


# *Exploring English self-concept and investment of successful EFL learners from a Chinese secondary school*

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### Abstract

Academic self-concept, a central psychological construct that powerfully explains learners' varied motivations and learning behaviors, needs to be further explored to deepen our understanding of language learner psychology. Drawing on self-reported learning histories, this study investigates the English self-concept of successful English as a foreign language (EFL) learners and their mediated learning behaviors from the theoretical lens of personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986). Data were collected from 12 students at a key secondary school in Shanghai using retrospective narratives and semi-structured interviews. The analysis revealed three categories of cognitive and affective characteristics in the learners' English self-concept and the corresponding investment features with subtle differences identified. Participants espoused average to high competency beliefs and moderate to strong positive affect toward English learning, nurtured by positive self-beliefs such as interest and self-efficacy formed through early English learning experience. Their sustainable, targeted, and resilient investment in English learning was also underpinned by the perception of mastery and performance

goals appropriately afforded by teachers, parents, peers, or the school. Practical implications for parents and educators are discussed in terms of what they can do to help learners build positive self-perceptions as EFL learners.

*Keywords:* successful language learner; academic self-concept; secondary school students; EFL learning; personal investment

## 1. Introduction

As an important psychological construct, self-concept often refers to one's beliefs or perceptions of oneself (Shavelson et al., 1976). Consisting of multiple dimensions, such as physical, social, academic, etc., it is a highly important factor associated with variables such as motivation, effort, educational choices, and aspirations, etc. (Yeung, 2011; Yeung et al., 2012). Together with other self-beliefs (e.g., self-efficacy, self-esteem), academic self-concept is a construct broadly connected with learners' behaviors, motivations, and attitudes toward learning (Mercer, 2011a), exerting a significant influence on successful language learning outcomes (Mercer, 2011b). Yet among the existing studies on language learner self-concept, few have examined academically successful English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' construction and perception of self-concept in terms of how it results from and contributes to positive learning outcomes and how its development interacts with other learner variables and contextual factors.

Research on academically successful second and foreign language (L2) learners has mainly focused on the strategies they adopt ever since the inception of the notion of "good language learners" (Rubin, 1975), with informative findings concerning the strategic behaviors contributing to successful language learning (Griffiths, 2013; Oxford, 2017; Pawlak, 2021). In contrast, the psychology of these learners remains understudied, especially in EFL contexts. The significance of language learner psychology has been underpinned by inquiries into key constructs such as motivation (Alamer & Alrabai, 2023; Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022; Liao et al., 2020; Takahashi & Im, 2020), emotions (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Li et al., 2019; Li et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022), and identity (Norton & Toohey, 2001, 2011), etc., but its relevance to effective language learning needs to be further explored regarding how it nurtures the process of achieving "exceptionally high levels of success" (Pawlak, 2023, p. 234). Students in China are known for their ability to obtain high scores in examinations at the cost of long school days and study hours, particularly those at the secondary level (King & McInerney, 2014; Li, 2017). Thus, the psychology of English language learners achieving academic success in such a competitive and even taxing environment can be

highly characteristic of the context and may add to our understanding of why and how language learning success is achieved.

To better probe into the psychological profile underlying adolescent EFL learners' learning behaviors and outcomes in the Chinese context, the present study seeks to explore language learner self-concept from the theoretical lens of personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986), which encompasses self-concept as an important construct determining learners' decision to invest in particular learning activities. Building on the learning experiences of secondary school successful EFL learners and deploying qualitative approaches, this study offers a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how successful EFL learning takes place, especially with regard to how these EFL learners' self-concept is shaped and how it mediates learning behaviors in the formal educational setting.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Self-concept of language learners

Recent years have witnessed a surge in studies in a range of self-related constructs, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-concept, a research interest chiefly brought about by Zoltán Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2009). As an important self-related construct, self-concept refers to one's perceptions of competence or adequacy in a particular domain (Manning, 2007; Shavelson et al., 1976), mainly academic (e.g., English, history, math) or non-academic (e.g., physical, social). Thus, it is more domain-specific and less task-dependent (Mercer, 2011a) compared with other interrelated terms such as self-esteem, which is a global construct referring to the evaluation of one's worth or value as a person (Harter, 1999), or self-efficacy, which denotes individuals' confidence in their ability to organize and execute a given course of action to accomplish a task (Bandura, 1997). Academic self-concept is believed to contain both cognitive and affective components (Arens et al., 2011). The cognitive component is often conceptualized as a student's competency belief and is more closely related to students' academic achievement (Yeung et al., 2012), whereas the affective component refers to how much one likes learning and better predicts students' engagement, attitude, and aspirations (Kadir & Yeung, 2020; Yeung, 2011). The present study focuses on learners' self-concept in the domain of EFL learning, or English self-concept, which is conceptualized as learners' self-beliefs in English-related competency and affect comprising skill-specific self-concepts in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Arens & Jansen, 2016).

