THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROFICIENCY AND SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA STUDENTS LEARNING ESL

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Introduction

A body of literature exists that shows that self-efficacy beliefs are important in learning. Moreover, this literature contains findings from research conducted in a number of disciplines and places which indicate that there is a relationship between proficiency, gender and self-efficacy beliefs. Despite these important findings, little self-efficacy research has been conducted in the English as a second language (ESL) area. Moreover, to my knowledge, self-efficacy research has not been extensively done in Botswana particularly in the ESL area of learning.

Self-efficacy beliefs have been found to influence learning by social cognitive psychology research. For instance, individuals have been found to develop certain beliefs about how they can cope with certain tasks in specific situations (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1989a, 1989b; Bandura & Schunk, 1981). According to Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, the manner in which individuals judge their capability to perform tasks, or their self-efficacy beliefs, foretell their potential to accomplish such tasks. Bandura (1986: 391) defines self-efficacy beliefs as "people's judgement of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances".

A study of self-efficacy beliefs in language learning is essential in Botswana because its findings can be utilized to assist students particularly at the University of Botswana (UB) where the research reported in this article took place. UB students have been found to perform badly in English language learning. According to Chimbganda (2000) the first year students he investigated at UB were not able to perform even basic writing skills in English, especially in Science. In fact, he went on to suggest that first year students lack a 'general education' that gives them the necessary preparation to enable them to read and write in English at an acceptable level. Consequently, in an attempt to tackle these English language problems the Communication and Study Skills Unit (CSSU) was established at UB in 2000 in order to offer and co-ordinate English for Academic Purpose (EAP) and English for Specific Purpose (ESP) courses in a more organized manner. In addition, optional Communication and Study Skills courses began to be

offered, even to post graduate students, to help them develop their English proficiency. However, despite these efforts, difficulties with the English language still persist for many students. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate the role played by self-efficacy beliefs on the performance of the UB students in this subject.

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and proficiency of the UB students. The other interest of this study is to confirm the findings of previous research that attribute success to stronger self-efficacy beliefs. In this study, proficiency is synonymously interchanged with achievement, performance and success in language learning. It has also been found that students with stronger self-efficacy beliefs achieve their learning goals (See Jinks & Morgan, 1999; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1994; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Schunk, 1982a; Skinner, 1985). In line with this, self-efficacy beliefs have been demonstrated to positively relate to academic achievement (See Bandura, 1986; Jinks & Morgan, 1999; Locke, 1996; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Pintrich and DeGroot, 1990; Schunk, 1981, 1982a; 1984a ; Schunk and Gunn, 1985). Students with high self-efficacy beliefs have been found to have a strong sense of personal competence, greater inherent interest in activities, set challenging goals and maintain a strong commitment to them. They have also been found to recover confidence after failures or setbacks and ascribe failure to lack of effort or deficient knowledge and skills which they believe they are able to acquire (Ching, 2002). Self-efficacy has also been found to play an important role in successful language learning. According to Rossiter (2003), a student who is confident that she/he can write an essay will most likely develop more interest, perseverance and resilience in essay writing than the one who is not (see Hull & Rose, 1989; Meier, McCarthy, & Schmeck, 1984; Multon et al., 1991; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). It is important to point out that, for the purpose of this study, self-efficacy is differentiated from self-esteem. Although both affective factors influence human functioning and help mediate the impact of motivation and achievement they do not mean the same thing in this study. Self-efficacy refers to "a judgment of capability to perform a task or engage in an activity, whereas self-esteem is a personal evaluation of one's self that includes the feelings of self-worth that accompany that evaluation" (Pajares, 2000: 8). Pajares further indicates that self-esteem is particularly dependent on how a culture or social structure values the attributes on which the individual bases those feelings of self-worth whereas self-efficacy is dependent primarily on the task at hand independent of its culturally assigned value.

