When family background shapes EFL Learners’ English self-concept: An unintended consequence of the new English education policy in Taiwan

Ling-Hui Hsu

Department of Applied English,
Ming Chuan University
5 De Ming Road, Guishan Township,
Taoyuan County, Taiwan, 333
Email: linghui@mail.mcu.edu.tw

Abstract
To boost global competitiveness, the Taiwanese government has introduced a new English education policy. Consequently, English ability has become all the more prized in the Taiwanese society, leading to heavy investments in English learning for children in well-to-do families. Hence, a learning hierarchy structured generally on availability of family financial resources has been created. The current study builds on two assumptions. First, the learning hierarchy might have led to low English self-concepts among economically disadvantaged students. Second, the impact on university students might be smaller than on elementary children due to differential teaching methods at elementary schools and universities respectively. The findings provide empirical support for lower English self-concepts among students located low at the learning hierarchy. Also, compared to elementary students, university students are in better capacity to maintain an overall positive English self-concept. Interventions are suggested to enhance both English self-concepts and capabilities of economically disadvantaged EFL learners.

Key Words: English self-concept, EFL learner, reciprocal effects model

1. INTRODUCTION
In the early 2000’s, English education reforms have taken place in several countries in East Asia (Butler, 2005). Coinciding with the reform wave, Taiwan incorporated English language learning into the elementary school curriculum in 2001. As a result, English has become one of the core subjects for Taiwanese youngsters from the fifth grade up in 2001 and from the third grade up in 2005 (Lee, 2010). In Taiwan, English is taught as a foreign language. With continued internationalization, the ability to speak English has come to stand for a status symbol, a linguistic capital to secure a good job (Tsai, 2010). Families with adequate resources are eager to equip their offspring with the language valued at schools and job markets. For families that are not well-to-do or can barely make ends meet, sending children to public
schools for compulsory education is perhaps the best that can be done. Additional learning in a foreign language or spending in special talent cultivation is simply unaffordable for these families.

The educational policy change stands for the Taiwanese government’s determination to deepen globalization and ensure that all kids have an equal access to English education (Chang, 2013). However, the well-intended policy change has resulted in a prevailing “two-peak phenomenon,” characterized by a bimodal distribution of high versus low English abilities among students in Taiwan (Chang et al., 2007; Chen & Tsai 2012; Chien, 2013). In general, those with higher English proficiency are the ones that receive an extra dose of English lessons at cram schools or after-school language programs. Others who depend solely on English instruction at school normally lag behind (Chou, 2013). Consequently, high achievers in English may possess a sense of superiority whereas low achievers may feel completely lost in the realm of English study (Chang, 2013).

Apparently, a learning hierarchy structured along family financial resources has been created for Taiwanese English learners. Although it is common to see a correlation between students from low socioeconomic status and academic under-achievement (Croizet, Désert, Dutrévis, & Leyens, 2001), it does not provide a good reason to rationalize the English learning environment in Taiwan where richer kids outperform poorer kids because they receive more than normal school English education. Knowing that it takes much belief in self to learn a foreign language well, this researcher would like to find out whether English as foreign language (EFL) learners in Taiwan have come to learn of their places at the hierarchy and form a specific concept about self in relation to English learning which either enhances or undermines learner performances? What possibly can English educators do to minimize the learning gap between children of families who have and those who have not?

2. KEY CONCEPTS

2.1 Self-concept

Picture a coconut street vendor. Nearby a school boy was working on his homework at a makeshift desk, a chair-turned-table. Just across the street from the vendor, streams of children were dropped off in front of an upscale English cram school by parents in cars or on scooters. This scenario, a personal encounter of this researcher, and many similar others are repeated at different corners in cities throughout Taiwan. The image of the little boy bending over the makeshift desk led this researcher to wonder how this little boy might see himself in comparison to those stepping into the cram school; whether he would ever find English an interesting subject.

