

The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners' Self-efficacy Beliefs and Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between Iranian EFL juniors' self-efficacy beliefs and their employed vocabulary learning strategies. The participants were 50 juniors studying English Translation at University of Sistan & Baluchestan. The self-efficacy and vocabulary learning strategies questionnaires were administered to identify the students' self-efficacy beliefs and their vocabulary learning strategies. The obtained results revealed that students had rather high level of self-efficacy and that self-efficacy was significantly positively related to their use of the four subcategories of vocabulary learning strategies in general and the use of memory strategies in particular. Highly self-efficacious students reported significantly more use of vocabulary strategies than those with low self-efficacy. The results point out the importance of nurturing learners' self-efficacy beliefs and its impact on successful learning experiences and achievement.

Keywords: Self-efficacy, Vocabulary learning strategies, Learner beliefs

1. Introduction

The construct of learners' self beliefs is a topic that has gained much attention in education in recent years. Nearly two decades of research has revealed that self-beliefs are strong influential factors on academic achievements causing a new wave of attention to self-beliefs (Pajares, 2003). "Of all beliefs, self-efficacy is the most influential one which plays a powerful role in determining the choices people make, the effort they will persevere in the face of challenge, and the degree of anxiety or confidence they will bring to the task at hand" (Bandura, 1986, p. 397). It is this perceived self-efficacy that helps explain why people's behaviors differ widely even when they have similar knowledge and skills. Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1986) as "people's judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance. It is concerned not with the skills one has but with the judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses". (p. 391). Delcourt and Kinzie (1993) noted that "perceived self-efficacy reflects an individual's confidence in his or her ability to perform the behavior required to produce specific outcomes". (p. 36).

Previous researches showed that efficacy beliefs result in more motivation (Graham & Weiner, 1996; Schunk & Pajares, 2002), more behavioral, cognitive and motivational engagement in the classroom (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). These findings as well as other studies (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991, Robbins, Lauer, Le, Davis, Langly, Carlsroth, 2004) showed the positive effect of efficacious feeling on achievement and performance i.e. higher efficacy results better achievement. Multon, Brown and Lent (1991) reported a positive effect of efficacy on performance; moreover, in their study, they found that efficacy is more effectual among low achieving learners than the other students. Their research findings indicated the powerful influence of students' efficacy beliefs on their academic performance. Other

research findings have documented the influence of students' efficacy beliefs on first language reading (Nicholls, 1979; Paris & Oka, 1986; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989), writing (Pajares & Johnson, 1996; Pajares, Miller, & Johnson, 1999; Pajares & Valiante, 1997, 1999; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989), and listening (Schunk & Rice 1984) achievement.

In a study of the relationship between self-efficacy and language learning strategies, National Capital Language Resource Center (2000a, 2000b) reported that students' self-efficacy correlates with the strategies they employ. Similarly, Yang (1999) and Shmias (2003) found that students with higher level of self-efficacy use more strategies, they more believe in their abilities in performing particular tasks, use more strategies, actively participate and ultimately achieve better. While these studies showed the positive link between self-beliefs and strategy use, Pajares and Schunk (2001) reported that high self-efficacious students use more cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies and they are more successful. Similarly, Feather (1988), Fincham and Cain (1986), Pape and Wang (2003) found that self-efficacy beliefs are related to self-regulated learning and use of learning strategies. Siew and Wong (2005) surveyed the relationship between language learning self-efficacy and language learning strategies. They reported that high self-efficacy pre-service teachers reported more frequent use of language learning strategies than did low self-efficacy pre-service teachers. In another study, Li and Wang (2010) explored the relationship between reading self-efficacy and the use of reading strategies. Their findings showed that reading self-efficacy was significantly positively related to the use of reading strategies, particularly meta-cognitive strategies. According to Li and Wang, highly self-efficacious readers reported significantly more use of reading strategies than low self-efficacious. This study suggests the necessity of considering the role of learners' reading self-efficacy and reading strategy use and incorporating them in language teaching.

