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Exploring Changes in Academic Self-Concept in Ability-Grouped English Classes

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Abstract

The study aims to assess changes of domain-specific self-concept among homogeneously grouped EFL students over time. Subjects comprised 126 college freshmen placed into three different proficiency levels for English instruction. The academic self-concept scale used in the study was composed of two subscales to measure students' academic confidence and academic effort. Statistical methods were conducted to determine: (1) whether there are any significant differences in academic self-concept among students of different ability levels at the initial stage of the grouping practice, (2) whether there are any significant changes in EFL students' academic self-concept during the one-year study, and (3) whether proficiency level effect on students' changes in academic self-concept is significant. The results indicate that for the full sample academic confidence and overall academic self-concept significantly changed over time, whereas there was no significant difference in perceived academic effort. The main level effect was found to be highly significant. Students placed in the lower ability level had significantly lower perceived academic self-concept than their average and above-average counterparts. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the

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academic confidence and overall English self-concept of low-ability students showed the largest improvement during the study, while those of the high-performing students remained quite stable over time.

Keywords: Academic Self-Concept, Academic Achievement, Ability Grouping

1. Introduction

Researchers in both educational psychology and developmental psychology have long been interested in self-concept. However, there is no agreed-upon definition of this term. Self-concept is usually defined as the perceptions people have of themselves, but self-perceptions can be described using terms such as self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Despite a lack of clear distinction among these self-related perceptions, current researchers agree that self-concept has a multidimensional nature (Bong and Skaalvik, 2003; Marsh, Byrne and Shavelson, 1988; Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton, 1976). Researchers also agree that self-concept is not innate, but rather it is formed through an individual's experiences and interaction with the environment (Bong and Clark, 1999; Bong and Skaalvik, 2003; Marsh and Shavelson, 1985), where "significant others" play an important role (Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton, 1976; Sanchez and Roda, 2003). Sanchez and Roda (2003) defined self-concept as a component of human personality development. It is developed through the process of self-reflection and is susceptible to change. Shavelson et al. (1976) noted that self-concept can be described as an organized, multifaceted, hierarchical, and developmental construct, in which general self-concept is at the top of the hierarchy, whereas academic self-concept is a subcomponent of general self-concept and is further divided into four subclasses: English, history, math, and science. They reported that self-concept tends to become increasingly differentiated with age.

(1) Changes in Academic Self-Concept

According to Sanchez and Roda (2003), self-concept on the lower hierarchical end becomes not only more specific but also more subject to change. Liu and Wang (2005) suggested that students' academic self-concept tends to decline from early to mid-adolescence as this can be a difficult phase of self-questioning and adjustment. A similar finding was obtained by Marsh (1989), who suggested that self-concept reaches its lowest point in middle adolescence. However, he also found that self-concept increases through early adulthood. Guay et al. (2003) contended that as elementary students grow older, their academic self-concept becomes more stable. Also, the relation

between academic self-concept and achievement becomes stronger with age. There are some conflicting results regarding the academic self-concept/achievement relation for students in secondary schools. Some research studies have found a stronger correlation between academic self-concept and achievement as students move through the grades (Marsh et al., 2002), whereas others have found that this correlation becomes weaker (Marsh and Yeung, 1997).

Many researchers (e.g., De Fraine et al., 2007) have suggested that the causal direction of academic self-concept and achievement vary with age. The academic self-concept of younger students is more likely to be influenced by school performance. As they enter higher grades, academic self-concept and achievement are more likely to influence each other. Although most researchers concur that the relation between the two variables is reciprocal, there is still a lack of a conclusive answer on when the effect is stronger in one direction or the other, or whether the effect of one variable on the other is stronger.

(2) Models of the Self-Concept/Achievement Relation

There has been extensive debate among researchers concerning whether prior academic self-concept influences academic achievement or prior academic achievement causes subsequent academic self-concept. Marsh et al. (2002) considered this a "chicken-egg" question. Three models have been proposed to explain the relationship between academic self-concept and achievement. According to the first model, the self-enhancement model, the direction of causal ordering is from academic self-concept to achievement. Thus, academic achievement is the consequence of academic self-concept. Enhancing students' self-concept should be the priority for teachers rather than only focusing on improving students' academic performance.

The second model, the skill-development model, on the other hand, postulates that the direction of causality is from academic performance to self-concept. Academic achievement is therefore the primary determinant of academic self-concept. To enhance students' academic self-concept, the best way is to improve students' academic performance.

