

The Effect of Academic Self-efficacy on ESL/ EAP Learning Performance

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Abstract: As higher education becomes increasingly internationalized, the use of English as a medium of instruction has expanded significantly in recent years. More higher education institutions are now offering academic courses taught in English, particularly for non-Anglophone students. A substantial body of research has identified academic self-efficacy as a critical motivational factor that significantly influences students' learning performance. Given its impact, it is imperative to investigate the role of academic self-efficacy within ESL and particularly EAP teaching contexts. This construct not only affects students' motivation and learning outcomes but also has strong implications for their psychological well-being and long-term academic and professional growth. This study seeks to examine how academic self-efficacy influences students' performance in ESL/EAP learning, aiming to deepen the understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying language acquisition and to support educators in designing more effective instructional strategies that enhance learner outcomes.

Keywords: Academic Self-efficacy, ESL/EAP, Learning performance, Effect.

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of economic globalization and the internationalization of education, global knowledge competition has intensified unprecedentedly. The need to use English as a learning tool has increasingly emerged among many non-native English speakers (Ju, 2006)^[1], and the internationalization of talent development has become a critical priority. The demand for English as a second language (ESL) as a medium for academic communication continues to expand within higher education, reflecting a broader trend of the globalization of academic linguistic expression (Block, 2004)^[2]. Consequently, English for academic purposes is not only an essential academic competency that contemporary college students must possess for professional learning, but also a vital professional quality urgently required in the current era of economic globalization (Bai, Liu, Wang, & Zhou, 2021)^[3]. Academic self-efficacy, defined as learners' beliefs regarding their capability to successfully complete academic tasks, exerts a significant influence on the enhancement of ESL/EAP learning performance. This study focuses on how academic self-efficacy can be leveraged to promote students' long-term academic and professional development in ESL/EAP proficiency.

2. The Theoretical Foundation and Sources of Academic Self-efficacy

(1) Bandura's Self-efficacy Theory

Bandura (1977)^[4] has systematically summarized and theoretically constructed self-efficacy theory, showing that its basic feature is to emphasize the necessity of the subjective factor for human learning and its determinacy for the realization of human potential. In other words, self-efficacy could significantly function to regulate learners' learning behavior. Academic self-efficacy refers to "students' beliefs in their abilities that they can successfully regulate learning, master academic activities, and determine their aspirations,

level of motivation, and academic accomplishment" (Bandura, 1993, p. 117)^[5]. It is the result of the interplay of environment, behavior, and subjective initiative, where people's motivations, emotions, and actions are generated not by the reality of the situation, but by their expectations or perceptions in their minds. Through affecting students' learning psychology and learning behaviors, academic self-efficacy is a key intrinsic factor that influences an individual's academic achievement.

Self-efficacy theories explore the role of the subject's self in learning from the perspective of the dynamics of the individual's psychosomatic functioning. There are four stages in the formation of self-efficacy: cognitive process, motivational process, emotional process and choice process. The work of cognitive process basically manifested in two aspects, "goal-setting" and "predication" (Bandura & Ramachaudran, 1994, p.73)^[6]. An individual's self-efficacy affects the his or her perception of the value and difficulty of the task as well as his or her evaluation of the ability to successfully complete the task. Specifically, the stronger the sense of self-efficacy, the more challenging the goals are generally chosen. These people will strive to use their analytical thinking and put in more effort, resulting in better performance in specific studies. As far as motivational processes are concerned, an individual's evaluation of the task as well as his or her own abilities affects their level of motivation to learn. When learners perceive, for example, that the task they are faced with is not too difficult, but of high value, and that they are fully capable and confident of completing the task, their level of motivation increases, as does their determination to overcome the difficulty and the persistence of their behavior. Self-efficacy plays a crucial and indispensable role in the operation of motivation, which greatly contributes to optimal learning behavior in foreign language learning (Woodrow, 2006)^[7]. Considering the affective process, self-efficacy affects the learner's emotional state towards the task when people are engaged in learning activities (Pajares & Miller, 1995)^[8]. People with low self-

efficacy are prone to be anxious or stressful and develop avoidance behaviors when faced with difficult or challenging tasks or activities. During the selection process, an individual's self-efficacy is one of the main dynamic factors

that influence the outcome of his or her behavior (Bandura, 1989)^[9]. Individuals with different levels of self-efficacy choose tasks with different levels of difficulty.

