

Self-Efficacy Perceptions of Turkish Foreign Language Students of İstanbul Gelişim University

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i5.2342>

APA Citation: Gök, S. (2025). Self-Efficacy Perceptions of Turkish Foreign Language Students of İstanbul Gelişim University. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 7(5).283-288. <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i5.2342>

Received:

10/08/2025

Accepted:

30/09/2025

Keywords:

self-efficacy;
foreign
language
learning;
higher
education;
motivation;
resilience;
lifelong
learning.

Abstract

Background: Self-efficacy, a core construct of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, significantly influences motivation, persistence, and resilience in learning. This study examines the self-efficacy perceptions of English Language and Literature students at İstanbul Gelişim University in the context of foreign language learning.

Method: A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through students' written responses to three open-ended questions and analyzed thematically.

Findings: Students defined self-efficacy as confidence in their abilities, persistence through challenges, and a learnable skill shaped by education and experience. They emphasized its role in sustaining motivation, overcoming fear of failure, supporting self-study, and guiding academic choices. Broader insights included career adaptability, daily responsibilities, and emotional resilience.

Conclusion: The study confirms the strong link between self-efficacy and language achievement. Educational programs should integrate strategies to strengthen self-efficacy, thereby promoting academic success and lifelong learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving educational landscape of the 21st century, individuals are expected to develop competencies that enable them to adapt to technological, social, and professional demands (Belet-Boyacı & Güner-Özer, 2019; Hamarat, 2019). These so-called *21st century skills*—including communication in foreign languages, digital competence, learning to learn, and cultural awareness—are increasingly essential for personal and professional success. Among these competencies, proficiency in English, widely regarded as the global language of communication, has gained exceptional importance for accessing and disseminating knowledge in a globalized world.

Self-efficacy, a core construct in Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, refers to an individual's belief in their capability to organize and execute the actions required to manage prospective situations. This belief influences not only cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes but also the level of effort and persistence in pursuing goals (Demir, 2011; Kurbanoglu, 2004). In the context of language learning, self-efficacy shapes students' motivation, learning strategies, and achievement levels (Torres, 2001). High self-efficacy has been consistently linked with persistence in challenging tasks, the willingness to take risks, and greater resilience in the face of setbacks (Yaman et al., 2003).

Research has demonstrated a positive correlation between self-efficacy beliefs and foreign language achievement (Aydoslu, 2005; Gömleksiz & Serhatlıoğlu, 2013). However, while these predominantly quantitative studies establish important statistical relationships, they rarely capture how language learners themselves conceptualize and experience self-efficacy in their daily academic lives. In particular, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative research that investigates how university students in the Turkish higher education context make sense of self-efficacy as they navigate the challenges of foreign language learning.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines the perceptions of English Language and Literature students at İstanbul Gelişim University regarding self-efficacy, focusing on its meaning, its perceived role in foreign language learning, and related personal experiences. By eliciting students' own voices and interpretations, this study contributes nuanced insights that can inform learner-centered pedagogical practices and institutional strategies to enhance both academic achievement and lifelong learning capacity.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a *qualitative case study design* to explore the perceptions of self-efficacy among university students studying English. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of participants' beliefs and experiences, providing rich, descriptive data.

2.1.Participants

The study group consisted of volunteer students from the English Language and Literature Department at İstanbul Gelişim University. All participants were informed about the research objectives and consented to take part.

2.2.Data Collection

Prior to answering the questions, participants were given a detailed explanation of the concept of self-efficacy, supported by examples relevant to academic and language learning contexts. Students were then asked to respond to three open-ended questions:

1. What perceptions do you have regarding self-efficacy?
2. Does it contribute to learning a foreign language?
3. Is there any additional issue you would like to add?

Participants were invited to elaborate freely on their personal interpretations and experiences. Their responses were submitted in written form.

2.3.Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns, themes, and subthemes within the students' responses. The analysis was guided by the three research questions and included open coding to capture emergent ideas not directly prompted by the questions. Frequencies of thematic occurrence were noted to highlight the most prevalent concepts.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1.Perceptions of Self-Efficacy

The first set of findings explores **students’ overall understanding of self-efficacy**, including how they define it, its developable nature, and its role in their academic and personal decision-making. These themes are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table-1
Perceptions of Self-Efficacy

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Example Phrase
Belief in abilities	Confidence in achieving goals	10/10	“Belief in my ability to succeed”
Persistence	Continuing despite challenges	8/10	“Not quitting after failing exams”
Learnability	Developed through education/experience	6/10	“It can be learned, not innate”
Decision-making	Guides career/life choices	7/10	“It led me to choose this department”
Habit & discipline	Sustained effort via routines	5/10	“Studying every day made it a habit”
Dual nature	Overconfidence as a potential risk	2/10	“It can help or hinder depending on the person”

Students predominantly defined self-efficacy as the belief in one’s own abilities combined with the persistence needed to achieve goals, in line with Bandura’s (1986) definition. Many emphasized its developable nature through education and experience (Kurbanoglu, 2004; Gömleksiz & Serhatlıoğlu, 2013). Self-efficacy was also described as influencing decision-making in career and life choices, often sustained through habit formation and discipline.

