

Exploring English Self-Efficacy Among Vietnamese Undergraduates: The Role of Gender and Academic Major

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ABSTRACT

Self-efficacy has been shown to be a key determinant of foreign language learners' efforts and academic achievement. Hence, understanding learners' self-efficacy and the factors that may influence it is vital to improving learners' language learning outcomes. This study investigated Vietnamese learners' overall English self-efficacy and explored potential differences by academic major and gender, using a cross-sectional, quantitative design. 549 participants from four majors at a university in Vietnam were recruited through non-proportional quota sampling. The results revealed that the participants generally have moderate English self-efficacy, with the highest self-efficacy reported in reading. There was a significant difference between majors, as English majors showed higher self-efficacy than their non-major counterparts. In terms of gender, male learners are found to have higher English self-efficacy than female learners, although the gender difference was modest. These findings highlight the importance of structured training, underscoring the need for new pedagogical strategies to boost English learners' self-efficacy and providing implications for further research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English has emerged as the dominant global language, serving as a critical tool for international communication, education, and professional advancement (Crystal, 2003; Alakbarova, 2025). In Vietnam, where English is widely regarded as a key to academic and career success, understanding the factors that influence English learning has become imperative for educators and policymakers. Among these factors, psychological constructs

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like learners' self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific tasks—have been shown to play a vital role in motivating students and shaping their language acquisition outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Artino, 2012; Goetze & Driver, 2022; Cedzich, 2024).

As a core component of Albert Bandura's social-cognitive theory, self-efficacy is defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). These beliefs are not general dispositions but rather domain-specific and context-specific self-judgments (Pajares, 1996; Artino, 2012; Arens et al., 2022; Wang & Sun, 2024). For example, a medical student might have high self-efficacy in asking about patients' medical backgrounds or performing a physical exam, but low self-efficacy in biochemistry (Artino, 2012). It is important to differentiate self-efficacy from related constructs such as self-concept. While both are "beliefs about one's perceived capability," self-efficacy is more task- and situation-specific and is used "in reference to some type of goal" (Pajares, 1996, p. 546). Self-concept, on the other hand, is measured at a broader level of specificity and includes an evaluation of competence and feelings of self-worth (Pajares, 1996). As a result, Bandura emphasized that measures of perceived self-efficacy should be tailored to specific domains of functioning and represent gradations of task demands within those domains (Artino, 2012). Global or inappropriately defined self-efficacy assessments tend to weaken effects (Pajares, 1996).

According to Bandura's theory (1997), individuals primarily acquire information to evaluate their efficacy beliefs from four main sources, including (1) Mastery experiences, (2) Vicarious experiences, (3) Social persuasion, and (4) Physiological states. (1) Mastery experience refers to the past experience of successes, which constructs the belief of individuals in their ability to achieve success in the future. (2) Vicarious learning is the belief that is achieved through observing others performing a specific task. (3) Social persuasion is the third source influencing self-efficacy. It refers to encouragement from others, such as parents, friends, or teachers. When people receive the fosters and positive reinforcement, their self-efficacy increases, and vice versa. In addition to direct persuasion, other forms of social influence also play a crucial role in reinforcing an individual's belief in their own competence. Finally, (4) physiological states can affect the development of self-efficacy. While positive states can reinforce beliefs in people's capabilities, negative states can undermine them.

Self-efficacy has received increasing attention in educational research, particularly in the areas of academic motivation and achievement (Kim et al., 2021; Meng & Zhang, 2023; Cheng, 2020; Musa, 2020; Zysberg & Schwabsky, 2021; Hidajat et al., 2023). In the context of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL or EFL), self-efficacy is defined as "one's beliefs about how well he/she can successfully perform a task in English based upon his/her past experiences" (Kim et al., 2021, p. 3). It is important to note the domain-specific and context-specific nature of self-efficacy. This means that a person's self-efficacy to excel in writing might differ from their self-efficacy in reading comprehension (Raofi et al., 2012). Therefore, for effective measurement and intervention, self-efficacy needs to be tailored to the particular domain of interest, such as specific language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) (Kim et al., 2021; Su et al., 2018; Teng et al., 2017).

