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Exploring University Students' Self-Efficacy in Learning English

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Abstract

Language acquisition research has expanded foci to explore the social and metacognitive dimensions of learning, looking more at motivational, strategic, and psychological qualities that facilitate learner autonomy. Aligning with this trend, this study aimed to investigate the characteristics of self-efficacy (SE) in learning English among English-major students at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The research sample comprised 150 students, with data collected through questionnaires and interviews. The study sought answers to understand to what extent the students were self-efficacious with the four language skills and what factors affect their SE. Comparisons of various groups regarding gender and learning experience were also performed. The findings indicated that Vietnamese English-major students generally possess a relatively high level of self-efficacy in learning English. Moreover, no significant differences were observed between the groups, except for the case of writing SE, where seniors exhibited higher self-efficacy levels than sophomores. Factors affecting self-efficacy were mastery experiences, teachers' feedback and support, collaborative learning, and an environment conducive to learning. These results suggest that targeted interventions focusing on enhancing these factors could further improve self-efficacy among learners. Consequently, the key practical implications of the study are discussed in further detail.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, English is critical in various domains, including business, education, science, technology, and culture. Indeed, mastering English can broaden knowledge and foster communication and collaboration with people from diverse nations. For instance, Peltokorpi (2023) highlights the substantial impact of English language competence on career success outcomes for local employees in foreign subsidiaries. Furthermore, Kawsar (2023) illustrates the indispensable role of English proficiency in career development, underscoring its importance for achieving professional success.

Moreover, Martirosyan et al. (2015) demonstrate the critical relationship between English proficiency and academic performance among international students, thereby revealing its vital role in achieving academic excellence. Additionally, Karim et al. (2023) explore the impact of language ideology and English proficiency on professional communication performance among business graduates, highlighting how these factors contribute to

employability, while Owens and Devine (2018) synthesize empirical studies that illustrate the influence of English language proficiency in diverse professional contexts. These studies substantiate that English proficiency is vital for students aiming to maximize their talents and achieve significant academic and professional success.

To successfully learn English, students need many qualities, including self-efficacy (SE), which refers to people's beliefs about their abilities. It is usually easier for people to attain their goals when they believe they can achieve them (Bandura, 1997). SE is defined as students' beliefs about their ability to perform learning tasks (Bernhard, 2013). The relationship between English learners' SE beliefs and English language achievement has been investigated in different contexts (Chen, 2007; Nguyen & Bui, 2023). SE can foster learners' confidence and motivation, enhancing their engagement and persistence in language acquisition. High SE can lead to more effective language learning strategies, better problem-solving skills, and a greater willingness to take on more challenging tasks. Furthermore, it can reduce the anxiety often associated with language learning, making the process more enjoyable and productive. As a result, promoting SE can significantly enhance the outcomes of English language education.

Although SE is considered important, large-scale investigations into its role in educational contexts remain sparse. While several studies have been carried out to investigate the impact of confidence on language learning in general, there has been limited systematic research on psychological factors that influence student achievement in the Mekong Delta. Therefore, this present research adds to the limited research on measures of SE among EFL students in the region. This study aimed to explore the factors influencing students' perceptions of SE and understand their overall level and features in learning English. Toward this end, the study attempts to find out the answer to the following questions.

RQ1. What is the overall level of self-efficacy of English major students?

RQ2. What are the differences, if any, in the levels of self-efficacy between groups of different genders and learning experiences?

RQ3. What are the factors affecting the self-efficacy of English major students in learning?

Literature Review

An Overview of Self-Efficacy

To begin, a brief discussion of self-efficacy's meaning should be considered. According to Bandura (1997), SE is an individual's belief in their capabilities to execute the actions required to manage prospective situations. Essentially, people are more likely to achieve their goals if they believe in their ability to do so. Bernhard (2013) defines SE as learners' confidence in performing specific tasks. According to Pajares (2000), students' SE involves their assessment of their academic performance. Theories of SE have been clarified in Ehrman's (1996) research, which defines SE as the extent to which students perceive themselves as competent to handle learning challenges. This belief in one's ability is crucial for language learners; those who believe they can successfully learn a foreign language are likelier to do so, while those with low SE often struggle from the outset (Bernhard, 2013).

Importance of SE in Learning English

A positive relationship exists between SE and academic performance. SE helps students overcome difficulties in the learning process and motivates them to continue striving and not give up. Indeed, SE directly impacts English language achievement through integrative motivation, highlighting its pivotal role in language learning (Kim & Shin, 2021). Furthermore, Meera and Jumana (2015) noted that SE is multidimensional and context-dependent, affecting different domains in varied ways. This multifaceted nature of SE means that it can influence a wide range of academic and personal outcomes. High SE can lead to greater engagement, persistence, and resilience in educational settings, essential for academic success. Conversely, low SE can result in avoidance of challenging tasks, decreasing effort, and a higher likelihood of giving up when faced with difficulties.

Emotional and physical experiences mainly contribute to English-speaking SE among university students (Luu & Truong, 2024). The higher the SE, the better academic performance among English-majored students (Nguyen & Bui, 2023). Besides that, Chen et al. (2022) demonstrated that SE mediates the relationship between self-concept, self-imagination, and English language learning outcomes in a blended learning environment in China. Additionally, Wang et al. (2018) found that English SE indirectly influences academic SE through the ability to use English for learning among international students in the United States. While methodologies across these studies commonly include surveys and structural equation modeling, Vietnamese research often incorporates qualitative methods like interviews for deeper insights. These findings collectively emphasize the universal significance of SE in language learning while highlighting contextual differences that can inform tailored educational strategies.

