

A Study on the Self-efficacy in English Learning of Ethnic Minority Students in Vocational College

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Abstract: Ethnic minority students face transferring native language, Chinese and English to each other in English learning, so attention should be paid to them in English teaching. By applying qualitative and quantitative research methods and adopting such research modes as questionnaire and semi-structural interview, this thesis chooses the ethnic minority students in vocational colleges as the research objects, and carries out detailed empirical analysis and research to ethnic minority students' self-efficacy level in English learning and its influencing factors. It also discusses how to apply effective methods to enhance students' self-efficacy in English learning in the process of teaching and learning.

Keywords: English Learning; Self-efficacy; Influence Factors; Vocational College; Ethnic Minority Students

1. Introduction

The concept of self-efficacy, introduced by American psychologist Bandura in 1977, refers to an individual's belief in their ability to accomplish a specific behavior in a particular context.[1] Self-efficacy influences an individual's goal selection and level of effort, among other factors.[2] Bandura's concept of self-efficacy quickly found application in educational settings, where scholars began studying domain-specific self-efficacy, such as self-efficacy in English learning. This refers to students' perceived ability to learn English or engage in English-related activities and tasks. English teaching has increasingly focused on learners' self-evaluations of their abilities to complete English learning tasks and the psychological changes that occur during the process of English learning. Given the complex nature of students in vocational colleges, there is limited

research specifically on self-efficacy in English learning among ethnic minority students in vocational colleges. A search conducted on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) full-text database using the combined keywords "ethnic minority students in vocational colleges" and "English self-efficacy" did not yield any results meeting the criteria. Ethnic minority students face challenges in language learning due to the interplay between their native language, Chinese, and English. They learn Chinese as a second language while English becomes their third language. Taking Xizang students as an example, their English learning involves the interaction of three languages: native language Zang, Chinese and English. The uniqueness and complexity of English learning among ethnic minority students greatly increase the difficulty of language acquisition.[3]

In this study, the self-efficacy in English learning was treated as the dependent variable, while ten influencing factors, including alternative learning, past successful experiences, verbal persuasion, goal setting, diverse learning resources, and learning strategies, were considered as independent variables. The data were compiled and analyzed using SPSS to conduct regression analysis, through which the self-efficacy level in English learning among ethnic minority students in vocational colleges was measured. Furthermore, factors that influenced the self-efficacy in English learning among vocational students were identified, and the application of effective methods in teaching and learning to enhance the level of self-efficacy in English learning was discussed. The aim was to improve students' English learning abilities by elevating their self-efficacy in English learning.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Subjects

The research subjects of this study are ethnic minority students enrolled in Nanjing Institute of Tourism and Hospitality, representing 22 different ethnic groups, with a majority of Zan and Hui students. Their ages range from 18 to 22 years old, and they have an average of more than 5 years of English learning experience. The data collection took place in May 2022. The questionnaires were distributed, completed, and collected under the supervision of the respective course instructors. A total of 183 questionnaires were collected from students in 18 different majors, out of which 175 were deemed valid, resulting in a valid response rate of 96%.

This study will employ both quantitative and qualitative research methods, specifically employing survey questionnaires and structured interviews. The major advantage of the questionnaire method is its ability to conduct surveys on a large scale, involving a significant number of learners to obtain sufficient research samples. On the other hand, structured interviews require respondents to answer a series of specific questions in a fixed order, generating data that can be easily organized and subjected to statistical analysis. Therefore, in this study, a questionnaire will be used to collect data and information on the self-efficacy of ethnic minority students in English learning in vocational colleges. The purpose of the small-scale interviews is to gain a more detailed understanding of students' perspectives on English learning.

