

Learners' Self-efficacy in ESL/EFL Context

L.H. SHI

Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing, China

ABSTRACT: Self-efficacy is gaining more and more attention nowadays. Learners with high self-efficacy will willingly undertake challenging tasks, expend more efforts, exhibit stronger persistence in the presence of obstacles, readily readjust their learning strategies and consequently achieve better academic results. So, how to improve the learners' self-efficacy becomes the key point in ESL/EFL teaching. This paper reviews the related literature on self-efficacy in ESL/EFL context with the hope of helping the self-efficacy of language learners.

KEYWORD: self-efficacy, Social Cognitive Theory, ESL/EFL context

1 INTRODUCTION

The past decades have witnessed the gradual but significant shift from the teacher-directed approach to the learner-oriented approach in the field of second language acquisition/foreign language acquisition (ESL/EFL) (Nosratinia, et al, 2014). The language learner's individual differences which encompass personality traits, learning styles, learners' beliefs, strategies, aptitude, age, gender, motivation, etc. have herein attracted much attention of the ESL/EFL researchers. They have found that there exist an abundance of differences among individual language learners in their perception of the foreign language as well as in their ways and rates of acquiring the linguistic skills (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Saeid, et al, 2012). Research indicates that the learners' conception of the task (Williams & Burden, 1997), learners' beliefs in their ability to perform a behavior (Bandura, 1997), their learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990), motivation (Dörnyei, 2001, 2005; Gardner, 2000), attribution (Weiner) and anxiety (Hortwitz) may account for some learners' academic success with almost the same aptitude and capabilities. Although so many variables are involved in such a multifaceted and complex psychological and educational process as learning, learners' beliefs in their capability to accomplish a task, i.e. the learners' self-efficacy, seems to play a crucial role in the cognitive procedure to explain the psychological change (Bandura, 1977).

According to Bandura, self-efficacy is the learners' beliefs whether they have the necessary capabilities to successfully fulfill a task. Learners' self-efficacy beliefs can powerfully affect their performance in many ways. With strong self-efficacy beliefs, the learners will willingly undertake challenging tasks, expend more efforts, exhibit stronger persistence in the presence of obstacles, consciously reduce anxiety level, effectively activate their interest in academic matters, readily readjust their learning strategies, accurately evaluate their achievements and would more autonomously regulate their learning than others. As a consequence, they achieve better academic results (Bandura, 1977; Mills, et al, 2007). On the contrary, learners with low self-efficacy beliefs may be afraid of difficulties and are ready to give up. They cannot persevere and prefer to exert the minimal effort to attain the lowest goal. They usually have high anxiety and poor performance. Learners' self-efficacy beliefs, therefore, is a best predictor of their performance (Bandura, 1977).

Given the significant role of self-efficacy in learning, it is becoming the research focus during the past decade. Although there is a considerable body of study on self-efficacy, it is quite underexplored in the domain of second and foreign language acquisition. This paper attempts to review the empirical researches on self-efficacy in the ESL/EFL settings during the past 10 years with the purpose of depicting the extent to which the self-efficacy research in ESL/EFL has generally covered and exploring the nature, effect and implication of self-

efficacy beliefs in second language learning and teaching, and hence giving a brief picture of the development of self-efficacy research in ESL/EFL.

2 SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

As the key component, self-efficacy was first proposed by Bandura in his social cognitive theory. Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) emphasizes cognitive variables. It is a learning theory which explains how people acquire and maintain certain behavioral patterns, while providing the basis for intervention strategies (Bandura, 1997). SCT places a heavy focus on how human beings operate cognitively on their social experiences and how these cognitions then affect their behavior (Pajares, 2002).

At the core of SCT is "triadic reciprocity", i.e. the human behavior change is determined by the interplay of personal, environmental and behavioral influences (Mills, et al, 2007). Bandura shed lights on the nature of behavior change by explaining the psychological process. The outcome of an individual's behavior and the responses from the environment may work together to form one's self-evaluation which decides one's beliefs about his capabilities and his expectation of his future behaviors. A person forms his judgments and his future expectancy based on his interpretation of the consequences of his behavior. His beliefs decide his courses of action which may contribute to the change in environment. So, human behavior is actually the result of 3 influential factors working together. They cause each other and do not work alone. According to Bandura (1997), human's beliefs is such a powerful component that they may self-regulate one's behavior and lead to the change in environment. Besides, SCT states that an individual cannot only learn from personal experiences, but he can also learn by observing the models in the environment.

