

Article

Reading Self-Efficacy and Language Development: Affective Conditions for Engagement in Higher Education EFL

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Abstract

Reading has long been recognised as a central mechanism for second language development, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where exposure to the target language is limited. However, learners do not seem to benefit equally from comparable reading demands, suggesting that factors beyond linguistic competence influence developmental outcomes. This study examines the relationship between reading self-efficacy and English language proficiency among undergraduate students enrolled in a Degree in English Studies at a Spanish university. A cross-sectional quantitative design was employed with a sample of 141 participants and data were collected using the Reader Self-Perception Scale 2 (RSPS2) and a standardised multilevel English placement test aligned with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). The results revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between reading self-efficacy and language proficiency, whereas literary epistemological beliefs did not show a comparable association. Among the RSPS2 dimensions, perceived Progress and Physiological States emerged as the strongest correlates of proficiency, indicating that learners' sense of development and emotional comfort while reading is particularly relevant to language achievement. The study argues that reading self-efficacy is related to textual exposure and language development, shaping whether learners engage with texts in sustained and productive ways. By linking learner self-perception to measurable proficiency outcomes, the study contributes empirical evidence to current discussions on affective variables in language learning and offers pedagogical implications for fostering engagement in higher education EFL contexts.

Keywords: reading self-efficacy; English language proficiency; English as a foreign language; higher education; second language reading; affective mediation



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1. Introduction

The role of reading in EFL acquisition has long been recognized as central to the development of linguistic competence, particularly in instructional contexts where learners have limited access to spontaneous target-language interaction. Through reading, learners encounter lexical variety, recurrent grammatical constructions, discourse patterns, and textual conventions that gradually consolidate comprehension and productive language use. For this reason, extensive reading and sustained text exposure have repeatedly been associated with vocabulary growth, improved grammatical sensitivity, inferencing ability, and broader communicative development (Day et al., 1998; Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Krashen, 2004).

Recent research on higher education EFL reading development has increasingly emphasized the fundamental role of reading in the acquisition and consolidation of second-

language competence. Far from functioning merely as a receptive skill, reading in EFL contributes significantly to vocabulary expansion (Oliver & Young, 2016), grammatical awareness, discourse comprehension, and the development of critical literacy abilities in adult learners (Fairclough, 2003; V. Richardson, 1996; Wallace & Wray, 2011). In tertiary education contexts, exposure to academic and authentic texts enables learners to interact with complex linguistic structures and culturally situated meanings, thereby fostering both linguistic proficiency and interpretive competence.

Nausa et al. (2024) argue that advanced academic reading skills are essential for postgraduate students to access disciplinary knowledge and participate effectively in academic discourse communities. Similarly, Kurt-Taşpınar and Çubukçu (2020) highlight the importance of critical literacy practices in enhancing adult EFL learners' reading comprehension and analytical engagement with texts. These perspectives align with broader approaches to academic literacy and discourse analysis proposed by Fairclough (2003), J. E. Richardson (2007), and Wallace and Wray (2011), who emphasize that reading development in a second language involves not only decoding linguistic information, but also understanding the ideological, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions embedded within discourse. Consequently, reading may be understood as a central mechanism through which adult EFL learners expand their linguistic competence while simultaneously developing critical and intercultural awareness.

Yet the apparently straightforward relationship between reading exposure and language development conceals a more complex educational reality, as university instructors frequently observe that learners subjected to similar reading loads do not derive equivalent developmental benefit (Griffiths & Soruç, 2021). Some students engage productively with texts, persevere through difficulty, and progressively improve their language competence, whereas others approach reading with hesitation, fatigue, or avoidance and show comparatively weaker gains over time. Such a difference suggests that reading cannot be understood exclusively as a technical decoding process dependent on linguistic knowledge. Rather, it must also be understood as an affectively mediated academic behaviour.

Recent scholarship in literacy studies and applied linguistics has increasingly emphasized this multidimensional view of reading. Reading achievement is now commonly described as the outcome of an interaction between cognitive resources and affective dispositions, including motivation, anxiety management, persistence, and self-beliefs (Mori, 2002; Wigfield et al., 2016). Learners may possess sufficient lexical and grammatical knowledge to process texts yet fail to transform that knowledge into reading development if they approach reading with low confidence, weak expectancy of success, or a history of discouraging experiences. In this sense, reading competence is inseparable from learners' perceptions of themselves while performing the act of reading.

One of the most productive constructs for examining this self-perceptive dimension is self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as individuals' judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to attain designated performances. Within educational settings, self-efficacy beliefs have consistently been linked to persistence, resilience, effort investment, strategic regulation, and academic achievement (Pajares, 2006; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Crucially, efficacy beliefs do not just reflect current competence; they are also behaviourally generative, influencing whether learners initiate tasks, how long they remain engaged when difficulty arises, and how they interpret temporary setbacks.

Transferred to the reading domain, this theoretical lens becomes particularly relevant. Reading in a foreign language is inherently effortful. It routinely involves lexical uncertainty, delayed comprehension, inferential reconstruction, and tolerance of partial understanding. Learners who perceive these moments as manageable tend to continue read-

ing; learners who interpret them as evidence of inadequacy often disengage. Consequently, reading self-efficacy may function as a bridge variable between linguistic competence and actual reading behaviour. Students with stronger efficacy beliefs are more likely to read voluntarily, persist through challenging passages, and accumulate textual contact through which proficiency develops.

