

Identifying Sources of English-Speaking Self-Efficacy among Vietnamese EFL University Learners

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Abstract

Current research shows that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in academic success. Therefore, understanding how learners perceive their self-efficacy can lead to more positive and realistic views on learning foreign languages, especially in improving English-speaking skills. This study focuses on identifying the sources of self-efficacy in English speaking among 203 Vietnamese university students and examining its connection with their speaking performance. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire for quantitative analysis and a speaking test to assess speaking skills. The results reveal that the students generally had strong self-efficacy in English speaking, with emotional and physical experiences being the main contributors to their self-efficacy. Furthermore, a positive correlation was found between their self-efficacy in speaking English and their actual speaking performance. These findings significantly illuminate how self-efficacy influences speaking performance in the context of language learning.

Keywords: self-efficacy, English-speaking, speaking achievement, Vietnamese EFL learners

Introduction

Self-efficacy beliefs, which are an individual's evaluation of their abilities to learn or perform tasks, are key factors that affect human functioning (Schunk & Pajares, 2010). These beliefs are fundamental to human motivation, well-being, and personal achievement (Waddington, 2023). Empirical research has demonstrated that self-efficacy strongly predicts academic performance (Peterson & Arnn, 2004). Therefore, more emphasis should be placed on learners' self-efficacy in all facets of learning and growth within academic settings. Notably, identifying self-efficacy beliefs is a crucial initial step in cultivating more optimistic and realistic attitudes towards foreign language learning, particularly English-speaking abilities. Mastering the ability to produce fluent speech in English is essential for effective communication. However, L2 learners have to deal with a wide array of variables, from linguistic components to psychological barriers. Speaking English often causes apprehension and anxiety among L2 speakers due to performance-based features (Zheng & Cheng, 2018). In this context, English-speaking self-efficacy plays a vital role in motivating speakers and giving them confidence to accomplish oral tasks.

A considerable amount of research has been dedicated to exploring the level of self-efficacy in English-speaking across diverse settings (Alimunddin et al., 2020; Millatasari, 2021; Truong & Wang, 2019; Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). These investigations consistently demonstrate a moderate level of English-speaking self-efficacy among L2 learners. However, within this body of literature, there exists a notable inconsistency in pinpointing the predominant source of self-efficacy, suggesting a need for further research-based evidence in this domain. What is more, while existing studies have established a positive correlation between English self-efficacy and speaking achievement (Arlinda, 2022; Desmaliza & Septiani, 2018; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2023; Kitikanan & Sasimonton, 2017; Ramassari, 2017), this relationship warrants validation within the specific context of Vietnam.

Consequently, the present study endeavors to address these gaps in the literature. It seeks to elucidate the primary sources of English-speaking self-efficacy beliefs among Vietnamese university students enrolled in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs. Additionally, it aims to examine the extent to which these students' self-efficacy beliefs correlate with their English-speaking achievement. By doing so, this research aims to contribute a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping English-speaking self-efficacy among Vietnamese EFL learners, thereby enriching the existing scholarly discourse on language learning and pedagogy.

In pursuit of these objectives, the current study is guided by two overarching research questions:

1. What are the predominant sources underpinning English-speaking self-efficacy beliefs among Vietnamese EFL university students?
2. To what degree do these students' self-efficacy beliefs influence their English-speaking proficiency and achievement?

Literature review

Self-Efficacy Beliefs

From the social cognitive theory perspective (Bandura, 1999), “self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). According to this view, such belief is important because it can affect people’s decision-making, their effort made in given endeavors, their perseverance in the face of difficulties, their resilience to adverse situations, the level of stress they experience, and the level of accomplishments they achieve. Specifically, in academic contexts, students with a high sense of efficacy may undertake challenging assigned tasks more readily than less efficacious students. The reason is that high perceived self-efficacy involves a remarkable investment of cognitive effort and superior learning. Moreover, this belief also plays a significant role in predicting various forms of motivation in learning (Schunk, 1991; Zimmerman, 2000). In other words, self-efficacy is a key construct that affects motivation and achievement.

