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FLL Proficiency and its Link with Self-perceived Performance in the EFL Classroom: An Exploratory Study

Thomas Lockley

Abstract

This paper investigates some possible factors involved in proficiency self-perception (PSP) increases in reading, writing, speaking and listening in 103 language learners over the course of one academic year. It compares these by ability level and furthermore correlates the speaking PSP score with actual improvement in performance, as measured by a recognized speaking test. Higher level students were found to have higher PSP scores, although underestimated their actual proficiency while lower level students had more accurate PSP scores. PSP scores were generally in tier order. A look at the literature and research context suggests that curricula that concentrate on improving how students feel about their own language skills, that take place in positive learning environments where support is available and feedback is individually targeted may contribute to more accurate and rising PSP.

Introduction

It seems evident that if a learner believes that natural talent is necessary in order to achieve a high level of proficiency, then they would need to believe that they possess such talent in order to attain such a goal. Similarly, believing you do not possess such talent implies that a learner would be likely to set lower goals and not even attempt to strive for such 'perfection'.

(Mercer & Ryan, 2010, p. 440)

I find myself agreeing with the logic of this quote and even reflecting on my schooldays when I tried to avoid effort in anything resembling maths or science because I “knew” I would fail. Yet, as an educator I would like to find a way to mitigate this, to find a way of using self-perceptions to increase proficiency and feelings of ease in class, to enable students, whatever their ability, to feel that they are able to achieve a measure of success in foreign language learning (FLL). I believe knowledge of how learners self-perceive their own proficiency could be important for a whole host of reasons including curriculum construction, teaching methods and strategies and classroom group dynamics. Hence this research was originally conceived to explore how proficiency self-perception (PSP) might be measured and to attempt to find factors involved in its construction.

As such this paper is an attempt to further research in this relatively neglected area and answer the call by Mercer and Ryan (2010, p. 443) for research both ‘at various language proficiency levels [and] across skill areas within FLL’, and into the ‘nature of possible relationships between actual achievement and mindsets’ (2010, p. 443). To increase student well-being and proficiency, it is clearly highly important for educators to ensure that students feel they are progressing positively, yet to be conscious of shortcomings so that these can be attended to. This is not always the case, for example Prichard and Maki (2006) found that the Japanese learners of English in their study tended to self-perceive their general linguistic ability lower than the reality.

Literature Review

Dörnyei (2009) notes that there are a confusing plethora of concepts and theories connected with the theme of “self”, and mentions a figure of 75000 articles

from an internet search he carried out. The problem is not that there are so many, if they all referred to different and complementing concepts then it would indicate a wealth of accessible information about the “self”, but many of the terms used overlap and even duplicate other theories (some researchers compete with each other to popularize their term) thereby making it challenging and confusing to get a succinct picture of the state of human knowledge in this area. Despite this plethora, the research presented here appears to cover an area which has not been studied in exactly this form anywhere else and therefore I am sadly adding to this alphabet soup of “selves” with the term PSP, referring to the individual learner’s self-perception of their own level of proficiency.

The term ‘self-concept’ (James, 1896) provides a useful umbrella term for all areas of the study of the “self”. Self-concept refers to any belief about the “self” including for example gender and sexuality role, educational ability, racial/national identity, in fact everything to do with personality and beliefs about it. As the James citation indicates, this is not a new concept, but it has rarely been studied FLL.

Sarah Mercer in fact appears to be the first to treat FLL self-concept in her book “Towards an understanding of language learner self-concept” (2011). She notes that it is an understudied area closely connected to willingness to communicate and therefore potentially key to language learning. She found that higher-level language learners have a more fully developed sense of self-concept, and that the factors involved are largely socially constructed; connected with belief systems. Self-efficacy (beliefs of self competence) figures highly.

But how important exactly is PSP in the panoply of language learning, does it play a large role? Gagné’s (2004) Canadian study concluded that although IQ is by

far the best predictor of academic achievement, more important than the other factors by five times on average, there are three further factors that contribute to or detract from high achievement. Interpersonal traits are highest (for example, self-perceptions and self-efficacy), followed by environmental, (for example social factors and psychological influences) and finally, chance, which I will not treat here because it cannot be controlled for in the same way as the other two factors. PSP would come under the interpersonal traits.