Disparate views exist as to what extent learner self-concept is stable or dynamic (Henry, 2015; Mercer, 2012; Serafini, 2020), while it has become increasingly accepted that it incorporates both stability and dynamicity (Peng, 2016). For EFL learners, specifically, their self-concept can be highly context-responsive. The case study conducted by Mercer (2011b) provided strong evidence that the self-concept of an advanced foreign language learner was a multilayered system comprised of both stable and dynamic dimensions, with the latter reflecting contextual changes. Yoshida's (2013) study on Japanese EFL learners demonstrated positive development of learners' self-concept through peer interactions conducted in Japanese. Regarding the factors affecting the dynamic development of self-concept, Marsh (1986) proposed the internal/external model to account for the sources for the formation of self-concept, while empirical findings have provided evidence that there is a reciprocal effect between learners' academic achievement and their self-concept (Marsh & Craven, 2006). For example, Erten and Burden's (2014) study on young Turkish learners of English indicated a close association between self-concept and L2 learning outcomes at primary school level. Chao et al.'s (2019) investigation of Hong Kong secondary school students' self-efficacy, self-concept and academic achievement in learning English and Chinese revealed that students' English self-concept predicted both their English and Chinese learning achievements. Other studies have also suggested the influence of both psychological and contextual factors on language learners' self-concept. By conducting action research on children learning English at a small rural primary school in Catalonia, Waddington (2019) reported that their self-efficacy levels had a direct impact on their emerging self-concepts in foreign language learning. On the other hand, it was found in Roiha and Mäntylä's (2022) study on former Finnish pupils' English learning experiences in the content and language integrated learning (CLIL) context that the social comparisons with non-CLIL peers, the feedback from significant others, and the early start of CLIL all played crucial roles in forming their positive English self-concept.

The previous findings have highlighted the significant role self-concept plays in learners' academic performance or learning outcomes. However, most of the research was confined to instructional settings (Erten & Burden, 2014; Waddington, 2019; Yoshida, 2013). As the context of language learning has already extended beyond the classroom to, for example, the family, online platforms, etc., learners' self-construal involved in this process has become ever more complicated. Therefore, language learners' individual differences, or what differentiates more successful language learners from their less successful peers, may be more thoroughly understood via probing into this central psychological construct that encompasses a holistic set of learners' underlying self-beliefs in EFL learning across a range of contexts and that powerfully explains learners' varied motivations and behaviors (Mercer, 2011a).

## 2.2. Self-concept and personal investment in language learning

Within the field of L2 learning, the notion of investment was initially used by Norton (1995) and was viewed as an extension of the role of motivation (Norton & Toohey, 2001). The concept was later developed into a model of investment that integrates identity, capital, and ideology as the main constructs, and the language learner is thus regarded as “a social being with a complex identity that changes across time and space and is reproduced in social interaction” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 37). The theoretical lens that informed this study, however, is another theorization of investment, called personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986), which has quite different disciplinary foundations from Norton’s (1995), even though the “investment”<sup>1</sup> in both theories can be operationalized in similar ways.

Personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) proposes that knowledge, skills, time, and energy are resources that all individuals possess, but are invested in different fields (e.g., academic activity, work, sports), and this decision is affected by three key facets: self-concept, perceived goals, and facilitating conditions. *Perceived goals* are defined as reasons or purposes for engaging in a task (King et al., 2019). Previous research has focused on four types of goals: *mastery goals* (wanting to do well because of personal interest), *performance goals* (seeking to outperform others), *social goals* (wanting to help others and enhance the sense of belonging), and *extrinsic goals* (desiring social recognition and tangible rewards), among which mastery goals have been found to be salient across different settings, exerting a positive influence on learning and academic outcomes (King & McInerney, 2014; Yeung et al., 2012). *Facilitating conditions* refer to the social-contextual environment that makes certain options more available and salient (King et al., 2019), including contextual conditions facilitating or inhibiting individuals’ investment by extension. The reason why this study draws on personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) over Norton’s (1995) model of investment is that the latter is more concerned with the connections between investment and identity formation which is mainly about one’s “sense of self in relation to a particular social context or community of practice” (Mercer, 2012, pp. 11-12). However, the present study aims to explore learners’ underlying psychological self-beliefs about themselves as EFL learners across a range of learning settings. Thus, personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) is believed to be a more suitable theoretical lens in which self-concept constitutes a key construct exerting an important impact on learners’ motivation to invest in learning. The emphasis on the individual’s subjective

