Teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs and their English language proficiency: A study of nonnative EFL teachers in selected language centers

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Abstract

This study examined the efficacy beliefs of nonnative English speaking (NNES) EFL teachers in terms of personal capabilities to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and their perceived English language proficiency in selected language centers in one Middle-East country. Data were collected through a survey administered to 187 teachers. A modified version of the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) was used to assess efficacy for classroom management, student engagement, and instructional strategies. The results showed that the teachers' perceived efficacy was positively correlated with self-reported English proficiency.

Keywords: Self-efficacy; English language proficiency; English as a foreign language; Language centre.

1. Introduction

Research on teachers’ beliefs and their impact on teacher cognition has been a relevant topic for educational inquiry over the last four decades. Understanding teachers' perceptions and beliefs is important because teachers, heavily involved in various teaching and learning processes, are practitioners of educational principles and theories (Jia, Eslami & Burlbaw, 2006). Findings from research on teachers' perceptions and beliefs indicate that these perceptions and beliefs not only have considerable influence on their instructional practices and classroom

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behavior but also are related to their students' achievement (Grossman, Reynolds, Ringstaff & Sykes, 1985; Johnson, 1992; Prawat & Anderson, 1988). Thus, knowing the perceptions and beliefs of teachers enables one to make predictions about teaching and assessment practices in classrooms. One important belief that appears to be an important influence on teacher and student outcomes is teachers’ sense of efficacy.

This study is based on self-efficacy theory proposed by Bandura, 1997. Self-efficacy theory, applied in the educational realm, has sparked a rich line of research into how teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs are related to their actions and to the outcomes they achieve (Tschannen- Moran et al., 1998).

It is important to note that self-efficacy is a motivational construct based on self perception of competence rather than actual level of competence. Actions and behaviors are better predicted by beliefs rather than actual accomplishments. Bandura (1997) suggested that it is most fruitful when teachers slightly overestimate their actual teaching skills, as their motivation to expend effort and to persist in the face of setbacks will help them to make the most of the skills and capabilities they do possess (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Based on Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) teacher self-efficacy is cyclical in nature. At first, information about one's efficacy comes from four sources: mastery experience, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions and physiological arousals (Bandura, 1997). Teachers then process the information by analyzing the teaching task and assessing their personal teaching competence. After the information is analyzed, teachers generate efficacy judgments or teacher self-efficacy. Next, teachers use these judgments or self-efficacy beliefs to set their goals, determine the amount of effort they invest in achieving these goals, and their level of persistence. The performance and outcomes of their efforts provide new mastery experiences that lead to future efficacy judgments. It is noted that "like all self-efficacy judgments, teacher self-efficacy is context-specific" (p. 118).

Meanwhile, Language proficiency constitutes the foundation of the professional confidence of non-native English teachers (NNES). Language competence has been rated as the most essential characteristic of a good teacher (Lange, 1990). According to Doff (1987), a teacher's confidence in the classroom is undermined by a poor command of the English language. Poor command of the language can affect the self esteem and professional status of the teacher and interfere with simple teaching procedures. Furthermore, it can keep the teacher from fulfilling the pedagogical requirements of a more communicative approach to language teaching. As shown by research, perceived language proficiency is an important issue for NNES teachers and has an impact on their professional self-esteem and confidence (Medgyes, 1994; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999; Kamhi-Stein & Mahboob, 2005).

As it is clear, language proficiency seems to be a factor related to EFL teachers feeling of self-efficacy. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the relationship of self-efficacy and language proficiency in EFL teachers working in the English language centers in one Middle-East country. To this end, the following questions were proposed for this study:

1. What are the current levels of the self-efficacy beliefs of English language center teachers?
2. What do teachers report to be their English proficiency level?
3. What is the interaction effect between teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs and their proficiency in English?

Based on the above research questions the following null hypothesis was suggested:

HO: There is no interaction effect between English teachers’ reported proficiency in English and their self-efficacy beliefs.

2. Method

2.1. participants

The target population for this study consisted of English teachers working in the English language centers in the TESOL context in one Middle-east country in Asia. The questionnaire adopted a convenience sampling method and the researcher distributed more than 200 sets of the questionnaires among the teachers.
2.2. Research Design

This study included both descriptive research methods and correlational research methods. The study was designed to explore English language center teachers’ sense of efficacy and its interaction effect with their reported proficiency in English, so a descriptive correlational design was used.

