Self-efficacy perception of oral communication ability among English as a Second Language (ESL) Technical Students

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Abstract

The declining level of the English language proficiency among Malaysian graduates has caused great concern among employers in Malaysia. Many studies have been conducted on self-efficacy in second and foreign language settings; however, there is a paucity of research on self-efficacy in relation to speaking ability in second language learning, especially among technical college students in Malaysia. This study has been conducted to investigate differences, if any, in self-efficacy in speaking English among 60 technical college ESL students based on gender during two different semesters. Research was conducted using a questionnaire adapted from previous research. The students’ perceived self-efficacy of speaking ability was measured using three constructs, namely ability, activity perception and aspiration. In general, the findings have shown that female students and Semester 5 students tended to possess high levels of self-efficacy. Implications of the findings in relation to theory and practice of self-efficacy and speaking proficiency are further discussed in the paper.

Keywords: self-efficacy; technical students; oral communication; speaking ability

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1.0 Introduction

Self-efficacy refers to a person’s beliefs concerning his or her completion of a task and perceived competency level in performing the task (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy is believed to play a key role in the learning process by helping or hindering a learner’s progress (Bandura, 1984). Bandura further proposed that a person’s attitudes, abilities, and cognitive skills comprise what is known as a ‘self-system’. This system plays a major role in how one perceives situations and how one behaves in response to demanding situations. A person’s belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation forms an essential part in this self-system. Thus, self-efficacy can have an impact on everything from psychological states to behavior and motivation.

1.1 Self-efficacy in Second Language Learning

Self-efficacy has a great impact in academic settings. According to Bandura (1986), the belief in self-efficacy refers to the ability of a student in carrying out an academic task given at a specific level. Studies on ESL learners’ self-efficacy and its relationship to English language achievement have found that the learners’ achievements corresponded to their perceptions of their own ability (Mahyuddin, Elias, Cheong, Muhamad, Noordin & Abdullah, 2006; Schunk & Swartz, 1991). Huang and Chan (1996) found that high self-efficacy pre-service teachers adopted more diverse language learning strategies than low self-efficacy pre-service teachers.

Meanwhile, in other language domains, Wong (2005) found that students who had high writing self-efficacy beliefs spent more time on a writing task, were motivated in earning a good grade and to participate in writing tasks, were willing to try, and were more willing to take risks than students with low self-efficacy beliefs. Students with a higher sense of writing self-efficacy also demonstrate a greater degree of writing development than those with lower self-efficacy for writing. However, students who demonstrate poorer writing achievement have lower self-efficacy than students who demonstrate higher writing achievement (Shell et al., 1989). In a longitudinal study by Wong (2005), students with lower self-efficacy tended to exhibit more negative behaviors including a tendency to be distracted more easily and quit, task avoidance, rushing through a writing task, or taking extended time to complete a task.

1.2 Self-efficacy in Speaking

Speaking is a productive skill that challenges students’ capability to perform a task. The key to communication is the ability to communicate or speak with other people. Speaking is carried out in a real-time which demands learner’s abilities to plan, process and produce the language. This poses as a difficult task for students attempting to master speaking skills, especially ESL learners.

Kim and Lorshbach (2005) conducted a study on self-efficacy and speaking ability of pre-university ESL students at a private university. They found that the students had high levels of self-efficacy in terms of their ability to speak English. The study also revealed that students who are more confident in their speaking ability performed better than those with low efficacy beliefs. Another study conducted by Kim and Lorshbach found that the t-test results for speaking self-efficacy level of female students were significantly higher than male students in terms of ability and aspiration. These findings on gender differences were similar to previous studies carried out on the relationship between gender and self-efficacy.

Similarly, high efficacy students from the Faculty of Social Sciences at a public university were found to be actively involved and to speak more in the classroom. They appeared to be more confident and tended to show a higher interest in performing speaking tasks.

A majority of technical and engineering fields in Malaysian institutions of higher learning are dominated by male students. As such, it would be interesting to investigate whether there is a difference in terms of confidence in speaking between male and female students. Idrus and Saleh (2008) found that female students exhibited higher self-efficacy in areas related to language. This finding is also consistent with a study by Pajares (1996) on gender
and psychological factors in English language learning. They found that female learners have a higher positive attitude towards the language and a liking for it. This finding shows that even though engineering fields are dominated by male students, when it comes to speaking ability in English, female engineering students seemed to be more confident than their male counterparts.

