



Examining the Sources and Development of EFL Learner Self-Efficacy Through Narrative Inquiry

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Student engagement with language learning is a vital concern for all language programs, and self-efficacy is a primary factor that can impact a student's level of engagement with various tasks in the language learning classroom. In this study, the language learning histories of two female Japanese university students were analyzed through an analysis of narrative approach using a series of journals and interviews to determine potential patterns in the development of their self-efficacy, as well as their engagement with language learning. The narratives of the two participants revealed that as their self-efficacy for specific domains and tasks increased, their engagement with the macro-skills of language learning changed. Thus, it is possible that through understanding the sources of self-efficacy and how they contribute to an individual's belief in their capabilities, teachers and researchers might also better understand various patterns of engagement and disengagement with language learning. The discussion section also considers how the experiences of the women in this study might relate to the experiences of students in other contexts, as well as how teachers might address developing the self-efficacy of their own students.

Keywords: self-efficacy, engagement, EFL, narrative inquiry

Introduction

The acquisition of a second or foreign language is a deeply personal process and, as such, a myriad of social-psychological factors often conflates to either bolster or hinder this process. Since the first model of language learning motivation emerged in the early 1970s (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) there have been a wealth of ideas carried over from the field of psychology, educational psychology, and even theories developed specifically for language learning (see Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002 for a thorough detailing of the prevailing theories). While there are a wealth of lenses through which to examine learner psychology, one of the most often used theories arose from the social-cognitive field, self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was selected for this study because a core argument made by Bandura (1977, 1986, 1989) was that self-efficacy plays a primary predictive role in the kinds of tasks an individual actively seeks out, their level of effort expenditure, and how willing they are to persist when the task becomes difficult. All three of these factors are crucial for understanding how students choose to engage with the language learning process, and thus self-efficacy theory is an effective tool for developing a deeper understanding of student engagement.

The purpose of this study was to examine the development of self-efficacy for foreign language learning with two female Japanese university students through narrative inquiry. Although self-efficacy has grown in popularity in SLA research, according to the meta-analysis by Raoofi et al. (2012) the vast majority of studies have been quantitative in nature, and very few have focused on the sources of self-efficacy. In other words, many studies have not examined how self-efficacy develops, choosing instead to focus on the potential relationship between self-efficacy and achievement, and there is a need for more qualitative approaches to examining self-efficacy in



SLA research. The two women in the current study completed a series of journals and interviews to provide narrative data on their entire learning history with English, which were then analyzed for potential encounters with the sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The diverse development of self-efficacy for language learners is a crucial point of investigation for teachers and researchers because it is one of the keys to understanding the complex ways individuals engage with language learning, the amount of effort they expend, and how willing they are to persist when tasks become difficult.

Literature Review

Self-Efficacy: A Brief Overview of the Theory

Self-efficacy (SE) is an individual's belief in their capability to regulate and perform tasks, and has been argued to influence the tasks they seek out, the amount of effort they expend, and their level of persistence when the task becomes difficult (Bandura, 1982, 1997). In contrast to other self-systems within educational psychology, SE is both domain and task specific. In other words, an individual's SE for speaking might not necessarily correlate with their SE for writing, and SE for tasks within each of these domains might also differ. Additionally, it is important to note that SE for tasks depends equally on an individual's ability to prepare for the task and their capacity to execute it; thus self-regulation plays a vital role in understanding SE.

Bandura (1997) proposed four primary sources that contribute to the development of SE: mastery experience, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. Mastery experiences are moments in an individual's past where they felt they performed a task particularly well (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). Vicarious experiences are based on the conception that the performance of others can influence an individual's belief in their own capabilities (Bandura, 1997, p. 86). Verbal persuasion describes moments when respected others provide substantive feedback on an individual's performance that leads them to believe one way or another about their capabilities (Bandura, 1997, p. 101). Finally, physiological states detail how one manages physical or emotional reactions, such as increased heart rate or anxiety, during a task (Bandura, 1997, p. 106). Of the four sources, Bandura argues that past mastery experiences bear the greatest impact on an individual's belief in their current and future capabilities. However, some scholars have questioned whether cultural or contextual factors, such as emphasis on the group rather than the individual, might lead to other sources becoming more impactful (Bai et al., 2019; Burrows, 2016; Chen et al., 2021; Kobayashi, 2021).

Self-Efficacy in SLA

The vast majority of research on SE in second language acquisition (SLA) has attempted to establish a correlation between SE and language learning achievement as measured through various methods, such as final grades, standardized tests, and individual performance scores (Anam & Stracke, 2020; Bai et al., 2019; Putra et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2022; Todaka, 2017). Furthermore, many of these studies highlighted the importance of self-regulation, as the students who reported high levels of SE also tended to have distinct patterns of strategy use, attribute more personal control over their learning, and generally make greater efforts to practice and prepare (Sardegna et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2022; Todaka, 2017; Yabukoshi, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Thus, it appears that greater achievement tends to correlate with belief in one's capability not only to execute the various tasks associated with language learning, but also to organize and prepare for them.

