Correlating English Proficiency and Self-Efficacy in Language Learning of Japanese Senior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the relationship between English proficiency and self-efficacy in language learning among third-year senior high school students in a public school in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. While some literature acknowledges the role of self-efficacy in academic achievement, almost nothing has been written about this relationship in the context of Japanese EFL learners. A quantitative design using a descriptive-correlational method was employed to bridge the gap. A total of 184 students were selected through stratified random sampling. We used a standardized CEFR-aligned test to assess English proficiency, and a 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire to gauge self-efficacy in language learning. We found a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$); that is, students who were more proficient in English tended to have more confidence in their language learning abilities. We discuss the results and their implications. The results emphasize how crucial it is to combine skill development and confidence-boosting techniques in language education. The implications indicate that Japanese English instruction has to adopt more communicative and learner-centered methods.

Keywords: English proficiency, Self-efficacy, Japanese EFL learners, Senior high school students, Japan.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

The English language has become a global lingua franca. It is tasked with the all-important duty of allowing people who hail from wonderfully diverse backgrounds to communicate with one another. In our burgeoning phase of globalization, when individuals from all parts of the world are coming together, English has become the golden key that unlocks the multitude of opportunities that exist in academic, professional, and social settings (Mehmood et al., 2023). These days, it seems as though every international gathering is conducting at least part of its business in English.

In recent decades, the push to educate people in English has sharpened across Asia (Nghia & Vu, 2023). The reasons are obvious and threefold: (1) the forces of regional economic integration; (2) the drive to global competitiveness; and (3) the strong imperative to enable cross-border communication. Massive amounts of money have been spent on teaching English in Asian countries like South Korea (Choi, 2024), China (Pan & Wang, 2024), and the Indochina (Choi et al., 2024). These nations have been investing in teaching English, convinced that English proficiency can and will lead not only to upward mobility for individuals but also to a substantial shot in the arm for overall national development. To make this prospect seem feasible, English teaching programs have relied heavily on the concept of self-efficacy (Bai et al., 2022).

In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has put in place all sorts of reforms to pump up English ability among students, especially in secondary schools (Aspinall & McLaughlin, 2024). Yet, even with these big efforts, many Japanese students still have very serious language confidence problems that raise questions about whether the pedagogical approaches currently in vogue are really effective. Self-efficacy has become a construct of interest in the Japanese educational landscape because it has a lot to do with students' motivation, engagement, and perseverance in language learning (Kobayashi, 2021). It seemed that gaining some insight into the relationship between self-efficacy and real English proficiency could help rethink some of the educational practices that have been adopted to increase English proficiency in this country.

This study, then, took as its focus the Shizuoka Prefecture. We selected Shizuoka because it has a mix of urban and rural communities that makes it quite different from the pure urban or rural contexts of English proficiency in Japan. By examining this local context, the study hopes to offer a more sophisticated understanding of how academic and psychological aspects interact when learning English in a particular Japanese culture.

While previous research (Aizawa et al., 2024; Harris & Strefford, 2024; Thompson et al., 2022) has investigated English proficiency and self-efficacy, either one or the other, there is little research that has penetrated down to the local level to examine, in the context of Japanese senior high schools, the direct correlation of these two constructs. This study takes a step toward bridging that gap; it plows ground where little research has been done, especially in terms of not even looking at the direct correlation of these two constructs at the local level. The outcome of this plowing contributes not only to local scholarship but also to the larger areas of public educational psychology and applied linguistics in Japan and East Asia.

Thus, this study aims to explore the connection between English proficiency and the self-efficacy of language learning of Japanese senior high school students. It takes as its respondents the students in Shizuoka Prefecture who are learning English. Very few studies have investigated this correlation, so this one first seeks to determine the levels of English proficiency and self-efficacy in language learning, then, whether a relationship exists and, if it does, the nature and strength of that correlation. Language teaching strategies, curriculum development, and learner support mechanisms are areas that this study hopes to make a few contributions to, in Japan and elsewhere.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1991; see also Mujahidah & Yusdiana, 2023), with a specific focus on the concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in their capacity to execute the behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments. When it comes to learning, self-efficacy shapes students' motivation, perseverance, and emotional responses toward challenges and setbacks. Bandura's theory posits that learning occurs in a social context through the dynamic interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors, which he terms "triadic reciprocal determinism" (see Bandura, 1984). Among these factors, self-efficacy is most central because it determines (or at least partly determines) how individuals approach goals, tasks, and challenges. High self-efficacy generally leads to greater effort and persistence, while low self-efficacy generally leads to avoidance and decreased performance (Bandura, 1995). The self-efficacy theory states that students who have confidence in their capacity to learn and utilize English are more likely to participate in educational programs, practice the language, and persevere through challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study utilized a quantitative research design following descriptive-correlational method, which is appropriate for exploring the relationship between the two variables: English proficiency and self-efficacy in language learning. Correlational research allows the degree and direction of association between two variables to be determined statistically.