The third model of causal relationship proposes that academic self-concept and academic achievement determine and influence each other mutually. This reciprocal

effects model tends to be more realistic (DeFraine et al., 2007) and is widely supported by most researchers (Guay et al., 2003; Marsh and Yeung, 1997; Muijs, 1997). According to this model, teachers should enhance academic achievement and self-concept simultaneously.

(3) Effects of Between-Class Ability Grouping

There are no conclusive research findings about the effects of between-class ability grouping on students' self-concept (Liu et al., 2005). Some findings have revealed that there is no evidence to show that homogeneous grouping has a detrimental impact on students' self-concept (Cheung and Rudowicz, 2003; Kulik and Kulik, 1982; Loveless, 1998). In a meta-analysis of findings from 52 studies on ability grouping conducted in secondary schools, Kulik and Kulik (1982) found clearer positive effects of ability grouping only on student attitudes toward the subject taught in the grouped classrooms. The grouping effects on self-concept and achievement are essentially zero. Consistent findings were reported in another study by Kulik and Kulik (1992) that the effects of ability grouping on students' self-concept are negligible overall. However, they also concluded that homogenous grouping tends to have slightly positive effect on below-average students and slightly negative effect on high-group students.

Other researchers such as Slavin (1990) have expressed concern over the effect of homogeneous placement on students' self-concept, especially for those placed in the lower level. Ireson, Hallam and Plewis (2001) reported that ability grouping in English settings fostered the English self-concept of lower-performing students and lowered the English self-concept of higher-ability students, whereas the grouping practice in mathematics and science settings had no effect on the corresponding academic self-concepts. Liu, Wang, and Parkins (2005) established that the academic self-concept of lower-performing secondary students was lower than that of their higher-ability counterparts immediately after being grouped. However, three years later, these students had a more positive academic self-concept than their high ability peers, while a more pronounced decline in academic self-concept was found for highly able students.

Byrne (1990) analyzed the data from high school students in Canada to examine the impact of self-concept on discriminating between low- and high-performing students. As expected, higher level students had higher academic self-concept than their

lower-level counterparts. Results showed that academic self-concept not only determines school achievement, but also serves as a more effective discriminator than academic achievement to differentiate between low- and high-ability students. Although grouping by ability may have a negative effect on lower-ability students' academic self-concept, Byrne concluded that it may not have an unfavorable effect on nonacademic self-concept facets (e.g., social self-concept and physical self-concept).

(4) Aims of the Study

The academic achievement/self-concept relationship has been reported in numerous studies by Marsh and his colleagues (Marsh et al., 1988; Marsh and Yeung, 1998; Marsh et al., 2001). Nevertheless, they rarely focused on the relation between English self-concept and language-related ability. Rather, they were more interested in examining the relationships among self-concepts in specific content areas and different academic achievement measures, e.g., math achievement and English achievement, to see how they correlate with each other. As an example, Marsh et al. (1983) found that math achievement had a higher correlation with math self-concept (.55) than with self-concept in reading (.21). They also found a correlation of .22 between reading achievement and self-concept in the corresponding area. In a study conducted by Liu (2008) in the Taiwanese EFL context, there was a correlation of .41 between student English self-concept and language proficiency, with a higher correlation (.46) for females than for males (.30). As proposed by the reciprocal effects model mentioned above, academic self-concept may be an important predictor or an effect of student academic performance. There is a need for more research on this variable, particularly in the foreign language learning environment.

Furthermore, since it has become a universal practice to group college students for English instruction in Taiwan, it is important to conduct more in-depth investigation into the variables that affect student learning in the homogeneously grouped setting. The current study analyzes one of the important affective factors, the academic self-concept, which has been shown to be correlated with foreign-language achievement, and examines whether and how it changes in ability-grouped classes in the Taiwanese context. The objective of this research is to provide foreign language instructors with more information about the role of this variable in foreign-language performance with

the hope that this can benefit student learning in the English setting in the long run. To be more specific, the study aims to ascertain the following research questions:

(a) Are there any significant initial differences in academic self-concept among students placed into different proficiency levels at the start of the grouping practice?
(b) Do the academic self-concepts of students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) significantly change over time in ability-grouped classes?
(c) Does proficiency level have any significant effect on students' academic self-concept over the duration of the study?

