A Study of Self-Efficacy
of Chinese Students in English Study

Wei Jian Dong[*] and Songsri Soransataporn[**]

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the self-efficacy of Chinese students in their English study. The sample included 250 third-year students at one Teacher College in China selected by simple random sampling. Questionnaires were used as research tools and consisted of two sections: the General Self-efficacy Scale and Self-efficacy Scale in English learning. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of the first and the second sections were 0.78 and 0.84 respectively. Data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics and Pearson's Correlation Coefficient. The major results of this study showed that students in this college had high self-efficacy in dealing with problems in their daily life; whereas, they had low self-efficacy in their English study.

Key Word: Self-efficacy, Chinese Learner, English Study, EFL

---

[*] Master's student, Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics Program, Mahidol University; Email: jerrydong522@163.com

[**] Associate Professor, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Mahidol University; Email: songsrisora@yahoo.com

Introduction

According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." In other words, self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. Bandura (1994)described these beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave, and feel. Therefore, self-efficacy can facilitate people to achieve their goals both in their daily lives and in education.

Self-efficacy in general contexts: People's self-efficacy can have a significant impact on their goals and accomplishments by influencing personal choice, motivation, their patterns, and emotional reactions (Bandura, 1997). For example, people tend to avoid threatening situations that they believe exceed their coping skills. Perceived self-efficacy also affects how successfully goals are accomplished by influencing the level of effort and persistence in which a person will demonstrate in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 1997). Simply put, the stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active our efforts. Higher self-efficacy is also associated with more persistence, a trait that allows us to gain corrective experiences that reinforce our sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Self-efficacy in educational contexts: Self-efficacy can greatly affect students' motivation to learn (Schunk, 2008). When students' self-efficacy perceptions are high, they will engage in tasks that foster the development of their skills and capabilities, but when self-efficacy is low, students will not engage in new tasks that might help them learn new skills (Bandura, 1997). It has been acknowledged that self-efficacy has been shown to be an important mediator of all types of achievement behavior (Schunk, 2008).

Self-efficacy in English teaching and learning contexts: As long as English language study is concerned, it is thought that students' self-efficacy plays an important role in predicting their effort and performance in oral communication and students with high self-efficacy in communicating in English may be better prepared to enter to the job market in today's highly competitive job market (Idrus, Salleh, and Abdullah, 2011). Students with high self-efficacy in communicating in English may be better prepared to enter the job market in today's highly competitive job market (Idrus, Salleh, and Abdullah, 2011). In fact, self-efficacy levels can determine whether students would be successful in effective communication or performing an important task in their future occupational scope. Moreover, self-efficacy beliefs are vital in determining whether students persist in oral communication discipline (Idrus, Salleh, and Abdullah, 2011).

Therefore, it is vital to help students build strong self-efficacy. Margolis and McCabe (2006) propose four ways for teachers to help students increase their self-efficacy. (1) Mastery experiences-Students' successful experiences boost self-efficacy; while failures erode it. This is the most robust source of self-efficacy. (2) Vicarious experience-Observing a peer succeed at a task can strengthen beliefs in one's own abilities. (3) Verbal persuasion-Teachers can boost self-efficacy with credible communication and feedback to guide the student through the task or motivate them to make their best effort. (4) Emotional state-A positive mood can boost one's beliefs in self-efficacy; while anxiety can undermine it. A certain level of emotional stimulation can create an energizing feeling that can contribute to strong performances. Teachers can help by reducing

stressful situations and lowering anxiety surrounding events like exams or presentations.

In the academic domain, self-efficacy has also been widely studied (Bandura, 1999; Parares, 2002; Fencl and Scheel, 2005; Schunk, 2008; Yusuf, 2011; Motlagh, 2011; Kirk, 2012; Meral, 2012). However, most of these studies only were conducted on the relationship between self-efficacy and motivation, and none of these studies focused on students' self-efficacy in general contexts and in their English as a foreign language study. One research was compared between pre-service English teachers' self-efficacy beliefs with the instructors' views of teaching competence (Çakır and Alici, 2009). The other research was investigated three Chinese boys' self-efficacy beliefs learning English as a second language across English language learning tasks and home-based and school-based contexts (Wang and Pape, 2007). Thus, the present study will fill this gap by studying of students' self-efficacy in general contexts and in their English study. Two research questions were posted: "To what extent did the Chinese college students perceive their general self-efficacy and their self-efficacy in English study?" and "Was there any correlation between general self-efficacy and self-efficacy in learning English?"

Methodology

This study investigated general self-efficacy and self-efficacy in English study of Chinese English learners. General Self-efficacy Scale (GSES) and Self-efficacy Scale in English Learning (SESEL) were used as research tools to find self-efficacy belief of these learners.

