

# Exploring the English Self-Efficacy of L2 Graduate Students

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## Abstract

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capacity in performing a specific task, and many studies have shown that self-efficacy is associated with academic achievement. The objectives of this research were 1) to examine the level of English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students, and 2) to compare the difference in the English self-efficacy of graduate students with respect to genders and major subjects. The subjects in this research were 108 graduate students of Dhurakij Pundit University in Thailand. The research instrument included the Questionnaire of English Self-Efficacy (QESE) containing 32 five-point Likert scale items. The data were analyzed by using mean scores, standard deviation, a t-test, and Welch's ANOVA analysis. The findings showed that the average scores for the English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students were at a moderate level. In terms of English language skills, the average scores for self-efficacy in all skills were at a moderate level. Listening self-efficacy was at the highest rank, followed by reading self-efficacy, speaking self-efficacy, and writing self-efficacy. In addition, there was no statistically significant difference in the English self-efficacy in terms of gender or major subject. It is recommended to enhance the English self-efficacy of L2 students in order to develop their language learning.

**Keywords:** self-efficacy, L2, graduate students

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays English is widely used throughout the world. Learners studying at the master's degree are expected to use English as a major tool in quest for truth and to expand their knowledge in specific areas of interest. Advanced reading skills, such as reading academic textbooks and writing for academic purposes, including reports, research summaries, essays, and theses are essential skills for graduate students. However, a study conducted by Punpruk and Mahapoonthong (2007) revealed that Thai students face huge difficulties in using English at postgraduate levels. The study showed that students were not able to define their ideas, discuss conceptual frameworks, or propose their work by using English effectively. They also were limited in using English for communication purposes, demonstrating critical thinking skills, and writing research papers in relation to their own area of study. Even though students were aware of the importance of English, they were not confident in producing the target language and were not capable of using English to respond to various situations.

According to the English requirements of the Graduate Program at Dhurakij Pundit University, students are required to attain the minimum criteria on the TOEFL, the IELTS, or the DPU Graduate English Test. Those who reach the designated scores are interpreted as an intermediate user that is able to use English to study at a more advanced level. However, it turns out that some students, with limited competence in English, cannot pass the mentioned criteria, so it is necessary for them to take the English for Graduate Study course. In order to be successful in English language learning, learners require a number of variables and attributes, such as language competence, learning styles, learning strategies, confidence, and motivation (Dörnyei, 2005). Additionally, self-efficacy is one of the key elements that can be used to predict students' success or failure. Self-efficacy is significantly correlated with learning achievement (Schunk, 2003; Usher & Pajares, 2009), and many studies have demonstrated that low-achieving students also have a low level of self-efficacy, while high-achieving students, on the other hand, reflect a high degree of self-efficacy (Kitikanan & Sasimonton, 2017; Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2006; Tilfarlioglu & Cinkara, 2009). In this study, English self-efficacy will be explored in order to find the level of beliefs that students perceive in

their own abilities. The results from the study will encourage language teachers to design teaching methods that can enhance the self-efficacy and self-confidence of their L2 students in terms of English language learning.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 What is self-efficacy?*

Self-efficacy as derived from Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory refers to the belief in one's capacity in performing a specific task (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy simply answers the question, "Can I do this task in this situation?" (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). Learners have their own judgment about their capacity and then they will decide and organize their actions in relation to a particular task. Learners with high self-efficacy tend to have perseverance and show persistence in their learning. When they face difficult tasks or problems, they attempt to overcome those obstacles by using various learning strategies. On the other hand, students with low self-efficacy are likely to have low motivation, avoid difficult tasks, and have limited ideas on how to solve problems. For all these reasons, high-efficacious learners are likely to be successful in learning. Many studies have pointed out that self-efficacy can be used to predict an individual's learning achievement and learning retention (Schunk, 2003; Usher & Pajares, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000). In addition, many studies have shown that self-efficacy has a positive correlation with academic achievement (Rahemi, 2007; Raoofi, Tan & Chan, 2012; Wang, 2007). Self-efficacy, therefore, is an essential affective factor in predicting an individual's performance, patience, effort, and judgment in performing a task (Bandura, 2006; Schunk & Pajares, 2002).