Secondly, this study examines gender as another important factor in language learning. Pajares and Schunk (2001) indicate that self-efficacy

beliefs are related not only to academic achievement but also to gender. They indicate that whereas recent findings suggest that gender differences in academic achievement are either diminishing or practically non-existent, gender differences in the academic beliefs of American students may still be prevalent. For example, it seems that boys and girls report similar confidence in their mathematics ability during the elementary years, but by high school, boys are more confident and girls more likely to underestimate their capability. However, it is important to note that there is very little research in the relationship between language learning self-efficacy beliefs and gender (See Huang & Chang, 1996; Khaldie, 2000; Purdie & Oliver, 1999). That being the case, this study most importantly responds to the call for more research on self-efficacy beliefs in the area of English language learning. It is hoped that the findings of this self-efficacy beliefs exploratory study will assist in finding a solution to the lack of proficiency of the UB students in learning English. Specifically the study addresses the following questions:

(a) What are the language learning self-efficacy beliefs of the University of Botswana students?

(b) Is there a relationship between proficiency and self-efficacy beliefs of these students?

(c) Is gender related to the self-efficacy beliefs of these students?

Methods

Participants

Data for this study was collected from 137 first year UB students in the faculty of Humanities. These are some of the students taking the Communication and Study Skills (CSS) course, which is compulsory for all first year students. Of the 137 participants in this research, 63.5% *(n=87)* were females and 36.5% *(n=50)* males. Furthermore, 59.9% *(n=82)* of the students were aged between 16 and 20 years; 34.3% *(n=47)* 21-25 years; 2.9% *(n=4)* 26 years and above. The students were further categorized in terms of proficiency: Proficient or good (*n=39)* (28.5%); middle proficiency or fair *(n=34)* (24.8%); and low proficiency or poor *(n=64)* (46.7%). (Table 1 provides a summary of this information).

The students from which data was collected for this study were selected using the stratified random sampling method; according to gender, and level of English language proficiency as determined by their respective lecturers. With respect to the English proficiency level of the students, it should be noted that this categorization is not a reflection of the learners'

potential. As Oxford and Green (1995: 269) noted in their study, "it is important to emphasize that in characterizing some students as less successful we are implying no judgment of their potential as learners, but are merely referring to the fact that at the time of our study they had not been successful learners of English, for any of a number of possible reasons".

Table 1: Background Factors of Participants

		Age				Gender		Proficiency		
	N	11-15	16-20	21-25	26 +	Female	Male	Good	Fair	Poor
n	137	4	82	47	4	87	50	39	34	64
%		2.9	59.9	34.4	2.9	63.5	36.5	28.5	24.8	46.7

Questionnaire Method

This study used the Morgan-Jinks Student Efficacy Scale (MJSES) questionnaire. This instrument was pilot tested before data collection could be done. In the MJSES questionnaire the items were designed for a Likert scale response using a four-interval scale of "Strongly Disagree", "Disagree," "Agree," and "Strongly Agree." In order to clarify the subject or language referred to in the questions, the word "English" was added to some of the questions (e.g. questions 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 24, 27 and 30). The questionnaires were coded using the numbers 1, 2 and 3 which referred to: 1 = *High proficiency or good*; 2 = *middle proficiency or fair*; 3 = *low proficiency or poor)*. According to Jinks and Morgan (1999) the MJSES scale has undergone extensive development to assure validity and reliability using DeVellis' (1991) *Scale Development: Theory and Application* for primary guidance. In this study the alpha reliability coefficient of the instrument was found to be 0.67. Although low, this level is still deemed to be within the acceptable range.

Interviews

To confirm data collected using the questionnaire, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the 24 students selected from the 137 students who had completed the questionnaire. Their English proficiency levels consisted of: *good (n=9); fair (n=6); poor (n=9)*. Sixteen of these students were female and ten were male. According to Guilfoyle and Hill (2002), the selection of interview participants has very little to do with numbers because the sampling is not done to get enough people but to collect

sufficient data. The interviewees were informed that the interviews were purely for research purposes. The interviews were tape-recorded and lasted for approximately one hour. The semi-structured protocol was chosen for the following reasons: It is the most commonly used protocol; it allows potential comparisons between data; it does not subject students to restrictions usually imposed by adhering to a structured protocol; and, finally, it allows students to say something that is intrinsically motivated.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze this data. The data obtained from the MJSES questionnaire was computed into means and standard deviations. In addition, one sample t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA); repeated measures ANOVA and mixed factorial ANOVA tests were used to determine the significance of variation in mean self-efficacy beliefs by proficiency, and gender. To determine where the specific differences lay Least Significance Differences (LSD) and Bonferroni post hoc tests were used. In addition, the Pearson Product Moment test was conducted to calculate correlation between self-efficacy beliefs and proficiency levels and gender. Transcriptions were made based on recordings of the interviews. After transcribing the interview a summary of the interviewees' responses to each question was made to reflect the content and spirit of the responses. The resultant data was analysed in accordance with the research questions. Finally, common patterns were identified and compared with responses obtained, and were also compared to the data obtained in the quantitative study.

