

# To believe or not to believe: self-efficacy belief and performance

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"For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so".

Hamlet

"Your life is what your thoughts make it".

Marcus Aurelius 121-80 AD, Roman Emperor, Philosopher

"Believe that you will succeed, and you will."

Dale Carnegie, 1888-1955

"What people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave".

Albert Bandura, Professor of psychology at Stanford University

Second language acquisition research for the past fifty years has investigated a number of cognitive and affective variables in its quest to uncover the processes underlying learning another language. Unfortunately, investigations of this nature are similar to the conclusions drawn by *The Blind Men and the Elephant*. This ancient Indian fable tells the story of six blind men being placed before an elephant for the first time. Each one perceives the animal in relation to what each selects as the object of perception. Each one touches a different part of the elephant and proclaims what he considers as the truth. The elephant is like a spear (the tusk); the elephant is like a wall (the side); the elephant is like a tree (the knee); the elephant is like a fan (the ear); the elephant is like a rope

whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

One corollary to this fable is that whatever you concentrate on grows in importance. Recently, an interesting approach to learning gives importance to beliefs of self-efficacy to explain success or failure within a range of human behaviour. The man behind the theory is a Canadian named Albert Bandura and his theory has become known as self-efficacy belief. This theory is of special interest to students and to educators for it provides a partial answer to a number of questions. Why, given equal competence, do some people succeed and others fail at a given activity? What motivates someone to choose an activity (language, math, science, exercise, smoking, etc.) or a career option? Why are some people ap-

(the tail); the elephant is like a snake (the trunk). The parable ends by exclaiming that "each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong." The

prehensive and panic stricken during an activity whereas others have a more serene attitude?

Bandura defined perceived self-efficacy as people's beliefs about their abilities to produce designated levels of performance on specific tasks. Bandura notes "people who regard themselves as highly efficacious act, think, and feel differently from those who perceive themselves as inefficacious. They produce their own future, rather than simply foretell it" (1986, p. 395). Unlike the more general notion of self-esteem, self-efficacy beliefs are task specific, goal oriented, and context-sensitive. The beliefs fall into the realm of "I can" statements. "I am confident that I can solve that math problem"; "I am confident in my ability to write an essay in English without making spelling errors." In general, someone with a strong sense of self-efficacy approaches a difficult task as a challenge rather than a threat and is able to quickly recover after a setback or failure. Indeed, for someone with a strong belief in self-efficacy, failure is not due to any intrinsic shortcoming, but rather to lack of knowledge or skills that can be acquired.

Référence

On the other hand, a person with weak self-efficacy belief when faced with a difficult task will concentrate on personal inadequacy, obstacles, and potential adverse outcomes. These persons quickly lose faith in their capabilities. Despite skills similar to the strong believers in efficacy, those with low self-efficacy belief will shy away from difficult tasks and fail to persevere when difficulties arise. These negative consequences of self-belief undermine any effort that might be made. What one focuses on grows in importance.

The humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow illustrated this thinking when he coined the term "self-actualisation". In a chapter entitled "Goals and Implications of Humanistic Education", Maslow's recommendations to educators echo those of Bandura: "If we want to be helpers, counsellors, teachers, guiders, or psychologists, what we must do is to accept the person and help him learn what kind of person he is already. What is his style, what are his aptitudes, what is he good for, not good for, what can we build upon, what are his good raw materials, his good potentialities? We

would be non-threatening and would supply an atmosphere of acceptance of the child's nature which reduces fear, anxiety, and defence to the minimum possible." (1971, p.182). In Maslow's hypothesized hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation is highest.

