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Is Self-efficacy Correlated with English Proficiency Levels?

—A Case Study of Taiwanese Arts Students

Min-chen Tseng[1*]

[1] General Education Center, National Taiwan University of Arts, New Taipei City, Taiwan

* Min-chen Tseng, E-mail: janetseng@ntua.edu.tw

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between arts students' English proficiency level and their self-efficacy. Many studies have proved that self-efficacy is a significant predictor of learning and achievement (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Pajares, 1996, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2005). Does this apply to arts students? Arts students spend most of their time practicing skills related to their professions. They have great confidence with what they were doing in their own fields, but they have to sacrifice the time that could be spent studying English. Therefore, are arts students' self-efficacy correlated with their English proficiency levels? A total of sixty-eight students participated in this study. They were equally divided into two groups: High Proficiency Learners (HPL) and Low Proficiency Learners (LPL). The results show that there was no significant correlation between students' English proficiency levels and their self-efficacy levels. The results did not support Bandura's theory. However, the findings did indicate that although arts students' English proficiency levels were poor, especially for students in the LPL group, they did believe that they had the ability to achieve a certain task. They did well in their professions but not in English. Further studies and more qualitative and quantitative data on arts students are needed.

Keywords

self-efficacy, English Proficiency Levels, GEPT, Arts students

1. Introduction

Self-efficacy, the belief that one can complete a specific learning task effectively, is of vital importance for students studying English as a foreign language. Teachers are often bewildered by how and why some students are eager to learn and willing to tackle new challenges while others seem uninterested or unmotivated no matter how hard teachers try. Why do some students demonstrate high levels of confidence in their abilities, while others seem uncertain of themselves? Another piece of the learning puzzle for teachers is how students believe self-efficacy influences the ways in which they approach the learning task. Self-efficacy plays a key role in the learning process by either helping or hindering the learner's progress (Bandura, 1984). The beliefs learners hold about their ability to learn English can regulate the ways in which they approach the learning task as well as how they respond in EFL classroom settings.

English proficiency is one of the requirements for being able to graduate from universities in Taiwan. It is a task that arts students have to tackle. They cannot choose to give it up. What do students think about this and do they believe that they are capable of learning English? Why are these arts students so confident in their majors or professions but not in their ability to learn English? As Siegle (2000) indicated, self-efficacy is specific to the task being attempted. This study inquired about arts students' beliefs about learning English at different English proficiency levels by investigating the aspects of cognitive, affective, and behavioral. While there are ample reasons to view EFL students' English self-efficacy as powerful enough of an indicator to predict EFL performance, it seems that this approach has not received enough attention for arts students. Therefore, this study was designed with the goal of sensitizing Taiwanese teachers, allowing them to understand their students' affective variables and beliefs about themselves and the effect these factors may exert on their performance in learning English.

2. Review of the Literature

Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 391). Self-efficacy affects students' choices of activities, effort and persistence. Students holding low self-efficacy may avoid a difficult task whereas students with high-self-efficacy work harder and persist longer when they face difficulties. Salomon (1984) found that highly efficacious students cognitively put more effort into learning when the task is regarded as difficult; however, they are likely to expend less effort when the tasks was seem easy. Self-efficacy is also highly related with students' use of deeper processing strategies and general cognitive engagement of learning (Graham & Golan, 1991; Pintrinch & Schrauben, 1992). Pintrich and De Groot (1990) found that junior high school students with high self-efficacy tend to use various cognitive and self-regulatory learning strategies. Self-efficacy is a significant predictor of learning and achievement (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Pajares, 1996, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2005). Self-efficacy is situation specific. Students' self-efficacy for a specific task on a given day might be different due to their preparation, physical condition (sickness, fatigue), affective mood, and external conditions such as the nature of the task (length, difficulty), and social background and environment (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008).

Generally speaking, success raises students' self-efficacy and failure decreases it. If students believe their learning progress is slow or their skills have stayed at low levels, self-efficacy is not helpful at all. However, success encourages students to put in great effort and boosts students' self-efficacy. Students will maintain high self-efficacy as long as they believe they can sustain the level of effort needed to succeed. Observing successful peers makes them believe that they can learn as well. When observing failures, students will doubt whether or not they can make it (Rosenthal & Bandura, 1978). A trustworthy source is fairly important too. Students feel efficacious when they are persuaded by a trustworthy source (e.g., the teacher) that they are capable of doing something. Several bodily symptoms are served as physiological cues. For example, sweating and trembling are signals when students are not capable of learning (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008).

