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The Relationship among Assertiveness, Self-consciousness, and L2 Oral Ability of English Learners

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship among assertiveness, self-consciousness, and L2 oral ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To this end, 45 intermediate EFL learners were selected by convenience sampling. The participants were provided with Self-consciousness Scales and Rathus Assertiveness Schedule to determine their level of self-consciousness and assertiveness. Afterward, an interview was conducted to assess their L2 oral ability so 10 to 15 questions were asked during a twenty-minute interview. Finally, Kanda Group Oral Discussion Test Descriptor Bands were used for assessing the students' L2 oral ability in terms of pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills. The results revealed: (a) a negative correlation was found between self-consciousness and L2 oral ability, (b) a positive correlation was found between assertiveness and L2 oral ability; (c) among the five constructs of oral ability, the highest level of assertiveness was related to communication skills, (d) the highest level of self-consciousness was negatively related to communication skills, pronunciation, and vocabulary, respectively, and finally, (e) private self-consciousness influenced L2 oral ability more than public self-consciousness. The findings of this study highlighted the importance of individual differences in L2 language learning, i.e., this study reminds English teachers to be aware of individual differences in their classrooms, and they are recommended not to attribute their students' failure only to whether they can learn L2.

Introduction

Gordon Allport was among the first scholars to indicate the importance of individual differences. As Allport (1937) stated, no two people have identical responses to an event, and each person behaves according to a unique trait structure. In academic contexts, Li et al. (2022) noted that individual differences among language learners might cause success or failure in EFL/ESL learning. In other words, individual variability in the final result and the acquisition rate has been frequently observed and reported by teachers and researchers (Van Patten & Williams, 2015), and differences among individual learners are one of the major factors explaining such differences (Li et al., 2022; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

While the general impact of personality on learning is acknowledged, the specific interplay between personality traits and oral production warrants further empirical examination, particularly in the Iranian EFL context. Schade et al. (2025) claimed that self-conscious individuals are strongly influenced by embarrassment and social anxiety in public places. In defining

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assertiveness, Hartley (1999) stated that "assertiveness is open and clear expression, firm and fluent conversation, and quick, spontaneous answers" (p. 197).

Despite the common assumption that self-consciousness is a personality factor that can hinder the L2 oral ability acquisition (Nguyen, 2024) while "assertiveness is thought to facilitate it" (Ockey, 2011, p. 968), there remains a need to statistically verify these relationships within specific learner populations to move beyond theoretical assumptions. Hence, the present study examined the relationships among Iranian English learners' assertiveness, self-consciousness, and L2 oral ability. The significance of this research is in helping educators identify at-risk learners who may struggle with oral production due to personality barriers, enabling the development of targeted interventions to foster assertiveness and reduce speech-related anxiety.

Assertiveness and Its Relevance to L2 Learning

The assertiveness concept and its theoretical foundation were introduced by Anni Townend (1991). This theory links assertiveness to self-respect and respect for others, grounded in Transactional Analysis (TA), proposed by Eric Berne in the 1950s.

Assertiveness is among the most complicated and critical social skills (Monjas, 2007; Patiño-Domínguez, 2024) and is highlighted among social competencies. This skill involves speaking and acting powerfully while respecting others. According to Paterson (2000; as cited in Tartakovsky, 2012), a clinical psychologist and the author of "The Assertiveness Workbook: How to Express Your Ideas and Stand Up for Yourself at Work and in Relationships," "assertiveness is all about being there" (p. 13). Ramadani et al. (2025) and Parray et al. (2018) argue that all students need to be assertive and learn to develop their assertiveness to achieve higher educational attainment. However, empirical evidence linking this trait to specific L2 proficiencies remains fragmented and contradictory.

The relation between L2 oral ability and assertiveness is particularly contentious. While distinct studies confirm a correlation, the direction of this relationship varies significantly across contexts and methodologies. Oskouei (2004) reported a small but significant negative relationship between assertiveness and L2 oral ability among Iranian students, whereas Ockey (2011) found a significant positive relationship between assertiveness and L2 oral ability. This discrepancy implies that the value of assertiveness in oral production may be culturally dependent.

