Self-efficacy, Culture, and English Proficiency of University Students in South Korea

Hyun Sun Im

(Korea University)

Im, Hyun Sun. "Self-efficacy, Culture, and English Proficiency of University Students in South Korea." *Studies in English Language & Literature* **44.4 (2018): 111-129.** This study examines self-efficacy, defined as a person's beliefs or personal judgments about his or her competencies, in relation to the English proficiency of university students in Korea. It also discusses the interaction of culture and self-efficacy in this context. Cross-cultural studies on the topic indicate that, in Asian countries with Confucian societal backgrounds, students' high academic achievement is often accompanied by relatively high levels of anxiety and self-doubt, and relatively low levels of confidence and self-efficacy, in comparison to students in Western countries. This study's data consist of the completed surveys of 29 students who had TOEFL scores of 110 or above (the highest possible TOEFL score is 120). Three types of data were considered in this study: the means of their TOEFL scores, the means of their self-efficacy ratings and the percentage of errors in their writing. The study finds that the participants' ratings of their own English proficiency are, overall, lower than other indicators of their proficiency would suggest. It speculates about possible cultural reasons for this discrepancy between the participants' self-efficacy and their actual proficiency, and discusses potential implications for educators. (Korea University)

Key Words: self-efficacy, evaluation, Asian culture, Confucian, confidence

I. Introduction

The ways individuals think and feel about themselves are overarching factors in

their behavior and performance, especially in academia. In general, research on self-evaluation in education has focused on learners' motives, especially learners' desire to feel good about themselves, or to have a positive sense of self (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010); learners' desire for others to see them in the way they see themselves (Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003); and learners' desire to know how they can do better in the future (Taylor, Neter, & Waymant, 1995; Wood, 1989). In educational research, the concept of competent behavior is largely understood with reference to the role students' thoughts and beliefs play in the learning process (Pajares, 2006; Schunk, 2003) which is known as cognitive theories. With connection to the cognitive theories and a lot of research demonstrates that self-efficacy affects students' performance and learning in such aspect as the tasks they choose, their competence behavior exertion, perseverance, and performances (Schunk, 1995, 2003).

In the case of South Korea (hereafter, Korea), English is widely seen as a tool for achieving upward social mobility and economic prosperity. There has therefore been enormous zeal for learning English, which has led to many learners beginning their English education in private institutions at a very young age. Educational institutions in Korea, which focus on outcome-based education, invest substantial effort into supporting their students' acquisition of the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies.

The present article focuses on one aspect of personal beliefs about the self, which is known as self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's self-perceived capability in performing tasks that are necessary for achieving goals (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy appears to be a significant variable in student learning, because it affects students' motivation and learning outcomes (Pajares, 1996, 2006; Schunk, 1995, 2003). For instance, Wood and Locke (1987) reported that differences in self-efficacy levels correspond to a significant difference (of about 8%) in the academic performance of undergraduate students. Pajares and Miller (1994) also reported a significant correlation between college students' self-efficacy in math and

their performance in math. These studies indicate that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of college students' academic performance. While the importance of self-efficacy in English education has been generally recognized by researchers and educators in the field, the factors that determine the effects of self-efficacy have not been discussed sufficiently. The present study aims to examine self-efficacy, defined as a person's beliefs or personal judgments about her or his competencies, in relation to the English proficiency of university students in Korea. It further explores how the participants' culture might affect their self-efficacy in this context.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature to provide a background for the study. The subsequent section describes the study's methodology. Next, the study's findings are presented. The penultimate section discusses the findings, and the final section concludes the study by considering its implications and offering suggestions based on the findings.

II. Literature review

2.1 Self-efficacy in educational contexts

In modern society, the ability to evaluate oneself is considered an important skill. Expressing and valuing oneself is also considered to be essential preparation for securing a job. Both within and outside of academia, the possible positive role of self-efficacy in both learning and the development of professional competence has been recognized. For instance, social cognitive theory attaches great value to self-reflection as a human capability (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Self-reflection is a form of self-referential thinking with which people evaluate and modify their own thoughts and behaviors. Self-referential thoughts include perceptions of self-efficacy, that is, "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). In the field of

educational psychology, the construct of self-efficacy is widely recognized as a crucial factor in explanations of motivation, learning, self-regulation, and achievement (Pajares & Urdan, 2006). Research that measures self-efficacy has found it to have high predictive power with reference to performance. According to Finney and Shraw (2003), self-efficacy is task-specific; that is, the construct tends to have high predictive validity when it is assessed with regard to a specific task. For example, if the criterial performance involves algebraic manipulations, then what must be measured in order to gauge the effects of self-efficacy is the participants' judgment of their ability to perform algebraic manipulations. Bandura (1997) and Pajares (1996) both pointed out that prior research reporting that self-efficacy has no significant effect has usually failed to measure and assess corresponding types of self-efficacy and performance.

