# English Self-Efficacy Beliefs of EFL Low Proficiency Graduate Students

## Nawarat Siritararatn, Ph.D.

*Kasetsart University*

## *Abstract*

*All Master's degree students at Kasetsart University, Thailand, are required to take an English course--the English Required by Graduate School unless they pass the standard test offered by KU-Test Center. The main objective of this course is to practice students' reading skills in English expository texts with the emphasis on the use of strategies that enhance effective reading comprehension. Through ten years' experience, the researcher has observed that most of the students who studied in this course had low proficiency in their reading ability. Many students had to attend the course several times before completing it. Various studies indicated that there are many factors that contribute to the students' language learning proficiency including their self-efficacy beliefs. Self-efficacy refers to people's judgments about their abilities to complete a task. It is an important factor which indicates the success or failure in students' academic study as it influences students' planning, motivation, strategy use, and ultimately actions (Bandura, 1990). This study investigated the self-efficacy beliefs in English of 43 KU low proficiency graduate students' enrolling in English Required by Graduate School during April-May 2013 and examined the sources that contributed to their success or failure in learning English together with its consequences. The data was collected both quantitatively and qualitatively by using a questionnaire adapted from Bandura (1990) to assess the students' English self-efficacy beliefs and an open-ended interview to explore the sources that conduced to the students' perception toward their success or failure in learning English.*

## 1. Introduction

Almost everyone in many countries around the world realizes the importance of English as a medium for international communication. It has been widely accepted as the most widespread language in the world (Kitao and Kitao, 1996). Besides, English also plays a crucial role in academic genre as it can be seen that a large number of academic publications in English has been increasing dramatically (Mercer and Swann, 1996.)

In higher education in all countries worldwide, graduate students are expected to expand their body of knowledge and experiences that would be necessary for their studies. Through reading, students are able to derive a vast amount of information from these English publications.

This scenario is certainly true of graduate students in Thai context including those who study their master degree at Kasetsart University, one of the leading Thai universities whose expertise is concerned with the creation of knowledge of the land for the well-being of the nation especially those in the areas of agriculture, science and business.

As the university realizes the important of English, before graduation all graduate students are required to attain the minimum score of 45 on the TOEFL Internet-based exam, 450 on the TOEFL paper-based exam, or 5.0 on the IELTS. This score is interpreted as a modest user who has partial command of English.

Alternatively, students may take an English proficiency examination held by the Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Humanities. If students fail the examination, they have to apply for the "English Required by Graduate School" course and pass with a successful result or reapply for the examination.

Generally, students who attend the course are the ones with low levels of English proficiency although these students including most Thai students have studied English as a foreign language for more than ten years since their primary schools. A potential cause of problems may arise from the environment where most people in Thailand speak the same language. The needs for learning English among Thais are limited and chances for learners to be exposed to English are rare. Therefore, it is clearly seen that this kind of environment does not support foreign language learning, English acquisition becomes difficult for Thais.

Several studies have been conducted to explore how to effectively learn a foreign or second language, and it has been discovered that there are many factors which contribute to successful foreign language learning. Many studies indicate that self-efficacy is a strong indicator which predicts the success or failure of learning as well as of foreign language learning. As self-efficacy refers to people's judgments about their abilities to complete a task (Bandura, 1990), it affects students' planning, motivation, strategy use, and actions. From this notion, self-efficacy can be a potential factor

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that influences KU graduate students' low English proficiency, and the study of KU graduate students' level of self-efficacy and the factors affecting their performance may shed light on the causes of students' low proficiency. The results will be useful for the development of the acquisition of English in Thai context.

## 2. Research Questions

Regarding the objectives of the study, the following research questions are proposed:
1. What is the level of self-efficacy beliefs of EFL low proficiency KU graduate students'?
2. What are the sources that conduced to the KU low proficiency graduate students' perception toward their success or failure in learning English?

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 What is Self-efficacy?

Since the first introduction of self-efficacy, which was originally constructed within a social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977), a large number of educational research studies have been conducted to explore students' and teachers' self-efficacy beliefs which influence both successful and failure performances of learners. Self-efficacy refers to "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p.319) In other words, individual learners possess a system of self-beliefs which enables them to exercise control over their thoughts, feelings, as well as actions.

