

Sources of Speaking EFL Self-Efficacy of Japanese University Students

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Reference Data

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Raising the English-speaking fluency of university graduates is a key concern. The ability to communicate in English serves as a gateway to global education and employment opportunities, at the same time, the English level of Japanese is one of the lowest in Asia. Self-efficacy, which is a person's confidence in their abilities to complete a specific task, may help in understanding why. It is formed through the interpretation of learning experiences and is a predictor of academic success. However, its role in EFL speaking in Japan remains under-researched. Consequently, in this study 15 university students were interviewed about their EFL speaking learning experiences at junior and senior high school in relation to sources of self-efficacy. Findings suggest a tendency for passive speaking mastery experiences, insufficient peer modelling and a strong preference from students for more communicative activities.

大学卒業者の英語力の向上は重要な課題である。英語でのコミュニケーション能力は、グローバルな教育や雇用機会への入り口となるが、一方で日本人の英語レベルはアジアでも最低レベルである。その理由を理解するには、特定の課題を成功させるための自己効力感 (self-efficacy) が役立つかもしれない。自己効力感は学習経験の解釈を通して形成され、学業の成功を予測するものである。しかし、日本のEFLスピーキングにおけるその役割については、まだ十分な研究がなされていない。そこで本研究では、15名の大学生を対象に、中学・高校でのEFLスピーキングの学習経験と自己効力感との関連についてインタビューを行った。その結果、学生には受動的なスピーキング習得の傾向がみられ、ピア・モデリングが不十分であり、学生がより多くのコミュニケーション活動を好む傾向があることが示唆された。

Cultivating the communicative ability of graduates is a significant concern for educationists in Japan because it is an impetus for the internationalisation of higher education institutes and the global expansion of industries (Baker, 2016; Breaden, 2014;

Tsuruta, 2013). Raising the English spoken fluency of graduates has been challenging because Japanese learners of English tend to have weak oral proficiency (Hamada, 2008; Rogers, 2007). Furthermore, the English proficiency level of Japanese people is one of the lowest in Asia with some assessments indicating that the level is decreasing (Education First, 2019).

Japanese students' low proficiency has been attributed to loss of motivation and low willingness to communicate caused by the grammar translation teaching methods used at junior and senior high school (JSHS, hereafter) (Kikuchi, 2009; Munezane, 2015; Murakami et al., 2012; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). These findings suggest that students' experiences at JSHS impact on their current English proficiency and that students do not receive enough speaking practice at school. Therefore, understanding the students' experiences of learning English speaking at JSHS could help researchers identify the causes of students' low proficiency and confidence to speak English. This study investigates students' learning experiences through sources of self-efficacy. In the following sections I outline the background of self-efficacy research in academic contexts and discuss the methodology for the semistructured interviews. Finally, I present the five themes relating to students' sources of self-efficacy experiences and make recommendations for teaching EFL speaking skills.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy (SE hereafter) is the confidence a person feels in their ability to achieve specific levels of performance (Bandura, 1994) and is a powerful predictor of academic success. Thus, students who have robust sources of self-efficacy experiences develop strong SE which in turn fosters achievement and motivation. Self-efficacy is a core element of Bandura's (2012) influential social cognitive theory which holds that people have the power to influence their actions through the interplay of behavioural, environmental and personal determinants. Although originally formed to alleviate

the debilitating effects of phobias, research consistently shows that SE levels predict student academic achievement (Zimmerman, 1995), and motivation (Busse & Walter, 2013; Schunk, 1995). Self-efficacy levels are based on information gathered from four sources: mastery: experiences of success with a task, social modelling: watching similar others complete the task, social persuasion: feedback from significant others about task performance, and physiological states: physical and emotional responses to the task (Bandura, 2012). Self-efficacy in EFL learning has been studied as an aspect of motivation (Dörnyei, 1998; Kormos et al., 2011) with research identifying SE as a powerful indicator of EFL learning success (Burrows, 2016; Templin et al., 2001).

In the Japanese context, EFL SE has been explored in relation to reading and listening skills (Burrows, 2016; Todaka, 2017). Studies that have addressed the speaking confidence of Japanese learners have approached the problem from perspectives such as self-perceived communicative competence (Lockley, 2013), language learning beliefs (Toyama, 2015), or foreign language anxiety (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). Research into sources of SE has connected the sources to other educational factors such as achievement, motivation and self-regulated learning (Mills et al., 2007) and concluded that mastery is the most powerful source of SE beliefs (Usher & Pajares, 2008). However, Oettingen (1995), has argued that this is a Western-centric view and that in collectivist societies, such as Japan, social persuasion is likely to be the most potent source of SE.

