

The Importance of Self-Efficacy to the English Proficiency  
Of Middle School Students in China

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-EFFICACY TO THE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY  
OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CHINA

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Abstract

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-EFFICACY TO THE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY  
OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CHINA

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Michael Dalecki

The concept of self-efficacy has received great attention in different fields. Self-efficacy is an influential affective variable on learner's autonomy and motivation. As a strong predictor of success, self-efficacy beliefs determine the effort students would make, the length people would persist and how resilient the students would be when facing difficulties in the tasks. Students with higher self-efficacy tend to have better achievement. This paper reviewed self-efficacy and this concept in the area of Chinese middle school students' English learning, and explored the methods to improve students' self-efficacy in English learning.

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## Chapter I Introduction

With the development of globalization, more people choose to learn one or more languages. In China, English is becoming more and more important in examinations for entering middle school, high school and college. As one of the major required subjects, English achievement plays a vital role for adolescents in China. It is inevitable for teachers and parents to help students improve their English performances.

Chinese National New English Curriculum Standard (2011) affirmed that students' mental attitude and psychological state are the important factors to students' learning development. More specifically, teachers need to take cognitive factors into consideration such as motivating students' English learning enthusiasm. The process of English teaching and learning should be a process of emotional communication between teachers and students, as well as a process of cognitive activities and emotional practice. Since then, the traditional teacher-center learning mode started to switch to the student-center learning mode, a lot of teachers started to focus on inspiring and cultivating the students' learning interest, and establishing confidence.

Lots of studies focused on the factors to help students' English achievements. Self-efficacy has becoming a significant factor in the field of language learning.

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is a determining element in human behavior, an important factor to affect learner autonomy. At the same time, self-efficacy can motivate and regulate students' learning. Self-efficacy plays an important role in learners' inherent ability, past achievements and future performances (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1986) believed the beliefs that people have about their abilities to accomplish something can be the predictors for people's behaviors. As a strong predictor of success, self-efficacy beliefs determine the effort people would expend, the length people would persist and how resilient they will be when facing difficulties in the tasks (Bandura, 1997).

Schunk (1989) also believed that the stronger people perceive self-efficacy, the higher level of goals that people would like to set for themselves. People have high self-efficacy beliefs tend to

approach more challenging tasks, but the ones with low self-efficacy beliefs tend to avoid difficulties which they consider threats in life.

Bandura (1986) stated that researchers should measure self-efficacy in specific tasks to avoid generality. Foreign language learning is also different from native language learning when the researchers explore the development of self-efficacy and the factors affect their self-efficacy. In the last several years, more and more researchers start to research and believe that self-efficacy plays important role in foreign language learners' positive attitude, efforts, goal setting, and the motivations to learn and regulate themselves (Raofi, Tan & Chan, 2012).

This study reviewed the basic foundational theories about self-efficacy, the factors that influence self –efficacy. In addition, this study discussed that how self -efficacy affects students in English learning and the recommendations for English educators to increase students' self-efficacy.

### **Statement of the Problem**

From the perspective of social cognitive theory, human achievement depends on interactions between one's behaviors, personal thoughts and beliefs, and environmental conditions (Bandura, 1977). In China, parents and teachers stress on the acquirement of English knowledge. However, few people pay attention to the mental states in the learning process, and the factor that could increase English achievement. This study explored the following questions in the field of language learning:

1. What is Self-efficacy?
2. What are the basic theories about Self-efficacy?
3. How does Self-efficacy affect students' English Achievement, especially middle school students?
4. How to increase students' English achievement by improving students' Self-efficacy?

### **Definition of Terms**

Self-efficacy: As a performance-based measure of perceived capability, self-efficacy refers to “people’s judgments of their capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments ” (Bandura, 1997, pp. 194). According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy determines human motivation; at the same time, outcome expectancies and efficacy expectancies determines people’s self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy in the educational context: Ehrman (1996, pp.137) defined self-efficacy as “the degree to which the student thinks he or she has the capacity to cope with the learning challenge”. Students’ self-efficacy beliefs determine how much effort the students would to make on learning. In other words, students’ perceptions of their beliefs on learning and accomplishing their learning tasks in academic performances are highly influenced and predicated by teachers (Pajares, 1996).