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 Scale design

Two scales were employed as research tools in this study: the questionnaire on self-efficacy in English learning and the questionnaire on sources of self-efficacy in English learning. The questionnaire used in this study was devised by Li Mengru of Jiangxi Normal University. It was developed by referring to the self-efficacy questionnaire created by Pinch and DeGroot, and it was grounded in Bandura's self-efficacy source theory. Furthermore, it underwent multiple empirical validations. [4,5] Given its close alignment with the research objectives and design of this study, this questionnaire can be considered to possess sound content validity. The

questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale and comprised a set of statements. Each statement offered five response options: "completely unsuitable", "somewhat unsuitable", "undecided", "somewhat suitable", and "completely suitable". They were coded as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively. Respondents were required to provide their basic personal information, such as gender and major. Each question was designed as a single-choice item. In the questionnaire on self-efficacy in English learning, higher scores indicate greater levels of self-efficacy among learners. As for the questionnaire on sources of self-efficacy in English learning, higher scores suggest that a particular source is more likely to be associated with self-efficacy.

The questionnaire "Survey on Self-Efficacy in English Learning" consists of 20 items that assess the current self-efficacy levels of learners. In order to enhance the accuracy of measuring participants' self-efficacy in English learning, this section was designed for students to self-assess their performance in English language learning tasks based on Chinese prompts. Among these items, 8 were positively scored and 12 were negatively scored. In the case of negatively worded items, a lower score indicates a higher level of self-efficacy. If the average score is higher than 4, it reflects a high self-efficacy in English learning. Conversely, if the average score is lower than 4, it indicates a low self-efficacy in English learning.

The questionnaire "Sources and Influencing Factors of Self-Efficacy in English Learning" consists of 10 items. Among them, 4 items correspond to the four aspects emphasized by Bandura's theory of self-efficacy sources, namely past successful experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological/emotional states. The remaining 6 items focus on students' proficiency in English learning and list potential factors that may influence their self-efficacy, including the teacher's competence, student goal-setting, student foundation, use of learning strategies, teaching materials, and learning resources.

The survey was conducted during the students' second and third years of college when they had a better understanding of course requirements, learning goals, and strategies. They also had clear memories of their high school learning experiences, making it easier

to evoke their recollection of past successful experiences. Prior to the questionnaire, the research participants were informed about the purpose of the survey, which aimed to help them understand their learning difficulties and design the best ways to assist them. This understanding of the survey's significance sparked the students' interest, leading them to respond to the questionnaire sincerely and objectively.

2.2.2 Interviews

The interviews were conducted with 33 minority students, taking into account Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation theory and the theory of sources of self-efficacy. Four specific factors, namely past behavioral experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional states, were examined in relation to students' current background in English learning.[5] The results of the interviews were analyzed and served as reference material for Scale 2, as well as providing practical evidence for the reform of teaching methods in vocational English education. The specific questions asked in the interviews were as follows: 1. Did you enjoy studying English during your secondary school years? Did the learning in that stage contribute to your current college courses, including learning strategies and grades? 2. Did you experience positive influences from certain classmates or teachers during your English learning process, which you were able to convert into positive experiences? 3. When faced with difficulties in learning English, were you positively influenced by the words of encouragement from teachers, family members, or classmates? 4. Under what circumstances does your emotional and mental state have a significant impact on your English learning? 5. What methods or resources do you prefer to use when learning English? 6. What do you consider as the biggest influencing factor in your English learning?

2.2.3 Reliability analysis

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, during the initial phase of the research, 30 randomly selected students were invited to participate in the questionnaire survey. Participants were asked to evaluate the clarity and friendliness of the questionnaire items, the time required for completion, and provide suggestions for improving the questionnaire. Additionally, the questionnaire

was also distributed to 10 English teachers to seek their opinions, and appropriate modifications were made based on their feedback.

To assess the internal consistency reliability of the scales, Cronbach's α was used to measure the consistency of variables or scores for each item. The self-efficacy scale in this study consisted of 20 items, with a Cronbach's α of 0.809. The reliability statistics for the factors influencing English learning self-efficacy scale, which consisted of 10 items, yielded a Cronbach's α of 0.882. Both values are higher than the reliability threshold of 0.8 for Cronbach's α , indicating that the sample responses in this study are accurate and reliable. The variables involved in the study exhibit high reliability, thus the data from this study can be used for further research purposes.