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy involves students' judgments of their ability to perform a task within a specific domain. It is important to bear in mind that high efficacy in one academic subject that does not guarantee high efficacy in another. Even students with high efficacy in one domain may be not be willing to take another challenging class. The lack of prior knowledge or strategies necessary to do well in that class could hinder students to do so. Also, the generality of students' self-efficacy is important. In other words, some students may feel able to perform well in almost any academic setting, while others feel confident in only one or two settings and still others have little self-efficacy in any domain (Bruning, Schraw, & Norby, 2011). As for arts students, they are highly efficacious in their professions such as painting, dancing, and playing musical instrument. However, this does not lead them to become successful learners in English. Therefore, the major purposes of this study were to determine English language learning self-efficacy levels of arts students and correlate the results with their language proficiency levels. This study also attempted to find out whether or not the relationship between self-efficacy and EFL success falls in line with the predictions of previous research (Betz and Hackett, 1983; Lent, Brown, and Larkin, 1986; Bandura et al., 1977; Bandura, 1982). To achieve these goals, the following research questions have been formulated: 1. What were the EFL self-efficacy levels (as determined by the English Learning Self-efficacy Scale (ELSS), which was adapted from Gorsuch, 2009) of the arts students? Was students' self-efficacy correlated with their English Proficiency level? 2. Were the EFL self-efficacy levels of two EFL proficiency level groups (namely lower intermediate and intermediate) different?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Sixty-eight students from an arts university in Taiwan participated in this study (See Table 1). They took General English as a required course in the first year of university and their English language proficiency level ranged from intermediate to high-intermediate level on the basis of their GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) score. The GEPT is commonly recognized by various government institutions, companies, and schools in Taiwan. Eleven students were from the department of music, ten students were from the drama department and eight students majored in architecture and art preservation. Six students were from the visual communication design and graphics communication arts departments. Four students majored in fine arts and another four students majored in crafts & design. Another three students were from radio & television and multimedia & animation arts

departments.

Table 1. Structure of Students from 20 Academic Departments

Major	Numbers of Students	Percentage
Crafts & Design	4	5.9
Architecture Art Preservation	8	11.8
Multimedia & Animation Arts	3	4.4
Fine Arts	4	5.9
Music	11	16.2
Painting & Calligraphy	3	4.4
Chinese Music	2	2.9
Visual Communication Design	6	8.8
Motion Pictures	3	4.4
Graphic Communication Arts	6	8.8
Dance	2	2.9
Radio & Television	3	4.4
Sculpture	3	4.4
Drama	10	14.7

3.2 Materials

An online GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) test and an English Learning Self-efficacy Scale (ELSS) were adopted in this study.

3.2.1 GEPT-Style Test

The test was provided by a software company. Students who were registered as full-time students could access and use the tests provided by the company on the Internet. Students received their scores immediately.

3.2.2 English Learning Self-Efficacy Scale (ELSS)

In 2009, Gorsuch conducted a study to examine the self-efficacy of students who learned different foreign languages such as Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. The Second Language Learner Self-efficacy questionnaire was adopted in this study. A 6-point Likert scale was used to answer the questions: 6 = "this very much fits me", 5 = "this fits me", 4 = "this fits me a little", 3 = "this does not fit me very much", 2 = "this does not fit me", 1 = "this does not fit me at all". The questionnaire was divided into three parts: the cognitive aspect, affective aspect, and behavioral aspect. Eleven questions were included in the cognitive aspect. Thirteen questions were listed in the affective aspect. The behavioral aspect consisted of seventeen questions. Students had to fill out forty-one questions. The reliability of the questionnaire was .974. It reached a high reliability. Cronbach's alpha of the cognitive aspect was .949. It was .932 for the affective aspect, and .956 for the behavioral aspect.

3.3 Procedure

All the participants took the GEPT-style test. The participants were required to take the test twice a year in their freshman year. After the test, the questionnaires were handed out to students during regular class hours in their classrooms. Students were informed about the study and permission was granted. The students were also told that they had the choice not to fill out the questionnaires or to quit any time they wanted. Their teachers then handed out the questionnaire and asked them to complete it anonymously.

