The Relationship Between Teaching Self-Efficacy and Perceived Proficiency among Iranian Language Teachers

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Abstract: Taken into account the theory of self-efficacy and the bulk of research studies done in this domain, this study examined the relationship of teaching self-efficacy and perceived language proficiency. For this purpose, a number of Iranian high school English language teachers provided the necessary data. The results showed a low but significant correlation between the two variables. Discussion of findings and implications for further research are presented.

Key words: Social cognitive theory · Teaching-self-efficacy · Perceived proficiency · Language teaching

INTRODUCTION

Over the recent decades, a plethora of research projects have investigated a number of internal teacher-specific variables that seem to influence and control teachers' undertakings in classroom. Calling these variables "the unobserved cognitive dimension of teaching" [1], Borg asserts that this dimension includes teachers' knowledge, beliefs and thought. This is while, EFL/ESL domain has witnessed a surge of interest in a particular dimension of teachers' cognition named sense of self-efficacy reported to deal with their perceptions and beliefs rather than their real performance [2].

Self-efficacy as defined and developed over the recent years has been reported to be affected by a variety of factors such as teachers' grade in which s/he taught [3-7], gender [8], teaching experience [9-13] and school environment [14], etc. However, a review of literature reveals that the role of English proficiency as a vital variable in teachers' professional career in enhancing or reducing their teaching self-efficacy has not received the due attention [15]. Due to the scarcity of such an investigation especially in an EFL context such as Iran, the current research study intended to shed light on any possible relationship between teaching self-efficacy and English proficiency. That is, the study aimed at revealing whether teachers with high proficiency enjoyed higher levels of teaching self-efficacy as well.

Theoretical Framework

Teaching Self-Efficacy: Having originated from early theories such as social learning theory and its offshoots (i.e. locus of control and attribution theory), self-efficacy has received much of its current status from Bandura's writings. Bandura as one of the main stubborn critics of such theories proposed self-efficacy construct in 1977 in his often-cited article, *"Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change"* [16] and later in 1986 in his book, *"Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory"* [17].

Since then, Bandura's social cognitive theory in general and self-efficacy in particular have been widely applied in educational research, especially diverse disciplines and contexts. It has also been supported from growing body of findings from different fields of study [18]. For example, self-efficacy has been the focus of "studies on clinical problems such as phobias, social skills and assertiveness, on smoking behavior, on pain control, on health and on athletic performance" [18].

Bandura defines self-efficacy as "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" [16] or more recently as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" [2] and notes that self-efficacy is a type of self-perception and not an objective measure of effectiveness and deals with perceptions of competence rather than actual level of competence (1997).

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Language Proficiency: The issue of what exactly constitutes language proficiency has triggered scholars' curiosity, the result of which has been a number of categorizations and conceptualizations of this construct. The early conceptualization of language proficiency has roots in Hymes' notions of communicative competence, emphasizing that language proficiency involves not only knowledge but also the ability to use that knowledge [19]. These words had great effect on the linguistics and psycholinguistics realms that since then thought of language proficiency just as structural knowledge or linguistic competence [20]. These effects led some researchers to develop a new conceptualization of communicative competence as composed of grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competences [21, 22].

Although over the past couple of years the approach towards language proficiency has changed [23], educational practitioners do not hesitate in stressing the significant role it plays in language teachers' careers. For example, there are studies that have reported significant correlations between English proficiency and beliefs about language teaching and learning [24]; teaching effectiveness [25]; and teaching confidence and self-esteem [26, 27].

However, studies investigating the relationship between teaching self-efficacy and language proficiency are scare, especially in EFL settings [15]. Therefore, this study aimed at bridging the gap by investigating such a relationship in an EFL context such as Iran.

The Present Study: The Iranian State education system is a type of centralized top-down system in which all educational policies and materials are set by government in general and Ministry of Education in particular [28-30]. In such a system, English textbooks are reading based with little or no emphasis on aural and oral skills [15, 31]. That is, teachers do not see developing these skills as compulsory and teaching to the test (i.e. preparing students to take part in exams that are mainly reading- and translation-based) is viewed as their primary responsibility [15]. As a result, the graduated students are not able to use language for communicative purposes.

