The Effect of ESL Learning on Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, Confidence, Stress, and Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

The study conducted to show the effects of second language learning on self-esteem, self-efficacy, anxiety, confidence, and stress within second-language speakers. The study was achieved through the use of numerous questionnaires on 130 participants. Participants ranged from beginners to intermediate and advanced English users, with a control group of 34 native speakers. The findings show significant differences in the outcomes between groups and their use of English where beginners show the least self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy, and more anxiety. In contrast, the advanced users show the most self-esteem, confidence, and self-efficacy and the least anxiety with their abilities in comprehending and speaking the English language. Still, there was no difference in stress levels between these groups. This study shows that there is a direct correlation between language competence and its social implications for its use as a second language.

Keywords: English, second language, self-esteem, self-efficacy, anxiety, confidence, stress.

1. Introduction

When new to a language we have not had regular practice in its speaking, it is common to doubt our ability and develop self-conscious feelings about using it with people fluent in the language. Dealing with a new language affects us in many ways; it can create unease feelings and affect our self-esteem. Second language learning is an anxiety-provoking experience (Muchnicke & Wolfe, 1982; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Rubio, 2004). English is a difficult language, and it does not sound the way it looks. Learners are often frustrated, trying to understand what others are saying and too self-conscious about their accents (Judy M. Thompson).

Self-esteem refers to the evaluation that the individual customarily maintains concerning himself; it indicates the extent to which an individual believes in himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy (Coopersmith, 1981; Brown, 2001). When self-esteem is low, the psychological homeostasis is unbalanced, creating insecurity, fear, social distance, and other negative situations. With this, we develop feelings of anxiety and stress. Anxiety is a feeling of worry or nervousness about something with an uncertain outcome. Anxiety is a common feeling shared by all people; any task that involves a certain degree of challenge can expose feelings of anxiety.

In studies of self-esteem and language, Brodkey & Shore, 1976 and Gardner & Lambert, 1972, concluded that self-esteem proves to be an important variable in SLA.
Eleni Pappamihel of The Florida State University experimented in 2001, looking at anxiety in students using English as a second language, and found that their overall level of anxiety towards English increases when students are in a mainstream class. When asked about their anxiety, the students’ responses clarified that the anxiety was associated with social interactions. When Pappamihel had asked them which they prefer, being in a mainstream class or their ESL class, participants preferred ESL classes due to unease caused by being exposed to English speaking students in their mainstream classes.

The participants’ responses also indicated low self-efficacy towards their capabilities in the English language in a social environment. Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s own ability to complete tasks. Bandura’s (1991) theory of self-efficacy posits that when a situation is perceived as threatening, the resultant anxiety is dependent on individuals’ perception of their ability to deal with that threat positively.

Nicole Mills 2009 conducted an experiment measuring French learning students' self-efficacy. She found that the students' self-efficacy developed over the semester in which students had learned French through Problem-Based Learning (PBL). The PBL course curriculum provided students with ongoing feedback from both their instructor and peers about their performance. Bandura stated that self-esteem could act as a mitigating factor in anxiety generating circumstances. Through feedback from both instructors and peers, students feel more inclined to do better not to “embarrass” themselves in front of their peers. The PBL used anxiety as a positive outcome in teaching and learning the French language to boost students’ confidence throughout the semester, bringing about higher self-efficacy.

Confidence is a socially-defined construct; what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave (Bandura, 1986). Learners with greater confidence will be more likely to develop their language abilities further than those with less confidence.

In this study, we will look at how people with different English language competencies judge their capabilities of performance. We hope that this study will advance the understanding of desirability for people to have high self-efficacy in their foreign language concepts. Though participants will have a comprehension of the English language, we must look at how confident and comfortable they are using it in English speaking environments. With the concept of confidence in speaking a second language, it is said, “Many learners experience anxiety when they feel that they are unable to be themselves when speaking a new language, and more advanced learners may be more sensitive to their true personality and the version of themselves they can communicate in the new language” (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986).

The research aims to see if our language capabilities impact our confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, anxiety, and stress when we are exposed to a language that is not of our mother tongue. When having to deal with a language foreign to us, do our confidence, and self-esteem levels drop as a result of our ability with the language? Do our anxiety and stress levels rise? Also, does this impact our self-efficacy when dealing with the language?