Self-efficacy beliefs are formed based on the four primary sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and affective states (Bandura, 1999; Gallagher, 2012; Schunk & Pajares, 2010). Mastery experience or the interpreted outcome of one's prior performances is the indicator of his/her capability of completing a specific activity. Simply put, results perceived as triumphant enhance self-efficacy; those interpreted as fiascos

diminish it. In addition to reflecting upon their own actions, students also shape their self-efficacy by observing models who are their counterparts or associates. By witnessing their peers achieve success, students are inspired to follow suit with a belief that if others can do it, they can, too. These positive vicarious experiences guide and motivate students' development, especially for those who lack familiarity with the specified tasks. Moreover, students can also increase their self-efficacy when receiving encouragement and appraisals, which are forms of verbal persuasion. The exposure to these positive verbal judgments empowers students' beliefs in their capabilities in task accomplishments. The last source of self-efficacy beliefs stems from physiological and affective states. These somatic and emotional cues, which arouse stress and anxiety, can negatively affect students' thoughts and actions, namely, gauging their confidence and triggering their apprehension.

English-Speaking Self-Efficacy

Speaking, as a fundamental aspect of social interaction, transcends linguistic boundaries and holds significance irrespective of one's proficiency in the first or second language (Luoma, 2009). Bygate (1987) delineates speaking skills as a combination of motor-perceptive and interactional skills. The former encompasses “perceiving, recalling, and articulating in the correct order sound and structures of the language”, while the latter involves “making decisions about communication, such as what to say, how to say it, and whether to develop it, in accordance with one’s intentions” (Bygate, 1987, p.6). Notably, one characteristic of speaking is the temporal constraint under which it often occurs, which can significantly impact speakers' fluency and coherence under pressure.

Speaking performance is potentially affected by a myriad of factors, including linguistic factors such as lexical knowledge (Koizumi, 2013), pronunciation accuracy (Levis, 2018), and grammatical competence (Hinkel, 2018). Moreover, psychological factors such as motivation levels (Wu, 2022), anxiety (Zheng & Cheng, 2018), and situational variables like time pressure exert a notable influence (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011).

In this regard, English-speaking self-efficacy is about how students judge their capabilities to produce speech to attain a designated speaking objective. Specifically, High levels of self-efficacy empower students to engage confidently in challenging oral tasks, invest greater effort in task completion, exhibit resilience in the face of obstacles, and effectively manage emotional barriers such as stress and anxiety when communicating in English (Zimmerman, 2000).

Previous Studies about English-Speaking Self-Efficacy

Research into self-efficacy beliefs has been conducted from different perspectives. While some researchers examined the impacts of instructional practices on English self-efficacy, such as intensive English training programs (Xu et al., 2022), collaborative authentic tasks (Karnchanachari, 2020), task-based language teaching (Quang et al., 2022), some attempted to validate the psychometric properties of a scale measuring English language self-efficacy in various settings including Thailand (Polrak et al., 2023), Vietnam (Kim et al., 2021), and China (Wang et al., 2014). In the English-speaking domain, several studies have been conducted to explore learners' self-efficacy beliefs. Alimunddin et al. (2020) investigated how self-efficacious Indonesian EFL students feel when speaking in the classroom context. Their

findings show that students are moderately self-efficacious in speaking English. Moreover, the fact that most of the students had low levels of self-efficacy when performing oral tasks was ascribed to their somatic and emotional states, including feelings of apprehension, unease, and diminished self-assurance. In the same vein, Millatasari's research (2021) results discovered a moderate level of self-efficacy in speaking English among 36 university students. However, the dominant source of self-efficacy was found to be vicarious experience, not mastery experience or verbal persuasion.

Meanwhile, Zhang and Ardasheva (2019) explored the degree to which four sources of self-efficacy predict English Public speaking self-efficacy among 263 EFL Chinese college students. An English public speaking self-efficacy scale and sources of English public speaking self-efficacy scale were administered to collect the data. Enactive mastery experience was found to play a significant role in how EFL learners perceive English public speaking self-efficacy, followed by verbal persuasion and vicarious experience. The physiological and affective state was identified as a non-significant contributor to English public speaking self-efficacy, which was explained by the fact that these students were willing and motivated to join the speaking course and had developed a repertoire of learning strategies thanks to their prior experiences in English public speaking. In another research, Zhang et al. (2020) employed a mixed-method approach to investigate the development of self-efficacy related to English public speaking performance among 82 EFL students in China. This time, the outcome was different. They discovered that the most influential factor in forming English public speaking self-efficacy was feedback from the teachers or verbal persuasion sources. However, students' performance success was still decided mainly by their speaking performance experiences. In Vietnam, Truong and Wang (2019) investigated the self-efficacy perspectives of 767 Vietnamese first-year college students concerning their English language ability and prior learning experience. Learners reported a medium level of self-efficacy. The findings indicated that master experience is a dominant source of self-efficacy beliefs. The inconsistency among these findings in identifying the main source of self-efficacy beliefs indicates the need for more research-based evidence, especially in the Vietnamese context, where research into English-speaking self-efficacy has received little attention.