In one longitudinal mixed-method study focused on English speaking SE for Japanese university students, Leeming (2017) found that SE, as characterized by questionnaire responses, increased over the course of an academic year. More interestingly, the qualitative data revealed that students mostly attributed gains in SE to their ability to acclimate to the class, their perceived increase in ability, and individual contextual factors. In fact, group membership during speaking tasks was a key factor highlighted in this study. The acclimation process noted by the students potentially points to incremental successes within the course, or possible mastery experiences, whereas the contextual factors - particularly the group membership aspect - indicate that vicarious experiences were another vital source of SE development.

Another study examined English public speaking SE for Chinese university students, and findings based on self-reported questionnaire data indicated significant growth of SE over the course of a semester (Zhang et al., 2020). The qualitative results showed that students attributed their gains in SE to self-regulation, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion. Both the teachers and students alike pointed to the important link between preparation and success, coinciding with the organizational aspect of SE theory (Bandura, 1997). The studies by Leeming (2017) and Zhang et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of understanding not only how SE might potentially correlate with achievement, but also how it develops differently among learners over time and how the sources of self-efficacy impact learners' beliefs in their capability. Furthermore, both studies also show that vicarious experiences play a prominent role in the development of SE in Asian contexts.

However, beyond the previous two studies there are few investigations of SE in SLA that incorporated qualitative or mixed-methods approaches, and fewer still that examined the sources of SE (Burrows, 2016; Raoofi et al., 2012). Many studies have used self-report responses on questionnaires as quantitative data, but one potential problem with this approach is that instrument design and general understanding of what SE is and is not has been inconsistent (Burrows, 2016; Graham, 2022).

Potential Impact of Self-Efficacy on Engagement with Language Learning

Several scholars have pointed out that satisfactory progress in L2 plays a determining role in an individual's satisfaction with their learning experience (Irie, 2003; Miyahara et al., 1997; Murphey et al., 2005; Tse, 2000; Xie et al., 2021b). In fact, an investigation of Japanese university students' beliefs about language learning revealed that students were not satisfied with their foreign language progress (Sakui & Gaies, 1999). Results from this study also showed that Japanese university students do have some awareness and beliefs regarding different methodological orientations, and they strongly agreed that factors related to building oral communicative competency were important, but were not sufficiently addressed in the classroom. Interestingly, students from other studies have likewise indicated a lack of oral communicative competence as a point of dissatisfaction in their language learning (Busse & Walter, 2013; Kobayashi, 2021; Tse, 2000). One possibility for these findings is that the students have developed a sufficient level of SE for these skills and are hoping to engage with them further, or, more likely, they are aware of their lack of SE for these skills and are hoping to remedy the situation.

Gaps in the SLA Literature and Purpose of the Study

Most researchers investigating SE in language learning utilized quantitative methods to analyze potential relationships between SE and achievement. Few studies focused on the sources of SE, and there are no known studies that looked at development of SE through an in-depth analysis of an entire language learning history.

The purpose of this study is to use an analysis of narrative approach to analyze the reported development of self-efficacy for foreign language learning for two female university students in Japan. The aim is to review the language learning history of these participants through a mixture of journaling and three one-on-one interviews in search of the sources of SE to better understand how these moments contributed to the development of their belief in their language capabilities. Insights from the experiences of these participants might then provide valuable insight into patterns of engagement or disengagement with language learning that could be of use to all language teachers and researchers. As such, the research questions are as follows:

1. How has self-efficacy developed over the course of the language learning history of the two women in this study?
2. How has the self-efficacy of these two women impacted their engagement with various language learning tasks in and out of the classroom?

Methods

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a method of using storytelling as a form of data for analysis (Barkhuizen et al., 2014) and honors lived experience as a vital fount of knowledge and understanding. Storytelling represents both a method for individuals to contextualize lived experience and a means of building and dismantling representations of who that individual believes they are in a performance-like manner for a particular audience (Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 2008). It is also a way by which human beings, “give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 11) and reform these experiences into a story in order to make sense of them.

Pavlenko (2007) cautioned, however, that we must not take narrative retellings as factual accounts, but rather as subjective interpretations. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) highlighted that these subjective performances are also contingent upon both temporal and contextual factors. This view aligns with Bruner’s (1986) argument for two types of narrative performance: the well-formed argument versus a good story. The former seeks so-called “objective” truth, whereas the latter seeks subjective lifelike experience. Whereas the latter might be objectively incorrect, the subjectively held beliefs that lead to its performance nevertheless have a social and psychological meaning and impact for the performer. In other words, it still holds meaning for them, and narrative inquiry seeks to discover how individuals give meaning to their experiences beyond simply determining if they are factually correct (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Narrative inquiry has also tended to focus on one of two primary approaches. Polkinghorne (1995) framed this in a dichotomy of “analysis of narrative” versus “narrative analysis.” The latter approach takes excerpts from a participant and forms them into a narrative, whereas the former seeks to deconstruct preexisting narratives to analyze portions thematically, linguistically, or structurally. This project utilized an analysis of narrative approach to analyze the participants’ stories thematically for patterns of SE construction.

