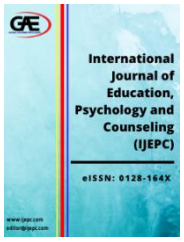
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SELF-EFFICACY AND SELF-WORTH IN AN EFL CONVERSATION CLASS: A CASE STUDY IN A JAPANESE PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

This paper is a follow-up to Abdul Hadi's (2026) study on scaffolding and its impact on motivations in a conversation-based class amongst low-proficiency students at a Japanese professional university (専門職大学). Previously, it was found that scaffolding activities helped increase self-confidence and motivation in engaging native speakers of English in conversation among low-proficiency English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The opportunity to monitor the development of this program arose again in the spring semester of 2026 and in this iteration of the study, this paper is interested in whether returning students have a higher sense of self-efficacy over similar tasks, whether students' perceptions of the helpfulness of the scaffolding lessons were associated with their self-efficacy during the language exchange program, and whether students with low self-efficacy would depend more on self-worth preservation tactics when compared with high self-efficacy students. It was suggested that while returning students showed a somewhat higher sense of self-efficacy when compared with new students, this difference was not statistically significant, and self-efficacy levels for both groups converged as the exchange program progressed. Students who reported scaffolding lessons as helpful generally also reported a higher sense of self-efficacy. Finally, regardless of sense of self-efficacy, students demonstrated engagement in self-worth preservation tactics. The results suggest that scaffolding perceived as helpful is linked to higher self-efficacy among professional university EFL students, and that instructors should prioritize such support even though self-worth protection tendencies may persist regardless.

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Introduction

This paper is a follow-up to Abdul Hadi's (2026) study on scaffolding and its impact on motivations in a conversation-based class amongst low-proficiency students at a Japanese professional university (専門職大学). Previously, it was found that scaffolding activities helped increase self-confidence and motivation in engaging native speakers of English in conversation among low-proficiency English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. However, it was unknown whether such activities would be useful to students' self-efficacy when they are of Intermediate English language proficiency and to returning rather than to new students of the program. Further, the previous study only tracked students' motivation and did not look into their self-worth preservation tactics. As the previous study was based on a continuous exchange program with an American higher educational institution, the opportunity to monitor the development of this program arose again in the spring semester of 2026. In this iteration of the study, this paper is interested in addressing the following research questions:

1. Would students who have engaged in conversation with a native speaker through a previous iteration of this course have a higher sense of self-efficacy to students who have never undergone the course before?
2. Would students' perceived helpfulness of the scaffolding lessons be associated with their self-efficacy during the language exchange program?
3. Would students with low self-efficacy depend more on self-worth preservation tactics?

Literature Review

There are five points will be discussed in the Literature Review: the background of Japan's professional universities (専門職大学) and its connection with English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the theories of self-efficacy and self-worth protection strategies, as well as the English Cafe programs in Japanese universities.

Japan's Professional Universities (専門職大学) and EFL)

Japan's Professional Universities, or the 専門職大学 (senmon-shoku daigaku), was established in 2017 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). A relatively newer category of higher educational institution, its programs combine both the theoretical aspects of a traditional university with the professional training of a

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vocational college. As of August 2026, there are only 16 private professional universities and 3 public professional universities across Japan. Classes are smaller than a university, with 40 students being the maximum allowed in a classroom. Upon graduation from a four-year program, the professional university's degree can be used to obtain a job, further their studies into graduate school, or join a study abroad program (MEXT, 2026). Because of the special nature of this institution, the types of students that join these programs are also quite different from those of a typical university and that of a vocational college.

For English as a Foreign language class, vocational college students appeared to be more extrinsically motivated, needing more direct relationships between the courses they learn and the professional world that they will enter upon graduation (Abdul Hadi, 2025, p.93). This is less so with traditional university students. Being only in existence for nine years, professional university students are even less studied in terms of their motivations and behaviors in class. Thus, it is hoped that this study could shed some light on the ways in which to approach this type of institution and its students in the future.

Self-Efficacy

The aspect of motivation of interest to this paper is the self-efficacy theory of motivation attributed to Bandura (1977). According to this theory, a person's inclination to take part in an activity would be based on their perceived past performances (pp. 194-195). Bandura argues that people

> "…fear and tend to avoid threatening situations they believe exceed their coping skills, whereas they get involved in activities and behave assuredly when they judge themselves capable of handling situations that would otherwise be intimidating" (1977, p. 194).