2. Method

(1) Subjects

Participants of the study comprised 126 college students from a private university in central Taiwan. They were ability grouped into basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of English classes when they entered the school. The same series of teaching materials were used in all of the ability-grouped classes. Different levels of the teaching materials were selected on the basis of students' proficiency levels. Students placed into the same ability level were instructed using identical teaching materials and given the unified final exam at the end of each semester. Two classes of students from each ability level were selected to participate in the study. Those who had missing values in their responses to the academic self-concept questionnaire, which was administered twice during the academic year, were excluded from the study. The number of the remaining participants in each ability group is presented in Table 1.

(2) Instrument

The academic self-concept (ASC) scale used in the study, which consisted of two subscales (AC and AE) to measure students' academic confidence and academic effort, was developed by Liu et al. (2005). The academic confidence subscale measures students' perceptions toward their academic ability and the academic effort subscale is used to assess "students' commitment to and involvement and interest in schoolwork" (Liu et al., 2005). The questionnaire was revised and translated into a Chinese version

Table 1: Number of Participants in Each Ability Level

	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Total
Male	12	18	14	44
Female	27	18	37	82
Total	39	36	51	126

by the researcher. The internal consistency estimates of reliability for the 19-item ASC scale, 9-item AC subscale, and the 10-item AE subscale in the present study are .89, .87 and .83, respectively. Students were given the questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the academic year.

(3) Data Analysis

In order to address the first research question concerning whether there are significant initial differences in students' academic self-concept immediately after being grouped, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed on the pre-test scores. To determine whether there are any significant changes in students' domain-specific self-concept over time, first, the full sample data were analyzed using a repeated measures analysis. Next, to ascertain whether there are significant level effects on students' academic self-concept over time, a second repeated measures analysis was conducted on the data using ability level as the between-subject factor and the two instances of test administration as the within-subject factor. Students' scores for overall English self-concept, academic self-confidence, and perceived effort were respectively used as the dependent variables. For all of the analyses, eight negatively worded questionnaire items were recoded before the subscale and total scores were computed.

3. Results and Discussion

(1) Analysis of Initial Differences in ASC Scores

The means and standard deviations of the academic self-concept of students grouped into different ability levels are presented in Table 2. As shown in the table, lower-ability level students had noticeably higher post-test mean values for perceived

academic confidence and overall English self-concept by the end of the one-year period. Also, there was a slight increase in their perceived academic effort. Students who were grouped into the intermediate level likewise had higher post-test mean values for their academic confidence and self-concept after one year; however, their perceived academic effort did not increase. As for the higher ability students, they tended to have slightly more positive confidence in their academic performance over time. Nonetheless, there was a slight decline in their academic effort. Their English self-concept seemed to remain stable over time.

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed on students' AC, AE, and ASC scores at time 1. The Wilks'Lambda statistic for the level effect was .835 (F=5.75, p=.000). The findings indicated that there were significant differences in at least one of the dependent variables, academic confidence, effort, and overall academic self-concept, among these students immediately after the practice of homogeneous placement at the beginning of their first school year (see Table 3). Post hoc test results revealed that the biggest difference existed in the English self-concept between the lower- and higher-level students. Whereas the low-performing students had significantly lower AC, AE, and ASC scores than their intermediate and higher-level counterparts, the difference in the ASC scale and subscale scores between the average and above-average students was not statistically different. It must be highlighted that these students were tested shortly after being grouped. Although the results alone cannot determine the direction of causal relationship between academic self-concept and academic performance, they strongly support the existence of a self-concept/achievement relationship. The prior academic performance of these students before entering college may still have strong effects on their self-concepts in related academic domains.

(2) Repeated Measures Analysis of ASC Scores

To address the second research question of whether there were any significant changes in students' subject-specific self-concept, a repeated measures analysis was first conducted on the total sample (see Table 4). The test results showed that there were significant changes in student academic confidence and overall self-concept during the study. Students' AC and ASC scores significantly improved after one year of English instruction, whereas their AE score did not significantly differ over time.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Academic Self-Concept