There has been a notable increase in research interest in self-efficacy beliefs within the field of second language learning over the last decade (Raofi et al., 2012; Saleem et al., 2018; Bai & Wang, 2020; Li et al., 2024). Studies across contexts consistently show that students with stronger self-efficacy demonstrate greater effort, persistence, and interest in their language learning, ultimately leading to better performance. For example, Anam and

Stracke (2020) found that young Indonesian learners with high self-efficacy for English tasks achieved greater proficiency. Similarly, self-efficacy has been identified as a strong predictor of mastery across both productive (speaking, writing) and receptive (reading, listening) skills (Kutuk et al., 2023). A comprehensive meta-analysis by Wang and Sun (2020) confirmed a small-to-medium positive correlation between self-efficacy and language proficiency across 74 studies. Interestingly, effect sizes reported in studies with East Asian students were larger than those in Western cultures, suggesting that self-efficacy plays a more prominent role in Asian and Middle Eastern cultures.

In the Vietnamese EFL context, while a significant body of research has explored teacher self-efficacy (Luu, 2013; Ly & Brew, 2010; Phan & Locke, 2015; Nguyen & Ngo, 2017; Hoang & Wyatt, 2021), studies on learner self-efficacy are comparatively fewer. Nevertheless, the emerging literature consistently demonstrates a positive and significant relationship between students' self-efficacy beliefs and their English language achievement (Hong & Phan, 2020; Luu & Truong, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022; Truong & Wang, 2019). This connection underscores the critical role of self-efficacy in language acquisition, even as findings on the specific levels and sources of this confidence vary.

A recurring theme across studies is that Vietnamese EFL learners often exhibit modest levels of self-efficacy, typically ranging from low to moderate. Research focusing on non-English majors (Nguyen et al., 2022) and students preparing for the TOEIC test (Hong & Phan, 2020) found a generally low level of self-efficacy. Participants in one study attributed this to factors such as a weak foundation in English, shyness, insufficient vocabulary, and a lack of practice (Nguyen et al., 2022). Other studies have reported more moderate beliefs; Truong and Wang (2019) found a "medium level" of self-efficacy in general proficiency, while Luu and Truong (2024) observed a "moderate level" specifically for English speaking skills. Taken together, these studies suggest that while Vietnamese students may not be overly confident, their self-efficacy is not uniformly low across domains and populations.

Regarding the sources of these beliefs, findings align with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, which posits four main sources of information. Several studies in the Vietnamese context identify mastery experiences—successes in past performances—as the most significant predictor of self-efficacy, particularly for general proficiency and test-taking (Truong & Wang, 2019; Hong & Phan, 2020). However, research into specific skills reveals a more nuanced picture. In the domain of speaking, for instance, Luu and Truong (2024) found that emotional and physiological experiences (e.g., feelings of anxiety or calmness) were the primary contributors to self-efficacy, followed by vicarious experiences. This highlights that the source of confidence can be domain-specific, shifting based on the nature of the language task.

Finally, the role of gender in English learning self-efficacy remains an area with inconsistent findings. Nguyen et al. (2022) identified a significant difference: female students reported higher self-efficacy and better outcomes than male students, suggesting that females may have greater confidence in communicative domains. Conversely, other researchers found no significant gender-based differences (Truong & Wang, 2019; Tran, 2022). These conflicting results have been attributed to potential confounding variables, such as a sample of English majors who already possess high self-efficacy (Tran, 2022) or unequal participant numbers that limit generalizability (Truong & Wang, 2019).