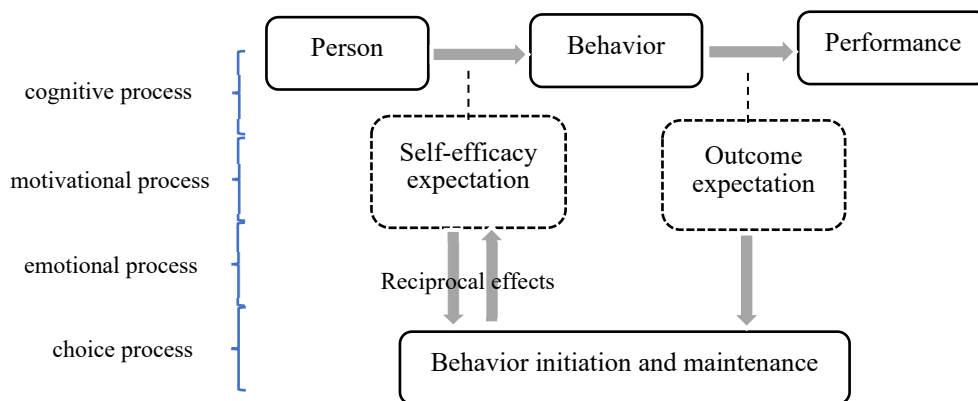


Figure 1. Bandura's Self-efficacy Theory Schema

At the same time, Bandura argues that an individual's behavior is constrained not only by the outcome of the behavior, but also by the individual's perception of his or her ability to perform the behavior. Therefore, he proposed self-efficacy expectation and outcome expectations, which are specific representations of self-efficacy theory at different intervals. Self-efficacy expectation refers to a subjective assessment of an individual's ability to perform a behavior while outcome expectation means an individual's prediction of the outcome that will result from his or her performance of a certain behavior. As shown in Figure 1, the individual will first judge whether he has the competence and confidence to carry out a certain behavior before it is carried out. If the individual believes that he is capable of and confident in accomplishing a certain task, then he will actively take action and put it into practice. During the occurrence of the behavior, the individual will make constant judgments on the results, and if the positive prediction is maintained all the time, it will be conducive to the persistence of the behavior and the degree of effort, finally resulting in the corresponding performance. Otherwise, the behavior won't occur, or it won't lead to the corresponding performance.

Hence, individual behavior is under the influence of outcome expectations and even greater constraints of self-efficacy expectation. Self-efficacy has a decisive role in individual behavior, whose main function is to regulate and control behavior so as to influence learning performance. Higher academic self-efficacy stimulates behaviors that facilitate academic engagement.

(2) Sources of Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is believed to originate from four primary sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and emotional arousal (Usher & Pajares, 2006)^[10]. Mastery experience refers to individuals' judgments of their own competence based on prior success in similar tasks. According to Bandura (1997)^[4], perceptions of past successes enhance self-efficacy, whereas repeated failures tend to diminish it. Negative experiences can also influence expectations for future performance. Furthermore, Bandura (1993)^[5] highlights the importance of attribution in this context. Specifically, self-efficacy is strengthened when success is attributed to internal or controllable factors, such as personal ability. Vicarious experience involves observing

others' accomplishments in similar tasks (Usher & Pajares, 2006)^[10]. Research by Goddard et al. (2004)^[11] indicates that when an observer perceives someone similar to themselves performing well, they are likely to believe they can achieve comparable results in similar situations. Conversely, if those perceived as similar perform poorly, the observer's self-efficacy may decline. Social persuasion encompasses feedback, evaluations, and appraisals from significant others regarding one's engagement in a given task (Usher & Pajares, 2006)^[10]. Positive reinforcement, such as encouragement from teachers, peers, or constructive performance feedback, can enhance an individual's sense of self-efficacy. Notably, such encouragement can counteract self-doubt, particularly in the face of challenges or setbacks (Bandura, 1997)^[4]. Emotional arousal pertains to affective and physiological states, such as anxiety, sadness, or calmness, experienced during task performance. These emotional states can significantly influence levels of self-efficacy (Usher & Pajares, 2006)^[10]. High levels of emotional arousal, particularly anxiety, are often associated with diminished performance outcomes.