Relevant Studies

Examining SE in English language learning has been a focal point of numerous academic investigations, underscoring its critical role in language acquisition and educational outcomes. Truong and Wang (2019) conducted a comprehensive study on Vietnamese college students' SE beliefs, revealing a significant impact on their English learning achievements, particularly in speaking and listening. Their findings highlighted that SE is a pivotal determinant of students' performance in language tasks, emphasizing the importance of fostering positive SE beliefs to enhance language learning outcomes.

Similarly, Bai et al. (2022) explored the relationships between academic SE, task importance, and interest in the context of English language learning among Asian students. The findings suggest that these motivational factors significantly influence students' engagement and success in learning English. On the other hand, Genç et al. (2016) examined EFL learners' perceived SE and its correlation with language learning performance. Their research demonstrated a strong positive relationship between SE and language learning outcomes, suggesting that enhancing learners' SE could improve language acquisition performance. The study also identified various factors contributing to SE, including learners' previous successes, social modeling, and verbal encouragement, which can be leveraged to design effective pedagogical interventions.

In another significant study, Luangpipat (2017) investigated the levels and sources of SE among foreign language learners at different stages of their learning process. The results indicated fluctuations in SE levels over time. The study identified vicarious experience, mastery experience, emotional states, and social persuasion as the most influential sources of SE, with their impact increasing with the number of years spent learning the language. By recognizing the diverse sources of SE, educators can develop strategies to enhance learners' confidence and motivation, ultimately leading to better language learning outcomes.

Raoofi et al. (2012) explored SE in second/foreign language learning contexts, emphasizing the complex interactions between SE, motivation, anxiety, and learning strategies. Their study highlights the importance of addressing these interrelated factors to improve language learners' SE and overall academic performance. The researchers advocate for a holistic approach to language education that considers the emotional and psychological dimensions of learning alongside traditional pedagogical methods. Recent studies have also investigated the relationship between SE and psychological constructs such as stress, burnout, and mindfulness. Xu et al. (2022) examined the moderating effects of mindfulness and gender on English learning stress and SE among undergraduate students. Their findings suggest that mindfulness practices can mitigate stress and enhance SE, providing a valuable tool for educators to support students in managing language learning challenges. The study underscores the potential of mindfulness interventions to improve language learners' psychological well-being and academic performance.

Li (2024) explored the relationship between SE and learning engagement among English majors, concluding that higher SE is associated with greater engagement and academic success. Their research emphasizes the critical role of SE in fostering student engagement and highlights the need for educational practices that build and sustain learners' confidence in their language abilities. By promoting SE, educators can enhance students' motivation and persistence in language learning, leading to better academic outcomes. Zhang et al. (2023) investigated the relationships among English language proficiency, SE, motivation, motivational intensity, and achievement in an ESP/EAP context. The study concluded that SE is a crucial determinant of language proficiency and academic achievement, reinforcing the importance of fostering positive SE beliefs among language learners. The findings suggest that interventions to enhance SE can improve language proficiency and academic success.

Alashouri (2023) explored the impact of SE on the academic performance of language learners, focusing on the interplay between SE and learning strategies. This study underscored the importance of SE in achieving academic success and informed the development of effective pedagogical approaches. These related studies collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of SE in English language learning and provide valuable insights for enhancing learners' SE and overall language proficiency.

Justification

Although SE is often considered a universal concept, variations in perceived SE levels have been observed across different cultures. Collectivist cultures, in particular, tend to report lower SE beliefs compared to individualist cultures (Scholz et al., 2002). Research has indicated that Asian students, despite demonstrating higher academic

performance, often report lower SE than their non-Asian peers (Eaton & Dembo, 1997; Klassen, 2004). Specifically, a survey on the confidence level of English language students in a Vietnamese university showed that students have low confidence in learning English. The factors that affect this lack of SE include learners' experience and language proficiency. This means that the more students are exposed to and practice English, the higher their SE (Truong & Wang, 2019).

In contrast, several studies have investigated SE in learning English among students in developed countries. The results show that students in these countries often have high confidence in their ability to use English. Indeed, according to Alashouri (2023), students have high levels of confidence at a university in Tripoli, specifically in skills such as listening, speaking, and reading. This may be because students in these countries are exposed to English very early and widely daily. Furthermore, standardized educational standards and rich educational systems can also create a better learning environment, helping students to be more confident in their English ability (Bandura, 1997; Chen, 2007). Also, in the theoretical research of psychologist Bandura (1997), it was pointed out that 4 factors that can help improve SE are experience and proficiency, social role models, social persuasion, and psychological reactions.

Nevertheless, little is known about the degree and characteristics of SE possessed by university students in the context of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta. Thus, we attempt to reach more insights into self-efficacies, especially those attached to learning the four language skills. It is also aimed at comparing self-efficacies across different groups regarding gender and learning experience so that implications can be drawn to improve the quality of English education in this area and similar contexts.

Method

Context

The study was conducted at a prominent higher education institution in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The university offers a range of programs, including English Studies, English High-Quality Program, Translation and Interpretation, and Teacher Education, which are designed to provide students with advanced language skills and knowledge. The data collection occurred in classrooms and other designated areas within the university campuses, ensuring a familiar and comfortable environment for the participants.

Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively investigate issues related to SE in English learning among English majors at the researched university. The research was conducted during the 2023-2024 academic year, encompassing a diverse group of second and fourth-year students. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data was expected to provide a robust foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of SE in English learning. The insights gained from this study are expected to contribute significantly to developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms to enhance SE among English majors in the Mekong Delta and similar contexts.

