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Exploring Motivation and Engagement: Sociocultural Influences on Saudi Female EFL Learners^(*)

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Abstract

The major theoretical works of Albert Bandura and Lev Vygotsky apply to this quantitative study on how female English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners enrolled at a public university in Saudi Arabia respond to the sociocultural orientations influencing motivation and engagement in foreign language learning. By evaluating the peer-reviewed academic literature and accounting for evidence gaps in this research area, the study seeks to address how a small group comprised of the target population feels motivated and engaged with the EFL instructional content. The main results revealed that female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia prefer learning a second language in collaborative environments with peers. While these results provide empirical evidence that young women in Saudi Arabia have more opportunities to become proficient in L2 English and participate in the global economy, these results suggest that in Saudi Arabia, there are increasing opportunities for young learners to achieve proficiency in L2 English and engage in the global economy. Furthermore, the role of technological innovation in enhancing learner autonomy is noteworthy. Additionally, the prevailing sociocultural norms in Saudi Arabia influence the skill sets acquired by EFL learners. Future studies on how female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia respond to constructive emotional and intellectual challenges will help researchers close evidence gaps. The future research implications of this study are such that ongoing progress is possible despite the limitations.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, female learners, sociocultural orientations, motivational strategies, engagement, Saudi Arabia.



Introduction

Foreign language learning is essential for young adults entering higher education environments to compete in the global economy after receiving a degree. As students accumulate oral, writing, reading, and communication skills, their instructors are responsible for motivating students to engage with culturally relevant content. However, only a small number of peer-reviewed studies addressed the roles played by sociocultural factors on how female English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students negotiate with the sociocultural factors impacting motivation and engagement levels (Alghamdi et al., 2023; Elmahidi et al., 2023; Mustafa & Alghamdi, 2020). Applying the seminal works of Albert Bandura (1986) and Lev Vygotsky (1978), the study presented here offers a quantitative examination of how 20 students representing the target population feel motivated and engaged with the instructional content. External factors like economic globalization receive close attention in this study. The role of technological innovation is also meaningful when motivation and engagement depend on which platforms instructors use to support L2 English proficiency.

Literature Review

The research applying Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory shows that female learners in Saudi Arabia acquire L2 English differently when the motivational and engagement strategies favor self-efficacy cultivation. Whereas SCT posits that learning fulfills different purposes to achieve long-term goals, sociocultural theory addresses how normative structures and beliefs inform problem-solving abilities (Ishaq et al., 2022; Sun & Zhang, 2021; Tuncel, 2015). Bandura's theory further underscores how L2 English acquisition in female learners depends on individual motivation to overcome challenges. For instance, some EFL learners in Saudi Arabia might experience anxiety, stemming from a perception of differential opportunities available for cultivating self-efficacy in reading, oral, and written skills (Al-Mubireek, 2022; Arta, 2018; Bensalem, 2021; Shoaib, 2023). Female EFL learners also may have internalized the stigma associated with having a noticeable accent and maintaining cultural commitments, as researchers have suggested (Birney et al., 2020). However, the market demands placed on the subjects establish how sociocultural factors leave variable impacts on L2 acquisition



outcomes (Doan & Hamid, 2021). Considering how Saudi Arabia competes intensely across globalized industries, its economic status presents lasting impacts on how female EFL learners feel engaged and motivated to achieve long-term success.

Vygotsky's theory applies to this research context by suggesting that L2 English acquisition necessitates closer attention to diversity with cultures as shaping how female EFL learners feel motivated and engaged. Accordingly, language learning takes place cooperatively in social contexts when instructors deliver content not guided by rote memorization (Zhao et al., 2022). Prevailing cultural opinions and attitudes toward L2 acquisition significantly influence how EFL learners assess their readiness to improve their English proficiency. However, providing learners with the autonomy to learn English also entails understanding and addressing the assumptions instructors may have about different learner groups (Boudouaia et al., 2022; Kuo & Lai, 2006). Instructors may have certain expectations regarding the learning environments for language acquisition, which could inadvertently align with broader cultural perceptions about language learning and sociocultural norms. This perspective is also evident in research on L2 English acquisition, where biases can influence the learning process.