Taking into account what went on above, this study intended to: (a) investigate teaching self-efficacy of Iranian high school language teachers; (b) determine the level of the teachers' perceived English proficiency; and (c) inquire into the possible relationship between self-efficacy in teaching and perceived English proficiency.

Table 1: The Distribution of Study Participants by Age, Teaching Experience and Academic Degree

Participants' characteristics		Frequency
Age	20-30	15
	30-40	120
	40-50	138
	More than 50	39
Teaching by year	Less than 5 years	34
	50-10	28
	10-15	58
	More than 15	192
Academic degree	BA	218
	MA	90
	PhD	4

Methodology

Participants: 312 in-service high school language teachers provided the necessary data (N = 312). Of the total sample, 192 were male (61%) and 120 (39%) were female. They aged from 35 to 55 years old, had teaching experience ranged from 3 to 25 years and had academic degree ranged from BA to PhD in TEFL (Table 1 for further information).

Measures: The following measures were used for the purpose of the study:

* *Demographics questionnaire.* To obtain information about respondents' gender, teaching experience and academic degree.
* *Teacher's Sense of Efficacy Scale* (TSES) [32]. To investigate high school English language teachers' sense of teaching self-efficacy.
* *Butler's [25] perceived English proficiency scale.* To obtain information about the level of respondents' English proficiency. The original questionnaire includes seven language domains (i.e. listening comprehension, oral fluency, vocabulary in speech, pronunciation, grammar in speech, reading comprehension and writing), only four of which were employed for the purpose of this study (i.e. listening comprehension, oral fluency, reading comprehension and writing). The reason for using just four skills out of the seven ones was two-fold. First, the researcher came to the conclusion that large number of items would have negative effects on the teachers' self-ratings. Second and more importantly, a review of the original scale showed that knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar are common elements of the four skills and it was better to limit the scale to the four well-known skills.

Procedure: In order to enhance respondents' comprehension, the researchers decided to translate the scales into teachers' mother tongue (i.e. Persian). The translation process was done at two phases. First, two professional English-to-Persian translators were asked to translate the original scales into Persian. Then, a second group of translators who were expert in Persian-to-English translation were recruited to translate back the Persian version into English. This process of translation from/to Persian was done to identify any instance of mistranslation.

Having prepared the package of instruments including demographics questionnaire, teaching self-efficacy and language proficiency scales, the respondent teachers were given the package and asked to fill them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question No. 1: The aim of this research question was to investigate how much Iranian English language teachers perceived themselves to be efficacious in teaching English despite the fact that they were facing so many daily problems and barriers in the process of language teaching. As discussed above, the scale investigating the teachers' self-efficacy named Teacher's Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy [32] was used for this purpose.

First of all, alpha Cronbach was run to estimate the reliability of the teaching self-efficacy scale. The result of the estimation showed an acceptable degree of reliability (α =.87). Also, the results showed that the items of scale had an acceptable level of validity (KMO = .88, Bartlett = .00). Furthermore, the reliability of instructional strategies, classroom management and student engagement as sub-scales of TSES came out to be .86, .88 and .85 respectively.

Table 2: Percentage of Responses given to Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Self-efficacy scale	.9	.6	3.5	1.6	7.6	6.6	15.8	25.3	38

Having estimated the reliability and validity of the scale and having been assured of the acceptable level of these two pivotal features, the responses given to this 12-item scale by the English language teachers were investigated and some interesting findings came out. The markings of the respondents showed that they enjoyed a high level of self-efficacy in teaching language. This claim is supported by Table 2 that shows how the participants responded to the scale and which points of the Likert scale were marked more frequently. The general pattern of responses shows that most of them fell in between 7 to 9 (*quite a bit to a great a deal*). It means that over 79 percent of the respondents agreed (either slightly or strongly) with the scale's statements. On the other hand, only about 11 percent of the markings fell in between 1 to 6 (*not at all to some influence*).