Context and Participants

The participants were two female second-year university students at a public school in eastern Japan. The participants chose “Suzu” and “Miyu” as pseudonyms. Both participants were students in the international liberal arts department of the university, and neither were English majors. Suzu took one year of general education English at the university before entering a teacher training program. Miyu took three total semesters of general education English before satisfying her English language credit. Suzu and Miyu were students in different sections of my required general education English class during the Fall semester of 2020/21. These two women were selected because they both actively sought to engage with language learning tasks in the classroom, displayed a high level of effort expenditure, and always seemed to persist through difficult tasks that other students often abandoned. Thus, Suzu and Miyu seemed to display all three of the factors Bandura (1997) argued as indicators of high levels of self-efficacy.

Data Collection

Twelve journals and three one-on-one interviews represent the two primary data sources. The journals, adapted from the work by Murphey et al. (2005), aimed to engage the participants in reflection over the most salient moments in their language learning histories. The journals were an elective task specifically for this research project. No grades or linguistic feedback were given, and the participants could complete the journals in either English or Japanese. The sequence of the journals and interviews appears in Appendix A.

The journals potentially provided data that are “...temporal (reflecting on the past and looking to the future), emotive (positive and negative experiences, surprises), reflective (beliefs, expectations, and practices), strategic (plans and goals) and instructive (advice)” (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 38). Using these journals to construct and re-construct the participants’ learning history also allowed them to recognize the development of their SE for various aspects of language learning and the key moments that contributed to their belief in their capabilities.

Interview Approach

The participants participated in one-on-one interviews after completing the fourth, eighth, and twelfth journal. The three-interview series “allows both the interviewer and participant to explore the participant’s experience, place it in context, and reflect on its meaning” (Seidman, 2019, p. 21). Multiple interviews also allow the researcher to assess the consistency of participant responses. The participants had the option to conduct the interviews in English or Japanese¹ and Suzu chose Japanese, while Miyu chose English. The first interview focused on the participants’ experiences in language learning, the second interview delved into the sources of SE, and the final interview explored their aspirations for the future along with a reflection on the journals and interviews. A sample of the questions used for each interview can be found in Appendix B.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions that allowed the participants to tell their story in their own way, at the same time also attempting to minimize potential notions of a “correct” or “desired” response (Atkinson, 1998; Hatch, 2002). For the life history goal, descriptive “tell me about...” questions were utilized to set the basic landscape of inquiry while still affording the participants the freedom to respond in whatever manner they felt most significant (Seidman, 2019; Spradley, 1979). All interviews were recorded on an iPhone 8plus using the Voice Memo application. Interviews were transcribed with a focus on content rather than form. Therefore, false starts, repetitions, and disfluencies were removed. I initially transcribed all the Japanese transcripts, and then two native Japanese speakers working at the university where the study was conducted double checked the translations and came to an agreement on the final version.

Positionality

I approached this project from a constructivist perspective. The constructivist approach that I employ accepts that reality is based on individual contextualization of human experience, and often that contextualization occurs through joint construction. As for my relationship with the participants, I am a male heritage English speaker from the United States, and I served as Suzu’s English teacher during her first year in university, and as Miyu’s during her second. Thus, the participants’ responses, particularly regarding their time in university, are a performance that incorporates a complex interweaving of gender issues and personal investment. It might be that their responses would have been different with a different person asking the questions.

Analysis

The narrative data in this study were analyzed thematically using hypothesis coding (Saldaña, 2021). Thematic is used here to highlight that analysis focused on the content of the data, or “what” was said, rather than “how” it was said (Riessman, 2008). According to Saldaña, hypothesis coding is “... the application of a researcher-generated, predetermined list of codes to qualitative data specifically to assess a researcher-generated hypothesis” (2021, p. 219). The predetermined codes for this project were the four sources of SE proposed by Bandura (1997): mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and physiological states. The data were input into multiple linked files using QDA Miner Lite (Provalis Research, 2022) and put through three full passes.

Results

Suzu’s Narrative

Early years through junior high school

¹ I minored in Japanese at UCLA, and I passed the second level (二級) of the Japanese Level Proficiency Test (JLPT) during that time, which indicates a high level of proficiency. Therefore, my conversational Japanese level was sufficient to conduct the interviews in Japanese.

Suzu's English journey began at a conversation school she attended toward the end of elementary school, and her primary recollections were of her teacher.

He was an American from Colorado... and he taught us about more than just the language, but about culture and other things. I started to get really interested in more than just the language and I wanted to get much better at communication because of his influence. - Interview 1

So, when he told her she should apply for a homestay program, she was immediately interested and applied. She went to Australia the next year where she was placed with two other students from the same school. During her homestay one of the other students became homesick, and Suzu was put into a position that would impact the rest of her life.

...Of the three of us, I was the one that could speak the most. There was a student in our group who got really homesick, and I played a kind of translator, so I built a really good relationship with the family, and it was a great experience. - Interview 1

Suzu was put in the precarious position of go-between, trying to pass messages between the conversation school, the host family, and the homesick student. Despite a limited range of language knowledge, Suzu was able to help resolve the issue. The result of this experience left Suzu feeling confident in her English communicative abilities, and for the rest of the trip she focused on what she termed, "survival English."