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the relationship between confidence, self-esteem, anxiety, self-efficacy, and stress impacted by ESL learning.

Participants and Setting

The participant pool consisted of 130 candidates, including two different English-speaking classes, Primary English language speakers, which was used as a control group, and Secondary English language speakers. The latter had three subcategories: beginner, intermediate and advanced.

The participant pool consisted of approximately 26% primary English language speakers and 74% secondary English speakers, with the subcategories consisting of roughly 34.5% beginners, 31% intermediate, and 34.5% advanced ESL speakers.

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<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Characteristics of Study Participants</th>
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<td>English Language Use</td>
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The questionnaires were shared online using Google Drive. Then they were spread through the internet to immediate participants being final-year psychology students of Payame Noor University and close family and friends being asked to participate in the study through social media resources that were then spread and shared onwards, using the snowball effect.

**Instrumentation**

Before the surveys, two questions were asked to determine which categories participants fall under:

1. Do you speak English as your primary or secondary language? Where participants chose between the two answers and for those that chose "Secondary", the participants then had to choose:

2. What level of English language abilities do you think to be capable of? Participants were able to select either beginner, intermediate or advanced.

Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale was used to assess self-esteem as it is a widely known survey to measure self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale consists of 10 items, half of which being worded negatively and the other half positively, that ask participants to evaluate their current feelings. All questions provided are based on self-esteem. Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale is a Likert-type scale with the item's answers being on a four-point scale ranging from strongly agree to disagree strongly. Items worded negatively are reversely scored, and all items are then summed together where the higher the score, the greater the overall self-esteem from that person.

To test self-efficacy in relation to the English language, an adapted version of Nicole Mills Self Belief Instrument was used. Originally a 40-question self-efficacy survey, it was shortened down to a 5 question self-efficacy survey based on the first 35 questions of the original due to the repetition and similarity of questions, the author made the judgment of this, and where the question asked about the feelings of students towards the French language (as it was originally a questionnaire used for students of French schools), it was adapted and replaced to ask the questions about the English language. The Self-Belief Instrument questions range in answers on a scale of 0-7, 0 being "no chance" in completion of what the question asks and seven beings "completely certain". When the scores are summed, the results will show the higher the total, the greater the person's self-belief to perform tasks using the English language (minimum figure = 0, maximum figure = 35). Running a Cronbach's Alpha on this scale shows that there is a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .883, which indicates a high level of internal consistency of our scale within our sample population (88% reliability).

To measure confidence in relation to English, an adapted version of the final five questions of Nicole Mills Self Belief Instrument were used, as it measured confidence to pass English classes over five various grades, originally the grades in the questions involved the use of letter grading (e.g. "How confident are you that you will get a grade better than B?"); this was converted to a percentage grade (e.g. "How confident are you that you will get a grade better than 70%?"), as to not confuse what the aim of the grade was for participants. The author made the judgment of this. As the self-efficacy scale used, it also measured answers on a scale of 0 -7, 0 being "no chance" in completion of what the question asks and seven beings "completely certain". When the scores are added, the results will show the higher the score, the greater the person's confidence in their English language use (minimum figure = 0, maximum figure= 35). Running a Cronbach's Alpha on this scale shows that there is a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .942, which indicates a high level of internal consistency for our scale within our sample population (94% reliability).

A second language acquisition survey was used to measure second-language performance anxiety, provided by Mark Davies of Brigham Young University. The survey was adapted to suit the study, cutting out a secondary part that involves matching puzzle pieces through pictures, and four questions that did not fit the purpose of the current study were also removed. Initially, a survey with answers on a scale of 1-5, the scoring had to be reformulated for the study, so scoring was made, like Nicole Mills Self Belief Instrument, on a scale ranging from 0-7 to be later evaluated by adding all the scores together and the higher the score, the less perceived anxiety from the person (minimum figure = 0, maximum figure = 70), the judgment of this was made by the author. One item of the questionnaire (question 2) is phrased negatively while the rest are positive. This question is the only one reversely scored in the questionnaire. Running a Cronbach's Alpha on this scale shows that there is a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .704, which indicates a high level of internal consistency for our scale within our sample population (70% reliability).