2.3. Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study consisted of two questionnaires: 1) Teachers’ sense of efficacy in teaching English and 2) Teachers’ reported English language proficiency. Both questionnaires were Likert-type scale and the participants indicated the degree they could do with each item and assessed themselves on the scale provided.

2.3.1. Teachers sense of efficacy in teaching English

This section was designed to measure the teachers’ sense of efficacy (or confidence) in teaching English. For this, the 12-item short version of the Teacher’s Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) by Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy (2001) was adapted to fit the English language center context.

The TSES items were Likert scale from one to nine. Participants would indicate the degree to which they could do with each item. A rating of one indicated that the respondent could do nothing about the statement presented. A rating of nine indicated that the participant could do a great deal about the statement.

Three factors were identified in the TSES: 1. Efficacy for student engagement, 2. Efficacy for instructional strategies, and 3. Efficacy for classroom management.

The reliability of the original TSES was 0.90 with all of the 12 items (0.86 with the instructional strategies, 0.86 with the classroom management, and 0.81 with the student engagement) (Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). This showed that TSES could have been considered a reliable measurement of teacher self-efficacy.

2.3.2. Teachers’ reported English language proficiency

This section was designed to examine the teachers’ self-reported current level of English proficiency that the teachers believed necessary for them to teach English effectively in the English language centers. To this end, 25 items developed by Chacon (2005, 2002) and Shim (2001) were adapted based on this study. The items asked teachers to assess their level of proficiency in English on a 6-point Likert-type scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree” to indicate how teachers evaluated themselves in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

After piloting the test, 4 items of the language proficiency questionnaire were deleted and it was shown that the reliability of the test increased significantly. So the final version of the language proficiency questionnaire which was later distributed among the participants of this study had 21 items.

Concerning reliability coefficient, the Cronbach alpha of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing were .958, .912, .947, and .907 respectively. After deleting the four items the reliability increased to .973, .920, .947, and .947 accordingly.

2.4. Procedure

2.4.1. Validity

The construct validity of the instruments of the present study was partially established by the instruments on which the current instruments drew. However, as some items were modified and some were newly added to the present study, there was a need to reestablish the validity of the instruments.
In the present study, content validity and face validity were established by the judgment of a panel of 3 experts and field testing. A panel of the experts and 5 English language center teachers who were teaching at different levels were asked to review the instruments in terms of validity, suitability, and clarity. They were requested to comment on appropriateness of expressions and general readability of the instruments. Comments on instrument’s wording, ambiguities, and appropriateness were welcomed. Based on the advice of the panel of experts and field test participants, the instruments were modified and later the approved and corrected format was distributed among participants.

Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) examined the construct validity of the TSES questionnaire. The results of the analyses indicated that TSES could be considered reasonably valid and reliable. It is of reasonable length and is a useful tool for researchers interested in exploring the construct of teacher self-efficacy.

2.4.2. Reliability

After field-testing the instrument, the reliability coefficient of the test was calculated by using Cronbach alpha coefficient. Cronbach reliability coefficients of the scales were: 0.96 (Instructional Strategies), 0.95 (Classroom Management), and 0.95 (Student Engagement) for the present study. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the whole test was .956 which is significant and considered high. It means that all the three sub-categories of self-efficacy beliefs are highly correlated and it supports that the whole test is a reliable measurement of self-efficacy beliefs.

In addition, the Cronbach alpha was calculated for each of the sub-categories of Language Proficiency questionnaire after conducting the main study. The Cronbach Alpha was .973, .921, .946, and .946 for each of the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing respectively, which were all significant and favorable. The reliability of the whole test was .96 which was considered high and favorable. It showed that language proficiency questionnaire was completely reliable.

3. Findings

3.1. Levels of English teacher efficacy dimensions

The mean score of each component was calculated in order to examine the teachers’ level of self-efficacy in teaching English. The teachers rated their self-efficacy in teaching English at rather high level in the all dimensions of Instructional Strategies, Classroom Management, and Student Engagement (Table 1). In other words, they believed that they could have some influence in the three dimensions. The teachers responded that they felt more confident in Classroom Management (M = 7.54) than in any of the other dimensions. In the meantime, it was found that the teachers felt least confident in their Instructional Strategies (M = 7.10).

|                | Mean  | Standard Deviation |
|----------------|-------|--------------------|
| Student Engagement | 7.21  | 1.558              |
| Classroom Management | 7.54  | 1.550              |
| Instructional Strategies | 7.10  | 1.870              |

Note: 1 = Nothing/not at all, 3 = Very little, 5 = Some influence, 7 = Quite a bit, and 9 = A great deal

In examining the teachers’ self-reported efficacy or confidence levels in teaching English, note that the present study did not report the overall teacher efficacy level by aggregating the three factors. The researcher believed that each dimension had its unique domain, while not convinced of the absolute value of the overall score in explaining the teachers’ sense of efficacy in English teaching in general.