In the context of this paper, self-efficacy will be used to understand students' inclination to take part in an EFL classroom activity. For example, if a student had found success in a previous EFL classroom through tests or presentations, they would arguably have a higher sense of self-efficacy, which would motivate them to take part in further EFL activities even if it was difficult or challenging. This motivation is spurred based on their previous experiences where they had already experienced success in navigating EFL activities and thus gives the student more confidence in approaching future tasks.

For students who have not had success in previous EFL classrooms, all is not lost. If these students persist through activities that they find challenging, they may also build self-efficacy that would assist in motivating them through future endeavors (Bandura, 1977, p. 194). Students can obtain self-efficacy through four channels: performance accomplishments (usually through tests or completed assignments), vicarious experience (through seeing others complete a difficult task), through verbal persuasion (support from teachers, peers, or even themselves), and emotional arousal or "physiological indexes" (through the students' own personal feelings when approaching an activity where "persons who feel less anxious in a situation may interpret that to mean that they are more capable of succeeding") (Bandura, 1977, pp. 195-200, Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2021, p. 157).

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The first channel, that of performance accomplishments, is usually measured in terms of students' past experiences in the classroom. However, Kobayashi (2021) found that performance accomplishments outside the classroom were "[some] of the most engaging experiences students recounted" in her study (p.117). In this instance, students recounted their feelings of interacting with foreigners. Of note, students appeared to have greater motivation to improve their English-speaking skills regardless of whether the interaction had been successful or not. If the result was positive, students developed greater self-efficacy in terms of speaking in English. If the result was negative, students felt a greater desire to improve their speaking skills. Thus, this shows that real-world experiences could have a positive effect on motivation and self-efficacy in an EFL classroom.

One aspect of these channels is especially pertinent to this study: that of verbal persuasion through instructor's feedback. More specifically, the type of feedback given by teachers is important. Schunk and DiBenedetto stress that emphasizing students completed efforts ("You've been working hard") carries more weight in terms of raising students' feeling of self-efficacy than emphasizing intended outcomes ("You need to work hard") (2021, p. 164). This is based on the foundational work by Dweck and Reppucci (1973). Leis (2014) argues that emphasis on efforts rather than results allows students to focus on the activity rather than carrying out defensive pessimism through smaller goals so as to obtain repeated praise (p. 85). This type of language was taken into consideration when the researcher was carrying out classroom feedback prior to the language exchange weeks.

Another aspect that can't be overlooked is a student's physiological index. Abdul Hadi's (2026) study found that though students reported low self-efficacy as they had received lower grades in their English proficiency tests and they had been placed in the lower proficiency class[1], none approached the activity of talking to American exchange students negatively. Indeed, 60% of students were either "Excited" or "Nervous, but excited" at the prospect of having to meet and chat with the exchange students. At the end of the activity, almost half of the students reported a higher sense of English ability, showing that the positive feelings they had throughout the semester resulted in a sense of academic self-efficacy (Abdul Hadi, 2026, pp. 205-207).

Previous studies have shown that achievable short-term goals were better at increasing self-efficacy than long-term goals (Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2021, pp. 162-3). This makes the annual exchange program a particularly effective exercise; the students are aware that there is a short-term goal that needs to be achieved. They understand that by working on improving their English proficiency throughout the year, they would be able to communicate with the American exchange students when the time calls for it. This type of short-term goal is much more motivating than for students to learn English with the goal of "one day" using the language in a non-specific real-world context.

According to Schunk and DiBenedetto (2021) "[compared] with individuals who feel less efficacious, those with higher self-efficacy should choose to engage in activities, expend greater effort, persist longer and especially during difficulties, and achieve at higher levels" (p. 156). This is important when considering Japanese students' motivation towards a willingness to communicate in their EFL classes.

[1] Schunk and Pajares (2002) found that "[ability] groupings can lower self-efficacy among those relegated to lower groups" (p. 20).