Indeed, humans live in a world of comparison. Ever since a young age, we are made to compare with others. Significantly, resulting from such a social comparison process, evaluations about self are formed (Trautwein et al., 2009). Also, through comparisons, we find our own niches in our social universe and the categories to place ourselves in. In accordance with the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), we have come to formulate a self-concept, a perception of self. Self-concept dictates one to engage in self-stereotyping — the belief that one is a prototype of the group one identifies with. Through the process of cognitive grouping of oneself and the practice of incorporating stereotypical characteristics of the group into self, the result is internalization of group into the concept of self (Sani & Bennett, 2009).

At a school environment where reference others abound and competition is a staple, students know where they stand on every point of comparison. Therefore, it is proposed in the current study that young English learners in Taiwan are aware of their place in the learning hierarchy inadvertently created by their family background and their parents’ attitudes towards English learning. A legitimate question to ask is how such awareness might influence the self-concept of these youngsters? While self-concept is a complex
system composed of multiple social identities, and self-concept is multifaceted and hierarchical (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985), of relevance to the current study is the academic aspect of the self, the academic self-concept. Academic self-concept is how one evaluates self regarding a specific academic domain (Preckel et al., 2013). The question then is how the learning hierarchy might impact academic self-concepts of young EFL learners in Taiwan.

2.1.1 Relationship between self-concept and academic achievement. When studying self in an academic setting, an important question to explore is the relationship between student self-concept and academic achievement. Extensive educational and psychological research in this regard has yielded inconclusive results in both relation and causality of the two constructs (Huang, 2011). Research supporting the effect of prior self-concept on subsequent achievement corresponds with the self-enhancement model (Calsyn & Kenny, 1977). With the self-enhancement model, efforts should be made to enhance student self-concept for improved academic performance. On the other hand, the skill development model (Calsyn & Kenny) coincides with the studies advocating the effect of prior achievement on subsequent self-concept formation. Through developing stronger academic skills, a more positive self-concept would emerge as a result.

More recent synthesis of related self-concept and achievement research has pointed to a reciprocal relation between the two constructs explained by the reciprocal effects model (Marsh & Martin, 2011). The model suggests a mutually reinforcing relationship between the two elements, saying that it is too simplistic to claim either a self-concept effect or an achievement effect, and interventions should be designed in such a way to simultaneously enhance self-concept and improve academic skills so as to ensure lasting gains in both aspects.

In addition, Marsh (1990a) pointed out the inappropriateness of using a general measure of academic self-concept since achievement in particular school subjects is more highly correlated with self-concept in the corresponding content areas. Therefore, measures of self-concepts in specific subject areas, such as math self-concept and English self-concept, should be adopted if the goal is to improve students’ self-concepts and related achievements in specific content areas. Accordingly, in the current study, the goal is to examine the unique factors which influence formation of Taiwanese EFL learner self-concepts in the subject area of English. The construct of English self-concept proposed by Lau et al. (1999) will be adopted.

2.2 English Self-concept

Lau and colleagues (1999) proposed four distinct skill-specific constructs (listening, speaking, reading, and writing self-concepts) which could be represented by a higher order global English self-concept. To test the assumption of the multidimensional and hierarchical nature of students’ academic self-concepts in the subject area of English, Lau and colleagues measured student participants’ self-concepts in the four skill-specific facets of English. Using confirmatory factor analysis, Lau et al. confirmed the distinctiveness of the four specific facets and a substantial relationship between the skill-specific constructs and the global English self-concept factor, as well as the finding that a global English self-concept can be inferred from the four skill constructs.

2.2.1 Self-concept, a dynamic and situational construct. To make the current study possible, belief in mutability of self-concept is necessary, which makes it meaningful to introduce potential interventions to enhance EFL learner self-concept. In their study on how received self-relevant information may alter one’s self-conceptions, Markus and Kunda (1986) concluded that self-concept should be characterized by both stability and malleability. According to Markus and Kunda, self-concept is a reservoir of self-conceptions.
composed of the more enduring core self-conceptions and other subsets of self-conceptions. Malleability of self-concept lies in the fact that one’s self-concept may vary from one moment to another depending on which subset of self-conceptions is activated, leading to formation of the working self-concept (p. 859). Specifically, affective and motivational states of an individual or the ongoing social conditions may turn on a certain subset of self-conceptions and make it accessible in one’s memory; hence, leading to change in one’s working self-concept.