Population, sample, and sampling

The target population of students was 738 Chinese English learners at the English Department of Lijiang Teachers' College in the City of Lijiang, Yunnan Province, China. The sample included 250 third-year students selected by using the simple random sampling technique. This technique was convenient and all students of the accessible population have an equal chance of being selected the sample size was specified by using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) Table for Determining Sampling Size from a Given Population.

Data collection instruments

Two research tools were used: the General Self-efficacy Scale (GSES) and Self-efficacy Scale in English Learning (SESEL). The GSES was first developed in 1979 by Matthias Jerusalem and Ralf Schwarzer. It was created to assess a general sense of perceived self-efficacy with the aim to predict coping with daily hassles as well as adaptation after experiencing all kinds of stressful life events. Responses are made on a 4-point scale (1 = not at all true, 2 = hardly true, 3 = moderately true, 4 = exactly true). In samples from 23 nations, Cronbach's alphas ranged from .76 to .90, with the majority in the high .80s. The scale is unidimensional. The GSES was translated from English to Chinese using back translation.

The SESEL was adapted from an English-learning self-efficacy test developed by a Chinese website: www.zhijizhibi.com/questionnaire /210521239 in 2009. This test has been used to test students' self-efficacy in their English study by many Chinese teachers of English in high schools and tertiary schools across China. There were 21 items altogether. The Cronbach's alphas ranged from .70 to .90, with the majority in the high .84s. The question items used in this study are

rated on the five-point Likert scale, ranging from completely not true to completely true (1 = Completely not true, 2 = Basically not true, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Basically true, 5 = Completely true).

Then these tools were put into one set of questionnaires and included two sections: GSES and SESEL. Three experts verified these tools before and after conducted a pilot study. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of the second and the third sections were 0.78 and 0.84 respectively.

A Pilot study was done with 20 Chinese college students who were not subjects in this study but had similar background and characteristics. The results of the pilot study were used to clarify statements of both GSEP and SESEL. After having corrected language and formatting questionnaires from the pilot study, three experts verified these tools. Finally, the first researcher distributed questionnaires to students and collected them back on the same day. The researchers checked all questionnaires. Only those completed questionnaires were used and data were keyed in. In this study, 221 questionnaires were perfected. After the data were keyed in, they were checked for typo errors and accuracy before analysis.

Data Analysis

The completed questionnaire was tallied, tabulated, and entered into the SPSS program. Then percentage, mean score (M), and standard deviation (SD) were calculated to determine the prevalence of participants' attitudes towards their general self-efficacy and their self-efficacy in English study. The results revealed in the next section.

Results

Perceptions of Chinese college students on their general self-efficacy and their self-efficacy in English study

Self-efficacy in general contexts and self-efficacy in English study were illustrated below.

Self-efficacy in general contexts

Overall, the data show that the majority of students believed that the general self-efficacy statements were either mostly true or exactly true for them, except for the last item, in which two-thirds do not believe or hardly believe that they can usually handle whatever comes their way. See details in Table 1.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations and percentages for students' general self-efficacy

n=221

Students'general self-efficacy	M	SD	% A*	%B*	%C*
1. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.	3.02	0.74	24.2	47.5	28.1
2. I can solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.	3.01	0.67	20.8	57.0	22.2
3. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.	2.79	0.75	35.7	47.1	17.2
4. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.	2.78	0.74	37.1	45.7	17.2

Table 1 (Continue)

Students'general self-efficacy	M	SD	% A*	%B*	%C*
5. I am confident I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.	2.64	0.74	42.1	47.1	10.9
6. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.	2.58	0.74	45.7	44.8	9.5
7. If someone opposes me, I can find the ways to get what I want.	2.48	0.73	52.0	40.7	7.2
8. When I am confronted with a problem, I can find solutions.	2.44	0.75	45.2	42.1	12.7
9. I can usually handle whatever comes my way.	2.25	0.77	66.1	28.1	5.9
10. It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.	2.11	0.81	70.6	24.9	4.5

*Note: % A= Not/hardly true, % B = Mostly true, % C = Exactly true

The ten items were also combined into a scale of general self-efficacy. The 10-item general self-efficacy scale has a Cronbach's alpha internal consistency of 0.78. The scale has an average inter-item correlation of $r = .37$. The scale mean was 26.30 with a standard deviation of 4.35, with an actual range in scores from 15 to 35.

Self-efficacy in English Learning

The top-endorsed item was "I am sure I have the capability to study English well" (M = 3.69, SD = 1.11). This also means that more about six in ten students believed that they had the capability to study English well. However, the least-endorsed item was "when I meet difficulties in English, I usually give up" (M = 1.98, SD = 1.08). This means that 19 percent of students said that they usually did not give up when they met difficulties in English study. See details in Table 2.

