

The relationship between English learning achievement and perceived self-efficacy of the first-year students at Naresuan University

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore the relationship between English learning achievement and students' perceived self-efficacy, and the possible factors of the students' perceived self-efficacy. Some 370 first-year students at Naresuan University were randomly selected to fill in the questionnaires while grades representing students' learning achievement were collected from the instructors. The collected data was analyzed by Pearson's Correlation and Multiple Linear Regression.*

The result of the study showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between English learning achievement and students' perceived self-efficacy. The factor related to students' perceived self-efficacy was mainly from vicarious experience, which was somewhat contradictory to the findings of earlier studies (Bandura, 1986; Kiran & Sungur, 2012; Lent, Brown et al., 1996; Luzzo et al., 1999; Pajares, Johnson & Usher, 2007). Hopefully, the result of this study can be utilized to improve student performance in English learning through a better understanding of self-efficacy and its related factors.

Keywords: *Self-efficacy, English learning, Learning achievement*

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Introduction

Thailand, as a non-native English-speaking country, has recognized the importance of English by means of introducing the English language in primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary institutions for several decades (Anyadubalu, 2010). However, according to an English Proficiency Index (EFI) survey in 2011 by Education First, a leading international education company, Thai students' English proficiency is in a 'very low' group, ranked 42 out of 44 non-native English-speaking countries (Prasertsuk, 2012). Moreover, English is still the least favorite subject among Thai students (Kaewmala, 2012). According to Kaewmala (2012), most Thai students feel about an English class the same way they feel about a dentist appointment; consequently, it is not so easy for them to do well at what they are afraid of. A bigger problem than their fear of English is their belief that they are poor English learners. Students are always hammered as 'not good enough' learners (Jabbarifar, 2011); therefore, they tend to believe it is difficult for them to succeed in learning English.

Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs about their ability to accomplish a specific task (Maddux 1995 cited in Weaver, 2008). According to Bandura's work on learning theory in the early 1960's, self-efficacy has been denoted as a person's beliefs concerning his or her completion of a task and his or her perceived competency level in performing the task (Bandura, 1986) – or, as simply concluded by Jabbarifar (2011), as a matter of the learners' believing "I can" or "I can't".

Although many studies (Jabbarifar, 2011; Mahyuddin, et al, 2006; Tilfarlioglu & Cinkara, 2009) have explored students' self-efficacy in areas such as math, science, and sports, one domain has been surprisingly neglected is language learning (Hsieh, 2004). Since language learning has different characteristics from other types of learning, students' self-efficacy in learning a language may vary from other areas and may work differently in influencing their achievement (Gardner, 1982). Moreover, this topic has rarely been researched in Thailand, especially at the university level.

In order to make a difference in students who learn English, a positive self-efficacy in learning a language, particularly English, should be fostered (Fukami, 2002). Also, the experience of failure or success should be adjusted as a factor to raise students' self-efficacy instead of decreasing it. Thus, the relationship between English learning achievement and self-efficacy among the first-year students at Naresuan University should be investigated. Furthermore, the factors that go into creating the students' self-efficacy should be studied in order to assist students in generating the 'can do' belief and mitigate the 'can't do' belief.

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between English learning achievement and perceived self-efficacy among the first-year students at Naresuan University, and to investigate the factors related to the students' perceived self-efficacy in an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any relationship between English learning achievement and perceived self-efficacy among the first-year students at Naresuan University?
2. What are the factors related to the students' perceived self-efficacy?

Literature Review

Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura (1977) formally defined self-efficacy as a person's belief about their ability to organize and execute courses of action necessary to achieve a goal. However, self-efficacy was considered a differentiated set of self-beliefs specific to different areas of functioning, e.g. social self-efficacy or academic self-efficacy, since no person can feel competent at all tasks (Bandura, 1997; Maddux, 1995 cited in Weaver, 2008). The concept of self-efficacy as domain- or task-specific has been proven to be a better predictor of actual behavior than a general self-efficacy concept (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Multon, et al., 1991; Lent, Brown, et al., 1996).