I ended up playing the middleman, translating between the representative and the host family... at that point I had been studying English for about three years and I wasn't sure what to say, so I was just using disjointed vocabulary like, "Tomorrow, water, bring!" ... using gestures, my dictionary, and momentum to survive that week. - Interview 1

When Suzu began her first year of junior high school the next year she was informed about an English speech contest held across Japan, and she immediately decided to apply. However, the school only selects a limited number of students to participate, so she was initially nervous about her chances.

So, only one person from the school could participate in this contest. So, we had to audition. I ended up being chosen, along with a third grade² student, and I got fifth place. My speech was about my homestay experience in Australia. Then, when I was in second grade, I spoke about my experience two years later in America... Finally, in my third year I spoke about my experiences in Canada. - Interview 1

As her words indicate, her first homestay experience was not her only journey abroad. Her initial feeling of success on the first trip encouraged her to seek out further homestay experiences in each successive year of junior high school. Furthermore, each trip coincided with another application for the speech contest.

High school

Suzu's experiences in high school were a marked departure from her junior high school days. The focus of teaching shifted from a mixture of language-focused learning and communicative practice to a strict focus on test preparation.

In high school, I didn't do much speaking because I was studying mainly reading and writing. - Journal 4
The English class in high school was like studying for the center test³... - Journal 1

Suzu felt that, in general, she was better at speaking and listening than most of the students around her, but she rarely got to access those skills in her high school English classes.

² Third grade and second grade in these instances are referring to her third year and second year in junior high school, respectively.

³ The center test is the primary standardized test all Japanese high school students must take when applying for university.

University

Upon entering university one of the first things Suzu had to do was reassess her English abilities in her new environment.

I went to a small junior high school in the countryside, and I had a lot of confidence that I could do most things better than the students around me. Then I got into high school, the university, and the amount of people that could do things as well or better started to mount up. - Interview 1

As time went on, she came to realize that, whereas her speaking skills no longer set her apart in most situations, her listening comprehension skills continued to be a strength. In fact, many students in her classes turned to her for help when they did not understand the teacher's directions or how they were meant to complete different tasks.

...speaking wise I was a bit better, and I think they felt like, "ah, Suzu can do this" ...so whenever they had a question, like, "how are we supposed to do this homework?", or "how do we do this task?" they would ask me. - Interview 2

Teacher training

After completing the general education language requirements Suzu began her teacher training courses. Suzu's hometown was struck hard by the Fukushima Earthquake in 2011, and her brother's service in the self-defense forces (自衛隊) at that time sparked a desire in her to pursue a career helping others, and she ultimately settled on becoming a teacher. Thus, after completing her general education courses she moved into the education department of the university and started a teacher training course. This experience again reframed Suzu's perception of her abilities, primarily in relation to the various strengths and weaknesses of her new classmates.

...there are times when I feel like my English is insufficient. For example, in my (English) teaching courses... all the classes are classes that people who want to become English teachers must take so all the students have a lot of confidence in their English. - Interview 2

Suzu also went through an evolution in terms of the level she hoped to teach. She initially aimed to become a high school English teacher, but after her first demonstration lesson in the training program that goal became less certain.

...all the classes I've taken before I entered the university were very much the classic Japanese style of grammar instruction and vocabulary learning. So, I made up a lesson based on what I have experienced as a learner. Then my teacher told me very directly that it was boring... - Interview 2

The teacher's feedback caused Suzu distress on multiple levels. First, the lesson design did not represent the way she wanted to teach, but her assumption of what the teacher and the program expected. Second, after putting considerable effort into modifying the lesson and trying again, she realized she was not certain this was the way she wanted to teach. This experience thus led her to consider becoming a junior high school teacher instead, where there are more opportunities for incorporating a communicative approach to language teaching.

The future

Suzu's aim at the time of writing was still to become an English teacher in Japan, and she hoped to return to her hometown when she completed her teacher training. She was also still undecided as to what level she would eventually teach, but her primary drive in becoming a teacher was quite specific.

...recently I've been thinking more about the teachers who took care of me, like my schoolteachers and my English conversation teacher, that, for me, were really important to my life and thought about why I really want to become a teacher... it's not just, "I want to be a teacher" but also "what do I want to do? What kind of teacher do I want to be?" ... I realized that it's that joy of becoming able to use the language, and in a new language being able to communicate with another person and learning a new word or idea from that - and the joy of that - I realized that, when I become a teacher... that I can change small things about the lesson and put in things like foreign culture or ideas that you can talk to foreigners about and hopefully be able to increase the number of students who notice the fun of doing that. - Interview 3

Initially she had hoped to serve as a cultural bridge between Japanese people and English-speaking people, but as time went on, she began to feel the most valuable moments in her own language learning experience were when she came face-to-face with a demanding situation and had to rely on her abilities to overcome it.

Miyu's Narrative

Early years through junior high school

Much like Suzu, Miyu's first experiences with English began at an extracurricular conversation school prior to elementary school. She recalled having to act out short plays and skits of English stories and fairy tales while she was there, and the most memorable for her was a performance of *Narnia* when she was in fourth grade of elementary school.

I was the narrator. It was a little bit longer than the year before... I remembered it perfectly. That improved my confidence in speaking and remembering English. - Interview 1

Interestingly, Miyu highlighted her self-regulatory skills as one of the primary reasons she felt she was so successful in remembering her lines.