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<sup>1</sup> “Investment” informed by personal investment theory can be viewed as a manifestation of learning motivation or motivational patterns. It is concerned with the motivational willingness to learn, hence it differs from “engagement” in that the latter is believed to feature the action dimension.

perceptions of the learning experience in the theory (King et al., 2019; Van Mol, 2022) provides the rationale for the adoption of self-report data types in this study.

Mainly used in educational psychology and cross-cultural psychology to investigate school motivation, personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) has rarely been applied to L2 research. Among the few attempts, Da Silva and McInerney (2005) revealed that Japanese first-year university students' academic performance in EFL learning can be predicted by self-concept characteristics. In the Chinese context, King and McInerney (2014) found that Hong Kong secondary school students' English self-concept slightly increased across a time span of three years, and school band predicted their initial level of self-concept, while gender influenced both the initial level and rates of change for English self-concept. Another study with Hong Kong secondary school students (King et al., 2014) highlighted the impact of a competitive environment on learners' adaptive outcomes related to performance goals. It can thus be seen that personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) has helped generate key insights into students' investment in learning and academic performances in various sociocultural contexts.

As an integrative and multi-faceted framework focusing on a wide range of variables (King et al., 2019), personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) can offer a different lens for looking at language learners' willingness to invest in learning as well as its interrelationship with their self-construal, motivational goals, and the proximal and distal contexts they study in. Therefore, the application of the theory can hopefully provide fresh theoretical and empirical explanations for the complex issue of foreign language learner psychology. Another gap that motivates the current study is the dearth of attention to adolescent English learners' psychology in the Chinese context. As it has been argued that stable self-representations do not emerge before adolescence (Zentner & Renaud, 2007), it would be reasonable to conduct self-related research on adolescent language learners, yet in the Chinese context the cohort of adolescent EFL learners has been underrepresented in the literature. At an intermediate phase of English learning, students at the secondary school level can have very different self-perceptions regarding language learning from those at the tertiary level. Further empirical investigations can not only facilitate our understanding of how adolescent EFL learners in this context perceive themselves as language learners (Lyons, 2014), but also help us catch a glimpse of their underlying self-beliefs in general academic domains that motivate or demotivate their investment in learning. Aiming to address these gaps, the present study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the English self-concept of successful EFL learners from a Chinese secondary school?

2. How does their English self-concept influence their personal investment in English learning?

### 3. Research methods

#### 3.1. Research context and participants

The study involved 12 successful language learners from a public secondary school in Shanghai, a cosmopolitan city in East China. The basic English language education in the city totals 12 years of instruction which is composed of five years of primary and seven years of secondary schooling. As one of the key secondary schools in Shanghai, the subject school covers both junior and senior high school sections and is known for its quality of foreign language teaching and learning. Apart from English, the school also provides language courses in German, French, Spanish, Russian, and Japanese. In terms of the English curriculum, the school offers eight instruction periods weekly, and one of them is allotted to elective courses from which students can choose the subject they are interested in for each semester, such as American literature, British history, etc. Since its foundation, the school has cultivated a large number of outstanding graduates. Most students enter China's top universities to major in foreign languages after graduation, and some are admitted into prestigious overseas universities for further studies.

The concept of "successful language learners" is operationalized in this study as referring to learners who achieve better academic performance in English compared than their peers. The specific criteria adopted for sampling participants for this study were as follows: (1) English test scores in school steadily among the top 15% of the grade, which equals a grade point average (GPA) of A+; (2) excellent scores obtained in standardized English tests (such as 110 out of 120 points in TOEFL) or certificate tests (such as the Shanghai English Interpretation Accreditation Examination); (3) first prize or above in English competitions at municipal or above levels. The English competence of all the participants had to meet at least two of the above standards. The first two participants were recommended by the then principal of the school and their consent was solicited before the data collection process. The other participants were subsequently recruited through "snowball sampling" (Creswell & Poth, 2018), that is, each participant was asked to recommend his or her schoolmates who met the criteria, and the ones expressing willingness to participate were included in the study. All the participants were explicitly informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their participation was voluntary. Table 1 displays detailed information about the participants who are coded as S1-S12. "Graduate" refers to the five participants

who had just graduated from the school 4-5 months before the time of data collection. Their years of learning English ranged from 7 to 13.

