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## Feature Article

# Students' Levels of Confidence in Using English, Self-Perceptions of Ability, and Perceptions of Course Difficulty

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Students' perceptions of their own ability to learn or successfully complete tasks at a specific level can have a wide range of impacts on their learning. While students' self-perceptions of English ability and levels of confidence in using English have been investigated, their connection to students' perceptions of difficulty has been relatively under-documented. Furthermore, students' attitudes towards the difficulty of full courses have not received as much attention as their perceptions of the difficulty of isolated tasks. This paper examines the relationship between 261 students' attitudes towards the difficulty of the materials focusing on different English skills in the EFL courses they enrolled in at a private Japanese university and their levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability. The impact of gender and place of origin on those perceptions is also analysed.

学生が自身の学習能力や、あるいはある特定レベルの課題を的確にこなす能力についての学生自身のどのように認識は、しているか、ということは学習そのものに大きく影響を与えます。英語力や英語使用に対する自信の度合いに関する学生の自己認識については、これまでもについては研究調査されてきた。しかし、これらと学生の困難難易度についての学生との関連を示す文献は十分であるとは言えないでしょう。さらに、授業全体の難易度コースの全過程を通して困難についての学生への考えという点は姿勢については、個々の課題の難易度について

でのをこなすことに対する認識ほどには注目されてこなかったいません。本稿この論文では、日本のある私立大学におけるのEFLの授業で使われた、コースにおける様々な英語の技能に焦点を当てた学習材料の難易度についてのための課題に立ち向かう261人の学生の考え姿勢と彼らの自信の度合いと能力についての対する自己認識との関係性をについて考察するしています。また、性差や出身地がこれらの認識に与える影響についても分析するされています。

The constructivist paradigm of education indicates that increasing student involvement in their own learning can lead to improved learning outcomes (Guthrie et al., 2004). Students' levels of confidence and beliefs about their own abilities can be a barrier to engagement, and thus, effective learning. Students that are overconfident can become frustrated at their perceived lack of progress, while students that lack confidence can easily become demotivated and give up (Savaşç, 2014).

Students' perceptions of their own ability to learn or successfully complete tasks at a specific level, known as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), influence academic motivation (Covington, 1992; Konnel & Bjork, 2007), learning (Seifert, 2004), task choice, effort, persistence, resilience, future courses of action, and achievement (Schunk & Pajares, 2002; Tavani & Losh, 2003). Students that have high levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability participate and engage in tasks more readily, work harder, persist longer when they encounter difficulties, achieve at a higher level (Schunk & Parajes, 2009), display less apprehension and anxiety (Parajes, 2002), and have greater self-regulatory skills (Zimmerman, 2000).

Factors that influence students' levels of confidence and perceptions of ability include social comparisons, degrees of student autonomy, and learning and teaching styles (Schunk & Parajes, 2009). Self-efficacy has been found to decline as students progress through the education system due to greater competition among students and increased social-comparative processes, such as test ranking (Jacobs et al., 2002). Classrooms that encourage social comparison, via processes such as announcing relative test performance, tend to lower the self-efficacy of students who perform at a lower level than their peers (Pintrich

& Schunk, 1996), a phenomenon accentuated by educational organisations streaming students by ability (Watt, 2004).

Pintrich and Garcia (1991) claim that attempts to teach strategies that promote meaningful cognitive engagement have a stronger impact when students have greater levels of confidence and perceptions of their own ability. If this is correct, then aiding the development of these factors should be a central part of educational courses, as they can positively influence motivation and academic achievement (Greene & Miller, 1996). Educators should encourage the early development of their students' positive self-beliefs and try to ensure they become automatic and self-perpetuating, determining the ways in which, and to what extent, they use the knowledge and skills they have learned (Parajes, 2002).

Assessing students' levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability can provide educators with valuable insights into their learners' academic motivation, behaviour, and future choices. Hackett (1995) reported that unrealistically negative perceptions of self-efficacy can have a greater impact on choices to avoid academic courses and subsequent careers than actual lack of ability. This tendency should be treated seriously, especially as low levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability are internal and therefore difficult to overcome (Graham, 2006).