Recent university-level EFL studies have reported that learners with stronger reading self-efficacy display greater autonomous reading engagement (Harimurti et al., 2025), lower reading anxiety, and more persistent use of reading strategies when confronted with difficult texts (Cancino & Gonzalez, 2023; Moulavinafchi et al., 2026; Yang et al., 2024). Muche et al. (2023), in a study with 150 Ethiopian EFL learners, found that both metacognitive reading strategy use and self-efficacy beliefs accounted for significant variance in reading comprehension performance; however, self-efficacy emerged as the stronger predictor. This finding is theoretically relevant because it indicates that learners' beliefs about their capability as readers may not simply accompany strategic reading behaviour, but may condition the extent to which cognitive strategies are activated effectively during reading. Such evidence reinforces the view that affective self-perceptions occupy a central rather than peripheral role in reading development.

At the same time, not all reading-related learner beliefs necessarily function in the same way. Learners may hold sophisticated or epistemic beliefs about literary interpretation and the multiplicity of textual meaning without necessarily perceiving themselves as confident readers. This distinction between beliefs about texts and beliefs about the self in relation to texts is theoretically significant. The present study emerged precisely from the need to determine which of these reading-related domains bears the clearest relationship to measurable language proficiency.

The Reader Self-Perception Scale (Henk & Melnick, 1995) and its later extension, the RSPS2 (Henk et al., 2012), offer an empirically robust means of highlighting this phenomenon. Rather than reducing reading confidence to a single undifferentiated score, the RSPS2 conceptualizes reader self-efficacy across four dimensions: Progress, Observational Comparison, Social Feedback, and Physiological States. Progress refers to learners' perception that they are improving as readers over time; Observational Comparison captures how they position their reading competence relative to peers; Social Feedback reflects perceived external judgments and encouragement from teachers or others; and Physiological States addresses the emotional and bodily comfort associated with reading, including calmness, confidence, and reduced anxiety. Together, these dimensions provide a multidimensional account of how learners perceive themselves while engaging with reading tasks.

By contrast, the Literature Epistemic Cognition Scale, or LECS (Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2016), examines students' beliefs about the nature of literary knowledge and textual interpretation. More specifically, LECS explores how learners perceive the literature, textual meaning, authorial intention, ambiguity, and the possibility of multiple interpretations. Students with more sophisticated literary epistemological beliefs generally understand literary meaning as interpretative, contextual, and open to critical analysis rather than fixed or absolute. Whereas RSPS2 focuses primarily on learners' confidence in their ability to perform reading tasks successfully, LECS addresses how students conceptualise the nature of texts and literary meaning itself.

Despite the relevance of this construct, reading self-efficacy remains underexamined in higher education EFL populations. A considerable proportion of prior RSPS2-informed work has focused on younger readers or general literacy contexts, while many EFL studies have researched broad motivation or anxiety constructs without isolating reader self-perception specifically, which leaves an important empirical gap. Undergraduate students in English Studies programmes are expected to process large quantities of literary, linguistic,

and academic reading in English, much of it autonomously and outside direct classroom mediation. Under these conditions, weak reading self-efficacy may become a substantial barrier to language development even when there are many formal curricular reading opportunities (Kurt-Taşpınar & Çubukçu, 2020; Nausa et al., 2024).

Drawing on data collected from undergraduate students enrolled in a Degree in English Studies at a Spanish university, this article investigates whether reading self-efficacy is associated with English language proficiency and which dimensions of reading self-efficacy, as measured through RSPS2, show the strongest statistical relationship with proficiency outcomes. A broader exploratory dataset initially included the data obtained from both RSPS2 and LECS in order to determine which of these two reading-related constructs demonstrated the clearest relationship with L2 competence development. However, preliminary analyses indicated that reading self-efficacy showed a substantially stronger and more educationally relevant association with language proficiency outcomes than literary epistemological beliefs. Consequently, the present manuscript centres its analytical attention on the RSPS2 dimensions and their correlation with standardized English proficiency scores, although some details about the LECS results will also be provided.

The study is significant for three reasons: first, it extends reading self-efficacy research into adult EFL higher education settings, where empirical evidence remains limited; second, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship arguing that affective variables are structurally implicated in language development rather than merely motivationally peripheral; and third, it offers pedagogical implications suggesting that effective university reading instruction should address not only textual complexity and analytical rigor, but also the learner's progressive confidence as a reader.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) To what extent are reading self-efficacy (measured using RSPS2) and literary epistemic cognition beliefs (measured using LECS) associated with English language proficiency among undergraduate EFL learners? (2) Which of these two dimensions of reading demonstrates the strongest relationship with proficiency outcomes?

Beyond these empirical questions, the study is situated within a broader theoretical shift in language education that reconceptualises reading as an entry point into deeper learning processes. Recent pluriliteracies approaches conceptualise reading not as an isolated skill, but as the initial stage in recursive cycles of meaning-making, perspective-taking, and knowledge construction (Meyer et al., 2026). Within this framework, learners' capacity to engage productively with texts depends not only on linguistic competence but also on affective conditions such as confidence, emotional comfort, and perceived progress.

The present study contributes to this line of inquiry by providing empirical evidence that reading self-efficacy functions as a mediating condition between textual exposure and measurable language proficiency. In doing so, it seeks to bridge micro-level learner psychology and macro-level pedagogical theory, offering a more integrated account of how reading contributes to language development in higher education EFL contexts.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative correlational design aimed at examining the relationship between undergraduate EFL learners' reading self-efficacy, literary epistemic cognition and their measured English language proficiency. A quantitative design was considered appropriate because the principal objective was not to manipulate instructional variables experimentally (Plavnick & Ferreri, 2013), but to determine whether naturally occurring differences in learners' self-perceptions as readers were statistically associated with differences in language performance. Correlational methodology is particularly

suitable when the aim is to identify associations or patterns among affective, cognitive, and achievement-related variables within authentic educational settings without disrupting the normal academic environment (McCombs, 2013).