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Self-Worth Protection Strategies

The second aspect of motivation under investigation involves self-worth protecting strategies. Covington (1984) explains that the "self-worth theory assumes that a central part of all classroom achievement is the need for students to protect their sense of worth or personal value" (p.4). The general idea is that students will generally take part in an activity that leads to success while avoiding those that would lead them to failure (Covington 1984, p. 8). Self-efficacy theory is related to self-worth protecting strategies as the latter depends on the person understanding their own capabilities. For example, Covington discusses the idea of "self-perceptions of ability" as being related whether directly or indirectly to a person's self-worth (1984, p.9). This "perception of ability" is essentially one's idea of self-efficacy, specifically related to the channel of performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1997, p.195). While this is so, there aren't many studies that look at both theories in conjunction with each other when analyzing behavior in a classroom. Most studies would not include the idea of "self-efficacy" and instead use terms such as "ability" or "confidence".

Leis (2014) is such a study that takes place in Japan, measuring students' confidence in language capability upon completion of a task. While this paper does not argue against Leis' methods or findings, it does raise the possibility that such a feeling of ability could also be interpreted as a form of self-efficacy. Leis' study on young learners of English in Japan found that experiencing failure led to a decrease in confidence in ability (i.e. low sense of self-efficacy) and students either cheated or withdrew themselves from learning. While Leis does not directly use the term "self-worth protection strategy", the author cites that the results were indicative of both Dweck (2006) and Covington's (1992, 1998) studies on self-worth. This relatedness is not surprising considering it is often grouped under the same motivation type of expectancy for success (Dörnyei, 1998, p. 119) and thus would be beneficial to be studied together.

When attempting to retain feelings of self-worth, especially in the context of EFL learning, studies focus on the following strategies: defensive pessimism and self-handicapping (Martin et al., 2003, Valle et al., 2005, Leis, 2022). Defensive pessimism has been described as where "subjects maintain low task success expectations, despite past positive experiences" (Valle et al. 2005, 100). When learners keep their expectations for success low, they experience more motivation to succeed. Self-handicapping, on the other hand, is where subjects would self-sabotage so as to "withdraw" themselves from "potential failure outcomes" (Valle et al., 2005, p.100). By purposefully self-handicapping, students can place blame away from themselves, thus protecting their self-worth (Martin et al., 2003, p.618). For example, by avoiding a task and receiving a failing grade, the failure does not stem from the student's inability, but through inaction. This inaction does not prove or disprove the students' ability, thus protecting them from self-worth damage.

The English Café

One aspect of the English language classroom in Japan that has often seen this form of self-handicapping is speaking activities. Many Japan-based EFL research has looked into addressing the "silence" that pervades the class. For this study, it is useful to understand student motivations to combat silence and encourage conversation with exchange students. In terms of English-speaking skills, Kobayashi's (2021) cohort of students desired the following from communicating in English: to be able to speak about everyday life, to convey their ideas

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effectively, to speak spontaneously, to develop better lexical fluency, to improve their pronunciation, and also to be able to understand what is being spoken to them clearly (p.118). These myriads of desires show that students' have different goals when it comes to developing their speaking skills - none of which included being more grammatically correct. It would be pertinent that this capability to use English in a natural way, as both speaker and listener in a conversation, needs to be addressed in an English conversation class. This idea of a "natural" way of learning English is reminiscent of Krashen's philosophy of a more "meaningful" manner for students to acquire a second language (Long, 1983, p.93).

One manner in which Japanese higher institutions provide this natural approach to acquiring English as a Foreign Language is through extracurricular activities called the "English Cafe". In this setting, a time and day is set for regular meetings between students and, usually, a native English speaker to converse on casual topics of conversation. In Johnson and Hiratsuka's (2018) study, they found that students generally improved their capability to hold a discussion with repeated participation in the program and that the students reported being satisfied with the "fun activities" (pp.40-41). However, one concern was that not all interested students could attend because of the extracurricular nature of the program; in Japan, many students have part-time jobs while studying and these programs might also coincide with other classes they are enrolled in (pp.41-42). Thus, for the sake of equal opportunity for the student, it may be better if this type of "English Cafe" was made to be an actual course that the students could elect to take part in and thus be fitted into their university schedule.