The correlation between self-efficacy and success in English-speaking

Previous research has consistently shown a favorable connection between English self-efficacy and speaking achievement. For instance, Ramasari (2017) conducted a study focusing on students' self-efficacy in professional speaking contexts, revealing a positive link between self-efficacy levels and speaking achievements. Similarly, investigations by Desmaliza and Septiani (2018) and Arlinda (2022) among seventh-grade students also underscored the connection between the two variables. Notably, the former study reported a particularly robust correlation between self-efficacy and speaking achievement.

In the same vein, Kitikanan and Sasimonton, (2017) investigated the levels of English self-efficacy of the L2 Thai learners and its relationship with various language skills. Thirty-two fourth-year English major students joined the study. Self-efficacy in each aspect of language skills was found to be relatively high and positively correlated with overall English learning achievement. Yet, no correlation was identified between self-efficacy and English learning

achievement. Conversely, recent research by Gedamu and Gezahegn (2023) confirmed a positive and significant moderate correlation between learners' attitudes to and self-efficacy beliefs of oral presentation.

While existing studies have emphasized the positive relationship between English-speaking achievement and self-efficacy, uncertainties persist regarding the applicability of these findings to Vietnamese learners. Therefore, the current study was undertaken to address this gap in the literature and provide valuable insights into the dynamics of self-efficacy and speaking achievement among Vietnamese learners.

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The target population for this study comprised second-year non-English major students attending a private university in Vietnam as a result of convenience sampling. Specifically, they were enrolled in a general English course at level 4. As per the university's curriculum, this indicates that they had already completed levels 1, 2, and 3 of the English courses, with three more levels (5, 6, and 7) remaining for them to undertake. These courses provide students with comprehensive linguistic knowledge covering all four language skills.

Speaking skills are taught and evaluated by predominantly English native-speaking foreign language teachers. Despite being exposed to conducive learning environments and opportunities to enhance their speaking abilities, the researchers noted a prevalent lack of confidence among the majority of students, coupled with difficulties in articulating their thoughts effectively. This observation prompted the researchers to delve into the students' speaking self-efficacy beliefs, recognizing them as pivotal factors influencing speaking performance.

Regarding the sample size, a total of 203 participants were included, comprising 62% females and 38% males, distributed across six randomly selected classes out of a pool of 200. The average age of the participants was 19 years old, and they represented various disciplines, including Management, Economy, Marketing, Banking, and Information Technology.

Design of the Study

The nature of this study is descriptive. The primary instrument utilized in this study was a questionnaire, chosen for its efficacy in gathering data on a large scale, a necessity for comprehensive research endeavors. The questionnaire employed in this study was adapted from the framework established by Zhang et al. (2020), who investigated self-efficacy concerning English public speaking performance. However, this study focused on a broader scope of speaking self-efficacy. Hence, certain questionnaire items were tailored to align with the specific objectives of the current research.

Comprising two principal sections, the questionnaire aimed to assess participants' speaking abilities across specific linguistic domains and to identify various sources contributing to their self-efficacy beliefs. These sources encompass mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and affective states. Respondents rated each item on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, reflecting degrees of agreement or disagreement, thereby

facilitating nuanced data collection. To mitigate potential language barriers, the questionnaire underwent translation into participants' native language.

To ascertain the questionnaire's validity and reliability, a pilot study was conducted among a subset of students before administering it to the designated sample, ensuring its appropriateness and effectiveness in assessing the intended constructs.

Additionally, a speaking test served as another crucial instrument, administered at the end of the course. This test, evaluated by native English teachers, assessed learners' speaking proficiency through two distinct components. Initially, pairs of students engaged in interactive dialogue based on prescribed scenarios, followed by individual questioning pertaining to the discussed content. Each speaking interaction spanned approximately 7 to 10 minutes. Evaluation criteria for this test were adapted from established standards, such as those found in the IELTS test, covering aspects including fluency, lexical range, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation proficiency.