Sobhana (2021) investigated the development of assertive interaction in English among Saudi university students, highlighting the importance of English teachers in enhancing students' communication skills, self-awareness, and self-efficacy for future personal and professional success. Liang and Kelsen (2018) examined the effects of motivation and personality on performance in an oral presentation. Their findings revealed that assertive and outgoing/sociable students performed better in collaborative oral presentations. This suggests that assertiveness aids L2 speaking, specifically when the task requires social negotiation, but may not be as advantageous in varying cultural or individual testing environments.

Conversely, the literature on literacy (reading/writing) and receptive skills shows a more uniform, positive trend than that on oral skills. For instance, Fahim and Kharrazi (2012) conducted an inquiry into the correlation between the assertiveness of Iranian English learners and their proficiency in reading comprehension. The findings revealed a statistically significant correlation between assertiveness and the ability to comprehend reading materials. Additionally, it was

determined that English learners who exhibited higher levels of assertiveness achieved superior results on reading comprehension assessments.

This consistency extends to writing proficiency. Dalari and Moinzade (2014) explored the relationship between EFL students' assertiveness and writing performance. They found that assertive participants outperformed on a writing test. Similarly, in another study by Jafari (2013), a statistically significant correlation between assertiveness and writing performance was reported. It can be hypothesized that, unlike oral tasks, which involve immediate social pressure, reading and writing allow assertive learners to draw on their self-efficacy and confidence to organize arguments and decode texts without the anxiety of real-time social evaluation (Ketabdar et al., 2014; Keikha & Pourghaz, 2025). Finally, Juretic and Kastelan (2012) and Moreira and Montes (2021) investigated the correlation between active listening and assertive communication in an educational setting. The findings of this study indicated a significant positive correlation between participants' assertiveness and active listening. Collectively, these findings indicate that while assertiveness consistently benefits receptive and literacy-based L2 skills, its impact on oral proficiency is more volatile and sensitive to the specific cultural and social demands of the speaking task.

Self-consciousness and Its Relevance to L2 Learning

The second personality trait investigated in our study was self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is a trait concerning one's behavior, a thorough awareness of the self as a social object, knowing about inner and outer specifications of the self, and contemplation (Fenigstein et al., 1975). It denotes excessive self-awareness of one's actions and appearance (Smith, 2020). Rochat (2018, p. 345) defined self-consciousness as "the propensity to perceive and to be aware of oneself, not only for oneself but also through the evaluative eyes of other individuals." This distinction is crucial in an L2 context, as it shifts the focus from simple introspection to the anxiety of external evaluation.

The complexity of this trait lies in its sub-dimensions: private and public self-consciousness. As noted by Fenigstein (1987), the private self involves internal cognition and intent, whereas public self-consciousness focuses exclusively on the self as a social entity. It is the latter dimension—along with the associated trait of social anxiety—that presents potential barriers to oral production. Social anxiety refers to the discomfort experienced in social interactions, and socially anxious people clearly avoid and escape social situations and interactions (Gado et al., 2025).

The empirical relation between self-consciousness and L2 oral ability appears inconsistent at first glance; however, a critical review suggests this disparity is likely due to the divergence between subjective self-assessment and objective performance. For instance, Hinenoya and Gatbonton (2000) reported a relationship between self-perceived L2 oral ability and self-consciousness. This suggests that self-conscious learners judge their own performance harshly, regardless of their actual competence.

Conversely, studies using objective performance measures yield different results. Hamayan et al. (1977) found no link between self-consciousness and L2 oral ability of school students. Ockey (2011) also investigated the degree to which assertiveness and self-consciousness might explain the variations in L2 oral ability. The results demonstrated that assertiveness significantly contributed to variations in L2 oral ability, whereas self-consciousness did not. These null findings imply that while self-consciousness may negatively impact a learner's confidence or

willingness to communicate (affective factors) (Badpa & Alinouri, 2025), it does not necessarily degrade their linguistic competence or actual test performance once they begin speaking. Thus, the literature suggests a gap between how self-conscious learners perceive their proficiency and how they actually perform on standardized tasks, especially in the Iranian context.