Confidence and ability are commonly viewed as distinct variables that have a direct positive relationship such that if one increases, so will the other (Butler & Lumpe, 2008; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). While motivation is also included in research focused on levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability (Wu et al., 2011), their relation to other factors such as perceptions of difficulty are commonly omitted (Li et al., 2007).

As students' levels of proficiency rise, they generally perceive tasks as less difficult (Hu, 2011), and there is some evidence supporting an inverse relationship between perceptions of task difficulty and self-perceptions of ability (Mangos & Steele-Johnson, 2001). However, this is not always reflected in students' performance levels (Lee & Tajino, 2008). Furthermore, perceptions of the difficulty of entire courses are often not investigated, with most focus being placed on successful completion of isolated tasks and consequent attitudes

towards difficulty at the task level.

Research into the relationship between gender and self-efficacy has generally reported that males indicate greater levels of confidence than females in academic areas related to mathematics, science, and technology (Meece, 1991; Wigfield et al., 2006), despite reported gender achievement gaps in these fields diminishing or disappearing in recent years (Eisenberg et al., 1996; UNESCO, 2016). Conversely, in areas related to languages and arts, male and female students exhibit similar levels of confidence despite the tendency for female students to outperform their male counterparts (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). However, there is a gap in the literature for research which adequately covers the relationship between gender and students' perceptions of difficulty and self-efficacy (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007).

Despite findings that culture has a large impact on learning (UNESCO, 2016), compared to the amount of research into gender and self-efficacy, relatively few studies have been published that investigate the impact ethnicity has on levels of confidence, self-perceptions of ability, and perceptions of difficulty, especially in Japan. However, Heine et al. (2001) found that Japanese students demonstrated a stronger self-improvement response to task failure when compared to North American students due in part to the relatively higher weighting placed on effort compared to performance in Japanese culture.

The relative lack of research into the impact ethnicity has on levels of confidence, self-perceptions of ability, and perceptions of difficulty when studying English as a foreign language is significant given the growth in the population of international students at Japanese universities since the mid-1980s (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002). This is of particular interest at universities where international students and Japanese students have the opportunity to study together. Thus, it is important to investigate how individual differences such as gender and place of origin impact on students' perceptions (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Rifkin, 2000).

Consequently, in this paper, the relationship between students' attitudes towards the difficulty of the materials focusing on different English skills in the EFL courses they enrolled in at a private Japanese university and their levels

of confidence and self-perceptions of ability are investigated, alongside overall perceptions of course difficulty. An analysis into the impact gender and place of origin have on those attitudes is also undertaken, with the following research questions being asked:

1. What are students' overall perceptions of the difficulty of the courses they enrolled in?
2. What are the connections between levels of confidence, self-perceptions of ability, and perceptions of the difficulty of materials focusing on the following: (i) reading; (ii) speaking; (iii) listening; (iv) writing; (v) vocabulary?
3. How do the variables of gender and place of origin impact on students' attitudes?

## **Methods**

The study participants consisted of 261 students (171 male, 90 female; median age 20) from Japan, South Asia (Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh), South-East Asia (Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines), and East Asia excluding Japan (China and Taiwan) attending a private four-year university in Japan. The large majority of participants (91%) were in their freshman or sophomore year (Table 1). All of the international students must have achieved level N2 in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test or have been highly recommended by a teacher at their Japanese language school. All students, Japanese and international, are required to take English language classes during their first two years of study at the university. These classes are not segregated by nationality, and many courses include a mix of nationalities.

In order to measure perceptions and attitudes, students were asked to complete a 26-item questionnaire during the final lesson of their course. The questionnaire consisted of three items of demographic data, eight modified Likert scale items relating to overall perceptions of course difficulty, and 15 modified Likert scale items relating to students' levels of confidence in using English, self-perceptions of English ability, and perceptions of the difficulty of the materials (which focused on English reading, speaking, listening, writing, and vocabulary).

