The Importance Of Self-Efficacy
And Foreign Language Learning
In The 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Two decades have now passed since Bandura (1986) introduced the concept of self-efficacy within the social cognitive theory of human behavior. He defined it as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances (1986). Much empirical evidence now supports the idea that self-efficacy touches almost every aspect of people's lives including foreign language learning; However, it has apparently received the least attention compared to other cognitive and affective issues. The present article attempts to shed some light on importance of the concept of self-efficacy, the role it can play in foreign language learning and the pedagogical implications it may have for foreign language teachers and the students of English language in the end of the first decade of the twenty first century.

Keywords: Self-Belief; Self-Efficacy; Social Cognitive Theory; Behavior; Foreign Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

Self-efficacy & Social Cognitive Theory

*T*he questions such as why some students succeed in learning a foreign or the second language while others fail: What language attainment is related? Why some learners rate higher in foreign language achievement than others? What makes some learners more eager to learn a foreign language than others has prompted much of the theorizing and research done in the field of foreign language learning. Psychological theories have always had a direct influence on education so that many learning theories have their origins in the disciplines of psychology; consequently, education scholars have been drawing on the psychologists' views on the nature of learning in general and language learning in particular to account for the variances in learners' attainment.

From 1910s through 1950s, behavior-oriented psychologists such as Watson, Pavlov, Thorendike and Skinner dominated much of the theories in psychology and directed attention to observable stimuli and responses so that the inner resources of the individuals were labeled as beyond the scope of scientific studies. In the mind of the behaviorists, persons are nothing more than simple mediators between behavior and the environment (Skinner, 1993, p.42S, in Naik, 1997). The approach to understand human behavior was an extremely mechanical one. It asserted that human nature could be fully understood by the laws inherent in the natural environment (Brown, 1998). Thus, according to behaviorists what makes the learners' language achievement different is nothing more than the environment in which they grow up.

Since the time, the stimulus-response pathway has been a point of debate among the theorists. They have been trying to find out whether there exist some mediating factors between stimulus and response that control behavior. Social Learning Theory (SLT) was a theory stemmed from the debate among behaviorists on the possible mediating variables regulating human behavior. While strict behaviorism represents human behavior as a simple reaction to external stimuli and explains human behavior only in terms of environmental factors, the social learning

theory incorporates the cognitive process into the behaviorists' approach to learning (Crozier, 1997). The theory asserts that there is a mediator (human cognition) between stimulus and response, representing individual's control over behavioral responses to stimuli.

Albert Bandura first began publishing his work on social learning theory in the early 1960s. To provide a better description of the theory and to make himself more distant from the mechanical view of behaviorists, he renamed it as Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) in his book "Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory". Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes cognitive variables. His theory places a heavy focus on how human beings operate cognitively on their social experiences and how these cognitions then affect their behavior (Pajares, 2002).

According to social cognitive theory, learners are proactively engaged in their own development and can make things happen by their actions. The key to this theory is the fact that among other personal factors, individuals possess self-beliefs that enable them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions, that is to say "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" (Bandura, 1986, p. 25). Bandura provided a view of human behavior in which the beliefs that people have about themselves are critical elements in the exercise of control and personal agency. This was the point at which learners' self-efficacy emerged as a crucial variable determining their success in English as foreign language learning (Brown, 1998).

While there is an ample reason to view self-efficacy as a powerful variable predicting English as foreign language learners' performance, it has apparently received the least attention as compared to other cognitive and affective variables. In fact the concept of self-efficacy in relation to language learning achievement is still new and there has been inconsiderable research in the area in comparison to the work done in other areas (Pajares, 1997). The present article attempts to shed some light on the concept of self-efficacy, it's sources, the features of high and low self-efficacious learners, the significance of studying self-efficacy, and the impacts it makes on learners' behavior in general and foreign language learning in particular, as presented in the relevant literature. Finally some pedagogical implications are provided for those involved in educational programs.

SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS

If people have high positive self-efficacy about learning a second language, then they have the power and abilities to reach this goal. On the other hand, people with low self-efficacy feel that they do not have the power and abilities' to learn a language, thus admitting failure from the start. (Barnhardt, 1997)

Nearly two decades of research have revealed that self-beliefs are strong predicators of academic achievements so that a new wave of educational psychologists is calling for attention to students' self-beliefs related to their academic pursuits (Pajares, 1997). Of all the beliefs, self-efficacy belief seems to have the most influential power in human agency and helps explain why people's behaviors differ widely when they have similar knowledge and skills (Bandura, 1986, p. 397).

