



Assessing Writing Self-Efficacy: Constructing a Scale

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Abstract Albert Bandura first started writing about self-efficacy and its predictive value on human functioning and extensive research supporting his self-efficacy theory has been conducted in several fields, such as educational psychology, health, medicine, and athletics. It has not been until the past ten years, however, that self-efficacy has emerged as a topic of research within the field of foreign language learning. Although research has been started, it has not been plentiful and the field continues to struggle with a pervasive lack of good instrumentation by which to measure self-efficacy. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the assessment of writing self-efficacy within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This overview will consist of a clear definition of the construct, examples of assessment of self-efficacy in past literature, guidelines for writing an assessment instrument for writing self-efficacy, and finally a completed instrument assessing the construct.

Key words self-efficacy, writing, English as a Foreign Language
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Introduction

Albert Bandura's (1977) seminal article entitled "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change," sparked many researchers from many fields (i.e., educational psychology, health, medicine, athletics, business, international affairs, psychopathology, and social and political change) (Pajares, 1996) to utilize self-efficacy to predict and describe a wide range of human functioning. Extant evidence suggests that self-efficacy can be used to predict such varied achievements as academic achievements, social skills, smoking cessation, and other behavior (Bandura, 1986). Within the social cognitive theoretical framework, self-efficacy has become a topic of avid interest in the area of academic motivation and achievement (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schunk, 2004; Bandura, 1986). In his most recent version of self-efficacy, Bandura (1997) illustrates the importance of this construct and its influence on human behavior, "People make causal contributions to their own psychosocial functioning through mechanisms of personal agency. Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than beliefs of personal efficacy. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act. Efficacy belief, therefore, is a major basis of action. People guide their lives by their beliefs of personal efficacy" (p. 2).

This paper will outline the reasons behind creating a self-efficacy scale to be used to measure the writing self-efficacy of a group of Japanese students who will be traveling to a non-English speaking country to participate in a short-term EFL study abroad program (Burrows, 2009). This paper includes a concise definition of the construct, examples of assessment of self-efficacy in past literature, guidelines for writing an assessment instrument for writing self-efficacy, and finally a completed instrument assessing the construct.

Overview of Self-Efficacy Research

Self-Efficacy Theory

The theoretical underpinnings of Bandura's self-efficacy theory and all its current implications, stems from Bandura's (1977) seminal article, "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change." In this article, Bandura coined self-efficacy as the strength of expectations individuals maintain about their ability to perform successfully a behavior that will lead to a particular outcome. Individuals' degree of self-efficacy is said to influence "whether certain (coping) behaviors will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (Bandura, 1977, p. 191). Following these guidelines of the theory, judgments of self-efficacy are task and domain specific. Those who hold a low sense of self-efficacy for accomplishing a particular task within a particular domain may avoid it, while those who have a higher sense of self-efficacy would be more apt to participate readily in the completion of the task.

Self-efficacy in Foreign Language Research

Although researchers from many fields (i.e., educational psychology, business, international affairs, psychopathology, and social and political change) (Pajares, 1996) have utilized self-efficacy to predict and demonstrate a wide range of human behavior, research in the field of foreign languages remains scarce. The need for further research into constructs adopted from other fields of study has been a constant need in the field of SLA.

In one study that helped support our knowledge of self-efficacy in the field, Graham (2006) demonstrated that most students with high self-efficacy credited both successes and failures to either an ample expenditure of effort or a lack of it, respectively. Those who considered themselves to have lower self-efficacy tended to blame their failures more on external forces like task difficulty, luck and ability.

Within the field of foreign languages, research has been conducted on the relation that study abroad has on self-efficacy. Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz

(1990), investigated the influence that study abroad exerted on such topics as education, career, personal satisfaction, and cultural values. The focus of the research was the role that study abroad played in students' acquisition of foreign languages, knowledge of and concern for foreign cultures and international issues, attitudes toward their home country and its values, and career objectives and accomplishments. Student profiles indicated stable patterns in motivation, achievement, and satisfaction that connect to the experience abroad.

