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Examining the Differences in Student Self-Assessment of Their Skills in English as a Foreign Language: A Pilot Study Comparing Male and Female Lower Secondary Students

Abstract

Developing English language proficiency is of utmost importance for education systems across Europe. Self-assessment of one's English as a foreign language (EFL) skills is a widely used source of information concerning learners' level of language proficiency. Thus, an investigation of the way different groups of learners assess their language skills is warranted. In this pilot study, we examine the self-assessment of both general and specific (reading, writing, listening, speaking) EFL skills from a sample of Czech lower secondary students and compare these self-assessments across genders. We also analyze the relationship of the self-assessment of specific EFL skills with the self-assessment of general EFL skills for male and female students. Our results show that Czech students are more confident in their receptive skills, while the productive skills are more closely related to their overall language self-assessment. Further research should take into consideration the differences in scale usage between different groups of students, possibly utilizing methodological approaches such as the anchoring vignette method.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, language skills, self-assessment, differences in scale usage

Introduction

The English language is spoken by more than a billion people as their first or second language (Education First, 2020). From the perspective of an individual, learning languages can create new personal and professional opportunities (Baïdak, Balcon & Motiejunaite, 2017). As for companies, workers with language competences are an important resource for their success in global markets (Baïdak, Balcon & Motiejunaite, 2017). The incentives to learn English, thus, have never been greater – yet the demand for English proficiency still outpaces supply (Education First, 2020).

The demand for the improvement of foreign language skills is apparent in education systems across Europe. In most European countries, the age when students start learning a compulsory foreign language has decreased, and in many countries, learning English is obligatory for all students during their compulsory education (Baïdak, Balcon & Motiejunaite, 2017).

Despite the overall improvement of English proficiency levels in Europe, there are still notable differences between speakers from different countries (Education First, 2020).

Self-assessment of language skills

Self-assessment of one's English as a foreign language (EFL) skills is a valuable, widely used source of information concerning learners' level of language proficiency. It is commonly used by researchers (e.g., Dueñas, Plo & Hornero, 2013; Jensen et al., 2011) but also in real-life situations such as job market applications. For example, an online CV creator *Europass* (European Union, n.d.) uses self-assessment of foreign language proficiency A1 to C2 levels, structured according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*.

The way people self-assess their language skills might thus have many consequences in terms of the accuracy of the information about the level of language proficiency of different (groups of) respondents reported by researchers. It might also impact the position of applicants in a labor market. In terms of one's learning efforts, self-assessment of knowledge and skills is an important factor in further educational decision-making and becoming an autonomous agent in one's own education (Dunning, Heath & Suls, 2004).

Previous research on language skills self-assessment has found robust associations between language learners' self-assessment and objective indicators of language proficiency. A meta-analysis conducted by Ross (1998) showed that the average correlations between learner self-assessment and objective indicators of language performance range between $r = .52$ and $r = .65$ for the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). However, numerous factors have been suggested to be related to the accuracy of learner self-assessment, e.g., the type of self-assessment items used, self-assessment training and experience, and the foreign language proficiency level (Liu & Brantmeier, 2019).

It has also been suggested that the accuracy of language skills self-assessment might differ by learner characteristics such as gender (Tamjid, 2008). The male hubris/female humility phenomenon (i.e., the tendency of men to overestimate and women to underestimate their abilities) has been examined in the area of self-claimed vocabulary knowledge, however, corroboration of this phenomenon has not been found (Ackerman & Ellingsen, 2014). Thus, an investigation of the way different groups of learners (based on gender but also other characteristics) assess their language skills is warranted.

Research questions

In this study, we examine the self-assessment of EFL skills and compare self-assessments between male and female students. The comparison is made for both the general EFL skills and specific EFL skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) separately. We also analyze the relationship of the self-assessment of specific EFL skills with the self-assessment of general EFL skills for male and female students.

Our main research questions are as follows:
(1) What are the differences in the self-assessment of general and specific EFL skills between male and female lower secondary students?
(2) What is the relationship between self-assessment of specific EFL skills and general EFL skills self-assessment for male and female lower secondary students?

Methodology

EFL skills self-assessment questions

In our study, we let the respondents assess their general EFL skills (1 question) and specific EFL skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking (4 questions). The general self-assessment question and an example self-assessment question for reading are:

How would you assess your level of English in general?
How do you assess your level of the following specific skills in English?
- Reading texts in English

The students were asked to assess themselves on the following seven-point scale: *0 No skill at all*, *1 Beginner*, *2 Elementary*, *3 Intermediate*, *4 Upper intermediate*, *5 Advanced*, *6 Expert*. In the analysis, the students' responses were coded as ranging from 1 (corresponding to no skill at all) to 7 (corresponding to expert).