	Basic Level		Intermediate Level		Advanced Level		Full Sample	
	time1	time2	time1	time2	time1	time2	time1	time2
AC subscale								
Mean	27.54	32.13	31.53	35.33	33.24	34.35	30.98	33.94
SD	7.48	7.44	5.25	5.37	6.96	5.89	7.07	6.36
AE subscale								
Mean	38.54	39.38	43.19	42.69	45.12	43.86	42.53	42.14
SD	7.96	7.10	5.91	5.31	6.27	5.86	7.25	6.37
ASC scale								
Mean	66.08	71.51	74.72	78.03	78.35	78.22	73.52	76.09
SD	13.94	13.03	9.54	9.24	11.82	10.18	12.95	11.25

Note. AC = Academic Confidence; AE = Academic Effort; ASC = Academic Self-Concept

Table 3: Multivariate Analysis of Variance Test Results for Academic Self-Concept at Time 1

Source of Variation	Dependent Variable	df	Mean Square	F	P
Level	AC	2	366.06	8.17	.000 **
	AE	2	489.37	10.76	.000 **
	ASC	2	1701.92	11.93	.000 **
Error	AC	123	44.81		
	AE	123	45.50		
	ASC	123	142.68		

** $p < .01$

Further, in order to determine whether there is a significant level effect on the change in students' English self-concept over time, repeated measures analysis was performed on the data with ability level as the between-subjects factor. The results are presented in Table 5. The test of between-subject effects indicated that there was a highly significant level effect whenever AC, AE, or ASC score was used as the dependent variable. Follow-up tests revealed that for all academic self-concept scale

Table 4: Test Results of Repeated Measures Analysis for Academic Self-Concept of the Full Sample

Source of Variation	df	Mean Square	F	p
AC	1	552.10	44.20	.000 **
Error	125	12.49		
AE	1	9.53	.76	.385
Error	125	12.51		
ASC	1	416.57	11.83	.001 **
Error	125	35.20		

Note. AC = Academic Confidence; AE = Academic Effort; ASC = Academic Self-Concept

** p < .01

Table 5: Test Results of Repeated Measures Analysis for Academic Self-Concept of Different Ability Levels

Source of Variation	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between subjects				
Level	2	393.76	5.41	.006 **
Error	123	72.75		
Within subjects				
AC	1	619.61	54.04	.000 **
AC x Level	2	75.61	6.60	.002 **
Error	123	11.47		
Between subjects				
Level	2	694.09	9.81	.000 **
Error	123	70.74		
Within subjects				
AE	1	5.65	.459	.499
AE x Level	2	24.55	1.99	.141
Error	123	12.32		
Between subjects				
Level	2	2114.87	9.25	.000 **
Error	123	228.74		
Within subjects				
ASC	1	506.89	15.42	.000 **
ASC x Level	2	178.40	5.43	.006 **
Error	123	32.88		

Note. AC = Academic Confidence; AE = Academic Effort; ASC = Academic Self-Concept

** p < .01

and subscale scores, students in the low ability classes had significantly lower mean values than their average and above-average counterparts. No significant difference between the high-achieving group and the intermediate group was found. Using the follow-up tests of students' academic self-concept scores as an example, the mean differences between the lower-level and intermediate-level groups and between the lower- and higher-ability groups were 7.58 and 9.50, respectively. There was only a slight mean difference of 1.91 between the average students' English self-concept and that of the highly able students.

As to the tests of within-subject effects, results showed that there was significant main timing effect for both AC and ASC scores, whereas there was no significant difference in students' perceived academic effort. Tests results on AC scores indicated that there was a significant difference in students' academic confidence between the first time and the second time the questionnaire was administered. Nonetheless, due to significant interaction effect between timing effect and level effect, paired-samples t test was conducted to examine the significance of simple main effect in each group. The findings showed that both the academic confidence and the overall self-concept of the students in the lower and middle level classes significantly increased over time, whereas no significant differences in the change of academic confidence and self-concept over time were found for the high-achieving students in the present study (see Figure 1). It should be noted that both in terms of AC scores and ASC scores, low-performing students showed the biggest improvement over the one-year period.