For students, self-efficacy reflects their personal beliefs regarding their capacity to achieve educational goals at expected levels; furthermore, an individual student's level of self-efficacy tends to be associated with the mental effort that individual makes to learn. People are most likely to choose activities that they consider themselves capable of performing, and to avoid those that they consider themselves incapable of performing (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001). Self-efficacy also helps individuals decide how much effort they should spend on a task and how long they should persist when experiencing difficulties, as well as influencing how resilient they may be in the face of failures. The stronger their notion of self-efficacy, the greater their effort, perseverance, and elasticity (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy also influences how people think and feel. People with weak self-efficacy are more likely to perceive given tasks as overwhelming. Studies have revealed that students with higher self-efficacy study more and use efficient learning strategies to manage difficult academic duties effectively (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001; Margolis & McCabe, 2004). Students with low levels of academic self-efficacy experience academic failure more often, and they have problems in school (Bandura, 1997). In their education, individuals must regulate their beliefs and judgments themselves.

Their academic self-efficacy affects their ability to engage in such self-regulatory behavior, which in turn influences their learning motivation, which can be an important factor in academic achievement (Pajares, 1996). For these reasons, recent studies have considered self-efficacy to be vital in educational contexts. Several researchers have indicated that students' self-efficacy influences their motivation and learning in a variety of ways (Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990; Lent, Brown, & Hackette, 2002). These studies' findings suggest that the self-efficacy of learners affects their interest, persistence, goal-setting, choices, cognition, and self-regulatory strategies. Studies conducted at various levels of education and in diverse fields, and with students of different ability levels, have reported direct and indirect effects of students' self-efficacy on their achievement. A great deal of research points out that self-efficacy plays a mediating role in students' achievement, motivation, and learning (Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990; Carmichael & Taylor, 2005; Lane, Lane, & Kyprianou, 2004). Self-efficacy has also been found to correlate with indexes of self-regulation, especially with the use of effective learning strategies. Further, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and the use of cognitive strategies are reported to be positively intercorrelated, and to predict achievement (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Considering the vital role of self-efficacy in education, this study seeks insights into the development of students' self-efficacy in order to better understand how educators might facilitate their educational achievement.

2.2 Cultural attributes and self-efficacy

One factor that affects the extent of self-efficacy's influence on performance is culture. International comparisons of self-efficacy have been conducted for several decades now (Stankov, 2010). Recent cross-cultural studies have suggested that personality, social attitudes, values, social norms, and culture are plausible factors in the effects of self-efficacy (Lee, 2009). Further, recent studies indicate that high academic achievement of students from East Asian countries with Confucian societal

backgrounds is accompanied by high levels of anxiety and self-doubt (Stankov, 2010). Moreover, students from Confucian societies have been reported to be less confident and to have lower self-efficacy than Europeans (Lee, 2009; Wilkins, 2004). For instance, Wilkins (2004) compared students' self-efficacy in 41 countries, and found that European students scored the highest on measures of self-efficacy, while students from Confucian-culture countries scored the lowest. Several explanations for such findings have been suggested. First, it is possible that the collectivist orientation of Confucian societies leads people from these countries to avoid exhibiting high levels of positive self-evaluation on constructs such as self-efficacy and self-concept. The second explanation pertains to a measurement issue, pointing to the use of less than perfect instruments in large-scale assessments (Heine & Hamamura, 2007). Specifically, large-scale studies tend to focus on breadth and measure constructs with a small number of items. For instance, the data reported by Wilkins (2004) were based only on the following two statements, which assessed mathematics and science self-efficacy, respectively: (1) "I usually do well in mathematics" and (2) "I usually do well in science." The use of too few items to assess such constructs limits the reliability of the assessments. However, the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) measured confidence with four items, and still found students from Confucian Asian countries to have the lowest levels of math self-efficacy (Mullis, Martine, & Foy, 2008). A third possible reason is that students from Confucian societies exhibit a realistic representation of their confidence or self-related judgment within their own countries. It is known that higher-performing students express higher confidence than their lower-achieving peers do, at a within-country level (Lee, 2009). Therefore, a relatively larger portion of high-performing students in Confucian Asian countries would necessarily exhibit lower ratings of themselves, because they would judge themselves against their peers within their own countries. Differences in self-efficacy may also be related to differences in motivational belief. That is, students from Confucian Asian backgrounds may consider math to be less challenging than do

their Western counterparts, who expect math to be difficult (Eaton & Dembo, 1997; Leung, 2001, 2002). This difference in motivational beliefs may play a part in Asian students' harsh self judgments. Finally, findings of a higher prevalence of negative feelings among Confucian Asian students than among Western students may be related to a matrix of societal, historical, and economic factors such as rapid industrialization; a relative lack of social safety nets, which is related to a cultural emphasis on looking after one's own parents as they age; and the high social and economic value of educational qualifications, which may lead to tremendous stress on students due to familial and societal demands for academic success (Woo et al., 2004).