Interpersonal

Hsieh and Kang (2010) found Korean EFL learners with a higher opinion of themselves tended to do better and to believe success was a result of their own personality; unsuccessful learners tended to perceive their failure due to external factors. Anyadubalu's (2010) Thai study concurred with Hsieh and Kang (2010) that higher self-efficacy equaled lower anxiety and hence better performance; high levels of anxiety adversely affected acquisition and performance and vice-versa.

Mercer and Ryan (2010), investigating learner beliefs about talent in language learning, found no common perception about whether hard work - a component of the interpersonal - or natural talent - related to IQ - contributed most. Their Austrian and Japanese interviewees held multiple and sometimes contradictory self-concepts about the learning of language as a whole, extending down to sub-areas such as the four skills and grammar, for example someone might perceive her speaking as poor, but listening as good. This variation was less pronounced in the lower proficiency Japanese interviewees; they tended to see language learning as a 'more global entity' (2010, p. 439), simply as English rather than the language being composed of different subsets. The researchers suggested this was because,

'as proficiency levels rise, finer distinctions are made between different domains and aspects of language learning' (2010, p. 439) implying that higher achievers are more able to perceive their true ability, which in the context of this article would mean they have better PSP. Supporting this standpoint, Prichard and Maki's (2006) higher level Japanese learners were able to distinguish between the proficiency in the four skills and generally perceived their passive reading and listening skills higher than the active skills of speaking and writing. This suggests that PSP is a highly important factor in FLL.

Environmental

Ushioda (2003) treats the environmental, asserting that perception and cognition are socially grounded and fluctuate depending on perceptions of the learning environment; the social setting where learning occurs is of prime importance.

Jamshidnejad (2010, p. 20) reported that when an 'interlocutor's level or proficiency and social status are perceived as higher', learners either step up to the mark so as not to lose face or give up all together, not even attempting to speak in the L2. He argues against the stereotype that the individual language learner is the only source of 'making problems in L2 communication' (Jamshidnejad, 2010, p. 20), agreeing with Gagné (2004) that self-perception, actual proficiency level, gender, social status and the reason for communication, all environmental and interpersonal self-concepts, play key roles in success. Environment then would contribute to PSP, either positively or negatively, suggesting that were one to find the ideal environment, then PSP could be improved and perhaps even proficiency itself boosted.

Practice

Anyadubalu (2010) suggests student centered methods, including pair and group work rather than whole class activities help create positive self-perceptions. This view is backed up by de Saint Léger and Storch (2009) who found that initially whole class discussions tended to daunt their Australian learners of French. Over time however, willingness to contribute increased and self-perceptions became more accurate as they became more confident and proficient in their vocabulary and fluency. Again higher proficiency seems to lead to more accurate self-perception of actual level.

Therefore, PSP seems to be situation and status dependent, improving with proficiency increases; higher achievers are more likely to perceive their level accurately with self-belief contributing to better performance. All of the researchers cited in this literature review believe that student-centered and communicative methods are likely to contribute to improved self-perception and higher achievement. This suggests that PSP benefits from such educational environments and to improve PSP, educators should be looking towards supportive and active learning environments where students feel they have the support to be able to actively aid and conceive of their own improvement.

This article will report on learner PSP in the four language skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening over the course of a year and compare the results by proficiency level. Additionally it will investigate how this links with actual improvement in speaking performance, by comparing PSP with actual performance on a recognized speaking test.

The research question is: *How do learner self-perceptions of proficiency change over a year?*

Methodology

Setting and Participants

The participants (N=103) were first year students, unknown to the researcher, at a private Japanese foreign language university. The university offers majors in English, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, International Communication and International Language and Culture and puts a heavy emphasis on communicative teaching methods with most teachers teaching in the L2/3. All participants in this research were enrolled in the English department, which separates students into proficiency tiers at the beginning of the university year on the basis of their performance in the Kanda English Proficiency Test (KEPT); the same test used to measure actual improvement in this research. All students also sit the TOEFL test at the end of the academic year; tier one students had an average TOEFL score of 482; tier two 461.6; tier three 449.3; tier four 452.1.

