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Exploring Tertiary Level EFL Learners' Self-efficacy Beliefs: A Mixed-Methods Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the self-efficacy levels of Turkish EFL learners across four language skills, listening, reading, writing, and speaking, and to explore the factors influencing their beliefs. Adopting a sequential explanatory mixed method design, the research was conducted at a School of Foreign Languages (SFL) of a state university in Türkiye with 130 elementary-level students. Quantitative data were collected using the English Self-Efficacy Belief Scale (Yanar & Bümen, 2012), while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants using extreme case sampling. Findings revealed a moderate overall self-efficacy level ($M=3.19$), with learners reporting higher efficacy in receptive skills (listening and reading, $M=3.32$) compared to productive skills (speaking and writing, $M=3.05$ and $M=3.09$, respectively). Factors influencing high self-efficacy included out-of-class practice, personal characteristics, motivation, and school-related support, while low self-efficacy was mainly shaped by affective barriers, perceived incompetence, and demotivational experiences.

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Many factors affect the language learning situation including social, cognitive, and affective dimensions. Yet, among these, psychological factors such as motivation and beliefs have also been considered to exert a huge impact on language learning process (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Hsieh, 2004; Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1990). Within this domain, learners' self-capacity beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping their motivation and thus their success or failure.

Research in educational psychology has long emphasized the interplay between self-efficacy and learning outcomes, showing that learners with higher levels of perceived competence are more likely to adopt effective learning strategies, demonstrate resilience, and achieve higher academic success (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Schunk & Ertmer, 2000). Accordingly, psychological constructs including motivation, self-esteem, self-regulation and self-efficacy have gained increasing interest in educational research (Clement et al., 1994; Li & Wang, 2010; Noels et al., 2000; Oxford, 2018; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Schunk & Ertmer, 2000; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). As a result, in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), investigation of self-efficacy perception, which has an important effect on the language learning, has come into prominence since relatively few studies have investigated how learners' self-efficacy beliefs interact with their classroom experiences across four language skills and learning environments.

Given this context, this study aims to explore how EFL learners' self-efficacy beliefs shape and reflect their language learning experiences. Thus, a mixed-method design was implemented to gain a more comprehensive understanding. By combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by providing nuanced insights into EFL learners' perceptions, challenges, and strategies regarding self-efficacy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, a concept developed from the field of social psychology, has been adapted to many fields and used in different disciplines. Self-efficacy perceptions, which affect an individual's functions, are judgments about one's own abilities to accomplish and organize the actions necessary to achieve the designed performances (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1999). Likewise, according to Schultz and Schultz (1994) self-efficacy is the feelings toward the adequacy, efficiency, and ability to cope with the life. Feist and Feist (2002), in a similar vein, define self-efficacy as an individual's belief in the ability and the control of the given task in the environment. In sum, self-efficacy is an individual's judgment of himself about how successful he or she will be in overcoming demanding situations in the future. Bandura (1977) proposed four main sources of self-efficacy perception, which are mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions, and physiological and affective states. Mastery experiences are the experiences that a person achieves when s/he attempts a new challenge and becomes successful. Thus, successes increase a person's sense of self-efficacy whereas the failures reduce the self-efficacy beliefs. Vicarious experiences are related to the achievements of peers. That is, having a positive role model with a high level of self-efficacy positively influences the individuals own self-efficacy beliefs. Verbal persuasions refer to the positive impact of feedback or motivation and encouragement about a given task. Namely, a teacher's expressing his/her faith in one's capabilities encourages and motivates that learner, and thus, boosts his/her efficacy beliefs. Physiological and affective states point to the importance of context and well-being in the development and maintenance of self-efficacy. In other words, though positive emotions strengthen the sense of self-efficacy, negative emotions like anxiety and stress weaken the efficacy beliefs. An individual's perception of self-efficacy is shaped by one or more of these sources of self-efficacy depending on the cognitive processing stage.

2.2. *Self-efficacy in Educational Research*

In the domain of educational psychology, self-efficacy is usually described as academic self-efficacy, and defined as the learner's ability to complete a task and accomplish academic goals. Researchers examining the self-efficacy, have determined that learners approach the tasks presented to them in a different way, put effort in different levels, attribute success or failure to different reasons, and exhibit different attitudes when faced with failure or success, depending on whether their self-efficacy perception is high or low (Bandura, 1997; Pintrich, 2003). According to Bandura (1986), the learners with high self-efficacy levels do not see difficult tasks as threats to be avoided, but rather as tasks to be overcome by struggling, which strengthens their interest in activities. They also set themselves interesting and demanding goals, and display a high sense of responsibility towards them (Bandura, 1997).