Academic achievement: In Dictionary of Education (Good, 1959), achievement means accomplishing or mastering performance in certain given knowledge or skills. Good (1959) also defines academic achievement as the development of acquired knowledge or skills in school subjects, and they are usually determined by test score that are assigned by teachers.

English academic achievement: English achievement can be defined as the knowledge or skills developed in English, usually determined by test score assigned by teachers or both. Sometimes, it refers to English academic performance. It means how students perform in terms of grades (Good, 1959).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study introduces theories and studies to the researchers who would like to study the relationships between Self-efficacy and English achievement. This study aims to figure out the relationship between self-efficacy of Chinese junior middle school students and their English academic achievement through an empirical study based on Bandura’s self-efficacy theory. At the same time, this research aims to discuss how to help students have better English achievements through improving their self-efficacy.

## **Significance of the Study**

From the theoretical aspect, a lot of studies have researched the relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement in different cultural and age contexts. This study would collect information of the middle school students' English achievement and self-efficacy in Chinese society. It will enrich the theories and provide a small part to the field for researchers who focus on the self-efficacy and English education.

On the other hand, from the practical aspect, this study will benefit Chinese teachers, parents, and students in middle school. It will provide English teachers the way to improve their teaching strategies and lesson designs with the considerations of students' self-efficacy. For parents, they will learn more about the factors in the improvement of their children's English learning and have a better understanding of their children. For students, this study can help them to explore an effective way to improve their attitudes and learning methods in English learning.

## **Methodology**

This study uses library research method. Collecting various data and information from the statement of institution and organizations by reading related academic journals and books. Then this study concludes the different proposition and analyzes the current problem. In the end, this study discuss the recommendations.

## **Chapter II Review of Literature**

### **Self-efficacy**

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive learning theory mentioned self-efficacy as a great factor on psychology and education. In social cognitive theory, people's surroundings can influence them, and their own minds also affect them. People's behavior can be predicted by their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1977) believed that an outcome expectancy as one's value and belief that a given behavior would lead to particular outcomes, an efficacy expectation as the belief of one person can successfully execute actions and make efforts for achieving their goals.

From Bandura's (1997) perspective, people with strong self-efficacy will have strong willing in completing real contexts. On the other hand, people who have low self-efficacy tend to hold negative attitudes and even escape from the difficulty tasks. In other words, when the people need to complete tasks and reach goals, the self-efficacy is the measure of one's own competence (Ormrod, J.E.2006).

### **Previous Research on Self- efficacy**

Self-efficacy beliefs have received increasing attention in last two decades. Albert Bandura (1977) is the first person who introduced the idea of self-efficacy, and he provided guidelines for measurement of self-efficacy beliefs for different domains of functioning based on a large theoretical framework known as the social cognitive theory.

Bandura (1997) stated that people have five capabilities to determine their behavior, capability, forethought capability, self-regulatory capability, vicarious capability, and self-reflective capability. Bandura believed that self-reflective capability plays the most important role to determine people's behavior among these five capabilities. Self-efficacy means students' beliefs and judgments about their capabilities to successfully perform tasks. It is a key predictor of success as the most powerful arbiters of self-reflection (Bandura, 1997). As a consequence, students' beliefs about their abilities to accomplish tasks could strongly influence their actual achievements.

Most researchers believe that self-efficacy influences people's decision making and action; people are willing to attempt tasks that they believe they could accomplish and tend to avoid those they believe exceed their capabilities (Relich, Debus & Walker, 1986). People with higher sense of efficacy means they would have greater effort, persistence, and resilience in their tasks (Bandura, 1997).