Besides that, the researcher decided to calculate the inter-item correlation of the self-efficacy items for each sub-category. It was shown that the items in each of the sub-categories of student engagement, classroom
management, and instructional strategy had quite high correlation with each other and all the correlations were above 0.80 which was considered high.

Later, the researcher examined the correlations among all three subcategories of self-efficacy (Table 2). It was shown that all of them are highly correlated. The highest correlation was between Student Engagement and Instructional Strategy dimensions.

Table 2. Correlations among dimensions of self-efficacy

|                         | Student Engagement | Classroom Management | Instructional Strategies |
|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Student Engagement      | 1                  |                      |                          |
| Classroom Management    | .880**             | 1                    |                          |
| Instructional Strategies| .905**             | .883**               | 1                        |

3.2. Levels of English teacher language proficiency

The means and standard deviations for each of the 21 items were calculated and the result is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of English language proficiency

|                             | Range | Minimum | Maximum | Mean   | Mean/Max | SD    |
|-----------------------------|-------|---------|---------|--------|----------|-------|
| Listening Score             | 22    | 8       | 30      | 19.06  | 0.63     | 8.118 |
| Speaking Score              | 20    | 16      | 36      | 26.46  | 0.73     | 6.408 |
| Reading Score               | 17    | 13      | 30      | 23.11  | 0.77     | 5.031 |
| Writing Score               | 14    | 16      | 30      | 24.80  | 0.82     | 4.700 |

By looking at Table 3 it can be concluded that the variety of scores in listening skill of the participants is more than the other skills (SD = 8.11). It means that we have different levels of listening proficiency among the participants of the study. On the other hand, the standard deviation of the speaking, reading, and writing is lower, 6.40, 5.03, and 4.70 respectively. It shows that the variety of scores is lower and most of the teachers are relatively at the high level of their speaking, reading, and writing skills compared to their listening.

Based on the value of Mean/Max, we can conclude that the participants are stronger in writing skills (.82) and weaker in Listening skills (.63). So, for the participants of this study the order of Language skills from the strongest to the weakest is Writing, reading, speaking, and listening respectively.

This result is understandable, as the context of the study is EFL and English is not used in the society and daily lives of the participants. The participants have quite limited access to English in their daily lives, so they can not improve their listening and speaking skills of their language proficiency.

In addition, the inter-item correlation of the language proficiency items for each skill of listening, speaking, reading, and writing was calculated.

Table 4 shows that the items in Listening skills have quite high correlations with each other and all the correlations are above .83 which is considered high and significant.

Table 4. Inter-Item Correlation Matrix of the listening skill

|                  | Eng. Pro 3 | Eng. Pro 4 | Eng. Pro 5 | Eng. Pro 6 | Eng. Pro 7 |
|------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Eng.Proficiency3 | 1.000      |            |            |            |            |
Correlation among the speaking skill items are shown in Table 5. The correlations are relatively high and significant.

Table 5. Inter-Item Correlation Matrix of the speaking skill

|                | Eng.Proficiency9 | Eng.Proficiency10 | Eng.Proficiency11 | Eng.Proficiency12 | Eng.Proficiency13 | Eng.Proficiency14 |
|----------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Eng.Proficiency9 | 1.000            |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency10| .686             | 1.000             |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency11| .681             | .755              | 1.000             |                   |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency12| .740             | .760              | .764              | 1.000             |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency13| .727             | .791              | .786              | .857              | 1.000             |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency14| .735             | .806              | .760              | .843              | .963              | 1.000             |

Table 6 pictures the correlation among reading proficiency items. All the correlations are above .65 and are considered significant.

Table 6. Inter-Item Correlation Matrix of the reading skill

|                | Eng.Proficiency15 | Eng.Proficiency16 | Eng.Proficiency17 | Eng.Proficiency18 | Eng.Proficiency19 |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Eng.Proficiency15 | 1.000             |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency16 | .909              | 1.000             |                   |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency17 | .853              | .934              | 1.000             |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency18 | .659              | .735              | .721              | 1.000             |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency19 | .692              | .780              | .766              | .902              | 1.000             |

The correlation matrix of the writing proficiency items are shown in Table 7. As it can be seen, the correlations are high and significant.