Sheldon Cohen's Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (1988) was used, as it is the most widely used and reliable measure of the perception of stress faced by a person. The PSS is a 10-item questionnaire that is designed to tap how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives to be. Six of the items are worded negatively, and the remaining four are phrased positively. Scoring for the four positive questions is reversed and all scored are added together; the higher the score, the greater the perceived stress is to be.
Procedure
The complete survey was hosted through Google Drive, with a cover letter explaining the study and purpose of the survey. It was noted that all participants had a choice to participate and submit their questionnaires and that they must be older than 18. Participants then went on to complete the survey after the cover letter.

Results
Data Analysis
The data were entered into the statistical analysis software. An Independent-Sample T-Test was run to test the significance of the difference between the means of two independent samples, in this case being Primary and Secondary language use in all of the outcome measures. A One Way ANOVA was also run using the data to compare all groups (Primary, Secondary; beginner, intermediate and advanced) in the study on all of the outcome variables, measuring the means in each group and their significant differences between the groups.

Independent-Samples T-Test
Independent-Sample T-Tests were run for all variables on all outcome measures (self-esteem, self-efficacy, confidence, anxiety, and stress).

An Independent-Sample T-Test was conducted to compare the self-esteem scores for primary English-language users and secondary English-language users. There was no significant difference in scores for primary (M = 24.24, SD = 4.82) and secondary, M = 22.64, SD = 4.78; t (128) = 1.67, p = .1 (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 1.6, 95% CI: -2.9 to 3.49) was small (eta squared = .02).

An Independent-Sample T-Test was conducted to compare self-efficacy scores for primary English language users and secondary English language users. There was a significant difference in scores for primary (M = 31.88, SD = 4.1) and secondary, M = 27.05, SD = 7.11; t (128) = 3.74, p = .000 (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 4.83, 95% CI: 2.28 to 7.38) was large (eta squared = .1).

An Independent-Sample T-Test was conducted to compare confidence scores for primary English language users and secondary English language users. There was a significant difference in scores for primary (M = 48.06, SD = 9.96) and secondary, M = 42.64, SD = 9.95; t (128) = 2.73, p = .007 (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = 5.42, 95% CI: 1.49 to 9.35) was moderate (eta squared = .06).

A second Independent-Sample T-Test was conducted to compare the perceived stress scores for primary English language users and secondary English language users. There was no significant difference in scores for primary (M = 21.15, SD = 8.42) and secondary, M = 21.58, SD = 6.25; t (128) = -.32, p = .75 (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -.44, 95% CI: -.15 to 2.28) was small (eta squared = .01).

| Table 2. Independent-Samples T-Test of Primary and Secondary English-Language Use Group Statistics |
|---------------------------------|---------|----------|---------------|---------------|
| Language Use                    | N       | Mean     | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
| Self-esteem                     |         |          |                |                |
| Primary                         | 34      | 24.2353  | 4.81827        | .82633         |
| Secondary                       | 96      | 22.6354  | 4.77740        | .48759         |
| Self-efficacy                   |         |          |                |                |
| Primary                         | 34      | 31.8824  | 4.08816        | .70111         |
| Secondary                       | 96      | 27.0521  | 7.11170        | .72583         |
| Confidence                      |         |          |                |                |
| Primary                         | 34      | 29.7353  | 5.90485        | 1.01267        |
| Secondary                       | 96      | 21.8229  | 9.28042        | .94718         |
| Anxiety                         |         |          |                |                |
| Primary                         | 34      | 48.0588  | 9.96339        | 1.70871        |
| Secondary                       | 96      | 42.6354  | 9.95370        | 1.01590        |
| Stress                          |         |          |                |                |
| Primary                         | 34      | 21.1471  | 8.42123        | 1.44423        |
| Secondary                       | 96      | 21.5833  | 6.25033        | .63792         |
One-Way Between-Groups NOVA

One-Way Between-Group ANOVA was conducted to analyze the variance of the variables on all outcome measures. Subjects were divided into four groups according to their English language ability (Group 0: Primary English language users [advanced level by default]; and the remaining groups comprised of those who used ESL; Group 1: Beginner level English users; Group 2: Intermediate level English users and Group 3: Advanced level English users).

