

Enhancing language self-efficacy of EFL university students through experiential learning: a study of the learning league project

Fiona Sze Han Ho, Nick Wong, Angie Wing Chi Li, Lo Lau

Center for Language Education, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong.

Abstract

The Learning League project aims to study the improvement of language self-efficacy among English as a foreign language (EFL) university students in Hong Kong after delivery English language classes to secondary school students in a 12-week programme. The project adopts a blended learning approach, utilizing the learning-by-teaching pedagogy and gamification to enhance students' motivation and English speaking skills. 13 university students were recruited as student tutors. They received teaching training before teaching English to 63 secondary school students. English speaking-related weekly tasks and selected materials were provided to the student tutors to complete and read before they taught. The language self-efficacy of university students were measured using language self-efficacy scale (Wong, 2005). The programme evaluation showed positive results for the university students' English speaking skills and language self-efficacy.

Keywords: *Experiential learning; English proficiency; language self-efficacy; tertiary education; gamification; blended learning.*

1. Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language (ESL) Under the Pandemic

1.1. Impact of the Pandemic on ESL Teaching and Learning

The Hong Kong education sector has been facing significant challenges under the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the government's support for funding e-learning initiatives since the 1990s by funding such as Teaching Development and Language Enhancement Grant (University Grants Committee, 2022), Quality Education Fund (Hong Kong SAR Government, 1997), Quality Enhancement Grant Scheme (Legislative Council, 2008), schools and universities were unable to fully utilize these resources during the pandemic. The transition to online teaching and learning was difficult as existing resources were often inadequate and led to extra preparation work for educators (Tang, 2020). The learning of foreign language speaking skills by Hong Kong students, especially English which is highly valued in both education context and workplace, was hindered (Ching, 2020) because e-learning has been assistive. The switch from face-to-face to online classes is beyond change of mode of lesson delivery. Both in-class and out-of-class learning opportunities need to be redesigned. It was challenging for university and secondary schools to create contexts for their students to use the language beyond regular classroom when students stayed home for lessons (Mok, Xiong, and Bin Aedy Rahman, 2021) where even opportunities for English corridor talks were gone. The English speaking assessment of university entry examination (Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination, HKDSE) was cancelled for three consecutive years due the pandemic (Tsang & Yiu, 2022). There were less opportunities and motivation for both university students and secondary school students to learn and practice speaking English. There is a need for continued effort to motivate and create opportunities for students to speak the language beyond the classroom.

1.2. Secondary and University Students' Motivation Learning EFL Speaking Online

The motivation for learning English speaking among university and secondary school students declined when learning happened behind the camera during the pandemic. Social-economic issue had the most impact on students' learning motivation. Yau, Yeung and Lee (2022) suggested that camera use concerning teachers' and students' presence is an important factor influencing students' online experience possibly due to the fact that most Hong Kong students lived in crowded space with family members. It was even more difficult for students to concentrate during real-time online teaching (Yeung & Yau, 2022) when students encounter IT problems such as unstable network connection and device problem. Students also reported that interaction with other students was rather limited and hence it was difficult to connect with their peers socially and academically. All these issues in online teaching discouraged students to improve their English speaking skills.

Since the English speaking assessment for the university entry examination (HKDSE) was cancelled for 3 consecutive years due to the pandemic, the secondary school teachers spent more time on training other English skills than speaking in online classrooms. Opportunities for using English outside classroom, which excite some students, was forgone. According to the survey and interview conducted by Hong Kong Association for Academic and Teaching Exchange (Lam, 2022), out of 510 secondary school respondents, 70% of students were most anxious about English. One of the interviewees said, "When I was in Secondary two, our school would take us to Stanley to interview foreigners. But the activity was cancelled due to the pandemic... Since I mostly speak Chinese in daily life, my English pronunciation has gotten worse." The situation for the underprivileged ones was even worse for schools was probably the only channel for most of them to expose to English. While the development of speaking proficiency is related cognitively to other proficiencies of the English language, the insufficient support has a negative impact on underprivileged students' English language public examination results and possibly the chance of entering university.

The lack of meaningful opportunities to speak English, low motivation and insufficient support exacerbate the problem of low spoken English proficiency among university students and secondary school students, making it difficult for them to achieve their full potential in education and beyond.