1.3 Communicative English in Technical College

The ability to speak English is important in the engineering field. Studies suggest that only 25% of long-term job success is based on technical knowledge, whereas 75% involve soft skills (Yaakob, Elias and Mahyuddin, 1993). For instance, at job interviews, candidates are assessed not only on their technical knowledge, but also on their communication skills. Being confident and possessing the ability to speak in English proficiently influences the perceptions of would-be employers and gives the job-seeker a higher chance of being hired.

It is undeniable that oral communication skills are essential for engineers who seek to carry out professional practice. Previous research in the field of engineering showed that the English language is of paramount importance in the academic and professional lives of engineering students (Prabhakar, 2004). English is an essential tool in engineering education; therefore, integrating English into engineering, science, and math courses are an effective way to improve the performance of engineering students in both oral and written communication. Engineering students have long been described as having low competency in the English language. Students face a lot of difficulties in using the language and as a result of their poor performance in the English language; many graduates are often unsuccessful in obtaining jobs for which they have applied. Although students are required to use the English language in the classroom, many seem to lack interest in using the language.

This study focuses on engineering students’ ability to speak in English. The English syllabus orientation in polytechnic education systems has been changed from English as Technical Purposes (ETP) to Communicative English (CE) as a result of the polytechnic transformative revamp action plan. It has been designed, in particular, to provide students with useful expressions that may be used in a wide variety of social interactions and situations (Pendergrass et al., 2001). The main course content for Communicative English prepares students for oral communication. Other skills in CE modules are job-hunting skills, description of products and services and processes and procedures, and making enquiries and complaints. It is compulsory for students to obtain a pass for the English language for it currently a required course. Grading is determined by students’ accumulative marks of spoken and written assignments, quizzes and listening tasks for the whole semester. These are then then combined with their final standardized test marks.

Recent studies have shown that a majority of Malaysian graduates are not proficient in the English language, and this affects their job marketability (Abdullah, 2001). The weak level of English language proficiency among Malaysian students seriously needs to be addressed.

Several studies have been conducted, especially in Asia, on the concept of self-efficacy in academic settings. In Malaysia, many studies have focused on correlation between learners’ self-efficacy and various variables, such as learners’ English achievement, motivation, and teachers’ efficacy, but few have focused on gender and level of study. In reviewing the literature, it appears that although many studies have been conducted on self-efficacy in second and foreign language learning settings, research on self-efficacy with regard to speaking ability in second language learning, especially in Malaysia is still lacking. Besides that, it has also been noted that while most studies examined the relationship between self-efficacy and performance in reading and listening skills, few studies have investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and speaking performance. This is likely because reading and listening are more easily to evaluate by objective tests and in addition, the evaluation is easy to control for large populations (Nair et al., 2012).

Thus, it is important to examine self-efficacy beliefs in relation to speaking skills. The aim of this study was to investigate technical college students’ self-efficacy in speaking English in relation to gender and level of study.
2.0 Objectives of The Study

2.1 To investigate any difference in self-efficacy in speaking English between male and female students.
2.2 To investigate any difference in self-efficacy in speaking English between semester 1 and semester 5 students.

3.0 Research Questions

Two research questions will be discussed for the purpose of this research:

3.1 Is there any difference in self-efficacy in speaking English between male and female students?
3.2 Is there any difference in self-efficacy in speaking English between semester 1 and semester 5 students?

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Participants and procedures

The participants of the study comprised 60 students from a Malaysian polytechnic college. They were chosen through purposive sampling. A total of 30 male and 30 female students were randomly chosen by semester (semester 1 and semester 5). The respondents completed the survey questionnaire in class and were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt that each item/statement described their own perception of their speaking ability.

4.2 Instruments

The data were collected using a 23-item 5 point Likert scale questionnaire designed by Hairuzila and Subarna (2007) which was adapted from Bandura (1990) and Mikulecky, Lloyd and Huang (1996). The questionnaire comprised four sections. Section A contains demographic information of the respondents such as gender, level of education, age and level of study. While Section B on group ability consisted of 14 items that focus on students’ perception of their ability to speak in English. Items in this group measure attributes such as ability to participate in discussions conducted fully in English, ability to communicate with lecturers and international students and ability to speak in English with peers. Section C measures grouped activity perception comprising 6 items which address students perceptions’ on activity that require them to speak in English such as group discussion, role play and oral presentations. The final part of the questionnaire, Section D, consisted of 3 items that measures student’s aspiration with respect to speaking in English. Students responded to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Strongly Agree’ to ‘Strongly Disagree’. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

5.0 Finding and Discussions

This section highlights the findings of the study. In this study, the mean score of 3.0 and below represents high self-efficacy while a mean of 3.1 to 5.0 signifies low self-efficacy.

