



Context-based sources of EFL teachers' self-efficacy: Iranian public schools versus private institutes



Shahab Moradkhani*, Sara Haghi

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Razi University, Kermanshah, 6714414941, Iran

HIGHLIGHTS

- Private institute teachers are more efficacious than public school teachers.
- Both frequency and variety of exposure to self-efficacy sources are important.
- Verbal persuasion is the most powerful source of efficacy for Iranian teachers.
- Unfavorable educational setting is the main factor diminishing teacher efficacy.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how contextual differences may affect EFL teachers' self-efficacy and their perceptions of its strengthening/weakening sources. Data were collected from 106 Iranian EFL teachers followed by 14 individual interviews. The findings showed that teachers in private institutes feel significantly more efficacious than their counterparts in public schools. This considerable difference is attributed to both frequency and variety of exposure to sources of teacher self-efficacy. Furthermore, verbal persuasion (rather than mastery experience) seems to be the most powerful source of self-efficacy among Iranian teachers. In contrast, unfavorable educational setting is the main factor diminishing EFL teachers' self-efficacy.

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1. Introduction

Teacher self-efficacy (TSE) refers to teachers' belief in their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). A review of previous TSE studies suggests that the positive consequences of this psychological construct can be observed in three levels of classroom ecology namely, students' academic adjustment, quality of classroom processes, and teachers' well-being (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Considering the first level, research has demonstrated that TSE at least partially explains students' better academic achievement (Akbari & Tavassoli, 2014; Malmberg, Hagger, & Webster, 2014).

Besides, students who are taught by efficacious teachers are highly motivated to attend schools and have positive attitude toward teaching and learning (Robertson & Dunsmuir, 2013).

TSE is also connected with positive classroom processes. More specifically, teachers with a stronger sense of efficacy are able to appropriately deal with high work load (Klassen & Chiu, 2010) and believe they can have positive influence on students' learning even in the face of negative external factors (Tournaki & Podell, 2005). Moreover, efficacious teachers usually use a wider and more varied repertoire of creative pedagogical strategies (Goker, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004; Thurlings, Evers, & Vermeulen, 2015; Wertheim & Leyser, 2002) leading to students' greater involvement in classroom activities (Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012). High self-efficacy educators are also more likely to create autonomous learners (Leroy, Bressoux, Sarrazin, & Trouilloud, 2007).

A strong sense of self-efficacy also impacts instructors' emotional and psychological well-being; for example, self-efficacious teachers are less influenced by job tension and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: s.moradkhani@razi.ac.ir (S. Moradkhani), sarihaghi@gmail.com (S. Haghi).

discomfort (Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016) and less likely to experience teacher burnout (Chesnut & Burley, 2015; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Wang, Hall, & Rahimi, 2015). On the other hand, they enjoy higher levels of job satisfaction (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Steca, 2003), are more committed to teaching (Klassen & Chiu, 2011), and typically stay longer in the teaching profession (Ware & Kitsantas, 2007).

Therefore, there is ample evidence indicating the positive role of TSE on various dimensions of teachers' classroom performance and student achievement (see Klassen, Tze, Betts, and Gordon (2010) and Zee and Koomen (2016) for a comprehensive review). Following these publications that focused on the consequences of TSE, another line of inquiry burgeoned concentrating on the factors that may boost this belief-related construct (henceforth, antecedents of TSE). In fact, once research findings revealed that TSE can be a reliable predictor of many positive elements related to classroom ecology, educational experts began documenting the variables that can heighten TSE.

Adopting this antecedent-based research domain, the present study aimed at investigating the influence of contextual differences on two groups of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' sense of efficacy. We were partially inspired by the idea that TSE is both subject matter and context-specific. That is, teachers may feel competent in one subject matter and when teaching a particular group of students and feel less efficacious in other subjects and with other groups of students (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). On the other hand, previous research has paid scant attention to school-level factors that may influence TSE (Klassen et al., 2010). One particular gap in this regard is the scarcity of comparative studies concentrating on TSE between various educational contexts (Fackler and Malmberg (2016) is one of the rarest studies). In the current study, we made attempts to address this lacuna in the TSE literature and expand our understanding of the mechanisms through which contextual differences can influence teachers' efficacy expectations, with special focus on EFL instructors. We investigated context-based influence on TSE by comparing data obtained from EFL teachers working in two main centers in Iran that are responsible for providing the English education within the country, namely public schools and private language institutes.