To address the debate of stability or fluidity of self-concept, Mercer (2011) studied learner self-concept in foreign language (FL) and concluded that self-concept is both stable and changeable, echoing the argument of Markus and Kunda (1986). The participant in Mercer’s case study underwent fluctuation in FL self-concept depending on external environmental stimuli, such as her immediate exam performances or her changing affective responses to the foreign languages. However, in the end, she was able to mobilize a certain part of her self-conceptions so as to maintain an overall positive self-concept in the targeted foreign languages. Through self-enhancement or self-protection (Mercer, 2011, p. 341), the learner was able to uphold a positive global FL concept by downplaying the importance of her weakness in a specific domain of the language and claiming her confidence in other domains. Language learner self-concept is, therefore, complex, situational, and multidimensional.

2.3 Assumptions, Research Questions of the Current Study

It is significant that the FL learner in Mercer’s (2011) study was able to modify some of her self-conceptions to maintain an overall positive FL self-concept. The question is whether EFL learners in Taiwan resort to such cognitive work in forming their English self-concepts, believed to be an important mechanism to EFL learners who desire to excel in the long journey of English study. It is speculated that due to differential teaching pedagogies, such a psychological mechanism is more readily available to university students than to elementary students in Taiwan. At elementary schools in Taiwan, students receive 80-minute English instruction per week. English as a course is included in school curriculum but no independent classes in any of the four specific skills are offered. Much emphasis is on cultivating communicative capability with little attention given to reading or writing (Chiu, 2008). Presumably, elementary students in Taiwan are more rigid in calibrating their English proficiency against abilities to comprehend and communicate with teachers in class since communicative skill stands for good English. Conversely, university students in Taiwan are offered stand-alone classes in all four skills of English. Inferring from the study results of Mercer’s (2011) described above, an assumption can be made; that is, compared to elementary students, students at universities in Taiwan enjoy more latitude in maintaining a positive English self-concept as long as they are good at any of the four English skills, which are likely equally emphasized in university school curriculum.

Informed by the English learning environment in Taiwan and the above literature review, the purpose of the current study is threefold. The first is to find out whether the created English learning hierarchy has influenced formation of English self-concepts among university and elementary EFL learners in Taiwan. The second is to test how university and elementary EFL learners differ in practicing the cognitive work of accessing a certain aspect of self-perceptions and modifying one’s self-concept. The third is to suggest possible interventions to make available the mechanism of maintaining an overall positive perception of self in English for low-performing children. Ultimately, the goal is to prevent those situated low at the learning hierarchy from quitting English studies too early too soon. Hence, the research questions are laid out below.
RQ1: How has the learning hierarchy impacted English self-concepts of university and elementary school English learners in Taiwan?
RQ2: Given that the global English self-concept is inferred from self-concepts of the four specific language skills, how do the four self-concepts relate to the English self-concepts of Taiwanese university and elementary students respectively?

3. METHOD

3.1 Overview

Two surveys were conducted in the current study. One was administered on the university student participants, and the other on the elementary student participants. Each survey questionnaire contained a basic information section followed by five scales measuring participants’ global English self-concept and self-concepts in the four specific English skills -- listening, speaking, reading and writing.

3.2 Measures

Information on individual English learning experiences was collected to judge where each participant stood in the English learning hierarchy. Reflecting the English learning environment in Taiwan, the current study has identified three factors that structure the learning hierarchy for Taiwanese elementary EFL learners. They are: whether the students were exposed to English before normal schooling; how many years they have attended cram schools; and whether they are attending cram schools currently. University students in Taiwan normally do not attend cram schools except for those who have graduate studies as their next ambition. As such, the identified factors that structure the learning hierarchy for Taiwanese university EFL learners are: whether the students were exposed to English before normal schooling; how many years they have attended cram schools; and whether they have studied English abroad.