Despite these valuable insights, a review of the literature reveals three research gaps. First, research has predominantly focused on self-efficacy in specific skills, such as speaking (Luu & Truong, 2024) or academic writing (Tran, 2022). Consequently, a holistic

understanding of Vietnamese learners' overall English self-efficacy remains underdeveloped, with only a few studies addressing it (e.g., Truong & Wang, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022). In addition, previous research focused on more non-English major students (Truong & Wang, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022; Luu & Truong, 2024), and less attention has been paid to English majors' overall English self-efficacy, with several research studies on certain skills of the English language (Truong, 2024; Tran & Nguyen, 2020). Lastly, there have been conflicting results regarding gender differences in English self-efficacy, with some studies indicating that females have higher self-efficacy than males (Wang et al., 2013; Nguyen et al., 2022), while others report no gender difference in self-efficacy (Truong & Wang, 2019; Tran, 2022). Therefore, this study sought to bridge these gaps by investigating the overall English self-efficacy of Vietnamese university students and exploring major and gender differences in English self-efficacy. Specifically, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of Vietnamese learners' English self-efficacy?
2. Are there any differences in learners' English self-efficacy in terms of their majors or genders?

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

To address the two research questions, the study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional design. The quantitative approach collects numerical data to identify common trends and provide a broad understanding of the phenomenon, aligning with the study's aims. The cross-sectional study design is used to collect data from a large pool of subjects at a single point in time. The participants in the study were contacted only once and were asked to fill in a questionnaire regarding their confidence in completing certain English tasks.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study were second- and third-year undergraduates from both English and non-English faculties at a university of social sciences in southern Vietnam. There are several reasons for this choice of participants. The first reason is participants' reflection on English self-efficacy. When the questionnaire was distributed, first-year students had just completed their first term at the university. If the researchers had included them in the study, they might have relied on their high school experiences to answer the English self-efficacy questionnaire, so the researchers did not choose them as participants. Four-year students were not selected as participants in this study because, at the time of distribution, they had completed their studies at the university or were engaged in an internship, making it difficult to contact them.

Participants were recruited through non-proportional quota sampling. In this type of sampling, participants are chosen based on predetermined criteria set by the researchers (Kumar, 2011). The recruiting process takes place at a location convenient for the researchers, and if participants meet the inclusion criteria, they are asked to participate in the study. The recruiting process continues until the researchers reach the required number of participants (quota). There are two main reasons for choosing this sampling method. First, this sampling method allows the researchers to ensure a balanced representation of English majors and non-English majors, making it easier to compare and contrast their English self-

efficacy. Another reason is to address time and resource constraints, as the researchers need to approach only participants who meet the inclusion criteria.

After determining the study participants, the researchers contacted the university's Student Affairs department to obtain the English majors' and non-English majors' populations. The English majors' and non-English majors' populations were 735 students and 1,242 students, respectively. After that, the researcher calculated the sample size with the previous population using Yamane's formula with an accuracy of 95% (Yamane, 1967). After calculations, the required sample size is 547 students, with 253 English majors and 294 non-English majors. However, in practice, the researchers distributed the questionnaires to more participants than the calculated sample size (600 participants, with 300 English majors and 300 non-English majors). The increase in the number of participants in the study thus allows the researchers to ensure the accuracy of the results and achieve the desired sample size.

After the questionnaires were distributed to participants, 549 valid responses were received, with 271 English majors (49.4%) and 278 non-English majors (50.6%), nearly satisfying the required sample size. The participants were from 4 majors: English Linguistics and Literature ($n = 271$), Journalism and Communication ($n = 82$), International Relations ($n = 91$), and Sociology ($n = 102$). In terms of gender, 444 participants were female ($n = 444$, 80.9%) and 105 were male ($n = 105$, 19.1%).

2.3 Instruments

The authors developed a 32-item questionnaire to elicit participants' English self-efficacy across four sub-skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking). In each sub-skill, participants were asked to rate their ability to complete in-class and out-class activities. The questionnaire was developed and formatted according to Bandura's (2006) guidelines for constructing self-efficacy questionnaires for specific domains.