2. Origin and sources of TSE

Self-efficacy, which is considered to be the most important component of Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, is defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 3). It is a future oriented concept which predicts the attempts people put forth, the way they deal with challenges, and their ability to organize their thoughts, plans, or actions (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). Applied to the teaching domain, TSE entails teachers' beliefs in their ability to improve their students' learning even in the face of obstacles (Ross & Bruce, 2007).

According to Bandura (1998), individuals construct their self-efficacy through processing information from four sources: enactive mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological/emotional state. Enactive mastery experience, which is considered to be the most powerful source of self-efficacy, has to do with the real, authentic experience of performing an action. In the educational domain, when teachers attribute students' progress to their pedagogical performance, their self-efficacy is likely to rise. Conversely, teachers' self-efficacy lowers if they believe that their teaching does not make any positive changes in students' learning. Palmer (2006) contends that, in addition to enactive mastery experience, teachers can accumulate cognitive mastery experience by their engagement in formal and/or informal

professional development activities like attending conferences, reading academic books and papers, and conducting classroom-based research.

Vicarious experience (the second source of self-efficacy) refers to how individuals feel when they compare themselves with a role model. While success stories of the role model can enhance teachers' self-efficacy, news of his/her failure can have detrimental effects. For example, observing successful instructors' performance can lead novice teachers to believe that they can be equally successful in similar circumstances. On the other hand, witnessing failures in experienced educators' classroom practice can erode novice instructors' self-efficacy since they may consider the task as unmanageable. The effect size of this source of self-efficacy is directly related to the degree of similarity teachers detect between themselves and the target role model.

Verbal persuasion, as the third source of self-efficacy, has to do with verbal judgments individuals receive from other people, such as their administrators, coworkers, or students. For instance, TSE increases when teachers receive positive feedback from their supervisors with regard to their performance. The potency of verbal persuasion largely depends on the credit that a person assigns to the feedback provider, meaning that it is more effective when given by a trustworthy person or an expert.

The last source of self-efficacy is related to people's physiological/emotional state, implying how individuals feel when they are completing a task. Feeling relaxed while teaching a particular subject, for example, can indicate self-assurance and anticipate future success. In contrast, trembling hands during teaching may signal self-doubt, hence lowering self-efficacy. It should be noted that sometimes a particular physiological/emotional state may function as a double edged sword depending on the individual's interpretation. A teacher's increased heart beat while teaching a new classroom, for example, may be regarded as a sign of excitement or stress, with the former strengthening self-efficacy and the latter diminishing it.

3. Antecedents of TSE

3.1. Teachers' personal attributes

This category involves all the variables that are related to teachers' characteristics and qualifications. Research has yielded mixed findings regarding teachers' gender. Cousins, Ross, and Gadalla (1996) reported that male teachers have significantly higher TSE. Klassen and Chiu (2010) also argued that female teachers have lower TSE when facing stressful workload. On the other hand, a number of other studies (e.g. Gencer & Cakiroglu, 2007; Klassen & Durksen, 2014; Malmberg et al., 2014; Taimalu & Öim, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007) detected no significant difference between male and female instructors' TSE. The findings are also inconclusive considering teachers' age. Campbell (1996) claimed that older teachers feel more efficacious, whereas Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2002) could not find any relationship between age and TSE. Some discrepancies have also been observed in the case of teachers' working experience; however, it may be argued that experienced teachers are more efficacious than their novice counterparts (Chan, 2008; Cruz & Arias, 2007; Huang, Liu, & Shiomi, 2007; Morris & Usher, 2011), but the effect of experience levels off in the course of time since, as teachers accumulate more experience, their self-efficacy beliefs become more or less stable. With regard to teachers' academic credentials, no significant difference was reported between teachers with undergraduate and postgraduate academic degrees in mainstream education (Pas et al., 2012) or EFL context (Akbari & Moradkhani, 2010). Taking into account the influence of formal teacher training, however, research

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