The survey items measuring English related self-concepts were adapted from Lau et al. (1999) who constructed their surveys by referring to Marsh’s (1990b) Academic Self Description Questionnaire (ASDQ). The six item stems of the ASDQ were repeated in the five self-concept scales to form a total of six items in each scale. The item stems are: “Compared to other students I’m good at___,”“I’m hopeless when it comes to ___,”“I have always done well in___,”“Work in ___ is easy for me,”“I get good marks in ___,” and “I learn things quickly in ___.” The five-point response scale ranged from definitely false (1) to definitely true (5). Therefore, example questions for the five self-concept scales would read as follows. “Compared to other students, I am good at English;”“Compared to other students, I am good at listening;” “Compared to other students, I am good at speaking;”“Compared to other students, I am good at reading;” and “Compared to other students, I am good at writing.” The survey did not specify the definitions of the four skills nor did it ask students to calibrate their abilities against a specific school exam or standard language exam. The purpose was to measure how students perceive or qualify themselves in terms of the four skills in general.

It is worth mentioning that for elementary school students, each skill-specific self-concept scale contained only five items. As described earlier, elementary schools in Taiwan do not offer independent classes in the four English skills. Therefore, elementary students take English exams but not tests on individual skills. As such, for elementary student participants, the item “I get good marks in ___” appeared only in the scale measuring the global English self-concept, but not in the five scales measuring self-concepts in listening, speaking, reading, and writing specifically.

Although the adapted instruments were straightforward in question wording, special efforts were made to ensure comprehensibility of each survey question to the young elementary participants in the current study. The final Chinese version of the elementary participant questionnaire was completed with the
invaluable advice of the English teacher who was teaching the elementary student participants when the current study was conducted. Based on the teacher’s own experience and consultation with other school teachers, multiple revisions were made to the questionnaire which was initially translated by this researcher. Pilot studies were conducted on 10 elementary students and 20 university students respectively to test reliabilities of the 10 scales (five scales for each cohort). All yielded high alpha reliabilities, ranging from .88 to .97 for the elementary school cohort and from .87 to .95 for the university cohort.

3.3 The Current Study

3.3.1 Participants. In compliance with the requirement of the researched elementary school, only those who had returned a consent form with parent signature were included in the study. As a result, 10 of the recruited 81 were involved in the initial pilot study whereas the other 71 participated in the final study. A total of 97 university students participated in the main study; they were recruited from two intact classes at a university in Northern Taiwan.

3.3.2 Procedures. The first survey was administered on university students. A total of 97 students completed the questionnaires on their own. The means and standard deviations of the five measured self-concepts and the scale reliabilities are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Mean (SD) Skill-specific Self-concepts (SC) of University Students, Scale Reliabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean SC scores</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening SC</td>
<td>3.01 (.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking SC</td>
<td>3.24 (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading SC</td>
<td>3.32 (.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing SC</td>
<td>3.11 (.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English SC</td>
<td>3.55 (.56)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second survey was administered on 71 elementary students in two different classes at a school in Northern Taiwan. Since these students were in Grade six, assistance from classroom teachers was procured to ensure class control and lessen possibilities of incomprehension among some students. Students proceeded along the survey simultaneously, made possible by teachers reading aloud each survey question. Every participant was allowed an equal amount of time to answer each question and a chance to ask for clarification of question statements. The means and standard deviations of the five measured self-concepts and the scale reliabilities are listed in Table 2.
Table 2
Mean (SD) Skill-specific Self-concepts (SC) of Elementary Students, Scale Reliabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill SC</th>
<th>Mean SC scores</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening SC</td>
<td>3.22 (1.02)</td>
<td>.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking SC</td>
<td>2.95 (1.09)</td>
<td>.945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading SC</td>
<td>2.86 (1.17)</td>
<td>.957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing SC</td>
<td>3.03 (1.24)</td>
<td>.962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English SC</td>
<td>3.00 (1.15)</td>
<td>.964</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1 Testing Research Questions

To test RQ1, two three-way independent ANOVA analyses were conducted. For both data sets, the dependent variable is the composite global English self-concept scores. The between-group factors for the university student data set are years studying at cram schools, exposure to English before normal schooling, and studying English abroad. The factorial ANOVA conducted on the university student data set yielded a significant main effect of studying English abroad on English self-concept, $F(1, 83) = 5.12$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.049$. The results indicate that those who have studied English abroad have scored significantly higher on English self-concept than those who have not ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .54$ for the former; $M = 3.48$, $SD = .55$ for the latter; see Figure 1). There was a significant interaction effect between studying English abroad and exposure to English before normal schooling on English self-concept, $F(1, 83) = 3.90$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.037$. The method of simple main effects (Winer, Brown, & Michels, 1991) was used to conduct further analysis on the significant interaction between the two independent factors (see Table 3).