The questionnaires were first created in English, and the forward translation method was used to translate them into Vietnamese. The reason for the language of the questionnaire in Vietnamese was due to the fact that the participants in the study were from different majors. They might have different levels of English proficiency; therefore, the translated version in Vietnamese was necessary to avoid any misunderstanding. After that, both the English and Vietnamese versions of the questionnaires underwent a pilot study with 25 participants from the target population. The criteria for participant selection were that participants be second- or third-year students and belong to one of the four majors (English Linguistics and Literature, Journalism and Communication, International Relations, and Sociology).

The inclusion of two versions in the pilot study was intended to ensure they were comparable in terms of validity and reliability. The pilot study results showed that the two versions had acceptable validity (based on participants' feedback) and excellent reliability, with both versions having Cronbach's alpha coefficients of around .95. Some revisions were made before distributing the Vietnamese versions to participants.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Regarding data collection procedures, the questionnaires were distributed in two modes: online and offline. Online questionnaires via the Google Forms platform were distributed to students via email, including an invitation to participate in the research and a

link to the questionnaires. In offline mode, the questionnaires were distributed to participants who volunteered to take part in the research during their breaks.

For data analysis, all collected data were exported to an Excel spreadsheet and then imported into IBM SPSS 23 for further analysis. Initially, the researchers expected to calculate the Mean and Standard Deviation to answer the first research question and to run an Independent-samples T-test for the second research question. However, preliminary analysis through the Shapiro-Wilk (S-W) test and visual inspection of histograms indicated that the collected data were not normally distributed. As a result, the median and Interquartile Range (IQR) were used to answer the first question, and the Mann-Whitney U test was employed to answer the second question. In addition, the effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) of the Mann-Whitney U test results were also calculated using the formula in Fritz et al. (2012). Although many researchers report effect sizes using *r*, the current study chose to report Cohen's *d* index, given the nature of the study. According to Ellis (2010), if researchers want to assess the strength of association between two variables, the *r* family is often used; however, if they want to compare between groups, the *d* family of effects is more preferable. As the current study aimed to determine whether there were differences in English self-efficacy across groups, we chose to report the effect size using Cohen's *d*.

3. RESULTS

Before answering the two research questions, Cronbach's alpha was run to provide some insights into the psychometric properties of the newly developed questionnaires. Table 1 highlights Cronbach's alpha results of the questionnaire.

Table 1
Reliability statistics of the questionnaire

Variables	N of items	Cronbach's alpha
Reading self-efficacy	8	.944
Listening self-efficacy	9	.958
Speaking self-efficacy	7	.971
Writing self-efficacy	8	.969
English self-efficacy (overall)	32	.986

The results of Cronbach's alpha when distributed to a large number of participants ($N = 549$) remained relatively consistent with those of the pilot study, indicating that the questionnaires had excellent reliability.

3.1 Participants' English Self-efficacy

The first research question was to find out Vietnamese undergraduates' English self-efficacy. The median and Interquartile Range (IQR) of overall English self-efficacy and self-efficacy in the four skills of the English language were calculated to answer the question. Participants' self-efficacy levels were evaluated using Alrabai's (2018) categorization framework. English self-efficacy median scores above 9 (90%) are classified as very high self-efficacy, and scores from 8 to 9 (80%–90%) as high self-efficacy. Scores of 7-8 (70%–80%) indicate moderate self-efficacy. Scores from 6 to 7 (60%–70%) were classified as low self-efficacy; scores under 6 (60%) were classified as very low self-efficacy. Table 2 illustrates the results for this research question.

Table 2

Vietnamese undergraduates' English self-efficacy

Variables	Median	IQR
Reading self-efficacy	7.63	2.50
Listening self-efficacy	7.33	2.56
Speaking self-efficacy	7.00	3.57
Writing self-efficacy	7.13	3.00
English self-efficacy	7.24	2.61

As shown in Table 2, participants rated their English self-efficacy at a moderate level, with a median of 7.24. In terms of specific English skills, participants rated their reading self-efficacy highest, with a median of 7.63, followed by their listening self-efficacy (Median = 7.63). Writing self-efficacy was at 7.13, and speaking self-efficacy was at 7.00—the lowest reported score within the four skills.