2.3 Methodology

The data from all 175 valid questionnaires were entered into a computer and analyzed using SPSS 16.0 software. The statistical procedures employed were as follows: (1) Descriptive Statistics: This involved calculating means and standard deviations to provide an overview of students' responses to self-efficacy items and the background information of the sample. Additionally, the average score for each item in the English learning self-efficacy questionnaire was computed. (2) Multiple Linear Regression Analysis: This method was used to examine the influence of the 10 variables on self-efficacy. The study employed multiple linear regression analysis to explore the relationship between these variables and self-efficacy.

3. Analysis of Research Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics of English Learning Self-Efficacy Levels

According to the statistical results, the average score for self-efficacy among vocational school students from ethnic minorities in English learning is 2.86, which is close to 3. The standard deviation is 0.53. This indicates that, overall, students have relatively low self-efficacy in English learning. They lack confidence in their language learning abilities and exhibit low levels of self-assurance

regarding their expected learning outcomes. For example: Only 33% of students are very dissatisfied with their English proficiency. Merely 20.43% of students believe that learning English well in a Chinese language environment is not difficult. Only 11.83% of students anticipate satisfactory results in every English test. 27% of students feel that they have the ability to overcome difficulties in English learning after one year of study. 32% of students believe that English teachers are satisfied with their answers to questions. 49% of students find it challenging to learn English well based on their current knowledge and abilities.

From these findings, it can be concluded that due to the differences between English learning systems and Chinese, students have developed a relatively low level of self-efficacy in English learning. Over time, they have formed ingrained impressions that learning English is extremely challenging. These fixed impressions may have been established even before students begin their English learning journey, directly contributing to their fear and apprehension towards English learning.

Table 1. Analysis of Influential Factors in English Learning Self-Efficacy

Variables	Average	Standard Deviation
Past success	3.18	1.20
Alternative learning	2.99	1.31
Verbal persuasion	3.58	1.11
Emotional state	3.03	1.14
Student foundation	3.35	1.14
Goal setting	3.17	1.03
Strategy utilization	3.22	1.02
Teacher competence	3.38	1.04
Material factors	3.23	1.05
Diverse learning resources	3.20	1.19

The Table 1 above presents the average scores of 10 influential factors on students' self-efficacy in English learning. These factors include past success, alternative learning methods, verbal persuasion, emotional state, student foundation, teacher competence, teaching materials, goal setting, the utilization of learning strategies and diverse learning resources. Please find the respective average scores in the Table 1.

Upon analyzing the average values of the

independent variables, an understanding of the overall attitude of students towards the variables was gained. From the above Table 1, it can be observed that the average scores for the 10 research variables, namely past success, alternative learning methods, verbal persuasion, emotional state, teacher competence, goal setting, strategy utilization, student foundation, material factors, and the utilization of diverse learning resources, were generally found to be close to 3. This suggests that students, as a whole, exhibited a neutral attitude towards these variables. Regarding the average scores for each question in the questionnaire, it was found that the item "I was told by a teacher or friend that I could excel in English, which boosted my confidence in learning", obtained the highest average score of 3.58. Following that was the statement "If I had previously achieved good grades in English, I believed I could excel", which garnered an average score of 3.38. Moreover, the statement "I felt more confident in my learning as confidence was instilled in me by the teacher during English instruction", scored an average of 3.35. These three variables received the highest average scores among all the items. This indicates that students generally displayed a relatively positive attitude towards the variables of "verbal persuasion", "teacher competence", and "student foundation". It implies that students expressed a certain level of recognition and acceptance towards these three variables when compared to others.

Based on the measurement results mentioned above, it is evident that vocational minority students have lower levels of English self-efficacy. They possess a lower subjective judgment and evaluation of their English language learning abilities, as well as limited self-control and adjustment capabilities. About 24% of students find it difficult to persist in accomplishing their English learning tasks, and 34% express uncertainty regarding this matter. Additionally, 20% of students indicate that they are easily distracted by external factors, which hinders their ability to concentrate on learning English, while 28% express uncertainty toward this issue. These challenges can be attributed, in part, to the overall lower quality of the student population, their weaker study habits, and limited self-awareness. Many of these students

hesitate to set ambitious learning goals. When asked to practice English speaking by their teachers, they tend to prefer reading sentences or passages to summarize the content, as constructing English sentences is more challenging for them than reading them. When writing English compositions, they tend to use simple or compound sentences instead of complex sentences and rely on short and basic vocabulary rather than employing new words or phrases. When encountering unfamiliar words while reading English texts, many students often give up reading the entire passage as they struggle to set reasonable goals, adopt effective learning strategies, engage in accurate self-assessment, and make optimal use of time and other learning resources.[6] These factors significantly weaken their beliefs in their ability to successfully learn English, leading to low self-efficacy.