Inherent in Bandura's construct are the notions of self-confidence and self-improvement. The world-view behind self-efficacy is that the individual is an agent of change. The concept of "self" has had a long history in the United States. The democratic ideal that all men are created equal, the rugged individualism of the frontier spirit, the "rags to riches" stories with the idealization of the entrepreneur, and the ascendancy of the Protestant ethic are but a few of the many examples of the importance given to the self. Even the expression "self-made man" has become synonymous with America. People as different as Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Jackson, and Ralph Waldo Emerson preached the importance of individualism and self-reliance. Toqueville (1835) made the pertinent observation that the focus on the individual did not necessarily

imply selfishness: "Although private interest directs the greater part of human actions in the United States as well as elsewhere, it does not regulate them all. I must say that I have often seen Americans make great and real sacrifices to the public welfare; and I have noticed a hundred instances in which they hardly ever failed to lend faithful support to one another... Men attend to the interests of the public, first by necessity, afterwards by choice; what was intentional becomes an instinct, and by dint of working for the good of one's fellow citizens, the habit and the taste for serving them are at length acquired." In other words, by becoming increasingly involved in community action, Americans developed a collective belief in the importance of mutual assistance.

Bandura's theoretical and empirical research has important implications for many domains of human behaviour. A significant number of research studies currently show that self-efficacy beliefs are better predictors of performance than is past performance. Self-efficacy scales have been applied to sports, leadership, pain reduction, career

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choice, and addictive behaviours (for an overview of self-efficacy research, see <http://www.emory.edu/education/mfp/effpage.html>). In addition, self-efficacy scales are currently being tested across different cultural contexts. The research findings have strengthened the claim that self-efficacy is indeed an accurate predictor of a student's motivation for future academic and career choices. The school is a social system where self-efficacy beliefs develop perhaps for life. The school can moreover confer upon their students a collective belief about the abilities of all the students in the school. Unfortunately, a collective belief in *inefficacy* is also a possibility. William Labov (1972) demonstrated in a series of experiments with inner city school children how teachers tended to believe in the collective inefficacy of African-American children. Minority children were seen as lacking in verbal skills in a predominately white classroom. In one creative experiment, Labov took the minority children aside and placed them in a room with a rabbit and told them that the rabbit was lonely and needed to be talked to. The children's verbal interactions with the rabbit were filmed and an analysis of the transcripts later showed a verbal sophistication as high as that of their white classmates. Although they had the same potential for verbal production, the environmental context of the classroom inhibited the use of the black children's verbal skills and the teacher's low expectations only reinforced this inhibition.

Gender differences in self-efficacy belief also exist. An interesting statistical illustration of under-confidence in college women was shown in a survey done by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA (reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2003, p.17). In 2002, UCLA surveyed 282,549 first-year students (18 years old) at 437 four-year universities. One question attempted to determine

whether students had "felt overwhelmed by all they had to do" during the previous year. "Overwhelmed" implies being made powerless by the amount of work demanded. The percentage of students who responded that they had felt 'frequently overwhelmed' was as follows: men 16.4%; women 35.2%; total 26.8%. In the academic context, men and women have the same amount of work, but their reaction to the work differed significantly according to these results. The disparity in the above statistics points to a potential for a "confidence gap" in the ability to cope. Gender stereotyping in the marketing of consumer items is especially dangerous in reinforcing collective beliefs of inefficacy. Mattel who makes the Barbie Doll once launched a talking Barbie who would say, among other things, "Math is difficult!" Regretting their mistake, Mattel quickly took the doll off the market.

### Sources of self-efficacy belief ■

**F**or Bandura, there are four main sources of self-efficacy information. One source is called "mastery experiences". This term refers to the self-judgement of the success (or failure) of an activity and the subsequent belief in a capacity to engage in such activities in the future. In the positive sense, this might be paraphrased as "nothing succeeds like success". Here the full import of the notion of self-efficacy belief comes into prominence. The more successes one has, the higher one's self-efficacy belief becomes. This creates favourable conditions for continuing the activity with an expectation of succeeding in the future. Significant mastery exercises can even become transforming exercises (passing the baccalaureate; winning a competition; entering a top

school/company) in which, as the result of succeeding in a difficult enterprise, confidence to deal with activities and events unrelated to the activity increases. Maslow (1971, p.172) in the framework of self-actualisation would have called these "peak" experiences: "Education is learning to grow, learning what to grow toward, learning what is good and bad, learning what is desirable and undesirable, learning what to choose and not to choose".