### 3.2 What does self-efficacy do?

Self-efficacy plays a crucial role in the performance of individuals in several areas (Mikulecky et. al, 1996) It influences pursued courses of action and decisions, the degree of expended effort, the level of perseverance and resilience to adversity in the face of obstacles, the affective states, and the degree of success realized (Bandura, 1997). Many research studies reveal the fact that students' self-efficacy beliefs are correlated with other motivation constructs and with students' academic performances and achievements including attributions, goal setting, modeling, problem solving, test and domain-specific anxiety, reward contingencies, self-regulation, social comparisons, strategy training, other self-beliefs and expectancy constructs, and varied academic performances (Pajares, 1996).

According to Bandura (1993), strong personal self-efficacy beliefs enhance motivation and performance. On the other hand, low self-efficacy beliefs are characterized by low aspiration and weak commitment to goals. Consequently, the individuals who engage in the latter condition are more likely to become frustrated when they confront with difficult challenges, and see these challenges as their own threats to be avoided rather than challenges to be learnt.

### 3.3 Where does self-efficacy come from?

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy beliefs are developed from four sources namely mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, physiological states and social persuasions. Mastery experiences can be seen when learners evaluate and interpret the effects of their actions, they formulate their self-efficacy beliefs. Outcomes interpreted as successful will raise self-efficacy; those interpreted as failures will lower it. Bandura (1986) emphasizes that one's mastery experiences are the most influential source of self-efficacy belief. Similarly, vicarious experiences consolidate self-efficacy beliefs through modeling where reinforcing observer responses raise future repetition of imitated behaviors. If the model's attributes are similar to their own, the influence of the vicarious experience will be strong. The third source is the learners' physiological states which include fear, anxiety, and stress. These affect learners' confidence to achieve tasks. Finally, social persuasions of positive feedback and reasonable praise enhance self-efficacy beliefs but overstating ability could undermine self-efficacy beliefs when learning experiences are unsuccessful (Bandura, 1997). In addition, Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) also suggest that positive feedback about academic achievement increase self-efficacy beliefs. Apart from these four sources, the interactions between social, economic, and educational factors can also influence academic self-efficacy beliefs and aspirations (Schunk and Pajares, 2002).

*3.4  What is the relationship of self-efficacy beliefs and language learning?*

Self-efficacy components have been widely investigated in varied disciplines and settings and have received academic support findings from diverse fields, for instance, social skills (Moe and Zeiss, 1982), teacher's self-efficacy beliefs, (Ashton and Webb, 1986), and academic motivation and self-regulation (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996). As Bandura (1986) suggests that self-efficacy is task-specific and is different from context to context, therefore, self-efficacy needs to be measured specifically. In the area of language learning, Williams (1994) states that language learning differs from other types of learning, as a result, more attention needs to be paid to investigate how students develop their self-efficacy beliefs and what factors affect their self-efficacy beliefs particularly in foreign language contexts.

Recently, there has been a growing interest in self-efficacy beliefs within the field of language learning such as the study of the relationship of self-efficacy beliefs and learning strategies, performance, causal attributions, and language anxiety. The results indicate that self-efficacy is a potential factor that affects learners' interest, persistence, the extent of effort learners invest in learning, the goals they choose to pursue and their use of self-regulated strategies in performing a task (Pajares, 1996, Schunk, 2003, Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2003; Carmichael & Taylor, 2005)

As mentioned above, research indicates that self-efficacy in the language context influences learners' self-efficacy beliefs.

## 4.  Methodology

### 4.1  Research Design

This study was designed by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. To address the two research questions, the theoretical framework of self-efficacy beliefs suggested by Bandura (1986; 1997), was mainly employed to guide the analysis. Moreover, content analysis including the descriptive and interpretive methods, suggested by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), were applied for the investigation.

### 4.2  Participants

A total of 43 EFL graduate students from several master programs of Kasetsart University who enrolled in English Required by Graduate School during April-May 2013 participated in the survey study. Most of them were low proficiency in English particularly in reading skills as mentioned earlier. Then, 13 students, which counts 30% of the total number of students, were randomly selected for the interview for the insight data about the reasons why these students hold those beliefs.