The majority of studies have explored the sources of SE for mathematics (Lent et al., 1991; Usher & Pajares, 2009) and student teachers (Phan & Locke, 2015; Poulou, 2007). Although there have been studies on SE, there have been very few on the sources, the antecedents, of SE in the Japanese context. This study aims to investigate Japanese students' sources of SE experiences for EFL speaking and whether any other issues may be contributing towards students' SE.

Methodology

Data was collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews with 15 students selected from an intact group of second year university students ($N=232$) majoring in economics at a small, civic university (population 1,400) in Western Japan. The questionnaire was administered in Japanese and is included along with the English version in Appendix A and Appendix B.

There were 129 (55.6%) female and 103 (44.4%) male students. The students were between 18 and 22 yrs. old ($M = 19.41$, $SD = .697$). Their English level ranged from A1 to

B1 (A1 = 9.9%, A2 = 87.1%, B1 = 3%). The students first filled in a selection questionnaire comprised of demographic and SE level questions. These were adapted from validated EFL SE scales: 2 items from Piniel and Csizér, (2013), 6 items from Yough, (2011), and 10 items from Wang et al, (2014).

Sixty-one students indicated that they were willing to be interviewed. However, due to students' busy schedules, only 15 students out of the original 61 students responded to requests for interview (4 male and 11 female).

Semistructured Interviews

An interview protocol was drawn up based on the four sources of SE and general questions to prompt rich student responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews lasted between 40 to 90 minutes. Participants were sent participant information sheets one week before the interview and were able to ask any questions before they provided informed consent. Ethical approval was granted from the research site university and aliases were used throughout the study. The interviews were conducted in Japanese and were digitally recorded. They were later transcribed and translated by the author. Translations were checked by two bilingual experts according to the American Translation Association (ATA) translation certification rubric and were found to be strong.

Analysis

The transcripts were analysed with hybrid, thematic analysis (Swain, 2018). This is a process that draws out the theoretical tenets with a priori (pre-existing) codes whilst also identifying data-driven themes with inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The data were first coded with the four a priori codes from sources of SE: mastery, social modelling, social persuasion and physiological states. Then the data were coded inductively as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify any additional themes. Nowell et al's, (2017) principles for reliability and validity of thematic analysis were followed. These are credibility, transferability, confirmability, and audit trails. The credibility of the data was checked through assessment of the transcripts against the final coding map. Two Japanese-English bilingual university professors reviewed the themes to evaluate transferability and confirmability. Finally, a complete record of transcriptions, analyses, and researcher field notes were collated to create an audit trail.

Findings

The background information of the 15 interview participants is shown in Table 1. The participants' English and SE levels were compared with the whole sample ($N = 232$). The interview participants' English levels show 12 out of 15 students had A2 level (80%) similar to the whole sample (87.1%). The SE level of the whole sample ranged from 1 to 4.5 ($M = 1.92$, $SD = .616$); the participants' SE levels ranged from 1 to 3.7 ($M = 2.16$, $SD = .682$). Thus, it was considered that the interview participants were representative of the sample.

