



Self-Efficacy and English Language Acquisition among Wenzhou University Students

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Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between self-efficacy and English language acquisition among university students in Wenzhou, China, addressing gaps in existing research on how self-beliefs influence academic performance in second language learning. Using a quantitative approach, 200 participants from seven local universities completed questionnaires assessing their self-efficacy, language ability (measured by CET-4/CET-6 scores), and sources of self-efficacy (e.g., mastery experiences, verbal persuasion). Results revealed significant gender differences in self-efficacy, with female students reporting higher confidence, though no gender disparity was found in actual language ability. Academic major (Humanities/Social Sciences vs. Natural Sciences) showed no significant impact on self-efficacy or language proficiency. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.706$, $p < 0.001$) emerged between self-efficacy and language ability, highlighting the pivotal role of self-belief in academic success. Additionally, all hypothesized sources of self-efficacy (e.g., vicarious learning, emotional state) correlated positively with language outcomes. Limitations include sample representativeness and reliance on self-report measures. The findings suggest that fostering self-efficacy through targeted interventions—such as modeling success, constructive feedback, and supportive learning environments—could enhance English language acquisition. This study contributes to the discourse on motivational psychology in education, offering practical implications for curriculum design and student support strategies.

Keywords: Self-efficacy; English language acquisition; Academic performance; Gender differences

1 Introduction

Language is a tool for expressing thoughts and communicating. It has the functions of expressing meaning, emotion, literature and aesthetics (University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016). After an extensive search, I found that the purpose of College English courses in Chinese universities for non-English majors focuses broadly on enhancing English language skills to facilitate global communication and international understanding. The courses aim to equip students with adequate English proficiency to engage in international exchange and comprehend global scientific and cultural achievements. These objectives align with the broader educational goals of fostering international cooperation in various fields like economy, culture, and education, thereby strengthening China's global position (Xu & Fan, 2016). However, in actual learning and teaching, students' learning revolves around the College English Test.

Whether or not they have passed CET-4 or CET-6 has also become an important bargaining chip for students' employment (Han, 2021). The content of the College English Proficiency Test is limited to memorizing words and sentences, doing mock test questions, and the purpose is to achieve high test scores. The fun of language learning has been greatly deprived, and the boring word learning makes students feel at a loss and gradually lose interest. The situation of not being able to understand, read, or speak makes it impossible that students are hard to experience the fun of second language learning. Students are stuck in a cycle of boredom, bad test scores, and frustrated self-confidence. They become nervous, depressed, depressed, and even inferior, and have the anxiety that is difficult to adjust. This emotion directly affects the motivation and effect of learning, and ultimately deviates from the original intention of setting up English courses (Li et al., 2012). Therefore, college

English teaching should pay more attention to creating an environment that conforms to students' learning rules and language ability development, so as to temper students' will and cultivate their confidence.

1.1 Self-Efficacy Beliefs

The concept of self-efficacy was proposed by American psychologist Bandura in his book in 1977 at first (Bandura, 1977). He denied the method of studying human behavior using physical experiments, and instead advocated studying human behavior in natural social situations. At the same time, he pointed out that the formation of self-efficacy is influenced by five factors: success and failure experience of brain-wide behavior, alternative experience, verbal persuasion, emotional arousal and situational conditions. This theory emphasizes the indispensable influence of subjective factors in completing learning tasks and tells people that self-efficacy determines the degree to which human potential is fully exerted. A learner's self-efficacy could explain why individuals with similar knowledge and skills often show significant differences in their performance (Bandura, 1993). Self-efficacy beliefs refer to a person's confidence in their ability to execute tasks effectively using their skills in specific situations (Bandura, 1995). Bandura and his colleagues had done a series of researches. Researches have shown that an individual's sense of self-efficacy primarily originates from four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional states. Mastery experiences refers to the direct behavioral experience individuals acquire during learning and performance activities. Consistent successful experiences can enhance an individual's self-efficacy, whereas repeated failures may diminish it. Nevertheless, the research also indicates that once a robust sense of self-efficacy is developed through persistent efforts, occasional failures do not significantly impact an individual's efficacy judgment. Vicarious experience is the experience which is gained through observation and learning. It is called indirect experience. Individuals transmit information through social comparison and demonstration behavior, observe or imagine the successful operations of people with similar abilities to themselves, and ultimately improve their judgment of self-efficacy and believe that they have the ability to complete similar tasks; while seeing the failed operations of people with similar abilities to themselves will reduce the observer's sense of self-efficacy.