In her final year of elementary school Miyu's parents sent her on a homestay in the United States for a month. She stayed with a family in Michigan, and she was initially apprehensive about going. However, she soon found that, despite her lack of belief in her speaking abilities, all the family members were very supportive.

At dinner time I listened to the host family and just copied what they said. One day we were eating meat and I copied what my host mother said, "can you pass me the salt please." She said, "Oh, your English is better than the first day." So, I gained confidence in my way of learning English - just listen, copy, and use it. So, I became more confident from that. - Interview 1

This moment of mastery experience, combined with the positive feedback from her host mother, was one of the most important moments in Miyu's English journey.

Miyu's junior high school teacher further supported her desire to engage with English as a means of communication. A native Japanese speaker in his first year as a classroom teacher, Miyu's teacher utilized a communicative approach to language teaching in a class where the primary focus was on listening and speaking.

He didn't want us just to study English, he also wanted us to enjoy learning English... For him, the important things were listening and speaking skills... it was a good way for me to learn English. - Interview 1

Miyu also decided to apply for the English speech contest during junior high school, just as Suzu had.

There was a speaking contest and I wanted to enter it, but many other people wanted to do it as well. So, I had to audition, and I got selected to enter the contest. So that increased my confidence for speaking... I couldn't win the contest, but I enjoyed the speaking contest... because it gave me a purpose to speak English. I wanted to tell the people my story, so I enjoyed it and it made me (feel) confident about my speaking. - Interview 1

Much like her *Narnia* performance, Miyu credited her performance in the speaking contest to her ability to prepare. Thus, the three most salient mastery experiences in Miyu's past, speaking with her homestay mother, as narrator in the *Narnia* play, and in the speech contest, her ability to self-regulate, or organize, were as memorable to her as her ability to execute.

High school

Unfortunately, Miyu's experiences in high school, much like Suzu's, were not as positive. English became a tool for passing the tests required for university and communication took a subordinate role to reading and grammar practice.

The chance to speak or listen to English decreased. Learning English was just a tool to enter college. So, I didn't have as much passion for learning English in high school. - Interview 1

Furthermore, Miyu had fewer opportunities to make use of her listening skills because the number of listening exercises decreased or were skipped altogether.

In high school, there were few chances to listen to CDs. Sometimes teachers skipped it because of other tasks... It was hard for me to learn English without listening. - Interview 1

Her high school English teacher's approach to speaking tasks further accentuated her demotivation.

... this teacher would choose one student to stand in the front of the class and talk about a topic. But we didn't have time to think.... We couldn't speak well standing in front of the blackboard. I didn't like that way... - Interview 1

This approach denied Miyu the opportunity to prepare, which she understood as key to her success in speaking, and presented her with a task she felt had no logical purpose. As Bandura (1997) argued, if an individual does not value the task, they will likely choose not to engage even if their SE is high. Thus, even when Miyu was given the chance to speak, she avoided the task because of how it was structured.

...with speaking, there are many steps before you do the assignment. I cannot do the assignment without all the steps - think about topic, write notes, practice, then do the assignment. - Interview 2

University

Miyu's English courses in university shifted to a four-skills based approach based on communicative competence and, like Suzu, she quickly became the person in the class that the other students would ask for help.

...when we've had assignments where we need to solve things in the textbook or understand the meanings of words, students often ask me to check their answers. In my first ... class too, during pair and discussion time other students would ask me how to say things in English. - Interview 2

She enjoyed the classes immensely, and her first teacher used a combination of speaking fluency development tasks and video recording homework that tapped into Miyu's ability to self-regulate and prepare.

The (English) speaking test was difficult, but the teacher told us what to do for the speaking test and I practiced and prepared for some topics, like what to speak about, and I prepared quite a bit. Thanks to that I was able to do my best and I could answer all the questions, and I was able to give a speech that I was satisfied with. - Interview 2

Two other moments from this class also had a significant impact on her experience with English, the first being feedback she received from her teacher on her first video recording assignment.

In one of the first marks for that assignment (the teacher) gave me positive feedback about my video, so I tried hard after that...It was just a short comment on my video journal, something like, "Great job, your video journal was really good, and you can speak really well." ... I was happy to get this feedback. - Interview 2

The second moment was during her preparations for the departmental speaking test⁴. The teacher told the students prior to the test what some of the topics might be and she and another student chose to take time out and prepare for the speaking test together.

... we had a shared goal of passing the (English) class... My partner's motivation was high, and she really wanted to pass (English class), and she did really well on the speaking test. So, my motivation was always up, like her, and I practiced harder because of that. - Interview 2

Seeing the motivation of the other student encouraged Miyu to push herself a bit more. Additionally, it helped her to see that she could perform at a higher level than she previously believed if she put the effort in. Then, in her second-year class Miyu was influenced by yet another student's approach to speaking tasks.

...when I speak English in class, I become nervous...But she seemed like she had no fear of speaking and she looked like she just expressed her feelings fluently. It made me think, "I should not be so nervous to speak English" ... it had a good effect on me, I think. - Interview 2

This class also made sure that students had the opportunity to speak one-on-one with all their classmates, allowing them to get a better understanding of each other's speaking abilities. Furthermore, Miyu had plenty of time to utilize her self-regulatory skills. These two factors helped her feel more comfortable speaking during class.