Interestingly, research has shown that when behavioral, personal, and environmental factors are combined, they contribute to the creation of diverse learning environments (Kuo & Lai, 2006; Kutuk, 2023; Yasin et al., 2022). Understanding these stereotypes is crucial for EFL learners in Saudi Arabia as they navigate varied educational settings. These learning contexts are often shaped by cultural norms and institutional policies. (Abdel-Al Ibrahim, 2023). These structures facilitate the culturally appropriate conditions of L2 English acquisition when instructors design curricula exclusively to assume that learners solve problems differently (Al-Ahmadi & King, 2023; Almusharraf, 2021; Bin Obaid, 2023; Mustafa & Alghamdi, 2020; Yaghoubi & Farrokh, 2022). Despite the Saudi government's commitment to competitiveness, the opportunities for acquiring L2 English proficiency within the Kingdom are influenced by the fulfillment of market trends. Women in Saudi Arabia comprise almost two-thirds of students enrolled in English-language institutions (Mustafa & Alghamdi, 2020). Nevertheless, the motivation to become bilingual is often influenced by



broader governmental policies and the approach instructors take toward acknowledging diversity in learning environments.

Institutional constraints highlight the variations in L2 proficiency acquisition among EFL learners in different types of learning environments, whether publicly funded or privately operated, confirming previous research hypotheses. Interestingly, aspects such as motivation and engagement appear to align with instructors' perceptions of resilience towards critique of their teaching methodologies. (Al Abiky, 2020; Pourbahram & Sadeghi, 2020). Instructors may observe variations in learner motivation for vocabulary acquisition, potentially influenced by prevailing cultural expectations. (Abdel-Al Ibrahim, 2023; Lee, 2020). Consequently, female EFL learners report higher anxiety levels when instructors relate to them as lacking fully developed self-efficacy perceptions (Alsaleem, 2020; Bensalem, 2021).

Instructors may assume that female learners also lack strong emotional regulation skills to cope with learning a second language and succeeding in a globalized economy (Deng et al., 2022; Doan & Hamid, 2021). Relying on negative stereotypes can notably diminish confidence in EFL learners who invest considerable cognitive effort in learning new subjects, especially when they encounter mixed messages about their economic contributions. (Kutuk, 2023; Shoaib, 2023). While individual differences may influence how EFL learners improve their proficiency levels, they also inspire researchers to develop strategies aimed at enhancing perceptions of self-efficacy.

Meanwhile, the research literature illustrates how multiple causal factors shape individual learning styles and preferences for all EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. Perceptual learning styles are preferable when learners retain linguistic information to organize the English language for its grammar, syntax, and mechanics (Al-Seghayer, 2021). However, the instructional content in EFL learning environments does not always consider perceptual differences when pedagogical preferences motivate or fail to motivate L2 acquisition (Shoeib, 2022). Instructors might reasonably expect that learners in EFL courses take responsibility for fully understanding English grammar and vocabulary. However, there is a risk of these instructors relying on unconstructive stereotypes when assessing how learners meet curricular



objectives. (Abdel-Al Ibrahim, 2023; Almesaar, 2022). Learning environments in Saudi Arabia have progressively evolved towards greater integration (Kamaeva et al., 2022). Similarly, educational institutions throughout the Kingdom have adopted hybrid and online learning to accommodate diverse learning needs (Almusharraf & Engemann, 2020; Alsowat, 2021). Considering that technological innovation theoretically enables more EFL learners to enhance their proficiency levels, its role in the global economy invites questions about the strategies that most effectively boost motivation and engagement.

The research literature reviewed here contains broad and specific implications for conducting future studies on how female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia feel motivated and engaged to increase L2 proficiency. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory remain essential frameworks, encouraging researchers to examine L2 acquisition from various perspectives. Concurrently, prior studies offer the opportunity to investigate how EFL learners in Saudi Arabia perceive the impact of different educational policies and cultural practices. (Abdel-Al Ibrahim, 2023; Pourbahram & Sadeghi, 2020). Since the research also stresses that female EFL learners in L1 Arabic-speaking countries express more anxiety than men, the study conducted here is necessary to test the working hypotheses (Bensalem, 2021). Furthermore, the research findings confirm that factors like cultural awareness by instructors facilitate motivation and engagement in members of the target population (Kamaeva et al., 2022; Yeh & Heng, 2022; Zandi & Hamad, 2022). This factor has significant implications for enhancing perceptions of self-efficacy, and its relevance to empirical data depends on what linguists identify as optimal for EFL learners in less advantaged social positions.

