

# Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2008

## The Relationship between Self-Efficacy and Self-Assessment in Foreign Language Education: A Pilot Study

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### Abstract

Though self-efficacy is an important contributor to success in foreign language education, its relationship with learners' self-assessment abilities and perceptions has not been adequately researched. This pilot study correlated students' self-efficacy beliefs about learning a foreign language with self-assessment ratings regarding an awareness of study habits and the importance of classroom learning topics. Results showed a significant positive relationship between students' self-assessment scores and their global (but not task-specific) self-efficacy beliefs about future foreign language success.

### Introduction

Few American students complete their college education with adequate foreign language (FL) competencies, despite the increasing globalization of American society and a growing emphasis on FL acquisition (Dirstine, 2006). Self-efficacy is an important variable that directly influences students' motivation, persistence, and success during FL learning (Mills, 2004). Self-efficacy is a psychological construct that can be defined as a belief that one can successfully complete future tasks (Bandura, 1997). Research has shown that during FL learning, as self-efficacy increases, motivation, achievement (Yamamori, 2004) and confidence (Kim-Yoon, 2001) also increase. Therefore, it is important to explore avenues for enhancing self-efficacy among FL learners.

Theoretically, if FL learners practice assessing their own strengths and weaknesses during the learning process, they will be better able to improve their skills and, thereby, strengthen their self-efficacy beliefs. Self-assessment skills, for example, can result in self-reflection, an awareness of what to improve and how to do so, and an internal locus of control throughout the learning process (Coronado-Aliegro, 2007). Although little empirical research relating self-assessment and self-efficacy exists for FL students, preliminary findings show that FL students who engage in self-assessment exercises display stronger self-efficacy beliefs than students who do not practice self-assessment (Coronado-Aliegro, 2006). In the most recent study found to date, students who were more active and self-reflective during FL learning demonstrated increased self-efficacy (West, Kahn, & Nauta, 2007). The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate the relationship between FL learners' self-assessment and their self-efficacy beliefs. The research question posed was, "Do Spanish undergraduate students' self-efficacy beliefs correlate with self-assessment exercises after one semester of instruction?"

### Method

#### *Participants*

Participants included 62 undergraduate students from two Midwestern and Northeastern universities. Participants were, on average, 24.2 years old ( $SD = 6.4$ ); 51.6% were male, and 48.4% were female. The majority self-identified as Euro-American (82.3%), followed by African American (12.9%), Hispanic American (1.6%), Asian American (1.6%), and mixed race (1.6%). Regarding years of higher education, 93.9% of participants were either in their freshman (8.1%), sophomore (16.1%), or junior (59.7%) year of college. All participants were from introductory (101 or 102) Spanish courses in order to minimize the influence that prior formal FL learning would have on self-efficacy beliefs.

#### *Procedures and Instruments*

The researcher attended summer semester classes at both universities, read an informed consent script to students, and received voluntary consent from participants to complete the study surveys. Toward the end of the first class, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. Throughout the semester, in addition to a standardized FL curricula taught by all instructors, once a week each student completed a self-

assessment instrument which focused on perceived FL-related learning needs, strengths, and weaknesses. Finally, a self-efficacy questionnaire was completed during the final class and correlated with scores on participants' final self-assessment questionnaire. All questionnaires were completed anonymously, and no identifying information was collected.

The demographic questionnaire inquired about participants' demographic characteristics. The Spanish as a Foreign Language Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (SFL-SEQ) was adapted from Mills (2004) to fit language curricula covered in the Spanish classroom. The SFL-SEQ focused on listening and reading interpretive skills that are part of the communication goal of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (2007). The SFL-SEQ had 40 items and was scored according to an 8-point Likert-type scale. The first 35 questions focused on self-efficacy in relation to specific FL tasks, such as being able to read a newspaper in the FL or being able to understand a television commercial in the FL. The last five items reflected "global" self-efficacy related to beliefs that one could perform successfully in the future using the FL. Two separate SFL-SEQ scores were obtained, one for the total task-specific ratings and one for the total global ratings. Higher scores equated with higher self-efficacy regarding Spanish as a FL. Cronbach's alpha coefficients on the original instrument ranged from .88 to .97 (Mills, 2004). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained in this study was .98.