Instruments

The questionnaire used in this study has been used previously for measuring the relationship between students' self-perceptions of their grammatical competence and its relationship with speaking proficiency (see Lockley & Farrell, 2011). It was originally created from data collected in two focus groups (n=9) concerning the issues of participants' attitudes to grammar and other factors influencing confidence in speaking.

For this research, the questionnaire was administered at the start of semester one in March 2010 and at the end of semester two in February 2011. It was designed to collect numerical data to establish a value of PSP in the four language skills. This was done by asking three virtually identical, but differently worded questions on

each skill, the rationale being to increase data reliability. For example, these are the three questions which determined speaking PSP:

- 1) I can speak well in English
- 2) I am good at speaking in English
- 3) I feel confident in my ability to speak English.

Participants indicated their confidence on a five-point Likert scale which when added together allowed a maximum self-perception score of 15 points for each skill.

To establish actual proficiency, the KEPT speaking examination was used. The students took the exam shortly before the first semester and shortly after the second semester, coinciding closely with the questionnaire administration. No such pre and post first year examination figures were available for any other skill. This research will report the percentage increase in performance for all four skills, but only speaking can be compared with a test performance.

The KEPT test requires the three or four examinees to hold an impromptu conversation for seven minutes after reading a short topic prompt. The two independent assessors grade fluency, lexis/grammar, pronunciation, and conversation skill out of 4, their grades are averaged to find the student score. Bonk and Ockey (2003) examined the facets of this test's administrations (examinee, prompt, rater, and rating items) and their contribution to score variance, finding that the Rasch model enables examinees to be reliably separated by ability. Van Moere (2006) investigated test taker reactions to the group discussion format and found that the test was a reliable measure of a candidate's ability in L2 speaking.

The tiering policy at the university where this research took place in 2010 was based on the results of the initial KEPT test in March 2010 (also used in this research). The first year English department students were divided up in to three main tiers with five classes in each. An additional tier of the very lowest students comprised only one class. This study utilized one class from each of the top three tiers plus the single class in tier four.

Findings

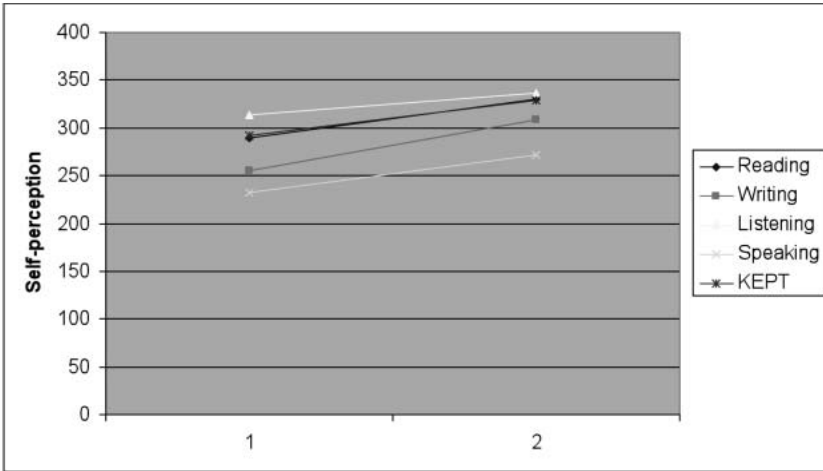
Tables 1–4 give the total PSP and KEPT scores for all participants in that tier for both March 2010 and February 2011. The percentage increase for all four skills and KEPT are tabulated. Figures 1-4 show the same results in a visual format to complement the numerical data. Table 5 indicates the average individual scores by tier and Table 6 indicates the average individual KEPT scores in both March 2010 and February 2011 with the percentage increase, visually complimented by Figure 5.