Reporting the strong link between self-efficacy and strategy use, studies have found a positive relationship between strategy use and achievement (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Green & Oxford, 1995; Rubin, 1975). According to literature, as students use more strategies, they achieve more success which increases their self-efficacy beliefs, as Bandura (1979) stated that previous achievement result in higher sense of self-beliefs. Zimmerman (1990) reported that effective use of learning strategies has been closely linked to the development of sense of self-efficacy leading to expectations of successful learning. Briefly, students' level of self-efficacy could be among the factors that determine their choice of learning strategy use, which, ultimately, results in better learning outcome.

As stated above, there is a direct relationship between self-efficacy and the use of language strategies. However, much of the research has focused on reading strategies and none of the studies stated above have investigated how the students' self-beliefs affect their choice of vocabulary learning strategies. Vocabulary learning strategies are one part of language learning strategies which in turn are part of general learning strategies (Nation, 2001; cited in Lotfi, 2007). According to Schmitt (1997; cited in Lotfi, 2007) there are two groups of strategies: The ones to determine the meaning of new words when encountered for the first time, and the ones to consolidate meaning when encountered again. The former contains determination and social strategies and the latter contains cognitive, meta-cognitive, memory and social strategies. Schmitt includes social strategies in both categories since they can be used for both purposes. To Schmitt, determination strategies are used when "learners are faced with discovering the meaning of new word without recourse to another person's experience" (cited in Lotfi, 2007, p. 205). Hence, learners try to discover the meaning of a new word by guessing it with the help of context, structural knowledge of language, and reference materials. For Schmitt, the second way to discover a new meaning is through employing the social strategies of asking someone for help with the unknown words. Beside the initial discovery of a word, learners need to employ a variety of strategies to practice and retain vocabulary. Learners thus, use a variety of social, memory, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies to consolidate their vocabulary knowledge. Cooperative group learning through which learners study and practice the meaning of new words in a group is an instance of social strategies for consolidating a word. Memory strategies, traditionally known as Mnemonics, involve relating the word with some previously learned knowledge by using some form of imagery or grouping. Cognitive strategies in this taxonomy are similar to memory strategies but are not focused on manipulative mental processing. They include repetition and using mechanical means such as word lists, flash cards, and vocabulary notebooks to study words. Finally, meta-cognitive strategies in Schmitt's taxonomy are defined as strategies used by learner to control and evaluate their own learning, by having an overview of the learning process in general. Testing oneself is an instance of meta-cognitive strategies which provides "input to the effectiveness of one's choice of learning strategies, providing positive reinforcement if progress is being made or a signal to switch strategies if it is not". (Schmitt, p.216; cited in Lotfi, 2007).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

It is a common belief that people with high levels of self-efficacy perform better than those with lower levels of self-efficacy in the use of language learning strategies. As stated in literature, students with high level of self-efficacy perform tasks better than those with low level of self-efficacy. So it might be a question whether self-efficacy affects students' performance in language components in particular. No specific research has hitherto

been done on the relationship between learners' self-efficacy beliefs and vocabulary learning strategies used by them. Based on this, whether self-efficacy affects the use of vocabulary learning strategies is the issue under investigation in the present study.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study looks into the role personality trait self-efficacy plays in the use of vocabulary learning strategies among Iranian EFL learners of University of Sistan & Baluchestan. The following are the objectives the study looks for:

The first objective is to explore the current level of self-efficacy beliefs of Iranian EFL students and their use of vocabulary learning strategies. The second objective is to find out if there is any possible relationship between self-efficacy beliefs of Iranian EFL students and their use of vocabulary learning strategies.

1.3 Research Questions

Regarding the objectives of the study the following research questions are:

1. What are the current level of Iranian EFL students' self-efficacy beliefs and their use of vocabulary strategies?
2. Is there a significant relationship between Iranian EFL students' self-efficacy beliefs and their use of vocabulary learning strategies?