Despite the importance of the relationships among assertiveness, self-consciousness, and L2 oral ability, there remains a paucity of empirical evidence on this issue in the Iranian context. Hence, the present study aimed to address the following questions.

1. Is there any relationship between self-consciousness and L2 oral ability?
2. Is there any relationship between self-assertiveness and L2 oral ability?
3. Which sub-constructs of oral ability (pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, or communication skill) are correlated more with assertiveness?
4. Which sub-constructs of oral ability (pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, or communication skill) are correlated more with self-consciousness?
5. Which of the three components of self-consciousness (private self-consciousness, public self-consciousness, and social anxiety) can most influence L2 oral ability?

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 45 Iranian EFL learners (34 females and 11 males) was selected and took part in this study. The participants' ages ranged between 22 and 37, and their level of speaking proficiency was intermediate, as measured by a placement test (four randomly selected TOEFL iBT speaking test samples). None of the participants had ever been to an English-speaking country or had any opportunity to speak English outside academic and English-language classroom contexts. It should be noted that the participants' written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Demographics		
Gender	Male	11
	Female	34
Age	22-29	27
	30-37	18

Assessments and Measures

Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (Rathus, 1973): This instrument comprises a total of 30 items utilizing a Likert scale that ranges from +3, indicative of a very strong characterization of the self,

to +2, signifying a relatively strong characterization of the self, +1, denoting a somewhat strong characterization of the self, -1, representing a somewhat weak characterization of the self, -2, indicating a relatively weak characterization of the self, and concluding with -3, which reflects a very weak characterization of the self. Rathus (1973) reported that this instrument demonstrated moderate to high test-retest reliability ($r = .78$; $p < 0.1$) and split-half reliability ($r = .77$; $p < .01$). Its validity was confirmed by three university professors of English Teaching. The reliability of the schedule estimated by Cronbach's alpha was .68 in the present study.

Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein et al., 1975): Private and public self-consciousness are most commonly measured by the Self-Consciousness Scale. The scale includes 23 items, and students indicate their responses on a five-point Likert scale: 0 (Not at all true), 1 (Hardly ever true), 2 (Sometimes true), 3 (True most of the time), 4 (Always true). The scores range from 0 to 92. SCS has three subscales, namely "private self-consciousness" (the first ten items), "public self-consciousness" (the second seven items), and "social anxiety" (the last six items). Three university professors of English Teaching confirmed the scale's validity. The reliability estimated by Cronbach's alpha was .75 in the present study.

Interview Questions: A set of interview questions on everyday topics was used to assess participants' L2 oral proficiency (Yahay & Kheirzadeh, 2015). This semi-structured interview included personal topics such as family, leisure time, hobbies, lifestyle, and travel, as well as general topics such as human and society, environmental, educational, and professional issues.

Observation Checklist: Kanda Group Oral Discussion Test Descriptor Bands, a nine-point scale for each of the five L2 oral ability sub-constructs: pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills, was used for assessing L2 oral ability and its sub-constructs, and also to homogenize the participants. The total score of the checklist ranges between 0 and 4.

Procedure

The research design for this study was descriptive-correlational, employing a systematic, multi-phase approach to investigate the relationships among assertiveness, self-consciousness, and second-language (L2) oral ability. In the first phase of the study, participants were provided with four TOEFL iBT sample speaking tests to standardize them according to their L2 speaking proficiency. Having obtained the proficiency test results, the researchers selected participants whose scores fell within one standard deviation of the mean (mean ± 1). In the second phase, the selected participants who met the homogeneity criterion were provided with translated versions of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (1973), consisting of 30 items on a Likert scale, and the Self-consciousness Scale, containing 23 items.