It is worth noting that the interquartile ranges for English self-efficacy and specific English skills self-efficacy were relatively high, indicating variation in participants' perceived self-efficacy. Speaking and writing self-efficacy results had the highest range, 3.57 and 3.00, respectively, whereas the interquartile range for reading and listening self-efficacy were slightly lower, at 2.50 and 2.56, respectively.

3.2 Differences in English Self-Efficacy in Terms of Majors and Gender

The second research question was to determine whether there were differences in English self-efficacy across participants' majors and genders. Since the collected data were not normally distributed, the Mann-Whitney U test, a nonparametric test, was performed to answer this research question. Table 3 presents the results of the Mann-Whitney U test and the effect size, calculated using the formula suggested by Fritz et al. (2012).

Table 3

Differences in English self-efficacy between majors and genders

Independent Variable	<i>n</i>	Mean Rank	U	z	p	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Major	English major	271	341.72			
	Non-English major	278	209.96	19,587.0	-9.731	< .001
Gender	Male	105	323.65			
	Female	444	263.49	28,418.5	3.495	< .001

In terms of majors, before conducting a Mann-Whitney U test, participants from three majors, namely Journalism and Communication, International Relations, and Sociology, were grouped as non-English majors, and participants from English Linguistics and Literature were changed into English majors using the function Recode into different variables in SPSS IBM. The distributions of English self-efficacy between English majors and non-English majors were not similar, as evaluated by visual inspection. The Mann-Whitney U test results showed that English majors (mean rank = 341.72, $n = 271$) exhibit a statistically significant, higher English self-efficacy than non-English majors (mean rank = 209.96, $n = 278$), $U = 19,587.0$, $z = -9.731$, $p < .001$. An effect size using Cohen's *d* was calculated from a z-value of -9.731 and a total sample size $N = 549$. This results in a large effect size (Cohen's $d = -.91$), as assessed using Cohen's guideline (1988).

Regarding gender differences in English self-efficacy, the distributions between males and females were not similar, as assessed by visual inspection. The results indicated that English self-efficacy of male participants (mean rank = 323.65, $n = 105$) was significantly higher than their female counterparts (mean rank = 263.49, $n = 444$), $U = 28,418.5$, $z = 3.495$, $p < .001$, small effect size (Cohen's d) = .30.

4. DISCUSSION

English self-efficacy has received scholars' attention in recent years, for it is believed to influence learners' behavior and achievement. The present study examined undergraduate students' English self-efficacy and differences by major and gender. In this study, we found that (i) participants have moderate English self-efficacy, with reading self-efficacy having the highest median, followed by listening, writing, and speaking; (ii) English-majored students have higher self-efficacy than their non-English-majored counterparts, and (iii) male participants were more self-efficacious than female participants.

With regard to the first findings on participants' English self-efficacy, the results align with previous studies (Truong & Wang, 2019) conducted in Vietnam, indicating that Vietnamese students have moderate English self-efficacy. However, the results contrasted with those of Nguyen et al. (2022). In their study, they found that students had low overall English self-efficacy, and, in specific English skills, students had the highest self-efficacy in listening, followed by speaking and then reading; writing was reported to be the skill with the least confidence. Our study indicates that participants were most self-efficacious in reading, followed by listening, writing, and speaking. We believe that such contrasting results can be attributed to differences in the participants of the two studies. In Nguyen et al. (2022), the study focused on non-English majors, whereas the present study included both non-English and English majors. It is possible that such a variation in participants can lead to differences in findings.

In terms of major differences in English self-efficacy, previous studies, to the best of our knowledge, have not conducted a study to examine the differences in English self-efficacy in terms of majors. The results of the present study indicate that major influences participants' English self-efficacy; that is, participants from English majors are more self-efficacious than those from non-English majors. This difference could be explained by participants' mastery experience, which, according to Bandura (1997), is the most significant source of a person's self-efficacy. In fact, English majors, at the beginning of the program, already experienced a sense of achievement after passing the entrance exam and being accepted into the English major. The sense of achievement has also been reinforced by the successful completion of English assignments and tasks in the English major program. Non-English majors, on the other hand, may lack such experiences. This rationale is somewhat supported by the findings in Truong and Wang's study (2019). In their study, they examined first-year students' English self-efficacy levels and conceptualized mastery experience as the number of years students had spent learning English and the number of hours they had studied English in high schools and university. They found that mastery experience is a significant predictor of students' English self-efficacy.