Table 1. Top Tier (n=34)

PSP	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KEPT
March 2010	290	255	314	233	291.5
February 2011	330	309	336	272	329.1
Total increase	40	54	22	39	37.6
% Increase	13.79	21.18	7.01	16.74	12.9

Numbers rounded up to 2 decimal places

Figure 1.



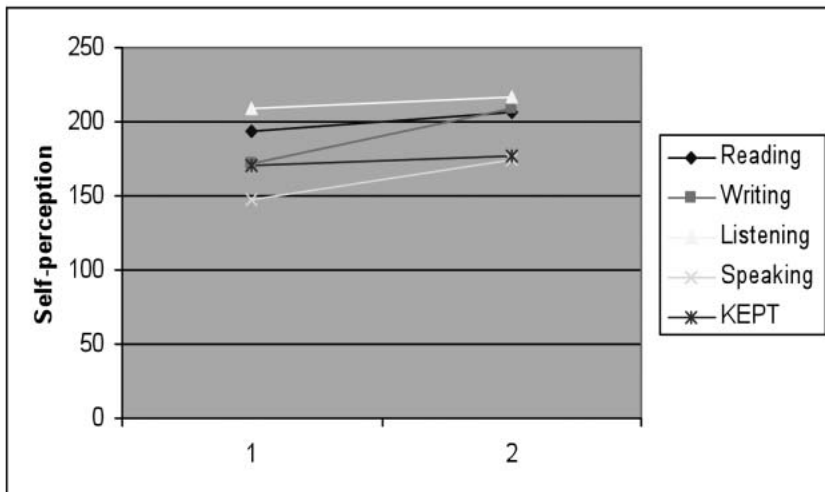
The top tier (Table 1 and Figure 1), experienced a rise in PSP in all four skill areas. Writing and speaking, (21 per cent; 16 per cent) came out on top, with reading and listening (13 per cent; 7 per cent) following. The KEPT test results also rose, curiously following the reading score almost exactly, but tier one massively underestimated their real speaking score.

Table 2. Second Tier (n=25)

PSP	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KEPT
March 2010	194	172	209	148	170.9
February 2011	207	209	217	174	176.3
Total increase	13	37	8	26	5.4
% Increase	6.7	21.5	3.83	17.57	3.16

Numbers rounded up to 2 decimal places

Figure 2.



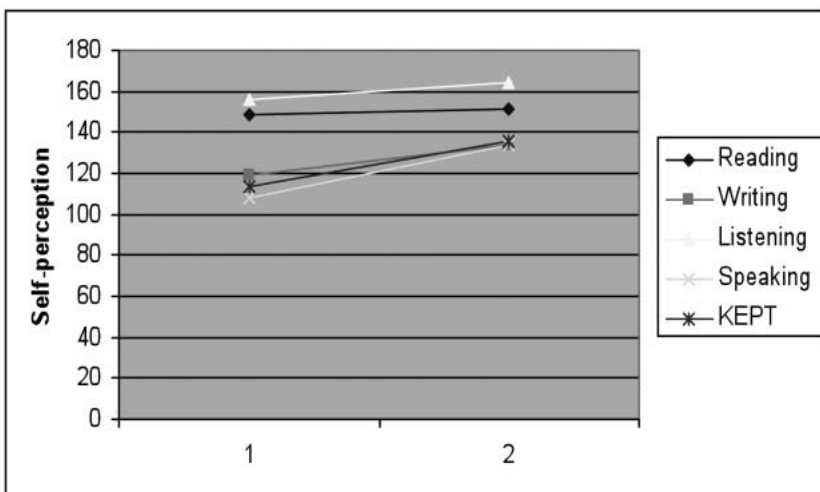
The second tier (Table 2 and Figure 2) self-perceived their skills improvement in a similar fashion, writing and speaking first followed by reading and listening. They had the least actual improvement on the KEPT test, only 3 per cent, but still perceived their speaking to have improved by 17 per cent. The KEPT score rose only 3 per cent but at the end of the second semester matched speaking PSP almost exactly. This shows that tier two got better at PSP through the year, their rise in PSP was due to a better understanding of their proficiency level.