Table 1 Participant demographics

No.	Grade	Gender	Criteria met
S1	Junior 1	Male	(1); (2) 203 out of 210 in C1 Advanced; (3) Grand Prize of Junior High School Group in ESDP
S2	Junior 3	Female	(1); (3) No. 1 in Literature in United States Academic Pentathlon China
S3	Senior 1	Female	(1); (2) 116 in TOEFL
S4	Senior 1	Female	(2) 118 in TOEFL; (3) Champion of China Division of National Speech and Debate Association
S5	Senior 2	Female	(2) 114 in TOEFL; (3) First Prize in "Star of Outlook" English Talent Competition Shanghai
S6	Senior 2	Male	(1); (3) Grand Prize in "Voices of the Future" APEC China
S7	Senior 2	Male	(1); (2) EIAE passed
S8	Senior 3	Female	(1); (2) 119 in TOEFL
S9	Graduate	Female	(1); (2) 116 in TOEFL; (3) First Prize in English Contest for Senior High School Students of Shanghai
S10	Graduate	Female	(1); (2) 116 in TOEFL
S11	Graduate	Male	(1); (2) 118 in TOEFL
S12	Graduate	Male	(1); (2) 117 in TOEFL; (3) Champion of Senior High School Group in ESDP

*Note.* 1. For the second and third standards, only one achievement is listed for each participant as an example. 2. ESDP is short for English Speech and Debate Pentathlon.

### 3.2. Data collection

Since self-report is regarded as the most appropriate and popular method of measuring self-concept (Kadir & Yeung, 2020), the data in this study were collected via retrospective narratives and semi-structured interviews (Liao et al., 2020). Although there is no consensus concerning the validity of self-report measures as they heavily rely on the accuracy of learners' memories and retrieval processes (e.g., Winne & Perry, 2000), the perception of the self that the learners are "partially aware of and able to articulate" (Mercer, 2014, p. 164) is most likely to be approached through self-report data.

The 12 participants were first asked to submit a retrospective narrative on their English learning experiences and their feelings at different stages of formal schooling. To ensure free expression, the narratives were written in Chinese with only a few Chinese prompts provided to the participants at the outset. After collecting the initial drafts, the researchers read them carefully and made comments on how to enrich the content with more details as well as on the points that needed further clarification by asking questions like: "Could you give an example?" or "How do you think that helped with your English study?" The majority of the personal narratives were effectively improved after the first revision, with richer content and clearer structures, while a few still needed further adjustments. For the latter, the researchers added suggestions, such as "Explain why you feel this way," and then collected them when the second revision was finished. The final versions of the narratives were around 3,000 Chinese characters in length on average.

Apart from retrospective narrative data, each participant was invited to do an individual semi-structured interview with the first author, which aimed to explore



further the recent status of English learning and triangulate their personal narratives. Due to COVID-19, the interviews were conducted online via WeChat, currently the most popular messaging APP in China. The formulation of the interview protocol was guided by the research questions and the retrospective narratives of the participants with reference to relevant literature. All the interviews, lasting for around an hour on average, were audio-taped with the participants' consent, using a smart recorder which automatically transcribed the speech verbatim. The transcripts of the interviews were double-checked by the first author for later analysis and then sent back to the participants for member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Any information that the participants felt reluctant to disclose was excluded and wording was also revised according to their suggestions. To ensure accurate expression and minimize misinterpretation during the communications between the participants and researchers, data collection was completed in Chinese, the mother tongue of both sides.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The qualitative data set was coded and analyzed in NVivo using both deductive and inductive approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inductive process involved thorough reading and iterative rounds of open coding of all the interview transcripts and narratives allowing themes to emerge from data, while the key constructs of personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) were applied to ground data analysis during the deductive procedures. The coding system and the exemplary data excerpts are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 The coding system of the qualitative data