Social cognitive theory stresses the significant role of future expectancy, i.e. self-efficacy on one's behavior. Bandura believes that "people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are more based on what they believe than what is objectively true" (Bandura, 1997). As Pajares (2002) aptly points out, "how people behave can often be better predicted by the beliefs they hold about their capabilities than by what they are actually capable of accomplishing, for these self-efficacy perceptions help determine what individuals do with the knowledge and skills they have". An individual's beliefs are the most important arbiter of one's behaviors. Humans can exercise control over the environment through resorting to their beliefs. Self-efficacy beliefs are the best predictor of future behaviors (Mills, et al, 2007).

3 SELF-EFFICACY IN ESL/EFL CONTEXT

According to Bandura, self-efficacy is domain-specific, which means self-efficacy may vary in different contexts. Since Second/Foreign language learning is different from other types of learning, the self-efficacy in S/F language learning calls for more attention to verify its ability to predict future achievement, to explore the relationships between self-efficacy and other variables in ESL/EFL, and to investigate into the factors that may contribute to the improvement of self-efficacy in ESL/EFL.

During the past 10 years, a growing number of researches have been devoted to the role of self-efficacy in ESL/EFL contexts (Wong,2005; Pajares,2007; Mills, et al, 2007; Hsieh, et al, 2008; Matthews,2010; Swanson,2012,2014). They can be mainly categorized into 2 groups based on different themes they deal with: the relationships between self-efficacy and other variables in language learning, such as learning strategies (Yang, 1999; Gahungu, 2005; Wong, 2005; Magogwe, et al, 2007; Bonyadi, et al, 2012; Nosratinia, et al, 2014), anxiety (Çubukçu, 2008; Woodrow, 2011), achievement (Mills, et al, 2007; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Hsieh & Kang, 2010; Woodrow, 2011), attribution (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Hsieh & Kang, 2010), age (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007), and intervention research (Zheng, et al, 2009; Alishaha & Dolmacib,2013) which probe into what factors or methods may enhance the learners' self-efficacy. Several (Pajares, 2007; Wang, et al, 2014) discuss the measurement of SE. Most of the research is empirical with quantitative method to explore the interrelationships between self-efficacy with other variables, with only a few utilizing qualitative method (Wang & Pape, 2007; Matthews,2010) or mixed method (Wong,2005; Zheng,et al, 2009; Busse & Walter,2013) to identify the factors related to self-efficacy in ESL/EFL.

This paper has reviewed the literature review on learners' self-efficacy research mostly during 2005-2014 from prestigious journals like Language Learning, The Modern Language Journal, System, etc. They are all selected from the electronic corpus: ERIC, SAGE, SCOPUS, ProQuest etc. with "self-efficacy", "second language", "foreign language" as the key words for the search engine.

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

As what has been discussed above, self-efficacy has a significant role in second/foreign language learning. Learners' with high self-efficacy may achieve better academic results, use more learning strategies, maintain low language anxiety and keep healthy attributions. Therefore, it is important for

teachers to help the students maintain properly high but accurate self-efficacy beliefs. Since the mastery accomplishment is the most significant source of an individual's self-efficacy, the academic tasks that the teacher assigns to the students should be challenging but within their reach. Task being too easy or too difficult can both harm the students' self-efficacy beliefs. They will not experience a sense of success in either way. Too many failures will do nothing but eliminate all their confidence. The teacher should also help the students to establish healthy attributions. Whatever their performance is, the teacher should subscribe their consequence to internal, controllable factors like efforts. Research indicates that if the students attribute their success to their ability and efforts, attribute their failures to their lack of efforts and some unsteady factors, their self-efficacy will be enhanced or maintained at a good level. On the contrary, if they attribute their success to external factors like others' help or task being easy, attribute their failure to their ability, their self-efficacy will be greatly lowered. The former is healthy attribution while the latter is not. The teacher should always encourage the students to make more efforts and confirm their even tiny achievements. The teacher should also promote the students' self-efficacy by directing the students' attention to their strong points. Fostering a domain-specific self-efficacy is more important than establishing a global self-esteem. Immediate feedback is also helpful to students' self-efficacy.

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