Method

The study followed a quantitative methodology in which a group of 20 undergraduate female EFL learners at one public university located in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia responded to one Likert-type survey questionnaire consisting of 20 items and a Likert-type interview questionnaire consisting of 29 items. The survey data was obtained from the participants, whereas the interview data was obtained a month later. Each participant was at least 18 years of age while completing the survey and interview questionnaires and received a letter of informed consent that provided explicit details of this study.



Specifically, the participants ranged mostly from 22 to 24 years old with one participant who was more than 25 years old. The participants were enrolled in two different instructional settings and were allowed to enroll in the prerequisite courses until they reached the maximum capacity. Each participant was enrolled in a course focusing on topics like sociocultural orientations, motivational strategies, and learner engagement in EFL instructional environments. Subsequently, the chair of the English Language Department at the study site randomly assigned the participants into two groups. Both sets of participants received the questionnaires via Google Forms. While the initial survey aimed to help the researcher identify which factors contributed to increased motivation and engagement in female EFL Saudi learners, the follow-up interview questionnaire provided a richer context for analyzing how the participants felt about their L2 acquisition capabilities throughout their university enrollment. Accordingly, the questionnaires showed that the participants comprising a specific population expressed unique preferences and attitudes regarding the influence of sociocultural factors in EFL contexts.

Each participant responded to prompts about their L2 acquisition preferences. For example, the participants responded to prompts about individual preferences for collaborating with peers. Following Arta (2018), such preferences inform how EFL learners improve conversational skills while participating in immersive environments. Similarly, the participants responded to prompts concerning how the perceptions and beliefs of classmates left positive impacts on each participant. Other prompts concerned how motivated each participant felt to increase their English proficiency levels and enhance their professional development skills.

Given that sociocultural factors like family environments leave variable impacts on learner motivation, their influence on self-efficacy perceptions remains context-dependent (Ishaq et al., 2022; Kutuk, 2023). By extension, the prompts focusing on sociocultural orientations were aimed primarily at addressing how each participant felt respected by instructors from different backgrounds. EFL students who feel respected by their instructors report improvements in L2 acquisition outcomes and proficiency levels (Almusharraf, 2021; Al-Seghayer, 2021). Female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia who feel respected by their instructors also cultivate enough self-efficacy to resolve power differentials common in hierarchical instructional



environments (Daraghmeh et al., 2021; Pourbahram & Sadeghi, 2020). Despite how not all learning environments are reciprocal, those that produce students and instructors whose capacities to resolve cross-cultural differences reflect positively on motivation and engagement. As explained in the results, the quantitative issues warrant further exploration in future studies addressing the relationship between sociocultural orientations, motivational strategies, and engagement in EFL learners from a specific population. The key insights derived from the survey and interview results further demonstrate how a small sample of female EFL learners felt motivated to engage with the instructional content and collaborate with others increasing their L2 proficiency.

Results

The survey and interview results generally indicated that female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia prefer learning English as a foreign language in collaborative environments with peers. The median age of female EFL learners surveyed was 23.5. Respondents used a Likert Scale system to agree or disagree with 29 statements related to learning the English language and collaborating with peers and classmates about their experience. Ranking their answers with a classification of 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) results of the survey are as follows with a sampling of survey questions:

On a scale from 1-5, how strongly do you feel that your classmates believe in the value of learning the English language?

On average, respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their classmates valued learning the English language. 14 out of 20 respondents ranked their numbers in the agreement categories within the Likert Scale. On a scale from 1-5, how comfortable do you feel discussing your English language learning experience with your classmates? The modal result from this statement was that overall, respondents felt they were reasonably comfortable (4) discussing their English language journey with their classmates.