Themes	Categories	Data excerpts
English self-concept	High competency	I think my spoken English at that time was very good.
	Average competency	I found that I could not understand the lines in English films and began to doubt my English competence.
Perceived goals	Strong affect	English has been my favorite subject.
	Moderate affect	I don't think I have a very strong interest in English. It is more like a tool for me to learn other things.
	Mastery goals	While I was watching English cartoons in kindergarten, I began to get curious in English and started to learn it.
Facilitating conditions	Performance goals	I competed with another classmate for the first place in class in every English exam and would be upset if I failed.
	Teacher influence	In my first oral exam, the English teacher made careful comments that I lacked accuracy in expression.
	Peer influence	The atmosphere that everybody around was working hard spurred me on to greater efforts.
	Parental influence	My parents played recordings of simple English readers at home, and that was when I got attracted to English.
	School climate	There were a variety of extracurricular activities in which we could put our language knowledge into actual use.
	Difficult situations	For the first time, I felt strenuous when doing English weekly exercises.
	Unexpected failure	I got extremely low points in that mid-term English exam.

To ensure reliability, the coding work was conducted in Chinese by the first author twice, with a three-month interval. Coded scripts were scrutinized by the second author and problematic coding was discussed between the two researchers until a 90% agreement was reached. In this way, triangulation was achieved via using more than one investigator in the research process (Denzin, 1989). The codes and the quoted excerpts from interviews (represented by I) and narratives (represented by N) were translated into English in a meaning-based manner by the first author and double-checked by the second researcher.

#### 4. Findings

The participants were categorized into three types based on their characteristics in relation to English self-concept and investment, and this section provides the portrait for each category. It should be noted that *high/average* or *strong/moderate* is a relative concept which is subject to change, while the labels adopted for each category (i.e., high competency belief and strong positive affect, high competency belief and moderately positive affect, and average competency belief and strong positive affect) were selected since they most appropriately represented the overall characteristics of each group of learners.

##### 4.1. High competency belief and strong positive affect leading to sustainable investment

Six participants (S2, S3, S6, S7, S9, S11) were included in this group as they claimed to have espoused high competency beliefs and strong positive affect over the course of English learning. Their strong positive affect can be largely attributed to their early English learning experiences. For instance, S6 clearly remembered how English was learned in primary school:

The textbook had a lot of dialogues and chants, making it possible for us to sing and play and then take the roles to learn. So I felt deeply enchanted at that time because having English lessons were like playing games . . . The English teacher required that we listen to and read after the recordings after class to imitate the pronunciation and intonation in exactly the same way. (S6I)

S6's intrinsic interest in English was fostered because of the interesting learning materials used in the primary school, and his pronunciation and intonation rapidly improved following the teacher's guidance. Once the positive self-concept in English oral ability was established, S6 began to take part in various public speaking contests and won a number of awards. Meanwhile, the parents' and

teacher's praising words as well as peers' admiration all motivated him to invest in more related activities.

In the case of S9, parents played a decisive role in the formation of her high self-concept. She articulated gratitude for her mother who offered tutoring at home as a supplement to formal English education, starting from kindergarten and continuing throughout primary school. The methods her mother adopted influenced the strategies S9 later used in English learning, such as to "read aloud materials" or "accumulate vocabulary incidentally instead of rote memorization from word lists" (S9N). The early-formed learning habits produced long-term benefits and made English learning "naturally happen" (S9I) across different stages.

Aside from affect, the competency beliefs of these learners were also kept at a high level even though mild fluctuations sometimes occurred. Currently obsessed with writing English novels, S2 has developed high competency belief in English writing since primary school because of frequent practice, as reported by her below:

The English teacher suggested that we read extensively and practice writing more frequently. She used to assign writing tasks every week, and for whatever you wrote, she would review carefully and make comments like "This is a good description," "This sentence would read more smoothly if you put it this way," etc. (S2I)

S2 believed that the teacher's regulatory effect manifested in the careful reading and feedback on writing assignments helped her develop the habit and confidence in English writing, partly giving rise to her goal of becoming a novelist.

On the other hand, temporary psychological undulation was evoked during the transition phase between primary and secondary school (S3 and S11). Selected as the most academically successful students from primary school, these learners felt intimidated in the new environment where "peers around were all excellent" (S11I). S3 was discouraged by fear and diffidence during that period until the English teacher recommended her an opportunity to perform in an English play, as recalled by her below:

My English teacher recommended me for the part of Rosalind in the play *As You Like It*. In preparation for the role, I read aloud the lines for hundreds of times and searched for relevant videos and audios to imitate. At last, I won the "Best Performance Award." (S3N)

This successful experience contributed to the promotion of her self-confidence and resulted in positive emotions, which in turn facilitated her academic performance as she "managed to keep a steady position at the top of the class" (S3N) in terms of her English grades. The frequent academic achievements helped maintain her English self-concept at a high level.