Nevertheless, it is fortunate that minority students hold a positive attitude towards their language learning abilities. For instance, 45% of students believe that achieving breakthrough progress in English learning is possible, and 51% of students recognize the significant impact of English on future employment. These beliefs provide a foundation for reforming the current state of English teaching and unleashing the linguistic learning potential of students. [7]Currently, there are several factors that hinder students from experiencing the desired enjoyment during the learning process and suppress their subjective initiative, active thinking abilities, logical reasoning skills, and even their creativity. These factors include the contradictions between the language learning environment for minority students and the requirements for actual language communication, the contradictions between students' cognitive levels and traditional English teaching concepts, and the contradictions between language practicality and the format of proficiency exams. This imbalance between expectations and reality leads to confusion, anxiety, restlessness, and boredom among students, resulting in learning fatigue, inability to utilize learning strategies effectively, and ultimately affecting academic performance.[8] Consequently, the self-efficacy in English learning gradually diminishes. Therefore, it is highly meaningful

to understand the current self-efficacy levels of vocational minority students in English learning and focus on English teaching and reforms to further enhance their self-efficacy.

3.2 The Statistical Results of the Regression Analysis on the Factors Influencing Self-Efficacy in English Learning

In order to better demonstrate the impact of the 10 factors, namely, past success, alternative learning, verbal persuasion, emotional state, teacher competence, goal setting, strategy utilization, student foundation, material factors, and diverse learning resources, as independent variables on self-efficacy, and to investigate the specific relationships between these variables and self-efficacy, further research was conducted through regression analysis (as shown below). Bandura suggested that one or more of the four sources of information, namely, past success, alternative learning, verbal persuasion, and emotional state, can have varying degrees of impact on individual self-efficacy.[9] Therefore, this study divided the ten factors into two parts for regression analysis, with the first four factors representing the sources of self-efficacy information proposed by Bandura, and the remaining six factors hypothesized to influence self-efficacy in English learning.

From Table 2, it can be observed that the variables of past success, alternative learning, verbal persuasion, and emotional state were included as independent variables, and self-efficacy was considered as the dependent variable in the multiple linear regression analysis. The model's R-squared value is 0.434, indicating that these four variables collectively account for 43.4% of the variance in self-efficacy. The regression coefficients for past success, alternative learning, and verbal persuasion are 0.129, 0.165, and 0.117 respectively, all of which show statistical significance at the 0.01 level. This suggests a significant positive impact of these variables on self-efficacy. However, emotional state did not demonstrate statistical significance in the analysis.

Based on Table 3, it can be observed that in the regression analysis of the six research variables: teacher competence, goal setting, strategy utilization, student foundation, material factors, and diverse learning resources, the R-squared value is only 0.142. This

indicates that these six factors have a minimal impact on self-efficacy. Among these variables, student foundation demonstrated statistical significance with a P-value less than 0.05, while the other variables did not show

statistical significance. Therefore, it can be inferred that compared to the other five variables, student foundation has a relatively stronger influence on self-efficacy.

Table 2. Regression Analysis of Influencing Factors of Self-Efficacy (1) Standardized Coefficient R2 F-Value

Dependent variable	Independent variables	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	t-value	Significance	R2	Adjusted R2	F
		B	Standard error	Beta					
Self-efficacy	Past success	0.129**	0.036	0.114	3.583	0.000	0.472	0.434	25.347**
	Alternative learning	0.165**	0.030	0.143	5.467	0.000			
	Verbal persuasion	0.117	0.038	0.094	3.079	0.013			
	Emotional state	0.041	0.035	0.087	1.185	0.238			