According to Bandura (ibid), self-efficacy refers to "peoples' judgments of their capability to recognize and execute courses of actions required to attain designated types of performance ". To him, self-efficacy is a type of self- reflective thought that affects one's behavior. He states that people develop expectations about their own abilities and characteristics that subsequently regulate their behavior by determining what a person tries to achieve and how much effort he will put into his performance. He proposes that there must be some internal processes within the individual which act heavily on perceiving and interpreting his behavior and on initiating or guiding behavior based on it's perceived consequences. In other words, People's behavior is regulated in terms of the expectations they develop about themselves, their environment, and the result of their actions (Crozier, 1997).

To Schunk (1991, in Pajares, 1997), academic self-efficacy is one's perceived capability to perform given academic tasks at desired levels. The concept of self-efficacy is recognized by Oxford & Shearin (1995) as "a broadened view of expectancy which is drawn from social cognition theory". They define the term as "one's judgment of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations".

In his proposed model of the theoretical construct of language learning beliefs, Yang (1999) introduces self-efficacy as a motivational construct. He claims that beliefs are composed of two main dimensions: meta-cognitive dimension which refers to learners' meta-cognitive knowledge or beliefs about second language learning, and motivational dimension which incorporates learners' attitudes or emotional reactions to the second language learning and learners' self-efficacy beliefs i.e. their beliefs about their ability to learn the second language and their expectations about the result of the learning task.

Baron (2004) introduces three types of self efficacy: self-regulatory self-efficacy (ability to resist peer pressure and avoid high-risk activities), social self-efficacy (ability to form and maintain relationships, be assertive and to engage in leisure time activities), and academic self-efficacy, which is the concern of the present paper (ability to do course work, regulate learning activities and to meet expectations).

As Siegle (2000) indicates, self-efficacy reflects how confident students are about performing specific tasks. In other words, high self-efficacy in one area may not match high self-efficacy in another area. For example, high self-efficacy in mathematics does not necessarily accompany high self efficacy in spelling. Thus self-efficacy is specific to the task being attempted. This view is consistent with that of Schuiz and Schwarzer (2000) who see self-efficacy as being domain-specific, that is, one can have more or less firm self-beliefs in different domains or particular situations of functioning. But some researchers believe that self-efficacy refers to a global confidence in one's coping ability across a wide range of demanding or novel situations. General self-efficacy aims at a broad and stable sense of personal competence to deal effectively with a variety of stressful situations.

Putting together all the definitions given by different scholars for self-efficacy and it's theoretical construct, one may come to this conclusion that self-efficacy is a matter of "I can" or "I can't" belief on part of the learners which, as White (1999) supports "is instrumental in defining tasks and play a critical role in defining behavior" (p. 443). To quote Bandura (1986):

Students' difficulties in many academic skills are often directly related to their beliefs that they cannot learn-when such things are not objectively true. In fact, many students have difficulty in school not because they are incapable of performing successfully, but because they are incapable of believing that they can perform successfully, that they have learned to see themselves as incapable of handling academic skills (p. 390).

Bandura (1986) explores four sources from which the efficacy beliefs are developed: mastery experience, vicarious experience, persuasions, and physiological states. To him, the most influential source of self-efficacy beliefs is mastery experience which refers to "the interpreted result of purposive performance" (p.393). Simply put, success raises self-efficacy and failure lowers it.

He emphasizes that students who perform well on English tests and earn high grades in English classes are likely to develop a strong sense of confidence in their English capabilities. On the other hand, low test results and poor grades generally weaken students' confidence in their capabilities. Mastery experience is renamed by Crozier (1997) as "direct experience" when he says: "We come to know what kinds of consequences follow from our actions" (p. 167). In this view, students bring a wide variety of past experiences with them when they enter your classroom. Some of those experiences have been positive, others have not. How students interpret their past successes and failures can have a dramatic impact on their self-efficacy.

Vicarious experience is the second source of efficacy information. Bandura defines it as "if he can do it, so can 1" method of developing a self-belief, In other words, "the consequences of other peoples' actions can be just as informative as our own actions" (Crozier, ibid). In other words, when a student sees another student accomplish a task, he makes judgments about his own capabilities. According to Siegle (2000), the more students relate to the model being observed, the more likely the model's performance will have an impact on them.