Table 3. Third Tier (n=19)

PSP	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KEPT
March 2010	149	119	156	108	113.1
February 201	151	134	164	134	135.8
Total increase	2	15	8	26	22.7
% Increase	1.34	12.61	5.13	24.1	20.1

Numbers rounded up to 2 decimal places

Figure 3.



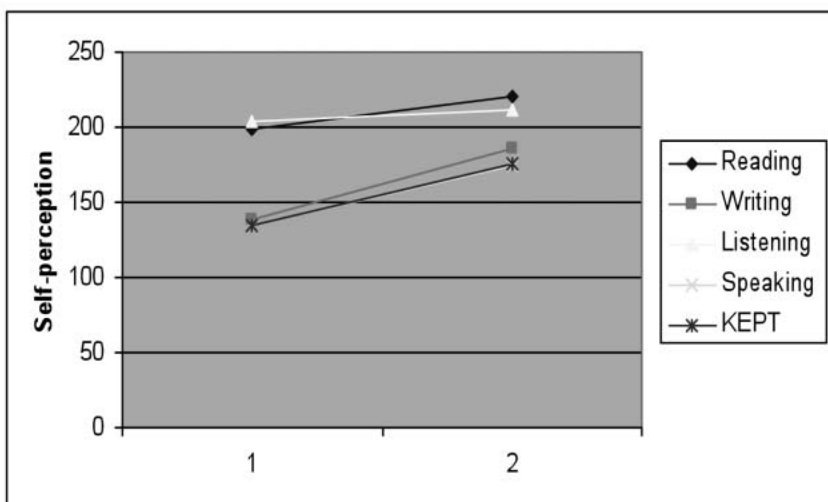
The third tier (Table 3 and Figure 3) judged their PSP improvement slightly differently, the highest being speaking with 22 per cent this time and the lowest being reading at 1 per cent. As with tier two, PSP at the end of the second semester closely matched the KEPT score, the large increase in PSP brought them to approximate parity with their true proficiency.

Table 4. Fourth Tier (n=25)

PSP	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	KEPT
March 2010	199	139	204	135	134
February 2011	221	186	212	175	175.9
Total increase	22	47	8	40	41.9
% Increase	11.06	33.81	3.92	29.63	31.27

Numbers rounded up to 2 decimal places

Figure 4.



The lowest group (Table 4 and Figure 4) had the largest variance, their PSP rose highest in writing, 33 per cent and lowest in listening, 3 per cent. They were also the only group to underestimate their improvement over the course of the year, their PSP speaking improvement at 29 per cent, actually being lower than their improvement on the KEPT test which was 31 per cent. Tier three was best overall at PSP however, with the scores at both the beginning and the end of the academic year being almost identical to the KEPT score.

Table 5. Average self-perception scores compared by tier.

	First Tier	Second Tier	Third Tier	Fourth Tier	All four tiers
Reading March 2010	8.53	7.76	7.84	7.96	32.09
Reading February 2011	9.47	8.28	7.95	8.84	34.5
Writing March 2010	7.5	6.88	6.26	5.56	26.2
Writing February 2011	8.68	8.36	7.05	7.44	31.53
Listening March 2010	9.24	8.36	8.21	8.16	33.97
Listening February 2011	9.85	8.68	8.63	8.48	35.64
Speaking March 2010	6.82	5.92	5.68	5.40	23.82
Speaking February 2011	7.85	6.96	7.05	7	28.86

Numbers rounded up to 2 decimal places

Tables and Figures 1-4 give a relative score for all attainment levels, but the individual figures (Table 5) show a picture of difference in PSP based on the actual scores that the participants assigned themselves. The figure represents the average PSP score in that tier. These show that, with the major anomaly of the reading PSP in March 2010 and the lesser anomaly of the February 2011 tier two speaking, those who are in higher tiers, rate themselves higher on the PSP scale.

It also shows that although the percentage increase in PSP speaking and writing were highest for all attainment levels, the actual PSP scores are the lowest;

the figures added together for all four tiers being 23.82 at the beginning of the year and 28.86 at the end. All the other figures are significantly above 30 with the exception of writing in March 2010, but even writing has risen to 31.53 overall in February 2011. Speaking PSP was lower than any other skill both at both the beginning and the end of the year. Participants overwhelmingly believed speaking to be their worst skill.