On the other hand, students with low self-efficacy levels doubt their own capacities, thus avoid difficult tasks since they perceive them as personal threats (Bandura, 1994; Pajares & Schunk, 2002). When faced with a difficult task, instead of concentrating on how to do it successfully, they focus on their own personal shortcomings, possible obstacles they may encounter, the daunting nature of the task, the possibility of failure, and any adverse consequences (Bandura, 1994).

Taking the above-mentioned effects of self-efficacy into consideration, in the endeavor to understand the role of self-efficacy in educational settings, many research studies have been conducted in different disciplines, basically math and science with a positive association (Hsieh et al., 2008; Pajares & Miller, 1994; Pajares, 1996; Pajares et al., 2000; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990). To illustrate, Pajares (1996) explored self-efficacy beliefs of gifted students and regular students in algebra classes. Findings indicated that gifted students had more accurate self-perceptions than regular mainstream students with a higher math self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and a lower math anxiety.

Besides, many other researchers have studied self-efficacy with some other components such as academic performance, motivation and self-regulation (Hsieh et al., 2008; Pajares, 2003; Pajares, 1996; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Schunk, 1984). For example, in Hsieh et al.'s (2008) study, 549 6th grade students' goal orientation, self-efficacy, and science knowledge were examined after engaging in science learning in a technology-rich classroom environment. Findings yielded a significant increase in students' science achievement scores and their self-efficacy levels for science thanks to this type of learning environment.

2.3. *Self-efficacy in EFL Setting*

When compared with the other disciplines, self-efficacy in EFL setting has been less researched (Wang et al., 2021). The past few decades have seen a significant comeback of EFL self-efficacy research with a particular focus on its relationship with English performance and academic achievement, and many studies resulted in a positive correlation (Apridayani & Teo, 2021; Aykaç-Duman, 2007; Chen, 2020; Başbay & Gözümlü, 2019; Kitikanan & Sasimonon, 2017; Truong & Wang, 2019). To illustrate, Huang (2024) examined how English Medium Instruction (EMI) affects self-efficacy and English performance among Taiwanese EFL undergraduates. Involving 272 students who had taken EMI courses for at least one semester, the research used questionnaires, TOEIC tests, and interviews. Results displayed a significant increase in self-efficacy across all four language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, after EMI instruction. Additionally, self-efficacy was found to be a moderate to strong predictor of English performance. Besides, Apridayani and Teo (2021) investigated the relationship among self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies, English self-efficacy, and English proficiency of Thai EFL students at tertiary level and concluded that students with higher proficiency level had higher levels of English self-efficacy compared to those with lower proficiency levels. Similarly, research by Chen (2020) focused on the influence of self-efficacy of Chinese high school students on their English performance and

aligns with previous research revealing a positive relationship between self-efficacy and language performance.

Some researchers have studied the associations of self-efficacy within other psychological aspects such as learner autonomy, learner beliefs, academic emotions and self-regulation (Asakereh & Yousofi, 2018; Genç et al., 2016; Kanadlı & Bağçeci, 2015; Pikiang et al., 2021; Su et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2024). For instance, Xu et al. (2024) investigated 1107 EFL undergraduate students' self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies, self-efficacy, and learning engagement in an EFL learning in smart classrooms in China. The results reflected that self-efficacy fully mediated the impact of SRL strategies on multiple dimensions of engagement including behavioral, cognitive, emotional, social engagement, displaying close interrelations among SRL, self-efficacy, and engagement. Wang et al. (2021) examined whether self-efficacy profiles are associated with academic emotions and language proficiency among Chinese EFL learners. The results indicated that high efficacious students had more positive emotions like enjoyment and pride and showed higher language success. Genç et al. (2016) investigated the interplay between learners' beliefs about language learning and their sense of self-efficacy with 210 Turkish EFL undergraduate students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language quantitatively. Findings indicated that EFL learners' English self-efficacy level has an impact on their language learning beliefs. Kanadlı and Bağçeci (2015) conducted a quantitative study focusing on the relationship between students' receptive and productive skills, self-efficacy beliefs and perceived autonomy support while learning English. The analysis reflected a significant and positive relationship between students' self-efficacy beliefs of both receptive and productive skills and perceived autonomy support. Beside positive relationships, research by Pikiang et al. (2021) indicated an average level of correlation between students' level of satisfaction with offline classes and their English self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy research has also examined the relationship between EFL learners' self-efficacy and