The Self-Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ) was adapted from Blanche and Merino (1989). The aspect of the SAQ used in this study included questions related to students' beliefs about the importance of each learning topic, how much they learned during the learning activities from the past week, and the helpfulness of their study habits. The purpose of the SAQ was to promote self-reflection among students. Each question was rated using a 4-point Likert-type scale. Three individual and one total combined SAQ score were obtained to provide a summary of students' overall self-assessment perceptions. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the SAQ was .91.

## Results and Discussion

Pearson correlations were used to evaluate the relationship between SAQ scores and SFL-SEQ scores. Results showed that task-specific SFL-SEQ scores were not significantly related to any of the three individual self-assessment items alone, nor were they related to the total self-assessment score. However, participants' global SFL-SEQ scores were significantly related to all three self-assessment ratings ( $r=.33$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r=.40$ ,  $p < .01$ , and  $r=.47$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively), as well as participants' total self-assessment score ( $r=.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In each case, a significant positive relationship existed between SAQ and SFL-SEQ scores, indicating that, as participants' self-assessment ratings increased, their self-efficacy beliefs strengthened. Self-assessment scores accounted for between 11% and 27% of the variance in participants' self-efficacy. These are considered large effect sizes (Cohen, 1992).

Because demographic data for participants showed that 14 (23%) students had some prior FL exposure either in their personal life or educationally, the researcher conducted a follow-up t-test to determine if those with prior FL experience had higher self-efficacy scores than those with no previous FL experience. Results indicated that prior FL experience did not differentiate participants' self-efficacy beliefs,  $t(52) = -.02$ ,  $p = .75$ . These results strengthen the argument that self-efficacy beliefs are associated with self-assessment and do not depend on prior FL experience.

These results add to the few prior studies in this area in terms of research design and findings reported (Coronado-Aliegro, 2006; Mills, 2004; West et al., 2007). As opposed to prior studies which used mailed survey methods (e.g., West et al., 2007) or between-group experimental designs (e.g., Coronado-Aliegro, 2006), findings of this study point to a direct association between the degree of FL self-assessment used and self-efficacy beliefs. However, it is curious to see that, in this study, global self-efficacy was related to self-assessment perceptions, whereas task-specific self-efficacy was not. Most writers who discuss self-efficacy assert that the construct should be assessed and reinforced in concrete and task-specific ways (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996). As Bandura (1997) explains, "People act on their efficacy beliefs and assess the adequacy of their self-appraisal from the [specific] performances they manage to achieve" (p. 81). Perhaps self-assessment and global self-efficacy beliefs are mutually reinforcing in unique ways depending on how each one is promoted and measured.

In this study, self-assessment ratings focused on broad areas, such as reflections about the importance of classroom learning topics, how they were learned during the past week, and the effectiveness of students' study habits. This type of self-reflection may have resulted in more independent thinking, greater internal locus of control, and increased thoughtfulness about how to achieve broad success in the FL. However, it is possible that, simply because the type of self-assessment studied here was not task-specific, it did not

influence participants' task-specific self-efficacy. In future research, it would be interesting to correlate more focused and specific self-assessment scores with the SFL-SEQ to determine empirically if a relationship exists similar to that proposed theoretically by others (Coronado-Aliegro, 2007).

Until further research clarifies the relationship between self-assessment and self-efficacy, this pilot study shows that helping FL students self-reflect on their learning promotes global beliefs about future success. This relationship has important implications for the FL classroom because self-efficacy is associated with classroom motivation (Bandura, 1994) and perseverance (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). However, additional research in this area is clearly warranted. The use of a relatively small sample to test the phenomenon in question with one FL (i.e., Spanish) among groups of beginning learners (i.e., undergraduate language students) limits the generalizability of results. Another limitation of this study could relate to adapting the instruments used here from a previous study. Some of the tasks assessed may be too difficult for a beginning learner and could have influenced responses to the questionnaires. Finally, generalization of these findings may be limited to non-native Spanish speakers in the United States. Results reported here may not be fully applicable to bilingual persons or those learning a different dialect of Spanish (e.g., someone from South America learning linguistic nuances from Spain).

Because self-efficacy is an important psychological factor related to successfully learning new skills (Pajares & Miller, 1997), particularly in educational settings (Bandura, 1994), additional empirical research is encouraged. The researcher recommends that replication studies be conducted to determine if task-specific self-efficacy is not related to self-reflection about learning goals. I also encourage future researchers to employ qualitative research methods so underlying perceptions of the self-efficacy-related benefits of self-assessment can be ascertained.

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