In all but one tier, listening skills are rated with the smallest improvement but the reality is that participants perceived their listening skills much higher at the beginning of their university year and these rose from 34.13 to 35.95.

Reading has similarly close figures, though less marked and this again despite the lack of PSP improvement in reading, participants were already confident in their abilities at the beginning of the year.

Table 6. Average KEPT scores compared by tier.

	First Tier	Second Tier	Third Tier	Fourth Tier	All four tiers
KEPT March 2010	8.57	6.84	5.95	5.36	26.72
KEPT February 2011	9.68	7.05	7.15	7.04	30.92
% Increase	12.95	3.07	20.17	31.34	15.72

Numbers rounded up to 2 decimal places

Figure 5.

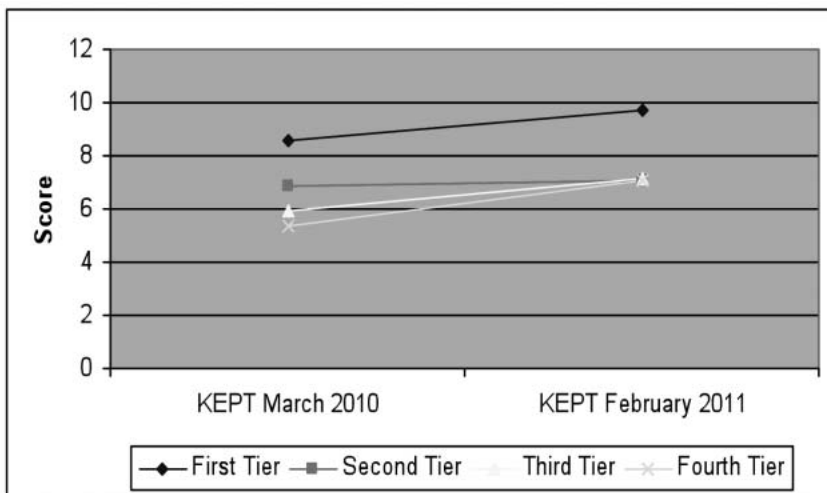


Table 6 and Figure 5 show that the KEPT test results in March 2010, on which basis the students were separated in to different tiers, have changed quite considerably by the end of the year. Although the highest tier are clearly still the highest, and in fact have pulled away from the other three tiers, the three lowest tiers are now nearly equal in their KEPT scores. The percentage increase shows that although the first tier has experienced a large increase in performance at 12 per cent, the third and fourth tiers have experienced huge increases, 20 per cent and 31 per cent respectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

This was a small-scale study in a Japanese university and may not be widely generalizable. The findings from the numerical comparisons and the literature all complement our understanding of how PSP and reality are linked in these

language learners. It is regrettable that only speaking test data was available, no correlation for reading, writing or listening test scores was possible. In future studies not only should pre and post scores in all four skills be established to strengthen the arguments and data sets, but statistical correlation should be calculated using ANOVA or similar methods.

Similarly, this study does not allow for teacher influence, it seems unlikely that individual teachers would have no affect whatsoever on learner performance, so in future studies a way to allow for this should be found. Despite these limitations however, many of the findings do generally concord with other studies mentioned in the literature which took place in countries as far removed as Japan, Korea, Thailand, Austria, Australia and Iran; this must give some strength to the findings.

All language learners who participated in this study perceived all four language skills to have improved over the year. This suggests that the communicative and L2/3 focussed teaching methods at the university in question are probably working, particularly for the lower learners who saw massive improvements in both PSP and actual speaking proficiency. This supports Anyadubalu (2010), de Saint Léger and Storch (2009) and Ushioda (2003) that concentration on learning environments, student centered methods, including pair and group work rather than whole class activities helped students feel better about their skills and raised confidence.

Jamshidnejad's (2010) findings also suggested that as learners become more comfortable with their interlocutors, due to a lowering of the social and status barriers, confidence in their own abilities increase. This may help explain the very large increase in performance by the lowest tier in particular, as, with the lowest PSP, it is likely that they initially felt the most anxious on entry to the university.