3. EAP Teaching and Learning

(1) Definition and classification of EAP

English for Academic Purposes (EAP), also referred to as academic English, is a form of English designed to meet the needs of students with a solid foundational proficiency, enabling them to further develop their language abilities and serve as a bridge between general English and discipline-specific English (Su, 2020)^[12]. As a major branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), EAP can be categorized into English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) (Hutchinson & Waters, 2002)^[13]. EGAP typically uses texts such as scientific or political articles as its content base and aims to equip learners with general linguistic knowledge applicable across disciplines—such as discourse organization, rhetorical strategies, referencing conventions, and techniques for summarizing and reviewing texts—as well as essential academic learning skills, including note-taking, literature searching and classification, and the ability to describe tables and figures. These competencies primarily support students' professional learning from a linguistic perspective. In contrast,

ESAP focuses on subject-specific content within particular academic fields, such as medicine, law, or finance, and is designed to enhance learners' abilities in cognitive processing, discourse analysis, generalization, and information identification within specialized academic texts. It mainly supports professional learning by addressing the linguistic and structural demands of specific disciplinary content (Dudley K-Evans & John, 1998, p. 36)^[14].

(2) Current Situation of EAP teaching

In recent years, EAP teaching has been developed to meet learning needs of college students in China. There are still a great many of problems in the teaching practice of EAP in most colleges and universities. Most reforms of EAP teaching are not satisfactory (Zhang & Deng, 2019)^[15]. There are two main problems in EAP teaching. On the one hand, there is a need but no guidelines for EAP teaching. Although "academic English" teaching has been paid more attention in high level colleges and universities in China, the curriculum setting and teaching mode of local colleges and universities still need to be further studied (Zhou, 2022)^[16]. It is necessary for any student in higher education to learn academic English, receive EAP training and develop their EAP performance related to his/her major (Hyland, 2005, p.3)^[17]. Both undergraduate and graduate students should have certain academic norms and awareness of academic research in the new era (Wang, 2020)^[18]. However, most universities do not have clear teaching guidelines on how to set up EAP courses for undergraduate and graduate students. Currently, the curriculum for undergraduate freshmen in Chinese universities is based on basic courses and that the number of students participating in EAP activities is limited. Most of the General English for Academic Purpose (GEAP) courses are offered in the second school year, while the bilingual or full English professional courses belonging to Specific English for Academic Purpose (ESAP) are mainly available in the advanced years, except for English majors and schools operating under the charge of sino-foreign cooperation, where English is the medium of instruction for all professional courses throughout the four years of the university. The EAP teaching of undergraduates in Chinese universities is still in the stage of experimental exploration, and the core instructional design issues, such as what to teach and how to teach, have not risen to the level of systematic theoretical demonstration yet (Gong, 2018)^[19]. Supposed to be the follow-up course of EAP for undergraduates, the EAP for graduate students in most colleges and universities has not well connected them in terms of curriculum setting, teaching content, textbook difficulty, teaching methods and other aspects (Chu & Yuan, 2016)^[20].

On the other hand, EAP courses are available in China but its quality needs to be improved. As EAP courses require a certain understanding of academic norms in other disciplines and professional fields, most English teachers in charge of EAP course generally have certain difficulties because the majority of them major in language and literature such as literature, linguistics, translation and culture, while few of them own the research and practice background in required discipline. Zhang and Deng (2019)^[15] selected 205 teachers from different universities in China as the research objects to analyze the restricting factors of teacher engagement in EAP curriculum reform. The survey results found that many teachers did not have a comprehensive understanding of EAP curriculum, felt confused and afraid, and the teaching effect needed to be improved. It can be seen that the lack of qualified

EAP teachers is a common problem in colleges and universities, which lead to the inferior quality of EAP courses. In addition, teachers lack a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting the development of students' EAP performance, and lack targeted measures to improve their EAP ability in class, which also affects the effectiveness of EAP teaching.

(3) Problems in EAP learning

Extensive research has consistently shown that there is a significant gap between the EAP abilities of Chinese university students and their academic needs in learning. More precisely, Chinese college students' demand for academic reading and writing is more than academic listening and speaking. Among these, EAP reading is in greatest demand for ESL students (Yu & Fu, 2015)^[21]. Bai et al. (2021)^[3] investigated Chinese graduates' demand in academic English learning. Although most of the students knew that the focus of English learning should be academic English or academic English supplemented by comprehensive English, it was apparent that the self-rating score of at-home students were still lower than that of international students at the aspect of English academic ability. Similarly, although students with a higher academic level have mastered a lot of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, they cannot use English, especially in writing academic papers and participating in English International academic activities (as cited in Bai et al., 2021, p. 537)^[18].