The results of the study showed strong factor loadings on two factors that the authors related to the self-efficacy construct, *attitudes toward self* and *sociability*. However, the findings did not support the hypothesis that study abroad experience would significantly result in increased levels of self-confidence and sociability. One of the reasons attributed to this failure would be the scales that were used in the study. Taken from Susan Harter's (1978) work on effectance motivation, the items of the scale, which were originally written for children, had to be revised. Many of the items also talked about attitudes toward self and sociability that might not change due to study abroad. They seem to be items that are almost trait-like in nature. For example, "Some students are very happy being the way they are." or "Some people are sure that what they are doing is the right thing." The items tend to be slightly ambiguous and lacking in any strong relevance to the underlying construct that was being studied.

In the rationale of the study given to explain the usage of the instrument, the authors explained, "Harter has developed a differentiated set of scales that assess cognitive, social, and physical competence. Each of these domains can be divided into specific sub-domains. In the present study, we chose to focus on social competence, or what we term personal self-efficacy. The reason for this is that we consider this dimension of one's perception of self to be particularly relevant for study abroad students" (Carlson et al., 1990, p. 24). There does not seem to be any clear connection between the items of the scale and the construct being studied, which in itself remains somewhat unclear. There were no explicit definitions of the self-efficacy construct, as perceived by the researchers in this study.

Guidelines for Assessing Self-Efficacy and Creating Self-Efficacy Scales

As was encountered in the Carlson et al. (1990) study, problems with the instrument of assessment can lead to distorted results. To prevent these types of problems from occurring, a review of literature on self-efficacy assessment is provided.

In mainstream psychological research, self-efficacy has been conceptualized and studied from two different perspectives, a trait like concept called general self-efficacy (GSE) (e.g., Eden, 1988; Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998) and a state like concept called specific self-efficacy (SSE) (e.g., Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Wood and Bandura (1989) defined specific self-efficacy as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive responses, and course of action needed to meet given situation demands.” On the other hand, Judge, et al. (1998, p. 170) defined GSE as “individuals’ perception of their ability to perform across a variety of different situations.” Chen, Gully, and Eden noted, “GSE captures differences among individuals in their tendency to view themselves as capable of meeting task demands in a broad array of contexts” (2001, p. 63).

Research has shown that GSE has a positive influence on SSE across tasks and domains (Eden, 1988). This positive relationship between GSE and SSE for a variety of performances seems to “spill over” into specific situations (Shelton, 1990; Sherer et al., 1982). Because of this, those with a high GSE are expected to be more apt to succeed across a variety of domains.

Bandura (2006) has offered a set of guidelines to be followed when creating scales for self-efficacy measurement. These guidelines have been teamed up with factors and situations that will presumably be encountered by study abroad students. As was mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this scale (see Appendix 1) and its creation is to provide the author with a measurement instrument to gauge the writing self-efficacy of a group of Japanese students who will be traveling to a non-English speaking country to participate in a short-term EFL study abroad program (Burrows, 2009). The guidelines are as follows:

1. Content validity: Firstly, items should reflect the construct under investigation.

2. Items on the instrument should be based on a good conceptual analysis of the relevant domain of functioning.
3. The items should be ordered in a gradation of challenge.
4. The items of the instrument should reflect varying levels of task demands.

Completed Writing Self-Efficacy Scale

With these recommendations and the purposes of the ensuing study in mind, the author has designed a writing self-efficacy scale.

Conclusion

Research in self-efficacy has been relatively limited in the foreign language field, but recent literature demonstrates a new interest in the theory and its possible connections to SLA. In this paper, I aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of self-efficacy. Examination of extant literature has also offered guidelines in constructing an assessment instrument for writing self-efficacy. Finally, I have offered an example of a completed instrument for writing self-efficacy. The completed scale will be used in a later study to measure the writing self-efficacy of a group of Japanese students who will be traveling to a non-English speaking country to participate in a short-term EFL study abroad program.

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Appendix

Completed self-efficacy scale

EFL self-efficacy scale for writing

Writing self-efficacy

A number of situations are described below about writing in English. Please rate in each of the blanks in the column how certain you are that you can write and make yourself understood in each situation.

0	1	2	3	4	5
cannot do at all			moderately can do		highly certain can do

Writing situation	Confidence (0-5)
1. Write a grocery list of foods I need	_____
2. Write an invitation to a friend for a party	_____
3. Write a 1-page essay on a topic regarding my major	_____
4. Write a 3-page essay defending the use of nuclear power in Japan	_____
5. Write a business letter requesting a book from a library in the U.S.	_____
6. Write an academic journal article on a topic in my major	_____