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

Table 3. Regression Analysis of Influencing Factors of Self-Efficacy (2)

Dependent variable	Independent variables	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	t-value	Significance	R2	Adjusted R2	F
		B	Standard error	Beta					
Self-efficacy	Teacher competence	0.075	0.044	0.160	1.700	0.091	0.175	0.142	6.231**
	Student foundation	0.087	0.031	0.711	2.806	0.037			
	Strategy utilization	-0.008	0.067	-0.015	-0.118	0.907			
	Goal setting	-0.025	0.065	-0.048	-0.377	0.707			
	Material factors	-0.042	0.063	-0.084	-0.674	0.502			
	Diverse learning resources	0.075	0.043	0.170	1.772	0.078			

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01

In summary of the analysis above, it can be concluded that past success, alternative learning, and verbal persuasion have a significant positive impact on self-efficacy, which aligns with Bandura’s theory of sources of self-efficacy. Additionally, student foundation also exerts a certain influence on self-efficacy. However, variables such as emotional state, teacher competence, strategy utilization, goal setting, material factors, and diverse learning resources do not show a significant impact on self-efficacy.

3.3 Analysis of Interview Results

Through the interviews, it was found that most students were unaware of the concept of

self-efficacy and had never considered evaluating their abilities objectively rather than subjectively. At times, their perception of themselves did not align with their actual performance, leading to either overestimation or underestimation. However, most students were not conscious of this discrepancy, resulting in unfavorable effects on their English learning. If they overestimated their actual abilities, they might feel frustrated when faced with unexpected outcomes. On the other hand, underestimating their abilities would restrict their potential for comprehensive development.

Regarding the first question about “past success experiences”, out of the 33

interviewees, 12 indicated a lack of pleasant and successful English learning experiences. This has dampened their interest in continuing to learn English and prevented them from building learning self-confidence. On the other hand, the remaining interviewees who had successful experiences emphasized that having good teachers was a key factor in increasing their learning interest. Additionally, finding learning methods that suit them, such as reading extensively, memorizing, and practicing more exercises, as well as developing the ability to generalize from specific instances, played an indispensable role in college English learning, establishing the psychological foundation for students' English learning. From this, it can be inferred that individuals who achieve success through their own efforts in a particular task or skill will enhance their self-efficacy in that task or skill. Conversely, experiencing failure in a task or skill will lower an individual's self-efficacy. Multiple failures, especially before self-efficacy has been firmly established, will greatly negatively impact an individual's self-efficacy expectations.

Regarding the second question about "vicarious experiences", 4 interviewees stated that they were not influenced by the actions of others and solely relied on their own methods of learning English. Seven interviewees mentioned that they had considered others' learning experiences but failed to translate those experiences into their own consistent learning methods, resulting in limited effectiveness. The remaining interviewees acknowledged that they had more or less drawn inspiration from others' successful experiences, finding motivation through role models and even being influenced by teachers' exemplary words and actions, which ignited their desire to learn. It can be observed that under certain conditions, efficacy judgments rely more on the efficacy information provided by vicarious experiences. Obtaining vicarious experiences through observing and imitating demonstrations and symbolic representations has a lasting impact on individuals' self-efficacy judgments.

Regarding the third question about "verbal persuasion", two interviewees mentioned that they were not influenced by teachers, elders, or classmates when facing setbacks in English learning. However, the majority of the

interviewees acknowledged that the guidance and encouragement from others were crucial in strengthening their resilience and enhancing their self-confidence in overcoming challenges. This aligns with Bandura's perspective on the impact of verbal persuasion on self-efficacy. Verbal persuasion, including persuasive encouragement, advice, warnings, and suggestions from others, can instill a belief in individuals, whether consciously or subconsciously, that they will ultimately succeed. This approach has proven to be highly effective in long-term practice, particularly when individuals experience setbacks and difficulties. When successful role models or significant individuals offer timely encouragement and express trust in an individual's eventual success, the improvement in their self-efficacy becomes remarkably significant.