On a scale from 1-5, how much do you feel that your classmates' attitudes towards English language learning have affected your own motivation to learn?

The average answer to this question was that the respondents strongly agreed that their classmates' attitudes affected their motivation to learn the



English language. The median answer to this question was neutral (3) indicating that most of the female EFL learners did not let their classmates' attitudes affect their progress in learning the English language.

On a scale of 1-5, how much do you feel that your classmates' beliefs and attitudes towards English language learning are similar to your own?

The respondents indicated in terms of a modal answer that they were neutral (3) on how their classmates were similar to their own. While (3) was the average answer there were three respondents who believed that their classmates' beliefs and attitudes were not at all similar to their own.

On a scale of 1-5, how accepting are your classmates' beliefs and attitudes towards EFL learning and are they hindering your own progress in the language?

The most popular answer was (2). Respondents disagreed that their classmates' beliefs or attitudes were hindering their progress in learning the English language.

On a scale of 1-5, how much do you feel that your classmates' beliefs and attitudes towards English language learning are not important to your own learning experience?

Respondents indicated that they were neutral (3) regarding how important their classmates' beliefs and attitudes affected their own English language learning experience. For this question, neutral (3) was the mode of the dataset, however, responses indicated that respondents felt both strongly disagreeable and agreeable with their perceptions of how others affect their learning progress.

How strongly do you agree or disagree that your cultural background is respected and acknowledged by your English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher?

Out of the 20 EFL students surveyed, 8 strongly agreed, 5 agreed, 4 were neutral, 1 disagreed and 2 strongly disagreed.

How often do you feel that your EFL teacher understands and addresses your cultural needs and concerns in the classroom?

Respondents indicated on average that they often felt that the EFL teacher addressed their cultural needs in the classroom. Respondents were



also asked about the inclusion of cultural diversity in classroom activities and their confidence in expressing their own cultural identity within the classroom environment and the median answers were somewhat confident for each data point, indicating that respondents felt comfortable with their culture being included as well as being able to express their personal culture identity. However, median responses to related questions regarding teachers and their familiarity with cultural beliefs indicated that the female EFL students disagreed that the teachers were familiar enough with personal beliefs and customs in that they integrated them fully into the classroom environment.

Further examination of questions regarding sense of belonging, EFL teachers' understanding of personal cultural beliefs, and feelings of connection?

As the survey moves on and questions related to the students' sense of belonging among their classmates and the EFL teacher's understanding of the students' personal thoughts and beliefs indicate that the students do not agree with how well they fit in with their peers or how well the teachers incorporate personal belief systems and thoughts into interactive and culturally diverse learning that encourages students about the English language. According to the survey, an overwhelming 10% of students do not feel connected to their classmates. Since there were only 20 students surveyed, this is half of the data set, indicating that there are cultural issues and personality conflicts that could have negative impacts on individual progress in English language learning. However, when students were specifically asked about how encouraged they felt about learning the English language, the median response was that they were mostly confident in their engagement activities in the classroom environment which motivated them to want to learn the English language despite the barriers indicated above.

On average, 75% of the students surveyed felt that their participation in an online environment as well as face-to-face learning helped encourage and keep them engaged in learning the English language. Respondents indicated that on average, practice was key to their personal engagement and helped them progress on their journey of learning the English language. However, at least 10 students indicated that they did not agree that practice helped



their English learning skills indicating some kind of negative impact on the learning environment for nearly half of the students. Interestingly, the results indicated that 35 percent of the participants strongly believed that the attitudes about EFL learning environments have positive impacts on motivation and engagement. Despite how most of the participants felt neutral about the beliefs and attitudes held by classmates, 25 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed about the positive effects of EFL acquisition opinions. The results described here present conflicting notions of how female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia perceive their abilities to continuously develop oral, writing, and reading skills while negotiating with divergent sociocultural orientations.