Table 1  
*Distribution of Participants' Place of Origin and Grade*

Place of origin	No. of Participants	Academic Year	No. of Participants
Japan	199	First Year - Freshman	113
South Asia	38	Second Year - Sophomore	125
South-East Asia	12	Third Year - Junior	18
East Asia (excluding Japan)	11	Fourth Year - Senior	5
Not Given	1		
Total	261	Total	261

The data was collected anonymously during the final lesson of the course as it was hoped that this would encourage the students to participate voluntarily, rather than out of a feeling of obligation or belief that it was a necessary part of the course. Furthermore, it was hoped that this timing would allow students the chance to adequately reflect on their experiences throughout the course. The classes were all either elective or semi-elective subjects with a focus on communicative English, and the class sizes ranged from eight to twenty-five with a mix of international and Japanese students. The courses included in this study were taught by L1 native-English-speaking teachers who had at least nine years teaching experience in Japan. Of the 276 questionnaires distributed, 261 were returned, representing a 94.5% response rate.

Independent-samples t-tests were undertaken to assess the statistical significance of the findings. Two levels of significance are reported, those with an alpha ( $p$ ) of .01 (denoted with a double asterisk), and those at an alpha ( $p$ ) of .05 (denoted with a single asterisk). For items found to be statistically significant, Hedge's  $g$  tests were conducted to establish effect size. Hedge's  $g$ -test was used because it provides more accurate results for relatively small sample sizes (Grissom & Kim, 2005; McGrath & Meyer, 2006) than Cohen's  $d$ . While they are not recognised as definitive benchmarks (Thompson, 2007), the effect sizes were interpreted as small ( $g = 0.2$ ), medium ( $g = 0.5$ ), and large ( $g = 0.8$ )

based on Cohen's (1998) suggestions. Furthermore, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to investigate students' perceptions in relation to the five different aspects of English.

Despite some criticism of self-report methodologies (e.g., Spector, 2006), it has been argued that students above secondary level can effectively comprehend, reflect on, and report their own characteristics (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Further research has indicated that self-perceptions of ability and levels of confidence accurately predict a variety of learning factors, including goal orientation and actual outcomes (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008; Leach et al., 2003). While students' levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability may be poorly correlated with external evaluations of the same factors (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000), it is the students' own perceptions of these variables that has the greatest impact on the level of effort they will invest in their education (Kember, 2004).

## **Results**

### **Overall perceptions of course difficulty**

Items 19 through 26 of the questionnaire investigated the students' opinions of the difficulty of the specific courses they had taken via 5-point Likert scales. The results obtained are presented in Table 2.

The large standard deviations observed in the responses indicate that there is a diversity of opinion. However, there appears to be a trend towards mild disagreement with the statement contents of items 19, 20, and 22 through 25, and a trend towards mild agreement with the statement contents of item 26.

### **Relationship between levels of confidence, self-perceptions of ability, and perceptions of difficulty of courses taken**

In items 4 through 18 of the questionnaire students were asked to indicate their self-perceived ability, levels of confidence, and perceived difficulty of course materials relating to English reading, speaking, listening, writing and vocabulary on a 10-point modified Likert scale. The results relating to gender are summarised in Table 3.

Results related to vocabulary presented the greatest statistically significant

Table 2  
*Overall Perceptions of Course Difficulty with the Variable of Gender*

Item	Overall		Male		Female		<i>p</i>	<i>g</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
19. I was surprised by how difficult this course was.	2.63	1.02	2.68	1.02	2.53	1.03	0.144	–
20. I thought this course would be easier.	2.64	0.99	2.65	0.97	2.61	1.05	0.374	–
21. I thought this course would be more difficult.	2.91	0.99	2.8	0.97	3.1	1.01	0.011*	0.305
22. I wanted this course to be easier.	2.58	1.14	2.68	1.1	2.41	1.21	0.040*	0.237
23. I wanted this course to be more difficult.	2.75	1.01	2.76	0.96	2.72	1.1	0.395	–
24. This course should be easier.	2.47	0.99	2.52	0.98	2.39	1.01	0.157	–
25. This course should be more difficult.	2.87	0.97	2.93	0.94	2.76	1.02	0.087	–
26. The level of this course was just right.	3.48	1.01	3.45	1.02	3.54	1	0.24	–