As an elective course, Nishimura et al.'s (2021) study looked into an English Cafe held in a nursing school where students could practice their English-speaking skills so that they could better deal with non-Japanese-speaking patients. The element of interest in this study pertains to the students' discovery that the goal of these speaking tasks was to communicate a message; even with limited English, the students realized through repeated sessions that they could communicate friendliness and kindness through facial expressions and body language alongside the simple English phrases they knew (pp. 29-30). Many students forget that the goal of learning EFL is to communicate with others and thus through this type of program, they could practice real-world communication which includes using other cues alongside their language skills.

Finally, the purpose of this paper is to look into the interactions between EFL students and native English speakers in an exchange program. Tsuneyoshi's (2005) paper was useful in understanding the challenges of holding such an activity. In particular, the study pointed out the difference between Western and Japanese expectations for the outcome of a university classroom (pp. 71-72, p.79); for example, in an American classroom, students expect to be able to share ideas with their classmates while in Japan, this is not necessarily the case. There is also the reality of the mismatch between exchange students' English capabilities and the EFL students' proficiency levels, as well as the exchange students' Japanese (or lack thereof) and the EFL students' Japanese capabilities (pp.80-81). While there are more international exchange students in Japan in 2026 than during the time of Tsuneyoshi's (2005) paper, these concerns are worth considering when preparing for structured interactions between the professional university students and the exchange students.

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Methodology

This study employed four questionnaires with a forced-choice Likert scale developed for this research as well as classroom observations and an interview across 15 weeks of classes to ascertain students' self-efficacy and self-worth preservation tactics. Participants were selected using purpose-style sampling as they were enrolled in the course that is being investigated in this study. There was a total of 31 students, 24 from Japan, and 7 international students (from Myanmar, China, Mongolia, and Nepal). Because attendance varied throughout the semester, not all students completed every questionnaire. Analyses were therefore conducted using all available responses for each statistical test (pairwise deletion), meaning that students who were absent or had incomplete responses for a particular analysis were excluded only from that analysis. Consequently, the sample size varies slightly across the reported statistical tests. Responses from the surveys were entered into Microsoft Excel before being analyzed using Jamovi while responses from the classroom observations were noted by the researcher after each class, and the interview responses were noted by the researcher and then analyzed thematically.

In the first class, students were given a pre-lessons survey. This questionnaire logged demographic information which included their student ID, gender, age, and nationality. This questionnaire also ascertained which students had taken the course previously and which students were new. For returning students, they were asked about their perceived performance with the previous course. Students were then asked whether they had ever spoken to a native English speaker before. Those who had were asked to detail their topics and venue of conversation, as well as how they felt during those interactions. Questions 3 to 11 took the form of a forced-choice Likert scale which asked students about their confidence in the four skills, whether they preferred to answer only when they were correct, their anxieties over making mistakes, their interests in the future conversation sessions with American students, and their motivations at improving their English.

After 5 weeks of content preparation, one lecture conducted purely in English, and one conversation session with American exchange students, the second survey was given and collected from the students on week seven. The students provided their student ID and answered nine questions to determine their impressions on their performances. All nine questions were again in the form of a forced-choice Likert scale. The survey also asked students to rate the helpfulness of their preparatory classes, and they also were asked to rate their excitement over three more conversation sessions with the exchange students. Finally, they were asked to rate their motivation to continue to learn English.

On week 10, after the completion of all four of the conversation classes, a third survey was carried out. All questions were the same as the previous survey, with one question on the students' excitement over future conversations being removed.

In the final five weeks of classes, students completed more textbook-based exercises that had them practicing all four skills again (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) with only their classmates. The final survey was done on week 15, the final class of the semester. These questions were all similar in a force-choice Likert scale which included questions from the pre-lessons survey as well as the conversation sessions survey. This final survey allowed students to rate their language capabilities over the four skills as well as their motivations and interests

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for learning English. The instructor also held a final interview with the students to ask about the course contents and their reactions to the activities throughout the semester.

Results

Of the 31 students enrolled in the course, 29 completed the pre-course questionnaire. Responses were entered into Microsoft Excel before being analyzed using Jamovi. As mentioned earlier, because questionnaire completion depended on student attendance throughout the 15-week semester, the number of participants differed across analyses. Students who were absent during a particular survey, or who did not complete all items required for a given analysis, were excluded only from that specific analysis. Consequently, sample sizes vary throughout the Results section and are reported for each statistical test where appropriate.