Table 1
Background of Interview Participants

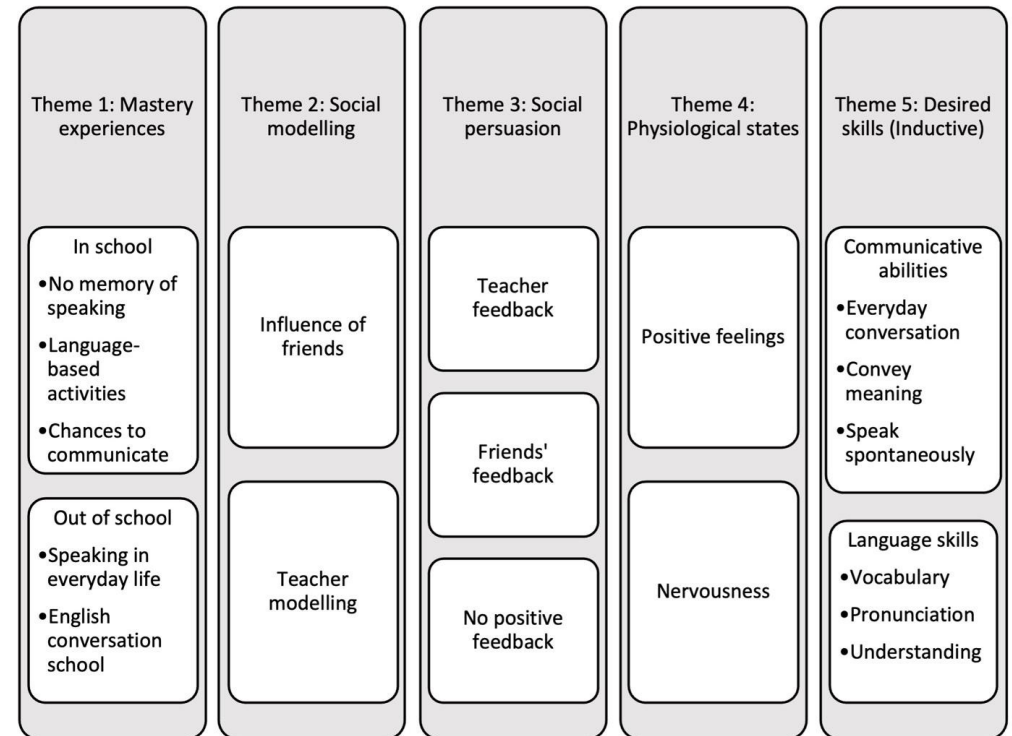
Alias	Age	Gender	English CEFR level	English SE level (1-5)
Hanako	19	female	A2	2.8
Minami	19	female	A2	2.4
Tomoki	19	male	A2	1.4
Ryuichi	19	male	B1	3.7
Shiori	19	female	A2	1
Aya	19	female	A2	2.6
Yumi	19	female	B1	2.4
Ayaka	20	female	A2	2.1
Eri	19	female	A2	2.2
Ichiro	19	male	A2	2.3
Rika	19	female	A2	1.9
Tomomi	19	female	A2	2.1
Aiko	20	female	A2	1.8
Yuko	20	female	A2	1.8
Taro	20	male	A1	2.7

Note 1: English level is CEFR level (A1 = lowest, C2 = highest).

Note 2: SE level from selection questionnaire (1 = lowest, 5 = highest).

The hybrid thematic analysis yielded five themes, the four a priori themes and a fifth inductive theme desired skills. The coding map is shown in Figure 1. Each theme is discussed below with extracts from the interviews.

Figure 1
Coding Matrix after Hybrid Thematic Analysis.



Mastery Experiences *In School*

When I asked students about their experiences of speaking English at JSHS, a common response was to say that they could not remember. For example, Hanako commented, "E h... we didn't do much, you know? Not that it wasn't interesting, but I only remember the drama at university. That's how little we did." Similarly, Taro professed, "To be honest,

I don't remember school. There wasn't really a proper English conversation class." Students recounted mainly passive speaking activities at school. Ichiro described a class activity for practising scripted dialogues with a look of distaste on his face, "Read John's part, read Emily's part, that kind of conversation and we did reading it aloud." Other passive activities were standing in front of the whole class to deliver speeches. Hanako said she remembered, "memorizing the textbook passages because we read out alone, we didn't add gestures or anything, it was just memorizing, it was mainly grammar and writing. We didn't do much speaking."

Yet some students had more communicative opportunities. Minami recounted scripting and performing a roleplay, she spoke with eagerness, "...We were just given that theme and asked what will you do? Um, we thought in each team and then presented." In these activities the students had agency in writing the scripts, but they did not communicate spontaneously. Nevertheless, the interesting topic helped to create a memorable learning experience.

Out of School

Some of the most engaging experiences students recounted involved unexpected exchanges with foreign people in town. A common feature was students feeling a sense of success from both understanding what the foreign person had said and communicating their thoughts. Eri's comments show how the exchanges, though often challenging, were also seen as rewarding, "But I was really happy to come to understand even a little of those conversations with foreign people."

When communication with foreign visitors was unsuccessful, it proved to be a powerful motivator to improve communicative skills. Minami described giving instructions to a foreign tourist and feeling frustrated about being unable to do so, "At those times, if I don't answer swiftly, they are like 'don't worry'. That's a big shock, so I thought I would study English more."