Table 7. Inter-Item Correlation Matrix of the writing skill

|                | Eng.Proficiency21 | Eng.Proficiency22 | Eng.Proficiency23 | Eng.Proficiency24 | Eng.Proficiency25 |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Eng.Proficiency21 | 1.000             |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency22 | .886              | 1.000             |                   |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency23 | .865              | .821              | 1.000             |                   |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency24 | .884              | .824              | .861              | 1.000             |                   |
| Eng.Proficiency25 | .816              | .751              | .794              | .856              | 1.000             |

Table 8 shows that to what degree the four skills are related together. The correlation among the skills is relatively high and significant.
Table 8. Inter-Item Correlation Matrix

|                  | Listening.Score | Speaking.Score | Reading.Score | Writing.Score |
|------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|
| Listening.Score  | 1.000           |                |              |               |
| Speaking.Score   | .925            | 1.000          |              |               |
| Reading.Score    | .927            | .947           | 1.000        |               |
| Writing.Score    | .924            | .868           | .913         | 1.000         |

3.3. Relationship between teachers’ sense of efficacy and proficiency in English

Table 9 summarized the correlations of the language proficiency and the three dimensions of the teachers’ self-efficacy (i.e., Instructional Strategies, Classroom Management, and Student Engagement). Overall, the correlations were significant and ranged from low (r = 0.202) to very high (r = 0.844).

Table 9. Correlation Matrix among teachers’ sense of efficacy and proficiency in English

|                  | L    | S    | R    | W    | SE   | CM   | IS   |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Listening        | 1.000|      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Speaking         | .925 | 1.000|      |      |      |      |      |
| Reading          | .927 | .947 | 1.000|      |      |      |      |
| Writing          | .924 | .868 | .913 | 1.000|      |      |      |
| Student Engagement| .842 | .811 | .831 | .916 | 1.000|      |      |
| Classroom Management| .816 | .826 | .800 | .880 | .880 | 1.000|      |
| Instructional Strategy| .798 | .779 | .815 | .898 | .905 | .883 | 1.000|

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).
L= Listening, S= Speaking, R= Reading, W= Writing
ME= Mechanical, CM= Communicative
SE= Student Engagement, CM= Classroom Management, IS= Instructional Strategies

Very high positive relationships were found between the three dimensions of self-efficacy and the four dimensions of English language proficiency (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The strongest relationship was between student engagement and writing (r = .916) which was considered very high. The weakest (yet still very high) relationship was between instructional strategy and speaking (r = .779).

Moreover, the student engagement was found to have a stronger relationship with English language proficiency dimensions (r = .811 to .916) than classroom management (r = .800 to .880) and instructional strategy (r = .779 to .898). It could be inferred that those teachers who are more proficient in English would engage students more in the English classrooms than managing the class and using the instructional strategies.

4. Discussion

In the current study, the teachers rated their self-efficacy in teaching English at rather high level in the all dimensions of Instructional Strategies, Classroom Management, and Student Engagement. In other words, they believed that they could have some influence in the three dimensions. The teachers responded that they felt more confident in Classroom management (M = 7.54) than in any of the other dimensions. In the meantime, it was found that the teachers felt least confident in their Instructional Strategies (M = 7.10).
In relation to the teacher efficacy levels among the teachers in the present study, it is important to note that the teachers’ self-reported English teaching efficacy or confidence levels in the present study were found to be higher than those in the previous studies adopting the TSES. It indicated that the teachers in the present study felt more confident in carrying out the teaching tasks than the teachers in other studies. For example, in the only study that adopted the TSES to examine teachers’ English teaching-specific self-efficacy beliefs in the EFL context, Chacón (2002, 2005) reported that her Venezuelan middle school English teachers rated their capabilities to carry out teaching tasks with their confidence at the “quite a bit” level (M = 6.59 on Student Engagement; M = 7.00 on Classroom Management; M = 7.13 on Instructional Strategies). Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2007), taking a non-subject specific approach, have documented similar degrees of self-efficacy beliefs reported by U.S. teachers. Besides, Lee (2009) reported lower results in comparison with the others. Her teachers rated their capabilities to carry out teaching tasks with their confidence at the “some influence” (M = 5.53 on Student Engagement; M = 5.70 on Classroom Management; M = 5.36 on Instructional Strategies).