![Figure 1. The main effect of studying abroad on English SC of university students](image-url)
Table 3
English SC Scores as a Function of Participant Exposure to English before Normal Schooling and Having Studied English Abroad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exposure to English before normal study</th>
<th>Have studied English abroad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.92 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3.64 (.16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A Bonferroni correction was applied to control for inflation of alpha. Pairwise comparisons yielded only one significant comparison pair. That is, university participants who had contact with English before normal schooling and have studied English abroad scored significantly higher on English self-concept ($M = 3.92, SD = .16$) than those who had contact with English when very young but have never studied English abroad ($M = 3.43, SD = .11$), $F(1, 93) = 6.54, p = .01, \eta^2 = 0.069$ (see Figure 2). Having studied English abroad is the key to holding higher self-perceptions in English ability. Furthermore, among those who have studied English abroad, exposure to English at a young age, such as returning overseas Chinese, provides another boost to confidence in English ability.

![Figure 2. English SC scores as a function of having studied abroad and exposure to English before normal school](image)

The second three-way independent ANOVA was conducted on the data sets generated by elementary EFL learners. The dependent variable is the composite global English self-concept scores. The between-group factors are exposure to English before normal schooling, years studying at cram schools, and current enrollment at cram school. The analysis yielded a significant main effect of the factor, current enrollment in cram school, $F(1, 58) = 9.13, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.107$, as well as a moderately significant main effect of the factor, years studying in cram school, $F(4, 58) = 2.36, p = .06, \eta^2 = 0.028$. Those who were receiving extra study at a cram school when the survey was conducted had significantly higher self-concepts in English than those
who were not attending cram school ($M = 3.53, SD = 1.04$ for the former; $M = 2.24, SD = .84$ for the latter, see Figure 3). Although only moderately significant, the English self-concept scores have formed an interesting trend along the categories of the factor, *years studying in cram school*. Notably, elementary students' English self-concept scores rise steadily with number of years attending cram school (see Figure 4).

**Figure 3.** The main effect of current enrollment at cram school on English SC of elementary students

![Bar chart showing the main effect of current enrollment at cram school on English SC of elementary students.](image)

**Figure 4.** Moderately significant main effect of years studying at cram school on English SC of elementary school students

![Bar chart showing the moderately significant main effect of years studying at cram school on English SC of elementary school students.](image)

The testing results of RQ1 have provided empirical support for the impact of a learning hierarchy on both the university and elementary EFL learners in Taiwan. Reflecting a hierarchical grouping difference, the participants who have received extra out-of-school English learning, or particularly, additional lessons beyond that offered through normal schooling in Taiwan, tend to think more highly of themselves in English.
ability than those who have not. The implication is family financial situation may likely determine learners’ confidence toward English and concomitantly their achievement in the subject area.

To test RQ2, a multiple regression analysis was conducted on the two data sets respectively. The purpose was to see which of the four skill-specific self-concepts better predicted the global English self-concept for either cohort. That is, based on which of the four skill self-concepts did university and elementary school students infer their global English self-concepts. Based on the study of Lau et al. (1999), it is believed that all four skill self-concepts contribute to the global English self-concept. In order to find out the individual contribution of each predictor, a forward stepwise analysis method was chosen. The analyses showed that for university students, speaking and reading self-concepts are the two more important predictors of English self-concept, accounting for 66 percent of the variation in English self-concept scores. Based on β coefficient magnitude, the predictors, as ranked by importance, are speaking self-concept, reading self-concept, writing self-concept, and listening self-concept (see Table 4). In addition, the descriptive statistics (see Table1) indicate that university students hold the highest self-perception in reading skill, followed by speaking, writing, and finally listening. Thus, the global English self-concept of university students was inferred from the two skill-specific facets that students had higher self-concepts in. In other words, when reporting self-concepts in English ability, university students referred to the two language skills they felt more confident with.