Undergraduates generally recognise that English learning at the university level should be distinguished from that at the secondary education level (Wang, 2020)^[3]. However, many students lack a basic understanding of academic writing genres, let alone the ability to avoid unintentional academic misconduct (Wang, 2020)^[18]. As students advance in their professional studies and gain a deeper understanding of the demands of future international careers, they increasingly recognise the importance of mastering professional English vocabulary, improving the efficiency of academic literature reading, and accurately searching for and utilising professional literature resources (Wang, 2020)^[18]. Unfortunately, their performance in academic English courses often falls short of expectations, such as reading English textbooks too slowly and struggling to keep up with the pace of instruction (Feng, 2016)^[22], or insufficient vocabulary of academic English and professional English, which makes it impossible to effectively understand and summarize English literature (Chen, 2020)^[23].

For graduate students, the lack of academic English vocabulary is also the biggest obstacle to improve their EAP performance (Chen & Yang, 2021)^[24]. When the graduate students read the academic papers, monographs or literature of their own major and neighboring majors, it can be seen that the students are more confident in understanding the key information in the academic articles of their own research field, while the cross-professional, interdisciplinary, and profound contents are slightly difficult for them to read (Sun & Wang, 2022)^[25]. Li and Li (2019)^[26] conducted a survey among 150 medical undergraduates and postgraduates in Jiangsu province to get well-known their specific EAP needs and performances. The survey results show that the respondents not only have a need for the improvement of EGAP skills, but also have a strong demand for ESAP. They believe that basic English cannot fully meet their career development needs, while mastering EAP skills can increase their career competitiveness. Among the four types of

language competence, students are even more eager of the input abilities (EAP reading and listening) than output abilities. However, it is clear that teachers are dissatisfied with students' overall EAP learning regarding of its speed (Li & Li, 2019)^[26].

4. The Relationship between Academic Self-efficacy and ESL/EAP Learning Performance

Academic Self-Efficacy (ASE), as a key motivational variable influencing ESL/EAP learning outcomes, is widely regarded by academics as an important prerequisite for learners' academic achievement. Numerous studies have consistently shown that there is a significant positive association between ASE and overall foreign language proficiency and performance in specific language skills (Mills, 2014)^[27], and that higher foreign language proficiency is usually accompanied by greater self-confidence, lower anxiety, and higher overall self-efficacy (Thompson & Lee, 2014)^[28]. Empirical studies have repeatedly confirmed that higher levels of language learning self-efficacy predict more significant academic achievement (Woodrow, 2011)^[29], a pattern that also holds true for EFL students (Kitikanan & Sasimonton, 2017)^[30].

(1) Correlation with ESL reading

Academic self-efficacy and outcome expectancy beliefs together account for significant variations in students' reading scores. A consistent body of research has demonstrated significant positive correlations between reading self-efficacy and reading ability among university students learning English as a foreign language (e.g., Naseri & Zafarani, 2012; Wang & Pape, 2007)^[31-32]. Boakye (2015)^[33] further revealed through regression analysis that academic self-efficacy is the strongest predictor of reading ability. The participants in this study were tertiary-level students, whose academic self-efficacy levels were assessed using a questionnaire measuring their awareness of reading challenges and their confidence in successfully completing reading tasks. Their reading performance was evaluated through the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL). Studies conducted in China have similarly reported positive associations between reading self-efficacy, reading strategy use, and reading performance among both high school (Huang, 2023)^[34] and vocational college students (Yang, 2022)^[35], with English reading anxiety potentially mediating this relationship (Shi, 2023)^[36]. Yang's (2022)^[35] English reading self-efficacy questionnaire includes three dimensions: frustration tolerance, perceived ability, and effort expectancy.

