



Sources of self-efficacy of Vietnamese EFL teachers: A qualitative study

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Vietnamese EFL teachers drew on 4 sources to construct self-efficacy.
- Social persuasion was the most influential source.
- Cognitive mastery experiences were an additional source.
- Cultural factors influenced cognitive processing of efficacy information.

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a qualitative study investigating Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of sources of self-efficacy information. Findings suggested that four sources of efficacy information appeared to influence teachers' sense of self-efficacy. Contrary to widespread belief, mastery experiences were not the most influential source of efficacy information. Rather, social persuasion was. Study teachers reported various vicarious experiences and physiological/affective states as supplementary self-efficacy sources, including cognitive mastery experiences, which were deemed more powerful than enactive mastery experiences. The study highlights a range of Vietnamese cultural and contextual factors that influenced the way the teachers selected, weighed and interpreted efficacy information.

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1. Introduction

Having taught EFL at a university in Vietnam for over 5 years, the first author often felt that students were not achieving as well as they should have and wondered if this was due to a lack of teaching strategies and English competency on her part. At the same time she saw a number of similarities between herself and her colleagues, who often complained that students' learning attitudes and/or other teaching constraints at the university made them feel less than effective in teaching the English language. She wondered where the feeling of ineffectiveness came from and what might be done to help teachers feel more confident and effective in teaching English language. She was aware of studies highlighting the poor quality of teaching and learning English in the university language class setting in Vietnam (Tran & Baldauf, 2007; Vu, 2007) and

studies that suggested ways of helping Vietnamese students learn English language (Phan & Phan, 2010; Phan, 2009; Tran, 2007). However, little has been done on Vietnamese EFL teachers' self-efficacy beliefs (Luu, 2013; Nguyen, 2011), and no studies have investigated sources of teachers' self-efficacy in the Vietnamese context and how this might be enhanced.

The definition of teacher self-efficacy adopted for this study was “the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context” (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 233) which is located within Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory (see next section). A number of studies have suggested a connection between teacher efficacy and practice. For example, teachers with a high sense of efficacy devote more class time to academic activities and less time to discipline. Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy work willingly with students who are having difficulties, invest considerable effort into finding appropriate teaching materials and activities, perform better, and probably remain committed to their work (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011; Mills, 2011).

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Teacher self-efficacy has been investigated in a range of studies and in the late 1990s was considered to “stand on the verge of maturity” (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 202). However, in a more recent review, Klassen et al. (2011) suggested that much remains to be known about teachers’ sources of self-efficacy and little is known about how sources operate in EFL contexts. The study reported here, which explored sources of self-efficacy beliefs of Vietnamese EFL teachers, aimed to discover ways of improving Vietnamese EFL teachers’ sources of self-efficacy, and thereby enhance English teaching and learning practices. Additionally, it was hoped that the study would contribute to the development of teacher self-efficacy theory and research, since it was unique in being conducted in the Vietnamese context.

2. Teacher self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a core concept in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997), emphasizing that individuals have the power to change the environments in which they live and work, even while their behaviors are mediated by environmental factors (Schunk & Pajares, 2010). Self-efficacy can help predict how much effort people make, how well they persevere when coping with challenge and how effectively they regulate their thoughts, actions and plans (Schunk & Meece, 2006). Bandura (1997) viewed teacher efficacy as a type of perceived self-efficacy related to “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p.3). Teacher self-efficacy is domain-, task- and context-specific, i.e. teachers feel efficacious and inefficacious in different circumstances. Teachers’ levels of efficacy vary as they teach different subjects, different learners and perform different teaching tasks (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2010; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). According to Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998), teachers establish their self-efficacy by way of evaluating their capabilities in relation to requirements for undertaking particular teaching practices in particular contexts. They may consider such factors as personal knowledge and skills or personality traits in the light of factors in the environment that impede or facilitate teaching. In other words, to make efficacy judgments, context, i.e. environmental or contextual factors such as teaching resources, student factors, leadership practices and collegiality, needs to be taken into consideration.