Social Modelling

Watching similar others succeed contributes significantly to SE levels. However, students' reflections showed that most did not have enough opportunities to watch others speaking English. Students' main modeller was their teacher, and their experiences were mixed. Some students reported teachers who seldom used English. Shiori talked of the teacher using English, "Just when it was necessary in the lesson", and

Ayaka noted that the lesson was, "Basically in Japanese." However, when teachers used English it had a lasting effect on the students. Tomomi described a teacher who, "Just spoke as usual in the lesson while we were solving the questions, he would ask 'How did you get that answer?' in English, and then we would answer the Japanese teacher like 'Well I thought like this.'" Hanako described the effect of hearing her teacher use English "My motivation went up and it's fun, and I thought I want to hear English more."

Several students said that they had not heard their classmates speak English. Ichiro talked about classmates who consciously decided not to speak English in class, "I listened to those around me, and they were speaking Japanese, so they said like 'Well I can't explain so I'll say it in Japanese', and the worst case was 'Here, read this.'"

Students who had friends that spoke English well thought they were amazing. Eri explained the influence of a friend who had been studying English hard, "I felt she was similar to me, but in quite a short time she could speak really well, so I felt that if I studied, maybe I could become like that."

Social Persuasion

Feedback from teachers tended to be constructive criticism designed to help students do better next time and students seemed to appreciate this kind of feedback. Aiko explained that, "When we did the presentation to the teachers, they told us detailed things, so I think that gave us more input." And Aya said, "The teacher pointed out the construction of sentences." Several students remembered teachers giving them negative feedback which focused on students' memorization and pronunciation of the text. Minami said, "It was like whether we had remembered it or not", she also commented that teachers had never told her about her speaking skill. Shiori said that her teacher, "Didn't do much, and that's the point from where I didn't like English."

Comments students received from their friends were also typically about pronunciation. Yuko, who was quite a shy student, sounded delighted when she told me, "I take care when I'm speaking to be easy to understand. I've been told I'm easy to understand." However, classmates' reactions were sometimes unhelpful. Ichiro said that, "There are many people who are stunned, there are not many people who mention advice to me. It finishes with them just being amazed that I speak English." But most students said that they did not receive positive comments from friends. Aiko summed up the students' experiences well, "I only have the chance to speak English in the lesson times, so I didn't get told anything from other people. Amongst my classmates, we didn't say things like that."

Concerningly, several students had received damaging comments. Tomomi looked uncomfortable while telling me that her Japanese accent was mocked by friends. She confessed that, “I often get told ‘you just speak word by word’, and I’m told that I speak Japanese English.” Similarly, Tomoki told of the teasing that he had received at home. He told me with sadness, “Well my parents don’t really, my parents don’t really speak English so, sometimes they teased me and said ‘Say something in English’ and I would half-heartedly say something. I’ve never been told anything especially advantageous.”

Physiological States

Students had more negative than positive responses to speaking English. The few cases of feeling positive about speaking were when students had some creative input into deciding what they would say. Ryuichi spoke about a presentation on biomimicry, “It was fun. Being able to use phrases yourself, phrases you’ve learnt, I experienced that, so first it was enjoyable.”

However, most students reported negative reactions to speaking English at school with unpleasant, physical sensations. Shiori’s reaction was one of the most vivid, “I was nervous, so I was quite stiff, you know, and I felt the blood drain from my face.” Her feelings were mirrored by Minami who talked of “Shaking, I was shaking. I thought I’m embarrassed because I can’t speak English. I was embarrassed for everyone to see me speaking.”

Desired Skills

The inductive analysis suggested the final theme of desired skills - the kind of English speaker students wanted to become (Dörnyei, 2009). Desired skills was defined by the communicative abilities they wanted to acquire and the specific language skills they wanted to attain.

Students saw themselves using English to talk about everyday things rather than in their future careers. Taro said, “Well, just using English normally, as much as possible in English, first of all, talk to people, speaking to people.” Students also wanted to convey meaning rather than produce grammatically correct phrases. The idea was described by Aya, “When it comes to actual communication, being able to convey meaning is important I think.” Many students also expressed a desire to be able to speak spontaneously without first formulating their responses in their head. Tomomi described her frustration with this, “When it came to speaking spontaneously, only the easy English that I learnt at junior high would come out.”

The students also talked about the language skills they wanted to have. They wanted to develop their lexical fluency. Ichiro was especially interested in being able to convey the strength of an emotion, “I want to get better at phrases to describe feelings (...) So, I think that I want to be able to express emotional phrases using various vocabulary.” Other students wanted to develop core vocabulary. Shiori said that, “I think of what to say in Japanese, don’t I? When I think to change it into English, my English vocabulary is often insufficient.”