Results

Questionnaire Results

The overall mean of the MJSES results for the tertiary students was 2.68 (SD = 0.25, n = 136). Using the self-efficacy scale whereby 1 equals 'strongly disagree', 2 'disagree', 3 'agree' and 4 'strongly agree', it can be seen that the above overall mean of 2.79 indicates that the University of Botswana students are generally positive about their learning of English language.

The proficiency results of the UB students show that both good (M = 2.69, SD = 0.249, n = 39) and fair students (M = 2.69, SD = 0.259, n = 33) had the same mean for self-efficacy beliefs, which was marginally higher than that of the poor students (M = 2.67, SD = 0.250, n = 64). Given the small difference, it is not surprising that the one-way ANOVA results showed that there was no significant difference between the means of the three groups (F (2, 133) = 0.117, p = 0.890).

Table 2: Self-efficacy Beliefs of Tertiary Students by Proficiency Level

Proficiency	n	M	SD
Good	39	2.69	0.249
Fair	33	2.69	0.259
Poor	64	2.67	0.250
Total	**136**	**2.68**	**0.250**

The gender results showed that male students scored higher on self-efficacy beliefs (M = 2.72, SD = 0.279, n = 50) than did the female students (M = 2.65, SD = 0.229, n = 86). However, the independent samples t-test results showed that there was no significant difference between the means of the two groups (t = -1.671, df = 134, p = 0.97, two-tailed).

The above results show that the UB students have positive, but not strong self-efficacy beliefs with respect to learning the English language. Perhaps the self-efficacy beliefs are not strong because the students were being modest about their capability to learn English. Culturally Batswana generally prefer to be modest about their high achievements to avoid being regarded as arrogant. Like with previous studies, the findings of this study show that the higher the self-efficacy beliefs the higher the proficiency or performance. Good students had higher self-efficacy means than did the fair and poor proficiency students. However, caution must be exercised as the results were not statistically significant. Similarly the results for gender did not show any significant differences.

Interview Findings

Most UB students thought they were 'average' at speaking English. Only three students thought that they were very good at speaking the English language and each belonged to a different proficiency category. Both good and poor proficiency students thought that they were poor at speaking English. Therefore, there does not seem to be a strong relationship between proficiency and English speaking confidence at UB. This may be because UB students generally belong to the same academic class in that they have all passed the senior secondary school leaving English examination that qualified them to be admitted to university as Humanities students. In so far as learning English is concerned the majority of the UB students thought that they were good at doing this, with good, fair, and poor students not differing a great deal in the way they rated their English language learning performance.

Discussion

The findings of this research, as predicted, are consistent with previous research findings that students have different types and degrees of self-efficacy beliefs. The results show that the University of Botswana students have positive, but moderate levels of self-efficacy beliefs with respect to learning the English language. However, more complex patterns of self-efficacy beliefs were revealed by the interviews. The interview findings suggest that Botswana students' self-efficacy beliefs, perhaps like students in other contexts, vary according to the subject, task or issue at hand. Furthermore, the interview findings show that, in fact, the students thought that they were average at speaking the English language but good at learning or studying it. This supports Pajares and Britner's (2001) observation that self-efficacy beliefs are task and context-oriented. The Botswana students' average self-efficacy beliefs in regards to speaking English may be related to the fact that the students do not use English fully, for example, for regular day to day communication. It may also suggest that they do not get enough opportunities to speak it in class and thus they do not gain the necessary confidence. Anecdotal evidence shows that many lecturers at UB still use the traditional lecture method to teach therefore not giving the students the opportunity to speak. It is important to note, however, that the students are offered an optional oral skills course in the Communication and Study Skills Unit and they also get the opportunity to speak when they practice interviews. Further, their good self-efficacy beliefs in learning or studying English suggest that they are instrumentally motivated to achieve high grades, and further, that they approach learning it as they do other content subjects. Therefore, most of them indicated that they thought they were good because they were passing English.