the four language skills, listening, reading, writing, and speaking, and has found self-efficacy to be a strong predictor of performance in these skills (Chen, 2020; Liao & Wang, 2018; Marlina et al., 2021; Mohammedain, 2021; Pajares, 2003; Paradewari, 2017; Peerakuntrakorn & Meesri, 2020; Woodrow, 2011). For example, Al-Khresheh (2024) explored Saudi EFL learners' self-efficacy across the four language skills and examined gender differences in their perceptions. Findings showed moderate overall self-efficacy, with the highest confidence in reading and the lowest in speaking. In addition, he found that female students reported significantly higher self-efficacy in speaking than males. Likewise, Peerakuntrakorn and Meesri (2020) investigated 10th grade EFL learners' self-perception on English language skills self-efficacy. The participants composed low, mid and high proficiency level Thai learners. The results displayed listening skill self-efficacy as the highest among high proficiency EFL learners, while mid and low proficiency groups ranked reading skill self-efficacy as the highest skill. In terms of writing, Woodrow's (2011) investigation indicated that self-efficacy was a strong predictor of EFL learners' writing performance which is in alignment with Chen's (2020) study that found out English listening self-efficacy was a powerful predictor of learners' listening performance. However, in Cladonia and Marlina's (2021) study, the results yielded self-efficacy and English speech ability did not have a correlation. That is, learners' having high self-efficacy does not guarantee high speech performance.

2.4. Statement of Purpose

Despite a growing body of research on EFL learners' self-efficacy in the Turkish context, existing literature has predominantly centered on correlating this construct with academic achievement (e.g., Apridayani & Teo, 2021; Chen, 2020) or exploring its interplay with other psychological variables such as learner autonomy, beliefs, and emotions (e.g., Genç et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021). While several studies have examined self-efficacy within the context of specific language

skills (e.g., Al-Khresheh, 2024; Woodrow, 2011), much of this work remains strictly quantitative and treats self-efficacy as an isolated cognitive attribute

However, the majority of these studies have adopted either a strictly quantitative (Chen, 2020; Cladonia & Marlina, 2021; Woodrow, 2011) or experimental approach (Liao & Wang, 2018; Mohammedain, 2021), often overlooking the contextual and learner-based factors that shape EFL learners' self-efficacy beliefs. In particular, relatively little attention has been paid to how institutional structures, instructional practices, and learners' prior educational experiences interact to influence self-efficacy beliefs. This is especially relevant in preparatory language programs in Türkiye, where exam-oriented instruction, limited exposure to communicative practice, and heterogeneous learner backgrounds may play a significant role in shaping learners' perceptions of their capabilities. In this regard, much of the existing research has treated self-efficacy as an individual cognitive attribute, largely detached from the broader learning ecology in which it is situated. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how self-efficacy beliefs are embedded within specific institutional contexts, such as preparatory language programs, which structure learners' experiences, opportunities for practice, and perceptions of success and failure.

Although some studies have incorporated qualitative components, relatively few have adopted an explanatory mixed-methods perspective that not only identifies patterns but also explains how and why these beliefs are shaped across different language skills within a given educational setting. Therefore, there remains a significant gap in in-depth, explanatory research that investigates the underlying factors influencing self-efficacy across the four language skills, especially at the tertiary level in the Turkish EFL context.

Given the importance of self-efficacy in shaping language learning behaviors and outcomes, addressing this gap is both timely and essential. Therefore, the present explanatory mixed-method study aims to move beyond descriptive and confirmatory accounts by examining EFL learners'

self-efficacy as a contextually mediated construct, shaped by both individual and institutional dynamics. Particularly, it aims to not only determine the self-efficacy levels of EFL learners at a state university in Türkiye but also explore the underlying factors that influence these beliefs. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, this study seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of Turkish EFL learners' self-efficacy across the four language skills and contribute nuanced insights to the field.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the self-efficacy level of Turkish EFL learners at a state university in terms of four language skills?
2. What factors affect their self-efficacy beliefs regarding the language skills?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