(2) Correlation with ESL writing

Research conducted both domestically and internationally consistently supports the positive correlation between writing self-efficacy and writing performance. Hetthong and Teo (2013)^[37] confirmed this relationship at both the paragraph level and the sub-skill level. The key implication of this finding is that teachers are encouraged to create a motivating environment and administer a self-efficacy questionnaire for diagnostic purposes prior to instruction, in order to better personalize students' learning experiences. Domestic studies have similarly reported consistent findings among non-English major university students (Hu, Luo & Li, 2006; Li, 2017)^[38-39]. Students with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to achieve better writing scores, and conversely, those with lower self-efficacy tend to perform less well. Female students

demonstrated higher levels of writing self-efficacy than male students, and those with better writing performance used writing strategies significantly more frequently than those with lower performance (Hu, Luo & Li, 2006)^[38]. Li (2017)^[39] investigated the dynamic relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing performance among 330 non-English major college students through cross-lagged regression analysis combined with semi-structured interviews. Based on Bandura's theory, Kang and Ren (2009)^[40] argued that academic self-efficacy influences students' preferences for writing tasks. The higher the self-efficacy, the more likely students were to choose challenging materials for writing practice.

(3) Correlation with ESL listening

Compared to reading and writing, there has been relatively limited research on the relationship between academic self-efficacy and listening and speaking skills, with most studies focusing on vocational college students. Canaran, Bayram, Doğan, and Baturay (2024)^[41] demonstrated that listeners' self-efficacy levels are positively and strongly associated with proficiency in second language (L2) listening. In their study, the target population consisted of 347 students enrolled in an English preparatory program in Turkey. Vocational college students with high self-efficacy were more likely to select challenging tasks and maintain a positive mindset, enabling them to focus on problem-solving strategies. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy tended to focus on potential failures and negative outcomes (Xia, 2012; Li, 2012)^[42-43]. Therefore, teachers are advised to effectively utilize instrumental motivation to foster integrative motivation, thereby enhancing students' learning desire, selecting appropriate listening materials, and creating a relaxed and supportive classroom environment (Lyu, 2023)^[44].

(4) Correlation with ESL speaking

Most studies conducted in the secondary school found that EFL students speaking academic self-efficacy had positive correlation with their speaking performance (Asakereh & Dehghannezhad, 2015; Desmaliza & Septiani, 2017; Arlinda, 2022)^[45-47]. The same result was also found in Hibatullah's (2024)^[48] research conducted in a vocational high school. In contrast, Khotimah et al. (2023)^[49] investigated the extent to which students' level of self-efficacy are correlated with their speaking skills among the eleventh grade students. This research adopted quantitative research and purposive sampling technique. The data was obtained from the self-efficacy questionnaire and the speaking test. Through the Pearson Product Moment (r) formula using t-test, the results showed there was a negative correlation between speaking ability and self-efficacy because the score on each test was not balanced. Zhang, Ardasheva and Austin (2020)^[50] claimed self-efficacy has neither direct nor indirect effects on English public speaking performance but their sample size is small. It may be more illustrative to broaden the scope of the study. Zhang, Ardasheva and Hong (2023)^[51] did precisely that their sample expanded to 189 non-English-major students, the results indicated both general English proficiency and self-efficacy had both direct and indirect impacts on English public speaking performance.

(5) Correlation with EAP performance

In an EAP context, Lee, Abbott, and Chen (2020)^[52] found that international students in Canada were reluctant to participate in classroom activities due to language anxiety and a lack of confidence—specifically, low self-efficacy in English for academic purposes—which had a direct negative

impact on their learning outcomes. This finding is consistent with Genç, Kuluşaklı and Aydın (2016)^[53], who argued that English self-efficacy significantly influences students' belief formation and their perception of language competence. However, Andrade (2006)^[54] reported a contrasting observation: some international students believed that despite having low English self-efficacy, their academic performance remained unaffected. This implies that the extent to which academic self-efficacy statistically influences students' perceived EAP abilities warrants further empirical investigation.

5. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, it can be concluded that students with higher levels of academic self-efficacy generally achieve better academic performance in English listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In other words, a high level of academic self-efficacy contributes to improved ESL performance, although it is often measured through test scores. However, there is limited specific research exploring college students, academic self-efficacy in relation to their actual English performance. Multidimensional and multi-level analyses in this area remain insufficient. Recently, an interesting phenomenon has emerged: many students who achieve high exam scores encounter real difficulties in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) learning. To date, although numerous studies have emphasized the role of self-efficacy in enhancing students' English language skills, the question of what role academic self-efficacy plays between test scores and practical EAP performance remains a relatively unexplored frontier that warrants further investigation. Therefore, future research could further explore the mediating role of students' self-efficacy between test scores and academic performance within the context of academic English teaching.

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