

STUDENTS' LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE IN USING ENGLISH, SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF ABILITY, AND PERCEPTIONS OF COURSE DIFFICULTY

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Abstract. This article explores the intricate relationship between students' levels of confidence in using English, their self-perceptions of linguistic ability, and their perceptions of course difficulty. Confidence is identified as a crucial factor influencing students' willingness to communicate and engage in language learning. Self-perception, shaped by individual experiences, feedback, and cultural context, often determines motivation and effort in learning. Furthermore, the perceived difficulty of a course significantly affects student outcomes, with overly challenging courses causing frustration and easy ones leading to disengagement. The article examines how these three elements interconnect, highlighting their collective impact on students' academic performance and personal development. Finally, it offers strategies for educators to create balanced learning environments that foster confidence, encourage realistic self-assessment, and maintain an optimal level of challenge to support language acquisition.

Keywords: Confidence, using English, self-perceptions of ability, perceptions of course difficulty, self-assurance, feedback, frustration, stress, "Just right" challenge, growth mindset and mixed mindset, anxiety, interconnections.

In language learning, success is often influenced by more than just the curriculum or teaching methods. Students' confidence in using English, their perceptions of their own abilities, and how they view the difficulty of their courses play pivotal roles in shaping their learning journey. Confidence empowers students to actively participate and take risks, both of which are essential for acquiring language skills. However, this confidence is closely tied to how students perceive their capabilities. Unrealistic self-perceptions—whether overly positive or overly negative—can hinder progress, creating a gap between potential and performance.

Moreover, the way students perceive course difficulty can significantly affect their motivation and engagement. When a course feels overwhelmingly difficult, students may feel discouraged and disengaged. Conversely, a course perceived as too easy may fail to stimulate their interest, leading to stagnation. The interplay between these factors creates a complex dynamic that educators must navigate to optimize the learning experience. This article delves into these interconnections, examining their implications for both students and teachers, and offers practical strategies to address these challenges effectively.

Research by Bandura (1997) on self-efficacy theory highlights that individuals who believe in their ability to perform tasks are more likely to persist in challenging situations and achieve better outcomes. In the context of language learning, students with higher confidence levels are more likely to actively participate in speaking activities, seek opportunities to use the language, and overcome obstacles, which accelerates their language acquisition.

Additionally, a study by MacIntyre (1998) on willingness to communicate (WTC) found that students with greater confidence in their linguistic abilities are more likely to initiate communication in a second language, fostering fluency and practical application of their skills.

Students' Levels of Confidence in Using English:

Confidence is one of the most critical factors in language learning because it determines how willingly students engage in communication. Key points include:

Impact on Communication Skills	Confident students are more likely to practice speaking and writing in English, which leads to faster improvement. Those with low confidence may avoid opportunities to use the language, leading to slower progress.
Fear of Mistakes	Lack of confidence often stems from a fear of making mistakes or being judged. This is especially common in speaking tasks or group discussions.
Growth Mindset and Fixed Mindset	Students who believe they can improve their English skills through effort tend to build confidence over time, while those with a fixed mindset may remain hesitant.

One of the most effective ways to boost students' confidence in learning is to encourage them to celebrate small successes. Recognizing even minor achievements reinforces a sense of progress and motivates students to continue putting in effort. Coupled with this, providing frequent and constructive feedback plays a pivotal role in building their self-assurance. Feedback should highlight strengths while offering clear, actionable steps for improvement, enabling students to see challenges as opportunities rather than obstacles. Additionally, creating a safe and non-judgmental learning environment is essential. When students feel supported and free from criticism, they are more likely to take risks, engage actively, and develop their confidence in using new skills. Together, these strategies foster a positive mindset that empowers students to overcome difficulties and grow academically.

Self-Perceptions of Ability.

Self-perception refers to how students view their own skills and abilities in English. These perceptions are often subjective and can significantly influence their confidence and motivation.

Students' self-perceptions of their abilities significantly influence their academic performance and motivation. Overestimating their skills can lead to frustration when they face challenges, causing a decline in motivation and engagement. Conversely, students who underestimate their capabilities may shy away from challenges, even when they have the potential to succeed. External feedback from teachers, grades, and peers plays a crucial role in shaping these perceptions, as it provides valuable insight into their actual performance. Additionally, cultural norms may influence students to downplay their abilities to appear humble, which can impact their participation in class.

To address these issues, self-assessment tools can help students evaluate their skills more realistically, encouraging a balanced understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement. Teachers can further support this by comparing students' current progress with their past achievements rather than with their peers, fostering a sense of personal growth. Promoting a growth-oriented mindset is also essential, as it reinforces the idea that language skills develop through consistent effort and practice.

Improving students' self-perception is essential for fostering confidence and motivation in learning. One effective strategy is to incorporate self-assessment tools, which enable students to evaluate their abilities more realistically and identify specific areas for improvement. This practice helps them develop a clearer understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Another important approach is to focus on comparing students' current performance with their past progress instead of with their peers. By highlighting individual growth, students are encouraged to recognize their achievements and stay motivated. Furthermore, promoting a growth-oriented mindset can be transformative. Emphasizing that language skills improve with consistent effort and practice reassures students that challenges are part of the learning process and that their

abilities can develop over time. These strategies collectively create a positive and empowering learning environment.