Regarding the fourth question about how "physiological and emotional states" affect English learning, 18 interviewees mentioned experiencing significant psychological stress when facing fluctuations in exam scores, being unable to answer questions in class, having poor spoken English skills, being mocked for making mistakes, or receiving criticism from teachers. These stressful situations have led to thoughts of giving up on their learning journey. It is evident that individuals partially rely on the bodily information provided by their physiological and emotional states to assess their own abilities. In general, individuals tend to interpret the physiological responses associated with high-stress environments as important indicators of their overall physical and mental functioning. These factors impact individuals' efficacy judgments and can decrease their self-efficacy.

The fifth and sixth questions primarily focused on an open discussion of the various factors that influence self-efficacy in English learning. The interviewees mentioned several factors, including a positive and enthusiastic English learning atmosphere, friendly teacher-student relationships, family background, family education, teacher authority, teaching materials, access to diverse learning resources, individual foundation, goal-setting, and the utilization of learning strategies, among others. Among these factors, individual foundation, teacher confidence, teaching materials, access to diverse learning resources, goal-setting, and

learning strategies were recognized by the majority of the interviewees. Therefore, they are considered as hypothesized factors influencing self-efficacy in English learning.

4. Research Conclusions and Recommendations

The research findings can be summarized as follows:

1) Ethnic minority vocational students exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy in English learning. Although half of the students hold positive views about their English learning abilities, they still lack confidence in their learning outcomes and expected learning effectiveness.

2) The main factors influencing self-efficacy in English learning for ethnic minority vocational students are past successful experiences, alternative learning, and verbal persuasion. Additionally, students' individual foundations also have a certain impact on learning efficacy. Other factors such as teacher competence, goal-setting, access to diverse learning resources, strategy usage, and teaching materials do not directly affect students' self-efficacy in English learning.

3) Ethnic minority vocational students have limited skills in listening, speaking, and writing, with a vocabulary level significantly lower than that of regular vocational students. Their grammar skills are extremely weak, and their reading ability is poor.

Due to their overall weak foundations and lack of developed study habits, ethnic minority vocational students tend to have lower self-efficacy in English learning. English teachers should pay attention to assessing students' self-efficacy levels and make efforts to help them improve their self-efficacy in English learning. Special attention should be given to students with low self-efficacy, and tailored measures should be implemented to help them enhance their self-efficacy in English learning. It is important for teachers to adopt individualized and appropriate approaches to support students in improving their self-efficacy in English learning.

Past success is an important source of self-efficacy, as every student aspires for progress and achievement, enjoying the pleasure and confidence that come after success. Therefore, providing students with more opportunities for success in English

learning can enhance their self-efficacy. It is a concern for teachers to ensure that students have more successful experiences. One approach is to adjust evaluation standards for struggling students and encourage them to engage in accurate self-assessment, thus fostering a sense of accomplishment. Providing positive feedback on students' learning is also crucial in enhancing their self-efficacy. Teachers should offer timely and constructive feedback, as students who value such feedback are likely to make progress in their future learning endeavors.

Alternative learning is also a significant factor influencing the self-efficacy of ethnic minority vocational students in English learning. Therefore, in English teaching, it is important to effectively utilize the power of role models and provide alternative efficacy information. An individual's self-efficacy is shaped and developed through the reciprocal interaction between self and the environment, where the successes and failures of others in the environment directly impact one's self-judgment, providing alternative efficacy information.[10] Thus, establishing appropriate role models and timely providing alternative efficacy information are effective ways to cultivate students' self-efficacy. Within the school context, teachers and peers are the primary sources of alternative efficacy information. In educational settings, teachers go beyond the traditional role of merely imparting knowledge and guiding students, but also need to influence and inspire students through a strong sense of professional responsibility, their words and actions, and authoritative expertise in order to maximize the students' self-efficacy levels. Furthermore, the degree of similarity between oneself and the role model also determines the impact of alternative efficacy information on individual efficacy. The higher the degree of similarity, the stronger the theoretical persuasiveness of the role model becomes. Hence, the power of peer role models is irreplaceable. Educators should cultivate students who are of similar age, experience, abilities, and conditions as role models, enabling them to feel and believe in their own abilities to achieve success through the process of becoming role models. This requires educators to pay attention to collecting and organizing successful cases among past students.

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