In the next phase, each participant was asked 10 to 15 questions in a 20-minute interview to determine their speaking ability across the five constructs of oral ability (i.e., pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills). Finally, in the last phase of the study, the scoring was done. It must be mentioned that the range of scores in the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule is between -90 and +90, and the scores of the Self-consciousness Scale range between 0 and 92. Furthermore, two raters listened to the recorded interviews, checked their transcriptions, and assigned ratings based on participants' oral ability. It is noteworthy that the ratings were made using both the tapes and the transcriptions following the observation checklist (Kanda Group Oral

Discussion Test Descriptor Bands). The scores for each sub-construct of L2 oral ability ranged between 0 and 4. The data were analyzed using Pearson and Canonical correlation.

Results

The findings of each research question are presented below.

Relationship between self-consciousness and L2 oral ability

As mentioned above, the first research question of the study sought to examine the relationship between self-consciousness and L2 oral ability (total score). In so doing, the Pearson correlation was run (Table 2).

Table 2

Pearson Correlation for Self-consciousness and L2 Oral Ability

		Self-consciousness
L2 Oral Ability	Pearson Correlation	**-.32***
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.03
	N	45

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 presents the relationship between L2 oral ability and self-consciousness. As shown in this table, the correlation coefficient is -.32, indicating a significant negative correlation between self-consciousness and L2 oral ability. In other words, the more self-conscious learners are, the less their L2 oral proficiency is.

Relationship between assertiveness and L2 oral ability

The second research question of the study concerned the relationship between assertiveness and L2 oral ability. As with the first research question, the relationship between assertiveness and L2 oral ability was investigated using Pearson's correlation, with the results presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Pearson Correlation for Assertiveness and L2 Oral Ability

		Assertiveness
L2 Oral ability	Pearson Correlation	**.54****
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00
	N	45

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 presents the correlation coefficient of L2 oral ability and assertiveness. As shown in this table, the correlation is .54, indicating a significant positive relationship between assertiveness and L2 oral ability. In other words, the more assertive the learners are, the higher their L2 oral proficiency is.

Relationship between assertiveness and the components of oral ability

A canonical correlation analysis was used to uncover the relationships between assertiveness and the components of oral ability. One set of variables included pronunciation, fluency, grammar,

vocabulary, or communication skills, and the other variable was assertiveness. With 45 cases in the analysis, the relationship between these variables was significant: Wilks' lambda = .47, R_c^2 = .53, exact F (5, 39) =8.62, $p < .05$, while one function was extracted. Eigenvalues, percentages of variance explained, and the squared canonical correlations for this function are indicated in Table 3. This function accounted for approximately 93% of the explained variance. For readers' interest, the statistical terms used in this section are briefly explained below.

Wilk's lambda tests how well each independent variable level contributes to the mode. Eigenvalues are the building blocks of linear transformations and represent the scaling factor by which a vector is transformed when a linear transformation is applied. They help reduce data dimensionality, resulting in a simpler, computationally efficient model with greater generalization accuracy. Finally, the squared canonical correlation is the simple square of the canonical correlation. It represents the proportion of variance shared by variables.

Table 4

Eigenvalues and Canonical Correlations

Function	Eigenvalue	Percent variance explained	Squared canonical correlation
1	6.71	100	.93

The structured coefficients for the independent canonical variant are presented in Table 5. As shown in this table, the highest level of assertiveness is associated with communication skills (.85); furthermore, grammar and vocabulary are equally associated with increased assertiveness.

Table 5

Structured Coefficients for the Independent Canonical Variant

L2 Oral ability Sub-constructs	Assertiveness
Pronunciation	.36
Fluency	.33
Grammar	.48
Vocabulary	.48
Communication skill	.85

Relationships between self-consciousness and the components of oral ability

Another canonical correlation analysis was used to explore the relationships between self-consciousness and the components of oral ability. The sub-constructs of L2 oral ability, namely pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills, constituted one group of variables, and self-consciousness was another variable. With 45 cases in the analysis, the relationship between these variables was significant, Wilks' lambda = .26, R_c^2 = .74, exact F (5, 39) = 21.33, $p<.05$, while one function was extracted. Eigenvalues, percentages of variance

explained, and the squared canonical correlations for this function are presented in Table 5. This function accounted for approximately 85% of the explained variance.