2.1. Sources of self-efficacy information

According to Bandura (1997), individuals construct their self-efficacy beliefs by processing information derived from four sources of efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states.

Mastery experiences are the authentic performances, the perceptions of previous enactive experiences of a teacher, viewed as successful or unsuccessful (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2010). Successful experiences may lead to increased efficacy and failures may result in decreased efficacy. Past performances enable teachers to ascertain their internal strengths and deficits as well as task requirements (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Teachers’ perceptions of unsuccessful experiences of teaching unmotivated students in the past, for example, may decrease their efficacy in teaching a group of struggling, unmotivated students, since they may assume that they lack the professional knowledge to teach such students. In another scenario, recalling previous teaching successes may increase efficacy to lead teachers to invest more effort into teaching. Mastery experiences are regarded as the most powerful source of efficacy information compared to other sources (Bandura, 1997; Morris & Usher, 2011; Poulou, 2007).

Bandura argued that, because people cannot always have

adequate ways of evaluating their capabilities, they need to compare their capabilities to others. *Vicarious experiences* – the information gained from observing other teachers or from comparing previous and present teaching practices – can enhance or weaken the development of positive teacher efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Meece, 2006). Teachers will consider such factors as the similarity between the models and themselves (for example, age, gender), the competence of the models (incompetent versus competent models), multiplicity of modeling (observing different models or a single model), when they construct their personal efficacy beliefs. If teachers view themselves as having similar teaching abilities as the people modeling successfully, their efficacy may be heightened. In contrast, if they believe that they are not as good as the model teachers, their own efficacy may be lowered (Johnson, 2010; Mills, 2011).

According to Bandura, *verbal persuasion* is the negative or positive verbal judgment of other people, such as administrators, colleagues or students about a teacher’s capability to carry out a particular task. Verbal persuasion provides information for both the analysis of the teaching task (e.g. by suggesting strategies) and the self-perception of teaching competence in the teacher (e.g. by giving specific feedback on the teacher’s performance of a particular task) (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The impact of verbal persuasion depends on factors such as the expertise and knowledge of people who provide the judgment (Bandura, 1997). For example, positive feedback from a senior teacher may have more effect on the self-efficacy of a teacher than feedback from an inexperienced colleague. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) gave the example of using professional development workshops and coursework to provide teachers with knowledge of both relevant teaching tasks and the skills required to improve teaching competence. Although not considered a powerful source of efficacy, verbal persuasion, when used with other sources of efficacy information, can enhance or diminish teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Milner & Hoy, 2003; Schunk & Pajares, 2010).

Physiological and emotional states such as anxiety or excitement in performing a particular task may have an influence on the sense of competence or incompetence of the teacher (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2010). Although generally regarded as the least powerful source of self-efficacy beliefs, affective states can increase or decrease a teacher’s self-efficacy when combined with other sources of efficacy information (Bandura, 1997; Morris & Usher, 2011; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Wyatt, 2013). After a successful teaching lesson, a teacher’s feeling of satisfaction may enhance self-efficacy. However, the way affective states influence a teacher’s self-perception of teaching competence depends on the way attention is directed to his/her affective states (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). A teacher may disregard feelings of anxiety as a result of focusing himself/herself on making a teaching task understandable to students. As this study discovered, cultural factors influence the way affective states are managed and processed (see next section).

2.2. Cognitive processing

Although information for self-efficacy judgment comes from the four principal sources, Bandura (1997) and later researchers such as Schunk and Pajares (2010) have asserted that the sources by themselves do not necessarily raise or lower self-efficacy beliefs. Only through cognitive processing do these sources become active (Bandura, 1997, p. 81). To make the sorts of judgments that constitute self-efficacy beliefs, people first select information deemed as relevant, then weigh and integrate this information to construct their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, p. 79).

Many factors appear to influence this cognitive processing,

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