Respondents

This study's respondents were students in their third and final year of senior high school enrolled at one public senior high school in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. The total population consisted of 349 students distributed across eight sections. These students represent the target population; they have completed several years of formal English education, and they have many accumulated experiences in language learning that make them particularly well suited to responding to a language learning survey. Using the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator set at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the recommended sample size for a population of 349 is 184 students. The sample was selected using a stratified random sampling method to ensure fair representation from each of the eight sections of the population. This method allowed the researchers to divide the population into strata, in this case, the eight sections, and then randomly select a number of students from each stratum that is proportional to the number of students in that section. This sampling method was used to minimize sampling bias and to ensure that the sample

reflects the diverse academic backgrounds and performance levels within the graduating class.

Instruments

This study employed two principal instruments. To assess English proficiency, a standardized English Language Proficiency Test (San Jose et al., 2024a; San Jose et al., 2024b) was used. The questionnaire contains 60 items; thirty items assessed the reading skills and the other thirty items assessed the listening skills of the respondents. The instrument's Scale-Content Validity Index (S-CVI) is 0.99 and a reliable Cronbach's alpha score of 0.94. The English proficiency levels were based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which is an international standard to describe language ability across reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The scales used to interpret English proficiency were proficient (C2), advanced (C1), upper intermediate (B2), intermediate (B1), elementary (A2), and beginner (A1).

The other instrument used was the Questionnaire of Self-Efficacy in Learning a Foreign Language (QSLL) with 20 items or five (5) items per macro skill (listening, reading, writing, speaking) (Kutuk et al., 2023). This standardized questionnaire included a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" and posed questions regarding learners' confidence in their ability to complete certain language learning tasks. These tasks included more general activities like "talking in the target language" and "writing in the target language" as well as more specific tasks like "understanding spoken instructions in the target language."

Data Collection Procedure

The study was first granted permission by the administration of the school where it took place. The respondents and their guardians were given informed consent forms (in both English and Japanese) that spelled out the purpose and procedure of the study, as well as its voluntary nature. Data were collected in two sessions. The English proficiency test was administered in the first session; the self-efficacy questionnaire was handed out in the second session. The sessions were supervised by the researchers to ensure that no instructions were given that might influence the respondents' performance on either task. Throughout the process, anonymity was ensured.

Data Analysis

Analyses were performed on the data using two types of statistics: descriptive and inferential. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were used to summarize the students' proficiency levels and self-efficacy ratings. To examine the relationship between English proficiency and self-efficacy, we computed Pearson's correlation coefficient (r). We interpreted the strength and direction of the correlation based on standard statistical guidelines. All analyses were performed using SPSS software.

Validity and Reliability

Even though quantitative research normally zeros in on such issues as validation and reliability, rather than the qualitative sense of "trustworthiness," that does not mean data quality was not a priority in this study. The instruments (tests) used to gather the data were standardized and pilot tested. They were administered to a small group of students who had the same sort of characteristics (demographic) as those in the study. Their responses were used to evaluate (1) the clarity of the instruments and (2) the internal consistency of the instruments (and thus their reliability).

Ethical Considerations

This research study followed all appropriate ethical guidelines and protocols set forth by the institution. This study was approved by the school administration. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and their guardians, as required by the institution. All respondents were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the ability to withdraw from the study without penalty at any time. Data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. No personal identifiers were associated with the data.

Result

The following are presented in this section organized according to the research objectives: (1) English proficiency level of graduating senior high school students in Shizuoka Prefecture, (2) level of self-efficacy in language learning, and (3) correlation between English proficiency and self-efficacy.

