and interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism places a strong emphasis on social interactions for learners' cognitive development. The critical incident process enabled learners to benefit from this throughout the implementation. Today's digitalized landscape provides foreign language learners all over the world with miscellaneous self-learning opportunities online. However, the interactive nature of foreign language learning is also relevant in this age. Research also acknowledges the role of learning with other learners to enable knowledge construction (Kabilan & Zahar, 2016; Aravind & Bhuvaneswari, 2023). Hence, the results showed that some learners discovered several self-learning opportunities with the help of their interaction with friends during the critical incident sharing process.

The findings of this study revealed that overall, critical incident sharing affected students' self-efficacy positively. On the other hand, while some students stated that self-efficacy was related to personality, others mentioned the exams, complex topics, and different learning environments and materials affecting their self-efficacy. Pandee et al. (2020) also investigated pre-service teachers' self-efficacy and found that self-efficacy was dynamic and it was affected by a variety of factors such as personal experiences, interactions with others, and the learning environment. The findings of the present study also indicated the presence of these factors.

The results of this study revealed the challenges and difficulties of both the critical incident sharing process and the preparatory year program. Students mentioned the difficulties of coming together with their group friends for critical incident sharing during exam weeks, illnesses, or absenteeism. Critical incident allows for exploratory research providing context-rich, first-hand perspectives on human activities as well as their significance. On the other hand, the technique has some drawbacks. For instance, it is reported to be time-consuming and its

personally recalled nature limits its generalizability (Hughes et al., 2007). The difficulty of maintaining the sessions during the challenging program was thus somewhat expected.

Critical sharing experiences enabled some of the students to have recommendations for their friends to help them learn better and increase their self-efficacy. Other students who benefited from these suggestions reported observing positive impacts on their learning and self-efficacy. The school environment, teachers, and peers were reported to influence self-efficacy and motivation (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021). Besides, Bandura (1997) mentions four factors that affect the development of self-efficacy beliefs: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological states. Sharing critical incidents seems to foster these important aspects of self-efficacy. During critical incident sessions, participating students benefited from each other's experiences and shared what worked for them with others. They also studied together and reviewed each other's assignments and presentations to give feedback to each other. Based on this, students seemed to benefit from mastery experience and vicarious experience to improve their self-efficacy through the critical incident sharing process. In addition, they felt more relaxed in a stress-free atmosphere in which they could ask as many questions as they wanted to each other. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that critical incident sharing sessions help learners benefit from factors affecting the development of self-efficacy beliefs and enhancement of learning.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

This study collected qualitative data and explored participating students' learning experiences and self-efficacy beliefs over a period of six weeks through critical incident sharing sessions held weekly. The limitations of the study should also be taken into consideration. Firstly, the study included pre-intermediate students who attended school regularly and volunteered to participate in the study. Other studies to include underachieving students or students from different levels

would probably yield different results in terms of their learning experiences and self-efficacy beliefs. Secondly, the study data were based on students' self-reports and included no in-class observations or any control groups to reveal the effects of this process more clearly. Future studies could include various factors and benefit from other data collection tools to shed more light on the effects of critical incident sharing as well.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study found that critical incident sharing sessions had positive effects on students' learning experiences and self-efficacy beliefs. The results suggested a reciprocal relationship between increased awareness and improvement in self-efficacy, which was enhanced through a critical incident sharing process. Peer interactions and self-efficacy could improve with increased awareness, which may, in turn, reinforce motivation for further learning and reflection. On the other hand, while the process enabled positive impacts, it also had challenges and difficulties that were caused by both the program and the critical incident process itself.

Critical incident sharing has the potential to make learning more effective and create a butterfly effect by contributing to other affecting factors for success, enhanced learning, and self-efficacy. Hence, strategies that encourage critical incident and peer learning can be incorporated into curricula. Students can thus benefit from interventions that promote increased awareness, as it seems to be a catalyst for self-efficacy improvement and, consequently, enhanced learning. The language classrooms are complex, indicating that there could be so many different critical incidents for everyone involved in everyday classroom learning and teaching. The outcomes of critical incidents are not possible to guess as individual meanings attached to them could vary. Hence, language teachers should be helped in order to for them to recognize the importance of critical incidents and instructed on how their students benefit from sharing them for more effective learning experiences. Sharing their learning experiences through critical incidents and helping each other to make their learning better could increase students'

awareness of their learning. Potential relationships between sharing critical incidents and improved self-efficacy should also be highlighted to enhance the foreign language process. Mastery experiences and vicarious experiences, which are considered to be the mechanisms behind this impact, could be enhanced through critical incident sharing. While learning with and from each other, learners move beyond classroom learning and interaction to improve their self-efficacy. Instructors could be trained on conducting activities that initiate and maintain the use of critical incidents through some prompts that will trigger such a process. On the other hand, the critical incident sharing process may have some drawbacks, which should also be highlighted. If not designed effectively, questions prepared to prompt students' discussions may fail to lead to in-depth exploration, and recalling and retelling incidents could be considered time-consuming. Students should be willing and open to share so that the technique could provide benefits. To make this sharing process more meaningful, teachers could gradually change the prompt questions to elicit deeper insights from students' experiences. The same questions used for discussion over a long period could make the process dull for some students.

This study contributes to the literature by making an in-depth analysis of the relationships among sharing critical incidents, learning and self-efficacy through a period of six weeks. The results have indicated the potential benefits on the side of the learner, indicating that similar procedures applied in different learning settings could enhance learning and improve self-efficacy in foreign language learning classrooms.

## **8. About the Author**

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