Participants

This study involved 150 participants (113 females and 37 males), second- and fourth-year English students from the institute's School of Foreign Languages. Participants were between 19 and 21 years old and had studied English for an average of 10 years, including their time in secondary and high school. The various learning experiences among the participants provided a comprehensive overview of the factors that influence students' SE in English learning. Participation in the questionnaire was completely voluntary. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity, and their privacy was carefully protected during interviews and throughout the study.

Instruments

Questionnaire

The quantitative data was collected via close-ended questions in a questionnaire. The questionnaire was based on Wang's (2004) SE scale, but it was reorganized and categorized according to the four primary language skills. The central part of the questionnaire included 32 items designed to measure SE in learning English, with 8 items for each skill. Respondents rated each item on a five-point Likert scale (instead of 7-point in the original scale). The reverse wording of certain items was retained to maintain the integrity of Wang's (2004) original scale. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a high value of 0.947, indicating an excellent level of internal consistency.

Interview Questions

Upon administering the questionnaire, this study further incorporated semi-structured interviews. Within the mixed-methods framework, semi-structured interviews are esteemed for enhancing and deepening the insights gleaned from other research methodologies (Jamshed, 2014). Integrating qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions was appropriate for attaining more comprehensive insights. This method allowed researchers to gather detailed, nuanced, and coherent data, enabling interviewers to adapt or ask follow-up questions whenever participants hesitated or provided incomplete responses. The primary aim of the semi-structured interviews was to explore the factors influencing their SE and the strategies they utilized to improve their SE across the four language skills. The interviews featured 5 principal questions (see Appendix B), supplemented by additional questions as necessary.

Data Collection

Copies of questionnaires were distributed in classes to collect data within two consecutive weeks. The researchers required participants to answer all the items and provided clear instructions. Ten students were selected for in-depth interviews. Interviewees were from the second and fourth-year cohorts. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility in exploring individual responses while maintaining a consistent framework for comparison.

Data Analyses

The authors analyzed quantitative data using SPSS version 26. The students' SE levels were analyzed and presented in means and standard deviations. By employing an independent-sample t-test, the authors compared responses to determine if there were significant differences in SE levels between student groups. A t-test compares the means of a continuous variable or any quantitative index between two groups. Additionally, a t-test allows for hypothesis testing regarding the mean differences between two groups. The results of this test indicate whether there are significant differences between groups. In this study, comparisons were made regarding gender and learning experiences (shown by years at university). We transcribed the responses from audio recordings and extracted relevant details for qualitative data. These details were then translated into English. The research members organized the data into sections for discussion based on the research questions.

Results

Overall Degree of SE

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 illustrate the degree of SE among English-majoring students in four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The students generally report high levels of SE in these four English skills, with mean scores ranging from 3.75 to 4.01.

Table 1. SE Across the Skills

Descriptive statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Listening	150	2	5	3.75	.50
Speaking	150	2	5	4.01	.68
Reading	150	2	5	3.77	.65
Writing	150	1	5	3.77	.68

Students have the highest SE in listening skills ($M = 4.01$). Meanwhile, the means for reading and writing were similar, at 3.76, slightly lower than listening skills. In addition, the data shows that students have the lowest SE in listening English compared to the other three skills ($M = 3.75$). Table 2 displays the detailed results of the questionnaire. The students generally have a high level of SE for listening skills, with mean scores from 3.26 to 4.31 across the 8 items in this cluster. It can be seen that these students believe that they can understand numbers spoken in English, expressed by the highest mean score of item 8 (*"Can you understand numbers spoken in English?"*; $M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.794$). Conversely, the item with the lowest mean score, *"Can you understand English movies without Vietnamese subtitles?"* ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.965$), indicates that these students encounter more difficulty comprehending complex dialogues in movies.

Like listening skills, speaking witnessed a high level of SE among the study participants. Specifically, the students are confident about their ability in self-introduction, with the highest mean score at 4.29 in item 16, *"Can you introduce yourself in English?"*. It is followed by item 12, *"Can you ask questions to your teachers in English?"*

($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.817$). In contrast, the students face challenges in engaging in open discussions on general topics when the mean score for item 14, “Can you discuss in English with your classmates some topics in which all of you are interested?” has the lowest value of 3.87.

Table 2. Results of the Questionnaire

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
<i>Listening</i>			
1	Can you understand stories told in English?	3.85	.693
2	Can you understand American English TV programs	3.67	.739
3	Can you understand radio programs in English-speaking countries?	3.39	.775
4	Can you understand English TV programs made in Vietnam?	4.03	.704
5	Can you understand if your teacher gives you a tape-recorded English dialogue about school life?	3.95	.698
6	Can you understand English movies without Vietnamese subtitles?	3.26	.965
7	Can you understand English songs?	3.53	.932
8	Can you understand numbers spoken in English?	4.31	.794
<i>Speaking</i>			
9	Can you introduce your school in English?	4.07	.769
10	Can you give directions from your classroom to your home in English?	3.97	.870
11	Can you tell a story in English?	3.79	.936
12	Can you ask your teachers questions in English?	4.10	.817
13	Can you introduce your English teacher in English?	4.03	.897
14	Can you discuss some topics in English with your classmates in which you are all interested?	3.87	.936
15	Can you answer your teachers' questions in English?	3.93	.849
16	Can you introduce yourself in English?	4.29	.773
<i>Reading</i>			
17	Can you finish your English reading homework independently?	3.86	.912
18	When you read English articles, can you guess the meaning of unknown words?	3.46	.902
19	Can you understand the English news on the internet?	3.67	.872
20	Can you read English short novels?	3.56	.959
21	Can you read English newspapers?	3.61	.911
22	Can you find the meaning of new words by using English-English dictionaries?	4.08	.916
23	Can you understand English articles about Vietnamese culture?	3.91	.806
24	Can you understand new lessons in your English book?	3.94	.796
<i>Writing</i>			
25	If you have internet access, can you write blogs on the Internet?	3.35	1.081
26	Can you write English compositions assigned by your teachers?	3.53	.953