#### **Four Processes of Self- efficacy**

Self-efficacy affects human functioning through four major psychological processes: cognitive process, motivational process, affective process and selection process ( Bandura, 1997) .

In cognitive process, the patterns of people's thoughts change by their efficacy beliefs. It means that "the stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goal challenges people set for themselves" (Bandura, 1997, pp. 122). In other words, people tend to challenge the difficult tasks as their opportunities if they are confident about their capabilities. In contrast, people would stay away from the difficult tasks as their threats if they are not confident about their capabilities (Bandura, 1997).

In motivational process, "people motivated themselves and guide their actions anticipatory through the exercise of forethought"(Bandura, 1997, pp. 128). Researchers built three theories about cognitive motivator in self-efficacy: attribution theory, expectancy-value theory, and goal theory (Bandura, 1997). Base on the attribution theory, people have more arbitrary reasons to raise the efficacy beliefs, they would achieve better performance in the future (Bandura, 1997). From expectancy-value theory, the level of people's motivation to act depends on the ways they value the outcomes. If they believe that particular behavior could lead to valuable outcomes, they tend to have high motivation for the actual action (Bandura, 1997). The goal theory states that cognized goals motivates people's behavior; people " seek self-incentives to persist in their efforts until their performances match their goals (Bandura, 1997, pp. 134).

The affective process means the process of regulating their emotional states and reactions ; people's beliefs of their capabilities not only determine the levels of their motivation, but also their

anxiety and depression when they are having difficult situations (Bandura, 1997). For example, if people believe that they have abilities to solve problems, they would rarely have disturbing thoughts. On the contrast, for people who do not have such beliefs, they normally have high anxiety. Thus, “ Perceived self-efficacy to control thought processes.... reduce anxiety and avoidant behavior” (Bandura, 1997, pp. 156).

For the process of selection, Bandura (1997) believed that people create or shape the environments around themselves through their beliefs. In other words, people would like to choose the activities and situations that they believe they could handle, and avoid the activities and situations that they believe exceed their abilities. The process of selection determines the direction of people’s personal development. “By the choices they make, people cultivate different competencies, interests and social networks that determine life courses” (Bandura, 1997, pp. 159).

#### **Four Sources of Self- efficacy**

As the corresponding of four processes, Bandura (1997) believed that four sources would influence self-efficacy beliefs: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological states.

Mastery experiences could help people to judge their capability as the most important source in efficacy information (Bandura, 1997). Mastery experiences are the direct experiences from individuals success or failure. The experiences of success could raise people’s efficacy beliefs. On the contrary, the experiences of failure could lower people’s efficacy beliefs. The continuous success or failure may make people establish a higher or lower solid efficacy (Bandura, 1997). It is crucial for people to understand the way to increase efficacy; people need to attribute their success to their ability, effort, and strategies instead of luck or other external reasons (Bandura, 1997).

Vicarious experiences could help people to compare their capabilities to others in different fields (Bandura, 1997). It means indirect experience people gained by observing the behavior of others. In other words, individuals would increase their self-efficacy beliefs if they observed others succeed in accomplishing tasks or reaching goals that are similar to theirs (Bandura, 1997). At the

same time, individuals' self-efficacy would decrease if they saw others performed badly in the tasks. Vicarious experiences are useful for people in the situations that they are not sure about themselves (Bandura, 1997).

Social persuasion means the social influences in people's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). It means that increase individual's efficacy by changing their knowledge and attitude with persuasive suggestions, advice, explanation and guidance. Social persuasion includes encouragement, informational feedback ,and constructive guidance from sources that individuals trust (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura (1997) found that physiological state could affect self-efficacy as one of the significant source. The joy of success and frustration of failure both influence individuals' Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Positive emotions like excitement will increase efficacy; on the contrary, negative emotions like anxiety and foreboding, will decrease efficacy. Calm and moderate emotion contributes to the formation of self-efficacy, at the same time, harmony and pleasant environment also can promote the establishment of individuals' self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

### **Self-efficacy and Learning**

Bandura (1986) believed that self-efficacy could influence that people's behaviors. In other words, self-efficacy is a vital factor in the accomplishment of people' behaviors in the following aspects (Bandura, 1989).