4. Summary and Conclusion

This study mainly investigates the academic self-concept, one of the important predictors of foreign-language achievement, of EFL students who are homogeneously grouped on the basis of their English ability. The findings establish that in general, students' perceived academic confidence and overall English self-concept significantly increase over time in ability-grouped classes; however, the change in student academic effort was found to be non-significant. More specific key findings of the research are summarized as follows:

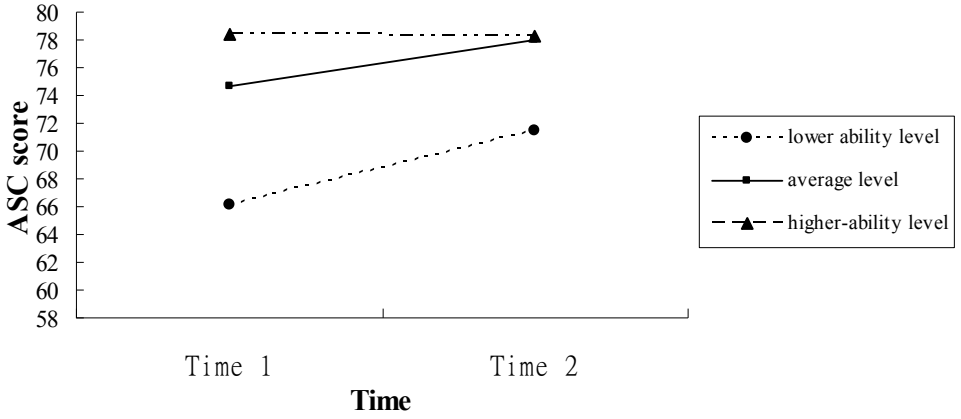

Figure 1: Cell Means of Overall ASC Scores for Each Ability Level at Times 1 and 2

(1) Significant differences in academic confidence, effort, and overall self-concept among these college students were found at the beginning of the academic year as they just entered the university. The most prominent difference existed in the English self-concept between the lower- and higher-achieving students. It should be noted that these students were tested shortly after being grouped. The findings suggest that the prior academic achievement of these students before entering college may continue to have noticeable influence on their academic self-concept.

(2) The results of repeated measures analysis show that the full sample's academic confidence and overall English self-concept were significantly fostered over the one-year period. Follow-up test results indicate that the AC and ASC scores of students grouped in the lower and intermediate level classes significantly increased. Nevertheless, there were no significant changes in higher-ability level students' AC or ASC scores over time. The biggest improvement in students' academic confidence and overall self-concept was found for the lower-achieving group. High-performing students had slightly higher posttest AC scores and nearly the same posttest ASC scores as compared with their own pretest scores, but the differences were found to be non-significant.

The results for the students in the lower-ability group are partially consistent with the findings of Liu et al. (2005) that students placed in the lower level have lower

academic self-concept at the beginning, but this increases over time. If there is indeed a grouping effect, it tends to be short-term. The students in Liu et al.'s study developed more positive academic self-concept 3 years after being ability-grouped. Although the present investigation is only a one-year study, students with the lowest level of proficiency also had the most noticeable enhancement in their confidence and overall academic self-concept compared with the other two groups one year after being grouped. In contrast with Liu et al.'s finding that high-level secondary students' self-concept declined over time, the academic confidence and overall English self-concept of higher-ability college students in this study were rather stable.

(3) Level effect on student academic confidence, academic effort, and overall English self-concept was not only significant at the initial stage of the grouping practice, but was also significant over the duration of the research. Tests results reveal that higher ability students consistently and significantly had the highest academic confidence and self-concept among the three different ability groups over time. On the other hand, low-achieving students had significantly lower average mean values than their counterparts in the other two groups over the duration of the study. The intermediate level students also had lower academic confidence and English self-concept than higher-level students, but the differences were found to be insignificant.

(4) The academic effort subscale used in the study assessed students' involvement and interest in learning English and their commitment to the English coursework. The findings show that lower ability students consistently had the lowest perceived academic effort at both time 1 and time 2. The intermediate level students had the second highest AE scores and high-performing students had the highest AE scores both at beginning and end of the school year. As aforementioned, there was a significant level effect on students' effort scores. Results show that the differences in group means between the lower level group and its counterparts, the average and above average groups, were significant. No significant difference in the mean AE scores was found between the average group and the advanced group. The findings may account for part of the reason why lower level students have the least satisfying English performance and higher level students have the best English performance. It is possible that students with lower level of ability develop lower academic self-concept or it may be the other way around that students with lower academic self-concept have less self-confidence,

are less motivated to put in more effort to learn, and thus have less satisfying academic achievement.

For the AE scores, a slight increase was found among lower-level students and slight decreases were found among the intermediate level and advanced level students. However, test results demonstrate that there was no significant difference in the change of academic effort within each group.