In this study, a mixed method research design was utilized, in which both quantitative and qualitative data collection items were used sequentially. Creswell (2012) emphasizes the importance of the blend of both quantitative and qualitative research methods so as to better comprehend the phenomenon. Thus, the present study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed method design, in which data collection and analysis commences quantitatively, followed by a qualitative phase (Dörnyei, 2007). As can be seen in Figure 1, the researcher adopted the explanatory sequential design, specifically QUAN → qual model, since it is not possible to collect both qualitative and quantitative data at the same time, and thus, prior to qualitative data, which are gathered to obtain in-depth data on the participants' self-efficacy beliefs, the quantitative data are collected (Şahin & Öztürk, 2019). Bearing the implementation in mind, the quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire. The qualitative data collection tools, namely the interviews, were implemented to obtain better understanding of learners' self-efficacy beliefs thereafter.

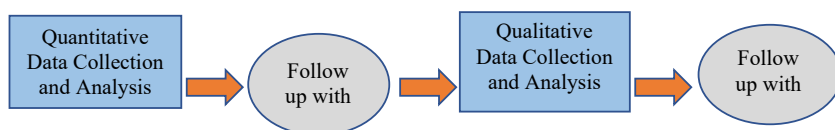


Figure 1
Research design: Explanatory sequential mixed methods

3.2. Research Setting

The research was conducted at a school of foreign languages (SFL) of a state university in Türkiye. Students received an intensive English language education in which four skills, speaking, listening, reading and writing as well as language use and vocabulary were taught in an integrated way. Although some learners studied at SFL on a voluntary basis, most of them were obliged to study at most two years. Students took 20 hours of classes weekly. In order to start their undergraduate studies, they were expected to become proficient in English and get 60 from the proficiency test held at the end of the semesters. At SFL, there were four language levels from A to D, in which A refers to the highest and D refers to the lowest level. At the beginning of the 2021-2022 Fall term, a proficiency test based on the Global Scale of English (GSE) was carried out to determine the level of the students. GSE, which is recognized worldwide, is a scale from 10 to 90, and pinpoints the four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing as well as grammar and vocabulary, and can be regarded as an extension of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). In this context, elementary level refers to C.

3.3. Participants

A total of 130 Turkish EFL learners volunteered to participate in the study. All participants were elementary-level students enrolled in the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) at a state university at the time of data collection. The participants were chosen through convenience sampling, as they were drawn from a pre-existing group that was readily accessible to the researcher. Although

convenience sampling facilitated access to participants, it situates the findings within a specific institutional context. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as context-bound, specifically reflecting the particular dynamics of the preparatory program in which the participants were enrolled, rather than broadly generalizable.

After the implementation of the English self-efficacy scale, a purposeful sampling strategy was used for the interview phase. More specifically, extreme case sampling was employed to identify students with the highest and lowest self-efficacy scores. This approach made it possible to examine the outliers who display extreme characteristics (Creswell, 2012), and to better understand the range of perceptions within the group (Dörnyei, 2007). Accordingly, interviews were conducted with eight students, comprising the four highest- and four lowest-scoring participants based on the questionnaire results.

3.4. Data Collection and Instruments

For the purpose of the current study, the English Self-Efficacy Belief scale developed by Yanar and Bümen (2012) was used to obtain the quantitative data. The 5-point Likert scale, which has a total of 34 items, consists of four dimensions: reading (8 items), writing (10 items), listening (10 items), and speaking (6 items). The scale was developed through certain stages. At the initial stage, 64 draft items were written, and after expert revisions, the item number was decreased to 47. After performing the explanatory factor analysis, 13 items were discarded, and the final version of the scale was obtained. The confirmatory factor analysis was also done. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of

the measurements is 0.97, which demonstrates the scale is a valid and reliable measurement tool.

The qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews to obtain deeper understanding of the participants' self-efficacy beliefs. Due to the nature of the research design, the questions were formed depending on the analysis of the questionnaire results. Prior to finalizing the semi-structured interview questions, expert opinions from two experienced ELT instructors working at AUSFL were sought, and the revised version of the questions were used in the interviews.

3.5. Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed via a statistical package program. First, the mean scores of all participants were calculated. Then the mean scores of each of four skills were obtained. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed to provide an overall picture of learners' self-efficacy levels.