English Proficiency Levels of Respondents

A standardized language proficiency test, aligning with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), was used to assess English proficiency of the 184 students in their third year of senior high school in terms of grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and listening. Interpretation of scores was based on levels defined in the CEFR: A1 (Beginner), A2 (Elementary), B1 (Intermediate), B2 (Upper Intermediate), C1 (Advanced), and C2 (Proficient).

The sample had an average score of 68.4. Its standard deviation was 10.2. Proficiency levels among the respondents, therefore, spanned only moderately. This lack of spread, however, does not preclude some level of consistent performance across the group. And it certainly indicates no performance outliers at either end of the proficiency spectrum.

Table 1 presents the distribution of students across the CEFR proficiency levels. A majority of students (83%) fell within the A2–B1 range, suggesting that most learners have achieved basic to intermediate communicative competence in English. Notably, 17% of the students reached B2 level, reflecting a more advanced ability to understand and use English in academic and social contexts.

Table 1. *Distribution of Students by CEFR English Proficiency Levels (n = 184)*

CEFR Level	Description	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
(A2) Elementary	Basic understanding of simple phrases and expressions; limited ability to communicate in routine tasks	70	38.0%
(B1) Intermediate	Ability to handle familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, or leisure	83	45.1%
(B2) Upper Intermediate	Capacity to interact with fluency and spontaneity; can understand more complex texts and concepts	31	16.8%
Total		**184**	**100.0%**

It is implied in the findings that although a significant portion of students have acquired the functional English skills needed for daily use, a smaller percentage have attained the proficiency needed for more challenging communicative scenarios like presentations, academic discourse, and interaction in global settings. These results highlight the necessity for focused teaching methods to help students move from intermediate to upper-intermediate skill levels.

Self-Efficacy in Language Learning

A self-efficacy questionnaire was used to gauge the students' confidence in their ability to acquire and use the English language. Based on well-known foreign language learning self-efficacy assessments, the instrument has 20 items with ratings on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The survey assessed a number of language learning skills, such as speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

The average self-efficacy score was 3.42 (SD = 0.58), which suggests that students have a moderate to high degree of confidence in their capacity to complete English language learning activities. This implies that although there is variance across certain subjects, students usually believe they are capable of learning English.

The highest self-efficacy was observed in reading comprehension (M = 3.76), followed by hearing (M = 3.59), and writing (M = 3.39), according to item-level analysis. Speaking-related tasks had the lowest self-efficacy ratings (M = 3.12), particularly those that called for spontaneous oral production, like taking part in impromptu conversations or replying without prior planning. Due to a lack of opportunities for real-world speaking both within and outside of the classroom, students in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environments typically have higher receptive skills (reading and listening) than productive abilities (speaking and writing).

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of Self-Efficacy in Language Learning by Skill Area (n = 184)*

Skill Area	Sample Item (Paraphrased)	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Reading	I can understand English texts and articles on familiar topics.	3.76	0.64	High
Listening	I can understand spoken English in classroom instructions.	3.59	0.60	Moderate to High
Writing	I can express my ideas clearly in written English.	3.39	0.55	Moderate
Speaking	I can participate in spontaneous English conversations.	3.12	0.62	Moderate to Low
Overall Average		3.42	0.58	Moderate to High

These results imply that although students are typically self-assured in their language learning skills, they struggle more and doubt themselves more when faced with activities that call for real-time language production. This emphasizes the necessity of instructional interventions that concentrate on improving students' speaking abilities, particularly through communicative and interactive exercises that mimic how English is used in everyday situations.

Correlation between English Proficiency and Self-Efficacy

To assess how closely students' English abilities are related to their self-efficacy in language learning, we calculated the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) using the students' proficiency test scores and their self-efficacy ratings. We chose this statistical method because it is commonly used to examine the strength and direction of linear relationships between two continuous variables.

The analysis resulted in the correlation coefficient r = 0.52, with a p-value of less than 0.01 (p < 0.01). This indicates that what we are looking at is a relationship that is statistically significant at the 1% level. If we refer to Cohen's (1988)

guidelines for interpreting correlation coefficients, we see that this value is considered to represent a moderate positive correlation.

This discovery indicates that pupils who do better on tests of English language proficiency also tend to tell us that they have higher levels of self-efficacy with respect to learning that language. Practically interpreted, this means that the learners who are showing us that they are more competent at the language are also giving us the impression that they are more confident in their new language learning situation. In contrast, the pupils who give us the impression that they are more competent with the language are also giving us the impression that they have more confidence in their language learning situation.

