

## Self-Efficacy Theory and Beyond: Japanese College EFL Learners

Yuichi Todaka

Miyazaki Municipal University  
E-mail: todaka@miyazaki-mu.ac.jp

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### Abstract

*The objectives of this study are twofold: (1) to examine if instruction focusing on sources of self-efficacy and meta-cognitive strategies can help Japanese EFL freshmen improve their English listening skills and enhance their self-efficacy with respect to their English listening skills; and (2) to investigate if the enhancement of self-efficacy level can lead to autonomous learning. The results of our study indicate that self-efficacy beliefs about our subjects' English listening skills and their actual listening skills are significantly related; however, Japanese college freshmen need to establish concrete and specific English study reasons in order for their self-efficacy beliefs to assist in autonomous learning.*

**Keywords:** self-efficacy, English study reasons

### 1. Introduction

The affective domain such as self-esteem (Malinowski, 1923, cited in Brown, 2007), anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; Oxford, 1999; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001), motivation (Dornyei, 2005; Dornyei & Skehan, 2003; Gardner & Lambert, 1972), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 2000; Cotterall, 1999; Chen and Deborah, 2007, cited in Rahimi and Abedini, 2009) has been focused upon in the realm of ESL/EFL teaching to understand inter-learner variability in L2 acquisition.

Kormos and Csizer (2008), for instance, examined the model of the L2 motivational self-system as proposed by Dornyei (2005) and Csizer and Dornyei (2005). This model consists of (1) Ideal L2 Self, (2) Ought-to L2 Self, and (3) L2 Learning Experience. Kormos and Csizer (2008), based upon their findings, suggest that teachers, materials, and activities are instrumental in shaping attitudes to learning, which leads L2 learners to shape their Ideal L2 Self-images.

A questionnaire assessing Japanese EFL learners' concept of their Ideal L2 Self and motivated learning behavior based on Kormos and Csizer' (2008) study was thus formulated and administered to 55 college EFL students in Todaka's (2009) study. It was found that the participants consider themselves to be able to become competent L2 learners because they enjoy learning English, and because they understand utilitarian benefits associated with being able to speak English. However, they indicated that *they had experienced varying degrees of anxiety in L2 communication*, and that *they do not have confidence in their linguistic abilities*. Furthermore, they also indicated that *they did not consider themselves to be diligent language learners*.

Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) investigated the external forces that reduce Japanese high school students' motivation to study English, and they reported that (1) course books, (2) inadequate school facilities, (3) test scores, (4) non-communication methods, and (5) teachers' competence and teaching styles were found to be demotivating factors for Japanese high school students. Among the factors extracted, they reported that non-communicative methods, which focus on grammar and preparation for college entrance examinations, had been perceived to be demotivating by many participants. As indicated, *there exists tremendous lack in their motivation and in their self-efficacy beliefs to carry out a task*. This is where self-efficacy theory comes in.

Self-efficacy theory describes that "people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions" (Bandura, 1997, p. vii) are the most important to determine how people choose to engage in and how much efforts people make when faced with challenges (Maddux, 2002). Thus, Self-efficacy is not perceived skill nor simply predictions about behavior, and an intention to attain a particular goal because self-efficacy is what I believe I can do with my skills under certain conditions (Maddux, 2002). Since Bandura (1977) proposed self-efficacy theory, many articles in various fields such as psychology, sociology, kinesiology, and medicine have been published.

Bandura (1977) outlined the four sources of self-efficacy: (1) performance outcomes; (2) vicarious experiences; (3) verbal persuasion; and (4) physiological feedback. Performance outcomes denote that our positive or negative experiences can influence our ability to perform a given task. Vicarious experiences are referred to as the influence of

someone else's success or failure on one's high or low self-efficacy. Verbal persuasion means that our self-efficacy is affected by what others say to us about what they believe we can do or not. Finally, physiological feedback is described as comfortable physiological and emotional sensations that are likely to lead one to have high self-efficacy in a given situation.

Raofi et al (2013: 63-65) reviewed 32 articles published between 2003 and 2012 with regard to the effectiveness of self-efficacy theory in the ESL/EFL contexts, so that we describe the findings of the studies reviewed.