As they felt more comfortable with the environment their PSP and their actual speaking performance improved; this would concur with Ushioda (2003) as well as other literature.

According to the PSP scores, higher achievers had better PSP scores; they knew they were better. Curiously though they massively over self-perceived their actual rise in proficiency while at the same time being the only tier that had a speaking PSP far below the reality of the KEPT score (see Figure 1), so although their PSP was higher, it was not more accurate. This seems to be a direct contradiction to other studies (Mercer & Ryan, 2010; Mercer, 2011) which found higher level learners were better at PSP. However, if one thinks of the bottom three tiers, it appears to agree with de Saint Léger and Storch (2009) who found that their students got better at self-perceptions over time as they felt more comfortable in their environment and improved their skills.

Of further interest here is the fact that the fourth tier, despite the largest improvement in performance, underestimated that performance, if only slightly. These over self-perceptions are also the opposite of what Prichard and Maki (2006) found in a similar population; they found their Japanese EFL students tended to underestimate their level. However, around two-thirds of their participants claimed to have studied English with a focus on grammar, it is suggested that the major difference here maybe the more communicative approach in this context aiding an increase in PSP and through that actual proficiency. However, that doesn't explain why the higher level participant PSP was similar to Prichard and Maki (2006) and the lower level not.

The biggest rises in PSP across the board were in the active skills, speaking and writing; however participants perceived themselves as having very low levels in

these skills at the outset and they are still lower than reading and listening at the end of the year. This concurs with Prichard and Maki's (2006) findings and suggests that perhaps an emphasis should be put on these two skills, particularly in the early/middle stages of a language education. More research needs to be done to see if this pattern is specific to this context or whether different groups judge their skills in a different order and why. Could it potentially be a rub off from the more passive-skill focused Japanese senior high school EFL lessons (although school curricula are in the process of change and this may not in fact be the case) or is it a wider phenomenon? This could have major implications for curriculum design, should all four skills be given equal weight or should educators veer towards ones where students have lower PSP?

The particularly high rises in PSP and actual speaking proficiency in the lowest two tiers, coupled with the fact that their average KEPT test scores rose to the level of the second, shows that this FLL year was particularly positive for them. However, these students still generally perceived themselves as being lower than the higher tiers, despite the actual improvement. The second tier in particular, despite perceiving themselves higher, in fact had the lowest real improvement and were actually overtaken by the third and nearly the fourth in their test scores. This suggests that PSP may receive a boost from the knowledge that one is in a higher tier, regardless of actual proficiency and could be a strong argument against dividing students in to classes based on ability or proficiency.

Although the research supports the first part of Mercer and Ryan's (2010) quote, regarding higher proficiency at the beginning of this article, it does not find that lower ability learners gave up, quite the reverse in fact. So in the population studied, language learners' PSP are linked to actual ability in some ways, even if it

is not clear why the lowest two tiers so spectacularly improved but mis-perceived this. Perhaps other factors have a far greater bearing on FLL PSP than reality does. Social setting and comfort within it, group dynamics, familiarity, self belief and self-perceived talent all fostered by communicative or student centred teaching methods may help form a language learners' PSP. Could it be that these methods are particularly suitable for mid-level and lower learners?

This study has thrown up more questions than answers, but the practical implications would seem initially to be that teachers and educational institutions should concentrate on improving how their students feel about their own language skills, creating curricula that contribute to this, actively constructing positive learning environments where support is available, feedback is individually targeted and students feel they can flourish. The results of this study indicate that this may lead to higher PSP which may lead to a knock on effect in proficiency. A better knowledge of the factors involved in PSP could lead to more effective foreign language learning curricula. This study concludes by agreeing with Mercer and Ryan (2010, p. 443) once more, that 'the relationship between beliefs about different levels of achievement, various approaches to language learning, and mindsets could be an area of great significance within the foreign language domain' and needs more research, particularly into the role of communicative teaching methods and constructive learning environments within it.

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