Verbal persuasion includes persuasive suggestions, explanations, exhortations, self-persuasion, etc. People hope that others will recognize their abilities, and once they are affirmed, their sense of self-efficacy will be supported. Of course, the persuader must have practical experience, otherwise it will lead to poor self-efficacy. Emotional state and psychological state are also important sources of information for the formation of self-efficacy judgment.

1.2 Self-Efficacy and Achievements

Extensive evidence supports the notion that self-efficacy is a vital predictor of academic success across a broad range of subjects, extending beyond second language learning (Wilson & Narayan, 2014). In particular, J. Lee & Stankov (2013) identified that academic self-efficacy is often the most significant thing that can foreshadow students academic performance, which means that self-Efficacy has a high relation with academic achievements. Within the domain of foreign language learning, research conducted by Mills et al. (2007) on college students revealed that those students who were with higher self-efficacy and self-regulation tended to get a high-up language outcomes, like scores and fluent speaking skills. Additionally, students who possess confidence in their language abilities consistently outperform those who harbor self-doubt regarding their skills (Liem, Lau, & Nie, 2008). This body of evidence underscores the critical role that self-efficacy plays in influencing academic achievement and suggests that fostering a strong sense of self-efficacy in learners can lead to improved educational outcomes across various disciplines.

1.3 Self-Efficacy and Self-Regulation

A positive , good, emotional and physiological state will enhance self-efficacy, while tension, depression, anxiety and even fear will reduce self-efficacy judgment. Bandura believes that self-efficacy plays an important role in the behavior of individuals. First, it can affect the individual's behavior orientation and the choice of behavioral tasks. If the self-efficacy is high, the individual will choose tasks that are both suitable for his or her ability level and challenging; otherwise, he or she will choose easy-to-complete tasks. Secondly, it can affect the degree of effort and persistence of the individual's behavior. Individuals with strong self-efficacy will have the courage to face challenges and setbacks, make greater efforts, and persevere in completing

tasks; otherwise, negative emotions such as tension and anxiety will continue to grow until they retreat. Then, it can affect the individual's way of thinking and emotional response. Individuals with high self-efficacy judgment have active thinking and actively seek solutions to problems; otherwise, they will consider the consequences of failure too much, their thinking will stagnate, and they may even have ways of escaping, which will make it difficult to solve difficulties and stagnate in work and study. Finally, self-efficacy will affect the individual's attribution style. Individuals with high self-efficacy tend to attribute behavioral failures to insufficient effort, while individuals with low self-efficacy tend to attribute them to their own lack of ability. It has been noted that beliefs about self-efficacy play an important role in how individuals learn a foreign language (Wang, Schwab, Fenn, & Chang, 2013). Self-efficacy affects students' behavior in several ways, including the individual's choice of activities, level of effort, perseverance in overcoming difficulties, and anxiety experienced. It can regulate and control several non-intellectual factors including interest, motivation, self-confidence, self-esteem, etc (刘, 2006). Among them, lack of foundation refers to the weak English foundation in middle school, which fails to achieve the basic goals of the middle school English teaching syllabus. Maladaptation refers to the slow acceptance and digestion of college English teaching materials, teachers, teaching methods and learning methods, or even the state of not accepting and digesting them. Plateau effect refers to the stagnation and difficulty in breaking through after students' English learning reaches a certain level. Difficult English learning leads to students' inefficient learning, which leads to failure in exams or difficulty in achieving expected goals. These failed experiences make students' self-efficacy increasingly reduced. The accumulation of these failed experiences leads to a decline in students' interest and motivation in learning, making them feel helpless and physically and mentally exhausted, and gradually grows and deepens negative emotions such as anxiety, depression and impetuosity. It can be seen that low self-efficacy in English learning has become the key problem for college students to improve their English scores. Therefore, the academic achievements of students are credited not just to their abilities and knowledge, but also to their own beliefs in what they are capable of doing (Pajares, 2002).

1.4 Self-Efficacy and Other Process

A research held by Hsieh & Kang (2010) highlighted that the reasons students attribute to their successes and failures based on their levels of self-efficacy, were notably different. There is a considerable evidence showing that there is a strong positive connection between self-efficacy beliefs and other motivational factors. Research by Students with high self-efficacy often attributed their successes to internal, controllable factors, while those with low self-efficacy attributed outcomes to external, uncontrollable factors. Additionally, Woodrow's (2011) study on Chinese EFL college students found that those with higher self-efficacy exerted more effort and maintained a positive attitude towards parental expectations. Conversely, students with lower self-efficacy showed less power and more concern about the pressures from their parents. Usher and Pajares (2008), in their study of validation discovered that students with higher self-efficacy for self-regulated learning were more confident in achieving specific grades and owning a clearer self-concept. These students who have higher self-efficacy were more focused on tasks and goals, felt more optimistic, and experienced greater authenticity. Moreover, they exhibited lower anxiety levels when engaging in writing and science activities.