Among the 32 articles reviewed, they report that 12 articles examined the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and ESL/EFL performance based on either course grades (Mahyuddin et al., 2006; Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2007; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008) or proficiency in reading (Mills, Pajares & Herron, 2006; Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2007), listening (Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2006; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Tilfarlioglu & Cifici, 2011). They found that the findings of these studies indicated a positive relationship between self-efficacy and performance, which are in line with the findings in other research domains such as math and education in general (Dennissen et al., 2007; Multon et al., 1991; Pajares, 1996).

Furthermore, 7 articles were found that examine the relationship between self-efficacy and anxiety (Mills, Pajares & Herron, 2006; Erkan & Saban, 2011; Anyadubalu, 2010; Cubukcu, 2008) and the relationship between self-efficacy and attributions (Hsieh & Kang, 2010; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Graham, 2006). The findings of these studies indicate a significant negative relationship between one's self-efficacy level and ESL/EFL performance. In other words, students with high self-efficacy attribute their failure to effort, whereas low-level self-efficacy students attribute their failure to low ability.

Raofi et al (2013) also reports the findings of studies focusing on factors that influence the enhancement of self-efficacy beliefs, though the number of those studies are limited. Cakir and Alici (2009) find past successful experiences and social persuasions to be influential factors affecting learners' self-efficacy. Wang & Pape (2007) reported that the factors such as past experience, interest, attitudes toward English language, social persuasion, task difficulty, and social and cultural setting to be important for determining learners' self-efficacy level.

As shown above, many studies investigated relationships between self-efficacy level and performance, anxiety, attributions, and influential factors. However, Raofi et al (2013) indicates that all the studies except one examine short-term influences on self-efficacy, and that studies investigating long-term effects on self-study need to be conducted.

The objectives of the present study are therefore twofold: (1) to examine if instruction focusing on the sources of self-efficacy and meta-cognitive strategies can help Japanese EFL learners improve their English listening skill and enhance their self-efficacy with respect to their English listening skill; and (2) to investigate if the enhancement of self-efficacy level can lead to autonomous learning.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Subjects/study periods

101 students at Miyazaki Municipal University participated in our 2012 project. All the freshmen at Miyazaki Municipal University were divided into groups of 25 students in accordance with their EIKEN (Test in Practical English Proficiency) and EPEP (Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading) test results. Students whose scores were among the bottom 25 percent are considered introductory students while those among the top 25 percent are recognized as advanced students; the remaining 100 students are considered intermediate. The introductory students and advanced students were the participants of this research. In 2012, the number of students enrolled in the introductory CALL class was 48, while that in the advanced CALL class was 53. 12 sessions for this project were conducted once a week from April through July in 2012. Each session lasted 90 minutes.

### 2.2 Instruction

We focused on the four sources of self-efficacy that Bandura (1977) proposes. We made sure that each student could gain confidence by having him/her experience an achievement in each class period. In other words, various strategies were employed to ascertain that all the students could understand listening materials they studied in each class period so that the student could gain confidence in their capabilities for English listening skill. Furthermore, 3 teaching assistants, who were juniors at the same university, participated in class to function as role models for the participants. The instructor verbally persuaded each student in a positive way to believe in their capabilities and to engage in each listening activity. Finally, the instructor made sure to provide the participants with comfortable physiological and

emotional sensations to help them have high self-efficacy in class.

In addition, we gave lectures on the significance of meta-cognitive strategies (e.g., O'Malley et al., 1985a,b, cited in Brown, 2007), which help L2 learners raise their awareness of the learning process (Cohen, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 2002, cited in Nakatani, 2005) and ideal L2 self-image since Bandura (1986) suggests that students need to be taught about the cognitive and be provided with tools necessary to learn. Therefore, various exercises specifically targeting the development of necessary English communicative skills were employed (Todaka, 2009), and advice on various learning strategies for individual student needs was given (Todaka, 2009). Since Backman and Palmer (1996) also propose the importance of goal-setting, assessment, and planning, we developed a self-assessment checklist (1) to help students fully comprehend what phonetic features they need to understand to improve their English communicative skills and (2) to provide students with concrete, pertinent study items so that students will be able to plan current and future English study in accordance to their checklists.