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
27	Can you leave a message in English to your classmates?	4.11	.807
28	Can you make new sentences with the words just learned?	4.03	.819
29	Can you write email messages in English?	3.89	.959
30	Can you make sentences with English phrases?	4.03	.882
31	Can you write diaries in English?	3.65	1.049
32	Can you write an article about your English teacher in English?	3.57	1.006

As seen in Table 2, the average ratings for the reading section are relatively high. The mean score of item 22, “Can you find the meaning of new words by using English-English dictionaries?” is the highest ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.916$). That would mean the students are proficient in defining new vocabulary using English dictionaries. Conversely, the item with the lowest mean score is item 18, “When you read English articles, can you guess the meaning of unknown words?” with $M = 3.46$ and $SD = 0.902$, which indicates that students find it more challenging to infer the meaning of new words when reading English articles.

Finally, the data in Table 2 show that students’ SE in writing is pretty high, with mean scores ranging from 4.11 to 3.35. Item 27, “Can you leave a message to your classmates in English?” has the highest value ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.807$), while the lowest mean is seen in item 25 ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.018$), which refers to writing online blogs in English.

Comparison Between Genders

The bar chart (in Figure 1 below) illustrates the average SE levels of males and females across four language skills. Overall, males and females exhibit similar SE levels in listening, reading, and speaking skills; however, females demonstrate much higher SE in writing skills than males. Both males and females have nearly equivalent SE levels for listening and reading, ranging just above 3.5 but below 4. Regarding speaking, males report slightly over 4, while females report precisely 4. Nevertheless, a notable disparity is observed in writing, where females demonstrate higher SE, with scores exceeding 3.5, whereas males score below 3.

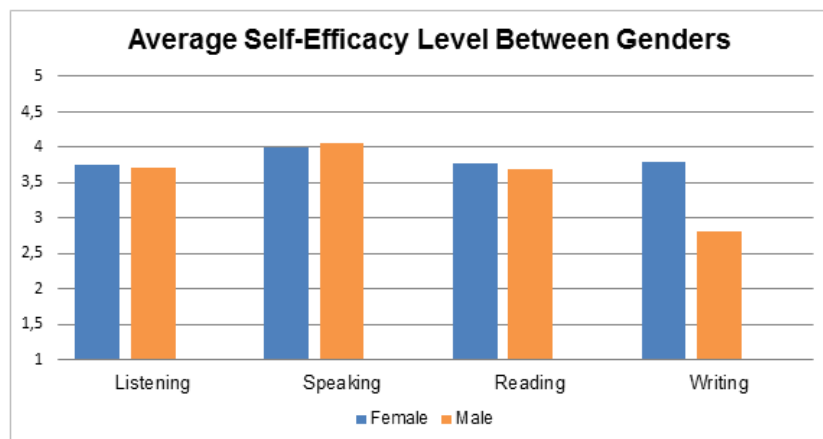


Figure 1. Difference in SE Between Genders

While there is a general parity in SE levels between males and females in most skills, writing stands out as the area where females exhibit a markedly higher level of confidence. However, the difference in mean scores observed in writing SE between the two genders is not confirmed by the t-test result in Table 3 below.

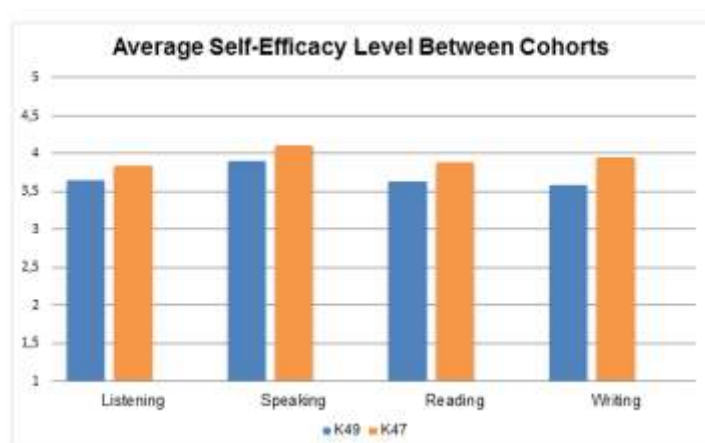
Table 3. Result of Independent Sample T-test Comparing SE of the Two Genders

Skills	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	t	p
Listening	Female	113	3.76	.425	.040	.440	.662
	Male	37	3.71	.704	.116		
Speaking	Female	113	3.99	.603	.057	.454	.652
	Male	37	4.06	.883	.145		
Reading	Female	113	3.78	.610	.057	.664	.508
	Male	37	3.70	.759	.125		
Writing	Female	113	3.79	.631	.059	.671	.503
	Male	37	3.70	.831	.137		

The independent sample t-test used to investigate the differences between the two genders regarding SE yielded a somewhat surprising result. No significant differences were found between females and males in their SE beliefs regarding all four language skills ($p > 0.05$). This finding was in alignment with that of studies conducted by Truong and Wang (2019).

Comparison Between Experience Groups

Figure 2 compares SE levels among students from 47 and 49 cohorts across four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.