The design was therefore conceived as an empirical inquiry into the extent to which reading-related self-beliefs may function as meaningful indicators of second language improvement. In addition to the principal RSPS2 variable, LECS were initially measured as an exploratory comparative construct in order to determine whether beliefs about texts or beliefs about the self as a reader were more closely aligned with proficiency outcomes.

2.2. Participants and Educational Context

The participants were 141 undergraduate students enrolled in the Degree in English Studies at a Spanish university. The students were between 19 and 21 years of age and in their second year. The data were collected specifically for the purposes of the present study through a standalone research design focused on reading-related variables and English language proficiency. The sample was obtained through convenience sampling (Golzar et al., 2022), as participation depended on students' voluntary completion of the instruments during the data collection phase. Although convenience sampling limits broad statistical generalizability, it remains a common and methodologically acceptable procedure in exploratory higher education language research, particularly when the aim is to capture naturally occurring learner variability within a specific academic programme.

The educational context is especially relevant to the present study because students enrolled in English Studies are expected to engage regularly with extensive reading in English across literature, linguistics, language acquisition, and cultural studies modules. This reading is not limited to surface comprehension but frequently requires inferential processing, analytical interpretation, and sustained interaction with complex disciplinary discourse. Consequently, the learners' internal experience of reading may reasonably be expected to play a significant role in how productively they benefit from such exposure (Harimurti et al., 2025).

Moreover, because a substantial proportion of the degree workload is completed autonomously, students' self-regulation and willingness to persist with demanding reading tasks become even more central than in highly teacher-mediated face-to-face environments. This makes the sample particularly suitable for examining the educational relevance of reading self-efficacy.

2.3. Instruments

Three instruments were administered online through Google Forms. However, the present article focuses analytically on those variables directly related to the relationship between reading self-efficacy and English language proficiency. Due to copyright restrictions, the instruments cannot be reproduced in this paper, although they may be consulted in their corresponding cited sources.

The principal instrument was the RSPS2 developed by Henk et al. (2012), an expanded and psychometrically refined version of the original Reader Self-Perception Scale. The RSPS2 measures four dimensions of reader self-efficacy and consists of 47 items, one of which is general; 16 items correspond to Progress (PR), 9 to Observational Comparison (OC), 9 to Social Feedback (SF), and 12 to Physiological States (PS). Although the RSPS2 has its origins in adolescent literacy research (Webber, 2024), its dimensions are conceptually transferable to young adult readers because they measure stable psychological efficacy domains rather than age-specific reading behaviours. In the present sample, the instrument demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with very high Cronbach's alpha values across the principal subdimensions, particularly Physiological States ($\alpha = 0.947$), Progress

($\alpha = 0.963$), and Social Feedback ($\alpha = 0.918$), thereby confirming its reliability for use with university EFL learners.

The second instrument was a standardized multilevel English placement test retrieved from the Macmillan English Hub platform and administered online through the same Google Forms environment. This adaptive commercial assessment measures learners' English proficiency according to *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) levels ranging from A1 to C1 and has been validated in previous studies (Tinedo-Rodríguez, 2025). Because the test adjusts item difficulty according to learner performance, it allows for a continuous and comparatively sensitive estimation of English language proficiency rather than relying on broad classroom-level placement labels. The resulting score was used as the principal linguistic outcome variable in the statistical analyses.

This test consists of 70 multiple-choice items with four response options each. Its score bands can be aligned with the CEFR, thus providing an internationally recognized interpretation of proficiency levels. Specifically, the Beginner level (items 1–6) corresponds approximately to A1, while the Elementary level (items 7–20) aligns with A2. The Pre-Intermediate band (items 21–34) can be associated with B1, whereas the Intermediate level (items 35–48) reflects a solid B1+ to B2 range. The Upper Intermediate band (items 49–62) corresponds to B2, and the highest band, Advanced (items 63–70), aligns with C1. This alignment allows the test results to be interpreted within a widely used proficiency framework, thereby facilitating comparison across contexts. The maximum possible score was 70.

A third instrument, the LECS (Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2016), was also included in the wider Google Forms study in order to measure students' beliefs about literary knowledge, textual interpretation, and the multiplicity of meaning in literary texts. In the present sample, the instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.77$, 95% CI [0.70, 0.84].

In both RSPS2 and LECS, scores were computed as mean scale scores rather than raw cumulative totals, following common practice in Likert-scale research. Consequently, the maximum possible score for both instruments was 5, independently of the total number of items composing each scale.

Given the ordinal nature of the Likert-scale questionnaire data and the significant deviations from normality observed in the dataset, nonparametric analyses using Spearman's rho were employed instead of Pearson's correlations. Spearman's rho was considered more appropriate for examining monotonic relationships between variables without assuming normal distribution properties.

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected during a single research phase in which participants completed a questionnaire consisting of the RSPS2 questionnaire, the LECS, and the standardized English placement test. The time devoted to the completion of the questionnaire was 1 h through Google Forms in a face-to-face setting. The study did not involve any instructional intervention or experimental manipulation, as its purpose was to capture the naturally occurring statistical relationships among learner beliefs and language proficiency at one specific point in the participants' academic trajectory.

All questionnaire responses were coded numerically and entered into a statistical database together with the proficiency scores obtained from the multilevel English test. Once compiled, the data were subjected to reliability analyses and correlational procedures.