\* =  $p < .05$

difference, with both male and female students indicating much higher perceptions of difficulty when compared to their levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability. Male students indicated significantly greater perceptions of difficulty in relation to English speaking and writing when compared to their levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability. Conversely, Female students indicated significantly greater levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability compared to their perceptions of difficulty in relation to Listening with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests indicating self-perceptions of ability and perceptions of difficulty to be different with an alpha of 0.0366.



Table 3

*Relationships Between Levels of Confidence, Self-perceptions of Ability, and Perceived Difficulty of Course Materials for Five Aspects of English with the Variable of Gender*

Aspects of English		Levels of confidence		Self-perceptions of ability		Perceived difficulty of course materials		F	p
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Reading	Male	5.4	2.16	5.54	1.96	5.55	2.02	0.28	0.753
	Female	5.13	1.94	5.54	1.63	5.28	1.94	1.14	0.321
	Overall	5.31	2.09	5.54	1.85	5.46	2	0.92	0.398
Speaking	Male	5.04	2.13	5.08	1.86	5.58	2.1	3.7	0.025*
	Female	5.09	2.28	5.4	1.93	5.2	1.85	0.54	0.583
	Overall	5.06	2.18	5.19	1.89	5.45	2.02	2.45	0.087
Listening	Male	5.36	2.09	5.35	2.04	5.57	2.08	0.61	0.545
	Female	5.21	2.07	5.7	1.86	4.97	1.99	3.19	0.043*
	Overall	5.31	2.08	5.47	1.98	5.36	2.06	0.44	0.645
Writing	Male	4.82	2.08	4.96	1.97	5.54	2.08	5.9	0.003*
	Female	4.82	2.12	4.93	1.87	5.31	1.72	1.63	0.198
	Overall	4.82	2.09	4.95	1.93	5.46	1.96	7.26	0.001*
Vocabulary	Male	4.72	2.06	4.61	1.83	5.58	1.97	12.47	0.000*
	Female	4.26	1.89	4.42	1.77	5.42	1.98	10.04	0.000*
	Overall	4.56	2.01	4.55	1.81	5.52	1.97	21.7	0.000*

\* =  $p < .05$

With regard to the impact of place of origin on students' perceptions, the results in Table 4 indicate that international students had significantly greater levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability compared to their perceived levels of difficulty in reading. However, the opposite was indicated in relation to listening.

Table 4

*Relationships Between Levels of Confidence, Self-perceptions of Ability, and Perceived Difficulty of Course Materials for Five Aspects of English with the Variable of Place of Origin*

<u>Aspects of English</u>		Levels of confidence		Self-perceptions of ability		Perceived difficulty of materials		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
		<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>		
Reading	Japanese	5.36	1.81	5.08	2.06	5.52	1.97	2.6	0.753
	International	6.15	1.87	6.05	2	5.24	2.08	3.85	0.023*
	Overall	5.31	2.09	5.54	1.85	5.46	2	0.92	0.398
Speaking	Japanese	5.1	1.92	4.91	2.26	5.58	2.04	5.49	0.004*
	International	5.48	1.79	5.52	1.84	5.02	1.91	1.38	0.254
	Overall	5.06	2.18	5.19	1.89	5.45	2.02	2.45	0.087
Listening	Japanese	5.4	1.98	5.17	2.1	5.49	2.05	1.3	0.274
	International	5.72	1.99	5.76	1.96	4.94	2.07	3.24	0.042*
	Overall	5.31	2.08	5.47	1.98	5.36	2.06	0.44	0.645
Writing	Japanese	4.73	1.93	4.56	2.07	5.61	2	15.79	0.000*
	International	5.66	1.77	5.66	1.92	4.96	1.75	3.02	0.051
	Overall	4.28	2.09	4.95	1.93	5.46	1.96	7.26	0.001*
Vocabulary	Japanese	4.41	1.82	4.4	2.08	5.65	2	22.81	0.000*
	International	4.97	1.74	5.05	1.68	5.13	1.85	0.13	0.881
	Overall	4.56	2.01	4.55	1.81	5.52	1.97	21.7	0.000*