Table 2 Means, standard deviation, and percentage for students' self-efficacy in English study

(n=221)

Students' self-efficacy in English study	M	SD	% A*	%B*	%C*	%D*
1. I am sure I have the capability to study English well.	3.69	1.11	20.8	19.0	33.9	25.8
2. I can solve the most problems in my English study if I study hard.	3.65	1.01	22.2	19.0	43.0	15.8
3. I believe I can reach my goal in my English study so long as I study hard.	3.56	1.27	24.9	15.4	31.2	28.5
4. I think I can study oral English well.	3.55	1.09	25.3	24.0	31.7	19.0

n=221

Table 2 (Continue)

Students' self-efficacy in English study	M	SD	% A*	%B*	%C*	%D*
5. I will achieve the same accomplishment as good students in class if I study hard.	3.45	1.11	27.6	25.8	26.7	19.9
6. The failure in my English study will only induce me to study harder.	3.31	1.09	25.8	30.3	30.8	13.1
7. The more difficult the task in my English study is, the harder I study.	3.28	1.07	29.4	29.4	30.3	10.9
8. No matter how big the trouble in my English study is, I can solve it if I try.	3.27	1.03	26.7	27.1	34.4	11.8
9. When I meet difficulties in my English study, I can find a good solution.	3.27	1.00	26.2	27.1	40.3	6.3

Table 2 (Continue)

Students' self-efficacy in English study	M	SD	% A*	%B*	%C*	%D*
10. I do not have difficulties when I want to master some English knowledge.	3.23	1.06	12.2	27.1	30.3	29.9
11. Sometimes, the question is easy for me, but hard for others.	3.23	1.06	29.0	26.7	33.9	10.4
12. I like challenging tasks in my English study, because I can succeed in challenge.	3.20	1.07	32.6	25.3	31.7	10.0
13. I can overcome most difficulties in learning English.	3.19	1.00	28.1	31.2	38.6	8.1
14. I can answer the questions my English teacher asks even though other students cannot do it.	3.00	1.12	35.3	28.2	25.3	10.4

Table 2 (Continue)

Students' self-efficacy in English study	M	SD	% A*	%B*	%C*	%D*
15. The failure in English study will puzzle me for a long time.	2.96	1.10	10.3	28.1	29.4	34.2
16. It is easy for me to get good scores in English examinations.	2.82	0.98	33.5	40.3	22.6	3.2
17. English is easy for me.	2.74	1.11	46.2	29.0	21.3	3.6
18. I think my English is good compared with other students.	2.66	1.16	42.1	36.2	16.3	5.0
19. I have the ability to deal with the most troubles in English.	2.54	1.21	41.2	29.4	20.8	8.1
20. When I meet difficulties in English study, I usually give up	1.98	1.08	10.4	18.6	31.2	39.8

*Note: % A= Not/hardly true, % B = Not sure, % B = Mostly true, % C = Exactly true

Correlation between self-efficacy in general contexts and self-efficacy in English study

There was statistically significant positive correlation between self-efficacy in general contexts and self-efficacy in English study ($p < .000$, $r = .34$).

Discussion

In this section, first students' general self-efficacy was discussed, followed by students' self-efficacy in their English study. Finally, conclusion and suggestions of the present study were discussed.

General self-efficacy

The result of this study showed that that a majority of students had strong self-efficacy to deal with their problems in their daily lives. For instance, they were confident that they could solve most difficult problems with their efforts. They could also find ways to get what they wanted and found solutions to difficult problems. Furthermore, they could handle unforeseen situations and unexpected events efficiently. The results of this study co-responded to a study conducted by Schwazer, Babler, Kwiatek, Schroder, and Zhang (1997). Their study examined German, Costa Rican, and Chinese university students' self-efficacy by using German, Spanish and Chinese versions of General Self-Efficacy Scale. The results showed that a majority of university students from these three countries had high general self-efficacy.

In this study, the reason why students had strong self-efficacy in dealing with problems in their daily life may be related to their family background. Most of the students in the College are from rural areas,

where the living conditions are poorer and more arduous. Children living in the rural places have to face more problems in their daily life and learn to deal with them at earlier age than urban children. Living in harsh conditions in the rural areas can help children develop a strong will to cope with difficulties. This can help explain why these students had strong efficacy in dealing with problems in their daily life.

Self-efficacy in English study

Despite the fact that students had strong self-efficacy in dealing with problems in their daily lives, data gathered from Self-efficacy Scale in English learning indicate that compared to general self-efficacy, participant students had lower self-efficacy in their English study. They were not as confident in dealing with problems in their English study as they were in dealing with problems in their daily lives. The results of this study were consistent with the findings from Çakır and Alıcı (2009) and Wang and Pape (2007). Çakır and Alıcı (2009) found that some Chinese university students had lower self-efficacy in English learning. They discovered the reasons were that students' past experiences and educational background affected learners' self-efficacy in English learning to a large extent. Wang and Pape (2007) investigated the factors that affected the development of self-efficacy of three young Chinese students in learning English as second language in the U.S. The study revealed that these three Chinese students had low self-efficacy in English learning. Factors such as learners' past experience, social and cultural setting and educational background affected learners' self-efficacy in English study.