2.5. Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded in two sequential stages. First, reliability analyses were conducted to determine the psychometric stability of the RSPS2 dimensions within the present university EFL sample. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each principal subscale as shown in Section 2.3.

Second, correlational analyses were performed to examine the relationship between reading-related variables and English language proficiency. At a preliminary global level, Spearman's rho coefficients were used to compare total RSPS2 scores, LECS, and proficiency outcomes. Subsequently, Spearman correlation coefficients were calculated among the four RSPS2 dimensions and the standardized proficiency score in order to identify which dimensions of reader self-perception demonstrated the strongest statistical relationship with language competence.

This two-stage procedure allowed the study to move from a broad comparison of reading-related learner constructs to a more precise examination of the internal architecture of reading self-efficacy itself.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the principal variables included in the study, namely overall English proficiency scores, LECS, and RSPS2. As shown in the table, participants obtained a mean proficiency score of 48.72 out of a maximum possible score of 70, suggesting an overall intermediate-to-upper-intermediate level of English competence within the sample. The mean score for LECS ($M = 3.303$, $SD = 0.496$) indicates moderately developed literary epistemological beliefs, whereas the higher mean observed for RSPS2 ($M = 3.646$, $SD = 0.708$) suggests comparatively strong levels of reading self-efficacy among participants. The relatively wide ranges observed across the variables also indicate substantial learner variability, which supports the suitability of the sample for exploring possible relationships between affective reading-related constructs and language proficiency outcomes.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for English proficiency and LECS.

Variable	N	M	SD	Min	Max
English proficiency	141	48.72	12.34	17.00	68.00
LECS	141	3.303	0.496	1.875	5.000
RSPS2	141	3.646	0.708	1.422	4.933

Note. N = number of participants; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum; Max = maximum.

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for the four RSPS2 subdimensions. Overall, the highest mean score was observed for Physiological States ($M = 3.926$, $SD = 0.824$), followed closely by Progress ($M = 3.855$, $SD = 0.770$). These findings suggest that participants generally perceived themselves as emotionally comfortable while reading in English and considered their reading abilities to be improving over time. By contrast, Social Feedback ($M = 3.2929$, $SD = 0.765$) and Observational Comparison ($M = 3.290$, $SD = 0.785$) showed comparatively lower mean values, indicating that students appeared somewhat less confident when evaluating their reading competence in relation to external judgments or peer comparison. Nevertheless, all four subdimensions produced mean scores above the midpoint of the scale, which points overall to relatively positive reader self-perceptions within the sample.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the RSPS2 subdimensions.

Subdimension RSPS2	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Physiological States (PS)	141	3.926	0.824	1.455	5.000
Progress (PR)	141	3.855	0.770	1.313	5.000
Social Feedback (SF)	141	3.292	0.765	1.222	5.000
Observational Comparison (OC)	141	3.290	0.785	1.333	5.000

Note. PS = Physiological States; PR = Progress; SF = Social Feedback; OC = Observational Comparison.

As illustrated in Table 3, regarding proficiency level distribution, the largest proportion of participants was situated within the Upper-Intermediate category (N = 63), followed by the Intermediate level (N = 37) and the Pre-Intermediate level (N = 22). A smaller number of learners reached the Advanced level (N = 18), whereas only one participant was classified within the Elementary band and none fell into the Beginner category.

Table 3. Frequency of levels.

Level	Frequency
Beginner	0
Elementary	1
Pre-intermediate	22
Intermediate	37
Upper-intermediate	63
Advanced	18

Overall, the distribution reveals a clear concentration of participants within the intermediate-to-upper-intermediate proficiency ranges. This pattern is consistent with the linguistic profile typically expected in undergraduate English Studies programmes, where sustained exposure to English language and literature generally presupposes at least moderate levels of proficiency. At the same time, the presence of learners distributed across several adjacent proficiency bands indicates sufficient variability within the sample to permit meaningful analysis of the relationship between reading self-efficacy and English language competence. The absence of Beginner-level participants additionally suggests that the sample predominantly represents learners already capable of engaging with relatively complex academic reading tasks in English.

3.2. Preliminary Exploratory Comparison of Reading-Related Variables

A preliminary exploratory analysis was conducted to determine which of the reading-related constructs measured in the broader project demonstrated the clearest relationship with English language proficiency. Results from the Shapiro–Wilk test ($W = 0.965, p < 0.001$) indicated that the data did not meet the assumption of normality; consequently, Spearman’s rho, the nonparametric alternative to Pearson’s correlation coefficient, was applied.

Spearman correlation coefficients (Table 4) revealed that literary epistemological beliefs did not demonstrate a statistically significant association with English language proficiency ($\rho = -0.139, p = 0.231$). By contrast, total reading self-efficacy scores showed a positive and statistically significant relationship with proficiency ($\rho = 0.308, p < 0.001$). Furthermore, literary epistemological beliefs and reading self-efficacy exhibited only a weak positive association with one another ($\rho = 0.201, p = 0.017$).

As can be observed, literary epistemological beliefs failed to demonstrate statistical relevance in relation to proficiency, whereas reading self-efficacy displayed a moderate and significant positive association.

Table 4. Spearman Correlations among Reading-Related Variables and English Proficiency.

Variable	English Proficiency	LECS Total	RSPS Total
English proficiency	—	−0.139	0.308 ***
LECS total	−0.139	—	0.201 *
RSPS total	0.308 ***	0.201 *	—

Note. $p < 0.05$ *, $p < 0.001$ ***.