Pre-Course Survey

The following results were collected in the first class of Week 1, prior to teaching, lectures, and the exchange program.

Descriptive Statistics

Students entered the course with relatively low levels of English self-efficacy. Confidence was lowest for writing (M = 1.72), followed by speaking (M = 2.00), while reading (M = 2.28) and listening (M = 2.38) were rated slightly higher. Overall, these findings suggest that students perceived productive language skills as more challenging than receptive skills.

Differences Between Returning and New Students (RQ1)

An independent sample test compared the self-efficacy of returning students with those taking the course for the first time. Returning students reported higher self-efficacy (M = 2.46, SD = 0.59) than new students (M = 1.98, SD = 0.60). Although this difference did not reach statistical significance, t (27) = 1.89, p = .070, the effect size was large (Cohen's d = 0.82), suggesting a practically meaningful difference that may not have reached significance because of the relatively small sample.

Self-Worth Protection and Group Differences

Independent samples t-tests found no significant differences between returning and new students in overall self-worth protection, t (27) = -0.80, p = .430, worry, t (27) = -1.21, p = .236, or avoidance, t (27) = -0.22, p = .830. These findings suggest that previous experience in the course did not substantially reduce students' tendency to engage in self-worth protection behaviors.

Relationships Between Self-Efficacy and Self-Worth Protection (RQ3)

Pearson correlations indicated a moderate negative relationship between self-efficacy and worry, r (27) = −.36, p = .054, although this relationship was not statistically significant. No significant relationship was observed between self-efficacy and avoidance, r (27) = .20, p = .311. In contrast, strong positive relationships were found between self-worth protection and both avoidance, r (27) = .88, p < .001, and worry, r (27) = .87, p < .001. Avoidance and worry were also moderately positively correlated, r (27) = .53, p = .003. These findings indicate that worry and avoidance were strongly associated with self-worth protection at baseline.

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Surveys During the Exchange Program

The following results were collected after students had their first exchange session on Week 7 and after their last exchange session on Week 9.

Changes in Self-Efficacy Across the Semester

Descriptive statistics indicated that students' self-efficacy increased following the language exchange program and remained elevated throughout the semester. Mean self-efficacy scores increased from the pre-course survey (M = 2.09, SD = 0.61, *n* = 30) to Exchange 1 (M = 2.63, SD = 0.86, *n* = 28), remained stable at Exchange 2 (M = 2.65, SD = 0.82, *n* = 27), and were maintained at the end of the semester (M = 2.59, SD = 0.77, *n* = 28).

A repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted using the 21 students who provided complete data across all four time points: F (3, 60) = 6.17, p = .001, ηp^2 = .236. Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was met, W = 0.580, p = .070. Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons showed that self-efficacy was significantly higher after the first language exchange than at baseline, *t* (20) = −3.04, p = .039. Self-efficacy also remained significantly higher than baseline after the second language exchange, *t* (20) = −3.15, p = .030, and at the end of the semester, *t* (20) = −3.00, p = .042. No significant differences were observed between Exchange 1 and Exchange 2, Exchange 1 and the final survey, or Exchange 2 and the final survey (all Bonferroni-adjusted p = 1.000), indicating that the initial improvement in self-efficacy was sustained throughout the semester.

Changes in Self-Worth Protection Across the Semester

Mean self-worth protection scores decreased during the language exchange sessions before returning to approximately their initial level by the end of the semester (Pre: M = 2.66, SD = 0.58, *n* = 29; Exchange 1: M = 2.39, SD = 0.90, *n* = 28; Exchange 2: M = 2.35, SD = 0.78, *n* = 27; Final: M = 2.69, SD = 0.52, *n* = 27).

Repeated measures ANOVA was conducted using the 20 students who provided complete data across all four time points: these changes were not statistically significant, *F* (3, 57) = 2.03, *p* = .121, ηp^2 = .096. Although students reported greater confidence in their English abilities as the semester progressed, their tendency to engage in self-worth protection behaviors remained relatively stable.