Sample

Our pilot study was conducted at four Czech lower secondary schools (ISCED 2) of different types. Two schools were regular, state-governed, nonselective schools providing general education to a wide population of students. The other two schools were elite, private, selective grammar schools providing general education to academically oriented students. Students in the last year of their compulsory education (generally 14 to 16 years old) were selected for the study. In this paper, we analyze the data from 150 students (91 girls, 59 boys) for whom we had a complete data set in terms of their EFL skills self-assessment and gender.

Results and discussion

For each student, we calculated a mean self-assessment on the seven-point scale for each of the five self-assessment questions (one general self-assessment question and four language skill-specific questions). In general, boys assessed their skills as higher across all five self-assessment questions than girls, the difference being the highest in the general self-assessment question and the smallest in the domain of speaking. None of the differences, however, reached statistical significance. If we rank the mean responses to the four language skill-specific self-assessment questions, both boys and girls assessed their reading skills as the highest, followed by listening, writing, and speaking skills. Thus, in general, both boys and girls reported higher proficiency in receptive skills than productive skills.

This finding is interesting as it suggests that Czech language learners are more confident in their receptive skills in comparison to the production of language. This might be partly attributed to the emphasis placed on the particular skills during the EFL classes at school. Video studies conducted on a sample of Czech lower secondary level EFL teachers indeed showed that reading and listening, receptive language skills, are more prominent during language classes than productive skills (Šebestová, Najvar & Janík, 2011).

Furthermore, we conducted a correlational analysis, examining the strength of the relationships of the four language skill-specific self-assessment questions with

the general EFL self-assessment. For the whole sample, the strongest association was found between general EFL self-assessment and writing, followed by speaking, reading, and listening. The same pattern was observed when analyzing the data for girls separately. In the case of boys, the strongest association was found between general self-assessment and speaking, followed by writing, reading, and listening. Thus, for both boys and girls, productive language skills self-assessments correspond more closely to the general EFL self-assessment than those for receptive skills.

An intriguing phenomenon occurs when productive skills, which the students are less confident in, seem to correspond more closely to their general language self-assessment. It is possible that when evaluating their global language proficiency, students take the specific language skills into account to a different degree. In the case of our sample, it would appear that both boys and girls rely, when making global self-assessment, more on their "weaker" skills. This might indicate that learners might generally focus more on their weak spots in language proficiency when making the assessment. Alternatively, it might also be the case that language production is simply more important to learners when making a global judgment of their abilities, irrespective of whether they see themselves more proficient or less proficient in productive skills than the receptive ones. Further research inquiry should focus on this matter in more detail.

Also, there are some methodological considerations that need to be further examined. Previous research using student self-assessment in different areas has suggested that groups of respondents might differ in the way they use scales when responding to self-assessment questionnaire items (e.g., Kyllonen & Bertling, 2013). For example, two students with the identical objective level of a certain skill (e.g., English as a foreign language proficiency) might assess themselves in response to self-assessment questionnaire items differently – one as advanced, while the other only as intermediate (Vonkova & Hrabak, 2015). These differences might bias the self-assessment data, hindering the accurate comparison of different groups of students. Previous research has shown that there are differences in scale usage between boys and girls, for example, in the domains of student dishonest behavior (Vonkova, Bendl & Papajoanu, 2017) and life satisfaction (Vonkova, 2019). It is possible that such differences might also exist in the domain of EFL skills, potentially biasing the results of research in this area.

Further research should take the differences in scale usage in the domain of EFL skills into consideration. Methodological approaches have been suggested in research to (a) identify and (b) adjust for these differences to improve the comparability of self-assessment data (e.g., Kyllonen & Bertling, 2013; Vonkova, Bendl & Papajoanu, 2017). Some of the promising approaches that might be well suited for application in the EFL domain are the anchoring vignette method and the overclaiming technique. We strongly recommend that researchers utilize some of these approaches in further research to examine the way learners assess their language skills in more detail.

Conclusion

Our results have shown that, on average, boys assessed their language skills (both general EFL skills and reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills

separately) higher than girls, although the differences were not statistically significant. In general, both boys and girls reported higher language proficiency in receptive skills (reading, listening) than productive skills (writing, speaking). As for the relationships between the four language skills self-assessment and the general EFL skills self-assessment, the productive skills self-assessments correspond more closely to the general self-assessment than the receptive skills self-assessments for both boys and girls.

Overall, it seems that Czech learners are more confident in their receptive skills, while productive skills are more closely related to their overall language self-assessment. However, a potential limitation of our study is that we used only a correlational analysis. Also, we conducted our study on a rather small sample of students. Future analysis using data from more respondents might provide deeper insight into the way different groups of students assess their EFL skills. Future research should also take into consideration the differences in scale usage between different groups of students, possibly utilizing methodological approaches such as the anchoring vignette method.

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