Table 6

Eigenvalues and Canonical Correlations

Function	Eigenvalue	Percent variance explained	Squared canonical correlation
1	2.72	100	.85

The Structured coefficients for the independent canonical variant are presented in Table 7. As shown in this table, the highest level of self-consciousness is negatively related to communication skills (-.87), pronunciation (-.66), and vocabulary (-.57).

Table 7

Structured Coefficients for the Independent Canonical Variant

L2 Oral ability Sub-constructs	Self-consciousness
Pronunciation	-.66
Fluency	-.35
Grammar	-.51
Vocabulary	-.57
Communication skill	-.87

Influence of self-consciousness on L2 oral ability

The fifth research question of the study sought to determine which of the three factors of self-consciousness most influences L2 oral ability. To come up with an answer to this question, private self-consciousness, public self-consciousness, and social anxiety scores were compared via a one-way analysis of variance.

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics of Private Self-consciousness, Public Self-consciousness, and Social Anxiety Mean Scores

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Private Self-consciousness	45	31.02	5.45	.81	19	39
Public Self-consciousness	45	23.13	3.26	.48	17	28
Social Anxiety	45	16.35	4.69	.69	8	23
Total	135	23.50	7.52	.64	8	39

The mean scores for private self-consciousness (31.02), public self-consciousness (23.13), and social anxiety (16.35) differed from one another. The ANOVA table determines whether the differences among these mean scores were significant.

Table 9
One-way ANOVA Results for Private Self-consciousness, Public Self-consciousness, and Social Anxiety Mean Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4849.25	2	2424.63	116.61	**.000**
Within Groups	2744.48	132	20.79		
Total	7593.74	134			

As presented in Tables 8 and 9, there was a statistically significant difference among private self-consciousness (M=31.02, SD=5.45), public self-consciousness (M=23.13, SD=3.26), and social anxiety (M=16.35, SD=4.69) (p< .05).

Table 10
Post Hoc Test for Private Self-consciousness, Public Self-consciousness and Social Anxiety Mean Scores

					95% Confidence Interval	
(I) self	(J) self	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Private self-consciousness	Public self-consciousness	**7.88***	.96	**.00**	5.61	10.16
	Social anxiety	**14.66***	.96	**.00**	12.38	16.94
Social anxiety	Private self-consciousness	**-14.66***	.96	**.00**	-16.94	-12.38
	Public self-consciousness	**-6.77***	.96	**.00**	-9.05	-4.49

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

In the results presented above, the mean differences between private and public self-consciousness (M=7.88), private self-consciousness and social anxiety (M=14.66), and social anxiety and public self-consciousness (M=6.77) were statistically significant (p < .05). Accordingly, it might be concluded that among the three subscales of self-consciousness, private self-consciousness, with the mean score of 31.02, could most influence L2 oral ability. Public self-consciousness and social anxiety, with mean scores of 23.13 and 16.35, respectively, exerted less influence on L2 oral ability (Table 10).

Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between assertiveness, self-consciousness, and L2 oral ability. The findings concerning the first research question established a significant negative correlation between participants' level of self-consciousness and their L2 oral ability. This outcome supports the hypothesis that self-focus significantly impedes productive L2 skills. Specifically, the observed relationship aligns with prior findings, such as those of Bonk and Van

Moere (2004), who reported a small but significant negative relationship among a large sample of Japanese university learners.

Crucially, however, the current finding directly contradicts the null results reported by both Ockey (2011) and Hamayan et al. (1977). This divergence warrants a critical examination of the methodological and contextual factors at play. While the original study suggests the inconsistency may be due to participants or to different data collection instruments, a more rigorous critique is necessary. The lack of a relationship in Hamayan et al.'s (1977) study involving ESL learners and in Ockey's (2011) study using the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (Japanese version) may not necessarily negate the present results but rather reveal boundary conditions for the trait's impact. The null findings in these earlier studies might be attributable to the operationalization of the dependent variable (L2 oral ability), where standardized tests may minimize the spontaneous, affective filter-inducing pressure present in real-world communication or even the specific interview context used here.