Perceived Scaffolding and Self-Efficacy (RQ2)

Students consistently rated the preparatory lessons positively. Mean ratings of scaffolding were high following both Exchange 1 (M = 3.17, SD = 0.78) and Exchange 2 (M = 3.22, SD = 0.60). A paired-samples *t*-test found no significant difference between these ratings, *t* (22) = -0.327, *p* = .747, Cohen's *d* = -0.07, suggesting that students' perceptions of the preparation lessons remained consistently positive across both language exchange sessions.

To determine whether students with lower initial self-efficacy perceived greater benefit from the preparation lessons, a Pearson correlation was conducted between pre-course self-efficacy and perceived scaffolding following the first exchange. The analysis revealed a weak positive but non-significant relationship, *r* (24) = .216, *p* = .290, indicating that students' initial self-efficacy was not associated with how helpful they perceived the scaffolding to be.

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In contrast, perceived scaffolding was significantly associated with self-efficacy following both language exchange sessions. Positive correlations were found between scaffolding and self-efficacy after Exchange 1, r (25) = .618, p < .001, and after Exchange 2, r (24) = .568, p = .002.

To further examine whether scaffolding was associated with improvements in confidence, self-efficacy change scores were calculated by subtracting pre-course self-efficacy from post-exchange self-efficacy. Perceived scaffolding was positively correlated with gains in self-efficacy following both Exchange 1, r (24) = .529, p = .005, and Exchange 2, r (23) = .432, p = .031. These findings suggest that students who perceived the preparation lessons as more helpful tended to report greater improvements in self-efficacy across the language exchange program.

End-of-Semester Findings

A final survey was given on the final day of the course on Week 15, after students had completed an interview with the researcher.

Students' perceived ability to keep up with the course was positively associated with final self-efficacy, r (25) = .610, p < .001, indicating that students who felt they had successfully kept up with the course also reported greater confidence in their English abilities. No significant relationship was observed between perceived course progress and self-worth protection, r (25) = .172, p = .390.

Overall, the findings indicate that participation in the language exchange program was associated with sustained improvements in students' English self-efficacy. Although self-worth protection remained relatively stable throughout the semester, students consistently evaluated the scaffolding activities positively, and those who perceived greater benefit from the preparation lessons tended to report both higher self-efficacy and greater gains in self-efficacy across the course.

Discussion

From the survey results, one of the most prominent findings is that students’ self-efficacy rose considerably upon interaction with the American exchange students and that the level of self-efficacy was maintained throughout the semester, even once the exchange program was over. This result is replicated through supplementary materials such as classroom observations as well as the final interviews with the students. For example, prior to speaking with the exchange students, many students used AI tools to complete opinion-based answers. However, for the final presentation task, many students relied on their own knowledge to complete their speech. This meant that when they spoke, they were able to use language that was of their own level and was more understandable to their fellow classmates. It could tentatively be suggested that students’ higher self-efficacy obtained through the exchange program motivated them to attempt writing their speeches on their own, rather than relying on an AI application.

One aspect that should be mentioned is that not all students were talkative during the exchanges with the American students. Despite this, even the quieter students appeared to increase their sense of self-efficacy by the end of the program. From this finding, it appears that seeing their peers' successful interactions was sufficient in raising their self-efficacy. This is reminiscent of

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Bandura's theory of "vicarious experience" being a way for students to obtain self-efficacy; they don't need to experience a successful interaction themselves; it was enough to see that others could complete the task (Bandura, 1977, pp. 197-198). This is related to Kobayashi's (2021) EFL study where students' motivation to learn English rose even when faced with an unsuccessful learning experience; this supposed "failure" caused the students to desire to improve their capabilities. The final interviews reflected this sentiment; approximately 87% of the students expressed their enjoyment of their experience speaking with the exchange students, and approximately 80% of students mentioned that the experience left them wanting to improve their English because they wanted to speak more.