Table 4
Multiple Regression Results for University Students Data Set

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SEB</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking SC</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.70**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking SC</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading SC</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking SC</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading SC</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing SC</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking SC</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading SC</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing SC</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening SC</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.21*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $R^2 = .48$ for model 1, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .18$ for model 2, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .06$ for model 3, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .03$ for model 4, $p = .003$

$p < .01$  ** $p < .001$. 

*p < .01  ** $p < .001$. 

10
Analysis on elementary student data set shows that listening and speaking self-concepts are the two more important predictors of English self-concept, accounting for 91.4 percent of the variation in English self-concept scores. Based on β coefficient magnitude, the predictors, as ranked by importance, are listening self-concept, speaking self-concept, reading self-concept, and writing self-concept (see Table 5). The descriptive statistics (see Table 2) indicate that elementary students hold the highest self-perception in listening skill, followed by writing, speaking, and finally reading skill. That is, when forming a global English self-concept, elementary students did not necessarily refer to the skill domains in which they perceived themselves more highly. For instance, elementary EFL learners perceived themselves highly in writing; yet, the writing self-concept turned out to be the least powerful predictor of their global English self-concept. Instead, when reporting on English self-concept, elementary students referred to their perceptions of the two skills, listening and speaking, which are exactly the focal skills of school English education. Finally, the findings allow for a comparison between university and elementary EFL learners in formation of English self-concept based on the four skills. That is, compared to elementary EFL learners, university EFL learners hold a better capacity in prioritizing certain self-conceptions to maintain a positive English self-concept.

Table 5
Multiple Regression Results for Elementary Students Data Set

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SEB</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|        | Listening SC | 1.05 | 0.05 | 0.93***  
| Model 2 | Constant | -0.37 | 0.14 |  
|        | Listening SC | 0.61 | 0.08 | 0.54***  
|        | Speaking SC | 0.47 | 0.07 | 0.45***  
| Model 3 | Constant | -0.32 | 0.13 |  
|        | Listening SC | 0.52 | 0.08 | 0.46***  
|        | Speaking SC | 0.32 | 0.08 | 0.30***  
|        | Reading SC | 0.24 | 0.07 | 0.25***  
| Model 4 | Constant | -0.25 | 0.13 |  
|        | Listening SC | 0.42 | 0.09 | 0.37***  
|        | Speaking SC | 0.27 | 0.08 | 0.25**  
|        | Reading SC | 0.21 | 0.07 | 0.21**  
|        | Writing SC | 0.17 | 0.07 | 0.18*  

Note.  \( R^2 = .86 \) for model 1, \( p < .001 \); \( \Delta R^2 = .05 \) for model 2, \( p < .001 \)
\( \Delta R^2 = .01 \) for model 3, \( p = .001 \); \( \Delta R^2 = .01 \) for model 4, \( p = .02 \).

*** \( p < .001 \) ** \( p < .01 \) * \( p < .05 \)

4.2 Possible Interventions

As the study shows, the learning situation of elementary EFL students in Taiwan is particularly worrisome. On one hand, the learning hierarchy has exerted a toll on English self-concept of students -- mean English self-concept score 3.53 (above the scale midpoint 3.0) for 42 participants attending cram
school versus 2.24 (below the scale midpoint) for 29 participants who were not. To worsen the situation, the students have formed self-perceptions of their English abilities based on skills considered valuable by school but not by assessment of their own abilities. Fortunately, analyses of the university data set have offered some hope for potential interventions. Interpretation of university participant responses shows that like the FL learner in Mercer’s (2011) study, university EFL learners in Taiwan are capable of practicing the cognitive work of accessing a certain set of self-conceptions to maintain an overall positive English self-concept -- mean English self-concept score 3.78 for 23 participants who have studied abroad versus 3.48 for 74 participants who have not (both above the scale midpoint). It is therefore important to make the psychological mechanism available to elementary EFL learners as well. The following three intervention measures center on the belief of the reciprocal effects model (Marsh & Martin, 2011) which argues that solid interventions should bolster both self-concept and academic performance of under-achieving children.