The Confucian Asian culture has a long history of high regard for learning and educational achievement. In addition, its collectivist nature emphasizes relationships, family closeness, and social harmony. Putting together these two salient features of Confucian Asian cultures suggests that individual members of these cultures strive to achieve not only for personal success, but also for the honor of their family and society (Huang & Leung, 2005; Mok, 2006). A finding from the 2003 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that Confucian Asian students expressed higher levels of anxiety and self-doubt (Lee, 2009) can be interpreted in terms of the unique cultural features of Confucianism. That is, in the minds of these students, the distinction between the self and the family is not clear cut, and one's personal achievement is also seen as the family's achievement. Consequently, Confucian Asian students become aware of and learn to take seriously the implications and consequences of their academic successes and failures. From this vantage point, the internal pressure for academic achievement is probably higher in Confucian Asian societies than it is in other parts of the world. Considering such cultural differences, the present study examines self-efficacy－people's self-belief or personal judgment about their competencies－within the Korean educational context.

III. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Data were collected over three semesters, in the spring of 2017, the fall of 2017, and the spring of 2018, at a university in Seoul, Korea. The participants were enrolled in a one-semester English course, "Practical Reading and Writing," which was conducted entirely in English. A survey was conducted on the first day of the course in each of the three semesters during the study period. The survey was in English. This study's data consist of the completed surveys of 29 students who had TOEFL scores of 110 or above (the highest possible TOEFL score is 120). Of the participants, 90% had experiences of living abroad, which may explain their high TOEFL scores and their general fluency and proficiency in English.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The first part of the survey inquired into the students' backgrounds, including their major field of study, any experiences of living abroad, and their proficiency in English (i.e., their self-reported TOEFL scores). The second part pertained to their self-efficacy related to English, that is, how good they believed they were at English, with reference to the skills of speaking, reading, writing, and listening, as well as their knowledge of English grammar. The third and last part of the survey was designed to assess their writing skills. In this section, students were asked to write about themselves, about their interests, about something they would like the instructor to know about them, or about their expectations of the course. They were not required to follow any specific format or restrict themselves to specific topics. They were asked to write freely, with no limits on the number of words, time, or writing style. This writing section was analyzed to examine how it matched their self-efficacy ratings.

Three types of data were considered in this study. The first was the participants' scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The TOEFL is designed to measure the English language proficiency of individuals. It is used by governments, various education institutes, scholarship programs, and exchange programs worldwide. The test assesses all four language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) that are important for effective communication. It emphasizes integrated skills and provides information about test takers' ability to communicate in an academic setting, and their readiness for academic coursework. It entails fair and objective scoring, and provides valid and reliable information to support score users in making effective decisions regarding test takers' English-language proficiency. In the present study, the participants' TOEFL scores needed to be 110 or over. They were asked to report their TOEFL score in the first section of the survey. The means of their TOEFL scores were computed.

The second type of data was the students' self-efficacy rating. They were asked to rate their English proficiency on a scale of 1–5 (bad to good). They rated themselves on four aspects: speaking, writing, reading, and listening. The means of their self-efficacy ratings were computed.

The third type of data was the percentage of errors in their writing. For this, the number of words written was counted, and the mistakes were identified. The number of errors was calculated and then converted into percentages.

IV. Findings

Figure 1 presents the participants' TOEFL scores, accuracy in their written production, experience of living abroad, and their overall self-efficacy ratings. Their TOEFL scores indicate their real English language proficiency. The mean TOEFL score was 116 out of 120, which is well above the average percentile rank for the internet-based TOEFL iBT, as determined by the Educational Testing Service (ETS),
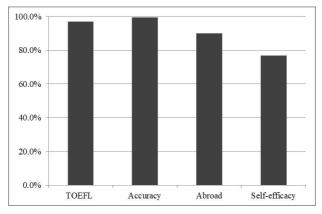
which conducts the TOEFL (Table 1; ETS, 2018).