### 4.3  Instruments

#### 4.3.1  Questionnaire

In this study, the questionnaire targeting the English self-efficacy beliefs of the KU students which was developed by Rahemi (2007) was employed. It was constructed based on Bandura's (1986; 1997) self-efficacy theory, the existing instruments BALLI (Horwitz, 1988), and the general self-efficacy scale by Nezami et al., (1996). It was also validated and piloted to ensure its validity and reliability. The questionnaire consists of 10 five-point Likert scale items which address students' perceived abilities and their traits such as their aspiration in learning English, one item requiring the respondents to choose the factors that influence their success or failure in EFL learning from the total eight factors, and the last item requiring respondents to rank those eight factors according to how important they judged them for their success or failure in EFL learning. The two dimensions of the first part of the questionnaire contain students' perceived language abilities and their aspiration in learning English.

#### 4.3.2  Interview protocol

The open-ended interview protocol, which was developed based on the questionnaire by the researcher, was utilized with the expectation to understand what factors that formulate students' beliefs influence their successful or failure performances in learning English.

### 4.4  Data Collection

The questionnaire was delivered and gathered for an analysis to 43 KU EFL undergraduate students at the beginning of the course around April 2013. The interview was carried out immediately after the quantitative phase of the study.

### 4.5  Data Analysis

### 4.5.1  Quantitative data

The data collected from the 43 questionnaire were analyzed and interpreted using the SPSS computer program to calculate descriptive statistics of frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

### 4.5.2  Qualitative data

Content analysis was employed to analyze the data attained from the interview. After the researcher read through all of the data several times, the themes for the analysis emerged.
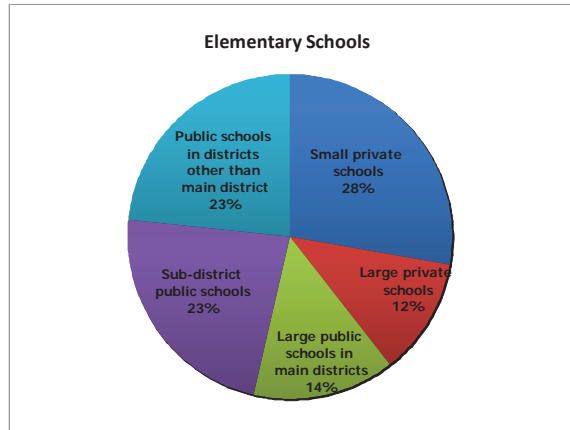
## 5.  Results

The participants for this study were 43 EFL low proficiency graduate students enrolling in the English Required by Graduate School during April-May 2013 from 9 faculties of Kasetsart University. The majority of participants were from the Faculty of Agriculture, Engineering, Economics and Education which takes 79.2%.

**Figure 1.** The number of years that students studied English in schools
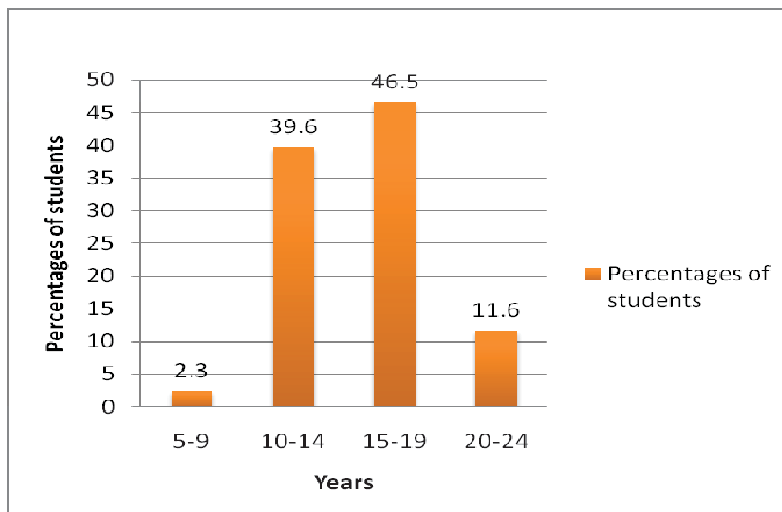


The composition of the sample was 51.2% male and 48.8% female. These students had been studying English as a subject since their elementary and high schools. As presented in the figures above, the majority of students which counts 46.5%, reported that they studied English for 15-19 years while 39.6% indicated 10-14 years. In addition, 11.6% reported an even longer period of 20-24 years.