The future

At the time of writing Miyu was in her third year of university and had started her search for a job, though she was reluctant to leave the university world to join society at large. She was considering a future working in child psychology to help children who have suffered abuse or neglect. However, she felt that her lack of fear of English was a huge asset to her, because she understood that many of her classmates feared interacting in English.

...if I want to join the company... that uses English, that gives me a chance to go work in a foreign country.... I don't hesitate to speak English, so I can join these kinds of companies. So, I have a lot more choices than people who don't like English. - Interview 3

In short, her collective experiences helped alleviate any fears of engaging with English as a means of communication, and Miyu knew that might help her in her future job because many companies sought employees who could do just that. If such an opportunity came up, Miyu would not hesitate for a moment to seize it.

Discussion

Development of Foreign Language Self-Efficacy as Revealed in Language Learning Histories

⁴ This is a one-on-one speaking test conducted during the 7th and 14th week of a 15-week semester. The test is structured similarly to the IELTS speaking test.

The discussion focuses on an examination of the four sources of self-efficacy proposed by Bandura (1997) and their relation to aspects of language learning as seen through the narratives of the two participants. Examination of these instances might expand our understanding about development of self-efficacy for these two women and how their experiences potentially relate to the experiences of other students struggling to acquire a second or foreign language.

Mastery Experiences

Mastery experiences are essential to the successful development of any skill or behavior. Murphey et al. (2005) argued that language learners also need these successful experiences to engage with the learning process. Ensuring that students are provided with opportunities to experience moments of mastery in language learning is therefore a vital point to consider. Additionally, it is important to note that not all successful attempts in learning can be considered mastery experiences. Bandura (1997) pointed out that mastery experiences must be sufficiently difficult and require a marked level of effort.

For example, Miyu's first mastery experience came during her fourth year of elementary school in the *Narnia* play. Narrator roles would be sufficiently difficult and require a marked level of effort for most eight-year-old children in a first language, let alone a second language. For Suzu, her first real mastery experience came during her first homestay when she was forced into the role of middleman. She highlighted how difficult the situation was, how hard she had to work to overcome it, and how that feeling of success stayed with her for the rest of her life.

Thus, task difficulty and effort expenditure marked the important mastery experiences for both women. Multiple studies have shown that mastery experiences of this kind are a powerful source of SE (Byars-Winston et al., 2017; Ngoc Truong & Wang, 2019), and Bandura (1997) argued that an individual's SE determines the type of tasks they engage in. It is therefore telling that upon completion of her first homestay Suzu elected to engage in two further homestays in the following years, and that both Miyu and Suzu volunteered for the English speech contest in all three years of junior high. In sum, one vital key to evaluating learner engagement comes through understanding the crucial role that past and present mastery experiences play in the learning process, as well as the fact that individuals judge the value of their experiences based partially on the relationship between task difficulty and effort expenditure.

Verbal Persuasion

Understanding the value of substantive feedback in language learning is another key aspect of increasing engagement with language learning, particularly how even small moments can lead to substantial change. Suzu's conversation teacher suggested in passing that she go on a homestay, and this small encounter shaped the rest of her journey with language learning. Additionally, it is likely Miyu's host mother could not have predicted how her response to Miyu's request for salt at the dinner table would prove to be a pivotal moment in Miyu's language journey. Although these instances appear to coincide with the arguments of several scholars that verbal persuasion might be as impactful as mastery experiences with Asian students (Bai et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020), what is more notable is that each of these instances would likely not have been marked for any of the individuals *giving* the feedback. This serves as an indication of two important aspects of feedback, first that it is difficult to predict when or how it will affect a learner's belief in their capabilities, and second, that substantive feedback from a respected source is often necessary for students to contextualize their successes.

In contrast, an example of the impact of negative feedback arose in Suzu's demonstration lesson in the teacher training program. Being told her lesson was "boring" created a conflict for Suzu between her beliefs about language learning and the teaching approach she felt forced to adhere to in the training program (Busse & Walter, 2013; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Tse, 2000). This moment of verbal persuasion pushed her toward reconsidering the level she wanted to teach in the future. Whereas many would judge this as a positive moment for Suzu overall, it is doubtful her teacher intended it that way. Thus, a high level of awareness is warranted when teachers provide feedback because it might ultimately impact a student's engagement with learning in unpredictable ways.

Vicarious Experiences

Characteristics of group and pair work, both of which are ubiquitous in most language learning classrooms, can also impact an individual's sense of SE and engagement based on comparisons those individuals make between themselves and the performance of other group members. Both Suzu and Miyu noted that members of their English classes often came to them for clarification when they had difficulties, particularly with listening and speaking, and these instances further reinforced Suzu and Miyu's belief in their capabilities as communicators. As Bandura noted, "When adequacy must be gauged largely in relation to the performance of others, social comparison operates as a primary factor in the self-appraisal of capabilities" (1997, p. 87). Therefore, group composition, and most importantly the variable skill levels of the members, might also impact engagement with tasks.

