Self-perception of English Ability: Is it related to proficiency and/or class performance?

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1 Introduction

Language learners' self-perception of target language ability is one of the important factors which may affect acquisition of the language. It has been discussed in relation to learners' affective factors such as debilitating language anxiety and strength of motivation (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley 1999, Kitano 2001, and MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Donovan 2002). These researchers suggest that self-perception of language ability is negatively related to levels of anxiety and positively associated with strength of motivation.

What is the relationship between self-perception of language competence and actual target language ability? It can be expected that there is a high positive correlation between the two. When we talk about 'language ability,' however, we have to be careful of how we assess the ability. In my study (Takahashi 2004) of Japanese university EFL (English as a foreign language) learners, I used two kinds of assessment to measure learners' language ability, i.e. proficiency tests and final examinations. This is because language proficiency and class performance (measured by final examinations) are two different concepts.

While language proficiency is defined as a person's general level of ability in the target language, class performance is a person's achievement in the class. A proficiency test aims to produce a single score result which usually covers a wide range of aspects of the language. It aims to find a broad level of ability in the target language (Underhill 1987). On the other hand, an achievement test takes a sample of the target language elements or skills that have been covered in the language course. It aims to test how well the learner has mastered those elements (ibid). While proficiency tests are general in nature and cannot be related to the goals and objectives of any particular language program, achievement tests must be designed with very specific reference to a particular course (Brown 1996). In order to shed light on the nature of self-perceived language ability, it is necessary to examine which of the language assessments is more closely associated with self-perceived competence. The present study will investigate this.

A secondary concern is that of the relationship between self-perception and facilitating language anxiety. Facilitating anxiety (FA) is a type of anxiety that motivates the language learner to tackle the new language learning task, and it gears the learner emotionally for approach behavior (Scovel 1978). Kleinmann (1977) reported a positive relationship between FA and foreign language learning. FA has been discussed by researchers such as Mandler

and Sarason (1952), Sieber (1977), and Ehrman (1996). If self-perceived ability is closely related to affective factors such as debilitating anxiety and strength of motivation, it may also be associated with FA. A learner whose perceived language ability is high may be fond of learning the language, have higher motivation for learning, and experience lower levels of debilitating anxiety, and these may contribute to experiencing higher levels of facilitating anxiety. It may also be interesting to examine how FA relates (or does not relate) to each of the English ability measurements.

2 Research Questions

The two major research questions of the present study are: 1) Is self-perception of English ability positively related to proficiency and/or class performance?; and 2) Is self-perception of English ability positively related to facilitating language anxiety?

3 Methodology

3.1 Subjects

The subjects were 98 Japanese students enrolled in two English courses at two universities in Niigata, Japan. All of them were freshmen majoring in science: 64 males and 34 females ranging in age from 18 to 20. The average age was 19. Sixty-four (40 males and 24 females) were from two English classes, 'English I,' at one university, and 34 (24 males and 10 females) were from one English class, 'Standard English,' at another university. Both of these English courses were one-semester courses starting in April and ending in July. They were required of all freshmen. All the classes met once a week and lasted 90 minutes. All subjects were native speakers of Japanese and of Japanese nationality.

3.2 Measurement instruments

The data was gathered in 2007. In June, a questionnaire including the Can-do Scale (15 items) and the Facilitating Anxiety Scale (11 items) was introduced to the students during class time. The questionnaire items are presented in Appendix A.

In order to measure self-perceived Japanese language ability in college learning situations in the United States, Kitano (2001) modified the Can-do Scale originally developed by Clark (1981). In the present study, Kitano's version was used. An example of an item in the scale was "I can say the days of the week in English." This scale was originally written in English, and a translated Japanese version of the scale was used. It was slightly modified to use in the Japanese EFL classroom, such as replacing the term "Japanese language" with "English language." For this scale, a three-point Likert response scale was used for each item, a practice originally used by Kitano with the scale. A student's endorsement of "quite easily" was equated with a numerical value of 3, "with some difficulty" with 2, and "with great difficulty or not at all" with 1. A higher score on the scale indicated a higher level of self-

perception of English proficiency. The possible scores on the scale ranged from 15 to 45 (3 × 15). The reliability of the scale was high in Kitano's study (Cronbach's alpha=92, N=212).