Concerning motivation, the results indicated that 80 percent of the participants felt incentivized by visual cues to resolve cultural differences and revise their purpose for learning L2 English. While such a high percentage of the participants reported strong motivations to increase their L2 English proficiency, another 75 percent reported that interacting with L2 English speakers was a distinct motivator. These results coincided with the notion that cross-cultural differences were valuable drivers of motivation for each participant. Specifically, 90 percent of the participants reported that learning about new cultures motivated them to continuously build L2 proficiency skills. Another 80 percent of the participants reported that learning about cross-cultural differences occurring in predominantly English-speaking countries motivated them to enhance self-efficacy perceptions and develop the corresponding L2 acquisition skills.

Next, the results indicated that 65 percent of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the prompt on English language acquisition for educational/vocational purposes. The results further established that a median percentage (55%) of the participants either strongly agreed or agreed that English language acquisition would increase their ability to gain familial or social recognition. As further discussed, the results are congruent with those produced in earlier studies (Birney et al., 2020). These empirical observations also bode well with reports touting that English is now a universal business language. Based on that, the results indicated that 60 percent of the participants believed L2 English acquisition aided their development of essential communication skills in an increasingly globalized



society. Considering how female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia and their instructors tend to have different sociocultural origins, they also perceive respect differently when collaborating with others in lecture-based or seminar environments.

Discussion

Conducting future research on the impacts of sociocultural orientations on motivation and engagement in female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia will require a larger sample size to make the quantitative results more generalizable. For instance, researchers might consider how female EFL learners who feel marginalized for different reasons have low self-efficacy levels and struggle to increase proficiency levels. young adults entering higher education institutions may encounter challenges when economic expectations necessitate proficiency in L2 English to attain a desirable standard of living. (Doan & Hamid, 2021; Lee, 2020). Similarly, researchers have numerous opportunities to address how the learning expectations communicated by EFL instructors conflict sharply with sociocultural norms (Othman & Aljuhaish, 2021; Sung & Zhang, 2021). While instructors strive to assist all learners in improving their proficiency levels, there may be unintended contributions to reinforcing existing educational norms. Learners in L1 Arabic countries have reported gradual increases in autonomy in acquiring L2 English skills. (Boudouaia et al., 2022). However, broader cultural norms may impact the participation of many EFL learners in academic discussions. The concerns raised here further the need to conduct more detailed investigations of the correlations between variables. The results indicated that 55 percent of the participants either strongly considered or generally considered the topics discussed in EFL learning environments as relevant. Despite how most of the participants felt that instructors understood and respected their beliefs, 25 percent disagreed while the other five percent strongly disagreed about the perceived relevance of the instructional content delivered in EFL learning environments. This presents a challenge moving forward as more Saudi women enter higher learning environments.

Future studies on how female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia respond to emotional and intellectual challenges could lead researchers to make discoveries about the impacts of sociocultural orientations on motivation and engagement. As the results indicated an overwhelmingly positive



response to these challenges, they confirmed what researchers previously noted about the anxiety initially felt upon entering unfamiliar learning environments (Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al., 2023; Almusharraf, 2021; Alsaleem, 2020). Concurrently, research on how positive responses to emotional and intellectual challenges improve metacognitive abilities can support the goals of future studies. As a substantial number of participants felt more engaged with the instructional content as time passed, instructors may have integrated the concepts of Bandura's (1986) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories into the instructional content. In doing so, the instructors presented novel challenges that granted considerable degrees of learner autonomy and permitted them to discuss which sociocultural factors negatively impacted their L2 English acquisition skills (Almusharraf, 2021; Al-Seghayer, 2021). Since young adults make autonomous decisions while acting within institutional, legal, or other barriers, the participants in future studies should possess experiential knowledge of how the culture at large informs the economic justifications to continuously develop English-language skills.

Future studies need to involve researchers evaluating the impacts of online, hybrid, and in-person learning environments on motivation and engagement. Aside from how the COVID-19 pandemic made in-person learning virtually impossible, the current sociocultural environment raises legitimate questions about how female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia will respond to rapidly shifting global economic demands (Daraghmeh et al., 2021). The seemingly universal status of English raises concerns about professional communication standards when young adults who are digital natives view L2 acquisition as an investment in their economic future (Mustafa & Alghamdi, 2020). Nevertheless, possessing formal communication skills requires motivation and engagement to code-switch from L1 Arabic to L2 English. While exclusively online learning environments provide instructors with multiple platforms to deliver instructional content, hybrid or in-person environments are more conducive to motivation and engagement when simulated real-world conversations requiring direct participation occur (Almusharraf & Engemann, 2020; Wang et al., 2022).