1.4 Significance of the Study

It has always been assumed that personality plays an important role in learning a second language. Thus, the present study finds significance as it seeks to find out if learners' self-efficacy beliefs affect their use of vocabulary learning strategies. In this perspective, therefore, the results of the present study can shed more light on academic improvement of second language learners. The findings can also help parents develop certain personality skills such as self-efficacy beliefs of their children in this case in order to help them learn a second language better.

2. Methodology

This section introduces the participants, research instruments and data analysis methods used in the research study.

2.1 Participants

Fifty male and female junior students majoring in English translation from University of Sistan & Baluchestan were randomly selected to participate in this study. They have studied English for at least 4 years in high school and nearly 2 years at university.

2.2 Instruments

The instruments used in this study are as follows:

1. The self-efficacy beliefs questionnaire which was the Persian Adaptation of the General Self-efficacy Scale constructed by Nezami, Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1996). The questionnaire consists of 10 likert-scale items. The students were asked to read each statement and decide if they: (1) strongly disagree (2) moderately disagree (3) moderately agree (4) strongly agree.
2. The vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire taken from Lip (2009) was adapted from Cheung (2004) which based on Schmitt's (2004) taxonomy of VLS. It included the followings: five statements on cognitive strategies (COG), ten statements on memory strategies (MEM), nine statements on determination strategies (DET) and three social strategies (SOC) in vocabulary learning. The selections of vocabulary strategies are measured by 5-point likert scales.

3. Data Analysis and Results

3.1 The Current Level of Iranian EFL Students' Self-efficacy

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviation of the Iranian EFL learners' level of self-efficacy. As can be seen the average level of participants' self-efficacy was 32.25 based on a scale of 1-5 implying the fact that the participants felt relatively high. On the scale, a value of 3 indicated "agree i.e. I basically can do it." Therefore, on average, the participants believed that they could basically complete the tasks. Our findings support previous findings as mentioned above and report rather high level of self-efficacy among Iranian students.

3.2 The Current Level of English Majors' Use of Vocabulary Strategies

Table 1 also showed that: memory strategies ($M = 33.35$), cognitive strategies ($M=14.22$), determination strategies ($M = 12.12$), and social/affective strategies ($M = 11.13$). With regard to the four subcategories of vocabulary learning strategies, the most frequently used category was memory strategies ($M = 33.35$), and the least frequently used one was found to be social/affective strategies ($M = 11.13$). Participants' memory strategy use was

considerably higher than their cognitive strategy use. This implies that Iranian EFL junior university students try to associate their existing or background knowledge with the new learning in general and vocabulary in particular. This result suggests that these participants sometimes employed various vocabulary strategies and the frequency of use varied across the four subcategories.

3.3 The Relationship between Self-efficacy and the Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Self-efficacy was found to be significantly positively correlated with: memory strategy use ($r = .389, p < .005$), cognitive strategy use ($r = .439, p < .001$), determination strategy use ($r = .283, p < .046$), and social/affective strategy use ($r = .498, p < .000$). This reveals that learners with a higher level of self-efficacy tend to use vocabulary strategies more frequently. The positive correlation between self-efficacy beliefs and vocabulary strategy use supports findings from previous researches both in strategy use and language acquisition fields (Wong, 2005; Li & Wang, 2010). The obtained result highlights the necessity to combine cognitive processes with motivational processes in vocabulary instruction and to emphasize the motivational role of self-efficacy in vocabulary learning.

3.4 Differences of the Use of Vocabulary Strategies between High Self-efficacious Students and Low Self-efficacious Counterparts ($n = 50$)

The median (32) was used as the cut-off criterion to set aside low self efficacy students from high self-efficacy students. Table 3 revealed that highly self-efficacious students ($n = 26$) reported higher vocabulary strategy use than low self-efficacy students ($n = 24$).