\* =  $p < .05$

Japanese students indicated significantly greater perceptions of difficulty compared to their levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability in terms of speaking, writing, and vocabulary.

Overall, the participants indicated significantly higher perceptions of

difficulty compared to their levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability in relation to writing and vocabulary. However, international students actually indicated an opposite trend with regards to writing, but this narrowly failed to reach significance ( $p = 0.051$ ).

Table 5 indicates that gender significantly impacted only on students' perceptions of the difficulty of the listening materials of their courses, with male students indicating they were more difficult than Female students. Conducting a Hedge's  $g$  test on this item produced an effect size of  $g = 0.292752$ , which is interpreted as a small effect based on Cohen's (1998) suggestions.

The results displayed in Table 6 indicate that place of origin had a much greater impact on perceptions with 12 of the 15 items achieving significance. The results indicate that, compared to their Japanese classmates, international students were significantly more confident in relation to reading, writing, and vocabulary, had significantly higher self-perceptions of ability in all five aspects of English, and perceived the course materials as significantly less difficult in all of the aspects of English but reading. However, it must be noted that effect sizes were small to medium.

### **Impact of gender and place of origin on students' attitudes**

The only items that produced statistically significant differences between male and female students were items 21 and 22, which indicated that female students had expected the courses they had enrolled in would be more difficult and that male students wanted their courses to be easier. However, Hedge's  $g$  for both of these items was  $< 0.5$ , which indicates small effect sizes based on Cohen's (1998) suggestions.

The results displayed in Table 7 illustrate that only two of the items (19 and 20) produced statistically significant differences between Japanese and international students. The results indicated that international students were retrospectively more surprised by how difficult their courses were, whereas the Japanese students had initially anticipated that their courses would be easier than they were. Again, effect sizes for both of these items were small.

To better interpret the overall relationships between items 19 through 26

Table 5  
*Impact of Gender on Students' Perceptions*

		Male		Female			
	<u>Aspects of English</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<i>p</i>	<i>g</i>
Levels of confidence	Reading	5.4	2.16	5.13	1.94	0.3214	–
	Speaking	5.04	2.13	5.09	2.28	0.8605	–
	Listening	5.36	2.09	5.21	2.07	0.5808	–
	Writing	4.82	2.08	4.82	2.12	1	–
	Vocabulary	4.72	2.06	4.26	1.89	0.079	–
Self-perceptions of ability	Reading	5.54	1.96	5.54	1.63	1	–
	Speaking	5.08	1.86	5.4	1.93	0.1934	–
	Listening	5.35	2.04	5.7	1.86	0.1758	–
	Writing	4.96	1.97	4.93	1.87	0.9054	–
	Vocabulary	4.61	1.83	4.42	1.77	0.4208	–
Perceived difficulty of course materials	Reading	5.55	2.02	5.28	1.94	0.2991	–
	Speaking	5.58	2.1	5.2	1.85	0.1493	–
	Listening	5.57	2.08	4.97	1.99	0.0254*	0.293
	Writing	5.54	2.08	5.31	1.72	0.3693	–
	Vocabulary	5.58	1.97	5.42	1.98	0.5341	–

\* =  $p < .05$

that may be interpreted as contradictory or mutually exclusive, paired items were further analysed via Student's *t*-Tests with an alpha of 0.01. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 8.