The fact that the present study confirms the assumption that self-consciousness impedes L2 acquisition (Trishina, 2024; Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000) underscores that in contexts, like Iran, where L2 interaction opportunities are limited, the cognitive resources lost to self-focused thoughts (Hagen et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024) are especially detrimental. This loss of focus prevents smooth interaction and, ultimately, limits opportunities for language practice (Pabro-Maquidato, 2021). Therefore, we argue that self-consciousness is a potent inhibitor of L2 speaking, particularly in high-stakes or low-interaction environments where learners cannot easily externalize their focus.

Theoretically, it is posited that self-aware learners of a second language (L2) exhibit a diminished propensity to engage with individuals in the target language community, thereby forfeiting valuable opportunities to enhance their oral proficiency in L2 (Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000). Thus, self-conscious English learners seem to avoid interacting in their L2 (Pabro-Maquidato, 2021).

Hagen et al. (2024) contended that when an individual participates in a continuous interaction, the exchange may unfold fluidly and organically; however, should the individual become preoccupied with self-referential thoughts during the course of that interaction, the focus diverts from the content of the conversation to concerns regarding the potential reception of their contributions, whether they may be perceived positively or negatively. Moreover, self-conscious individuals are concerned about being observed in public, or they focus on their thoughts and feelings (Lee et al., 2024). Therefore, we conclude that self-consciousness might inhibit speaking in L2, as learners fear being rejected by the teacher and, especially, by their classmates in an English-speaking context. In other words, self-conscious English learners do not engage in discussion tasks even if they might be proficient enough to produce sound sentences.

The second research question concerned the relation between L2 oral ability and assertiveness. Based on the results obtained from the present study, assertiveness and L2 oral ability are positively correlated. In other words, assertive language learners performed better in their L2 oral performance. Simply put, the higher the students' assertiveness, the better their speaking proficiency.

This finding is inconsistent with Oskouie's (2004) results, which found a negative relationship in a similar Iranian context. The original discussion correctly attributes this inconsistency to the data-collection instruments—Oskouie used an argumentative interview and the Persian version of a specific assertiveness questionnaire. We contend that the argumentative setting introduces an adversarial element, potentially conflating assertiveness with aggressive or culturally inappropriate behavior. In such a high-pressure, competitive task, high assertiveness might detract from fluency or linguistic accuracy, resulting in a negative correlation. However, the results of this

study were consistent with those of Ockey (2011), who found a positive correlation between assertiveness and second language learning across pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills. Ockey concluded that assertiveness significantly predicted the variance in L2 pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills. Similarly, Omura et al. (2019) investigated the effect of an assertiveness communication training program on the assertiveness levels and speaking intentions of a group of nursing students. The results revealed that most participants in the experimental group expressed an intention to talk and showed higher assertiveness.

As discussed in the literature review, some English learners' failure in interpersonal interaction and oral discussion (Nussbaum & Bendixen, 2003) may be partly due to a lack of assertiveness. That is, they cannot easily, properly, or without anxiety voice and defend their viewpoints, interests, and emotions (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). As a personality factor, a lack of assertiveness may contribute to observed differences in learners' behavior, particularly in oral interaction. Considering the English learning context, assertive learners actively participate in oral discussion tasks and interact with other students.

The third research question was to find the oral ability sub-constructs, i.e., pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skill, which are more correlated with assertiveness. Based on a canonical correlation analysis, the highest level of assertiveness was associated with communication skills; furthermore, grammar and vocabulary were equally associated with increased assertiveness. In other words, language learners with a high level of assertiveness are better at communication skills. This finding fundamentally supports the view of assertiveness as a communicator's competence enhancer (Antić et al., 2024; Fong Betancourt et al., 2021) and replicates Ockey's (2011) key finding. Wijayanto and Hastuti (2021) explored the communication strategies used by Indonesian English Learners in an English conversation course. In so doing, the conversations between teachers and learners during classroom communication were recorded, and the findings demonstrated that assertiveness was the most frequent speech act learners use.