K49: second-year

K47: fourth-year

Figure 2. The Difference in SE Between Cohorts

It is evident that Cohort 47 consistently exhibits higher SE in all four skills compared to Cohort 49, with a particularly notable difference in writing SE. Regarding listening and speaking, cohort 47 demonstrates greater SE, with scores exceeding 3.8 and around 4.1, respectively. Conversely, cohort 49 shows lower SE in these areas. Notably, speaking is the skill in which cohort 47 students exhibit the highest SE among the four skills. Regarding reading and writing, cohort 47 maintains high SE levels, approximately 3.9 for both skills. In contrast, cohort 49's SE levels are lower, around 3.6 for both. Interestingly, writing is the skill where cohort 49 students have the lowest SE, with a mean value of just below 3.6. However, an independent samples t-test was used to explain whether those differences were statistically significant. Table 4 displays the result of this comparison.

Table 4. Comparison of SE Between Second and Fourth Year Students

Skills	Years	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	t	p
Listening	2	75	3.65	.490	.057	2.378	.367
	4	75	3.84	.506	.058		
Speaking	2	75	3.90	.717	.083	1.893	.531
	4	75	4.11	.628	.073		
Reading	2	75	3.63	.670	.077	2.483	.323
	4	75	3.89	.603	.070		
Writing	2	75	3.59	.732	.085	3.264	.050
	4	75	3.95	.586	.068		

The result of the independent sample t-test to compare the differences in SE levels between English-major sophomores and seniors in four English skills presented above shows that, generally, the mean score differences are not significant, except for SE in writing skills. In other words, it is shown that there are no differences in terms of listening, speaking, and reading SE between the two cohorts ($p > 0.05$). However, it is noted that there was a significant difference in the level of SE between the two cohorts in writing ($p = 0.05$).

Influential Factors

This part presents the results of interviews with 10 students regarding their perspectives and experiences about SE in English communication. SE is a crucial factor in the progress and success of every student. Frequent exposure and practice learning English help improve language skills and build confidence. Through various learning experiences, many students have noticed positive changes in how they perceive themselves and their communication skills, evolving from initial shyness to confidently presenting and exchanging ideas. Elements such as learning experience, teacher feedback, peer support, and a positive learning environment have significantly contributed to boosting their SE, helping them overcome psychological barriers, and expanding opportunities in both academic and personal life.

Learning Experience

The interviewees reported the changes in SE and factors that triggered these changes through the following excerpts.

“[...] After a period of study, I have made significant progress compared to my previous self.” (Interviewee A)

“I feel that my skills have improved considerably, especially my speaking skills. I am now more confident when communicating in English compared to when I first entered university.” (Interviewee H)

“To be honest, I can see the difference compared to my first day at school. I used to be very shy and struggled with almost all my English skills.” (Interviewee I)

“I feel more confident when communicating with foreign teachers now. I am not as hesitant or nervous as when I first started higher education.” (Interviewee C)

Additionally, interaction with teachers and peers over time significantly impacts students' SE. Support and encouragement from teachers help students recognize their abilities while engaging with friends, creating opportunities to practice skills. These various kinds of interaction make students feel more comfortable when communicating and significantly improve their SE. The interviewees' comments are as follows.

“Compared to when I first started, I feel I have made significant progress, especially in interacting with classmates and teachers in English.” (Interviewee D)

“I feel much more confident speaking English now than when I first started. I can comfortably interact with friends and teachers in English without feeling as shy or afraid of making mistakes as I did in my first year.” (Interviewee E)

“I used to be shy about speaking and engaging in conversations; I was mostly passive. However, through the learning process, I have had more exposure to classmates and especially teachers, providing me with opportunities to express my opinions, which has boosted my confidence in class.” (Interviewee G)

In short, students' SE in learning English results from continuous learning, teacher support, and positive interactions with peers. These are important factors in studying and daily life, fostering students' overall development and boosting their social confidence.

Teachers' Feedback

Teachers' feedback strongly impacts students' SE in various ways. First, positive feedback from teachers can encourage and motivate students to continue their efforts and develop their skills. Many students have shared that compliments and positive comments help them believe more in their communication abilities, especially during presentations. These are evident through the students' responses.

“Lecturers often provide feedback to students to promote their development and improvement. I believe that the feedback from lecturers usually positively impacts students, as it allows me to reflect, assess, and improve to become a better version of myself.” (Interviewee A)

“I believe those kinds of feedback have helped me improve my confidence in learning English. Although they were conveyed differently, most of the advice helped me recognize my shortcomings and weaknesses so I could improve them, reinforcing my English knowledge.” (Interviewee C)

“Positive comments make me more confident, while constructive feedback helps me grow.” (Interviewee D)

“Sometimes, though teachers' comments, I feel much more motivated to study.” (Interviewee H)

Conversely, negative feedback can have a detrimental effect on students' psychology, leading to anxiety and decreased confidence. However, if communicated constructively, such feedback can be a powerful motivator, encouraging students to improve and avoid repeating past mistakes. The students confessed how they felt about negative feedback in the excerpts below.

"[...] If feedback is negative or critical, it can make students feel timid and discouraged." (Interviewee F)

"[...] Not all comments are easy to hear, understand, or accept, as it also depends on how the student perceives the feedback they receive from their teachers." (Interviewee G)

"[...] Being evaluated by a highly skilled instructor made me feel honored, and I always looked forward to receiving feedback. [...] Some quite harsh comments sometimes hindered my improving my English skills. However, after a while, I realized that everything was just feedback and suggestions, and all I needed to do was think positively. I will be better!" (Interviewee I)

Teachers' support and guidance help students better understand their strengths and weaknesses, thus facilitating their development. In an environment where students feel recognized and supported, they can gradually build confidence in their communication skills, a vital aspect of English language learning.

Furthermore, it is evident that positive or negative feedback has an impact, but more importantly, it depends on how students receive and process it. Transforming negative feedback into motivation enhances language skills and reinforces confidence, helping students overcome barriers and challenges in their studies and daily life. In summary, the influence of teachers' feedback helps students improve their skills and shapes their confidence in communication and learning.