Many students wanted to perfect their English pronunciation. Specifically, they felt that speaking with a Japanese accent was a sign of low aptitude. Tomomi felt that she wanted, “To be able to speak with an understandable pronunciation. I have a strong Japanese intonation, me, I think I want to be able to speak English so that others can understand.”

Students also felt that being unable to understand everything that people said to them was the reason that they could not communicate sufficiently. Aiko felt that it was the most important skill, “if I don’t know what people are saying, then I can’t convey anything, so rather than speaking, I feel I want to get better at listening.”

Discussion

The students’ experiences of speaking English at school tended to be giving speeches or reading scripted dialogues aloud. The classroom activities had limited communicative benefit and often did not reflect real world communication. I found this result disheartening because the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2012) introduced recommendations that communicative English should be given precedence in order to develop students’ international opportunities. It is worrying that in-class learning experiences are inconsistent with student needs because this leads to demotivation (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). The finding is similar to other Japan-based studies, Watanabe, (2013) found that the non-communicative English classes at high school contributed to students’ low willingness to communicate. Another study suggests that 66% of students find experiences of learning speaking EFL at high school unmeaningful (Osterman 2014). Students’ active learning experiences were more likely to have occurred out of school talking to foreign people in town. Research suggests that students’ experiences of using English in out-of-class activities are a learning strategy that boosts SE (Osboe et al., 2007).

Students’ reflections showed that social modelling experiences were also often insufficient. Many students had not been able to hear their classmates speak English,

but for the few who had, it was an impressive experience. Burrows (2016) found similar results; in his study, students had more meaningful social modelling experiences at university than they did at JSHS. This is important because unlike Western cultures where individuals depend on their own experiences of success, East Asian cultures respond best to group focused instruction (Earley, 1994). Therefore, not observing similar others speaking English meant students lacked valuable SE formation experiences.

The study's findings also suggest that the students had not received enough positive feedback from significant others. Feedback was generally related to students' delivery of speeches and textbook dialogues not communicative ability. Education in Japan draws on the concept of *ganbaru* (try hard) (Cowie, 2006), where effort rather than self-belief spurs achievement and it seems teacher comments were designed to help students try harder next time. Ruegg (2014) found that constructive feedback from teachers raised Japanese students' SE even when praise was absent. Students reporting that they did not receive any praise could be due to a cultural tendency to avoid embarrassing people, or due to students having few opportunities to converse in lessons. These findings are concerning because not only is SE easier to undermine with negative comments than it is to enhance it with positive ones, but social persuasion may be more influential in East Asian contexts. Therefore, students having little memory of receiving feedback is likely to have significantly diminished their SE to speak EFL.

The students' negative, physiological reactions to speaking English at school were caused by being the focus of everyone's attention. When students are reciting in front of the entire class, they are under everyone's scrutiny, so any mistakes or mispronunciations stand out. However, in conversation, speech is interactional, and a person's focus will be split between what the other person is saying and how they will respond. Research suggests that Japanese students prefer to speak in small groups and that delivering speeches is one of the major sources of student anxiety (Osboe et al., 2007; Williams & Andrade, 2008). It appears that the prevalence of speaking English in front of the whole class created adverse reactions which diminish SE.

The language abilities and skills that students desired were to quickly convey meaning in everyday conversations, and also to have adequate listening ability, no Japanese accent, and a broad vocabulary. For students, conveying meaning clearly was more important than producing a grammatically correct response. Perhaps this is because speaking activities at school were focused on accuracy at the expense of fluency. There appear to have been insufficient opportunities for students to converse with the need to process information and then formulate a response. The desired skills theme is related to ideal L2 self which is part of the L2 motivational self system proposed by Dörnyei, (2009). Ideal

L2 self refers to the type of L2 user that students imagine themselves to become. This image stimulates students to try to close the gap between their current perceived L2 self and their future ideal L2 self (Ueki & Takeuchi, 2013). Although ideal L2 self contains the communicative abilities that students reported in this study, it also includes using the L2 in international work and leisure settings (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Ueki & Takeuchi, 2012). These kinds of distal goals were not a strong feature in this data set so desired skills is considered as one part of Ideal L2 self.

Conclusion

The students in this study had a range of sources of SE experiences in learning speaking EFL. It was heartening to hear about students who had dedicated teachers communicate in English enthusiastically, but it was equally discouraging to hear of students who had not had positive learning experiences.