The world in which we live is supposed to be the third source of information: People create and develop self-efficacy beliefs as a result of the verbal persuasion they receive from others. From what other people, tell us or what we read or see, we develop certain self-beliefs (Crozier, 1997). In this view, persuaders can play a significant role in the development of an individual's self-beliefs. This stresses the role of teachers as persuaders who can

cultivate English as foreign language learners' beliefs in their capabilities. Regarding the role of teachers in developing learners' positive self-beliefs, Pajares (1997) states:

I recall one discussion with a doctoral student who was struggling with a portion of her dissertation. At a particularly difficult juncture she said to me, " You know, professor, I've come to the realization that although it is important for me to believe that I can do this, it seems equally important for me to believe that you believe I can do this (p. 19).

The above example is in line with Dornyei and Otto's (1998) suggestion that learners do not exist in isolation and there are certain external figures such as parents, peer groups, and teachers who can exert positive or negative impact on the development of learners' self-beliefs, including self-efficacy beliefs.

As an outcome of his research, Andres (1999) posited that individuals' self-beliefs greatly depend on the positive or negative experiences that they have in their environments, and on how they are viewed by the significant others, i.e., the people learner sees as worthy such as their teachers. They act like mirrors through which learners see and judge their images. If the image is positive, the students will feel worthy of love and value, while receiving negative responses will make them believe that they are rejected, unwanted and unloved, and their behavior will accordingly be affected.

The final source upon which self-efficacy beliefs are based is physiological factors such as stress, arousal, fear reactions, fatigue, and pains while performing a behavior. Strong emotional reactions to task provide cues about the anticipated success or failure of the outcome. Sweaty hands or a dry mouth are often interpreted as signs of nervousness. Students may feel that such signs indicate they are not capable of succeeding in a particular task. Conversely, students may be aware of feeling relaxed before confronting a new situation and develop a higher sense of efficacy toward the task they face.

HOW SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS AFFECT LEARNERS, BEHAVIOR?

Chamot (1993), identifying some of the major academic needs of the students who want to learn English, reports that one of the basic needs of language learners is to have high self-efficacy. Students confident in their academic skills expect high marks on related exams and papers. Conversely, students who doubt their academic ability see a low grade on their paper even before they begin their exam. Throughout her article Bamhardt (1997) describes the features of self- efficacious learners as follows:

Self-efficacious learners feel confident about solving a problem because they have developed an approach to problem solving that has worked in the past. The attribute their success mainly to their own efforts and strategies, believe that their own abilities will improve as they learn more, and recognize that errors are part of learning. Students with low self-efficacy, believing themselves to have inherent low ability, choose less demanding tasks and do not try hard because they believe that any effort will reveal their own lack of ability (p.3).

What is implied in Bamhardt's statement is the point that ability attributions are associated with self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) asserts: "an attribution of success to ability is associated with high self-efficacy, while an attribution of failure to lack of ability is associated with low self- efficacy" (p. 308). He continues that a pattern often exists for students who do not do well: Students who explain their poor performance as a lack of effort demonstrate higher self-efficacy than those who explain it as low ability. Students who have not done well, but believe that all they must do to succeed is to work harder, may still be very confident about their skills.

Learners' self-efficacy is also associated with the goals they set for learning the language. That is, learners with high self-efficacy set higher goals and higher personal standards. The amount of effort, persistence, or attention exerted to reach a specific goal is also influenced by a perceived probability of the attainability of the outcome (Tremblay and Gardner, 1995, p. 507).

Bandura's (1997, in Baron, 2004)) key contention regarding the role of self-efficacy beliefs in human functioning is that" people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe

than on what is objectively true" (p.2). Self-efficacy beliefs provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment. This is because unless people believe that their actions can produce the outcomes they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties.

Bandura (ibid) successfully showed that people of differing self- efficacy perceive the world in a fundamentally different way. People with a high self- efficacy are generally of the opinion that they are in control of their own lives; that their own actions and decisions shape their lives. On the other hand, people with low self-efficacy see their lives as somewhat out of their hands.

How self-beliefs affect behavior is describes by Bandura (1986) as follows: First, they influence choice of behavior. Individuals are likely to engage in tasks in which they feel competent and confident and avoid those in which they do not. He writes that "our assessment of our own capabilities is basically responsible for the outcomes we expect and for the knowledge and skills we seek and acquire. Hence, self-efficacy is a more powerful determiner of the choices that individuals make" (p.394).