As far as proficiency is concerned, the MJSES results of the current research show that the UB proficient students were more self-efficacious than less proficient ones, although good and fair students had the same mean, which was only marginally higher than that of the poor proficiency students. Even though these findings did not show marked difference, the general pattern does support the findings of others, such as Lent, Brown, and Larkin's (1986) who found that students with high self-efficacy for educational requirements achieved higher grades than students with low self-efficacy (see also Andrew, 1998; Chacko & Huba, 1991; Collins, 1982; Pajares, 2002).

However, contrary to expectation, some of the proficient students had low self-efficacy beliefs. The interviews showed that some of the UB students with average self-efficacy beliefs were good and fair proficiency students. The interviews offered some explanation in that some students

indicated that they underestimated their capability because they felt that by so doing they were encouraging themselves to work harder. This finding seems to suggest that, at least in the Botswana context, low self-efficacy beliefs are not always consistent with performance. There is support for this from Pajares (2002) who suggests a high sense of efficacy may not produce behaviour consistent with that belief if engaging in that behaviour will have undesired effects. Therefore, there appears to be a need to investigate and interpret self-efficacy beliefs according to the student's prevailing perceptions and motivations.

The relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and gender was also examined in the current research. The findings show that both genders were confident about their learning of English language. However, male students scored higher on self-efficacy beliefs than female students although the difference was not significant. Thus, it would appear that gender does not seem to impact on self-efficacy beliefs. These non-significant results are in contrast to those reported in previous research, for example, the Britner and Pajares study (2001) which found that girls had both higher self-efficacy and achievement than boys. They concluded that in areas related to arts, female students tend to exhibit stronger confidence than male students. Yet, in the current study set in Botswana, this does not seem to be the case.

In summary, the findings of the current research show that the UB students are moderately efficacious about their learning of the English language although, as the interviews demonstrated, they are less confident at speaking than at studying English. Thus, it would seem that they could be assisted to enhance their confidence in speaking English. The current research also supports the findings of previous research which found that proficient students are more efficacious than less proficient students, though not consistently so (Pajares & Graham, 1999; Pajares & Valiante, 1997). Comparatively, the results showed that in Botswana self-efficacy beliefs are not that significant as far as gender is concerned. With regards to the findings, the UB students should be assisted not only to identify their self-efficacy beliefs but also to develop these in a positive way. According to Pajares and Johnson (1996) teachers should pay as much attention to students' self-efficacy beliefs about their competence as to their actual competence, for it is the beliefs that may more accurately predict students' motivation and future academic choices. As the interview results showed, the Botswana students are less efficacious in speaking than in studying the English language. Therefore particular attention should be paid to encouraging the students to develop more confidence in speaking. Once again this highlights the need to develop and improve speaking skills in the CSS curriculum in UB.

Limitations of this Study

A limitation of this study concerns the method used to select students. The UB Communication and Study Skills lecturers were asked to select good, fair and poor students either by using their marks or their knowledge of the students' performance in English. It should be noted, however, that there may have been some variation in the procedures used by the teachers to select the students. A standardised test could have provided data that allowed for more reliable comparisons.

Conclusion

This research has shown that the UB students have positive but moderate self-efficacy beliefs in learning English language. In addition, it appears that the UB students generally have low self-efficacy in relation to their ability at speaking, though they have higher estimations of themselves with regard to studying the English language. This research speculated that the reason for this may be because the UB students studied English hard in order to get more marks and they used English to communicate with others about school related matters, rather than for day to day purposes.

The implication of the findings of this research is that the UB students do not fully exploit their self-efficacy beliefs to their own advantage because high self-efficacy beliefs have been said to help the students achieve more in language learning. With regard to that, the UB students should be assisted not only to identify their self- efficacy beliefs but also to develop these in a positive way. Particular attention should be paid to encouraging the students to develop more confidence in speaking.

Finally, this study recommends more research to investigate self-efficacy beliefs, proficiency, and gender related differences in language learning in Botswana. Moreover, self-efficacy instruments should be specifically designed for the ESL field and specific to language learning tasks.

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