Although one should be cautious in making direct comparisons of the scores reported in different cultures due to the possibility that survey responses may reflect cultural biases (King, Murray, Solomon, & Tandon, 2004), such a comparison can provide useful information in examining where the teacher efficacy levels reported by teachers in the present study are located in relation to other teachers, especially when there are no previous studies conducted in the Middle-East EFL context using the same instruments.

Regarding the self-assessment levels of English proficiency, this study found that the teachers tended to rate their current proficiency levels in writing skills higher than for the other skills (i.e., listening, speaking and reading). Based on the value of Mean/Max, it was concluded that the participants were stronger in writing skills (0.82) and weaker in listening skills (0.63). So, for the participants of this study the order of Language skills from the strongest to the weakest was Writing (0.82), reading (0.77), speaking (0.73), and listening (0.63) respectively.

A possible reason for the teachers’ lower proficiency in listening and speaking skills in this study could be found in the English education that the teachers received when they were students. English education in the EFL context of this study focused mainly on grammar and reading comprehension, not the development of listening or speaking ability. Also, in the EFL context of this study, teachers and learners have few opportunities to speak or listen in English for communicative purposes—the target language is not used in everyday life—but they can easily obtain writing and reading materials. Given this context, it seems unsurprising that the teachers felt less competent in listening and speaking skills than reading and writing skills (Park, 2006).

In Lee’s (2009) study, it was found that the teachers tended to rate their current proficiency levels of receptive skills (i.e., Listening and Reading) higher than productive skills (i.e., Speaking and Writing). Park (2006) also found, by using a different instrument, that the Korean secondary English teachers rated their productive skills lower than their receptive skills. Meanwhile, language deficiencies particularly in listening, speaking were self-reported with low means in Chacon’s (2002) study. English language deficiencies in speaking were mentioned as a factor that affected teachers’ confidence in their capabilities to teach oral English.

The present study has found that self-reported English proficiency levels had high relationships with all of the English teaching-specific efficacy dimensions (r = .779 to r = .916), so the null hypothesis was rejected. This result means the teachers who rated their English proficiency higher in the four skill domains tended to believe more strongly in their capability for teaching English. This corroborates the previous studies that have reported significant relationships between teachers’ sense of efficacy or confidence in teaching English and English language proficiency (Chacón, 2002, 2005; Lee, 2009; Shim, 2001).

The relationships of English proficiency levels with student engagement (r = .811 to .916) dimension of English teaching self-efficacy beliefs were stronger than with classroom management (r = .800 to .880) and instructional strategy (r = .779 to .898) dimensions. These results indicated that the variance on teachers’ self-reported English language proficiency levels shared more variance on their beliefs about capability to carry out teaching tasks related to the student engagement than those related to classroom management and instructional
strategies. Those who perceived they had sufficient English language proficiency tended to believe in their capability to carry out tasks related to student engagement more than the other dimensions of classroom management and instructional strategy.

In sum, the present study corroborates studies that have documented significant association between English language proficiency and teacher efficacy (Chacón, 2002, 2005; Lee, 2009; Shim, 2003). This suggests that improving one’s English language proficiency can enhance English teaching-specific teacher efficacy or confidence.

5. Recommendation for future studies

As the first study that adopted the notion of teacher efficacy in conceptualizing teachers’ confidence in teaching English in the EFL language center education context, the present study provides possible direction for future research as follows:

1. Teachers’ perceived efficacy is a multifaceted construct that varies across tasks and contexts where teachers do their teaching. Additional research needs to be conducted to assess teachers’ capabilities to teach English as a situated activity immersed in a sociocultural milieu. It would be useful to explore teachers’ perspectives through additional studies that provide a deeper understanding of how teachers’ sense of efficacy influences teachers’ actions and decision-making in planning and conducting lessons. Observations of teaching performance, teaching techniques as well as multiple interviews should be used as another source of data to explore teachers’ sense of efficacy and the teaching of foreign languages, English and others.

2. given the fact that the present study was based exclusively on self-reported data, additional research is needed that could include quantitative data on teachers’ perceived efficacy in teaching English as foreign language using independent measures to investigate the relationship on this variable and student outcomes (e.g., ability to speak English as measured by purposeful sampling interviews). This type of study is needed to determine if teachers’ sense of efficacy correlates in statistically significant ways with student learning of English as a foreign language in certain contexts (e.g., language centers in EFL context).

3. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to investigate whether teachers’ perceived efficacy to teach EFL varies across years. It is recommended to follow-up teachers to investigate whether or not and how their efficacy changes over the years.

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