Second, self-beliefs help determine how much effort people will expend on an activity and how long they will persevere. Low self-efficacy in a student, for example, creates a self-doubt that may keep him away from trying. So the higher the sense of efficacy, the greater would be the effort, expenditure, and persistence.

The third way that self-beliefs influence human agency is by affecting an individual's thought patterns and emotional reactions. People with low efficacy, for example may think that things are tougher than they really are. This belief may foster stress and may make them attribute failure in difficult tasks to deficient ability rather than to insufficient effort. In this regard, Pajares (2002) asserts: "the perseverance associated with high self-efficacy is likely to lead to increased performance, which, in turn, raises one's sense of efficacy and spirit, whereas the giving-in associated with low self-efficacy helps ensure the very failure that further lowers confidence and morale"(p.7).

The last way self-efficacy influences behavior is by recognizing humans as producers rather han simply foretellers of behavior. In this regard, Bandura (1986) states:

Self-confidence breeds success which in turn breeds more challenging performance; self-doubt breeds hesitancy, defeat, and failure to try. In other words, our perceptions of efficacy help determine how we think, feel, and behave (p. 396).

The relevant literature indicates that high self-efficacy is accompanied by improved academic achievement and performance. Pajares (1997) observed that the acquisition of new skills and the performance of previously learned skills have been related to efficacy beliefs at a level not found in any of the other expectancy constructs. Wen and Johnson (1997) also stressed that self-efficacy is crucial when starting and continuing the formal study in a foreign language. They also suggested that students who believe they are capable of performing academic tasks use more cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies and persist longer than those who do not.

Based on her study on the key variables in language learning, Cotterall (1999) considers self- efficacy as a crucial key variable in success of language learners when she argues:

Attention could also be paid to learners' beliefs about their ability as language learners, along with other aspects of their self-efficacy and self- esteem. Teachers need to explore learners' beliefs about their ability as language learners and take actions where they discover that learners lack confidence (pp. 510-511).

Pintrich & Schunk (1996) investigated the role of self-efficacy construct in Math and English achievements. The subjects in his study were given self-report measures of self-perceptions of ability and expectancy for success in Math and English at the beginning of one school year and at the end of that same year. At the same time, the researcher also collected data on the students' actual achievement on standardized tests and course grades. The study showed that learners' self-perception of ability and their expectancies for success are the strongest predicators of subsequent grades both in Math and English.

Mills (2004) studied the self-efficacy of College Intermediate French Students in relation to motivation, achievement, and proficiency. The learners' self-efficacy proved to make a positive and great contribution to the prediction of their French achievement, and proficiency grades and their motivation.

Many studies in the second language acquisition have identified an association between self-efficacy and language anxiety. Cheng (2001), following Bandura's (1986) claim that self-efficacy could be a source of second language anxiety, investigated the relationships among language learning self-efficacy, beliefs in giftedness for language learning, and language anxiety. The results revealed that students' level of anxiety about English class was positively and moderately correlated with their belief in the notion of giftedness, but was negatively and strongly correlated with their English self-efficacy. In other words, students who had higher levels of second or foreign language class anxiety tended to believe more strongly that the ability to learn the second language well is a gift and they had lower self-assessments of their second language ability. A negative and moderate correlation was also found between English self-efficacy and belief in giftedness. That is to say, students with less confidence in their second language competence tended to have a stronger belief in giftedness.

Edmond (2005), using a Liker-type scale, measured self-efficacy and the preferred learning styles in terms of student oriented or teacher oriented activities, which is another subject of studies on self-efficacy. The data indicated that the students had a high level of self-efficacy (80%), and among them half preferred student oriented learning methods. This implies that teachers should have a good start towards implementing a student oriented learning methodology in foreign language classrooms.

Ergul (2004) conducted a study on the relationship between students' characteristics and their academic achievement in distant education and its application on the students of Anadolu University. According to the results of this study, it appears that the students with higher self-efficacy beliefs of distance education, which is one of the variables motivating students, have higher academic achievement. He continued that a combination of cognitive style, personal characteristics and self-expectations is asserted to be able to predict the achievement in distance education.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the relevant literature justify the significant role of positive self-efficacy as one of the major contributors to the second or foreign language success. Consequently, the notion of self-efficacy, its' origins and effects, as well as the strategies for developing high and positive self-beliefs should be given due attention in any educational programs, including foreign language learning. Pajares (1997) asserts that research on achievement, on why students achieve or fail to achieve? and why they do things they do in school naturally? must be focused, at least in great part, considering students' sell-efficacy beliefs.