Collaborative Learning

Teamwork has become a cornerstone in the learning environment and is crucial in developing students' personal skills and collaborative spirit. Interviews with students indicate that participating in workgroups boosts their SE, improves their communication skills, and allows them to learn from their peers. From sharing ideas to solving problems together, these experiences build a solid foundation for personal development. Students recognize that through cooperation and mutual support, they can overcome barriers to confidence and develop essential skills for the future. The interviews' extracts illustrate how the students perceive the benefits of collaborative learning.

"When there are more people, the work progresses faster. We have a variety of ideas and opinions for a specific problem. Working in a group will help us become more responsible and make learning more effective." (Interviewee A)

"I have found that working in a group has helped me develop important skills such as communication, teamwork, and soft skills. It helps me develop myself more, not only by building individual skills but also by knowing how to cooperate with others." (Interviewee C)

"Teamwork greatly influences my studies. It allowed me to learn from my friends and honed my communication and collaboration skills. I feel that group work supports my development and confidence in learning." (Interviewee D)

"Collaborating with classmates helps reduce my shyness and makes me more confident; I can also share and work together to solve common problems." (Interviewee E)

"I believe teamwork is also an important activity that helps students understand each other better and learn how

different people work. Additionally, group work fosters flexibility in tasks and helps everyone progress together. Therefore, I think teamwork promotes the development and confidence of students.” (Interviewee H)

Learning from peers is an invaluable and essential part of teamwork. Students can absorb new and diverse information from their classmates through interaction and knowledge exchange. This broadens their knowledge and helps them develop important skills such as presentation and idea development. Understanding the working styles of different individuals and the mutual support within the group also contributes to students' SE and adaptability, creating a conducive environment for continuous progress in their learning.

Teamwork, however, poses challenges for some students who may be more inclined to learn independently or those who are not yet used to it. This eventually can affect students' SE. While some students find that working in teams improves their communication, collaboration skills, and SE, the feeling of limited control can sometimes create pressure and negatively impact their mental well-being.

“Throughout my studies, I have experienced favorable and unfavorable group work. However, working in groups and collaborating with classmates positively affect my learning. [...] The more I understand, the more confident I become in those assignments.” (Interviewee B)

“Working in groups helps me improve my communication and collaboration skills. This boosts my self-efficacy. However, sometimes it makes me feel pressured because I cannot control everything according to my wishes.” (Interviewee F)

The interviewed students also share that group work experiences can vary from favorable to unfavorable, yet they still positively impact their learning. Taking on different roles in a group requires students to understand the tasks and responsibilities involved, and as they grasp knowledge, their SE increases. Learning and interacting with group members significantly contribute to their skill development and SE despite challenges. In other words, teamwork can be both an advantage and a challenge. However, with a progressive mindset and the ability to self-reflect, students can turn challenges into opportunities for growth and increased confidence.

Learning Environment

The learning environment is crucial in developing students' SE, especially in English communication. Two common types of environments are the strict learning environment and the friendly environment, each with advantages and disadvantages, affecting students' confidence differently.

The strict learning environment often requires students to adhere to strict rules and schedules. This can help students focus more on their studies and cultivate discipline.

“Each environment has its advantages and disadvantages. I prefer a strict environment because I thrive under pressure from instructors. I cannot proactively speak up or contribute ideas without some form of accountability and encouragement. This drives me to improve myself and my language skills.” (Interviewee A)

“As a dedicated student, I have high expectations for my university instructors. A balanced approach, with strictness applied at appropriate times, helps students develop discipline not only in their studies but also for future careers [...]” (Interviewee I)

However, this strictness can also create psychological pressure, making students hesitant when communicating.

Some students report being afraid to speak up or participate in communication activities due to fear of criticism. Therefore, many students believe that a friendly environment allows them to express better and develop their language skills.

“[...] In a friendly environment, learners feel more comfortable, which helps them learn in a relaxed and natural way. I believe a friendly atmosphere will make me more confident in learning English.” (Interviewee C)

“I think both a serious and a friendly learning environment have different impacts. I feel that a friendly environment helps me be more confident in communication.” (Interviewee D)

“A friendly classroom environment allows students to exchange freely, leading to a better-functioning class where everyone can communicate in English, boosting their confidence in communication and pronunciation.” (Interviewee F)

“I feel that a friendly learning environment helps me confidently express myself. When teachers create opportunities for communication, I am no longer afraid of making mistakes and actively participate in activities, making me more comfortable speaking English [...]” (Interviewee E)

“[...] My confidence is closely tied to the level of comfort the environment creates. The more open it is, the more confidently I can express myself during lessons, as I will not be afraid of making mistakes. Like any other student, I want to be able to interact and converse with my teachers, so creating an open space between students and teachers would increase the confidence of both parties.” (Interviewee G)

“[...] I feel that a friendly classroom will help me be more confident because a cheerful atmosphere makes me feel free to express myself without pressure.” (Interviewee J)

Additionally, some students suggest that blending these two environments would yield optimal benefits. Combining seriousness in studying and discipline with friendliness and open communication would help them focus on their studies while feeling comfortable expressing their opinions. A severe yet flexible learning environment would encourage students to express themselves and develop knowledge and soft skills confidently.