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**Figure 2.** The characteristics of the students' primary schools



It can be seen from the figure above that the majority of the students for this study or 74% were from small schools in the remote areas when they were in their elementary schools. These include small private schools, public schools in districts other than main district, and sub-district public schools. Fewer facilities especially teaching materials were provided. Besides, these schools may not employed teachers majoring in English to teach English language lessons or there might be only a qualified teacher teaching all students in six grades due to the limited school budget.

**Figure 3.** The characteristics of the students' high schools
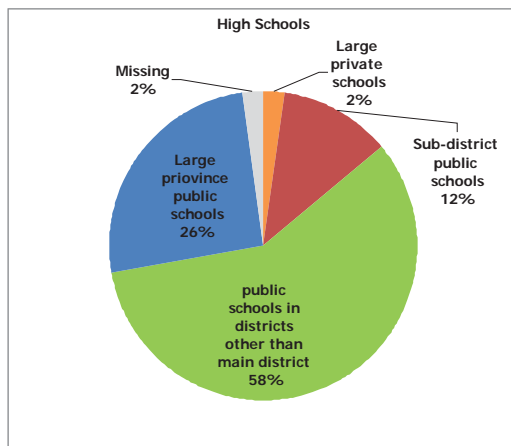


Figure 3 depicts the characteristics of the students' high schools. The majority of the students for this study or 70% were from the public schools in districts other than main district and sub-district public schools. The situation of teaching English in these high schools was more or less the same as that of the elementary schools.

The following section describes KU low proficiency graduate students' self-efficacy level and the factors which influence students' English proficiency.

**Table 1.** Students' self-efficacy

| Statements | Mean | S.D. |
|---|---|---|
| 1. I have got a special ability for learning English. | 2.40** | .877 |
| 2. I believe I have the power to pass the final exam | 3.37 | .757 |
| 3. I think that some day I will read English text very well. | 3.16 | .843 |
| 4. I am sure I can solve any problems I face in learning English because I have got the power to do it. | 2.70 | .741 |
| 5. Personally, I am satisfied with my current level of English proficiency. | 1.67** | .747 |
| 6. I am definitely sure that I can improve my English by trying more. | 4.12* | .625 |
| 7. If I do not do well in this class, it is only because I do not exert enough effort. | 4.00* | .845 |
| 8. Generally speaking, my self-confidence in English classes is high. | 2.47 | .735 |
| 9. Learning English is a very easy task. | 2.44** | .983 |
| 10. I try to study English to reach the highest level of ability in it. | 3.63* | .900 |
| Average | 2.996 | .791 |

Criteria for data analysis: 1 – 1.49 = Very low; 1.50 – 2.49 = Low; 2.50 – 3.49 = Average; 3.50 – 4.49 = High 4.50 – 5 = Very high

It was revealed from the above table that KU low proficiency graduate students indicated 'average' level of self-efficacy in learning English at the mean score of 2.996 or it can be claimed that this group of students had 'quite low' level of self-efficacy belief. However, they reported that they were not satisfied with their current level of English proficiency. They believed that they did not get a special ability for learning English and that learning English was not easy for them. It was also discovered that students were definitely sure that they could improve their English by trying more and that if they failed this English course, it was only because they did not invest enough effort.