### *2.2 Self-efficacy and English language learning*

Self-efficacy plays a vital role in English language learning. Numerous studies relating to self-efficacy and English language learning have been carried out. For example, Rahemi (2007) studied the correlation between self-efficacy and learning achievement, and the results showed a significant correlation between self-efficacy and English achievement. In this study, low-efficacious students exhibited poor performance since they had negative attitudes and had a bad experience with English learning. Further, research conducted by Tilfarlioglu and Cinkara (2009) showed that students that demonstrated various performances had different levels of self-efficacy. The self-efficacy of upper-intermediate students was higher than that of pre-intermediate students, for example. A study done by Mills, Pajares and Herron (2006) also presented the notion that self-efficacy had a positive effect on academic achievement. To illustrate, students that have high self-efficacy tend to show perseverance, patience, and put great effort into difficult tasks. They know how to use various learning strategies to tackle language obstacles. Moreover, the study conducted by Kitikanan and Sasimonton (2017) revealed that English self-efficacy in relation to all four skills had a significant positive correlation with the English language achievement of Thai learners. In other words, Thai students with high self-efficacy have high achievement in language learning.

Apart from positive correlations between self-efficacy and language achievement, Wang (2007) indicated some of the factors that influence one's level of self-efficacy: expertise in the content area, self-perception of English proficiency, attitudes towards English language learning, and social-cultural context. Additionally, Siritaratn (2013) identified some of the factors in language learning success, which included interests and attitudes towards English language learning, teaching methods, patience and perseverance, awareness of the importance of English, and fun activities. The negative factors that were seen to cause failure in language learning were bad experience with English, the grammar-translation method, and negative feedback from teachers.

### 3. Research Objectives

The main objective of this research was twofold: 1) to examine the level of English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students, and 2) to compare the difference in the English self-efficacy of graduate students with respect to genders and major subjects. The following hypotheses were tested:

- 1 The level of English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students is moderate.
- 2 There is a significant difference in the level of English self-efficacy among L2 graduate students with respect to their genders.
- 3 There is a significant difference in the level of English self-efficacy among L2 graduate students with respect to their major subjects.

### 4. Methods

#### 4.1 Subjects

The subjects in this study were 108 graduate Dhurakij Pundit University students from several programs enrolled in the English for Graduate Study course in the third semester of academic year 2017 (June - July 2018).

#### 4.2 Instrument

The Questionnaire of English Self-Efficacy (QESE), which was developed by Wang et al. (2014), was employed. The questionnaire consisted of 32 five-point Likert scale items. According to Wang et al. (2014), this questionnaire had acceptable reliability and validity coefficients: Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient value was 0.96, the concurrent validity was 0.55, and the predictive validity was 0.41. The students were required to rank the items according to how they perceived their own abilities in performing different tasks and skills. The answers ranged from 1 (I cannot do it at all) to 5 (I can do it very well). The items were designed to measure four English skills: (a) self-efficacy for listening (Items 1, 3, 9, 10, 15, 22, 24, 27); (b) self-efficacy for reading (Items 2, 12, 16, 21, 25, 26, 29, 32); (c) self-efficacy for speaking (Items 4, 6, 8, 17, 19, 20, 23, 30); and (d) self-efficacy for writing (Items 5, 7, 11, 13, 14, 18, 28, 31).

#### 4.3 Data collection and analysis

The QESE was delivered to 108 graduate students during the final week of the course (July 2018). It took about 15 minutes for them to complete the questionnaire. After collecting all of the questionnaires, the data were analyzed and interpreted using the SPSS program. Descriptive statistics, t-test, and Welch's ANOVA were utilized to reveal the findings of the study.