These preliminary findings are analytically important because they indicate that not all reading-related learner beliefs operate similarly in relation to language development. Abstract beliefs about textual interpretation and literary knowledge do not appear to translate directly into stronger language performance. To explore the correlational patterns controlling shared variance, a multiple linear regression analysis was implemented with the results shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Model Summary for the Linear Regression Predicting English Proficiency.

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	RMSE	AIC	BIC	ΔR^2	ΔF	df1	df2	p
M ₀	0.000	0.000	0.000	12.34	1111.78	1117.68	—	—	0	140	—
M ₁	0.376	0.142	0.129	11.52	1094.23	1106.03	0.142	11.40	2	138	<0.001

Note. M₁ includes LECS and RSPS2.

M₀ was the intercept-only model, including only the constant term. M₁ was the full model, which included LECS and RSPS2 as predictor variables. M₁ (RMSE = 11.52, AIC = 1094.23, BIC = 1106.03) improved over M₀ (RMSE = 12.34, AIC = 1111.78, BIC = 1117.68), as the lower RMSE indicates greater predictive accuracy. Likewise, the decreases in AIC ($\Delta = 17.55$) and BIC ($\Delta = 11.65$) suggest a better balance between model fit and parsimony. These results indicate that the inclusion of LECS and RSPS2 provided a superior fit compared to the null model. No additional models were tested.

It can be inferred from Table 5 that the regression model (M₁), which included LECS and RSPS2, accounted for a significant variance (14.2%) in English proficiency ($R^2 = 0.142$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.129$). These factors significantly improved the null model (M₀), $\Delta R^2 = 0.142$, $\Delta F(2, 138) = 11.40$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 6 presents the analysis of variance for the model including LECS and RSPS2 as predictor variables. The results indicated that the model significantly predicted English language proficiency, $F(2, 138) = 11.40$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 6. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for the Linear Regression Model Predicting English Proficiency.

Model	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
M ₁	Regression	3022	2	1511.2	11.40	<0.001
	Residual	18,300	138	132.6		
	Total	21,322	140			

Note. M₁ includes literary epistemological beliefs (LECS) and reading self-efficacy (RSPS2).

Furthermore, the regression coefficients (Table 7) reflected the same general pattern identified in the correlational analysis, with reading self-efficacy (RSPS2) emerging as a significant positive predictor of proficiency ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 4.60$, $p < 0.001$). By contrast, LECS showed a significant negative association with proficiency within the linear model ($\beta = -0.21$, $t = -2.51$, $p = 0.013$), consistent with the tendency previously observed in the correlational analysis. However, this finding should not be interpreted as evidence that literary epistemological beliefs are inherently inversely related to language proficiency. Rather, it suggests that, when both predictors are entered simultaneously into the model,

RSPS2 accounts for a substantially greater proportion of variance in English proficiency than LECS.

Table 7. Regression Coefficients for the Linear Model Predicting English Proficiency.

	Predictor	B	SE	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Tolerance	VIF
M ₀	Intercept	48.72	1.04	—	46.88	<0.001	—	—
M ₁	Intercept	41.63	7.37	—	5.65	<0.001	—	—
	LECS	−5.11	2.04	−0.21	−2.51	0.013	0.924	1.08
	RSPS2	6.58	1.43	0.38	4.60	<0.001	0.924	1.08

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.

Regarding multicollinearity, no evidence of problematic overlap between predictors was identified (VIF = 1.08 for both variables; see Table 7). Although LECS displayed a negative association with proficiency in both the correlational and regression analyses, students' self-perceptions as readers demonstrated a clearer and more robust relationship with proficiency outcomes. This finding justified the decision to centre the remainder of the analysis on the RSPS2 construct.

3.3. Correlations Among RSPS2 Dimensions and English Proficiency

The Shapiro–Wilk test for normality indicated a significant deviation from normality ($W = 0.984$, $p = 0.007$). Consequently, nonparametric analyses using Spearman's rho were conducted.

Spearman correlation analyses (Table 8) revealed that all four dimensions of the RSPS2 were positively and significantly associated with English language proficiency. However, the strength of these associations was not uniform.

Table 8. Spearman Correlations among RSPS2 Dimensions and English Proficiency.

Variable	1. PS	2. PR	3. SF	4. OC	5. English Proficiency
1. Physiological States (PS)	—	0.884 ***	0.594 ***	0.599 ***	0.305 ***
2. Progress (PR)	0.884 ***	—	0.657 ***	0.648 ***	0.376 ***
3. Social Feedback (SF)	0.594 ***	0.657 ***	—	0.740 ***	0.193 *
4. Observational Comparison (OC)	0.599 ***	0.648 ***	0.740 ***	—	0.190 *
5. English proficiency	0.305 ***	0.376 ***	0.193 *	0.190 *	—

Note. N = 141. $p < 0.05$ *, $p < 0.001$ ***.

Perceived Progress showed the strongest correlation with English proficiency ($\rho = 0.376$, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that students who perceived greater improvement in their reading over time tended to obtain higher scores on the standardized English test. Physiological States demonstrated the second strongest relationship ($\rho = 0.305$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that greater emotional comfort and confidence during reading were also positively associated with proficiency outcomes. Social Feedback ($\rho = 0.193$, $p = 0.011$) and Observational Comparison ($\rho = 0.190$, $p = 0.012$) showed weaker, although still statistically significant, correlations with proficiency.