Additionally, these comparisons can also have a negative impact, or push students to reevaluate their skills. Prior to university, Suzu thought of speaking as her strong point, but when confronted with classmates of equal or subjectively higher level, this changed to listening. Like the student in Leeming's (2017) study whose perceptions of his ability shifted based on the members of his group, Suzu's view of her strengths evolved with her new surroundings. A second alteration took place for Suzu when she entered the teacher training courses. In many ways, each progressive step took her into a more specialized English language community, and at each step she renegotiated her SE in relation to the other participants in the community. Thus, each time students step into a new classroom, or even when they are placed into pairs or groups, it is possible they are conducting this kind of reevaluation, which could in turn have variable effects on their SE.

Finally, these group experiences can also have a positive effect on students with high SE, pushing them to expend greater effort. This happened to Miyu on two separate occasions. The first was during her speaking test practice in university, where her partner's passion for getting a high grade sparked a new level of investment for Miyu. The second came when she saw another student seeming to speak without fear or anxiety, which encouraged Miyu to try to be bolder when speaking. Whereas many students might have been intimidated in these situations, Miyu saw them as a challenge. It is likely that Miyu's high level of speaking SE allowed her to see this not as a demotivating or intimidating situation, but rather as an indication of how she could push herself to improve. As Bandura argued, "Even those who are highly self-assured will raise their efficacy beliefs if models teach them even better ways of doing things" (1997, p. 87). Several studies have pointed out the importance of vicarious experiences for developing SE (Bai & Wang, 2020; Burrows, 2016; Chen et al., 2021; Kobayashi, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020), and it appears that the affordances of group and pair work might also potentially impact the positive or negative nature of these experiences.

Physiological States

Group dynamics can also elicit physiological reactions in students that might impact their engagement. For Suzu, her anxiety was dependent upon the perceived skills of those around her. If she felt their skill level exceeded hers it created a sense of self-doubt that led to a heightened sense of fear, causing her heart to race. Bandura argued that this kind of self-doubt is not strictly a bad thing as it can spur those with a healthy sense of SE into acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to accomplish the task (1997, p. 76). However, Bandura went on to acknowledge that self-doubt can also impede performance, as well as the ability to sustain effort in the face of difficult tasks. In Suzu's case it primarily resulted in pushing her to acquire the requisite skills she needed to feel like a competent contributor. However, students with lower SE might find these situations debilitating, which could result in task abandonment.

Additionally, task characteristics can also impact the way students perceive and react to tasks, and Miyu's speaking tasks in high school are a perfect example. Whenever the teacher started a speaking task, Miyu would begin to sweat and internally pray not to be chosen. The teacher's decision to call on students randomly, to deprive them of preparation time, as well as asking them to speak in front of the whole class resulted in Miyu's devaluing the task and hoping to avoid it. Thus, even when students have high SE for a particular skill, they might perform below their skill level depending on how a task is structured. Bandura stated that SE is based on, "what people believe they can do under given circumstances and task demands" (1997, p. 37). Therefore, lower task engagement

or performance might be the result of various task characteristics, rather than students' lack of either motivation or requisite skill.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the sources and development of EFL learner self-efficacy through a narrative analysis of two EFL university students. The aim was to discern potential patterns of language learning engagement with the hope that the participants' stories might shed valuable light on areas where teachers could better address student engagement in their own classrooms. Regarding disengagement, Suzu's and Miyu's narratives provide interesting evidence for how belief in one's capabilities impacts engagement. Their SE to accomplish the tasks they faced in high school, where much of the teaching approach focused on preparing for standardized tests, was low. However, that did not mean they were not capable in other ways. Thus, when they began to disengage with English during high school it was not from a lack of inherent interest in learning the language, but that the approach denied them the ability to utilize the skills for which their SE was much higher. The possibility of mismatches between the skills teachers are trying to tap and the skills that students feel more capable in is therefore another important aspect to consider (Hsu, 2019; Miyahara et al., 1997; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Tse, 2000; Xie et al., 2021a).

The patterns of engagement and disengagement with language learning, as well as the development of beliefs in language capabilities for the two women in this study, provide a compelling lens into the diverse factors that affect many second and foreign language learners. Furthermore, this study also highlights the importance of investigating, in whatever manner possible, the experiences that language learners bring with them into the classroom. Although an in-depth analysis for every student is not feasible in most classroom situations, including a simple journaling task at the outset of a course where teachers ask their students about their successes and failures in language learning, or about the positive and negative experiences they have had, could provide valuable contextual information. Additionally, this study has also shown the important role that each of the sources of SE plays in developing an individual's belief in their capabilities for acquiring and using a foreign or second language, and the ways these sources might manifest in the language classroom.

Limitations

Suzu and Miyu both displayed high levels of motivation, self-regulation, and general self-awareness, which is why they were chosen for this study. However, that also provides a very one sided analysis in some regards. It is probable that there are students, particularly students with low levels of SE, who might be unable or unwilling to recall their past experiences in detail. Additionally, a complex interweaving of gender, social status, age difference, and personal history might also have impacted the participants' responses. Nevertheless, Suzu and Miyu were given the chance to read the final versions of their stories, as well as the interpretations, to comment on and correct. Thus, the final version is one they felt comfortable sharing with the world.