Lectures on important English segmental and suprasegmental features (e.g., Vance, 1987; Holmberg, E. B., Hillman, R. E., & Perkell, J. S., 1988; and Todaka, 1995) were also given, and shadowing assignments using DVD movies, and evaluation of progress, based upon the self-assessment checklist criteria, were provided.

### 2.3 Assessment Tools

Student improvements of English skills were evaluated utilizing the results of EIKEN (Test in Practical English Proficiency) and of TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). The EIKEN was administered twice: (1) during the freshmen' orientation periods in April, 2012; and (2) during the final examination week in February in 2013. In addition, listening portions of two different TOEIC tests were administered during the onset and the outset of the spring semester in 2012. In addition, four<sup>1</sup> students (2 introductory and 2 advanced) were interviewed in April, 2013.

## 3. Results

First, the results of our checklist criteria were examined. 61 questions were asked of 101 students and they were told to respond to each question using 4-point Likert scale (4 equals strongly agree) indicating to what extent of agreement or disagreement with checklist criteria. Based upon the results, the scores of all the checklist criteria improved at a 99 percent confidence level, which in turn indicates a significant improvement in understanding of text materials.

Next, we examined the TOEIC test scores taken at the outset and at the end of the training sessions. 101 students (i.e., 48 introductory level students and 53 advanced students) took both the pre-and post TOEIC tests. Based upon an ANOVA analysis, the difference in scores between the pre-and the post TOEIC tests was found to be significant at the 95% confidence level for the introductory level students ( $p < .011$ ,  $F = 6.9$ ) and at the 99% confidence level ( $p < .0001$ ,  $F = 19.34$ ) for the advanced students.

Next, we examined student class evaluation sheets for both groups. Out of 6 questions, three questions were asked to examine their self-efficacy beliefs: (1) Do you now have confidence in your ability to improve your English listening skills?; (2) Do you think you have now understood appropriate ways to improve your English listening skills?; and (3) Do you think the teaching methods employed in this class help enhance your self-efficacy beliefs?.

With respect to the introductory level students, 46 students responded to the 6-point scale questionnaire. The mean obtained for each question was 5.48 for question (1), 5.61 for question (2), and 5.61 for question (3). The mean for each question in the case of the 53 advanced students was 5.64 for question (1), 5.84 for question (2), and 5.71 for question (3).

Next, we examined the listening section (30 questions) of the EIKEN tests taken during April in 2012 and January in 2013. 49 out of 53 advanced students took both tests, and non-significant result was found ( $p < .96$ ,  $F = .002$ ). 31 out of 48 introductory students took both tests, and non-significant result was also found ( $p < .08$ ,  $F = .06$ ). Thus, the students in both groups made significant improvements by the end of the spring semester, but during the academic year (i.e., from April, 2012 to January, 2013) as a whole, their listening scores did not improve or worsened.

## 4. Discussion

Our subjects' English listening skills show improvement during the experimental period (i.e., spring semester, 2012) and

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<sup>1</sup> Twelve students were asked to participate in the interview sessions; however, only four students came to the sessions.

our students had high self-efficacy beliefs in their English listening skills at the end of the semester. Nonetheless, non-significant results were found in their listening skills assessed in January in 2013 when compared with their listening skills in April in 2012.

Bandura (1977:202) states that

*...lasting changes in self-efficacy and behavior can best be achieved by participant methods using powerful induction procedures initially to develop capabilities, then removing external aids to verify personal efficacy, then finally using self-directed mastery to strengthen and generalize expectations of personal efficacy (p. 202).*

To investigate the causes of non-significant improvements on their listening skills throughout the academic year, the interview sessions with four students (two introductory and two advanced students), who either improved or worsened their English listening scores during the first academic year, were conducted in April in 2013. Each student was asked about (1) English study background, (2) English experiences and self-efficacy, and (3) English learning environment, and each session lasted 20 minutes.

First, those two advanced students had high self-efficacy about their English listening skills, while the other two introductory level students did not like English and had low self-efficacy about their English listening skills when they were in high school. Thus, their listening test scores at the beginning of the spring semester reflect on their level of self-efficacy. In other words, the advanced students who had high self-efficacy scored much higher on the EIKEN and the TOEIC listening tests taken in April in 2012. However, the low self-efficacy introductory level students were able to have high self-efficacy about their English listening skills during the semester, which in turn improved their listening scores taken in July, 2012. Thus, the findings of the present study made at the end of the semester are in line with those of the previous studies, mentioned earlier.