In addition to quantitative data, the qualitative data, namely the interviews, were analyzed thematically based on Creswell's content analysis scheme (2012, p. 224) (See Figure 2). Initially, the data were transcribed and verified with each participant to ensure accuracy and to check for any missing parts. To enhance analytic transparency, a step-by-step coding procedure was utilized. Initially, raw interview excerpts were segmented

into meaning units, which were then assigned initial codes reflecting participants' expressions such as "fear of making mistakes", "studying independently", and "feeling unsuccessful". In the next phase, conceptually related codes were grouped into broader categories, and subsequently abstracted into overarching themes such as affective factors, out-of-class practice, and demotivational experiences. For example, statements such as "I feel nervous when speaking" and "I forget everything when I am stressed" were initially coded as *anxiety* and later subsumed under the theme of *affective factors*. This iterative process enabled the identification of patterns while preserving the connection between raw data and the final themes.

Following this process, the researcher coded similar data sets and determined recurrent codes which led to the emergence of themes. To enhance the trustworthiness and the interpretive depth of the qualitative analysis, peer debriefing was employed. A colleague independently coded a representative subset (25% of the dataset) of the interview transcripts to validate the scope of the themes and ensure interrater reliability. Any initial discrepancies in the coding were addressed through an iterative consensus-building process. In this collaborative phase, the researchers engaged in detailed discussions to reach a mutual consensus on the final codes, allowing for a more analytical and rigorous refinement of the thematic framework.

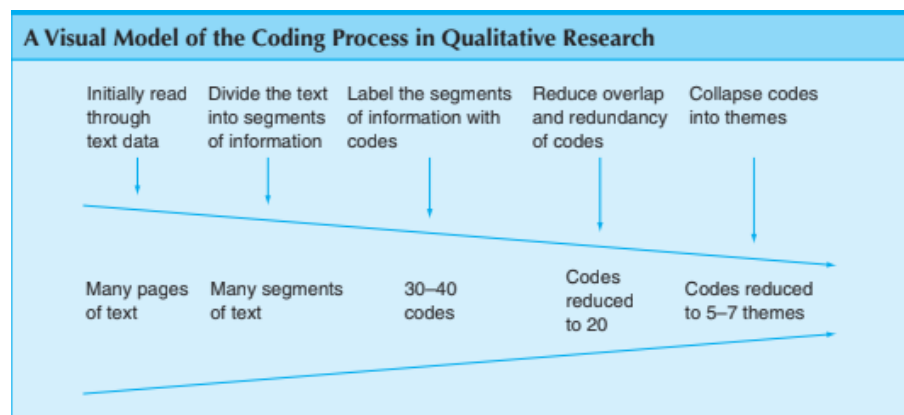


Figure 2
Creswell's Model of Coding Process

4. Findings

4.1. What is the self-efficacy level of Turkish EFL learners at a state university in terms of four language skills?

The first research question focused on the self-efficacy level of Turkish EFL learners at a state university in terms of four language skills. Table 1 represents the descriptive statistics of the findings of the self-efficacy questionnaire.

Table 1
Learners' Mean Scores of Self-Efficacy Levels Regarding Four Skills

Language skills	M	SD
Speaking	3.05	0.31
Writing	3.09	0.24
Reading	3.32	0.35
Listening	3.32	0.29
Total	3.19	0.31

Note. *N of participants = 130

The findings yielded a moderate level of self-efficacy ($M=3.19$). When each skill is examined specifically, learners had lower self-efficacy scores in terms of productive skills, namely speaking ($M=3.05$) and writing ($M=3.09$) when compared to receptive skills scores; listening and reading ($M=3.32$).

In addition to the quantitative data, the qualitative data gathered from the interviews confirms the questionnaire results. Table 2

represents the findings gathered from the eight participants. As can be seen in the table, six participants judged speaking as the least successful skill which is in line with the overall questionnaire results. However, writing is seen as the most successful skill among high efficacious students while reading is expressed as the most successful skill among low efficacious learners.

Table 2
Learners' Beliefs about the Most and the Least Successful Skills

	The most successful		The least successful	
High efficacious students	Writing	3	Speaking	3
	Listening & Reading	1	Listening	1
Low efficacious students	Reading	3	Speaking	3
	Speaking	1	Listening	1

4.2. What factors affect their self-efficacy beliefs regarding the language skills?

After obtaining the mean scores for each skill, the participants' scores were examined, and eight participants, with the highest (4 participants) and the lowest (4 participants) scores, were interviewed to attain in-depth data on what factors affected their self-efficacy beliefs. The interviews were

transcribed and analyzed by means of the qualitative content analysis scheme (Creswell, 2012). The findings of the study are displayed in two separate tables. Table 3 represents the frequency of the codes and themes derived from the analysis of the interviews with the high self-efficacious learners. Table 4 illustrates the frequency of the codes and themes gathered from

the analysis of the interviews with the low self-efficacious learners.