There are two important implications of this research. First, students with lower and higher levels of foreign-language proficiency in the Taiwanese context do have different perceptions of academic confidence and effort. As mentioned previously, the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement is considered a "chicken-egg" question by many researchers (De Fraine et al., 2007; Marsh et al., 2002). Students who have less satisfying academic performance may develop less positive academic confidence, which in the end leads to lower self-concept. On the other hand, students with less positive academic self-concept are more likely to lack learning motivation, which may result in poor academic performance. Academic self-concept and academic achievement tend to affect and determine each other. The findings of this study cannot determine the direction of the effects, but they tend to support the existence of an academic self-concept/achievement relationship.

Second, students' academic self-concept can be improved in ability-grouped English classes, even though they are assigned to the class with the lowest proficiency level. The findings establish that students' perceptions of academic confidence, one of the important components of academic self-concept, are subject to change. Thus, foreign-language instructors not only should strive to enhance students' academic achievement but also should tailor their instructional strategies to the affective needs of the language learners, with the expectation that the motivational properties of higher academic self-concept can lead to better subsequent language performance. Helping students to develop positive self-concept may be one of the most difficult tasks for teachers. However, teachers can try to help their students set specific learning goals and continuously provide them with motivational feedback that accentuates the positive aspects of their experience and performance. In the case that students' performance is not up to expectations, teachers still need to give constant support and encouragement. Teachers can praise their efforts and improvement in specific domain and describe what

they should do, rather than giving negative comments or feedback (Hadley et al., 2008). It is important that students develop confidence in their competence and be interested and motivated in learning English so that they will put in more effort in their English coursework and continue to make progress. How to increase learner satisfaction and stimulate EFL student motivation needs further investigation.

Researchers such as Marsh et al. (2005) have suggested that improving student academic achievement without enhancing self-concept in related academic domains is most likely to lead to only short-term gains. Academic self-concept is not only an important outcome variable, but also it is a mediating variable which facilitates the gain of related academic performance outcomes (Marsh and Yeung, 1997). Foreign-language teachers should consider academic self-concept as a powerful motivating force that can optimize language learning processes and more importantly, consider enhancing student academic self-concept as one of the primary goals of language education.

Appendix A

Translated Version of the Questionnaire

1. I can easily follow the lessons in my English class.
2. I usually day-dream a lot in my English class.
3. I am able to help my classmates in their English coursework.
4. I often do my English homework without thinking.
5. I believe that if I work hard, I am able to achieve the academic goals I have set for myself.
6. I pay attention to the teachers during my English lessons.
7. I think that most of my classmates are smarter than I am.
8. I always study hard for my English tests.
9. Most of my English teachers feel that I perform poorly in my coursework.
10. I am interested in English schoolwork.
11. I usually forget what I have learned in my English class.
12. I always try hard to pass all English tests.
13. I never feel like quitting.
14. English is one of the subjects I am good at.
15. I always want my English lessons to end soon.
16. My English test scores are not always satisfactory.
17. I do not give up easily when encountering difficulty.
18. I have better performance in English coursework than most of my friends.
19. I do not want to put in more effort in my English coursework.

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探究能力分班實施下不同英語能力等級的學生學業自我概念的變化

劉慧如*

摘　要

本研究主要分析能力分班實施下 EFL 學生其學業自我概念的變化。研究樣本包括 126 位大學一年級的學生，他們在入學後被編入三種不同能力等級的英文班級。研究中使用的學業自我概念量表主要在測量學生在英文學業方面的自信心與努力。統計方法的使用是在探究下列三個問題：(1) 在能力分班的初始階段，不同能力等級的學生是否已存在不同的學業自我概念？(2) 這些 EFL 學生的學業自我概念在長達一年的研究進行期間是否產生顯著的變化？(3) 能力等級對學生學業自我概念的變化是否具有顯著的效果？研究結果顯示全體學生在英文學業方面的自信與整體自我概念有顯著的改變，但在學業努力方面並未有顯著變化。能力等級對學業自我概念也存在有高度的顯著效果，被編入最低能力等級班級的學生其自我概念比中等與高能力等級班級的學生顯著的低，然而值得注意的是，這些學生在一年之後，不論是在學業自信或整體自我概念方面，與其他能力等級的學生相比有最大且顯著的進步，而高能力等級學生的自信與整體自我概念則保持相當穩定。

關鍵詞：學業自我概念、學習成就、能力分班

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