The RSPS2 dimensions were also strongly intercorrelated. The strongest relationship was observed between Physiological States and Progress ($\rho = 0.884$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Social Feedback and Observational Comparison ($\rho = 0.740$, $p < 0.001$). Additional substantial correlations were found between Progress and Social Feedback ($\rho = 0.657$, $p < 0.001$), between Progress and Observational Comparison ($\rho = 0.648$, $p < 0.001$), and between Physiological States and both Social Feedback and Observational Comparison. These high intercorrelations suggest that students who feel more emotionally comfortable during reading also tend to perceive greater progress and receive more positive external feedback.

In light of these findings, a multiple regression analysis was conducted (Table 9) to examine the contribution of each RSPS2 dimension to English proficiency.

Table 9. Model Summary for Regression Predicting English Proficiency.

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	RMSE	AIC	BIC	ΔR^2	ΔF	df1	df2	<i>p</i>
M ₀	0.000	0.000	0.000	12.34	1111.78	1117.68	—	—	0	140	—
M ₁	0.397	0.157	0.139	11.45	1093.65	1108.39	0.157	8.53	3	137	<0.001

Note. M₀ = null model (intercept only); M₁ = model including progress (PR), social feedback (SF), and observational comparison (OC). RMSE = root mean square error; AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

The model is presented in Table 9. It includes Progress (PR), Social Feedback (SF), and Observational Comparison (OC). An initial attempt to include all four RSPS2 dimensions resulted in multicollinearity issues affecting Physiological States (PS) and Progress (PR). Given the stronger predictive contribution of PR, PS was excluded from the final model.

The model explained 15.7% of the variance in English proficiency ($R^2 = 0.157$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.139$) and represented a significant improvement over the null model (M₀), $\Delta R^2 = 0.157$, $\Delta F(3, 137) = 8.53$, $p < 0.001$.

Regarding model fit, M₁ also showed improvement over the null model, as indicated by lower RMSE (11.45 vs. 12.34), AIC (1093.65 vs. 1111.78), and BIC (1108.39 vs. 1117.68) values. Together, these indices suggest improved predictive accuracy and a better balance between model fit and parsimony.

The analysis of variance presented in Table 10 indicates that the model significantly predicted English proficiency, $F(3, 137) = 8.53$, $p < 0.001$. In other words, the predictors (PR, SF, and OC) together explained a significant proportion of the variance in English proficiency.

Table 10. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for the Regression Model.

Model	Source	SS	df	MS	F	<i>p</i>
M ₁	Regression	3355	3	1118.2	8.53	<0.001
	Residual	17,968	137	131.2		
	Total	21,322	140			

Table 11 presents the regression coefficients for the model predicting English proficiency. Progress (PR) was the only statistically significant predictor ($B = 7.88$, $SE = 1.84$, $\beta = 0.49$, $t = 4.29$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher perceived progress in reading was associated with higher levels of English proficiency. By contrast, Social Feedback (SF) ($B = -1.58$, $p = 0.488$) and Observational Comparison (OC) ($B = -0.92$, $p = 0.671$) were not significant predictors. These findings suggest that, when considered simultaneously with PR, neither SF nor OC contributed uniquely to the explanation of proficiency outcomes.

Table 11. Regression Coefficients for the Model Predicting English Proficiency.

Model		B	SE	β	t	<i>p</i>	Tolerance	VIF
M ₀	(Intercept)	48.72	1.04	—	46.88	<0.001	—	—
M ₁	(Intercept)	26.57	5.07	—	5.24	<0.001	—	—
	Progress (PR)	7.88	1.84	0.49	4.29	<0.001	0.467	2.14
	Social Feedback (SF)	−1.58	2.27	−0.10	−0.70	0.488	0.311	3.21
	Observational Comparison (OC)	−0.92	2.16	−0.06	−0.43	0.671	0.327	3.06

Regarding collinearity diagnostics, VIF values remained below 3.5 and tolerance values remained above 0.30, indicating no serious multicollinearity concerns within the final model.

Overall, the results reveal a consistent pattern: although all dimensions of reading self-efficacy were positively associated with English language proficiency at the correlational level, perceived developmental progress emerged as the strongest and most robust predictor within the regression model. These findings suggest that students' internal perception of improvement as readers may play a particularly important role in higher levels of L2 proficiency development.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust empirical support for the claim that reading self-efficacy constitutes a meaningful component of second language development in higher education EFL contexts. More specifically, the results indicate that learners' perceptions of themselves as readers are systematically associated with measurable differences in English language proficiency. This positions reading self-efficacy not as a peripheral motivational variable, but as a construct with explanatory relevance for understanding how reading activity is transformed into linguistic development.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to a growing body of work that challenges purely cognitive accounts of reading and instead conceptualises it as an affectively mediated practice. In this view, reading outcomes depend not only on what learners can process, but also on whether they remain engaged with texts long enough for processing to become developmentally productive (Meyer et al., 2026).

The first point of significance lies in the contrast between reading self-efficacy and literary epistemological beliefs. Whereas literary epistemological beliefs did not demonstrate a significant relationship with English proficiency, total reading self-efficacy did. This distinction is theoretically revealing because it suggests that language proficiency is influenced less by students' abstract conceptions of textual interpretation and more by their lived experience of themselves during the act of reading. Learners may possess sophisticated views regarding the multiplicity of literary meaning without necessarily experiencing reading as a domain in which they can operate confidently and persistently. The present findings, therefore, reinforce the need to distinguish between beliefs about texts and beliefs about the self in relation to texts.