1.3. Project Needs

The *Learning League* project aims to address the challenges of lack of opportunities and low motivation in practising English speaking. The learning-by-teaching program utilized the skills and knowledge of university (higher EFL proficiency) students to support secondary school (lower EFL proficiency) students. Through completing online tasks, reading materials about learning ESL speaking and teaching speaking to secondary school students, the university students could realise their language gap and improve their English speaking skills. At the same time, the secondary school students benefited from additional support to improve their proficiency through practising with the university students. The project has given both groups an opportunity to use the language in a supportive and empowering environment.

2. Project Design

13 university students were tasked to teach 63 students from three local secondary schools, ranging from secondary 1 to 5. Each student tutor was assigned 4-6 secondary students to teach, using materials designed by the project team. The university students delivered 12 face-to-face lessons of 1.5 hours each over a 4-month period.

2.1. University Students' Profile

13 students from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (with IELTS overall score of at least 6.5) were recruited as student tutors. Among the 13 students, 5 students were undergraduate students while 8 were postgraduate students. The project had been promoted to them as a service-learning project which they signed up as voluntary teachers.

2.2. Language Teaching Support for University Students

Prior to their teaching, the university students received training from three University Lecturers specialising in English Language (the project team) on contrastive linguistics of Chinese and English and teaching pedagogy. The training enriched the university students' English language knowledge, helping them to understand rationale of the teaching materials design for effective lesson planning and delivery. During the programme, the project team and their colleagues (also University Lecturers of English Language) observed university students' classes at least twice during the teaching period and provided them with feedback on English language knowledge and teaching technique.

In addition to in-person coaching, the university students acquired English language knowledge and additional teaching skills through completing tasks and reading selected resources on an online platform at their own pace. They then applied teaching skills and English language knowledge they had learnt in their weekly teaching. The learning-by-teaching pedagogy applied by the project allowed university students to consolidate their English language knowledge while providing academic support to secondary school students and improved their language self-efficacy.

Such design aims to provide university students with a well-rounded educational experience, both as English language learners and as educators.

2.3. Design of Learning Materials for Secondary School Students

The design of learning materials for secondary school students included gamification elements to enhance their motivation and engagement. Gaming was the theme of the course learning materials. This theme is popular among teenagers and it is easy for both secondary school and university students to relate and motivate them to participate actively in lesson activities. Selected newspaper articles and TED talks were included in lesson materials as content input so both the secondary school students and university students read and listened to authentic English materials. The activities for lessons incorporated gamification elements such as rewards for completing tasks, process tracking, and narratives for higher learning motivation and engagement in class.

2.4. Data Collection

The university students were required to complete a self-efficacy survey before and after the 12 lessons. The project team studied changes in language self-efficacy of the university students by comparing pre-teaching and post-teaching surveys.

3. Implementation

The table below summarises the key implementation details of the project.

Table 1. Key Implementation Details.

Month / Year	Content / Activity / Event
Feb – Jun 2022	Reconfirm with the participating local secondary schools and recruit other possible schools. Confirm logistics and programme timeline with partnering schools.
Jun - Aug 2022	Design materials for student tutors' small-class teaching training, peer teaching and other project-related tasks.
Sept 2022 - Jan 2023	Recruit university students as student tutors. Project team offers teaching training for student tutors. Conduct orienteering activities for student tutors and secondary school students.
Feb – May 2023	Student tutors teach in secondary schools. Project team observes student tutors' classes regularly, write log for record and discussion with student tutors. Project team updates teaching materials from the student tutors' teaching experience and class observation.
Jun – Jul 2023	Hold evaluation meetings among secondary school teachers and student tutors. Conduct survey for teaching and learning effectiveness among student tutors and other secondary school students.
Aug – Sept 2023	Programme evaluation.

4. Discussion

As mentioned in 1.3, the *Learning League* project aimed to improve language self-efficacy of EFL university students after teaching English language to secondary school students. This section discusses how the strategies implemented address challenges related to the improvement of students' speaking competency and low motivation in learning English speaking.

4.1. English Language Proficiency of University Students for Lesson Delivery

One of the biggest challenges was to ensure that the university students had sufficient spoken English competency to effectively teach the secondary school students. To address this issue, the project team had introduced topics in contrastive linguistics in teaching training and designed English language knowledge materials relevant to lessons they taught to enrich their knowledge. In addition, the blended learning approach adopted in the project design proved to be successful in providing a comprehensive learning experience for both the university and secondary school students. It has several advantages, including increased student engagement and motivation, improved access to resources, and personalized learning experiences. The online resources allowed university students to access learning materials at their own pace, they can look for further information about lesson content and related lesson content before teaching in classroom. Some university students highlighted they had learnt new language knowledge from the blended learning materials and also new vocabulary during lesson preparation.