Further analysis of responses showed that majority of the participants had expressed their agreement to most items as it is evident from their markings. Most of the item markings fell in between 7 to 9. So it can be concluded that teachers seemed to be efficacious at all items. However, in-depth analysis of the responses showed that there was just one item to which the participants had expressed their discomfort. That is, they noted that they could not rely much on the parents' assistance in language teaching and learning process (Table 3 for more information).

To determine high school teachers' current level of teaching self-efficacy, descriptive statistics was calculated. It came out that Iranian high school English language teachers showed a moderate level of teaching self-efficacy ($\bar{x}$= 7.52, SD = 1.56).

Table 3: Participant Teachers' Pattern of Responses given to the Scale's Items

No.	Items	Not at all	2	Very little	4	Some influence	6	Quite a bit	8	A great deal
1	How well can you control disruptive behavior in your English class?	.6	.3	1.3	0	3.2	1.6	11.8	20.1	60.7
2	How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in learning English?	1	0	1.6	1.6	13.1	8.3	31.2	24.5	18.8
3	How much can you do to get students to believe they can do well in English?	.6	.3	1.9	1	7.6	8.6	24.8	21.3	34
4	How well can you help your students value learning English?	.3	0	2.5	1	6.4	8.3	27.4	24.2	29.2
5	To what extent can you craft good questions for eliciting responses from your students in English class?	0	0	1.6	.6	5.4	.7	22	25.9	36.7
6	How well can you get students to follow classroom rules in your English class?	.3	0	.3	.6	4.8	4.8	12.8	25.2	51.1
7	How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy in your English class?	0	0	1	.6	4.8	5.1	12.7	31.2	44.6
8	How well can you establish a classroom management system with your students in English class?	0	0	.6	.3	5.1	4.8	15.6	28.6	45.1
9	How much can you use a variety of assessment strategies in your English class?	.3	0	.6	1.6	4.5	5.2	21.6	27.7	38.4
10	To what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example in English class when students are confused?	.6	.3	.6	.6	4.8	4.8	12.5	22.7	53
11	How well can you assist parents to help their children learn English?	21.2	11.3	14.1	12.9	17.4	8.4	4.2	6.8	3.9
12	How well can you implement alternative teaching strategies in your English class?	.3	.3	2.2	3.2	7.6	7	24.8	27.3	27.3

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale

No.	Items	x̄	SD
1	How well can you control disruptive behavior in your English class?	8.2	1.3
2	How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in learning English?	7.1	1.5
3	How much can you do to get students to believe they can do well in English?	7.5	1.6
4	How well can you help your students value learning English?	7.5	1.5
5	To what extent can you craft good questions for eliciting responses from your students in English class?	7.8	1.3
6	How well can you get students to follow classroom rules in your English class?	8.1	1.3
7	How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy in your English class?	8.2	1.2
8	How well can you establish a classroom management system with your students in English class?	8.1	1.2
9	How much can you use a variety of assessment strategies in your English class?	7.8	1.3
10	To what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example in English class when students are confused?	8.1	1.4
11	How well can you assist parents to help their children learn English?	5.7	2.2
12	How well can you implement alternative teaching strategies in your English class?	7.4	1.7

Table 5: Percentage of Responses given to Perceived Proficiency Scale

Scale's points	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4	4.5	5	5.5	6
Language proficiency	0	0	4.4	10.8	14.4	23.7	20.6	14.4	5	3.3	3.3

According to the literature, this scale was comprised of three factors as originally determined by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy [32]. These factors are classroom management, instructional strategies and students engagement. The results of descriptive statistics showed that the current participants perceived themselves to be better in classroom management ($\bar{x}$ =8.0, SD= 1.33) than in instructional strategies ($\bar{x}$ =7.6, SD= 1.4) and student engagement ($\bar{x}$=7.0, SD= 1.9). Further analysis of response patterns showed that the item receiving the lowest rating from the high school English language teachers was the ability to: "assist parents to help their children learn English" ($\bar{x}$= 5.7, SD=2.2). The high school English language teachers rated highest the ability to: control disruptive behavior in your English class" ($\bar{x}$=8.22, SD= 1.34). High scores on the general teaching efficacy scale indicated the more robust belief of language teachers on their capabilities to teach language effectively. Descriptive statistics and factor loadings for the scale are presented in Table 4.