Grasping the importance of self-efficacy beliefs in language acquisition necessitates knowledge of studies on their connections to achievements, self-regulation, and other motivational processes. Enhancing students' self-efficacy in learning English can significantly boost their educational experience and increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Cultivating students' self-efficacy from different aspects can strengthen students' self-control ability and improve students' learning confidence, which in turn affects students' English learning strategies and forms a healthy interaction between psychological quality and academic performance. At the same time, cultivating students' self-efficacy in English learning is conducive to giving full play to students' learning enthusiasm and potential and promoting students' healthy psychological development. In this way, it can not only meet the foreign language requirements of future society for talents, but also be of great benefit to improving the quality of the entire nation.

This study takes the English learning self-efficacy of college students in Wenzhou as the research object, and attempts to find out the factors that affect students'

self-efficacy through this study, and combine it with practice to find feasible and effective solutions to improve students' learning conditions, effectively improve learning quality and teachers' teaching quality, and let students truly discover the essence of language learning.

2 Research Questions

Most of the above studies adopt quantitative methods, focusing on the level of self-efficacy, sources of self-efficacy and English proficiency of college students in Wenzhou in English learning. It is crucial to gather quantitative evidence to illustrate the importance of self-efficacy in university students' acquisition of the English language. This paper specifically investigates the following questions:

1. What factors in students' English learning are related to students' self-efficacy?
2. The manifestation of differences in self-efficacy based on gender and major.
3. The overall level of self-efficacy in English learning of college students in Wenzhou.

Thus, here came the hypothesis that:

- H1 - There are differences in self-efficacy between genders.
- H2 - There are differences in language ability between genders.
- H3 - There are differences in self-efficacy between the majors.
- H4 - There are differences in language ability among the majors.
- H5 - Self-efficacy increases with age.
- H6 - There is a correlation between self-efficacy beliefs and language ability.
- H7 - There is a correlation between different sources of efficacy and language ability.

3 Research Methods

3.1 Sample and procedure

The 200 participants were recruited from Chashan University Town in Wenzhou. This group included students from various institutions, namely Wenzhou University (WU), Wenzhou Medical University (WMU), Wenzhou Business School (WBS), Wenzhou Polytechnic (WP), Wenzhou Vocational College of Science and Technology (WVCST), Wenzhou University of Technology (WUT), and Wenzhou Kean University (WKU). An online survey was developed

and distributed via QR codes posted on the streets. Participants completed a questionnaire that gathered information on their self-efficacy and basic demographics. The basic information collected included gender, major, grade, CET-4 score, and CET-6 score. Among 200 students from Wenzhou, 90 (45%) were male and 110 (55%) were female. The distribution of academic year was as follows: 53 (26.50%) were first-year students, 46 (23%) were second-year students, 55 (27.50%) were third-year students, none (0%) were fourth-year students, and 46 (23%) were graduate students. Regarding their majors, an equal number of students, 100 (50%), were enrolled in Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) and Natural Sciences (NS).

3.2 Instruments and Questionnaires

This study employed quantitative research methods. Questionnaires and structured interviews are commonly used in second language (L2) learning research. The primary advantage of using questionnaires is their ability to conduct large-scale surveys, engaging extensive groups of learners, which is crucial for obtaining ample samples to answer research questions. Additionally, questionnaires ensure that respondents answer a specific set of questions in a fixed order, resulting in uniformly organized data that is easily applicable to statistical analysis. Thus, the methodology of this study involved collecting questionnaire data from college students regarding their English learning experiences. This approach aimed to gain detailed insights into their perceptions of English learning and identify other factors that might influence their self-efficacy in English.

The study utilized three questionnaires: basic information, the English Self-Efficacy Questionnaire and the Sources of English Self-Efficacy Questionnaire. Both questionnaires employed a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (never or almost never true) to 5 (always or almost always true). Participants provided basic demographic information, such as gender and major, and responded to each item by selecting one option. In the English Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, higher scores indicated greater self-efficacy. For the Sources of English Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, higher scores suggested more significant sources of self-efficacy.

The English Self-Efficacy Questionnaire, adapted from Pinch and DeGroot (1990), consists of twenty items designed to assess students' self-efficacy in performing English

language learning tasks within a Chinese context. Items 1, 2, 6, 8, 10, 12, 17, and 19 were positively phrased, while items 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, and 20 were negatively phrased and required recoding. An average score above four indicated high self-efficacy, whereas a score below four indicated low self-efficacy.