In order to measure facilitating anxiety in the Japanese EFL classroom, I created an eleven-item Facilitating Anxiety Scale (Takahashi 2004). Six items from Alpert and Haber's (1960) facilitating anxiety scale were translated from English to Japanese and used as items in my scale. Five items were newly created especially to measure FA amongst Japanese students in the EFL classroom. These items were originally written in Japanese and presented to the students. They were later translated into English. An example of an item in the scale was "I can read the text aloud better when I am conscious that other students are listening to me." For this scale, each item was scored on a five-point Likert response scale: 5 (strongly agree), 4 (agree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 2 (disagree), and 1 (strongly disagree). A higher score indicated a higher level of facilitating anxiety. The possible scores on the scale ranged from 11 to 55 (5 × 11). In my previous study (2004), this scale yielded internal consistency of .72 (N=308) using Cronbach's alpha.

On completion of the data collection, first, the scales were tested for reliability. After the reliability was established, a series of correlation analyses were performed amongst the scales, the proficiency test scores, and standardized final examination scores.

3.3 English ability measurements

In order to measure English proficiency of the students, a C-test (Takahashi 2004) was used. The C-test consisted of five short passages chosen from three different textbooks (Heyer 1998, Hill 1998, and Hill 1974). In these passages, the second half of every second word beginning in the second sentence was deleted. The overall number of deletions in the test was 100. The test was administered to the subjects in April, 2007: the students were asked to fill in the deletions in 15 minutes. The C-test is presented in Appendix B.

As a class performance measure, I used scores from the final examinations. Since the examinations were different in each class, scores needed to be standardized in order to make a comparison. Accordingly, z-scores were computed for each final examination score to provide standardized scores.

4 Results

The Can-do Scale yielded internal consistency of .84 using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The internal consistency of the Facilitating Anxiety Scale was .73. The reliabilities of the scales in the present study were compared with the reliabilities of previous studies. Table 1 shows this comparison.

Table 1 Reliabilities of the scales in comparison with previous studies

Can-do Scale	Present Study α =.84, N=98	Kitano, 2001 α =.92, N=212
Facilitating Anxiety Scale	Present Study α =.73, N=98	Takahashi, 2004 α =.71, N=308

＊ α =Cronbach's alpha ; N=number of subjects

The mean average score, standard deviation, and score range (with possible range) on the Can-do Scale were: M (mean) = 30.04, SD (standard deviation) = 6.98, R (actual range) = 16-45 (possible range = 15-45). The alpha of the self-perception scale was not as high as that from the study done by Kitano. This may partly be attributed to the smaller number of students in the present study. However, I regard the alpha of .84 as reasonably high. The alpha of the Facilitating Anxiety Scale was slightly higher than that of my study in 2004. The Cronbach's alpha of .73 was reasonably high considering that the number of items in the scale was only 11. The statistical data for this scale were: M = 26.44, SD = 5.99, and R = 11- 39 (11-55). Considering the middle point for the score was 33, the mean average of 26.44 was not very high. Nevertheless, the results showed that the subjects were experiencing some levels of facilitating anxiety in the classroom.

After the reliability was established, in order to investigate relationships between self-perception of English ability, actual proficiency, class performance, and facilitating anxiety, a correlation analysis was performed amongst the scales, the C-test, and the standardized final examination scores. Table 2 presents the results from the correlation analysis.