Table 3. *Correlation between English Proficiency and Self-Efficacy (n = 184)*

Variables	Mean	SD	Pearson's r	p-value	Interpretation
English Proficiency	68.4	10.2			
Self-Efficacy	3.42	0.58	0.52	< 0.01	Moderate Positive Correlation

The strength of this correlation offers empirical evidence in favor of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977), which maintains that academic achievement is significantly influenced by self-efficacy. Students who have confidence in their ability to achieve are more likely to persevere through challenges, acquire effective language learning techniques, and participate meaningfully in learning activities, all of which may improve their actual language proficiency.

DISCUSSION

English Proficiency Levels of Respondents

The findings indicated that a mere 17% of the respondents demonstrated B2 (Upper Intermediate) competency. Of the remaining students, a majority fell between the A2 (Elementary) and the B1 (Intermediate) levels of the CEFR. This competency distribution is a regular occurrence in Japanese students even in the university level. The study of Tokunaga (2021), for instance, revealed that Japanese English learners' fluency and accuracy were not significantly improved by a communication-focused curriculum, with some producing sentences using simpler grammar structures, and their accuracy suffered due to reduced grammar instructions. In a language like English, where the ability to communicate effectively is crucial, this distribution translates into seriously low levels of real competency.

While there have been changes implemented to English education by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), in order to align the English curricula with CEFR standards and to

foster more communicative competence, they do not seem to have been realized in a consistent manner. There could be two main reasons for this lack of consistent realization. First, it seems that teacher-centered instruction (see Eronen & Lee, 2024), which has long been the norm in Japan, continues to be the norm even in English instruction. Second, students seem to have very few opportunities to use English in the real world, whether inside or outside of the classroom (San Jose et al., 2025; Ratunil et al., 2025).

Moreover, the insufficiency of input and output opportunities beyond the classroom could be the reason for students' underperformance in the productive skills of writing and speaking. The proficiency distribution we saw raises the very real possibility that students are not getting the kind of all-encompassing language exposure that would be needed for them to achieve the kind of fluent language skills we hoped for. This is in no way an indictment of all high school English teachers; it is rather a profound statement about the English education system in Japanese high schools. These findings thus support the necessity for Japanese high schools to transition to more immersive, interaction-rich learning settings.

Self-Efficacy in Language Learning

The outcomes showed that the self-efficacy of students in acquiring a language ranged from moderate to high, with the greatest confidence in reading and listening (M = 3.76 and 3.59, respectively) and the least in speaking (M = 3.12). This trend aligns with the work of Ullah et al. (2024), Yang et al. (2024) and Aisyah et al. (2024), indicating that Asian EFL learners tend to have more self-efficacy in receptive skills than in productive skills.

Mastery experience is the foremost source of self-efficacy, according to Bandura (Waddington, 2023). The confidence that Japanese students have in reading and grammar is a result of the rigorous instruction and near mastery that they attain in those areas. Speaking in English is given much less priority, and as a result, Japanese students have many fewer experiences that they could call mastery experiences. Speaking with ease in a foreign language might not even be considered a rigorous task, but imagine how one would feel if one had to make a significant speech in an unfamiliar language. Shachter and Haswell (2022), in their investigation of silence in the Japanese classrooms, report that Japanese students often avoid speaking English because they are afraid of making a mistake. This makes them less confident when speaking orally. Although, Sato (2024) warns that "silence is not a negative phenomenon" in Japan.

Additionally, students' self-perception of their language abilities can be affected by social comparison and the comments made by instructors and classmates (see Masuwd et al., 2024). If the classroom atmosphere is too intimidating and unsupportive, students are more likely to assume that they have a language ceiling that they cannot break through. As Bandura noted, self-efficacy can be influenced in a positive way by verbal persuasion and in a negative way by emotional states (Waddington, 2023). This makes positive reinforcement and supportive environments as important as a well-planned curriculum.

This study consequently underscores the necessity for teaching methods that enhance not only the competence but also the confidence of students (see San Jose, 2025), particularly in the area of oral communication. Role plays, group speaking tasks, and presentations in non-threatening environments may serve to bolster both the oral communication performance and the self-efficacy of the student.