#### 4.2. High competency belief and moderately positive affect leading to targeted investment

Two participants in this category (S1 and S8) had high competency beliefs and their affect toward learning English was also positive, but not as strong as that of the previous group of learners. Instead of showing considerable interest in English, they appeared to be deeply attracted to other fields such as computer programming and biology. Therefore, in most cases, their progress in English incidentally happened when they learned through resources transmitted in English. In this process, they became increasingly aware of the instrumental value of acquiring English which was used as a lingua franca in multiple situations. For instance, S8 often read literature on biology and found that “a lot of academic articles were written in English and [she] got familiar with many terminologies while reading” (S8I). Likewise, the listening ability of S1 unconsciously developed while he watched videos introducing knowledge in computer programming. He sensed improvement in his English listening skill when “the circumstances in which [he] had to replay the video and listen again to understand the meaning were becoming less” (S1I). As a result, S1 and S8 would purposefully search for learning resources in the topics they liked and accessed via the English language.

In retrospect, S1's and S8's sense of competency was also closely related to an early establishment of positive self-efficacy beliefs. S1 started to attend private tutoring courses delivered by foreign teachers at kindergarten age, which prepared him for formal English education before and at the initial phase of primary schooling. As a result, he was able to obtain positive learning outcomes at school without much effort, culminating in the belief that “learning English was easy and pleasant” (S1I). The desirable emotion motivated his further interactions with the facilitating conditions in the learning environment such as the foreign teachers in the school with whom he often initiated conversations after class. The effective exploitation and utilization of the potential opportunities to use English in real contexts enhanced his self-efficacy beliefs and thus self-concept. S8 believed that she had benefited a lot from the institutionalized extensive reading program in primary school which provided access to numerous authentic English readers. Each student was encouraged to read the books they liked in extracurricular time and the points they earned by answering follow-up questions could exchange rewards such as having lunch with the principal or getting exempt from the final exam (S8N). S8 felt fortunate to have been stimulated to read extensively in primary school when “there was plenty of time and not much schoolwork to do” (S8N). The reading strategies employed, the vocabulary accumulated, and the sense of the language fostered scaffolded her for the more challenging reading tasks in later stages, and the positive emotions related to English reading increased her willingness to invest in relevant activities.

### 4.3. Average competency belief and strong positive affect leading to resilient investment

The English self-concept of the four participants (S4, S5, S10, S12) constituting this group was featured by strong positive affect yet average competency belief in English learning. The contributors to their positive affect were analogous to those previously illustrated, while the relatively lower level of their competency belief was mainly due to the difficulties they encountered in the learning process or unexpected failure in academic performances. S4 faced such difficulties in primary school when she produced negative emotions because “the English novel was very difficult for me at that time and I simply gave up after a few days” (S4I). S12 encountered a similar situation when he began to watch English TV series in junior grades and felt overwhelmed by the recurring new words and fast speech rate. However, it was fortunate that they received emotional support from significant others, such as peers (S4) and parents (S5, S12), who encouraged them to persist through difficulties or offered helpful suggestions like “noting down the new words and collocations and reviewing them regularly” (S12I), owing to which their intrinsic interest for English drove them to try harder after a short period of divestment.

The experience of S10, on the other hand, demonstrated how unexpected failures in exam results can strike one’s self-concept. The drastic fluctuations in her competency belief occurred along with a shift in her educational aspiration from going abroad to staying in China for tertiary education. Her failure to obtain satisfactory results on SAT at the end of Senior 2 gave her a heavy blow, putting her in the dilemma of whether to be content with admission into a lower-ranking university or to veer onto a different track and make intense preparations within a period of time shorter than normal. At last, she chose the latter, but during that perplexing stage, S10 was trapped in self-doubt and “lost motivation to learn English” (S10I). She consequently invested more time and effort in mathematics, another subject she felt competent in, and gradually reestablished self-confidence. The high math self-concept reinforced her global self-concept and thus her overall academic competencies, strengthening her motivation to learn. She began to “focus on every bit of progress” (S10N) in English learning such as a more comprehensive understanding of a word or a grammatical structure, which contributed to her restoration of positive emotions in relation to English learning and helped her overcome the difficult time.