In this study, the reason that these students had lower self-efficacy than general self-efficacy was also related to their family background

and educational background to some extent. A majority of these students came from poor and remote areas. Many of them had ethnic background, which meant that they were not Han Chinese. Their family members were also not well-educated so that they could not help their children with their study much. Most of the time, the children had to depend their study on themselves. English language was never used in their families. In addition, most of the students were the first generations to go to college in their families, and some of them could not even speak Chinese well. Therefore, it was understandable that these students had lower self-efficacy in their English study than in dealing with daily problems.

Correlation between self-efficacy in general contexts and self-efficacy

There was statistically significant positive correlation between self-efficacy in general contexts and self-efficacy in English learning (p < .000, r = .34). The reason was that the high self-efficacy in dealing with problems in students' daily lives can help students build high self-efficacy in their English study. Students' successful experiences in dealing with daily problems help them to boost their self-efficacy in their English learning. In addition, after students experienced success in dealing with their daily problems, they would have more positive mood in dealing with future problems. Their positive mood can also help boost their self-efficacy in dealing with problems in their English learning.

Conclusion and Suggestions

It should be noted that this study has only investigated the self-efficacy of the third-year students at the English Department of the teacher college where the contexts were different from other contexts. Thus, the generalization must be done with care. The first-year students, second year-students, or students from other departments were not included because they may not know, learn, or experience their self-efficacy and self-efficacy in English study enough. Three suggestions are provided.

1. The correlation coefficient of general efficacy and self-efficacy in English study of this study was low. The further study should be done to find the influence of variables. Then the results can be used to design and develop materials and activates which are suitable to these students.

2. The present research only studied the general self-efficacy and self-efficacy in English language learning. Little is known whether students' self-efficacy is related to students' academic performance. Therefore, further studies should be made to investigate if there is a relationship between students' self-efficacy and their academic performance.

3. In addition, further studies can also be conducted to investigate the self-efficacy in English study and other variables such as instructional practice, language learning, or life skills strategies. The results will help teachers and students to manage their class, learn better, and live happily.

References

Bandura, A. 1999. "Social Cognitive Theory: An Argentic Perspective." **Asian Journal of Social Psychology** 2 (1): 21-41.

_____. 1997. **Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control.** New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.

_____. 1994. **"**Self-Efficacy." in V. Ramachaudran (ed.). **Encyclopedia of Human Behavior**. New York: Academic, pp. 71-81.

Çakır., Ö. and D. Alıcı. 2009. "Seeing Self as Others See You: Variability in Self-Efficacy Ratings in Student Teaching." **Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice** 15 (5): 541-561.

Idrus, H., R. Salleh and M. Abdullah. 2011. "Oral Communication Ability in English: An Essential Communication Skill for Engineering Graduates." **Asia Pacific Journal of Educator and Education** 26 (1): 107-123.

Kirk, K. 2011. **Self-Efficacy: Helping the Students Believe in Themselves**. Retrieved October 5, 2011, from mmsel.word press.com/2011/10/08/building-students-self-efficacy-through-pedagogic-strategies/.

Margolis, H. and P. McCabe. 2006. "Improving Self-Efficacy and Motivation: What to Do, What to Say." **Intervention in School and Clinic** 41 (4): 218-227.

Maddux, J. 2000. **Handbook of Positive Psychology.** New York: Oxford University Press.

Meral, M., E. Colak, and E. Zereyak. 2011. "The Relationship between Self-Efficacy and Academic Performance." **Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences** 15: 1143-1146.

Motlagh, S., K. Amrai,M.   Yazdani, H. Abderahim and H. Souri. 2011. "The Relationship between Self-Efficacy and Academic Achievement in High School Students." **Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences** 15: 765-768.

Pajares, F. 2003. "Self-Efficacy Beliefs, Motivation and Achievement in Writing." **Reading and Writing Quarterly** 19 (2): 139-158.

Schunk, D. 2008. **Motivation in Education: Theory, Research, and Applications.** New Jersey**:** Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall.

Schwazer, R., J. Babler, P. Kwiatek, K. Schroder and J. Zhang. 1997. "The Assessment of Optimistic Self-Beliefs: Comparison of the German, Spanish, and Chinese Versions of General Self-Efficacy Scale." **Applied Psychology: An International Review** 46 (1): 69-88.

Wang, C. and S. Pape. 2007. "A Probe into Three Chinese Boys' Self-Efficacy Beliefs Learning English as a Second Language." **Journal of Research in Childhood Education** 21 (4): 364-377.