Table 2 Correlations

	S-Perception	Proficiency	Performance	FA
S-perception		.249*	.249*	.368**
Proficiency	.249*		.211*	(.066)
Performance	.249*	.211*		(.168)
FA	.368**	(.066)	(.168)	

＊ **=p<.01 ; *=p<.05

All of the three variables correlated with self-perception of English ability, although weakly. Of all the correlations, the strongest one was between self-perception and facilitating language anxiety (r=.368, p<.01). This indicates that students with higher self-perception of English ability displayed higher levels of facilitating anxiety. Both English proficiency (r=.249, p<.05) and class performance (r=.249, p<.05) positively correlated with self-perception. These correlations suggest that a learner whose self-perception of English ability was higher tended to show higher proficiency and scored higher in the achievement tests.

In order to investigate particular attributes of self-perception and facilitating language anxiety, I carried out an item analysis of the two scales. The items which received the highest and the lowest endorsements were examined. For the self-perceived ability scale, the following were the items with the strongest and lowest endorsements (the mean average endorsements are marked in parentheses):

Item 1: I can say the days of the week in English. (2.92 [maximum score = 3.00])
Item 2: I can give the current date (month, day, year) in English. (2.52)

Item 15: I can describe in English the role played by Japanese business corporations in the world market. (1.00 [minimum score = 1.00])
Item 13: I can describe the educational system of my own country in some detail in English. (1.01)
Item 11: I can sustain everyday conversation in very polite style in English with a person much older than I am. (1.02)

The subjects of this study were university freshmen and therefore, being able to say the days of the week (Item 1) and the current date (Item 2) in English was not surprising. The mean average endorsement of 1.00 indicates that almost all the subjects thought that they could not describe the role played by Japanese business corporations in English (Item 15). The vast majority of the students judged that their English was not good enough to describe the educational system (Item 13) nor to carry out an everyday conversation in a polite style (Item 11). It is probably difficult for most Japanese university freshmen to do these tasks in English.

For the Facilitating Anxiety Scale, the items with the highest and the lowest endorsements were the following:

Item 3: When I start a test, nothing is able to distract me. (3.34 [maximum score = 5.00])
Item 10: I would like the teacher to correct my English mistakes in front of other students. (2.87)

Item 8: I would like the teacher and other students to listen to my English pronunciation. (1.89 [minimum score = 1.00])
Item 9: I enjoy taking a difficult listening quiz more than an easy one. (1.92)

No single item was endorsed strongly. The fairly strong endorsement of Item 3 indicated that, when taking tests, the subjects could concentrate well, probably because Japanese learners take a number of English tests and examinations during their secondary school years, and have experienced FA during examinations. Some students wanted the teacher to correct their English in front of their classmates (Item 10). In my previous study (2004), I

found that Japanese EFL learners were not afraid of their teacher correcting their mistakes and that they would generally like their teacher to do it in front of their peers. The present endorsement supports these findings. The subjects did not want others to listen to their pronunciation (Item 8). This may be because they did not have confidence in their English pronunciation. At the same time, they may lack confidence in listening to English and they prefer easier tests to challenging ones (Item 9). In my study in 2004, Items 3 and 10 were amongst the most strongly endorsed items, and Items 8 and 9 were amongst the least strongly endorsed ones. Thus, it may well be that these traits are common characteristics of Japanese EFL learners.

5 Discussion of Findings

5.1 Relationships between self-perception of English ability and proficiency / class performance

The students who perceived themselves as having higher English ability showed higher proficiency and achieved more: they tended to score higher in the proficiency test and their grades on the final examinations were better. Perception of high ability might have facilitated learners' performance (in both kinds of tests), and at the same time, high performance might have led to better self-perception. Interestingly, perceived competence was related to proficiency and class performance in the same degree ($r=.249$, $p<.05$). However, this does not mean that the two showed the same aspects of language ability. The weak correlation between the two measurements ($r=.211$, $p<.05$) may support this claim. It only shows that there was a weak positive link between the two, and the link was weaker than the relationships between the two measurements and self-perception. The two kinds of tests did measure two different aspects of language ability. They were coincidentally associated with self-perceived ability in the same degree. Moreover, the relationships between self-perception and the two measurements were weaker than expected, and therefore, it is difficult to say that self-perceived ability reflects actual ability as measured by the two types of tests, much less which of the two types of ability it shows. It may well be that perceived competence is a complicated construct: it consists of not only self-perception of linguistic ability but also several affective factors such as confidence, debilitating anxiety, strength of motivation, and others, and therefore, it does not have a strong relationship with actual ability.