## 5. Discussion

In terms of the first research question, the findings highlight the noteworthy issue of what the English self-concept of these successful EFL learners is and how it is

shaped. If deemed as a continuum, the competency beliefs of the learners under investigation varied between high and average levels, while their affect toward English learning differed between strong and moderately positive emotions. The minor discrepancy can be attributed to the learners' overall steady academic performance in the English domain, echoing the previously documented association between self-concept and academic achievement (Chao et al., 2019; Erten & Burden, 2014). The slight divergence also supports the claim that the core of self-concept can be highly stable while the relatively peripheral self-beliefs, or, what Markus and Wurf (1987) called the "working self-concept," is context-responsive and malleable (Henry, 2015; Mercer, 2014; Peng, 2016). This positive core of self-concept seems to be rare in successful language learners' learning context as it is argued that learners in high-ability learning environments (such as selective class or school settings) tend to have lower academic self-concept because of the sense of inadequacy caused by the comparison with high-ability peers (Kadir & Yeung, 2020). The reason why the learners in this study espoused overall positive English self-concept might be twofold, with reference to the classic internal/external model (Marsh, 1986). Internally, English was one of the subjects that they felt most competent and interested in, which was fundamentally a result of their positive attitude to and motivation for the language anchored in their past learning experiences (King & McInerney, 2014; Mercer, 2011b). Externally, the comparison with peers did not constitute their single source of reference. Their English self-concept was developed through meaningful interactions with the learning environment (Shavelson et al., 1976) which was replete with opportunities to use the target language to achieve real communicative purposes. Favorable self-ratings were thus more accessible as they garnered positive evaluations from a wider range of sources (Arens & Jansen, 2016; Yeung, 2011). During the joint operation of internal and external processes, what needs to be emphasized is the role of affect in contributing to various educational outcomes beyond academic achievement, which has been largely overlooked in the existing self-concept research (Kadir & Yeung, 2020). The positive emotions in these learners' English learning experiences have been found to be closely related to other variables conducive to learning, such as self-confidence, resilience, and effort, underscoring the significance of positive affect in building a powerful core of self-beliefs in the course of language learning (Yeung et al., 2012).

Regarding the second research question, the influence of these successful EFL learners' English self-concept on their personal investment in English learning is mediated by perceived goals and contextual conditions informed by personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986). Mastery and performance goals were the most prominent types of goals reported in this study. It was found that the learners' sense of competence was related to performance goals, while affect

was connected with mastery goals, with the former exerting more immediate effects and the latter bringing long-term benefits (Yeung et al., 2012). In the case of S2, the formulation and perception of the mastery goal of becoming an English novelist seemed to have guided her investment of relevant writing strategies contributing to the achievement of the goal (Lyons, 2014), which signified genuinely motivated behavior and in turn constituted a part of her self-perception. Moreover, the long-term benefit of mastery goals was manifested in it providing resources for resilient energy when the learner confronted difficult situations inhibiting investment in the long and arduous process of language learning, as suggested by the experiences of S4, S5, and S12. The story of S3, on the other hand, well demonstrated the relationship between a sense of competency and performance goals as well as the positive correlation between self-efficacy beliefs and the cognitive dimension of self-concept (Waddington, 2019). Her case also featured the bidirectional impact of performance goals on personal investment in learning as well as increased investment on the realization of goals and then on the promotion of self-concept, indicating the intricate interplay between the learners' self-concept and investment.

Somewhat inconsistent with the previous findings that students from collectivist cultures pursue social or extrinsic goals (Cheng & Lam, 2013), the absence of socially oriented goals in this study may be due to the fact that, without authentic contexts for using the language, learning English as a curricular subject is mostly an individualistic matter and exam result is an individual affair affected by personal endeavor (King et al., 2014). Even though there were cooperative learning activities in which students had to work with their peers to achieve a common goal, such as pair discussion or role play in a drama, the weak connection between their performance in these activities and their achievement scores impaired the saliency of this type of goals. This further foregrounds the powerful role of performance goals in a competitive educational environment like China (King et al., 2014; Li, 2017).

Apart from goal mediation, contextual factors were also demonstrated to exert a substantial influence on the interplay between the learners' self-concept and investment. The learners espousing strong positive affect toward English learning manifested a shared feature of early cultivation of intrinsic interest in the English language with the facilitating conditions provided by, for example, in-class learning materials and activities (S6), institutional support of the school (S8), parents' effort in self-tutoring (S9), teacher guidance and encouragement (S3, S11), etc. For these learners, their interactions with parents, peers, and teachers constituted high-quality social relationships which provided affordances for them to construct the self-beliefs that "learning English is interesting" (affective) and "I am good at learning English" (cognitive). It can thus be inferred that the early

English learning experience plays an essential role in the positive and stable development of learners' self-concept, which further facilitates autonomous and sustainable investment (Roiha & Mäntylä, 2022).