First, self-efficacy affects the decisions that people make in daily life, and eventually influences the development of people' abilities (Bandura, 1989).. People would evaluate new tasks in their life, and tend to choose the tasks that they have higher self-efficacies. In other words, low self-efficacy would limit people to choose tasks that might be challenge for them to complete (Bandura, 1989).

Self-efficacy also indicate the degree of perseverance that people would have in accomplishing tasks, and how much effort they would like to overcome the difficulties (Bandura, 1997). People with high self-efficacy tend to make great effort with more time and patience to face

the challenges in problem solving. On the other hand, people who have low self-efficacy would have doubt about them in accomplishing the tasks and overcome the difficulties. At the same time, their strong anxiety and low self-confidence might lead them to avoid trying the tasks that they believe they could not succeed (Bandura, 2000).

Self-efficacy has a strong impact on people's attribution (Bandura, 1993). People who have high self-efficacy tend to attribute their failures to internal and the things that people could control such as personal effort (Bandura, 1993). In other words, they believe that their success is based on their endeavor instead of luck. However, people with low self-efficacy tend to attribute their failures to uncontrollable reasons such as personal ability and capacity. Once they have succeeded, they would believe that it is the occasional fortune (Bandura, 1993).

People's emotions also could be influenced by self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). People who have high self-efficacy tend to consider the problem or challenge more difficult than the actuality. This negative belief would lead to emotional responses such as anxiety, and eventually influence people to accomplish the tasks (Bandura, 1986). On the other hand, people who have high self-efficacy tend to be more active to seek solutions to finish the tasks (Bandura, 1986).

### **Self- efficacy and Academic Achievement**

The relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievements has been a major focus in the educational field. More and more researchers state that students' self-efficacies have great contributions to increase their academic performances (Bandura, 1997, pp. 222).

Students' beliefs about their abilities could strongly affect their performances (Bandura, 1997). Based on Collins's research in 1982, beliefs can predict performance better than their real ability. Collins (1982) explored the relationship between Self-efficacy and Children's mathematical performances in three different levels of mathematical ability. The result showed that children with higher Self-efficacy in their abilities "solved more problems...and did so more accurately" than children with lower Self-efficacy. The results were the same no matter which level of ability group the students were (Collins, 1982). The research proved the one statement that Self-efficacy could

predict the students' positive attitude. It means students performed poorer in tasks than others with the same actual abilities might be they lack the efficacy to use all the abilities they have when they are facing real difficulties and challenges (Collins, 1982).

According to Pintrich and De Groot (1990), students tend to have stronger faith when they have higher Self-efficacy. These students achieved success through setting learning goals with subsequent endeavors. Besides, they focus on academic studies with great enthusiasm and persistence.

Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) concluded that Self-efficacy has great influence on the level of writing accomplishments directly through researching the Self-efficacy beliefs on 95 first year college students. At the same time, Pajares and Johnson (1996) found that students' self-efficacy play an important role and affect their writing performance directly on writing performance in high school.

Bandura (1997) stated that students with high Self-efficacy kept up strategic thinking to search better solutions when they faced failures. In contrast, those students with low Self-efficacy usually ended up directing their efforts ineffectively.

Rune et al. (2015) researched academic self-efficacy in the ninth and tenth grade Norwegian students. It showed that academic self-efficacy is a strong predictor of academic achievement in the aspects of students' perceived task goal structure, perceived ability structure and civic virtue.

In other words, when schools could provide students a task-orientated and aimed environment towards to civic virtue, the students' academic achievement self-efficacy would increase. And this increase could positively affect students' academic achievements. On the other side, when schools focus on ability, grades, and competition, students would have lower academic self-efficacy and turns to have lower academic achievements (Rune et al., 2015).