Interestingly, the regression analyses also revealed a small but significant negative contribution of literary epistemological beliefs when entered simultaneously with reading self-efficacy into the predictive model. This finding should not be interpreted as evidence that sophisticated literary epistemic cognition hinders language development. Rather, it may suggest that abstract awareness of textual multiplicity and interpretive complexity does not necessarily translate into the behavioural persistence and sustained textual engagement required for measurable linguistic growth. In other words, learners may intellectually recognize literature as open, ambiguous, and interpretively rich while still lacking the affective confidence needed to engage productively with complex texts over time. Under these conditions, literary epistemological sophistication alone may be insufficient to support proficiency development unless accompanied by stronger efficacy beliefs regarding reading performance itself.

More broadly, what emerges from the data is that the reading–proficiency relationship should not be conceptualized solely in terms of exposure to written input, but in terms of the learner's psychological readiness to remain engaged with that input over time. A curriculum may provide substantial textual material, yet if learners encounter those texts from positions of hesitation, accumulated frustration, or low expectancy of

success, the developmental value of the input is diminished. By contrast, when learners perceive themselves as readers capable of coping, progressing, and understanding, the same textual environment becomes substantially more productive. The present findings thus shift attention from reading as an assigned academic activity to reading as sustainable learner behaviour.

This interpretation aligns strongly with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive proposition, which states that efficacy beliefs shape behaviour through persistence, resilience, effort investment, and willingness to confront challenge. Self-efficacy influences not only whether learners initiate a task, but also whether they continue when immediate success is uncertain. Reading in a foreign language is precisely such a task: it routinely requires delayed comprehension, inferential reconstruction, and tolerance of lexical incompleteness. Under these conditions, efficacy judgments may become one of the decisive filters determining whether learners remain engaged long enough for linguistic gains to accumulate.

The findings also relate to contemporary second language reading research, which emphasizes that reading volume is mediated by learner affect rather than guaranteed by curricular prescription alone. Extensive reading traditions have long argued that frequent reading promotes vocabulary acquisition, syntactic familiarity, discourse competence, and broader language growth (Day et al., 1998; Krashen, 2004). However, the present study complicates the implicit assumption that access to texts automatically translates into developmental reading practice. Learners do not benefit from reading opportunities merely because such opportunities exist; they benefit when they perceive reading as a domain in which effort is manageable and progress is attainable.

Particularly significant is the fact that all four RSPS2 dimensions correlated positively with proficiency, but not with equal strength. This unevenness is theoretically productive because it allows a more nuanced understanding of what forms of reading self-belief are most educationally consequential. The strongest association emerged in Progress, suggesting that the most powerful aspect of reading self-efficacy may not be external praise or peer comparison, but students' own recognition that they are improving. This is fully compatible with self-efficacy theory, which identifies mastery experiences as the most influential source of efficacy formation. When learners can detect evidence that repeated reading is producing greater comprehension, greater speed, or greater confidence, they become more likely to continue engaging with texts, thereby reinforcing the very conditions of further development.

The second strongest relationship appeared in Physiological States. This finding foregrounds the emotional body of reading; this is an area often underestimated in university language instruction. Reading in a second language can generate frustration, fatigue, cognitive overload, and anticipatory anxiety, especially when texts are academically dense. Students who repeatedly associate reading with emotional strain may disengage even when they possess sufficient technical capacity to continue. Conversely, students who feel calm, comfortable, and psychologically secure while reading are more likely to persist through moments of difficulty. The present results, therefore, suggest that language proficiency is built not only on repeated textual exposure, but on repeated emotionally tolerable encounters with texts.

Social Feedback and Observational Comparison showed weaker but still significant relationships with proficiency. This indicates that the social ecology of reading remains relevant, although less decisive than internally generated efficacy sources. Encouragement from teachers, constructive comments, and the perception of not lagging behind peers may contribute to a more positive reading identity, yet the comparatively smaller coefficients suggest that adult university learners rely increasingly on self-monitoring and internal standards of competence rather than exclusively on external validation.

An especially important implication of these findings is that they challenge the persistent tendency in higher education EFL programmes to conceptualize reading primarily as a technical academic skill. In many university English curricula, students are assigned demanding texts, asked to interpret them analytically, and expected to improve through intellectual exposure alone. The present study suggests that such an assumption is incomplete. Technical challenge without corresponding efficacy support may produce textual confrontation rather than textual growth. The issue is not whether university programmes should reduce rigor, but whether they should sequence reading demands in ways that allow learners to accumulate recognizable mastery experiences.

This has direct pedagogical consequences because if reading self-efficacy is associated with proficiency, then university EFL instruction should not only ask whether students are reading difficult texts, but whether they are experiencing an increase in competence while reading. Visible progress markers, structured opportunities for successful comprehension, low-stakes sustained reading, and carefully graduated text difficulty may all contribute to strengthening the two dimensions that proved most relevant in the present study: perceived progress and physiological comfort.

Taken together, [Muche et al.'s \(2023\)](#) findings and the present results point toward a broader interpretive conclusion: reading self-efficacy appears to mediate not only behavioural engagement with texts but also the cognitive quality of that engagement. If learners' strategic resources are activated more productively when they perceive reading as manageable and progressive, then self-efficacy may operate as a gateway variable through which both persistence and strategic processing contribute to language development.

The educational significance of these findings becomes even clearer when situated within broader contemporary work on affective variables in second language literacy. Recent investigations have increasingly demonstrated that reading achievement in EFL contexts is deeply shaped by learners' self-regulatory beliefs, strategic persistence, and affective tolerance of ambiguity. For example, [Horwitz \(2010\)](#) argued that language anxiety can substantially reduce learners' willingness to engage with demanding linguistic tasks even when technical competence is present. Similarly, [Ushioda \(2011\)](#) emphasized that autonomous language development depends not merely on access to learning opportunities but on learners' internally sustained sense of agency. These perspectives converge with the present findings, where reading self-efficacy appears to mediate whether textual exposure becomes educationally productive.