**Table 2.** Factors influence students' English proficiency

| No. | Statement | Number selected by students (n=43) | % | Order of importance | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1st | 2nd | 3rd |
| 1 | Interest and attitude towards English | 39 | 90.70 | 8* | 5 | 7 |
| 2 | Teaching methodology | 35 | 81.40 | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| 3 | Effort and perseverance | 34 | 79.07 | 6* | 6 | 8 |
| 4 | Feeling the need to learn it | 32 | 74.43 | 4 | 3 | 8 |
| 5 | Feeling happy when doing in-class activities | 30 | 69.77 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| 6 | Self-effectiveness and responsibility | 28 | 65.12 | 13* | 10 | 6 |
| 7 | Materials and text books | 18 | 41.86 | 5 | 7 | 7 |
| 8 | Special talent for learning English | 8* | 18.60 | 5 | 6 | 8 |

To answer the second research question concerning the sources that are conduced to the perception of KU low proficiency graduate students toward their success or failure in learning English, students were required to select those factors on the second part of the questionnaire. The results shown in the table above indicated that the most influential component perceived by these students is the 'interest and attitude towards English' which earns 90.70% while 'teaching methodology', 'effort and perseverance', 'feeling need to learn it', 'Feeling happy when doing in-class activities', 'self-effectiveness and responsibility' are also highlighted. It is also evident from the table that a small number of respondents agreed that having 'special talent for learning English' is a factor supporting the language learning.

In addition to the above results, students were also requested to rank the eight factors in the previous section according to how important they judged them for their success or failure in EFL learning. 'Self-effectiveness and responsibility', 'interest and attitude towards English', and 'effort and perseverance' are perceived as potential factors that influence students' English learning ability in this context while 'teaching methodology' and 'Feeling happy when doing in-class activities' seem to be the least two important factors that affect the ability in learning the language.

## 6. Discussion

This study investigated the level of self-efficacy beliefs of EFL low proficiency KU graduate students' and the sources that

conduced to their success or failure in learning English. The findings indicated that KU low proficiency graduate students indicated 'quite low' self-efficacy level in learning English. They perceived that 'self-effectiveness and responsibility', 'interest and attitude towards English', and 'effort and perseverance' are the main sources that contributed to English language learning performance whereas 'teaching methodology' and 'feeling happy when doing in-class activities' are seen as not very important. The low proficiency of KU graduate students in learning English as a foreign language could be partly explained by their self-efficacy beliefs. As stated by Mikulecky and Huang (1996), self-efficacy play a significant role in predicting human performance in many areas and by Bandura (1993), strong personal efficacy beliefs foster motivation and performance. In contrast, individuals with low self-efficacy lack confidence and hesitate to take necessary and decisive decisions and actions which cause negative consequences in learning.

## 7. Contextual Variables and Sources of Self-Efficacy

In terms of factors that influence the development of self-efficacy beliefs and aspirations in learning English among KU low proficiency graduate students are the interactions between the four sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), social, economic and educational factors (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Put it another way, both internal and external factors such as learners' interest, successful experiences, peers' successful performance, knowledge in the content area, positive feedback from others, social and cultural context of English all affect the development of learners' self-efficacy beliefs.

The low proficiency in English among this group of students may derive from 'quite low' self-efficacy level which may be constructed by the unsuccessful experiences while they were in their elementary and secondary schools. Findings from the interview revealed that many students had a negative attitude in learning English. Although the majority of students (46.5%) reported that they had studied English for 15-19 years, they were incompetent in English. As communicative theory for language learning and teaching has been promoted for at least thirty years, language learning methodology in Thailand has also been changed into teaching English for communication. However, a large number of schools in the remote areas lack teachers majoring in teaching English to conduct more effective English lessons. Teaching grammar and translating texts into Thai are still the two popular methods of teaching nowadays. With the traditional approach in teaching English as well as the teachers' inability, students may derive the negative attitude and experience in learning English at their early age when they learnt English. It is also revealed from the interview that several students were not satisfied with the lessons in their elementary and secondary schools. They felt uneasy when they were punished by the teachers if they were unable to spell the words correctly or if they were unable to answer the teachers' questions. The negative feedbacks could be a potential factor that causes low self-efficacy in this group of students.

## 8. Conclusion

By demonstrating quite low English self-efficacy level in KU low proficiency graduate students and the sources that contribute to their low proficiency in English, more studies to provide further evidence to clarify the causes of such a problem should be carried out in order to understand the circumstances that contribute to the lack of successfulness in learning English among low proficiency students in Thailand.

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