As can be seen in Table 3, the factors affecting high self-efficacious learners' self-efficacy beliefs were

classified as out-of-class practice and effort, personal characteristics, motivation to learn English and school-related factors.

Table 3
Findings Obtained After the Interviews with the High Self-Efficacious Learners

Themes	Codes	Frequency
Out-of-class practice & effort	Practice language skills via books, supplementary pack, internet	5
	Doing extra exercises	1
	Memorizing vocabulary	1
	Watching English films/serials	1
	Listening to English songs	1
Personal characteristics	Having self-confidence	4
	Not quitting but keeping trying	2
	Not afraid of making mistakes	1
	Not afraid of speaking & writing	1
Motivation to learn English	Wanting to learn English because it is important	3
	Dream of going abroad	1
	Getting high grades	1
School-related factors	Compulsory English at the department	2
	Efficacy of preparatory education	2
	2 nd year at school	1

The main factor that affects learners' having high self-efficacy is doing practice out-of-class and putting effort. Learners state that they do extra language practice from books, or their supplementary packs and by using the internet. Memorizing vocabulary, watching English films and serials as well as listening to English songs also boost their self-efficacy level. The extract below exemplifies the finding:

This is my 2nd year at preparatory school. The education was online last year, and I thought it didn't add anything to me, but I studied myself. I am reaping its fruit now. I did reading practice from a book last year. I checked the answers to the questions that I didn't know and maybe because I memorized words last year. I had a book, and did some exercises on the internet. (P1 – interview)

Another important factor that has an impact on learners' high self-efficacy level is their personal characteristics. Having self-confidence has an important effect on their level. Besides, some

learners set forth that keeping trying to learn instead of quitting and not being afraid of making mistakes while using the language have positively contributed to their self-efficacy levels.

One has to have some confidence in himself. In the same way, people should talk, even if they are wrong, or same for the spelling mistakes, instead of being afraid that I will make a mistake. We do not talk to the other person in order not to express ourselves wrongly, but this is actually wrong. We can correct our mistakes by learning. (P3 – interview)

Motivation to learn English is another emerging theme that impacts the high level of self-efficacy. Some students emphasize the importance of learning English which motivates them to learn the language well. The other motivational factors are the dream of going abroad and getting high grades.

For me, English is both a necessity and I have a dream of going abroad. That's why I work extra hard for English. (P4 – interview)

We all know the importance of English very well. I think I should learn all the details. I think that I need to further this in the future, and my plan is in this direction. (P2 – interview)

Participants also declared some school-related factors that lead them to become more self-efficacious such as studying the 2nd year at preparatory school, the achievements gained from the school, studying at a department which has a compulsory English preparation year and taking advantage of being a preparatory school student.

I think like this: we have studied English for about 8 years until this year, middle school, high

school etc. But still, I didn't think I had gone too far. That's why when I came here, I said, I have a good opportunity and I have to take advantage of it. That's why I wanted to learn English very much. That's why I wanted to learn English both for my own personal development and for the that will add to my department and my business in the future. (P2 - interview)

Table 4 illustrates the factors affecting low self-efficacious learners' self-efficacy beliefs, and are categorized as affective factors, incompetency and demotivational factors.

Table 4
Findings Obtained After the Interviews with the Low Self-Efficacious Learners

Themes	Codes	Frequency
Affective factors	Lack of self-confidence	2
	Not brave	1
	Not trusting herself/himself	1
	Feeling anxious/nervous while using the language	3
	Feeling stressful	1
Incompetency	Lack of English knowledge	2
	Lack of grammar knowledge	1
	Having low-level vocabulary knowledge	1
Demotivational factors	Feeling unsuccessful	2
	Lack of enthusiasm & hope	2
	2 nd year at preparatory school	1
	Having gap years	1
	Online education (pandemic)	1

The first theme derived from the analysis of the interviews was the affective factors. Half of the participants with low self-efficacy level stated that they did not have enough confidence. The others noted they did not trust themselves or were not brave enough, which leads them to be low self-efficacious learners.

At first, I don't feel confident about most things. Even if my exams are high, I think about how I got it and how I did it. (My self-efficacy level was) Low due to lack of self-confidence, I think. (P7 – interview)

Besides, three learners described how anxious and stressful they were while using the target language.