Antić et al. (2024) noted that assertiveness is associated with communication competence. They also mentioned that assertiveness is a behavioral, social skill related to communicative competence. Moreover, Fong Betancourt et al. (2021) indicated that assertiveness is viewed as a characteristic of a competent communicator. The results of the present study confirmed Ockey's (2011) findings, which assertiveness better explained communication skills than the other sub-constructs of oral ability. Accordingly, in an English-learning context, assertive and extroverted learners communicate better than their non-assertive counterparts; they use communicative strategies such as eye contact and turn-taking effectively and are more confident and fluent when speaking English (Ockey, 2011).

Consistent with the findings of the present study, Miri and Shamsoddini (2014) and Mohammadi et al. (2022) realized that among the four personality traits of assertiveness, aggressiveness, submissiveness, and passiveness, assertiveness significantly affected Iranian English learners' vocabulary knowledge. Meara and Zeng et al. (2025) stated that vocabulary knowledge plays a key role in learners' performance across various linguistic activities. They further claimed that when an English learner reads, writes, speaks, and listens, having sufficient vocabulary is essential for understanding and being understood.

Moreover, according to Mohammadi et al. (2024), vocabulary is a crucial component of language development, as students cannot perform well in academic courses if they lack the vocabulary to understand lectures, class discussions, and course texts. Thus, the conclusion that might be drawn from these views is that assertive language learners might be more interested in

communication. They know that the best communicators and speakers have a larger vocabulary and are aware that expanding vocabulary knowledge is crucial for successful second-language learning and communication.

In addition, our findings indicated that grammar is also a component correlated with assertiveness. As Hartley (2002) stated, "Assertiveness is open and clear expression, firm and fluent conversation, and quick, spontaneous answers" (p. 197). Based on this definition, assertive individuals might attempt not to produce vague, unclear, or ambiguous utterances in their interaction; thus, they might prefer to practice their language and speak more voluntarily in an English class to get the teachers' feedback, while they commonly request teachers to spell out the grammatical rules clearly. Therefore, the findings reveal that assertiveness primarily enhances communicative confidence, which in turn motivates focused effort on the supporting linguistic sub-skills (vocabulary and grammar).

The fourth research question sought to identify the sub-constructs of oral ability (pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills) that were most correlated with self-consciousness. According to the findings, the highest level of self-consciousness was negatively related to communication skills (-.87), pronunciation (-.66), and vocabulary (-.57), respectively. In other words, English learners' communication skills, pronunciation, and vocabulary are negatively correlated with self-consciousness, as self-consciousness is also a negative personality trait that may hinder language learning (Costa & McCrae, 1992). These strong negative correlations confirm the theoretical perspective that self-consciousness functions as a pervasive affective filter (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Hanifa, 2018). According to Hanifa (2018) and Khajavy et al. (2025), some affective factors can inhibit students' speaking in class, including self-consciousness, defined as students' constant comparison of their speaking competence with that of their peers, which can adversely affect their speaking performance.

Communication skills, pronunciation, and vocabulary are the three sub-constructs of L2 oral ability, which are negatively correlated with the level of self-consciousness. It is one of the individual differences and socio-emotional variables related to shyness (Fallah, 2014). Buss (1980) asserted that shy people are always worried about other people's evaluations and fear rejection. They have less self-confidence, low self-esteem, and too much self-focused attention. The state of being self-conscious and worried about others' negative opinions can make shy people lose confidence and be resistant to attending social functions (Firouzi et al., 2024). Thus, based on these views, self-conscious English learners lack confidence and fear rejection by others. Low self-esteem and shy students (a) are not involved in speaking and communicative tasks, like oral discussion and conversations, which can improve and facilitate their communicative and social skills, (b) are not concerned about the level of vocabulary knowledge for producing new utterances in L2, since they are resistant to getting involved in communicative tasks, and (c) do not get involved in repetition drill tasks and do not practice their English knowledge in English classes to get corrective feedbacks from their teacher or peers. The present data provide quantitative evidence that the core damage caused by self-consciousness is the systemic inhibition of productive engagement, crippling the development of publicly performed L2 skills.