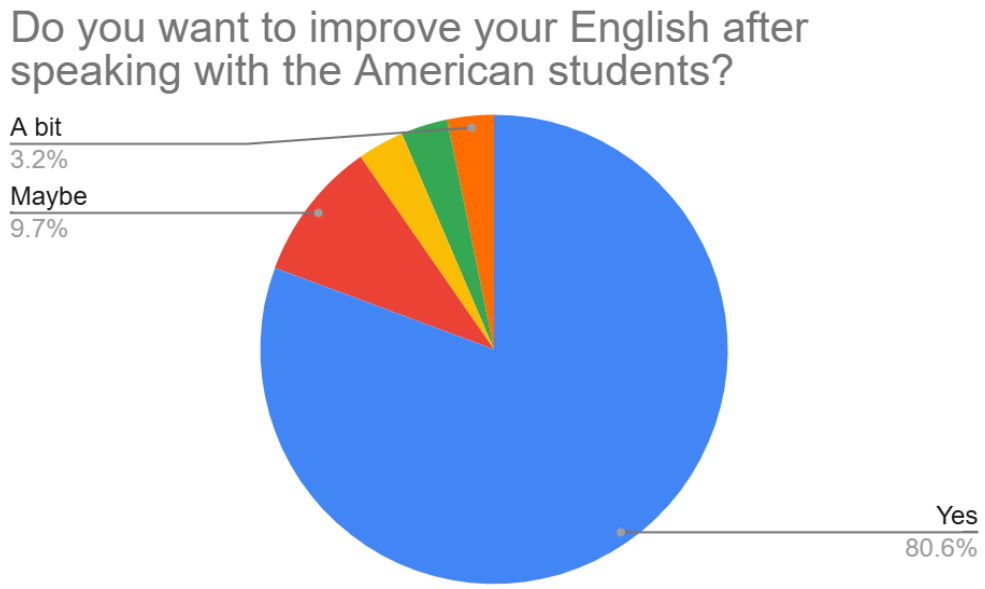


Figure 1: Final Interview Results

In this sort of situation where students must complete a task as part of their course, it is important that there is proper scaffolding provided by the instructor. From the results described earlier, it is seen that the scaffolding provided was seen overwhelmingly positively by the students. This is reflected in the observation notes taken during the exchange sessions: while students with higher proficiency tended not to use their notes when interacting with the exchange students, there were moments where there was a lull in conversation and the notes helped them continue their interactions. For the lower-proficiency students, it was even more useful that they had their notes to sustain the conversation with the American students; in this way, they always had questions to ask and also, they were able to have answers when they needed them. Scaffolding thus benefits both higher as well as lower proficiency students in the same class and task.

Finally, an interesting result was that regardless of whether students were new or returning, whether they had a higher sense of self-efficacy or lower, they all engaged in some form of self-worth protecting behavior. It appears that this tendency seems to drop when interacting with the exchange students but then returns to normal once the session is over. This might mean that students display self-worth protecting strategies in usual classroom settings where they are possibly graded according to traditional standards. This may be related to defensive pessimism, where despite the positive results of their conversations, students still worry about their grades and thus are cautious about how they are perceived by the teacher (Valle et al. 2005, 100). In

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observation notes, students also seem to self-handicap by being absent in different types of situations, for example, in lectures and some of the exchange sessions; perhaps they took themselves out of the situation in order to protect feelings of self-worth (Martin et al., 2003, p.618). This result may be somewhat comforting to other EFL instructors as there might be aspects of the learning that won't be changed despite all the efforts put into it. In this study, in particular, despite a higher sense of self-efficacy and scaffolding provided to engage with the exchange students, worry persisted. Perhaps the most important lesson is that instructors should prepare and support their students, and understand that despite their best efforts, students may continue to worry anyway. However, this is not necessarily negative as students' self-worth protection strategies don't appear to impede their motivation to improve their English language skills.

Conclusion

This is a small case study of 31 students and so the results are not meant to be generalized to the wider population. However, it does provide a window into helping EFL instructors manage expectations when facilitating an exchange program with an intermediate class of professional university students. In the future, it would be useful to see if there is a difference in self-efficacy and self-worth between international students and local students, or between male and female students. This study could also be widened to include a larger pool of respondents from different countries to analyze whether such an exchange program would be received similarly or otherwise. At the moment, this "natural" method of learning English as a foreign language appears to provide students not only with an opportunity to practice their language skills, but also to develop general communicative confidence.

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Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) "The author declares that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used during the preparation of this manuscript. The following tools were used: ChatGPT, Gemini, and ClaudeAI. The tool(s) were used for language editing, statistical data analysis, and revisions. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the manuscript."

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