The Sources of English Self-Efficacy Questionnaire consisted of ten items. Four items corresponded to Bandura's (1986) sources of self-efficacy: vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, previous success, and physiological states. Items 5 through 10 were designed based on the current learning context of college students. Various researchers have examined these factors influencing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Shell, Murphy & Bruning, 1989; Pajares & Valiante, 1999; Schunk, 2003). Although family factors, teachers' self-efficacy, and authority figures can influence personal self-efficacy, these aspects were not included in this study. Selected factors included teachers' confidence, students' confidence, textbooks, goal setting, learning strategies, and multiple learning resources. The final version of the questionnaire was established after conducting interviews and reliability tests.

It is important to note a few points. First, the survey was conducted during the second semester, meaning students were already familiar with course requirements, learning goals, and strategies. This timing could have influenced the survey results, which might differ if conducted at the beginning of course. Second, participants were informed about the purpose of the questionnaire, which was to understand their difficulties and design better support methods. This explanation made the questionnaire items meaningful and interesting to the participants, encouraging them to respond willingly and thoroughly.

3.3 Data Analytical Procedure

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 24.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The reliability of two questionnaires was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. As shown in Tables 1, the Cronbach's alpha for the English Self-Efficacy Questionnaire was .78, and the split-half coefficient for the Sources of English Self-Efficacy Questionnaire was .80. These results indicate that both questionnaires exhibit good reliability.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
English Self-Efficacy	.78
Sources of English Self-Efficacy	.80

N=200

There is no missing data.

3.4 Results

As mentioned above, each participant's Self-Efficacy was measured by the English Learning Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (ELSQ) and the Sources of English Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (SESQ). The ELSQ included items designed to evaluate students' confidence in their ability to perform various English language tasks, while the SESQ assessed different factors contributing to their self-efficacy, such as vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and previous successes. These tools provided a comprehensive assessment of the students' self-efficacy in relation to their English language learning. The basic information is shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of the Participants

Variable	Item	Frequenc y (N)	Percen t (%)	Cumulativ e Percent (%)
Gender	Male	90	45	45
	Female	110	55	100
	First Year	53	26.50	26.50
	Second Year	46	23	49.50
Grade	Third Year	55	27.50	77
	Forth Year	0	0	77
	Graduate	46	23	100
	Humanities and Social Sciences	100	50	100
Major	Natural Sciences	100	50	100
	WMU	46	23	23
	WU	39	19.50	42.50
	University	WP	31	15.50
University	WVCS	26	13	71
	WBS	29	14.50	85.50
	WUT	29	14.50	100

N=200

There is no missing data.

Table 3 CET-4 Scores of the Participants

Variable	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
301-	3						
350	2						
351-	2						
400	7						
Grad	401-	4	433		33	63.	
es	450	4	.02	449	8	02	-.48
	451-	6					-.91
	500	5					
	501-	3					
	550	2					

N=200

There is no missing data.

The hypothesis test on the relationship between cognitive autonomy, self-regulation, metacognition and academic performance of college students is as follows:

H1 - There are differences in self-efficacy between genders.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare Self-efficacy beliefs in males and females, There was a significant difference in the scores for female (M=3.06, SD=.46) and male (M=2.91, SD=.45), $t(200)=2.26$, $p=.025$.

H2 - There are differences in language ability between genders.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare language ability in males and females, There was not a significant difference in the scores for female (M=438.95, SD=58.97) and male (M=425.77, SD=67.26), $t(200)=1.48$, $p=.14$.

H3 - There are differences in self-efficacy between majors.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare Self-efficacy beliefs in Major in humanities and social sciences and major in natural sciences, There was not a significant difference in the scores for humanities and social sciences (M=2.99, SD=.47) and male (M=2.99, SD=.45), $t(200)=.05$, $p=.96$.

H4 - There are differences in language ability among majors.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare language ability in Major in humanities and social sciences and major in natural sciences, There was not a significant difference in the scores for humanities and social sciences (M=427.28, SD=67.13) and male (M=438.75, SD=58.40), $t(198)=-1.29$, $p=.20$.

H5 - Self-efficacy increases with age.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between age and Self-efficacy beliefs. There was no correlation between the two variables, $r = -.13$, $p < .01$.

H6 - There is a correlation between self-efficacy beliefs and language ability.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between language ability and Self-efficacy beliefs. There was a positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .71$, $p < .001$.

H7 - There is a correlation between different sources of efficacy and language ability.

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationship between language ability and different sources of self-efficacy. The results showed positive correlations between all sources and language ability. The results are shown in Table .