5.2 Relationship between self-perception of English ability and facilitating anxiety

As expected, self-perceived competence was positively related to facilitating anxiety: students who perceived their English ability to be higher than others scored higher in the Facilitating Anxiety Scale. It may well be that when an English learner thinks his/her ability is higher than that of his/her classmates', he/she gains confidence in learning. The learner may also have positive attitudes towards learning, and motivation to learn the language may be high. These may contribute to increasing levels of FA. At the same time, FA may influence

positively the learner's self-image as an English learner. This relationship may be reciprocal; however, a longitudinal study needs to be done in order to explore the cause-and-effect relationship between the two.

The positive association between self-perceived competence and FA ($r=.368$, $p<.01$) was the strongest correlation obtained. It was stronger than the positive relationship between self-perception and actual ability ($r=.249$, $p<.05$). This is an interesting finding. As I stated earlier, self-perception of English ability may consist of several different affective elements, and therefore, its relationship to another affective element, FA, was stronger than its association with proficiency/performance. It may well be that FA is one of the components of self-perceived English ability.

5.3 Relationships between facilitating anxiety and proficiency / class performance

Results from the present study failed to find relationships between facilitating anxiety and proficiency or class performance. These findings partly support my previous findings: in my previous study (2004), I found that FA was moderately positively correlated with proficiency ($r=.35$, $p<.01$, $N=73$) but not with performance. The positive association between FA and proficiency may suggest that the students with higher levels of FA were experiencing lower levels of debilitating anxiety in the EFL classroom, were more motivated to learn the language, and had confidence in their English ability. All of these may have contributed to higher proficiency in English. In the present study, however, no relationship was found between FA and proficiency. One possible reason for this is that the C-test was not constructed well. Although the proficiency test showed reliability in the previous study, it may somehow have not been so reliable in the present study.

Class performance was not related to levels of FA in my previous and present studies. This is partly because it did not necessarily reflect an individual learner's real language ability. Regardless of their English ability, students can attain more or less good marks in final examinations because these tests usually cover what they have studied in the class, and therefore, students can prepare for them. This type of anxiety may facilitate learners' real language ability only. Another possible explanation is using *z*-scores. Using standardized scores has limitations. They may not have shown an accurate ranking of the students. If I had used one achievement test for the whole group of students, the result may have been different.

6 Conclusions

The present study investigated whether or not learners' self-perception of English ability was related to proficiency and class performance. It also aimed at discovering if self-perceived competence was related to facilitating language anxiety. Perceived competence was positively related to both proficiency and performance, and it was also positively associated with facilitating anxiety.

One of the limitations of this study is that it used standardized *z*-scores instead of using one achievement test for all the subjects. Since the subjects were from three different classes of two English courses, using the same achievement test for the whole population was impossible, but it might have been a better way of measuring achievement. Also, an improvement could have been made to the 11-item Facilitating Anxiety Scale. Increasing the number of items which reflect various aspects of English learning may be useful in examining the nature of this kind of language anxiety.

In order to investigate the true nature of self-perceived foreign language ability, a comprehensive study is needed: affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, and confidence need to be investigated as well as studying several aspects of target language ability.