Figure 1. Proficiency and self-efficacy

For speaking, a score of 4 points, which is the highest, indicates that the response is generally well phrased and clear, and demonstrates effective use of grammar and vocabulary. It also implies a fairly high degree of automaticity, with good control of basic and complex structures, and that the response is sustained and sufficient for the task, and is generally well developed and coherent (ETS, 2014a). The highest score on writing, 5, suggests that the testee presented the topic well. It indicates that the content was well organized and developed, with clear and appropriate explanations, exemplifications, and details. It also indicates that the writing displays unity, progression, and coherence; and shows consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety, appropriate word choice, and idiomaticity (ETS, 2014b). To achieve a score of 116, the present participants would have to perform nearly perfectly on all four sections, as evident from the percentile table (Table 1).

Table 1. Percentile ranks for the TOEFL iBT scores of the total group (ETS, 2018)

Scale score	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total scale score	Percentile rank
30	95	95	99	99	120	100
29	89	91	98	97	116	99
28	83	85	95	93	112	96
.	.	.	.	.	.	.
.	.	.	.	.	.	.
.	.	.	.	.	.	.
0	.	.	.	.	0	.
Mean	20.7	20.3	20.4	20.8	Mean	82
S.D.	6.7	6.7	4.5	4.8	S.D.	20

A possible reason for the participants' high TOEFL scores is that they had almost all lived abroad. As evident from Figure 1, 90% of the participants had lived abroad. Although they did not all necessarily live in English-speaking countries, they would have been educated in international schools. Such schools promote international education by following a curriculum that is different from the national curriculum of the country in which the school is located. Usually, all the subjects are taught in English (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_school, accessed February 23, 2018). Therefore, the present participants had received education in English, and been exposed to an English-speaking environment while abroad.

The high proficiency of the participants was also evident from the analysis of their writing. The mean word count of their writing was 46.6 words. The writing analysis revealed a mean accuracy of 99.5%, with only minor mistakes such as those related to capitalization, punctuation, spelling, article use, and conjunction use. Most of their mistakes were related to capitalization. Thus, in accord with their TOEFL scores, the writing analysis showed that the participants were able to write and express themselves fluently in English.

The participants' mean self-efficacy rating was 3.8 out of 5 (76.8%). Though not low in certain circumstances, for participants who had scored in the top 1% on the TOEFL, who were able to write without critical mistakes, and who had lived

abroad, this indicates a relatively low level of self-efficacy, which is an interesting outcome, as discussed in the following section.

V. Discussion

Student self-efficacy has emerged as an important construct in educational research over the last thirty years. Self-efficacy, a key element of the social cognitive theory, appears to be an important variable in education, because it affects student's motivation and learning. Furthermore, research comparing students with higher academic self-efficacy to those with lower self-efficacy has found that the former tended to study more, and that, by using efficient learning strategies, they managed difficult academic duties more effectively (Satici & Can, 2016). Owing to the important role that self-efficacy plays in academia, universities have tried to clarify the factors that influence students' self-efficacy (Schunk, 1995). The present study focuses on examining the relationship between self-efficacy and culture, in an attempt to specifically identify how the latter affects the former. In contrast to what their TOEFL scores and writing ability indicate—that the present participants have outstanding English proficiency—they tended to perceive their proficiency as relatively poor. In other words, despite being good enough to be defined as "proficient language users" or "near-native speakers" (according to the TOEFL's guidelines for interpreting test scores), these Korean students tended to define themselves as "average" or "just okay."

In what follows, I present some speculations about reasons for the present findings, focusing on the likely or possible effects of the Korean cultural context and the Confucian societal background. First, Korea is a collective culture, whereas Western countries are individualistic. "Woori" is a Korean word meaning "we," "us," or "we-ness," which blurs into a collective "I." For instance, when a Korean individual refers to her or his mother or spouse, s/he does not say "my mother" or

"my husband/wife," but "our mother" or "our husband/wife." In Korea, it is important that the woori group is a part of one's own coalition or clique. Indeed, this concept is the antithesis of the Western idea of individualism. Accordingly, in Korea, the feeling of standing out and exhibiting excellence is considered negative, and is therefore avoided. Previous research in another Confucian cultural context, that of Japan, is relevant here. For instance, Lebra (1976) describes Japanese individuals as "fractions" who do not become whole until they have fit in and occupied their proper place within social units. Hence, according to Lebra, the Japanese are not expected to be motivated to separate themselves from their secure position in the group, even in a seemingly positive way. Such separation might actually imply alienation from the inter-dependent self. Kitayama, Markus, and Kurokawa (1994) found that, while, for Americans, pride and a sense of achievement were positively correlated with a sense of well-being, for the Japanese, these feelings were not associated with a sense of well-being. Rather, for the Japanese, a sense of acceptance from others was most strongly correlated to a feeling of well-being. Moreover, self-effacement, in the form of viewing oneself as average, would more likely serve their cultural mandate of maintaining interpersonal harmony. Therefore, one would not expect self-enhancing biases (distinguishing oneself as better than others) to be as common for the Japanese as they are for Westerners in general.