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of the perceived level of English language on self-esteem levels. There was a statistically significant difference at the p < .05 level in self-esteem scores across the four groups F (3, 126 = 11.81, p = .000). Bonferroni posthoc comparisons of the four groups indicate that the primary English-language (PEL) use group (M = 24.24, 95% CI [22.55, 25.92]) gave significantly higher self-esteem ratings than the beginner English group (M = 19.97, 95% CI [18.41, 21.53]), p = .001, and comparisons between the beginner group also gave significantly lower self-esteem ratings than the advanced (ESL) group (M = 25.88, 95% CI [24.35, 27.41]), p = .000 and the advanced (ESL) group (M = 26.68, 95% CI [20.68, 23.32]) gave significantly lower self-esteem ratings than the advanced (ESL) group (M = 26.68, 95% CI [20.68, 23.32]), p = .003.

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of the perceived level of English language on self-efficacy levels. There was a statistically significant difference at the p < .05 level in self-efficacy scores across the four groups F (3, 126 = 65.4, p = .000). Bonferroni posthoc comparisons of the four groups indicate that the PEL use group (M = 31.88, 95% CI [30.46, 33.31]) gave significantly higher self-efficacy ratings than the beginner English group (M = 19.58, 95% CI [17.51, 21.64]), p = .000, and comparisons between the PEL group (M = 31.88, 95% CI [30.46, 33.31]) also significantly higher scores than the intermediate ESL group (M = 29.95, 95% CI [27.57, 30.43]), p = .05.

The beginner ESL group (M = 19.58, 95% CI [17.51, 21.64]) gave significantly lower self-efficacy ratings than the intermediate (ESL) group (M = 29.95, 95% CI [27.57, 30.43]), p = .000, and also the beginner ESL group results were significantly lower than that of the Advanced ESL group (M = 32.76, 95% CI [31.74, 33.77]), p = .000.

The intermediate ESL group (M = 29.95, 95% CI [27.57, 30.43]) gave significantly lower self-esteem ratings than the advanced ESL group (M = 32.76, 95% CI [31.74, 33.77]), p = .004.

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of the perceived level of English language on levels of confidence. There was a statistically significant difference at the p < .05 level in self-efficacy scores across the four groups F (3, 126 = 49.67), p = .000. Bonferroni posthoc comparisons of the four groups indicate that the PEL use group (M = 29.74, 95% CI [27.68, 31.8]) gave significantly higher confidence ratings than the beginner English group (M = 13.73, 95% CI [11.5, 16]), p = .000, and comparisons between the PEL group also gave significantly higher scores than the intermediate ESL group (M = 21.8, 95% CI [19.15, 24.45]), p = .000.

The beginner English group (M = 13.73, 95% CI [11.5, 16]) gave significantly lower results than the intermediate ESL group (M = 21.8, 95% CI [19.15, 24.45]), p = .000, and also gave significantly lower results than the advanced ESL group (M = 29.94, 95% CI [27.85, 32]), p = .000.

The intermediate ESL group (M = 21.8, 95% CI [19.15, 24.45]), gave significantly lower results than the advanced ESL group (M = 29.94, 95% CI [27.85, 32]), p = .000.

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of the perceived level of English language on anxiety levels. There was a statistically significant difference at the p < .05 level in self-efficacy scores across the four groups F (3, 126 = 12.77), p = .000. Bonferroni posthoc comparisons of the four groups indicate that the PEL use group (M = 48.06, 95% CI [44.58, 51.54]) gave significantly lower anxiety ratings than the beginner English group (M = 36.48, 95% CI [32.88, 40.09]), p = .000.

Comparisons between the beginner ESL group (M = 36.48, 95% CI [32.88, 40.09]) also gave significantly higher anxiety scores than the intermediate ESL group (M = 42.93, 95% CI [40.3, 45.57]), p = .033, and the beginner ESL group also reported significantly higher anxiety results than the advanced ESL group (M = 48.52, 95% CI [45.53, 51.5]), p = .000.