When the students considered their English courses, they reported that they had expected the course to be harder (items 19 and 20, and items 20 and 21), but that the course level was appropriate (items 24 and 26, and items 25 and 26).

Table 6  
Impact of Place of Origin on Students' Perceptions

		Japan		International			
	Aspects of English	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>p</i>	<i>g</i>
Levels of confidence	Reading	5.36	1.81	6.15	1.87	0.0022*	0.433
	Speaking	5.1	1.92	5.48	1.79	0.0738	–
	Listening	5.4	1.98	5.72	1.99	0.1352	–
	Writing	4.73	1.93	5.66	1.77	0.0003*	0.491
	Vocabulary	4.41	1.82	4.97	1.74	0.0163*	0.311
Self-perceptions of ability	Reading	5.08	2.06	6.05	2	0.0006*	0.474
	Speaking	4.91	2.26	5.52	1.84	0.0180*	0.281
	Listening	5.17	2.1	5.76	1.96	0.0226*	0.285
	Writing	4.56	2.07	5.66	1.92	0.0001*	0.54
	Vocabulary	4.4	2.08	5.05	1.68	0.0073*	0.326
Perceived difficulty of course materials	Reading	5.52	1.97	5.24	2.08	0.1749	–
	Speaking	5.58	2.04	5.02	1.91	0.0268*	0.279
	Listening	5.49	2.05	4.94	2.07	0.0330*	0.268
	Writing	5.61	2	4.96	1.75	0.0075*	0.334
	Vocabulary	5.65	2	5.13	1.85	0.0309*	0.265

\* =  $p < .05$

Table 7  
*Overall Perceptions of Course Difficulty with the Variable of Place of Origin*

Item	Overall		Japanese		International		<i>p</i>	<i>g</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
19. I was surprised by how difficult this course was.	2.63	1.02	2.56	1	2.84	1.09	0.037*	0.274
20. I thought this course would be easier.	2.64	0.99	2.7	0.94	2.43	1.14	0.050*	0.273
21. I thought this course would be more difficult.	2.91	0.99	2.9	0.95	2.94	1.13	0.402	–
22. I wanted this course to be easier.	2.58	1.14	2.59	1.09	2.57	1.3	0.468	–
23. I wanted this course to be more difficult.	2.75	1.01	2.75	0.99	2.73	1.09	0.459	–
24. This course should be easier.	2.47	0.99	2.52	0.99	2.34	0.98	0.105	–
25. This course should be more difficult.	2.87	0.97	2.85	0.94	2.92	1.06	0.333	–
26. The level of this course was just right.	3.48	1.01	3.49	1.03	3.45	0.95	0.381	–

\* =  $p < .05$

Table 8  
*p-Values for Paired Item t-Tests*

Item Pair	<i>p</i>	<i>g</i>
19 and 20	0.91	–
19 and 21	0.001*	0.279
20 and 21	0.001*	0.272
22 and 23	0.072	–
24 and 26	0.000*	1.01
25 and 26	0.000*	0.616

\* =  $p < .05$

## **Discussion**

Overall, the participants indicated significantly greater perceptions of course difficulty when compared to their levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability in relation to writing and vocabulary. This may be attributed to the use of sentence-level writing (which the writing materials in these courses focused on) and vocabulary exercises often having dichotomous right/wrong answers. Consequently, students may feel that due to the ease at which they can ascertain whether they have been successful, the materials are actually more difficult. However, when attempting materials that focus on the English skills of speaking, listening, and reading, students are able to adopt a variety of strategies, such as the use of short – even single-word – answers, which can facilitate communication and the ability to complete lesson tasks at least minimally.

Male students indicated significantly greater perceptions of course difficulty when compared to their levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability in relation to speaking, writing, and vocabulary, but this was only true for female students concerning vocabulary. In relation to productive English skills, these findings suggest that female students perceive less distance among the three variables.