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Appendix A: Measurement Instruments

[1] Can-do Scale (mean average endorsement)

1 I can say the days of the week in English. (2.92)
2 I can give the current date (month, day, year) in English. (2.52)
3 I can order a simple meal in a restaurant in English. (1.68)
4 I can ask for directions on the street in English. (1.86)
5 I can buy clothes in a department store in English. (1.55)
6 I can introduce myself in social situations, and use appropriate greetings and leave-taking expressions in English. (1.79)
7 I can talk about my favorite hobby at some length in English. (1.53)
8 I can describe my present job, studies, or other major life activities in English. (1.37)
9 I can explain what I did last weekend at some length in English. (1.43)
10 I can explain what I plan to be doing 5 years from now at some length in English. (1.21)
11 I can sustain everyday conversation in very polite style in English with a person much older than I am. (1.02)
12 I can sustain everyday conversation in casual style English with my native-English-speaking friend. (1.16)
13 I can describe the educational system of my own country in some detail in English. (1.01)
14 I can state and support with reasons my position on a conversational topic (for example, cigarette smoking) in English. (1.09)
15 I can describe in English the role played by Japanese business corporations in the world market. (1.00)

[2] Facilitating Anxiety Scale (mean average endorsement)

1 I work most effectively under pressure when a task is given in my English class. (2.46)
2 Nervousness while taking a test helps me do better. (2.44)
3 When I start a test, nothing is able to distract me. (3.34)
4 I look forward to English exams. (2.08)
5 I enjoy taking a difficult exam more than an easy one. (2.01)
6 The more important the English exam, the better I seem to do. (2.62)
7 I can read the text aloud better when I am conscious that other students are listening to me. (2.31)
8 I would like the teacher and other students to listen to my English pronunciation. (1.89)
9 I enjoy taking a difficult listening quiz more than an easy one. (1.92)
10 I would like the teacher to correct my English mistakes in front of other students. (2.87)
11 I look forward to finding out how my English reports or composition will be evaluated by

the teacher. (2.49)

Appendix B: Proficiency Test

C-test

A. Mary works at a bank. She beg____ working a____ eight o'cl____ in th____ morning. S____ stops wor____ at fi____ o'clock i____ the after____. At fi____ o'clock t____ bank clo____ . Everybody go____ home. So_____ people dri_____ home. So_____ people ta___ the tr___. Some people take the bus.

B. Jack and Ann are married. They are not happy together. Why not? They ar____ very diff____. Jack smo____. Ann doe____ smoke. Ja_____ likes t____ watch base____ on T____. Ann doe_____ like base____. Ann lik_____ loud mus____. Jack doe_____ like lo____ music. Ja____ snores a____ night. A____ can't sle___. One d___, Ann loo____ at t____ house ne____ door. It is for sale. Ann buys the house and moves in.

C. Camille was three years old. She lived in a small town in France. Her fat_____ worked fa____ away i____ the ci____. Her mot____ worked i____ the ho____. One Satu____, Camille's mot____ fell do____ on th____ floor. H____ eyes we____ closed. Sh____ did n_____ move. Cami_____ father w_____ home. H_____ called th_____ doctor o_____ the telephone. The doctor came to help Camille's mother.

D. Mr. Jones was very angry with his wife, and she was very angry with her husband.For seve____ days th____ did n____ speak t____ each oth____ at a___ . One even____ Mr. Jo_____ was ve_____ tired wh_____ he ca_____ back fr_____ work, s_____ he we_____ to be____ soon af___ dinner. O____ course, h____ did n____ say anyt____ to M____ Jones bef_____ he we_____ upstairs. Mrs. Jones washed the dinner things and then did some sewing.

E. Early one morning, an old woman was walking from her village to the town, carrying a big sack of cabbages on her head. She wa____ taking th____ to t____ market, whe____ she ho____ to se____ them t____ the peo____ from th____ town. T____ road whi____ the o____ woman wa____ on w____ a nar____ one ov___ a moun___ . There was a cliff on one side, and a wall of rock on the other.