A second source of self-efficacy belief is vicarious experience or the modelling of behaviour. This could be paraphrased as "If he/she can do it, so can I". Once again there are positive and negative effects of modelling. Bandura has shown the negative power of example through his empirical research on the effects of TV violence on children. Bandura concluded that the worries about TV violence on children committing future acts of violence are legitimate. His major premise is that we do not necessarily learn by trial and error but rather by observing others through "vicarious" experiences. Thus Bandura posits a causal link between observation of an activity and the potential for accomplishing the activity. Throughout history, the "learn by doing" model has served as the basis for transmitting techniques and skills (for example, Rousseau's *Emile*). Even the etymology of the word "teach" comes from an Old English word that signifies "to show". Peer modelling is effective because peers serve as mirrors provoking a desire to imitate the behaviour of the model. Computer-assisted instruction will always lack this motivational element.

The third and fourth sources of self-efficacy belief have less importance in Bandura's framework. The third source of self-efficacy belief according to Bandura is social persuasion (both negative and positive feedback) given by a believable evaluator. This does not mean empty praise or insincere compliments. While positive reinforce-

ment is not a strong source of information, negative feedback is much more effective in undermining confidence. The fourth source of self-efficacy belief is an observation of one's physiological reactions to a situation (how tired, anxious, or physically upset one is). Fear reactions, fatigue, aches and pains lower perceived self-efficacy. Those who approach public speaking situations with sweaty palms and near nausea may interpret the physical symptoms as a signal of impending failure and this can culminate in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Classroom applications ■

Simply stated, internalised self-efficacy beliefs determine what people do with the knowledge and skills they already have. Foreign language skills, in particular, are subject to performance variations and depend on the context of communication, linguistic competence, and the responsiveness of others. Affective variables in foreign language learning are not the only explanation for success or failure. However, when self-efficacy belief is weak, the likelihood for failure is higher. Enhancing learner self-efficacy in addition to the teaching of knowledge and skills makes intuitive sense.

One framework for language learning that is coherent with an approach based on self-efficacy is that of Anna Uhl Chamont (1999) called the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). Her five-phase cycle of introducing, teaching, practicing, evaluating, and applying learning strategies provides opportunities for both mastery and vicarious experience. The preparation phase involves helping students identify the strategies they are already using (class discussions, think aloud sessions, questionnaires and checklists on strategies used). During the presen-

tation phase, the teacher explains and models the learning strategy (characteristics, usefulness, applications). The third phase, practice, gives the students an opportunity to practice the strategy in authentic situations frequently involving collaborative work with classmates. In the evaluation phase, students can evaluate their own success in using learning strategies (debriefing discussions, open-ended questionnaires on strategy use and effectiveness). The final phase is the expansion phase during which the learner applies the strategies to new contexts. This type of strategy-based instructional approach may be helpful in giving students a perception of more control over the learning process.

## Conclusion ■

In an academic environment, self-efficacy is not often given the importance it deserves as one of the variables affecting learning outcomes. However, even before considering self-efficacy, an educational system must first be receptive to correcting the factors that may create ineffective learning environments (large class size, heavy teacher workloads, bureaucratic paperwork, lack of resources, discipline problems, a curriculum that must be finished in a given period of time, teaching students to pass a specific exam, etc.) These negative

conditions can easily impair teacher efficacy. Both the learner and the teacher need a strong belief in their efficacy.

It remains to be seen whether Bandura's model is appropriate in cultures where power distance is high and individualism is low. Bandura's theory was developed in North America and is culturally specific to the North American classroom teaching style. In the North American classroom, mastery experiences and vicarious learning have been an integral part of the pedagogy due to the influence of the educator, John Dewey. Hierarchy and power distance relations between the teacher and students are low in North America. In addition, the American classroom has long emphasized a democratic goal of academic success by stressing the notion that no student should be left behind. Applying an approach based on self-efficacy within other cultural contexts requires sensitivity to the socio-cultural context of the culture and an adaptation of techniques to fit the teacher and student expectations. Nonetheless, an approach to strengthen self-efficacy belief through mastery experiences and vicarious learning in the language-learning classroom is worth trying. Self-efficacy belief thus can become an integral component of a model of communicative competence.

C. D. M.

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