Hwang et al. (2016) used an autoregressive model to measure self-efficacy beliefs and academic achievement in a group of Korean students from the 8 to 12th grades. The results showed that the past academic performances could predict self-efficacy beliefs positively and the self-

beliefs also could predict the academic performances in the following semester. This study also compared the effects between students' past academic performances on self-efficacy and self-efficacy beliefs on the following academic performances (Hwang et al., 2016).

### **Self-efficacy and English learning**

Students' self-efficacy plays an important role in predicting their effort and performance in English learning (Idrus, Salleh, and Abdullah, 2011). Raoofi, Tan and Chan (2012) explored thirty-two studies about self-efficacy in foreign language Learning context. They concluded the effects of self-efficacy and factors that affects self-efficacy in the context of foreign language learning. Raoofi, Tan and Chan (2012) found the similar results on self-efficacy and attributions across cultures and areas in different language learning studies; self-efficacy affect students to make attributions for their success and failure in language learning tasks. Students who have high self-efficacy tend to attribute their failures to personal reasons that they could have controls about themselves such as their efforts and the strategies they used in the tasks. However, for students who have low self-efficacy, they attributed their failures to external reasons such as their teachers.

Heidari et al. (2012) researched the relationship between Iranian EFL students' self-efficacy beliefs and their vocabulary learning strategies. This study had found that high self-efficacy was significantly positively related to vocabulary learning strategies among students. It revealed that the importance of achieving self-efficacy in English learning.

### **Summary**

In the past decades, lots of studies studied self-efficacy in different subjects towards to students' achievement, more and more researchers start to research and believe that Self-efficacy plays important role in foreign language learners' positive attitude, efforts, goal setting, and the motivations to learn and regulate themselves (Raoofi, Tan & Chan, 2012).

People's behavior associates with their beliefs about their capabilities rather than their actual capabilities. These beliefs determine the levels of effort that people would like to make to achieve their goals. In language learning, having such awareness of one's knowledge and skills can help

students to manage their language learning processes effectively and eventually have a better academic achievement. This research will emphasis on Self-efficacy and its relations with middle school students' English achievement in China and explore the methods to improve students' English achievements.

## **Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **How does Self-efficacy affect students' English Achievement?**

#### **Goal Setting**

Self-efficacy could influence students on setting practical English learning goals. The students with high self-efficacy beliefs tend to set the goals that are more challenging and could prove their English learning abilities. The students with low self-efficacy beliefs in English learning tend to set goals that are far below their abilities to accomplish. Eventually the impractical goal setting would affect students' self-efficacy in general.

#### **Attribution**

Students tend to seek different reasons to explain their academic achievements based on different self-efficacy. Students with high self-efficacy would attribute their success or failure to the levels of their efforts. On the contrary, students with low self-efficacy would seek the uncontrollable factors to attribute their results such as fortune and capacity. Self-efficacy would influence students' attribution in English learning, and eventually affect their subsequent learning behaviors and attitudes. It is easy for students who have low self-efficacy to give up efforts since they could not attribute success to personal efforts. In addition, they believe that they would never achieve any improvements in English learning, no matter how hard they have tried.

#### **Emotion**

Students with high self-efficacy normally have stronger beliefs about themselves in English learning. And they are more active and persistent in English learning. On the other hand, students who experienced failures in English learning, could not have achieved self-efficacy from the past experience. If they also failed on other subjects, it means they also could not achieve self-efficacy from various experience. Students with low self-efficacy, normally have low self-confidence, anxiety and frustrations in English learning. Sometimes they are afraid of starting their own English tasks, even the tasks are every easy to accomplish.

### **How to increase Self-efficacy in students' English Learning?**

There are that four sources would influence people's self-efficacy beliefs: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura ,1997). This paper would focus on discussing the strategies that could increase students' self-efficacy in English learning from these four recourses.

### **Teachers' Persuasions**

One of the important resources for students is social persuasion, which means the social influences in people's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). English teachers play important roles in students' English learning. English teachers could influence students greatly and help students to increase their self-efficacy.