Meanwhile, the findings showed that the factors inhibiting the learners' English self-concept and investment were chiefly difficult situations or unexpected failures. Although it has been argued that individuals look for coherent rather than fragmented sense of self so they would strive to narrow the gap between different selves (Dörnyei, 2014; Mercer, 2014), what we found seems to indicate that the discrepancy between perceived and actual English competencies formed a major demotivator to the learners' investment, which was particularly the case for learners at younger ages (S4 and S12). This may be explained by the fact that younger learners tend to have a higher self-concept since they lack the cognitive maturity to evaluate their abilities critically (Kadir & Yeung, 2020; Manning, 2007). During the emergence of English self-concept before and at the initial phase of adolescence (Waddington, 2019), the learner's awareness of the overly positive self-beliefs might be a threat to their motivation to invest in the domain.

The failure to obtain satisfactory results in exams was another inhibitive element, and the more high-stakes the exam, the more profound the negative impact on self-concept, as was revealed by the case of S10, which further underscores the value attached to academic success in the Chinese context (Butler, 2015). S10's successful experience of persisting through the hard time provides evidence for the interference effect between self-concepts in different academic domains (King et al., 2019), while the proximal context co-constructed by the teacher, peers, and parents offers important emotional support especially when learners (S3 and S11) undergo major shifts in the learning environment like the transition from primary to secondary school (Yoshida, 2013).

## 6. Implications

The findings of this study add to the limited empirical evidence that the cognitive and affective components of language learner self-concept are closely interwoven rather than clearly separated. High competency beliefs in the English domain bring forward positive emotions related to English learning, while positive affect can result in better performance and thus positively influence the sense of competency as it drives students to be more persistent and invest more time and effort in learning English (Yeung et al., 2012). This highlights the complex process of the construction of language learner self-concept but also conveys a heartening message as higher self-concept can be potentially approached via positive stimulations in either competency beliefs or affect.



The practical implications of this study point to the need to develop parents' and teachers' awareness of the significant role of early English learning experience foregrounded in these EFL learners' stories. In the family, it is important for parents to actively regulate their children's English learning process and cultivate their interest by introducing authentic resources of appropriate content and difficulty so as to foster mastery goals as well as positive self-perceptions regarding English learning in the early stages. In formal schooling, particularly primary school, educators need to fully consider the appropriate level of difficulty when designing instructional activities for the sake of students' construction of self-efficacy beliefs and self-confidence. Interesting and personally relevant topics should be selected to get the students actively involved (Mercer, 2014) so that English learning can be linked with positive emotions. This does not imply the attenuation of the importance of language learning at more advanced stages, yet for foreign language learners, the early-established positivity in the cognitive or affective dimension of self-concept better empowers them to cope with the increasingly heavy workload and pressure with calmness and confidence.

## 7. Conclusion

This study attempted to explore the English self-concept of Chinese secondary school learners who had achieved academic success in EFL learning and its impact on their learning behaviors in the domain drawing on the self-report of their learning histories. Our findings reveal three categories of cognitive and affective characteristics in the learners' self-concept and the mediated investment features with subtle differences identified. The data showed that the learners espoused average to high competency beliefs and moderately to strong positive affect toward English learning, nurtured by self-beliefs such as interest and self-efficacy formed through the early English learning experience. Their sustainable, targeted or resilient investment in English learning was also influenced by the perception of mastery and performance goals appropriately afforded by teachers, parents, peers, or the school. This study provides a more nuanced understanding of the language learner self-concept by supplementing qualitative insights into the topic (Lyons, 2014; Serafini, 2020). What we found also reinforces the potential of personal investment theory (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986) to be applied as a theoretical lens to examine the complexity of foreign language learner psychology.

One limitation of the study is that the participants were highly selective in a small sample size. Future research may compare successful EFL learners with less successful ones to probe more deeply into the differences in their English self-concept and the key mediating factors. Another methodological limitation lies

in the intrinsic flaw of self-report measures, which implies that learners were the only source of subjective data. Therefore, future studies may integrate perspectives provided by other data collection methods, such as observations in the actual learning settings like the classroom and, if possible, the family, so as to examine if there is any discrepancy between their reported self-beliefs and actual investment in learning.

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