4.2. Low Motivation Among EFL Secondary School Students

With the cancellation of English speaking assessment in university entry examination, the secondary school students were less motivated to practise English speaking skills. The project team prepared interactive English language activities in the orienteering day and gamified tasks in the weekly teaching materials to raise EFL secondary school students' interest in speaking the language. The secondary school students even gave speeches to their peers which was new experience to some and had boosted their confidence in using English for communication.

5. Conclusion, limitation, and future direction

The *Learning League* project was successful in addressing challenges of improving language self-efficacy of university students and the low motivation of secondary school students to learn English. The blended learning approach, which combined online resources and in-person sessions, provided a personalized and engaging learning-by-teaching experience for university and students. Additionally, incorporating fun and gamified activities, service-

learning and a learning-by-teaching pedagogy helped to increase motivation and improve the language skills of all participants.

5.1. Project Limitations

The project has certain limitations that could impact the validity and generalizability of the results. One limitation is the sample size, with only 13 student tutors and 63 secondary school students, it may not be possible to generalize the findings to a larger population. Additionally, the 12-week study period may not be long enough to fully gauge the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of the programme. Furthermore, the study is limited to EFL context in Hong Kong and may not be applicable to other language acquisition setting.

5.2. Future Directions

While the project is a step towards promoting education equity and improving English proficiency, there is still room for improvement and future directions. For example, the project could be expanded to include more universities and secondary schools in Hong Kong for a larger sample size, providing a more comprehensive picture of the programme's effectiveness. Additionally, the project can be extended to other foreign languages and cultures, allowing a wider reach and impact. Aligned with the use of technology in education, the programme could be modified to incorporate additional forms of technology, such as virtual and augmented reality in teaching training, to enhance the university students' learning experience. These modifications will contribute to the further development and refinement of the project and its potential impact on EFL learning in Hong Kong higher education.

References

- Ching, S.L. 程尚連 (2020, February 14). Tingke bu tingxue wangluo jiaoxue ge shi ge fa 停課不停學 網絡教學各師各法. *Sing Tao Daily*.
- Hong Kong SAR. (1997). *Quality Education*. Retrieved from The Chief Executive's 1997 Policy Address: <https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/pa97/english/paindex.htm>
- Lam, E. (2022, November 28). English exam worries due to lack of practice. <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/section-news/section/4/247705/English-exam-worries-due-to-lack-of-practice>. *The Standard*.
- Legislative Council Panel on Education. (2022, July 5). *Amendments to the Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance (Cap. 320)*. Retrieved from Legislative Council: <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr2022/english/panels/ed/papers/ed20220705cb4-603-1-e.pdf>
- Mok, K.H., Xiong W., Bin Aedy Rahman, H.N. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic's disruption on university teaching and learning and competence cultivation: Student evaluation of online learning experiences in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Chinese Education January–April 2021*, 1–20.

- Pintrich, P. R., & De Groot, E.V. (1990). Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance. *Journal of Education Psychology*, 82(1), 33-40. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.82.1.33>
- Tang, W. 鄧穎琳 (2020b, February 8). Yuke youzhiyuan eryue xuefei jianban jiaoshi xufang wuxinjie huo shujia bu hui 約克幼稚園二月學費減半 教師需放無薪假或暑假補回. *HK01*.
- Tsang, J., Yiu, W. (2022, January 28). DSE: Hong Kong's exam authority cancels English-speaking assessment amid Omicron outbreak. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3165102/dse-hong-kongs-exam-authorities-cancel-english-speaking>. *South China Morning Post*.
- University Grants Committee. (2022, October 14). *Teaching Development and Language Enhancement Grant*. Retrieved from University Grants Committee: https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/activity/teach_learn/tdg.html
- Wong, M. (2005). Language Learning Strategies and Language Self-Efficacy. *Regional Language Centre Journal*, 36(3), 245-269.
- Yau, A. H. Y., Yeung, M. W. L., & Lee, C. Y. P. (2022). A co-orientation analysis of teachers' and students' perceptions of online teaching and learning in Hong Kong higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*.
- Yeung, M. W. L., & Yau, A. H. Y. (2021). A thematic analysis of higher education students' perceptions of online learning in Hong Kong under COVID-19: challenges, strategies and support. *Education and Information Technologies*.