Research Question No. 2: As mentioned earlier, one of the main objectives of this study was to investigate the magnitude of high school teachers' command of English language. To fulfill this objective, a scale comprising of four sub-scales designed to measure reading, listening, speaking and writing proficiency was employed. In the following section, the self-reported level of English proficiency will be discussed.

It should be noted that in the current research study language proficiency was taken to be the sum of ratings given to the 4-skill scale. Therefore, summing up the respondents ratings for each sub-scale, researchers started analyzing the pattern of responses and came to the conclusion that the respondents' command of English language was moderate due to the fact that almost half of the respondents rated the 3.5th point in the scale which was an indicator of medium degree of English language proficiency (23.7%). Looking at the percentage of the given responses showed that most of them centered at the central points in the scale, ranging from 2.5 to 4.5 (See Table 5 for more information).

Research Question No. 3: The last research question was to investigate any possible relationship between teaching self-efficacy and language proficiency. In order to investigate this question the researchers analyzed the responses given to both scales and it came out that there was a low but significant relationship between the two variables (Somers'd statistic = .18, p ≤ 0.01). This outcome was consistent with the early research studies examining the relationship between self-efficacy and language proficiency, although its proportion was lower than that of other similar studies [16, 26].

CONCLUSION

As said above, this study had a three-fold aim: first, measuring Iranian high school language teachers' sense of teaching self-efficacy; second, measuring the perceived English proficiency of these teachers; and finally, estimating the correlation between teaching self-efficacy and perceived English proficiency. The upcoming section is devoted to the concluding remarks of the research

findings and implications of the current research for future studies.

Examining the pattern of responses given to the teaching self-efficacy scale showed that the teachers who participated in this study demonstrated a high level of teaching self-efficacy. The evidence for this claim is that more than 63% of teachers selected 9 (a *great deal*) or 8 for their answers. Also, analysis of responses given to the items showed that the participant teachers considered themselves to be good at controlling disruptive behaviors in their English classes and less successful in involving students' parents in English teaching process. The justification given in the literature for this trend is that Iranian teachers and students work and study in teacher-fronted classes and no time and energy are allocated for student-centered activities [28-30].

Also, a degree of correlation was found between teaching self-efficacy and English proficiency. But an interesting point came out of data analysis phase. Although the participant teachers had moderate command of English proficiency, their teaching self-efficacy was reported to be high. Also, a low degree of correlation was found between the two variables. These findings are to some extent in contrast to what the literature says about the relationship between teaching self-efficacy and language proficiency. For example, as Butler [25] asserts, non-native English language teachers' deficient proficiency has been reported to have negative effects on the images teachers have of themselves and may lead to lowering their self-confidence. The justification that can be said for the results of the present study is the status of English language in Iranian context. That is, the context of this study is an instance of an EFL setting in which the use of target language is restricted to classroom and teachers and students are not required to communicate via the target language outside of classroom. In such a situation, having a high command of language proficiency is not vital for those teachers and students who live in an EFL setting. Therefore, low or moderate level of target language proficiency is not as much relevant to teaching self-efficacy in EFL settings as it is relevant in ESL contexts.

The results of this study also had one important theoretical implication for teacher self-efficacy conceptualization that in EFL settings, language proficiency does not have the amount of influence on teachers' sense of self-efficacy as it does in ESL settings. Therefore, there should be other factors in such contexts that supposedly have more influence on teachers' self-efficacy. Also, this study suffered from some limitations as follows: limited number of participants and measuring teachers' language proficiency using a self-reporting subjective instrument instead of an objective one.

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