Correlation between English Proficiency and Self-Efficacy

A statistically significant and moderately positive correlation ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$) was found between students' level of English proficiency and their self-efficacy in language acquisition. This implies that as students' English skill increases, so does their confidence in their capacity to learn and use the language successfully. The results correspond with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1991; see also Mujahidah & Yusdiana, 2023), which posits that self-efficacy and performance are correlated—confidence affects achievement, and success boosts confidence.

Current studies corroborate these findings. For instance, Dan et al. (2022) found that Vietnamese high school students who achieved higher scores in English expressed substantially greater convictions regarding their abilities than those who made lower achievements. A similar investigation by Situmorang (2022) found that among self-efficacy improves the English performance of Indonesian nursing students. The link between these recent studies and the current research is one of self-efficacy, an understanding of which may very well facilitate greater language learning success.

The notion that learning is both a cognitive and emotive process is upheld by the association. Students with higher self-efficacy are more inclined to tackle demanding tasks, stick with them despite difficulties, and employ strategies that they know to be successful, all of which directly fosters language learning (see Lin et al., 2025). Self-efficacy is not dependent on skill or ability; instead, it reflects a person's belief in their potential to succeed (see Bandura, 1984; Bandura, 1995). Thus, the opposite also holds: students with low self-efficacy may not take advantage of opportunities to practice the language.

The association identified in this research implies that the Japanese educational context requires both skills training and self-perception training. Skills might be taught through traditional methods, and some students might experience the sort of improvement in linguistic competencies that would make them operate at a basic level of communication. But if we accept the notion that half the battle is between the ears, then confidence and motivation need to be factored into any equation that aims for language learning success. Therefore, the results encourage more communicative, psychologically supportive, and student-centered language training that aims to improve self-efficacy and competency at the same time.

This finding also aligns with the findings of other research on second language acquisition, which has consistently shown that self-efficacy is a predictor of language achievement (Cai & Xing, 2025; Wu et al., 2022; Pan & Wang, 2024; Lu et al., 2022). It is important to remember that correlation does not necessarily mean causation. Even though self-efficacy and proficiency are related, this study does not claim that either self-efficacy or proficiency emerged as a result of the other.

These findings highlight the significance of supporting language learners' emotive as well as cognitive abilities, which are essential for generating strong student performance, especially in speaking, the area of language production where many students struggle with the most. It may be appropriate for teachers to help students become more competent and confident in this area.

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and the concept

of self-efficacy in particular are supported by the positive correlation between students' English proficiency and their belief in their capacity to acquire and use the language. Self-efficacy has an impact on people's motivation, learning styles, and performance outcomes, according to Bandura (1997). In this study, students with higher proficiency levels reported higher levels of self-efficacy, supporting the theory's claim that pleasant experiences increase confidence, which in turn encourages sustained participation and achievement. Bandura's theory that self-efficacy is task-specific and impacted by contextual factors and past experiences is further supported by the found variation in self-efficacy across language skills, especially a decreasing confidence in speaking. The importance of self-efficacy as a predictor and result of language learning success is therefore validated, and the theoretical framework is supported and in line with the empirical findings.

CONCLUSION

This research examined the relationship between English proficiency and self-efficacy in language learning among students in their final year of senior high school in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. It appears that the majority of the students possess only a basic to intermediate level of proficiency in English, with relatively few achieving an upper-intermediate level. In contrast, the self-efficacy scores appear to be somewhat higher and within the moderate to high range, with the students feeling more confident regarding their receptive skills (reading and listening) and somewhat less confident regarding their productive skills (speaking and writing). A moderate positive correlation was found between English proficiency and self-efficacy, which suggests that students who have a higher level of self-efficacy (i.e., they believe they can do the tasks) might be more likely to achieve English proficiency. Equally important is the suggestion that if students achieve a higher level of proficiency, they are more likely to have a higher level of self-efficacy.

Implication

The study suggests that English language instruction in Japan should place greater emphasis on communicative practices and confidence-building strategies to support both proficiency and self-efficacy, particularly in oral skills, where learners reported the lowest self-confidence.

Limitation

The study was limited to one public senior high school in Shizuoka Prefecture and may not fully represent the broader population of Japanese high school students. Additionally, the reliance on self-report measures for self-efficacy introduces the possibility of subjective bias.

Directions for Future Studies

Future research could employ a longitudinal design to examine changes in self-efficacy and proficiency over time. Including qualitative data such as interviews or classroom observations could also provide deeper insights into the psychological and pedagogical factors influencing language learning success.

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