Six key recommendations for teaching can be gleaned from the findings. 1) Speaking practice should be focused on communication by practising non-rehearsed conversations that reflect common interactions in daily and business settings. This kind of practice will help students have positive mastery experiences of speaking EFL through conveying meaning and formulating answers on the fly. 2) Students should have more chances to watch teachers and students use English in the classroom. To this end, English should be used in the classroom as much as possible, not just when necessary. By so doing, its use becomes normalised and speaking in English will not make students stand out. 3) More positive verbal support needs to be given to students. There is some evidence that constructive criticism is as effective as praise in East Asian settings but too many students reported receiving either negative or no feedback. 4) Speaking in front of the whole class causes anxiety and its use should be restricted to when necessary. It should be replaced with speaking in pairs or in small groups whenever possible. 5) Assessment of speaking skills should be based on communicative competence to avoid students fixating on pronunciation and grammatical correctness. 6) Students should be encouraged to form a realistic image of the L2 speaker they want to become. An image that is not just composed of the skills and abilities they desire but also of using English to communicate in various situations.

Although measures were taken to make this study as reliable and ethically valid as possible, several limitations need to be stated. The lack of responses to requests for interview participation created a self-selection bias in that only students who were willing to be interviewed participated and the experiences reported may not be

reflective of the student group. Secondly, the self-selection created a gender bias of more than double the number of female participants than male. This means that the male perspective is underrepresented. Finally, the data collected is from one university and may not be transferrable to other contexts. Nevertheless, the study's findings should stimulate more research into speaking EFL SE in the Japanese context.

Bio Data

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Appendix A Japanese Version of Selection Questionnaire

学籍番号: _____

英語を話す自信アンケート

当てはまる答にチェック✓をつけてください。

1. 何年生ですか? (チェックしてください):
1年生 , 2年生 , 3年生 , 4年生
2. 総合英語1と総合英語2の単位をお持ちですか? (チェックしてください):
はい , いいえ
3. 年齢: _____ 歳
4. 性別: 男性 , 女性
5. 国籍: 日本 , 他 (国籍書いてください) _____
6. 海外の学校に在籍したことがありますか?
はい (回答を書いてください) _____ , いいえ
7. あなたは海外に住んだことがありますか?
はい , いいえ
→7 否をはいと答えた方に続きます。
a. どの国ですか? _____
b. 何ヶ月住みましたか?
1ヶ月以下 , 1ヶ月 ~ 6ヶ月 , 6ヶ月以上
8. 学校の授業意外で英会話を勉強したことがありますか?
はい (何年間を書いてください) _____ , いいえ
9. 母国語は何ですか?
日本語 , 他 (言語を書いてください) _____
10. あなたの両親のどちらかが母国語として英語を話しますか?
はい , いいえ
11. 最新の TOEIC スコアは何点ですか?
0~224 , 225~549 , 550~784 , 785~944 , 945~990

EFL Speaking Self-Efficacy Questions

Directions: Please use the scale the following scale to answer the questions below. Please circle the number that best describes how confident you feel to perform the following tasks.

0
1
2
3
4
5
 No chance Very Confident

1	Speak the English in front of your classmates	1	2	3	4	5
2	Participate in a conversation at the same speed as a native speaker of English	1	2	3	4	5
3	Express your opinions in English when speaking about general topics	1	2	3	4	5
4	Give a half hour speech on a topic you do not know well in English	1	2	3	4	5
5	Use English in a casual conversation with people you know	1	2	3	4	5
6	Find or create situations outside of class time to practice conversations in English	1	2	3	4	5
7	Do the speaking tasks in the university English classes.	1	2	3	4	5
8	Answer the teacher's questions in English in the university English classes.	1	2	3	4	5
9	Describe your university to other people in English?	1	2	3	4	5
10	Describe the way to the university from the place where you live in English?	1	2	3	4	5
11	Tell a story in English?	1	2	3	4	5
12	Ask your teacher questions in English?	1	2	3	4	5
13	Say English sentences with idiomatic phrases?	1	2	3	4	5
14	Introduce your teacher to someone else in English?	1	2	3	4	5
15	Discuss subjects of general interest with your fellow students in English?	1	2	3	4	5
16	Understand English films without subtitles?	1	2	3	4	5
17	Answer your teacher's questions in English?	1	2	3	4	5
18	Introduce yourself in English?	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for filling in this Questionnaire!