A minority noted that excessive self-efficacy could lead to overconfidence, potentially resulting in misjudgment (Yaman et al., 2003). The overall responses reflected a multidimensional understanding of self-efficacy, consistent with the literature emphasizing its cognitive, motivational, and emotional dimensions.

3.2. Contribution of Self-Efficacy to Learning a Foreign Language

The second theme addresses how self-efficacy directly supports English language learning—motivating students to start and persist, shaping academic choices, and enabling independent learning. Table 2 illustrates these responses.

Table-2
Contribution of Self-Efficacy to Learning English

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Example Phrase
Motivation boost	Encourages starting/continuing learning	10/10	“It motivated me to choose English Literature”
Persistence	Sustains effort during difficulties	9/10	“I studied more than native speakers”

Academic decision	Influenced department choice	8/10	“This belief led me to this department”
Hobby to career	Turned interests into goals	6/10	“Combined my love for books with English”
Fear reduction	Overcame fear of speaking/failing	5/10	“I started to speak without fear”
Self-study	Independent learning habits	5/10	“Learned English by watching shows and videos”
Adaptability	Switched career focus to language learning	3/10	“Switched from accounting to English”

Participants consistently identified self-efficacy as a major factor in motivating them to begin and persist in English learning. Many connected their academic choice of the English Language and Literature Department to strong self-belief in their language-learning abilities. Self-efficacy facilitated the transformation of hobbies, such as reading English literature or watching English-language media, into structured academic goals, echoing Torres’ (2001) findings on meaningful engagement.

Students also credited self-efficacy with reducing fear of failure, encouraging self-study, and enabling adaptability when shifting academic focus toward language learning. These points are consistent with prior research demonstrating the positive correlation between self-efficacy and language learning achievement (Aydoslu, 2005).

3.3.Additional and Implied Perspectives

The final theme captures broader insights into self-efficacy beyond formal academic settings, highlighting its relevance to personal life, emotional resilience, and societal attitudes. Table 3 presents these themes.

Table-3
Additional / Implied Insights

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Example Phrase
Beyond academics	Applies to daily life	4/10	“Even for doing laundry you need it”
Passion/enjoyment	Interest aids persistence	5/10	“I enjoy English, so I keep improving”
Career flexibility	Confidently changing paths	3/10	“I discovered my real interest later”
External support	Family/teacher encouragement	3/10	“My mom told me not to quit”
Awareness gap	Self-efficacy undervalued in society	2/10	“Many people don’t care about it”
Trial-and-error	Exploration to find path	3/10	“Tried different fields before settling”
Emotional resilience	Recovery from setbacks	4/10	“Failed, but came back stronger”

Students indicated that self-efficacy influences domains beyond academics, including daily responsibilities and overall self-confidence. Passion and enjoyment were cited as critical for sustaining persistence, aligning with Hamarat's (2019) emphasis on intrinsic interest.

Some noted the role of external support, such as family and teachers, in maintaining motivation, as well as the importance of career flexibility and self-discovery through trial and error. A smaller number highlighted the undervaluation of self-efficacy in society, suggesting a need for greater institutional emphasis.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that students perceive self-efficacy as a dynamic and essential attribute for academic and personal success. In the domain of foreign language learning, self-efficacy was consistently linked to motivation, persistence, and the ability to convert personal interests into formal academic goals. Additional insights suggest that self-efficacy impacts broader aspects of life, from daily tasks to long-term career adaptability.

Educational programs seeking to enhance self-efficacy should integrate strategies for skill development, emotional support, and habit formation. Such initiatives have the potential to improve not only foreign language proficiency but also lifelong learning capacity, adaptability, and overall well-being.

4.1. Implications for Further Research

Future studies could extend these findings by involving larger and more diverse student groups, employing quantitative methods to examine links between self-efficacy perceptions and measurable outcomes such as grades, and conducting longitudinal research to trace how self-efficacy develops over time. Such work would strengthen understanding of how self-efficacy shapes foreign language achievement and guide more targeted instructional strategies.

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