Likewise, [Grabe and Stoller \(2019\)](#) stressed that successful second language reading requires not only processing efficiency but strategic persistence across extended encounters with written discourse. The present study extends this position by suggesting that such persistence is affectively conditioned: students persist not only because they know how to read, but because they believe continued reading is manageable and worthwhile.

Additional support also comes from [MacIntyre's \(2017\)](#) broader work on affective barriers in language learning, which demonstrates that learners' anticipatory emotional responses can strongly influence engagement patterns. This is particularly relevant to the Physiological States dimension identified in the current study, as it suggests that emotional comfort is not a superficial accompaniment to reading but one of the behavioural conditions that make sustained reading possible.

The relevance of the Physiological States dimension in the present study is also consistent with converging evidence from higher education EFL, which affects research beyond the reading domain. For example, research conducted with university learners of English for Specific Purposes in Spain has shown that physiological manifestations of foreign language anxiety significantly shape students' performance during oral production tasks, with heightened bodily tension and emotional discomfort negatively affecting language

use. Although focused on speaking rather than reading, such findings support the broader interpretation that affective bodily responses constitute a cross-skill condition in foreign language learning. The present study extends this insight by suggesting that emotional calmness and physical comfort during reading are likewise associated with stronger language proficiency (García Marín et al., 2022).

A further interpretive consideration concerns the nature of causality. Although the present study demonstrates clear positive correlations, it cannot claim linear one-directional causation due to its cross-sectional design. Most plausibly, reading self-efficacy and language proficiency interact reciprocally. Stronger efficacy may support greater persistence and reading volume, while growing proficiency may in turn reinforce learners' sense that reading is manageable. This reciprocal cycle is educationally important because it implies that relatively modest efficacy-supportive interventions may produce cumulative developmental returns over time.

When interpreted through the lens of pluriliteracies and deeper learning frameworks, the present results acquire additional explanatory depth. Within the 4Rs model (Reading, Repositioning, Reflecting, Responding) (Meyer et al., 2026), reading is conceptualised as the initial stage of a recursive process through which learners engage with knowledge and develop disciplinary understanding. The present study isolates this initial stage and demonstrates that its effectiveness is not guaranteed by exposure alone, but depends critically on learners' affective positioning as readers.

In this sense, reading self-efficacy can be understood as a precondition for participation in deeper learning processes. Learners who do not perceive reading as manageable or progressive may fail to engage sufficiently with texts to enter subsequent stages of reflection and response. Conversely, learners who experience reading as a domain of growth and emotional stability are more likely to sustain engagement, thereby activating the broader epistemic cycle described in pluriliteracies theory.

The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that reading self-efficacy operates as a mediating mechanism between instructional conditions and language outcomes. While previous research has established that reading exposure supports language development, the present findings clarify that such exposure is not inherently effective. Rather, its effectiveness depends on whether learners are effectively positioned to engage with texts in sustained and productive ways.

By identifying perceived progress and emotional comfort as the most strongly associated dimensions, the study refines our understanding of which aspects of reader self-perception are most educationally consequential. This moves beyond general claims about motivation and provides a more precise account of how affective variables function within reading development.

The study should also be interpreted in light of certain limitations. The use of a convenience sample restricts broad generalizability, and the reliance on self-report questionnaire data means that perceived competence rather than directly observed reading behaviour is being measured. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs capable of tracing how reading self-efficacy and language proficiency co-develop across academic semesters, as well as mixed-methods approaches incorporating reading diaries, behavioural logs, or qualitative learner narratives.

Despite these limitations, the consistency of the correlations across all four RSPS2 dimensions provides strong evidence that reading self-efficacy deserves greater prominence in higher education EFL research. The statistical convergence is too systematic to dismiss as incidental motivational background noise; rather, it indicates that learner self-perception may function as one of the hidden mediating variables through which reading opportunities

are either converted into proficiency growth or allowed to dissipate without equivalent developmental return.

5. Conclusions

This study set out to explore the relationship between reading self-efficacy and English language proficiency among undergraduate students in a higher education EFL context. The findings demonstrate that reading self-efficacy is consistently and positively associated with standardized proficiency outcomes and that this relationship is observable across all four RSPS2 dimensions. Among these, perceived Progress and Physiological States emerged as the strongest correlates, suggesting that learners' internal sense of development and emotional ease constitute particularly important affective foundations for language growth.

This study, therefore, supports a broader reconceptualization of reading in university EFL settings. Reading should not be viewed exclusively as a linguistic decoding skill or as an academic comprehension task, but as an experience mediated by confidence, persistence, self-recognition, and emotional tolerance. Students who believe they are readers may be more likely to engage with reading in ways that support language proficiency development.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the implications are substantial. If university language programmes wish to improve learners' proficiency through reading, instructional efforts must move beyond assigning texts and evaluating comprehension. They must also cultivate conditions in which students repeatedly experience successful reading, recognize their own progress, and approach texts without debilitating anxiety. In practical terms, this means that reading pedagogy in higher education should integrate confidence-building mechanisms as deliberately as it integrates analytical or linguistic objectives.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the central question for higher education EFL pedagogy may not simply be whether students are exposed to reading in English, but whether they are supported in becoming readers who experience that engagement as meaningful, manageable, and progressively rewarding.

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