The similar levels of reported confidence and self-perceptions of ability in different areas of English corroborate previous research which indicated that male and female students tend to exhibit similar levels of confidence in areas related to languages (Parajes, 2002). They further support previous findings that male and female students generally hold similar views about language learning in general (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007), despite sometimes viewing their roles as EFL learners differently (Zhang, 2000). Where they vary from prior research is in indicating that there are some gendered differences in perceptions of difficulty.

For overall perceptions of course difficulty, despite the general agreement that the level of the courses were appropriate, female students indicated that they had thought their courses would be more difficult while male students reported a desire for easier courses. This suggests that female students would prefer the courses they enroll in to be more demanding than male students would.

Compared to gender, students' place of origin produced more noticeable

and significant differences in perceptions. International students indicated significantly greater perceptions of course difficulty only when compared to their levels of confidence and self-perceptions of ability for one of the five aspects of English (listening), whereas Japanese students indicated this to be true for three of the aspects (speaking, writing, and vocabulary).

International students were significantly more confident in reading, writing, and vocabulary. In terms of self-perceptions of ability, international students indicated significantly greater self-perceptions of ability than Japanese students on all of the five aspects of English. Likewise, Japanese students indicated significantly greater levels of course difficulty for all of the aspects of English except for reading. This may be a result of international students having a higher average age and experience of living and communicating in a foreign country, which builds confidence. Moreover, having devoted several years to learning Japanese, it is possible that they are more able to accurately assess their language learning ability. In addition, research has shown that Japanese students often under-estimate their abilities (Heine et al, 2001). A further factor contributing to lower levels of reported confidence and perceived ability compared to perceptions of course difficulty among Japanese students may be the greater emphasis placed on reading over other aspects of English in the Japanese senior high school classroom (Burden, 2001; Murphey & Sasaki, 1998).

Despite the findings outlined in relation to ethnicity above, international students actually indicated greater retrospective surprise at how difficult their courses were. However, this finding was seemingly contradicted by the result that many Japanese students indicated they had prospectively thought their courses would be easier. Unfortunately, the lack of qualitative data in this study means that analysis into what the students actually found difficult cannot be conducted.

The results outlined in this investigation do have important implications for English language educators, but it is important to acknowledge their limitations. Despite the diversity of place of origin of the participants, the perceptions of students from only one university were investigated, and as such, this reduces the overall general effect size of the findings. Furthermore, there is a large skew towards students in their freshman and sophomore years, which also reduces



the general effect size of the findings. This is a result of more focus being placed on thesis writing and job seeking for third- and fourth-year Japanese students reducing the opportunities to study English, a common phenomenon in both secondary and tertiary education in Japan (Burden, 2001; Bury & Oka, 2017). Also, variables that could have impacted on students' perceptions, including class size, students' previous language learning experiences, and teacher background, were not taken into consideration.

A further constraint in this study was that, due to the anonymous collection of student data, it was not possible to link students' self-assessed ability and confidence levels with their course test scores or independent assessments of their ability such as TOEIC scores. A possible solution to this would be to conduct interviews with the participants, which would allow more in-depth analysis to be carried out. Consequently, it is suggested that further research that includes the use of interviews and possibly pre- and mid-course questionnaires be undertaken at other colleges and universities to strengthen the scope of the findings and to gain further insights into English as a Foreign Language students in general.

Finally, while this study was able to identify gendered differences in perceptions of course difficulty, it was not able to ascertain why these differences exist. Consequently, further research is necessary in order to develop a better understanding of the source of these gendered differences in perceptions of course difficulty.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the thoughts and attitudes of learners can greatly benefit teachers, especially with multinational classes in the Japanese context. Thus, it is important to understand how different groups perceive their own strengths and weaknesses, levels of confidence, and perceptions of difficulty.

This study has attempted to add to the current literature by investigating students' perceptions in the context of a Japanese university. It was found that students' place of origin had a much greater impact on perceptions than gender, with international students indicating significantly higher levels of confidence

and self-perceptions of ability, and Japanese students indicating greater perceptions of difficulty.

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