However, one of the introductory students whose listening skill improved differed from the other introductory student whose listening scores worsened throughout the academic year in that she had had a specific reason to study English. In other words, even though both continued their English listening study during the fall semester in 2012, the student who improved her listening skills was able to sustain relatively high self-efficacy throughout the academic year because she had a concrete and specific reason why she wants to improve their English listening skill. On the other hand, the other student, who did not have a specific reason to study English, attributed her failure to uncontrollable factors such as learning environment.

With respect to the two advanced students, the student who improved her listening skills indeed had a concrete reason why she wants to improve her skills, whereas the other student did not. However, the advanced student who worsened his listening test scores mentioned that he would make effort to improve his listening skills during the sophomore year because he attributed his failure to lack of effort, and that he still has high self-efficacy.

The above findings reconfirm the findings of the previous studies (i.e., Hsieh and Schallert, 2008; Hsieh and Kang, 2010 cited in Raofi et al, 2012) in that high self-efficacy learners attribute their failure to lack of effort while low self-efficacy learners attribute their failure to uncontrollable factors. However, it is important to note that the two students who improved their scores have a concrete and specific reason or objective of their English study when compared with the other two students. Self-efficacy beliefs are important as found in the previous studies because the advanced student who worsened his listening score still believes in his capabilities to improve his English skills. Nonetheless, it is hypothesized that the importance of concrete and specific study reasons have to be recognized by low self-efficacy Japanese college EFL freshmen to appreciate the positive effects of self-efficacy beliefs on their English listening skills. In addition, it takes more than a semester for most Japanese college freshmen to have high self-efficacy beliefs about their listening skills because of years of entrance examination oriented teaching in secondary school caused most Japanese college freshmen to dislike English, which in turn triggered low self-efficacy beliefs about their English skills.

It is important to establish learning goals and Ideal L2 Self, as mentioned earlier, however, it is extremely difficult for college freshmen to even think about their future selves, and most of them have lost their primary reason to study English, as their English study objective in high school was to pass college entrance examinations. Thus, it seems important to help Japanese college freshmen to *rethink* their specific reasons for English study along with developing high self-efficacy beliefs about their English listening skills. In other words, instructors need to help Japanese college freshmen establish specific reasons to study English, and then they help their students establish high self-efficacy beliefs about their English listening skills by focusing on the four sources of self-efficacy beliefs, which in turn helps students shape positive learning behavior. With positive learning behavior, instructors equip their students with necessary learning strategies and meta-cognitive skills so that students have a clear vision of how to improve their English skills until concrete ideal selves can be formed.

## 5. Conclusion and Limitations

The objectives of the present study were twofold: (1) to examine if instruction focusing on the sources of self-efficacy and meta-cognitive strategies can help Japanese EFL learners improve their English listening skills and enhance their self-efficacy with respect to their English listening skills; and (2) to investigate if the enhancement of self-efficacy level can lead to autonomous learning.

The results of our study during the experimental period confirm the findings of the previous studies, mentioned earlier. However, the results of our follow-up study indicate that our participants' English listening skills either stayed the same or worsened during the academic year in 2012. Our qualitative analysis with four participants highlights the significance of having concrete reasons for Japanese college freshmen in order for the positive effects of self-efficacy beliefs on their listening skills to last to be autonomous EFL learners.

There are, however, several limitations of the present study that need to be mentioned. First, self-efficacy questionnaires were not conducted at the beginning of the semester and at the end of January. Thus, it is still unknown as to how the participants' self-efficacy beliefs about listening skill have changed. Second, the number of participants interviewed is too small to understand the significance of objective setting for Japanese college EFL freshmen. Third, two different test results (i.e., EIKEN and TOEIC) were utilized to assess English listening improvements so that the exact nature of improvements cannot be accounted for. Nonetheless, we hope that the present study can serve as a foundation on which further studies of self-efficacy beliefs and Japanese college freshmen's English listening skills are based.

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