“Studying in a serious environment helps students follow the correct path and concentrate, but it can also be stressful, making them less confident in sharing their ideas. [...] However, if the atmosphere is too relaxed, some students may not adhere to rules and disrupt the class, for example, being noisy or arriving late...” (Interviewee B)

“[...] However, if it is too strict, students may feel pressured and reluctant to communicate. Conversely, a friendly and open environment encourages students to participate and actively share their opinions and experiences. A friendly environment makes me more confident expressing myself because I can freely share my thoughts.” (Interviewee H)

“[...] I believe that the ideal learning environment should strike a balance between strictness and friendliness, accommodating students' diverse needs and mindsets.” (Interviewee I)

The interview results indicate that the learning environment plays a crucial role in shaping students' SE, particularly in the context of learning English. A severe environment, while potentially creating pressure and demanding discipline, helps students focus and enhances their learning effectiveness. However, this strictness can also limit interaction and comfort in student communication.

In contrast, a friendly environment fosters a comfortable atmosphere, encouraging students to express themselves freely without fearing criticism. This situation not only boosts their confidence but also improves their communication skills. Many students have pointed out that a combination of seriousness and friendliness can provide optimal benefits, allowing them to cultivate discipline while developing soft skills in a positive learning

space. In summary, to create an ideal learning environment, it is essential to harmonize seriousness and friendliness. This balance helps students concentrate on their studies and facilitates confident communication and comprehensive development.

Discussions

Self-Efficacy in Learning English

Overall, it is revealed that English-major students in this research have a fairly high SE level in learning English. The results of an independent sample t-test showed that the overall SE of English major students varies slightly across different groups, except in writing SE, where the variation is more significant depending on learning time at university. Second-year students generally reported lower writing SE compared to fourth-year students. This difference can be attributed to fourth-year students' increased exposure and experience in using English in academic and practical contexts. Indeed, SE can be built through the mastery experience (Bandura, 1997). The longer the number of years students have learned English, the greater SE they have (Truong & Wang, 2019). As English major students, they have a myriad of opportunities to practice their writing skills in their classes. Moreover, their long period in English allowed them to obtain more vocabulary and understand more about academic writing (Tran et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be seen that the SE level between sophomores and seniors in writing experienced a statistical difference.

It is noted that no gender differences are found in the degree of SE in English learning. This finding is in alignment with that of the study conducted by Truong and Wang (2019). In addition, female students exhibit slightly higher SE levels than their male counterparts, which does not align with Bai et al. (2022), who found that male students have a stronger belief in their English learning' SE than female students. In contrast, Bacon et al. (1992) indicated that female students are more driven and enthusiastic about learning languages. That is due to women being more predisposed to adopt diverse language learning strategies, particularly those centered around social interaction, to garner social affirmation for their linguistic proficiency (Alashouri, 2023).

Regarding the four language skills, English-major students have the highest SE belief in their English speaking. They are particularly confident in self-introduction tasks but less in discussing general topics. This mirrors the findings of Truong and Wang (2019), who observed that students often excel in basic communication but face challenges in group discussions and responding to teachers' questions, likely due to a lack of confidence or experience. Contrastingly, the lowest SE levels among English-major students are observed in listening skills. Listening is difficult because the rapid pace of spoken English, diverse accents, and background noise can make it difficult to comprehend every word. Bai et al. (2022) highlight that listening comprehension requires active engagement and the ability to infer meaning from context, skills that may not be explicitly taught in traditional language classes. These factors contribute to lower SE in listening among English-major students, as supported by the findings of Bacon et al. (1992) and Alashouri (2023). Meanwhile, this study also found that second-year English majors, especially male students, have the least SE in writing among the four skills. That is because writing requires students to have a solid grammar foundation and a wide range of vocabulary. Moreover, the time students spent on practice writing stimulated their SE in writing capabilities (Tran et al., 2020).

This study also identifies that students' SE levels are dynamic and change over time. Most students find themselves stronger believers in their English capacities compared to when they first entered the university. This growth could stem from frequent exposure, practice, and valuable learning experiences. Teacher feedback also significantly influences students' SE. According to Truong and Wang (2019), Vietnamese students highly respect and value teacher feedback. Positive feedback contributes to increasing the level of SE between students (Wang & Wu, 2008). Furthermore, teamwork plays a crucial role in developing students' SE. Collaborative experiences allow students to interact and learn from their peers. This finding is in alignment with the study conducted by Bandura (1997), which found that observing and interacting with peers can enhance SE. It is also worth noting that the learning environment greatly stimulates SE and belief. Friendly learning environments allow students to feel more comfortable and better express their ideas, while strict learning environments are on the reverse. For some students, they find that strictness creates psychological pressure and makes them feel hesitant when communicating. According to Woodrow (2011), positive emotions can strengthen one's beliefs in one's competence, but negative emotional and physiological states like worry, stress, anxiety, and depression can weaken one's SE. In brief, instructor feedback, peer support, and a supportive learning environment have greatly impacted students' SE, enabling them to overcome psychological obstacles and increase their opportunities both in their personal and academic lives.

Implications

The findings above underscore the multifaceted nature of SE in language learning, revealing how various factors influence students' confidence levels. Understanding these differences is crucial for developing targeted interventions to enhance students' confidence and performance in specific areas. The observed disparities, though minor, between cohorts and genders highlight the need for tailored educational strategies that address the unique needs of different student groups. For instance, the data indicates that second-year students may struggle more with speaking skills and academic writing than their fourth-year counterparts. Similarly, gender-based differences suggest that female students might experience lower SE in public speaking scenarios, while male students might lack confidence in dealing with reading tasks and academic writing. Educators can design effective teaching methods and support systems to boost SE by identifying areas where students lack confidence. Moreover, these insights can inform curriculum development, ensuring that it is inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of students. For example, more interactive speaking exercises should be incorporated for second-year students. Gender-sensitive approaches can also be implemented, such as creating a supportive and active environment for female students to practice public speaking. Ultimately, educators can foster a more supportive and effective learning environment by addressing these nuanced aspects of SE. This, in turn, can lead to better academic outcomes, as students who feel more confident in their abilities are likely to engage more actively in their learning process and perform better academically. The implications of these findings extend beyond the classroom, as enhanced SE can contribute to students' overall personal and professional development.