Based on independent sample t-test differences were found to be statistically significant at vocabulary learning strategy use. Highly self-efficacious students used significantly more strategies than students with low self-efficacy: $t = -2.89, p < .05$ meta-cognitive strategies, $t = -2.77, p < .05$ cognitive strategies, $t = -2.27, p < .05$ determination strategies, and $t = -3.01, p < .05$ social/affective strategies. Results show that there were significant differences between two groups in vocabulary learning strategies in high and low self-efficacious students. These results are consistent with the previous result from Pearson correlation, which stated that self-efficacy was positively related to the use of vocabulary strategies. That is to say, highly self-efficacious students tend to use vocabulary strategies more frequently and effectively than students with low self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy influences how people select their environment and activities. Individuals willingly undertake challenging tasks and activities which they believe they can handle and avoid those which they believe they cannot handle.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, most of the participants claimed that they basically made use of vocabulary learning strategies implying that they felt highly confident of their abilities to complete the tasks listed in the questionnaire. With regard to the four subcategories of vocabulary strategies, the most frequently used category was memory strategies, and the least frequently used one was social/affective strategies. Iranian students intended to associate their existing or background knowledge with the new learning, store and take them back later on. In the present research, memory processes in vocabulary learning are creating mental linkage, applying images and sounds, structured reviewing, and placing new words into a context to achieve a gist. In addition, a significantly positive relationship was found between self-efficacy and the use of vocabulary learning strategies. Finally, highly self-efficacious learners reported that they used vocabulary strategies more than the ones with low self-efficacy. The results of this study showed that English major college students generally felt rather confident about their abilities to complete tasks and also show the positive effect of self-efficacy on the use of vocabulary strategies.

As stated in literature, there is a strong link between self-efficacy and language learning strategy use. Pajares (2003) asserted that most of students' difficulties are due to students' self-beliefs. Students' low self-beliefs in themselves, rather than their lack of ability, in many situations are reason of their low motivation, participation, performance and achievement. It is necessary that teachers and parents pay attention to students' confidence, and don't contribute their failure to their weak knowledge base or inadequate skills. As students believe in themselves and in their abilities to perform tasks, they create greater interest in learning and develop their confidence to sustain focus when encounter difficulties during learning. As indicated, highly self-efficacious learners show more motivation and engagement in the classroom and better academic performance. Accordingly, instructors should improve this sense of students' efficacy which would be beneficial to their achievement. As effective use of learning strategies has been closely linked to the development of sense of self-efficacy leading to expectations of successful learning (Zimmerman, 1990), learning strategies linked to specific language learning tasks should be explicitly taught in EFL classrooms. Therefore, it is recommended that EFL teachers should realize the important role of self-efficacy in vocabulary instruction in order to help them make better and more use of vocabulary learning strategies. These results indicate that self-efficacy exerts some influences on the use of vocabulary learning strategies and that fostering self-efficacy could improve the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies instruction. Continuous researches on self-efficacy

with regard to its relation to language achievement, thus, are recommended.

In conclusion, the present research implies that the cultivation of learners' self-efficacy and the development of their vocabulary strategies should be emphasized simultaneously in vocabulary instruction in the Iranian EFL context and their integration will contribute to successful vocabulary learning.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Self-Efficacy and Vocabulary Strategy Use (n = 50)

	Self-efficacy	Memory strategies	Cognitive strategies	Determination strategies	Social strategies
Mean	32.25	33.35	14.22	12.12	11.13
Standard Deviation	4.74	5.08	3.34	2.70	3.42

Table 2. Correlation Coefficient of Self-Efficacy and Vocabulary Strategy Use (n = 50)

	Memory strategy use	Cognitive strategy use	Determination strategy use	Social strategy use
Self-efficacy	0.389** 0.005	0.439** 0.001	0.283* 0.046	0.498** 0.000

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Strategy Use of High and Low Self-Efficacious Students (n = 50)

	N	Memory strategy use	Cognitive strategy use	Determination strategy use	Social strategy use
High Self-efficacious	26	35.21 (4.05)	15.40 (2.89)	12.92 (2.03)	12.43 (3.66)
Low Self-efficacious	24	31.33 (5.38)	12.94 (3.38)	11.25 (3.09)	9.73 (2.52)