Pajares (ibid) suggested that the ordinary practices of schooling must be reexamined with a view to the contributions they make to students' sense of self-efficacy:

We can aid our students by helping them develop the habit of excellence in schooling, while at the same time nurturing the self-beliefs necessary to maintain that excellence throughout their adult lives. This will require not only frequent intellectual challenge and stimulation, but also frequent emotional support and encouragement (p.35).

In this regard, the role of foreign language teachers in exploring learners' beliefs about their abilities as language learners and supporting those who need to develop their sense of self-efficacy seem central. They, as Cotterall (1999) asserts, need to allocate class time and attention to raise awareness of monitoring and evaluating learners' beliefs about their abilities. This would allow teachers to either reinforce or challenge certain beliefs in their students. She continues:

Providing teachers with a means of identifying and supporting individual learners who need to develop their sense of self-efficacy beliefs, before they engage in learning task, max lead to a crucial intervention in the language learning experiences of such learners (p. 509).

Pajares (1997) views teachers as important persuaders who cultivate learners' beliefs in their capabilities, while at the same time ensuring that the envisioned success is attainable by exploring more efforts. His view is consistent with Littlewood's (1999) notion that learners should be encouraged to understand that innate ability does not determine how much success a person can achieve; with effort and self-discipline, everyone can achieve his or her goals, and failure can be retrieved by making more effort.

Since the literature has proved that learner's self-efficacy and goal-setting are interrelated, teachers should guide the unmotivated students to identify challenging, yet manageable, goals related to their interests, and encourage them to work towards their goals. Feeling that they can achieve these goals will likely result in reducing their anxiety, increasing their self-confidence, and giving them a sense of success and achievement. To Kondo (1999), "in order to encourage students to develop specific short-term goals, the program goals should be consistent with the students' learning needs and interests" (p. 86). Learners, who due to their past failures have learnt not to try, should be thought to formulate realistic goals which are within their grasp so that success in achieving them will bring the greater self-confidence.

Oxford and Shearin (1994) point out that extrinsic rewards provided by teachers may be beneficial, but teachers can also urge students to develop their own intrinsic rewards through self-talk and guided self-evaluations. They, then, suggest that teachers can encourage self-efficacy " by providing meaningful tasks at which students can succeed and over which students can have a feeling of control..., and by giving students a degree of choice in classroom activities" (p. 21).

Positive self-talk as an effective strategy for increasing self-efficacy was also suggested by Barnhardt (1997) who defined the term as "making positive statements like 'Iean do this' to help oneself get through challenging tasks" (p.4). This strategy may increase students' motivation to continue working at a different task rather than giving up because they feel that success is not within their abilities. A relevant view comes from Arnold and Brown (1999, p. 17) who argue that learners can be thought to tell themselves 'I did that well', 'I can learn this', or 'I can do better next time' in order to reinforce their beliefs about their capacity to learn.

Considering the existing relationship between self-efficacy and anxiety, another principal implication for foreign language teachers becomes clear: self-efficacy beliefs of the second language competence should be identified for learners who are experiencing the second language anxiety. Changing these wrong self-judgments might be helpful in reducing anxiety once evidence shows that a learner has underestimated his/her ability to learn the second language. In addition, it is crucial to explore methods of providing a non-threatening and supportive instructional environment that could lead to a learner's increased sense of the second language self-efficacy. Arnold and Brown (ibid) claim that students can use self-talk to reduce anxiety by reminding themselves of their progress, resources available to them, and their achievable goals.

Self-efficacy studies also offer significant implications for curriculum designers. Through designing a learner oriented language curriculum, which takes learners' self-efficacy into account in many ways, they may help language learners develop positive beliefs of their ability. Regarding the role of curriculum role in fostering positive self-beliefs, Arnold and Brown (1999) declare:

Participation in the decision-making process opens up greater possibilities for learners to develop their whole potential. In addition to the language content, they also learn responsibility, negotiating skills, and self-evaluation, all of which lead to greater self-image and self-awareness (p. 7).

Reflecting on the value of self-efficacy as reviewed in the paper, one may come to this conclusion that foreign language classrooms should be places where they foster care, respect, and mutual support. In such a place, a positive self-image is enhanced, social relationships are improved, and learning the foreign language is inevitable. In such places, as Andres (1999) argues:

our learners can grow, be beautiful, and unfold their talents. They can become butterflies. With a gentle flap of their wings, they can tap into reality of their potential and fly high, very high (p. 100).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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<u>**NOTES**</u>