Further practical implications are for educators and policymakers aiming to enhance students' SE in language learning. Educators should integrate more interactive and student-centered teaching approaches, such as group discussions, role-playing, and problem-based learning, into their curriculum to engage students and make the

material more relatable and easily understood. Schools and educational institutions should create opportunities for collaborative learning environments and establish peer support systems, encouraging students to collaborate on projects and assignments to build confidence through mutual support and shared knowledge. Teachers should provide regular, constructive feedback and formative assessments to help students track their progress, identify areas for improvement, and stay motivated, guiding them in setting realistic goals and developing effective learning strategies. Additionally, schools should facilitate and promote extracurricular activities related to English learning, such as language clubs, debate teams, and cultural exchange programs, providing students with additional practice opportunities in a less formal setting to boost their SE and make learning more enjoyable. Finally, educators should focus on creating a supportive and stress-free learning environment through mindfulness programs, stress management workshops, and access to counseling services, improving students' emotional and physiological states to enhance their overall well-being and positively influence their SE and academic performance. Implementing these strategies can create a more effective and supportive learning environment that fosters students' SE and promotes better educational outcomes.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size was limited to 150 participants from a single university, which may not represent all English major students in Vietnam. This limitation restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Additionally, relying on self-reported data could introduce bias, as students may overestimate or underestimate their SE. Self-reported measures are inherently subjective and can be influenced by various factors, such as the students' current mood or desire to present themselves in a favorable light. Furthermore, the study did not explore the underlying causes of the observed differences in SE, which could provide deeper insights into the factors influencing students' confidence. Understanding these underlying causes is crucial for developing targeted interventions. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional nature means it captures SE at a single point without considering how it may change throughout students' academic careers. Another limitation is the potential influence of external factors that were not controlled for in the study. Variables such as students' prior educational experiences, socio-economic background, and access to resources could all impact SE but were not accounted for in this research. Finally, the study's focus on a specific program within a single university may limit the applicability of the findings to other contexts, such as different educational systems or cultural settings.

Recommendations

Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Specifically, including participants from multiple universities and regions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of SE among English major students. Moreover, longitudinal studies could provide insights into how SE evolves and the long-term impact of targeted interventions. Tracking students' SE across different stages of their academic careers would help identify critical periods for intervention and support. Additionally, qualitative research exploring the underlying causes of SE differences could offer valuable information for developing more effective educational strategies. In-depth interviews and focus groups could

uncover the personal and contextual factors influencing students' confidence levels. Furthermore, investigating the role of specific teaching methods and classroom environments in shaping SE could provide practical insights for educators. For example, examining how collaborative learning, feedback mechanisms, and teacher-student interactions impact SE could inform the design of more supportive learning environments. Future studies could also examine the impact of cultural factors on SE, as cultural background can significantly influence students' beliefs and attitudes toward learning. Understanding how cultural norms and values shape SE can help educators develop culturally responsive teaching practices. Finally, exploring the interplay between SE and other psychological constructs, such as motivation and anxiety, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to successful language learning. This holistic approach would enable the development of interventions that address multiple aspects of students' psychological well-being and academic performance.

Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the levels and features of SE in English learning among English majors in the researched institute and simultaneously identify potential factors that influence the students' SE. By surveying 150 second and fourth-year students and conducting interviews with 10 students from the survey group, we gathered comprehensive data on the various elements influencing students' SE in their English language abilities.

The research revealed that English-major students at the researched university generally have a high level of SE in learning English. However, no significant differences between the groups of different seniority were noted, with the only exception being SE attached to writing skills. Second-year students reported lower SE compared to fourth-year students, likely due to the latter's greater exposure and experience in using English academically and practically. This supports Bandura's (1997) concept that SE is built through successful experiences over time. No significant differences were found in SE levels between the two genders, although female students showed slightly higher SE than males. This contrasts with some studies, like Bai et al. (2022), which found higher SE in males but aligns with Bacon et al. (1992) and Alashouri (2023), who noted that female students are often more driven and enthusiastic about language learning. Regarding language skills, students exhibited the highest SE in speaking, particularly in self-introduction tasks, but were less confident discussing general topics. This mirrors Truong and Wang's (2019) findings. Conversely, the lowest SE was in listening skills, with challenges such as the rapid pace of spoken English and diverse accents. This is supported by Bai et al. (2022) and Bacon et al. (1992), highlighting the need for active engagement and contextual inference in listening comprehension.

The importance of this research lies in its potential to inform educational practices and policies aimed at enhancing English language learning among university students. Educators and administrators can develop targeted interventions to support students in their language learning journey by identifying the key factors that influence SE. For instance, teacher training programs can be designed to emphasize the importance of providing constructive feedback and fostering a supportive classroom environment. Additionally, promoting collaborative learning opportunities and ensuring access to adequate learning resources can further enhance students' confidence and proficiency in English. Moreover, this research contributes to the broader understanding of SE in language learning, offering valuable insights that can be applied in various educational contexts. By reaffirming

the critical role of SE in academic success, this study underscores the need for continuous efforts to support and empower students in their language-learning endeavors. Ultimately, the findings of this research have the potential to positively impact the educational experiences of English majors at the studied university and beyond, paving the way for more effective and inclusive language education practices.

In conclusion, this study illuminates SE's characteristics and the factors affecting this construct in EFL contexts. It provides a foundation for future research and practical applications to improve language education. By understanding SE and addressing the identified factors, educators can help students build stronger SE, leading to better academic outcomes and greater confidence in their English language abilities.

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