#### 4.4 Interpretation of mean scores of the English self-efficacy level

The mean scores from the questionnaire were applied to measure the level of English self-efficacy based on the following criteria (Siljaru, 2017):

Score range	Self-efficacy level
4.50 – 5.00	Very high
3.50 – 4.49	High
2.50 – 3.49	Moderate
1.50 – 2.49	Low
1.00 – 1.49	Very low

## 5. Findings

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Variables	<i>N</i> = 108	Percentage
Gender		
Male	50	46.3
Female	58	53.7
Age		
Below 24	17	15.7
25-29	40	37.0
30-34	28	25.9
35-39	12	11.1
40 and above	11	10.2
Major subject		
Education and Social Sciences	40	37.0
Engineering and Technology	52	48.1
Health Science	16	14.8

The table shows that 58 students were female (53.7%) and 50 students were male (46.3%). The majority of the students' age was between 25 and 29 years (37.0%). The major subjects of the students were classified into three main areas: engineering and technology (48.1%), education and social sciences (37.0%), and health science (14.8%).

Table 2: Level of English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students

Statements	Mean	SD
1. I can understand the stories told in English.	3.00	.76
2. I can do homework/ assignments alone when they include reading English texts.	3.23	.82
3. I can understand American TV programs in English.	2.84	.74
4. I can describe my university to other people in English.	2.70	.87
5. I can compose messages in English on social media channels such as Facebook and Instagram.	3.19	.72
6. I can describe the way to the university from the place where I live.	3.08	.89
7. I can write a text in English.	2.62	.77
8. I can tell a story in English.	2.72	.87
9. I can understand English radio programs.	2.78	.78
10. I can understand English TV programs made in Thailand.	3.05	.66
11. I can leave a note for another student in English.	3.23	.72
12. I can guess the meaning of unknown words when I am reading an English text.	3.08	.71
13. I can form new sentences from words I have just learned.	2.94	.72
14. I can write e-mails in English.	3.08	.86
15. I can understand English dialogue in audio recordings about everyday school matters.	3.15	.82
16. I can understand messages or news items in English on the Internet.	3.02	.82
17. I can ask my teacher questions in English.	2.81	.78
18. I can produce English sentences with idiomatic phrases.	2.59	.83
19. I can introduce my teacher to someone in English.	2.90	.75
20. I can discuss subjects of general interest with my fellow students in English.	2.82	.79

Statements	Mean	SD
21. I can read short English narratives.	3.03	.84
22. I can understand English films without subtitles.	2.74	.91
23. I can answer my teacher's questions in English.	2.80	.78
24. I can understand English songs.	2.89	.71
25. I can read English-language newspapers.	2.81	.83
26. I can find out the meanings of new words using a monolingual dictionary.	3.20	.85
27. I can understand telephone numbers spoken in English.	3.66	.83
28. I can write diary entries in English.	2.78	.88
29. I can understand English articles about the Thai culture.	2.69	.85
30. I can introduce myself in English.	3.45	.75
31. I can write an essay in two pages about my lectures in English.	2.55	.94
32. I can understand new reading materials selected by my teacher.	2.83	.79
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>2.95</b>	<b>.84</b>

According to the first research objective, the results in Table 2 reveal that the overall level of the English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students was at a moderate level ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = .84$ ). Item 27 (I can understand telephone numbers spoken in English) was ranked the highest ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = .83$ ), while Item 31 (I can write an essay in two pages about my lectures in English) was ranked the lowest ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = .94$ ).

Table 3: Level of English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students in relation to English language skills

English language skills	Mean	SD	Interpretation	Rank
Self-efficacy in listening	3.01	.78	Moderate	1
Self-efficacy in reading	2.99	.83	Moderate	2
Self-efficacy in speaking	2.91	.84	Moderate	3
Self-efficacy in writing	2.87	.85	Moderate	4

In terms of English language skills, Table 3 reveals that self-efficacy in listening was at the highest rank ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = .78$ ), followed by self-efficacy in reading ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = .83$ ), self-efficacy in speaking ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = .84$ ), and self-efficacy in writing ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = .85$ ).

Table 4: English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students with respect to genders

English self-efficacy	Male		Female		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
	3.02	.57	2.88	.61	1.173	0.470

The results in Table 4 show that the level of English self-efficacy of the male graduate students ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = .57$ ) was higher than that of the female students ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = .61$ ). However, there was no statistically significant difference in the English self-efficacy between the male and female graduate students ( $p = 0.470$ ,  $> .05$ ).