Second, individual modesty may be an important element in maintaining group cohesiveness (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982), which leads to the next speculation. There is little dispute that modest self-presentation is valued in much of East Asia, and that people will often publicly describe themselves more modestly than honestly (Barnlund, 1975). However, the germane question for this study is whether East Asians feign modesty when evaluating themselves privately, on psychological measures, because the present data were obtained from such self-evaluations. Because the tendency to feign modesty is firmly entrenched among East Asians, and because there are cultural differences in self-efficacy, surveys may not be able to

capture people's true feelings. Modesty imposed by a culture may serve as a social tool to achieve the needed self-restraint. Modesty is the public under-representation of one's favorable traits and abilities (Cialdini, Wosinka, Dabul, Wheston-Dion, & Heszen, 1998). It reflects the social pressure to de-emphasize self-success. Because perceived self-success may nurture the perceived uniqueness of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991a), reduced social attention to successes can restrict perceptions of uniqueness. Korean culture has been influenced by Confucian values and this kind of socialization could serve as a first step toward the desired social situation in which individuals relinquish their own needs in favor of group needs. Indeed, modesty has been identified as a requirement in East Asian cultures, and the leading values of East Asian cultures include modesty (Chiu & Yang, 1987; Hwang, 1982; Tseng, 1973).

Discerning the adaptive significance of any psychological process is rendered more difficult if the process shows evidence of systematic cross-cultural variability. Cross-cultural variation in the manifestation of a psychological process suggests that theories regarding that process's universality or adaptive significance need to be targeted from a different level of analysis (Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). Recently, substantial research has suggested that motivation might be weaker, if not largely absent, among people of East Asian descent, specifically among those following the Confucian culture (such as the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese) as compared with Westerners (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991a). These findings have emerged from a research tradition in cultural psychology that maintains that culture is implicated in psychological processes at a far more fundamental level than what was previously considered (Markus & Kitayama, 1991b; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). The most common pattern of results identified by such research is that Westerners self-enhance significantly more than East Asians do, and that Westerners show a clear tendency for self-enhancement, whereas East Asians do not. For example, the false uniqueness effect, where people view themselves as uniquely talented, finds clear support among

Americans but not among the Japanese (Markus & Kitayama, 1991a). Likewise, while American students tend to evaluate themselves more positively than they are by others, Japanese students view themselves significantly less positively than they are by others (Heine & Renshaw, 2002).

VI. Conclusion: Implications and limitations

The present study has the following limitations. First, self-evaluations are subject to a great deal of error because people cannot assess themselves objectively or reliably enough to provide accurate information and the tendency to feign modest as mentioned in the previous section. In the present study, for example, participants may have given themselves a high self-evaluation in order to show their eagerness for the course in which the survey was conducted, or given themselves a low self-evaluation in order to suggest their self-awareness. Therefore, their ratings might not be reliable in terms of consistency or accuracy. Further, there is no way to confirm the extent to which their self-regulatory orientation affected their self-rating. Additionally, the TOEFL score is used as one of the requirements for academic achievement in Korean educational institutions that support outcome-based education. Accordingly, most students in Korea are trained to take the TOEFL. They learn strategies to obtain high scores, and often their main reason for studying English is to secure high test scores. Therefore, regardless of their high score in TOEFL, the participants' low perceptions of their English skills might be realistic because while they may have obtained high scores on the test owing to their training.

Self-efficacy is regarded as an important source of information in the academic context (Pajares, 1996). Considering the importance of ability evaluation, universities need to invest effort in helping students develop the required knowledge, skills, and competencies. Although competent behavior largely depends on acquiring knowledge and skills, students' self-efficacy plays a predictive and mediating role in relation to

students' achievement, motivation, and learning (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995). Therefore, it seems crucial for institutions of higher education to pay attention to the development of students' self-efficacy. This study has attempted to contribute to building a better understanding of East Asian students' self-efficacy, which could help universities in developing and planning curricula that enhance their students' self-efficacy.

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Im, Hyun Sun (Korea University/Lecturer)
Address: (02841) 145, Anam-ro, Seongbuk-gu, Seoul, Korea
Email: heatherim@hotmail.com