Speaking English is actually a big job for me. I'm really stressed out. My hands and feet are shaking. (P7 – interview)

I forget because I'm nervous. I forget the words; I forget the structures. It's all out of my mind. That's why I can't. (P5 – interview)

For example, I get very nervous and can't talk to people I don't know. I even pronounce the words very strange. (P8 – interview)

Two of the participants also mentioned about their lack of English knowledge. They believe they did not know the language very well. One of them specifically stated that s/he had lack of grammar knowledge, and another participant reported s/he

had a very low-level vocabulary knowledge in addition to their general English knowledge.

I lack in grammar; I need to concentrate on it. I don't know sentence patterns. (P5 – interview)

I don't think I have that much vocabulary. I have a hard time understanding it because I know lower level words. (P8 – interview)

The final theme derived from the interviews was the demotivational factors. As can be seen in the Table 3, two students said they felt unsuccessful and hopeless, and lost their enthusiasm towards language learning. A participant not only reported being a second-year student at preparatory class negatively affected him/her, but also online education due to the pandemic was also seen as a factor by the same participant. Another participant stated having a two-year gap lowered his self-efficacy beliefs.

I am studying the preparatory class for the second time. The first time I was studying it, I was very enthusiastic. But because it was online, due to the pandemic process, I couldn't attend the classes, I felt away. But it was low because it became a necessity when you study it for the second time. (P6 – interview)

5. Discussion

This study investigated Turkish EFL learners' self-efficacy levels across four language skills along with the factors that affect their beliefs. Quantitative findings displayed a moderate overall self-efficacy level among elementary level learners ($M=3.19$). In addition, the results indicated that the learners had lower-level of self-efficacy with regard to the productive skills, namely speaking ($M=3.05$) and writing ($M=3.09$) when compared to receptive skills ($M=3.32$). That is, learners reflected a relatively higher efficacy level in reading and listening skills, which aligns with prior research showing that learners often feel more confident in receptive skills. For example, Apridayani and Teo's (2021) study displayed similar findings among A2 level Tai EFL students from different majors, who demonstrated higher self-efficacy in reading and listening than in speaking and writing. In another study, Al-Khresheh (2024) reported moderate level of self-

efficacy among Saudi university students with reading ranked highest whereas speaking lowest.

Nonetheless, some studies reflect differing results. For example, Genç et al. (2016) conducted a study with 194 university students majoring in English Language Teacher Training Program at a state university in Türkiye. They implemented the same English self-efficacy questionnaire to their target group, and found that the participants were more efficacious in terms of reading and speaking than listening and writing. Similarly, the findings of the present study contradict those of other research (Kitikanan & Sasimonton, 2017; Su et al., 2018; Truong & Wang, 2019), which reported higher levels of self-efficacy in productive skills. For instance, Kitikanan and Sasimonton (2017), working with fourth-year English majors, found that participants demonstrated higher efficacy in speaking and writing than in reading and listening.

The main reason for these differences may be related to participants' academic backgrounds. The participants in the present study were preparatory school students from various disciplines, whereas those in the aforementioned studies were majoring in English. This distinction may also reflect differences in proficiency levels and exposure to the target language. Moreover, the year of study may play a role, as increased experience with English is likely to enhance learners' self-efficacy over time.

The findings of this present study can be more meaningfully interpreted when situated within the specific context of preparatory language education in Türkiye. The relatively higher self-efficacy in receptive skills may be linked to the instructional emphasis on input-based learning and exam-oriented practices, where reading and listening are more frequently assessed and practiced in structured formats. In contrast, lower self-efficacy in productive skills, particularly speaking, appears to be associated with limited opportunities for authentic language use, fear of negative evaluation, and learners' prior educational experiences, which often prioritize accuracy over communication.

The qualitative findings further suggest that self-efficacy is not merely an individual belief but is shaped by an interplay of institutional structures such as preparatory programs and curriculum

design, prior learning histories, and affective experiences. To illustrate, students who had experienced disruptions such as online education during the pandemic reported lower self-efficacy, indicating the role of continuity and engagement in shaping efficacy beliefs. Likewise, one of the main factors contributing to Turkish students' low self-efficacy in productive skills (speaking and writing) may be the exam-oriented nature of the high-stakes tests they take, such as the LGS and YKS, prior to entering university. These findings emphasize that self-efficacy should be understood as a contextually embedded and dynamically constructed phenomenon, rather than a stable individual trait.