Table 5: English self-efficacy of graduate students with respect to major subjects

Major subject	Mean	SD
Education and Social Sciences	2.85	.65
Engineering and Technology	3.07	.48
Health Science	2.78	.73

	<b>Statistic</b>	<b>df1</b>	<b>df2</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>English self-efficacy</b>	2.328	2	37.226	0.112

When comparing the English self-efficacy among the graduate students from the three different major subjects, the students that studied in the field of engineering and technology had the highest average mean score ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = .48$ ). The Welch's ANOVA statistic for English self-efficacy, as shown in Table 5, revealed that there were no significant differences among the different major subjects ( $p = 0.112$ ,  $> .05$ ). Based on the second research objective, it can be claimed that the students' genders and their major subjects had no effect on their belief in their English language self-efficacy.

## 6. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the level of English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students and to compare the difference in the English self-efficacy of graduate students with respect to their genders and major subjects. The findings for this study support the first hypothesis that the overall level of self-efficacy of the L2 graduate students was moderate ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = .84$ ). It can be explained that the students' self-efficacy was not high because they could not pass the English requirements of the graduate study programs. This finding was in line with a study conducted by Siritaratn (2013), which found that the levels of English self-efficacy of low EFL graduate students were moderate and quite low. This could be supported by students' opinions, which claimed that English is a difficult subject according to their perception, and students require tremendous effort to develop English language skills. This finding is also consistent with many studies that have shown that low-achieving students have a low level of self-efficacy (Kitikanan & Sasimonton, 2017; Rahemi, 2007; Tilfarlioglu & Cinkara, 2009). If students have strong self-efficacy, their English proficiency will be high as well. Bandura (2006) stated that individuals have different degrees of self-efficacy and this leads to how they perform tasks. When they believe in their own ability, they will find ways to achieve the task. However, learners with a low level of self-efficacy will judge the difficulty of the task and believe that they are not able to achieve it. Self-efficacy, as a result, is the key factor for a successful language learner.

Regarding self-efficacy for each language skill, the overall mean was also at a moderate level. To put it in order, listening self-efficacy came first, followed by reading self-efficacy, speaking self-efficacy and writing self-efficacy. It can be assumed that Thai students are more confident concerning their receptive skills. In the traditional Thai classroom, students are familiar with drill exercises, reading comprehension questions, and rote learning. Productive skills, on the other hand, cause anxiety and fear among students. They fear making mistakes and find it difficult to communicate with others using spoken and written English. (Schunk, 2003). This is consistent with a study of Ritthirat (2014), which indicated that Thai students are always nervous when they need to produce the target language. They also have limited vocabulary and find L1 interference when trying to speak or write in English.

However, this study does not support the second and third hypothesis that there is a significant difference in the level of English self-efficacy with respect to their genders and major subjects. The results showed no statistically significant difference. This is in line with several studies that have shown no significant differences in the self-efficacy beliefs between male and female learners (Ayoobiyani & Soleimani, 2015; Husain, 2014; Sawari & Mansor, 2013). This could be explained that self-efficacy beliefs vary from person to person, and it associates with academic achievement. Another reason to support this finding is the similar background and experience in English language learning of the L2 graduate students. None of them could pass the English language requirements that could indicate their English proficiency. Failure to learn English can lead to negative attitudes and motivation and can lower one's level of self-efficacy.

## 7. Conclusion

This study showed that the overall mean scores of the English self-efficacy of L2 graduate students were moderate. In addition, there is no significant difference in the level of English self-efficacy with respect to their genders and major subjects. The findings can provide some information for learners that they do not fully believe in their own capacity in language learning. What students believe they can do when a task is given can predict what they can actually do and how they feel about the task. Accordingly, self-efficacy can be used to predict the learning outcomes of a student; a low level of self-efficacy leads to low confidence in one's ability. English language teachers should place emphasis on enhancing the self-efficacy of their L2 students. Practical ways to boost such self-efficacy are, for example, encouraging them to set proximal goals and to break these goals down into smaller tasks. When L2 students achieve each small task, they will realize that their goals are attainable. Students that can see their progress in language learning will gradually increase their self-efficacy. Furthermore, teachers should convince their students that self-efficacy is specific to a particular task, and it can be changeable, controlled and developed. The more self-efficacy that students gain, the higher will be their English language achievement.

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