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of the perceived level of English language on levels of stress. There was a statistically significant difference at the p < .05 level in self-efficacy scores across the four groups F (3, 126 = 4.65), p = .004. Bonferroni posthoc comparisons of the four groups indicate that the advanced ESL use group (M = 18.15, 95% CI [15.77, 20.54]) gave significantly lower stress ratings than the beginner English group (M = 23.06, 95% CI [21.32, 24.88]), p = .018, and also the advanced ESL group gave significantly lower stress ratings than the intermediate English group (M = 23.73, 95% CI [21.66, 25.81]), p = .006.
Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between ESL and its effect on a person's self-esteem, self-efficacy, confidence, anxiety, and stress. Results show the expected significance between all outcome measures and different language abilities. Between ESL groups (beginner, intermediate and advanced), it was found that all variables have shown a vast difference in all of the outcome measures. The beginner ESL group has shown a vast difference in self-esteem compared to those of a higher English language ability (intermediate and advanced and primary English-language users), where their self-esteem was much lower than the higher-level groups. As expected, each level of English language ability has shown a difference where self-esteem was lower than that of the group higher than them in the English language (e.g. intermediate vs advanced). Advanced ESL groups did not show a significant difference compared with the primary English-language users; this was expected as both groups should have the same ability in English language comprehension and executive functioning.

Findings show the same pattern across all outcome measures; however, this is not the stress case. The significant difference in stress throughout the groups has shown that the advanced ESL group had a lower amount of stress than the rest of the variables. Still, there was no other difference when comparing beginner, intermediate, and primary English-language users.

The findings of the study correlate with the hypotheses challenging the study; when dealing with a new language, several psychosocial factors are affected by the challenging stimulus. As results show, the less we know, or the less ability we have in a new language, in this case, English, the greater impact it has on us. Self-esteem and confidence levels greatly plummet among learners; the lower ability there is in the language, the lower our self-esteem and confidence drop when having to deal with it too.

Our self-belief also takes a toll due to our language ability. Findings suggest that the lower a person's ability in English, the lower their self-belief in carrying out tasks using that language, such as reading a book or newspaper or comprehending and joining in on a conversation spoken in the new language. This could be a factor dependent on one’s self-confidence and self-esteem, bringing down their self-belief as we have seen that levels for all of them become lower across the ability of the ESL groups.

Anxiety is a factor dependent on social constructs (e.g. confidence), the anxiety felt by participants may be more associated with worry aspects of anxiety; Bandura stated that self-esteem could act as a mitigating force; it is not surprising to see that anxiety is higher in the roles of beginners compared to the advanced ESL group, as we’ve seen with confidence and self-esteem lowering though the lower English language groups in regard to the English language, anxiety is raised within these groups. The less confident we are with the ability of the second language we must use, the less comfortable we become dealing with it and communicating through it, which ultimately raises our anxiousness.

However, our results for participants' perceived stress have found that there was no difference within the groups, though advanced ESL learners have shown a lower amount of stress than all other groups. This was an expected result as it has been hypothesized that stress levels are likely to increase in groups of a lower ability in the English language. However, this is not completely unforeseen as the perceived stress scale questions do not deal with stress in relation to the English language, yet perceived stress of events that have transpired for the subject within the last month.

The implications of the study correlated directly to other research found in this field. Language learning anxiety has been investigated by researchers over the past thirty years and has been recognized and identified as being, and having, a negative impact upon second and foreign language learning (Aida, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). From the current study, we can see some aspects of what language learning anxiety is influencing and hope to understand its effects and causes better.

Though there was no difference in stress between groups, past research has shown that there is limited knowledge distinguishing the stressors for language learning. Though it is known first hand that language learning is a stressful feat to master, it is hard to pinpoint specifically what factors apply as stressors when learning a new language, whether its social factors or academic factors.

Findings in this study imply a deeper relationship among anxiety, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and confidence in second language use and interactions and that second language use and learning have wide social implications. Future studies should focus on the interface among these factors. As the migration of people moving around the globe continues, different social aspects of the integration of migrants should be considered, such as the knowledge and acquisition of other secondary languages, different age groups, and their comparisons of psychosocial construct affectedness, and cultural factors at play.

In conclusion, the study has found that the lower the ability in English as a second language user, the lower that person’s self-esteem, confidence and self-belief is likely to be when dealing with English, and in correlation to that, anxiety levels will be higher in regard to the ESL; self-esteem and confidence rise, self-efficacy is raised along with that and the language users' anxiety concerning the second language drops. Advanced second language users perceive identical results as native English users in terms of self-esteem, self-efficacy, anxiety, and confidence. No
correlation to stress within English language ability has been found.

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