As for gender differences in English self-efficacy, the results are not in line with previous results that found females were more likely to be more self-efficacious than males (Wang et al., 2013; Nguyen et al., 2022) or that found no gender differences in English self-efficacy (Truong & Wang, 2019; Tran, 2022). The present study found that male participants had higher English self-efficacy than their female counterparts. The researchers did not

expect this result because they initially assumed, based on previous studies (Wang et al., 2013; Nguyen et al., 2022), that female participants received social encouragement to study English and thus had higher English self-efficacy than males. However, the results did not support such an assumption. One possible explanation for such a difference lies in gender identity and covert sexism, as suggested by Leaper and Van (2008). In their study, they found that males who studied non-traditional majors, such as languages and sociology, were more likely to feel that they were less similar to other male students (gender typicality) and/or have less sexist attitudes in contemporary society (covert sexism). Importantly, they found that males who had low gender typicality and low covert sexism had the highest self-efficacy in their non-traditional fields. Our study was conducted at a university of social sciences in southern Vietnam, with a majority of female students. Males who study at the present research site are more likely to pursue non-traditional majors (e.g., languages, sociology, psychology). The participants in our study may have low gender typicality and low covert sexism, as suggested by Leaper and Van (2008). This could, in turn, lead to an increase in their English self-efficacy and thus surpass that of their female counterparts. However, this is a researcher's assumption and needs further investigation and validation. In addition, the gender difference in English self-efficacy results had a small effect size, indicating that the differences between the two groups are not large; therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Based on the findings, the present study can have several implications for educational contexts. The results showed that participants have moderate English self-efficacy, so instructors in the educational field can apply teaching methods to improve participants' English self-efficacy. If students have high self-efficacy, they can be persistent and motivated to learn English, and thus improve their English achievement. In addition, instructors can allocate more time for students to practice their writing and speaking skills, as the results showed that participants had lower self-efficacy in these areas. If students have more time to practice such skills, they will have more successful and unsuccessful experiences, in other words, more mastery experiences. This can later improve their self-efficacy in writing and speaking.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study found that the participants demonstrated a moderate level of English self-efficacy, with the highest median observed in reading, followed by listening, writing, and speaking. Regarding major differences, English majors have been found to have higher levels of English self-efficacy than their non-English-major counterparts. Regarding gender differences, the research found that English self-efficacy was higher among male participants than among female participants. By researching both English and non-English majors, the present study offers comparative insights into foreign language learning and academic self-efficacy, emphasizing the importance of structured training and consistent exposure to the English language in English self-efficacy. Moreover, the contrasting findings on gender differences in English self-efficacy contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the influence of cultural and contextual factors across different research settings.

The results of the present study should be interpreted with certain limitations in mind. First, the study's sampling method is non-proportional quota sampling, which may not comprehensively capture the diverse characteristics of the study population. Second, it involved only participants from four faculties within a single university, which may limit the

generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. Further studies can address these limitations by employing probability sampling and involving participants from diverse majors and universities to increase generalizability. In addition, we suggest conducting a study to explore the unexpected finding of the present research on gender differences in English self-efficacy.

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Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' Contribution

Huy Ngoc Tran developed the main conceptual ideas, contributed to data collection, conducted statistical analysis, and wrote the manuscript (methods, results, and discussion). Trong Duc Tran developed the main conceptual ideas, contributed to data collection, and wrote the manuscript (introduction and literature review). Thuong Ngoc Doan Nguyen contributed to data collection and wrote the manuscript (methods section). Mai Thi Ngoc Nguyen and Quynh Xuan Tran contributed to data collection and wrote the manuscript (conclusions and abstract section)

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