Table 4 Correlation between Language Ability and Different Sources of Self-Efficacy

Item	Language Ability
Successful Experience	.60**
Vicarious Experience	.66**
Verbal Persuasion	.65**
Physiological and Emotional State	.66**
Teacher's Confidence	.58**
Environmental Settings	.62**
Learning Strategies	.61**
Students Confidence	.58**
Teaching Material	.58**
Learning Resources	.62**

Note. ** $p < .001$

4 Discussion

The findings of this study provide clear insights into the differences in self-efficacy and language ability based on gender and academic major, as well as the relationships between self-efficacy, language ability, and various sources

of self-efficacy.

4.1 Gender Differences

There is a notable difference in self-efficacy between males and females, with females reporting higher self-efficacy. This suggests that gender can influence how students perceive their abilities, potentially due to different socialization, support systems, or educational experiences. To address this, targeted interventions to boost self-efficacy in male students could help improve their academic performance and well-being.

4.2 Language Ability

The study found no significant gender differences in language ability, indicating that both male and female students perform similarly in this area. This supports previous research showing that language skills are not inherently tied to gender. Educational programs should continue to support all students equally in developing their language abilities.

4.3 Major Differences

No significant differences were found in self-efficacy and language ability between students majoring in Humanities and Social Sciences and those in Natural Sciences. This suggests that these attributes are not dependent on academic major. Instead, factors like teaching methods, student support services, and individual learning strategies may be more influential. Institutions should aim to foster a supportive learning environment across all fields of study.

Correlations

There is a small negative correlation between age and self-efficacy, suggesting that older students might have slightly lower self-efficacy, possibly due to increased academic pressures or a more realistic self-assessment. Schools should consider supporting students' self-efficacy throughout their academic journey, especially as they progress in their studies.

A strong positive correlation exists between self-efficacy and language ability, meaning that students who believe in their abilities tend to perform better in language tasks. This highlights the importance of educators boosting students' self-efficacy through positive feedback, successful experiences, and supportive learning environments.

4.4 Sources of Self-Efficacy

The positive correlations between language ability and various sources of self-efficacy, such as successful experiences, observing peers' successes, receiving positive reinforcement, and learning in supportive environments, suggest these factors play a significant role in students' language performance. Educators should focus on enhancing these sources by providing opportunities for students to succeed, see their peers succeed, receive positive feedback, and learn in conducive settings. Tailoring teaching materials and resources to support these factors can further strengthen students' self-efficacy and academic outcomes.

These findings offer practical implications for educators and institutions aiming to improve student outcomes by understanding and leveraging the factors that influence self-efficacy and language ability.

5 Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into college students' self-efficacy and language proficiency, its limitations highlight the need for further research with more diverse, representative, and comprehensive approaches. Addressing these limitations could lead to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the factors that influence student success.

5.1 Sample Size and Representativeness

Although the sample size of 200 participants is adequate for statistical analysis, it may not fully represent the broader college population. Many senior students were not included in the survey due to their involvement in internships or graduation projects, potentially skewing the sample.

5.2 Gender Distribution

The gender distribution in the sample, with 90 males and 110 females, is relatively balanced, but may not fully represent the gender diversity in the overall student population. The binary classification of gender into male and female does not account for non-binary and transgender individuals, whose experiences with self-efficacy and language proficiency may differ from those of cisgender students. Future research should aim to include more diverse and inclusive samples to better understand these dynamics.

5.3 Self-Report Measures

This study relied on self-report measures for

self-efficacy and language proficiency, which can be influenced by biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Participants might overestimate or underestimate their abilities or provide responses they believe are socially acceptable. Utilizing objective measures of language proficiency and external assessments of self-efficacy would provide more accurate data and strengthen the findings.

5.4 Classification of Majors

Classifying academic majors into just humanities and social sciences versus natural sciences may be overly simplistic. Students within each broad category might have varied experiences and challenges that this study did not account for. Future research should consider more detailed classifications of disciplines to capture differences within these broad categories.

5.5 Focus on Outcomes Only

This study primarily focused on outcomes like self-efficacy and language proficiency, potentially overlooking other important aspects of the student experience, such as emotional well-being, motivation, and engagement. A more comprehensive examination of student outcomes could provide a richer understanding of the factors contributing to academic success and personal development.

5.6 Limited Scope of Relevance

While the study identified significant correlations between self-efficacy, its sources, and language proficiency, it did not explore other potential, mediating or moderating variables. Factors such as academic support services, peer influence, and teaching quality might also play crucial roles. Future research should include a wider range of variables to fully understand the dynamics at play.

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