The fifth research question was to find which of the three subscales of self-consciousness ("private self-consciousness", "public self-consciousness", and "social anxiety") most influences L2 oral ability. The findings of the present study revealed that among the three subscales of self-consciousness, private self-consciousness had the most influence on L2 oral ability, while public self-consciousness and social anxiety were less influential. In other words, participants with

private self-consciousness outperformed those with public self-consciousness and social anxiety in L2 oral performance.

In line with the theory of self-consciousness posited by Buss (1980, 1986, 2001), public self-consciousness is contingent upon the presence of an audience, other social entities, or cognitions pertaining to being in the proximity of others, alongside the scrutiny (or absence of it) from these individuals; conversely, this does not hold true for private self-consciousness. Since the interview served as the data-collection instrument to measure participants' L2 oral ability, participants with high public self-consciousness may not have performed well in this phase due to the absence of an audience and a lack of motivation to gain others' attention. Thus, they did not demonstrate their actual knowledge of English. Moreover, private self-consciousness is much stronger in a context like Iran, where there is little opportunity for social interaction in English. English students are often encouraged to use self-talk as a strategy to improve their oral English skills. This might lend more support to the greater degrees of private self among the present study participants. Moreover, the private self is conceptualized as comprising cognitions, emotional states, desires, and intentions, whereas the public self is perceived as a social construct (Fenigstein, 1987). Thus, individuals with private self-consciousness perform better in the interview (Lio et al., 2023) due to their emotional state and sense of responsibility to help the researcher conduct the research and present the actual knowledge of their L2.

As noted, limited social interaction opportunities in an EFL context, such as Iran, may strengthen the private self (self-talk, introspection) as a coping or study mechanism. The private self-consciousness measured here may not act as paralyzing anxiety but rather as metacognitive awareness, allowing the learner to self-monitor and improve linguistic output, even if they appear reserved. Therefore, the study suggests that private self-consciousness, when divorced from a strong external evaluation threat, may have an unexpected facilitative function in L2 production, distinguishing it from the purely inhibitory effects of its public counterpart.

Conclusion

The following results were reached upon the completion of the experiment: (a) there was a significant negative correlation between self-consciousness and L2 oral ability, (b) there was a significant positive correlation between assertiveness and L2 oral ability, (c) among the five constructs of oral ability, the highest level of assertiveness was related to communication skills, (d) the highest level of self-consciousness was negatively related to communication skills, pronunciation, and vocabulary, respectively, and finally, (e) private self-consciousness could exert more influence on L2 oral ability.

Regarding the limitations of the study, the participants were homogeneous (same L1, similar educational experiences, age group, and cultural backgrounds). Therefore, the findings of this study may be generalizable only to Iranian university students at the same level, and generalizing them to other contexts, such as ESL settings, private language institutes, and high schools, should be done cautiously.

Secondly, the sample size of this study was another shortcoming. It should be noted that the number of participants was not large enough to generalize the results to all English language learners. Finally, gender was not considered a significant variable in assertiveness and self-consciousness.

Obviously, one needs to be very cautious about making pedagogical implications from the results of this study. However, the findings of this study can be followed by some implications;

the results of this study demonstrated the importance of individual differences in L2 language learning, i.e., this study reminds English teachers to be aware of these individual differences in their classrooms, and they are recommended not to attribute their students' failure only to whether they can learn a second language English educators ought to take into account affective variables within their pedagogical frameworks and strategies to assist learners in surmounting obstructive personality traits and challenges. Moreover, they should facilitate opportunities for learners to cultivate positive social competencies and personality attributes. Implementing assertiveness training sessions could be beneficial for raising learners' awareness of this pivotal aspect of language acquisition.

As a future venue for research, it is necessary to uncover how, and whether, these characteristics can be taught, and which methods are most effective. This could be supported by the systematic analysis of the number of components that need to be taught to bring fruitful results. It is recommended to conduct cross-cultural studies examining how assertiveness and self-consciousness can be developed across cultures and whether their existing definitions in the literature are equally valid in different cultural contexts.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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