Sources of Self-efficacy

According to Bandura (1997), there are four major sources affecting self-efficacy: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological states.

Mastery experience refers to the past experience of success and/or failure (Bandura 1986). Successes raise efficacy appraisals; repeated failures lower them (Bandura, 1997).

Vicarious experience happens when people make judgments about their own capabilities by watching other people perform certain tasks, or simply say, 'if they could do it, I could do it as well' (Wikipedia, 2012).

Social persuasion generally manifests as direct encouragement or discouragement from another person. Discouragement is generally more effective at decreasing a person's self-efficacy than encouragement is at increasing it (Wikipedia, 2012).

Physiological states are closely linked to arousal of the nervous system with various states (Wikipedia, 2012).

Research Methodology

Population and sample

The population of the study comprised all first-year students who enrolled in the Fundamental English course (00112), a compulsory subject for first-year students. These students, estimated at 3,890, were registered as students at Naresuan University in the 2013 academic year.

370 of the first-year students, estimated based on Taro Yamane (1976), were selected as the sample for the research to prevent the students' self-efficacy from being influenced by other English-language courses in higher years of study.

Research Instruments

The students' self-efficacy was measured by means of a questionnaire. The questionnaire included questions about the students' general information, their self-efficacy with respect to English language learning, and factors related to their self-efficacy. The students' grades, as an indicator of the students' English learning achievement, were collected from their instructors in the Fundamental English course.

Data Collection

The sample group was asked to fill in the questionnaire before their Fundamental English mid-term examination in order to minimize the examination's influence on the students' physiological or psychological states. Then, the data from the questionnaire was analyzed.

Data Analysis

A quantitative design was chosen to analyze the data. The Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to explore the relationship between English language achievement and students' perceived self-efficacy. Multiple Linear Regression was used to describe the possible factor of the students' self-efficacy.

Result and discussion

Discussion One

Research Question 1 aimed to investigate whether there was any relationship between English learning achievement and perceived self-efficacy among the first-year students at Naresuan University. The result revealed a positive relationship between English language achievement and the students' perceived self-efficacy, even though the degree of the relationship was rather low ($r = .39$).

The result of the study was similar to that of Chemers et al., (2001), Mahyuddin, et al. (2006), Multon et al. (1991), and Tilfarlioglu & Cinkara (2009).

Chemers et al. (2001) identified self-efficacy as a significant predictor of academic performance ($r = .34$) while Mahyuddin, et al. (2006) found the significant positive correlations between several dimensions of self-efficacy and academic achievement in English language learning ($r = 0.48$). While Multon et al. (1991) showed a somewhat low relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance ($r = .38$), the study of Tilfarlioglu & Cinkara (2009) illustrated that the EFL students' self-efficacy levels and their EFL success measured by end-of-the-year GPA also yielded a significant correlation, but the degree of the relationship was fairly low ($r = .37$). It was noticed that the participants and research material of those studies were similar to those used in this study. The participants were mostly the first-year undergraduate students from diverse majors and different English proficiency backgrounds. Furthermore, the questionnaire was used as the research instrument in those studies.

The possible reasons for the rather low relationship between the students' perceived self-efficacy and their English language-learning achievement could be the research instruments, achievement evaluation, and students' learning condition.

The questionnaire might not be an adequate means of assessing the students' self-efficacy because self-efficacy is quite an individual construction. Also, grading was a considerable factor in different results, since the English Foundation Course comprised many aspects in evaluating the students' learning achievement. The grade the students acquired might have been contaminated by other factors such as class participation, extra activities or a group project. Moreover, the participants were first-year students; they might have been afraid or felt uncomfortable with the university educational system, which was new to them. As a result, they reported their self-efficacy as quite low, while the grades they received seem pretty positive compared to their perceptions.