4.2.1 Shared reality theory. Building on the shared reality theory (Sinclair, Hardin, & Lowery, 2006), the first intervention aims to discredit the learning hierarchy. The shared reality theory suggests that whether an individual applies stereotype-relevant information to self-views depends on the perceived evaluations of close others. As such, teachers’ role is crucial. Not only for the more mature university students, but for the young elementary kids in particular, teachers are an important part of school life. Teachers’ positive regard may serve as a protective effect to alleviate impact of stereotypes on student self-views. For instance, some students may believe themselves lower in English ability because they have never studied abroad or are not enrolling at cram school. Teachers should be prudent in language usage so as to discount groupings based on the learning hierarchy. Importantly, teachers should be sensitive in course preparation to take into consideration of various learning backgrounds of students. In doing so, the disadvantaged students would not be left out believing the material is prepared for the smarter group, those who have had extra out-of-school learning.

4.2.2 Self-accessibility manipulation. To enhance student self-concept, the idea of self-accessibility manipulation (Croizet, et al., 2001) is adopted. The basic assumption is to increase accessibility of other more positive self-knowledge or to make salient alternative aspects of one’s self-concept, similar to the protection psychological mechanism resorted to by the EFL learner in Mercer’s (2011) study. For instance, rather than emphasizing communicative ability only, teachers may at any time direct students’ attention to a facet of the content area of English, such as writing ability, to help those strong in English writing restore a positive self-image. Admittedly, it takes much more than the efforts of scholars and educators to alter the focus of Taiwan English education policy on learner communicative skill. However, this researcher strongly believes that it is at the micro level of teaching and in the daily contact with students that teachers may directly help students to see a more positive self in the world of English learning. In other words, teachers should give opportunities of self-affirmation to all students so that those under-perform in certain domains of English can maintain a generally good level of confidence in English based on their relative strengths in other domains.

4.2.3 School, teacher, parent partnership. The third intervention follows the skill improvement model (Calsyn & Kenny, 1977) and is designed to elevate academic achievement of low-performing children. While the purpose of the new English education policy in Taiwan is to create an equal learning environment for all children, extra attention should be paid to families in which parents do not have adequate resources or knowledge to devote to children’s English learning. For instance, several elementary schools in Taiwan have tried to involve parents in children’s English learning through promoting family English language and
literacy programs (Lee, 2010, p. 40). With similar programs, schools can provide support to families who need additional assistance in creating a home learning environment conducive to children’s learning and suitable for each unique family situation.

5. CONCLUSION

Behind any educational policies, there is a good purpose and prospect. However, policy enactors should be quick to react to unexpected negative outcomes resulting from policy implementation. For the new English education policy in Taiwan, the resulted status quo is a learning hierarchy defined by differential socioeconomic status and parental attitude towards English education. It is time that discussions and trainings are held for teachers who experience firsthand the dilemma of economically disadvantaged children. Very likely, the scenario in Taiwan can find its parallel in several other Asian countries where English teaching has become part of the elementary school curriculum at around the same time as in Taiwan, where globalization has been high on a nation’s agenda, and where education has been valued more than any other endeavors for a youngster. As a matter of fact, inequality in learning conditions is not a problem unique to the EFL learning environment in Taiwan. It is important that the current study fulfills its goal of providing some directions for all English teachers who aspire to give the disadvantaged students a chance of making it to the top at some point during their English study career.

5.1 Limitations And Implication for Future Research

One limitation of the study lies in the fact that the suggested intervention measures are not evidence-based. Arguably, it takes another independent, well-designed, and preferably longitudinal study to assess the effectiveness of the suggested interventions, which are nonetheless based on solid psychological theories. The new English education policy in Taiwan, although having created an English learning environment far from ideal, will likely continue in full force due to the irreversible globalization trend and the now deeply-rooted social value of prioritizing English education. The current study has identified a unique way of remedying the problem of a widening learning gap among EFL learners in Taiwan as well as providing empirical support for such an approach to the problem. A follow-up experimental study can be conducted to ensure both theoretical and practical significance of the proposed idea. The follow-up study shall tap into the wisdom and experiences of inservice teachers to solicit more practice-oriented input on ways of enhancing low-performing students’ confidence in English studies.

REFERENCES