Additionally, in the qualitative phase of the study, eight participants were interviewed to explore the factors influencing their self-efficacy beliefs. Based on the English Self-Efficacy Scale, four of these participants exhibited high levels of self-efficacy, while the remaining four showed low levels. As acknowledged in the literature, participants' responses revealed that effortful engagement in out-of-class activities, personal attributes, and motivational factors contributed to higher self-efficacy. In contrast, learners with low self-efficacy identified affective factors such as anxiety, stress, lack of confidence, and limited linguistic knowledge as major obstacles. Supporting this, Wang et al. (2013) stated that learners who scored higher on the QESE invested more effort in learning. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) reported that learners with higher self-efficacy experienced more positive emotions and less anxiety, aligning with the present findings.

Furthermore, Xu et al. (2024) showed that self-efficacy fully mediated the effects of self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies on cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social engagement. This corresponds with the current study, in which high self-efficacious learners demonstrated the ability to regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to pursue their goals such as studying abroad or achieving high grades. Genç et al. (2016) also found that high self-efficacious learners valued grammatical knowledge and accuracy and engaged in out-of-class practices, such as guessing word

meanings and using audio materials, which is consistent with the present participants' accounts.

Overall, high self-efficacious learners perceived challenging tasks not as threats but as opportunities to improve and pursued ambitious goals (Bandura, 1986). The participants with high self-efficacy in this study demonstrated resilience, viewing failure as a learning opportunity, for example, repeating a year or continuing practice outside the classroom. Conversely, Bandura (1994) noted that low self-efficacious learners tend to dwell on personal shortcomings when facing setbacks. Similarly, Pajares and Schunk (2001) highlighted that such learners avoid difficult tasks, perceiving them as threats to their self-worth, a pattern mirrored by low self-efficacious participants in this study, who often cited a lack of courage and self-confidence. This tendency can also be associated with learners' fear of social judgment, which can further inhibit their willingness to engage in productive language use.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated the self-efficacy levels of elementary-level EFL learners at a state university in Turkey and explored the underlying factors influencing these beliefs. The quantitative findings revealed a moderate level of self-efficacy, with participants reporting higher efficacy in receptive skills (reading and listening) and lower efficacy in productive skills (speaking and writing). The qualitative analysis highlighted that personal traits such as self-confidence, courage, low anxiety, persistence, and a willingness to make mistakes, significantly contributed to learners' self-efficacy beliefs. Furthermore, motivation and sustained effort, especially outside the classroom, were found to be important contributing factors. As Bandura (1986) emphasized, personal factors like beliefs and affective states shape behavior, which aligns with the findings of this study.

These results carry several pedagogical implications for EFL instruction, particularly in higher education contexts. First, instructors should aim to increase students' awareness of their own self-efficacy and make deliberate efforts to enhance it by building learners' self-confidence and reducing

anxiety through effective feedback and supportive guidance. As Pajares (2009) noted, teachers play a crucial role in the development of learners' self-efficacy beliefs. Similarly, Schunk and Ertmer (2000) underscored the importance of appropriate praise, encouragement, and accurate assessment in fostering student efficacy.

Second, a low-stress, supportive, and emotionally safe classroom environment can further strengthen learners' sense of efficacy. Cultivating a positive atmosphere may evoke emotions such as hope, enthusiasm, confidence, and resilience, which are essential for effective language learning.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of language practice beyond the classroom. Curriculum designers should consider integrating components that encourage and support extra-curricular language activities, which can enhance learners' perceived competence and boost their self-efficacy over time.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to elementary-level students at a single institution. Future research could involve participants across multiple proficiency levels to enable broader generalizations. Second, data for the qualitative phase were collected through one-time interviews with a small number of participants. Further studies could expand qualitative data collection through multiple interviews, reflection journals, or classroom observations to deepen the analysis and improve validity.

Taking these limitations into account, future research can build on the current study by employing a larger and more diverse sample and richer data sources to further explore the complex interplay between language learning and self-efficacy beliefs.

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Declaration

The author declares that this manuscript is original and has not been published or submitted elsewhere.

Ethical Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with general ethical research principles. All participants gave informed consent.

AI Disclosure Statement

No AI-generated content was employed in the development of this manuscript. However, ChatGPT was used solely for language editing purposes.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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