Discussion Two

The purpose of the research question two was to examine the factors related to the students' perceived self-efficacy. Vicarious experience seemed to be the only factor that had a statistically significant relationship with the students' self-efficacy. The other factors, which were mastery experience (ME), social persuasion (S), and physiological states (PS), showed no statistical relationship with self-efficacy.

This result contradicted the findings of many studies (Bandura, 1986; Kiran & Sungur, 2012; Lent, Brown et al., 1996; Luzzo et al., 1999; Pajares, Johnson & Usher, 2007) that identified mastery experience as the most powerful source.

Bandura's study (1986) suggested mastery experience the most powerful source of one's self-efficacy since it involved students' interpretation of their own past performance. Kiran & Sungur (2012) also implied that middle school students' self-efficacy was strongly informed by their mastery experiences. Lent, Brown et al. (1996) indicated that mastery experience was listed as the most influential source of self-efficacy, while Luzzo et al. (1999) reported that mastery experience significantly contributed to improvements in self-efficacy. Pajares, Johnson, & Usher (2007) also stated that mastery experience accounted for the greatest alteration in self-efficacy.

However, the study's results were supported by many other studies (Bentz, 2010; Pajares, 2002; Steven, et al., 2006; Usher & Pajares, 2006).

Bentz (2010) demonstrated that although students' questionnaire responses appeared to favor mastery experience, when they were asked personally about their early experiences learning to speak English during interviews, the dominant factor they mentioned was vicarious experience. They indicated that their learning occurred mostly during the time they spent with friends and siblings. Friends, siblings, and similar-age cousins were identified as the primary drivers for building capacity in oral English acquisition; they also provided feedback and judgments about the subjects' performance. Pajares (2002) stated that the effects of vicarious experience can powerfully influence a student's self-efficacy beliefs while Stevens et al. (2006) reported that vicarious experience was a significant predictor of self-efficacy beliefs. Usher & Pajares (2006) also illustrated that vicarious experience was a significant predictor of self-efficacy.

It can be assumed that the reason vicarious experience (VE) became the most significant factor related to the students' self-efficacy was that the students considered their peers to be a reliable source. Since a group has power over its members (Newcomb, 1962), the data collection in classrooms, where the students

shared similar experiences and sat in groups, might explain this result. Bandura (1997) and Pajares (2002) emphasized that vicarious experience could be the most influential factor when students have limited experiences or are uncertain about their ability to accomplish a task. Given that the students in this study were between 17 and 19 years old, it is possible to assume that they had limited experience. Consequently, they might need a role model to evaluate themselves, and their peers were likely to be the most influential people.

Implications and recommendations

Implications for teaching and learning

The motivation for this study partially stems from a desire to improve student performance in English language learning by better understanding self-efficacy. Hopefully, the results of this study can be widely beneficial in English-language education as well as other subjects.

Jabbarifar's study (2011) stated that positive self-efficacy was one of the major contributors to second-language success. Therefore, creating positive learning conditions could help develop constructive self-efficacy. Morris (2004) suggested that teachers provide more opportunities for students to receive encouraging mastery experience in learning. Morris (2004) also recommended that helpful vicarious learning, such as pair work or small-group work, should be introduced in class. Kiran & Sungur (2012) suggested that teachers provide students a scaffold so they could learn with their peers. Group work among students with diverse levels of English-language achievements should also be introduced in the classroom, since the influence of other students can impact students' perceptions of themselves (Emmett, Hall, & McKenna, 2013).

Recommendations for further studies

This current study tried to explore the relationship between learning achievement and the students' perceived self-efficacy, as well as the factors that make up self-efficacy. However, the results from quantitative research might not be sufficient to ensure new sources of self-efficacy for students. Qualitative research such as in-depth interviews or observations should be added, so that the factors behind student self-efficacy can be verified more accurately. Moreover, a longitudinal study should be conducted to see how an individual's self-efficacy is constructed and how it changes over time. In addition, the factors related to student self-efficacy should be investigated extensively in other demographic contexts in order to obtain a specific understanding of student self-efficacy and to provide greater opportunity to foster positive self-efficacy among students.

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