Data collection & analysis

Upon obtaining authorization from the university administration to access the target population, the researcher adopted a randomized selection process, choosing six classes from the pool of eligible participants. Subsequently, communication was initiated with the respective instructors in charge of these classes. Following this, the survey instrument was disseminated to the identified students utilizing the Google Forms platform, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives among the participants.

Upon completion of the course, the speaking test scores of the enrolled students were systematically compiled. Subsequently, all acquired data underwent analysis utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics were computed for each category and item to provide a comprehensive dataset overview. Concurrently, the Pearson correlation test was conducted to ascertain the nature and strength of the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and English-speaking achievement. This rigorous analytical approach aimed to elucidate the underlying dynamics governing the observed phenomena within the context of English-speaking proficiency.

Results/Findings

The major source of English-speaking self-efficacy beliefs among Vietnamese EFL students

The descriptive statistics, displayed in Table 1, show that the dominant source of English-speaking self-efficacy among the participants was decided by the physiological and affective states of the speakers ($M=3.5$, $SD=1.01$), followed by their vicarious experience ($M= 3.4$, $SD=.78$). The other sources, verbal persuasion, and mastery experience were reported to be less influential with $M=3.1$, $SD=.88$ and $M=3.0$, $SD=.88$, respectively. Besides, only a relatively medium level of self-efficacy in speaking English was specified among these Vietnamese learners.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of items regarding speaking self-efficacy (N=203)

Categories	Mean	Std. Deviation
Speaking self-efficacy	2.8	.79
Mastery experience source	3.0	.88
Vicarious experience source	3.4	.78
Verbal persuasion source	3.1	.88
Affective state source	3.5	1.01

Table 2

The Correlation Matrix of Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Speaking scores	1					
2. Speaking Self-efficacy beliefs	.131	1				
3. Master experience source	.143*	.774**	1			
4. Vicarious experience source	.096	.409**	.488**	1		
5. Verbal persuasion source	.083	.745**	.720**	.610**	1	
6. Affective state source	.033	.095	.021	.385**	.071	1

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Relationship between students' self-efficacy beliefs and their English-speaking achievement

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to ascertain the association between students' self-perceived efficacy in English speaking and their performance in speaking tasks. Table 2 illustrates the correlation matrix of related variables. Data demonstrates that only a positive association was detected between the two components ($r=.131$). Speaking achievement was identified to be connected to all sources of self-efficacy but was only significant in the case of speakers' experience in accomplishing the speaking tasks. Furthermore, a strong link was established between speaking self-efficacy and all sources of self-efficacy ($r=.774$, $r=.409$, $r=.745$) except the physiological and affective states, which only had a positive correlation ($r=.095$).

Discussion

The results of this investigation indicated that the students exhibit a moderate level of self-efficacy in English oral communication. This finding aligns with previous studies (e.g., Almunddin et al., 2020; Millatasari, 2021), demonstrating that learners also reported their perceived self-efficacy at a medium level. In the case of Vietnamese learners, Truong and Wang (2019) also discovered that the level of self-efficacy in learning English is moderate. It can be seen that most Vietnamese students have low confidence not only in learning English but also in speaking English. Truong and Wang (2019) explained that it was the embedded culture in daily lives and in teaching practices to which these learners were exposed to. Another possibility is that the opportunities for English-speaking interactions are scarce. Lack of practice in communication may raise the level of anxiety in producing speech even in the native language, not to mention in a foreign language.

Notably, the current study also uncovers that the students' self-efficacy is influenced primarily by the source of physiological and affective states, followed by vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and mastery experience. This outcome is contrary to those of prior studies that pinpointed the prevailing factor contributing significantly to self-efficacy: mastery experience (Zhang & Ardashaeva, 2019), teacher feedback (Zhang et al., 2020), and vicarious experience (Millatasari, 2021). A possible interpretation of the differences is that the cradle for nurturing self-efficacy may stem from the same sources that were established by earlier researchers (Bandura, 1999; Gallagher, 2012; Schunk & Pajares, 2010). However, the decisive factors may vary depending on the learners. This means that their differences with a focus on experience have a part to play in how the students perceive their sense of self-efficacy. These differences may include their educational background, their individual upbringing, environmental conditions, linguistic knowledge, etc. All these elements are fundamental and contribute to the formation of self-efficacy in learners who speak English.