4. Results

A total of sixty-eight students participated in this study. They were equally divided into two groups:

High Proficiency Learners (HPL) and Low Proficiency Learners (LPL). The students in the HPL group obtained a mean score of 210.32 on a GEPT-Style test, whereas students in the LPL group received a mean score of 79.76 on the same test (See Table 2). A t-test was used to compare the differences between the scores of the two groups. It showed a significant difference among the GEPT scores. The findings suggest that learners in the HLP group obtained a significantly higher score than the ones in the LPL group. If there had been no significant difference, it would have signaled that there was no difference between the total scores of learners from the HPL group and the LPL group. Therefore, the HPL group scored significantly higher than the LPL group on the GEPT-style test.

Table 2. T-test Results of the GEPT-style Test Scores for the HPL and LPL Group

	Groups	*N*	***M***	SD	*P-value*
GEPT-style Total Score	HPL Group	34	201.32	10.62	.000***
	LPL Group	34	79.76	17.27	
Listening	HPL Group	34	99.29	7.9	.000***
	LPL Group	34	49.23	13.61	
Reading	HPL Group	34	102.35	6.34	.000***
	LPL Group	34	30.53	12.78	

Note. HPL = High Proficiency Learners, LPL = Low Proficiency Learners. *** $p < .005$.

The mean score of all participants on the questionnaire was 145.90. From the cognitive section, the mean score was 38.97. The mean scores were 45.50 for the affective section and 61.43 for the behavioral section. To compare the HPL and LPL groups, no significant difference was found in cognitive, Behavioral, and affective sections. To investigate the relationship between students' English proficiency levels and self-efficacy, a correlation test was used. The result revealed that no significance was found (r = .071). For students in the HPL group, a significant difference was found (r = .462, p = .006, < .01), whereas, for students in the LPL group, no significant difference was found (r = -.137).

Table 3. Self-efficacy Results of the HPL and LPL Groups

	Groups	*N*	***M***	SD	*P-value*
All items	HPL Group	34	146.50	25.07	.832
	LPL Group	34	145.29	21.42	
Cognitive	HPL Group	34	38.41	7.97	.528
	LPL Group	34	39.53	6.48	
Affective	HPL Group	34	45.76	8.24	.775
	LPL Group	34	45.24	6.95	
Behavioral	HPL Group	34	62.32	11.31	.492
	LPL Group	34	60.53	10.04	

Note. HPL = High Proficiency Learners, LPL = Low Proficiency Learners.

5. Discussion

In answer to research question number one, "*What were the EFL self-efficacy levels? Was their*

self-efficacy correlated with their English Proficiency level?", the answer was "No". Arts students' self-efficacy levels were not correlated with their English proficiency levels. The GEPT-style test had two parts: listening and reading comprehension tests. The total score for each part in the GEPT-style test was 120, meaning that the group only received a means score of 79.76 on the GEPT-style test and students in the HPL group got a mean score of 201.32. Comparison obviously reveals significant difference. When comparing the self-efficacy level between the two groups of students, surprisingly, we found no significant difference at all. Their self-efficacy levels were very similar. However, for students in the HPL group, a significant correlation was found, meaning that students who received higher scores demonstrated higher self-efficacy. On the other hand, no significant difference was found for students in the LPL group.

In answer to research question two, "Were the EFL self-efficacy levels of the two EFL proficiency level groups different?", the answer was that there was no significant difference. Students from the HPL and LPL groups did not show any difference in their self-efficacy levels.

As mentioned above, Bandura said that high efficacy in one academic subject does not guarantee high efficacy in another. The arts students in this study were studying at a top arts university in Taiwan. In their fields, including dance, find arts, and music, they were the best students. Although their English proficiency levels were rather low, they were still equipped with high self-efficacy. This seems to contradict Bandura's theory, but Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as students' judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. In this study, there was a big gap between what students thought they could do and the actual actions they took. They thought they could learn English well but they did not take the necessary actions. We speculate that if students spent the same amount of time they used practicing piano or painting, they could probably reach a high English proficiency level. This statement would become more credible with more support and data from further studies of arts students in Taiwan.

6. Conclusion

Self-efficacy is a useful predictor of students' academic success. From this study, the English proficiency level of arts students was not correlated with their self-efficacy. The English proficiency level of students in the HPL group was correlated with their self-efficacy; however, this was not true of the students in the LPL group. Arts students are the best students in their own fields and spend most of their time practicing their professions. Even when they did not perform well in English, they still believed they had the ability to learn it well. Further studies and more data are needed to dig out the reason why arts students' English proficiency levels are not related with their self-efficacy.

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