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Appendix A

Journal #	Journal Topic	Interview # and Theme
1	Tell me about your experiences with WRITING from Junior high through to university. Think about positive and negative experiences you had, and what you learned from them. Also think about people, either teachers or other students, who might have influenced your experiences.	#1: Past Learning Experiences
2	“READING “	
3	“LISTENING “	
4	“SPEAKING “	
5	Write about experiences where you did particularly well or where you struggled with language learning	#2: Sources of Self-Efficacy
6	Write about students or peers whose performance in language learning left an impression on you	
7	Write about comments, feedback and support from teachers, parents, or other students on your language performance that you can recall	
8	Write about situations when you felt physically comfortable or physically uncomfortable in language performance settings	
9	What are the areas of language where you feel most capable? What do you think has contributed to this belief?	#3: Future goals & reflection
10	What are the areas of English you still want to improve in?	
11	What are your language learning plans and goals after graduation?	
12	What advice would you give to young Japanese students who want to improve their English?	

Appendix B

Interview 1: Suzu

- Tell me about your homestay experience.
- The conversation with your homestay sister.
- The correspondence - how did they respond to you? (feedback)
- Tell me about the diary with the AET.
- Tell me about the feedback your speaking teacher gave you.
- Tell me about your high school friend that went to Waseda.
- Tell me about your listening skills. Why do you think this is your strongest skill?
- Tell me about your American conversation teacher.
- You said that you did not practice speaking later in high school.
- Tell me how that made you feel about your language learning experience.
- Tell me about the positive experience you had with English that most stands out in your memory.
- Tell me about the people who have most influenced your English learning experience.
- Tell me about the people who have been most supportive of your English learning experience.

- Tell me about any physiological factors you experience when studying or learning English (relaxed, nervous, comfortable, excited)

Interview 1: Miyu

- Tell me about when your passion for improving English changed, and what changed it.
- Tell me about why you feel your listening is better than your reading.
- Tell me about the vocabulary books you made.
- Tell me about Mr. Kubodera.
- Tell me why you felt you had no passion for solving the questions in high school.
- You said that the teachers skipped the listening portions, which you felt you were good at.
- Tell me how this impacted your language learning experience.
- Tell me about your speaking contest experience.
- Tell me about the speaking tasks your teacher gave you in high school.
- Tell me why these tasks made you feel worried.
- Tell me how you feel about your English pronunciation.
- Tell me about the positive experience you had with English that most stands out in your memory.
- Tell me about the people who have most influenced your English learning experience.
- Tell me about the people who have been most supportive of your English learning experience.
- Tell me about any physiological factors you experience when studying or learning English (relaxed, nervous, comfortable, excited)

Interview 2: Suzu

- Tell me about your TOEFL score. Why do you think it went up?
- You said sometimes you feel afraid to fail and don't speak up. Can you tell me about that?
- You said that sometimes your classmates would rely on you for help in English. Can you tell me about some situations when that might happen?
 - You also said that sometimes you relied on other classmates. Can you tell me situations when that might happen?
 - Tell me about your classmate who spoke about literature in fluent English. Describe what it made you feel about your own ability to speak English.
 - Tell me about the time you felt angry when the students were speaking Japanese in the all-English class.
 - Tell me about your friend who studied abroad. How has she influenced your English studies?
 - Tell me about your mock English lesson.
 - Tell me about the feedback you got from that lesson.

Interview 2: Miyu

- Tell me about your speaking test in your first year.
- Tell me about how you prepared for that test.
- Tell me about the video journals in your Practical English class.
- Why did you feel this was a "heavy" assignment?
- Tell me how you prepare for speaking assignments.
- How about other kinds of assignments (like reading or writing)
- Tell me how STUDENT X's "no fear of speaking" influenced you
- Tell me about your practice with other classmates for the speaking test
- Tell me about the feedback Mel gave you on your video journals
- Tell me about the presentations from PE1 last semester.

- Tell me about the puppet show in Dean's class
- Tell me about a time when other students have asked for your help in English class. How did that make you feel?
- Tell me about a time when you have asked other students for help

Interview 3: Suzu

- You said that you want to become an English teacher in the future. Can you tell me about what made you choose that job?
- Can you tell me about any other plans you have for using English in the future?
- Can you tell me how your experiences with language learning have influenced the job you chose?
- Tell me how you feel about your experience participating in this research project.
- Tell me about how you felt about the journals.
- Can you tell me about anything you might have learned from writing the journals?
- Could you tell me about how you felt about the interviews?
- How about anything you might have learned from the interview process?
- Can you tell me what you think you learned from participating in this research project overall?

Interview 3: Miyu

- Can you tell me about your strong point in English? Why do you think that is your strength?
- Can you tell me about your weak point in English? Why is that your weakness?
- Can you tell me about your career plans after graduation? Why did you choose that kind of job?
- Can you tell me about any plans you have for using English in the future?
- Can you tell me how your experiences with language learning have influenced the job you chose?
- Tell me how you feel about your experience participating in this research project.
- Tell me about how you felt about the journals.
- Can you tell me about anything you might have learned from writing the journals?
- Could you tell me about how you felt about the interviews?
- How about anything you might have learned from the interview process?
- Can you tell me what you think you learned from participating in this research project overall?