Ultimately, it is up to instructors to ensure that EFL learners in Saudi Arabia enhance their existing L2 proficiency and navigate the prevailing cultural norms effectively. As the previous results align with the earlier



research by Kuo and Lai (2006), they present equally meaningful implications for increasing learner engagement in participants comprising the specific target population. For example, 85 percent of the participants reported that L2 English acquisition and proficiency were necessary to enter the global job market. These results confirmed what researchers found in previous studies explaining why English maintains its status as a universal language (Doan & Hamid, 2021 Yeh & Heng, 2022). In turn, 95 percent of the participants reported that L2 English acquisition and proficiency enhanced their self-efficacy perceptions in other areas of life.

Conclusion

The preceding study established that a specific population of 20 undergraduate female EFL learners at a university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia feel motivated and engaged to enhance L2 acquisition skills when collaborating with peers. While the results have implications for enhancing the delivery of instructional content, they also prompt important questions regarding the influence of cultural practices and economic globalization. Here, the applications of Bandura's and Vygotsky's theories extended to how researchers in L2 English acquisition offer best-practice recommendations. Learners in L1 Arabic-speaking countries, including those in Saudi Arabia, may encounter challenges when existing restrictions impact their ability to communicate openly. However, the study results highlight where researchers can identify progress influenced partly by globalization and technological innovation. Future studies on how female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia respond to constructive emotional and intellectual challenges will help researchers close evidence gaps. Similarly, future studies on the role of technology in learning will provide researchers with clear evidence of how learners from a specific population enhance their self-efficacy perceptions by feeling motivated to engage with the instructional content.

Implications

Given that earlier studies involved researchers identifying a positive feedback loop between self-efficacy and L2 proficiency, the present results established that constructive emotional and intellectual challenges warrant further exploration (Tunçel, 2015). Here, 75 percent of the participants reported that such challenges provided significant motivational benefits.



Another 75 percent of the participants reported that online, hybrid, and in-person learning environments presented no significant differences in motivation levels. Among the participants who largely disagreed with the emotional and intellectual challenges or with the impacts of different learning environments on motivation, these observations present an ongoing need to investigate the relationships between variables and test the working hypotheses.

Negative impacts related to feelings of belonging among peers is an important issue that needs to experience research related to deep diving into why these impacts are happening within an EFL learning environment. Additional surveys may be needed to reveal more inclusive data related to how female students relate to one another within an English language environment. Are social and economic constraints a factor within the learning environment? Questions related to preconceived notions or misconceptions could be formulated and given to students in a Likert Test. The survey could reveal underlying issues that are causing conflict that educators and EFL professionals might not be aware of. It is important to remember that not all students learn the same way. There could be indicators related to individual students that are impacting progression throughout the English language learning experience. Pre-screening surveys related to learning styles, what a student looks for in a learning environment, and questions related to personality, cultural beliefs, and identity could be utilized as a way for researchers to garner data sets related to how to decrease negative impacts on EFL English language learning environments.

The indicators above show that while practicing a language is important to some students, it isn't important to all students. Questions related to why this is so should be asked and data to solve those questions should be sought after. Data garnered from more surveys, regardless of pre-screen, while involved in the learning process, or post-screen should provide relevant data about improving the EFL English language process, updating the learning environment to be more inclusive to those who feel left behind, and improving processes that engagement students to want to proceed on a journey that includes learning the English language to further them along their individual, personal and professional paths.



Overall, the quantitative survey and interview data results highlighted the roles of sociocultural orientations on how female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia felt motivated and engaged. Since the participants comprised a specific population of 20 undergraduate students, the results present limitations concerning the generalizability of the findings. Despite this limitation, the results invite researchers in L2 acquisition to consider the dynamic impacts of micro-level and macro-level factors on self-efficacy and English-language proficiency.

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