Self-Perception Theory, proposed by Daryl Bem in 1972, suggests that individuals form their attitudes and emotions by observing their own behavior, particularly when their internal feelings are unclear. Instead of relying solely on introspection, people infer their beliefs and preferences from their actions, much like an external observer would. For example, a person who frequently donates to charity might conclude that they care deeply about social causes. This theory also explains phenomena such as the overjustification effect, where external rewards can diminish intrinsic motivation by shifting the perceived reason for behavior. Self-Perception Theory has been widely applied in psychology, marketing, and therapy to better understand how behaviors shape attitudes and self-concept.

Perceptions of Course Difficulty.

Students' perceptions of a course's difficulty play a crucial role in shaping their engagement, motivation, and confidence. When a course is perceived as too difficult, it can lead to frustration, stress, and a loss of interest in the subject matter. This sense of being overwhelmed often causes students to doubt their abilities, which further diminishes their confidence and willingness to persevere. On the other hand, courses that are perceived as too easy can have the opposite effect, resulting in boredom and disengagement. In such cases, students may not feel challenged or motivated to put in effort, leading to stagnation in their learning and development. Striking the right balance in course difficulty is essential to maintaining students' enthusiasm and promoting consistent progress.

Finding the "Just right" challenge is key to fostering students' confidence, motivation, and growth. Courses that are appropriately challenging and aligned with students' current proficiency levels encourage them to stay engaged and make steady progress. To achieve this balance, regular needs assessments can help educators adjust course content to meet the evolving abilities of their students. Incorporating differentiated instruction is another effective strategy, as it allows teachers to provide extra support for struggling students while simultaneously challenging advanced learners. Additionally, offering optional extension activities can cater to students who need greater challenges, ensuring that everyone remains motivated and engaged. By tailoring instruction in this way, educators can create an inclusive and dynamic learning environment that promotes continuous development.

Research evidence highlights key factors shaping students' perceptions of course difficulty. A study by Kember (2004) emphasized the importance of course design, workload, and teacher clarity in influencing how challenging students find a course. Similarly, research published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* (2007) demonstrated a strong correlation between perceived difficulty and lower engagement, which often leads to reduced academic performance. Additionally, university surveys frequently reveal that students identify elements such as course pacing, assessment frequency, and unclear expectations as significant contributors to the difficulty of a course. These findings suggest that both structural and psychological factors play a crucial role in shaping students' learning experiences.

The study by Brett D. Jones and Devin Carter explored how students' perceptions of their courses influence their engagement and learning outcomes. The authors found that positive perceptions of course relevance, interest, and utility were significantly associated with higher levels of student engagement. In turn, increased engagement correlated with improved learning outcomes, suggesting that enhancing students' course perceptions can lead to better academic performance. The study emphasizes the importance of designing courses that are perceived as valuable and interesting to foster student engagement and success.

Interconnections Between Confidence, Self-Perception, and Course Difficulty

The interplay between confidence, self-perception, and course difficulty significantly influences a student's learning experience. A student with positive self-perception, who believes in their ability to improve, is more likely to develop confidence over time. On the other hand, low confidence can distort self-perception, leading students to underestimate their abilities and

limit their potential. Similarly, course difficulty plays a vital role in shaping confidence. Properly paced courses foster a sense of achievement, as students feel capable of mastering new material, while overly challenging courses may lower confidence, and excessively easy ones might fail to build it. Furthermore, self-perception affects how students respond to course difficulty. Those with positive self-perception are more likely to embrace challenges in a difficult course, viewing them as opportunities to grow. In contrast, students with negative self-perception may find the same course overwhelming and become demotivated, highlighting the importance of balancing course demands with students' confidence and self-belief.

In 2019 study, England investigated the relationship between student anxiety, perceptions of course difficulty, and academic performance in introductory biology courses. The researchers collected self-reported data from students on various forms of anxiety—including general class anxiety, test anxiety, communication anxiety, and social anxiety—alongside their perceptions of course difficulty and intentions to persist in their major. Final course grades were also obtained to assess academic performance. The study found that an increase in perceived course difficulty from the beginning to the end of the semester was significantly associated with lower final grades, particularly among females, non-Caucasian students, and those with fewer Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Additionally, higher general class anxiety at the semester's start correlated with an increased intention to leave the major, especially for female students. These findings suggest that both demographic factors and initial anxiety levels play crucial roles in shaping students' academic outcomes and their perceptions of course difficulty.

Implications for Teachers.

Classroom Environment	Foster an encouraging and supportive space where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process.
Individual Support	Recognize that each student has different confidence levels and tailor support accordingly.
Active Feedback	Regular, personalized feedback can guide students toward more accurate self-assessment and build confidence.
Engagement Tools	Use engaging activities like role-plays, debates, or games to make learning English enjoyable and less intimidating.

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' confidence and self-perception by creating a supportive classroom environment where mistakes are embraced as learning opportunities. Providing individualized support tailored to each student's confidence level ensures that their unique needs are addressed effectively. Regular, personalized feedback helps students assess their abilities accurately and fosters a sense of progress. Additionally, incorporating engaging activities such as role-plays, debates, and games makes learning English enjoyable and reduces intimidation. By implementing these strategies, teachers can cultivate a positive and motivating atmosphere that empowers students to thrive.

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