Another finding is that English-speaking self-efficacy is positively connected to speaking achievement and all sources of self-efficacy. The result supports evidence from earlier investigations (e.g., Arlinda, 2022; Ramasari, 2017). Despite the differences in terms of context, a positive association between self-efficacy levels and speaking achievements was also identified. However, the level of correlation in this research is not significant, as was observed by Desmaliza and Septiani (2018). The discrepancy in the observed correlation between the two components might be explained in two ways. First, speaking English fluently tends to be performance-based because sometimes it is affected by many factors uncontrolled by the speakers. Therefore, an accurate measurement of the level of self-efficacy that can apply to a large population is relatively unattainable. The second problem may have something to do with the instrument utilized in each research for evaluating speaking abilities. The diversity of speaking tests may have some influence on the trustworthiness and credibility of the outcomes.

In sum, the outcome of this study still contributes significantly to the related literature in the context of Vietnamese self-efficacy beliefs. However, the generalisability of these findings is restricted by specific limitations. First, the relatively modest sample size of the current study precludes an exhaustive exploration of this relationship. Second, the study only focuses on examining the students' perceptions of speaking self-efficacy and its relationship with speaking performance. Empirical research from experimental design may provide more robust evidence for the impacts of self-efficacy on the oral tasks of the students.

Conclusions

Overall, the study attempts to delve into the primary determinants fostering self-efficacy among Vietnamese students in their English-speaking endeavors. Additionally, it seeks to establish a coherent understanding of the relationship between English-speaking self-efficacy and actual speaking achievement within the context of EFL university learners. The outcomes of this investigation hold significance across various dimensions.

First and foremost, the revelation of a moderate level of English-speaking self-efficacy among Vietnamese learners underscores the imperative for an augmented emphasis on speaking

activities within English courses. In the contemporary landscape, the proliferation of internet technologies has democratized access to global interactions, presenting learners with ample opportunities for linguistic practice. Nevertheless, the onus ultimately falls upon learners to actively engage in these opportunities. Hence, educators are encouraged to catalyze student motivation by fostering an environment that nurtures speaking proficiency through encouraging participation in diverse speaking contexts.

Secondly, the identification of physical and emotional conditions as the predominant sources of self-efficacy among Vietnamese learners underscores the necessity for tailored pedagogical approaches. Specifically, language teaching practices, particularly in speaking proficiency, should pivot towards addressing these intrinsic challenges. Implementing remedial activities targeting these specific areas can ameliorate students' confidence barriers. Furthermore, diversification of self-efficacy sources beyond physiological and affective domains should be emphasized, with deliberate efforts directed towards enhancing students' belief in their ability to succeed. This can be achieved through the provision of tasks that actively engage students in practicing speaking skills alongside recognition and celebration of exemplary performances, thereby fostering a culture of inspiration and emulation among learners.

Lastly, the discernment of a favorable connection between English-speaking self-efficacy and speaking achievement underscores the multifaceted nature of proficiency attainment. While linguistic knowledge undoubtedly forms the bedrock of competence, the significance of self-efficacy as a complementary factor cannot be overstated. Future research endeavors are encouraged to replicate these results by expanding the sample sizes to provide enhanced validation and elucidation of the intricate interplay between self-efficacy and speaking success in English language acquisition contexts.

Given the significant contributions mentioned above, some teaching strategies in speaking can be employed to enhance English-speaking confidence among Vietnamese learners, particularly in the context of Vietnam.

Regular speaking exercises should be woven into the curriculum, incorporating role-plays, debates, and group discussions that align with students' interests, thereby making the learning process more engaging. It's essential to create a classroom atmosphere that's both safe and inviting to alleviate the anxiety that typically accompanies speaking activities. This may involve rearranging the classroom to facilitate open discussion and actively acknowledging students' efforts and progress to foster confidence and reduce the affective barriers to language learning.

Instruction must be tailored to meet the diverse needs of the learners. This could involve adjusting the difficulty of speaking tasks or employing scaffolding techniques to incrementally increase task complexity. Incorporating technology—like language learning applications or recording devices—provides students the opportunity to practice speaking and conduct self-assessments in a more relaxed environment outside the classroom, thus supporting continuous learning and self-evaluation.

Moreover, students should be encouraged to engage in self-reflection regarding their successes in speaking tasks, helping them recognize and reinforce effective strategies. This reflective practice can be supported through a variety of authentic speaking assessments that not only

gauge proficiency but also embrace diverse learning styles and strengths. From presentations and interviews to storytelling exercises, these assessments can provide a richer picture of each student's abilities, thereby promoting a more individualized and effective path to language proficiency.

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