The first objective is on a comparison of self-efficacy between male and female students. Table 1 shows the mean score for male and female students on three dimensions: ability, attitude and aspiration. It revealed that the students in the present study possess low self-efficacy beliefs on all three dimensions. The results indicated that self-efficacy of female students (mean =3.37) was significantly higher than male students (mean=3.8) in terms of ability.
This finding on gender differences is similar to a number of previous studies on the relationship between gender and self-efficacy. Pajares (1996) found that female students exhibit higher self-efficacy in areas related to language. In his study, students were asked to provide confidence judgement on their academic skills and female students reported that they judged themselves to be better writers than the boys. This finding is also consistent with a study by Idrus and Rohani (2008) where female students showed higher self-efficacy levels compared to male students by ability dimension. This shows that female students are more confident than male students in speaking in English.

Meanwhile, the findings showed that there were slight differences in term of attitude and aspiration perception for both groups. This might be because the activities conducted such as group discussion and role-play are part of their course assessment. Therefore, the students found the activities relevant because these activities contribute some weight on their grades.

This study also compared two different groups of students: Semester 1 and Semester 5 students. This comparison was done to find out whether the length of exposure to the English language influenced students’ confidence to speak English. Table 2 shows the mean scores for ability, attitude and aspiration for this two groups. The results showed that Semester 5 students scored significantly higher than Semester 1 students for all three dimensions.

**TABLE 2: Mean scores for Semester 1 and Semester 5 students in English language speaking self-efficacy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Semester 1</th>
<th>Semester 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiration</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This results are consistent with that of Idrus and Sivapalan’s (2007) study on pre-university students which showed that they did have high level of self-efficacy in their speaking ability. This might be due to the fact that Semester 5 students were just completing their industrial training. They are exposed to real world communication in the workplace such as oral presentation and having conversations with other workers. Therefore, through vicarious experiences, they have stronger self-efficacy beliefs in speaking. Meanwhile, Semester 1 students took Communicative English 1 where they were exposed to various types of communication skills such as making small talk and to get involved in group discussions. They lack exposure to real-life jobs and to world communication as compared to Semester 5 students.

**6.0 Implications**

The findings of this present study provide several pedagogical implications for lecturers wishing to produce confident speakers of English language. Increasing students’ self-efficacy might be useful as it involves a complex interface of behaviors, cognitions, and affect. According to Idrus and Saleh (2008), if lower levels of self-efficacy are identified among students, appropriate actions should be carried out to help boost students’ self-efficacy levels through verbal persuasion and encouragement.

Persuasion is one of the four sources of self-efficacy listed by Bandura (1990). Therefore, it is important for teachers to give positive feedback and encouragement to enhance students’ self-efficacy in oral communication.
Students who show low self-efficacy tend to struggle to complete a task. They will find it hard to do, leading to frustration. Thus, having lectures and discussions in class helps them understand the nature of working in a group.

In addition, students should be exposed to successful role models such as peers and lecturers. According to Schunk and Swartz (1991), students will learn more by watching successful peer role modelling than teacher role modelling, because students can identify more readily with their peers. Using their peers as a role model will make them more comfortable. Therefore, students should be given chances to observe their friends perform a task successfully, as these will help learners to foster positive beliefs about themselves (Nair et al., 2012).

Moreover, lecturers should be aware that all three elements, namely ability, activity perception, and aspiration must be taken into consideration in enhancing students’ self-efficacy level in speaking English. These three elements may be integrated with teaching and assessing students. It should be noted that as this study is small-scale research; therefore, it may be unfair to provide generalizations regarding gender differences in self-efficacy and length of exposure to the English language. Even so, it may be a good indication of perceived self-efficacy in speaking English among technical students in Malaysian polytechnics. This study also adopted a quantitative approach in order to collect data from a large sample of the population. It would be desirable for future research to conduct a research using combination of quantitative and qualitative method to get a more in-depth view on this topic. Further research to fill the gaps would be a useful way forward.

7.0 Conclusion

In general, the findings have indicated that all 60 students in the sample possessed low self-efficacy beliefs in all three constructs, meaning that they showed low confidence in their ability to communicate in English. This implies that technical college students are still weak in mastering the English language. Lack of proficiency in English language will make them less marketable on the job market.

Language educators must be aware of factors that would contribute to the perceived speaking ability of these students and the reasons behind them so that they can be helped in facing any problems in the future. By increasing students’ self-efficacy beliefs may help them to achieve more in the English language learning process. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help language educators with a better understanding in order to guide students to be better speakers of the English language.

References


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