### ***Individual Guidance and Encouragement***

Different kinds of students need particular guidances and encouragements. For the students who have low self-efficacy and academic achievement in English learning, the one to one encouragement is extremely important. It means that teachers did not give up these left-behind students in her or his class. Such individual guidance and encouragement could increase students' self-efficacy by enhancing their confidences and motivations. At least, teachers could lead the students to start to believe themselves in English learning through the cognitive change. At the same time, the students who have both high academic achievement and high self-efficacy also need individual guidance since they might reach to a point that English learning is too easy for them.

### ***Informational Feedback***

Teachers' informational feedback is also very important for students in increasing self-efficacy. Especially in Chinese educational system, there are a great amount of tests and examinations. Teachers' feedback should not focus the scores that their students' achieved. Instead, they need provide students specific information that indicates the parts students need to improve and the parts students have achieved. It also could help the students understand that the examinations are only tools to help them in English learning.

### **Personal Reflections**

It is vital for students to understand that the main function of English tests and examinations is to help them improve. Thus, personal reflection is very important for students in English learning. In other words, they would believe that academic performance is based on things that can be controlled, instead of a matter of chance.

### ***Identify Strength***

Students who have great academic performances, it is essential for students to reflect on the learning skills, strategies and endeavors. It could help students to fortify their strengths and motivations. As a positive consequence, students could achieve self-efficacy from these past experiences, and motivate them to work hard insistently in the future. On the other hand, students who have low self-efficacy, reflection could be the way for them not only to identify their strengths and the achievements they have accomplished, but also the method for them to arouse possible hopes and expectations in English learning. Teachers could help students to develop confidences and motivations through students' reflections.

### ***Goal Setting***

Students who have low self-efficacy, reflections could help them to have practical ideas about setting goals. At least, it could help them to change the cognitive thinking that they could not accomplish any goal or they only could study on simple tasks. Students could have chances to analyze their learning conditions in short and long tracks through reflections. And teachers, educators and parents could encourage and guide students to set appropriate goals. The process of achieving their goals step by step is a significant way for them to enhance their self-efficacy.

### ***Peers' Influences***

#### ***Study Model***

As an important resource of increasing self-efficacy, peers experiences are very helpful for the students who have low self-efficacy, especially when they compare themselves to the peers who share similarities with them. Peer comparative information would be extremely helpful for the students who have doubts about their capabilities in English learning. By having study models and

observing peers to finish tasks successfully, students could gain self-efficacy. Teachers could provide opportunities in and out class for students to learn from their models. Such as teachers could lead the students who overcome their learning difficulties and achieve great improvements to share stories in class. Thus, the other students who have the same situations might believe that they could be successful in English learning as well.

### ***Cooperative learning***

Working and studying in groups could decrease the low self-efficacy students' negative emotions such as anxiety and frustrations. And cooperative learning could motivate students to be more active in English learning through interpersonal interactions and group responsibilities. In cooperative learning, teachers should guide groups to set each other's responsibilities in the groups each time. And students with low self- efficacy could start from the duties that they feel comfortable and easy to achieve. Thus they could help each other with shortages in cooperative learning and eventually to increase their self-efficacy by experiencing successes. Also, students need to play different roles in the group each time. Once the students with low self-efficacy gain development, they could choose the more challenging duties in the next time. Meanwhile, the interactions from the cooperative learning group would provide emotional support for each other in the group, and as a result, psychological state also would increase students' self-efficacy in English learning.

### **Task-oriented environment**

It is vital to have an atmosphere for students to study and express themselves in English class. At the same time, the class environment should be task-oriented that encourage students to apply English in practice, and reduce the intense competition in class.

Every student has different potentials and strengths. At the same time, different tasks could help teachers to find students' other potentials and advantages besides examinations. Using various tasks could enable every student to demonstrate and express the things in different opportunities.

Student could constantly experience success through activities, and these mastery experiences eventually become the resource of their self-efficacy in English learning.

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