Table 4. T-test of Strategy Use of High and Low Self-Efficacious Students (n = 50)

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
Memory strategy	Equal variance assumed	3.617	.063	-2.895	48	.006	-3.882	1.341	-6.579	-1.185
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.862	42.60	.006	-3.882	1.356	-6.619	-1.146
Cognitive strategy	Equal variance assumed	.402	.529	-2.774	48	.008	-2.462	.887	-4.247	-.677
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.756	45.45	.008	-2.462	.893	-4.261	-.663
Determination strategy	Equal variance assumed	4.757	.034	-2.274	48	.027	-1.673	.735	-3.152	-.193
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.237	39.29	.031	-1.673	.747	-3.185	-.160
Social strategy	Equal variance assumed	4.402	.041	-3.012	48	.004	-2.704	.897	-4.510	-.899
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.056	47.70	.004	-2.704	.884	-4.487	-.185

Appendix A: Self-efficacy Questionnaire

لطفا سوالات زیر را به دقت بخوانید و یکی از چهار گزینه را انتخاب کنید.

1. اگر به اندازه کافی تلاش کنم همیشه قادر به حل مشکلات سخت می باشم.

اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است صحیح است

2. اگر کسی با من مخالفت کند، می توانم راه و روشهایی برای رسیدن به آنچه می خواهم را پیدا کنم.

اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است صحیح است

3. براحتی میتوانم اهدافم را دنبال کنم و به مقصودم برسم.
 اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است
4. مطمئن هستم که می توانم بطور مؤثری با مسایل غیرمتزقبه روبرو شوم.
 اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است
5. بخاطر ابتکار و شایستگی ام، میدانم چطور با موقعیتهای غیرقابل پیش بینی مقابله کنم.
 اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است
6. اگر به اندازه کافی تلاش کنم می توانم اکثر مشکلات را حل کنم.
 اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است
7. در برخورد با مشکلات می توانم خونسردی و آرامش خود را حفظ کنم چون به توانایی درونی خود اعتماد دارم.
 اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است
8. وقتی با مشکلات روبرو میشوم معمولاً می توانم چندین راه حل پیدا کنم.
 اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است کمی صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است
9. اگر در دروس بیفتم یا رفتاری برایم پیش بیاید معمولاً می توانم چاره ای بیابم.
 اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است
10. مهم نیست چه در سر راهم قرار گیرد، معمولاً قادر به رفع یا حل آن می باشم.
 اصلا صحیح نیست کاملاً صحیح است صحیح است تا حدی صحیح است

Appendix B: Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLSs)

Gender:

Age:

Major:

Semester:

Listed below are statements about vocabulary learning. Please read each statement carefully and put a tick '✓' mark in the appropriate box that show how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I repeatedly say the word in my mind frequently.					
I repeatedly spell the word in my mind.					
I repeatedly say the word aloud.					
I repeatedly write the word.					
I analyze the word by breaking it into sound segments.					
I analyze the word by breaking it into meaningful parts.					
I link the word to a visual image in my					

mind.					
I link the word to another English word with similar sound.					
I link the word to a Persian word with similar sound.					
I use sound and meaning associations.					
I group words together with storyline.					
I remember the sentence in which the word is used.					
I remember the new word together with the context where the new word occurs.					
I make up my own sentences using the new word.					
I try to use newly learned words in imaginary situations in my mind.					
I remember words by doing dictations.					
I remember words by doing group work activities in class.					
I remember words by doing a project.					
Analyze the part of speech of the new word					
Analyze the affixes and roots of the new word					
Check for the L1 meaning of new English word					
Analyze any available pictures or gestures to guess the word					
Guess the meaning of the new word from the story					
Use a dictionary to check the words					
Ask teacher for the new word's synonym.					
Ask teacher for a synonym, paraphrase, translation					
Ask classmates for meaning of the word					